

**Ch. VI: Deepening One's Perspective on the World**  
(Section 4)

*4. The Pitfalls of Sensual Pleasure*

*(1) Cutting off All Affairs (from MN 54)*

*(2) The Fever of Sensual Pleasures (from MN 75)*

1. Introduction to the Chapter and the Sections 1-3
2. Main Translation of the Selections
3. Comment
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**1. Introduction to Sections 3 and 4**

In **Text VI,3** the Buddha uses this threefold scheme to make a detailed appraisal of three major objects of attachment: sensual pleasures, bodily form, and feelings. The major portion of the sutta is devoted to an examination of the dangers in sensual pleasures. It begins with a close-up view of the tribulations that a “clansman”—a young householder pursuing the ancient Indian counterpart of a professional career—might undergo in his quest for sensual gratification. As the discourse unfolds, the scope of the examination widens from the personal to the collective, encompassing the broader social and political consequences of this quest. It reaches its climax in striking images of the warfare and human devastation that follow from the frenzied mass drive for sensual gratification. “Form” is the physical body. The Buddha begins his treatment of form by asking the monks to consider a beautiful young girl. He then traces the progressive stages of her physical decay, through old age, sickness, death, and the eventual disintegration of the corpse until it is reduced to powdered bone. To show the danger in “feeling,” the Buddha selects the feelings of a meditating monk in the *jhanas*, the meditative absorptions, the most refined mundane experiences of pleasure and peace. He points out that even these lofty feelings are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change.

Although the following texts do not explicitly apply the threefold scheme, its underlying presence is obvious. Emphasis falls on the aspect of danger. The two texts presented in section 4 again accentuate the pitfalls to sensual pleasure, but do so differently from the text of the preceding section. In **Text VI, 4(1)**, the Buddha appears in dialogue with a pompous householder who imagines that he has “cut off all worldly affairs”. To dispel his complacency the Buddha uses a series of similes that expose the deceptiveness of sensual pleasures to show him what the “cutting off of affairs” means in his own system of training. The use of the similes prevails in **Text VI, 4(2)** as well which pits the Buddha against a hedonist called Magandiya. The Buddha here contends that the sensual pleasures seem to be pleasurable only through a distortion of perception but when seen rightly like the fire in a burning charcoal pit—“painful to touch, hot and scorching”. This passage includes some of the most powerful similes in the Nikāyas and there can be little doubt that the Buddha has not used them lightly.

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**2. Translation of the Selections**

**4. THE PITFALLS IN SENSUAL PLEASURES**

**(1) Cutting Off all Affairs**

[The householder Potaliya asked the Blessed One:] “Venerable sir, how is the cutting off of affairs in the Noble One’s discipline achieved entirely and in all ways? It would be good, venerable sir, if the Blessed One would teach me the Dhamma, showing me how the cutting off of affairs in the Noble One’s discipline is achieved entirely and in all ways.”

“Then listen, householder, and attend closely to what I shall say.” “Yes, venerable sir,” Potaliya the householder replied. The Blessed One said this:

15. “Householder, suppose a dog, overcome by hunger and weakness, was waiting by a butcher’s shop. Then a skilled butcher or his apprentice would toss the dog a well-hacked, clean-hacked skeleton of meatless bones smeared with blood. What do you think, householder? Would that dog get rid of his hunger and weakness by gnawing such a well-hacked, clean-hacked skeleton of meatless bones smeared with blood?”

“No, venerable sir. Why is that? Because that was a skeleton of well hacked, clean-hacked meatless bones smeared with blood. Eventually that dog would reap weariness and disappointment.”

“So too, householder, a noble disciple considers thus: ‘Sensual pleasures have been compared to a skeleton by the Blessed One; they provide much suffering and much despair, while the danger in them is still more.’ Having seen this thus as it really is with proper wisdom, he avoids the equanimity that is diversified, based on diversity, and develops the equanimity that is unified, based on unity, where clinging to the carnal things of the world utterly ceases without remainder.

16. “Householder, suppose a vulture, a heron, or a hawk seizes a piece of meat and flew away, and then other vultures, herons, and hawks pursued it and pecked and clawed it. What do you think, householder? If that first vulture,

heron, or hawk does not quickly go of that piece of meat, wouldn't it thereby incur death or deadly suffering?" "Yes, venerable sir."

"So too, householder, a noble disciple considers thus: 'Sensual pleasures have been compared to a piece of meat by the Blessed One; they provide much suffering and much despair, while the danger in them is still more.' Having seen this thus as it really is with proper wisdom ... clinging to the carnal things of the world utterly ceases without remainder.

17. "Householder, suppose a man took a blazing grass torch and went against the wind. What do you think, householder? If that man does not quickly let go of that blazing grass torch, wouldn't that blazing grass torch burn his hand or his arm or some other part of his body ... so that he might incur death or deadly suffering because of that?"

"Yes, venerable sir."

"So too, householder, a noble disciple considers thus: 'Sensual pleasures have been compared to a grass torch by the Blessed One; they provide much suffering and much despair, while the danger in them is still more.' Having seen this thus as it really is with proper wisdom ... clinging to the carnal things of the world utterly ceases without remainder.

18. "Householder, suppose there were a charcoal pit deeper than a man's height full of glowing coals without flame or smoke. Then a man came who wanted to live and not to die, who wanted pleasure and recoiled from pain, and two strong men seized him by both arms and dragged him toward that charcoal pit. What do you think, householder? Would that man twist his body this way and that?"

"Yes, venerable sir. Why is that? Because that man knows that if he falls into that charcoal pit, he will incur death or deadly suffering because of that."

"So too, householder, a noble disciple considers thus: 'Sensual pleasures have been compared to a charcoal pit by the Blessed One; they provide much suffering and much despair, while the danger in them is still more.' Having seen this thus as it really is with proper wisdom clinging to the carnal things of the world utterly ceases without remainder.

19. "Householder, suppose a man dreamed about lovely parks, lovely groves, lovely meadows, and lovely lakes, and on waking he finds nothing of them. So too, householder, a noble disciple considers thus: 'Sensual pleasures have been compared to a dream by the Blessed One; they provide much suffering and much despair, while the danger in them is still more. Having seen this thus as it really is with proper wisdom ... clinging to the carnal things of the world utterly ceases out remainder.

20. "Householder, suppose a man borrowed goods on loan—a fancy carriage and fine jewel earrings and preceded and surrounded by these borrowed goods he went to the marketplace. Then people, seeing him, would say: 'Sirs, that is a rich man! That is how the rich enjoy their wealth!' Then the owners, whenever they saw him, would take back their things. What do you think, householder? Would that be enough for that man to become dejected?"

"Yes, venerable sir. Why is that? Because the owners took back their things."

So too, householder, a noble disciple considers thus: 'Sensual pleasures have been compared to borrowed goods by the Blessed One; they provide much suffering and much despair, while the danger in them is still more.' Having seen this thus as it really is with proper wisdom ... clinging to carnal things of the world utterly ceases without remainder.

21. "Householder, suppose a dense grove not far from some village or town had a fruit-laden tree, none of whose fruit had fallen to the ground. Then a man came needing fruit, seeking fruit, wandering in search of fruit, and he entered the grove and saw the tree laden with fruit. Thereupon he thought: 'This tree is laden with fruit but none of the fruit has fallen to the ground. I know how to climb a tree, so let me climb this tree, eat as much fruit as I want, and fill my bag.' And he did so. Then a second man came needing fruit, seeking fruit, wandering in search of fruit, and taking a sharp axe, he too entered the grove, saw that tree laden with fruit. Thereupon he thought: 'This tree is laden with fruit but none of its fruit has fallen to the ground. I do not how to climb a tree, so let me cut this tree down at its root, eat as much fruit as I want, and fill my bag.' And he did so. What do you think householder? If that first man who had climbed the tree doesn't come down quickly, when the tree falls, wouldn't he break his hand or foot or some other part of his body, so that he might incur death or deadly suffering because of that?"

"Yes, venerable sir."

"So too, householder, a noble disciple considers thus: 'Sensual pleasures have been compared to fruits on a tree by the Blessed One; they provide much suffering and much despair, while the danger in them is still more.' Having seen this thus as it really is with proper wisdom, he avoids the equanimity that is diversified, based on diversity, and develops the equanimity that is unified, based on unity where clinging to the carnal things of the world utterly ceases without remainder."

(from MN 54: *Poṭṭhiya Sutta*; I 364-66)

## (2) *The Fever of Sensual Pleasures*

10. "Māgandiya, formerly when I lived the household life, I enjoyed myself, provided and endowed with the five cords of sensual pleasure with forms cognizable by the eye ... with sounds cognizable by the ear ... with odors cognizable by the nose ... with flavors cognizable by the tongue ... with tactile objects cognizable by the body that are wished for, desired, agreeable, and likeable, connected with sensual desire and provocative of lust. I had three palaces,

one for the rainy season, one for the winter, and one for the summer. I lived in the rains' palace for the four months of the rainy season, enjoying myself with musicians, none male, and I did not go down to the lower palace.'

"On a later occasion, having understood as they really are the origin, the passing away, the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of sensual pleasures, I abandoned craving for sensual pleasures, I removed the fever of sensual pleasures, and I dwell without thirst, with a mind inwardly at peace. I see other people who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures being devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, burning with the fever of sensual pleasures, indulging in sensual pleasures, and I do not envy them, nor do I delight therein. Why is that? Because there is, Māgandiya, a delight apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, which surpasses even divine bliss. Since I take delight in that, I do not envy what is inferior, nor do I delight therein.

11. "Suppose, Magandiya, a householder or a householder's son was affluent, and wealthy, and being provided and endowed with the five cords of sensual pleasure, he might enjoy himself with forms cognizable by the eye ... with sounds cognizable by the ear ... with odors -cognizable by the nose ... with flavors cognizable by the tongue ... with tactile objects cognizable by the body that are wished for, desired, agreeable and likeable, connected with sensual desire and provocative of lust. Having conducted himself well in body, speech, and mind, on the breakup of the body, after death, he might be reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world in the retinue of the Tavatīṃsa devas; and there, surrounded by a group of nymphs in the Nandana Grove, would enjoy himself provided and endowed with the five cords of divine sensual pleasure. Suppose he saw a householder or a householder's son enjoying himself, provided and endowed with the five cords of [human] sensual pleasure. What do you think, Māgandiya? Would that young deva surrounded by the group of nymphs in the Nandana Grove, enjoying himself provided and endowed with the five cords of divine sensual pleasure, envy the householder or the householder's son for the five cords of human sensual pleasure or would he be enticed by human sensual pleasures?"

"No, Master Gotama. Why not? Because divine sensual pleasures are more excellent and sublime than human sensual pleasures."

"So too, Māgandiya, formerly when I lived the household life, I enjoyed myself, provided and endowed with the five cords of sensual pleasure, with forms cognizable by the eye ... with tactile objects cognizable by the body that are wished for, desired, agreeable, and likewise connected with sensual desire and provocative of lust. On a later occasion, having understood as they really are the gratification, the dangers and the escape in the case of sensual pleasures, I abandoned craving for sensual pleasures, I removed the fever of sensual pleasures, and I dwell without thirst, with a mind inwardly at peace. I see other people who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures being devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, burning with the fever of sensual pleasures, indulging in sensual pleasures, and I do not envy them nor do I delight therein. Why is that? Because there is, Māgandiya, a delight apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, which surpasses even divine bliss. Since I take delight in that, I do not enjoy what is inferior, nor do I delight therein.

13. "Suppose, Māgandiya, there was a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a burning charcoal pit. Then his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, would bring a physician to treat him. The physician would make medicine for him, and by means of that medicine the man would be cured of his leprosy and would become well and happy. independent, master of himself, able to go where he likes. Then he might see another leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a burning charcoal pit. What do you think, Māgandiya? Would that man envy that leper for his burning charcoal pit or his use of medicine?"

"No, Master Gotama. Why is that? Because when there is sickness, there is need for medicine, and when there is no sickness there is no need for medicine."

14. "So too, Māgandiya, formerly when I lived the household life ... [as in 12] ... Since I take delight in that, I do not envy what is inferior. nor do I delight therein.

15. "Suppose, Māgandiya, there was a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a burning charcoal pit. Then his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a physician to treat him. The physician would make medicine for him, and by means of that medicine the man would be cured of his leprosy and would become well and happy, independent, master of himself, able to go where he likes. Then two strong men would seize him by both arms and drag him toward a burning charcoal pit. What do you think, Māgandiya? Would that man twist his body this way and that?"

"Yes, Master Gotama. Why is that? Because that fire is indeed painful to touch, hot, and scorching.

"What do you think Magandiya. Is it only now that that fire is painful to touch, hot, and scorching, or previously too was that fire painful to touch, hot, and scorching?"

"Master Gotama that fire is now painful to touch, hot, and scorching, and previously too that fire was painful to touch, hot, and scorching. For when that man was a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, his faculties were impaired; thus, though the fire was actually painful to touch, he acquired a mistaken perception of it as pleasant."

16. "So too, Māgandiya, in the past sensual pleasures were painful to touch, hot, and scorching; in the future

sensual pleasures will be painful to touch, hot, and scorching; and now at present sensual pleasures are painful to touch, hot, and scorching. But these people who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, who burn with the fever of sensual pleasures, have faculties are impaired thus, through sensual pleasures are actually painful to touch, they acquire a mistaken perception of them as pleasant.’

17. “Suppose, Māgandiya, there was a leper with sores and blisters His limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a burning charcoal pit; the more he scratches the scabs and cauterizes his body, the fouler, more evil-smelling, and more infected the openings of his wounds would become, yet he would find a certain measure of satisfaction and enjoyment in scratching the openings of his wounds. So too, Māgandiya, people who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, who burn with the fever of sensual pleasures, still indulge in sensual pleasures; the more they indulge in sensual pleasures, the more their craving for sensual pleasures increases and the more they are burned by the fever of sensual pleasures, yet they find a certain measure of satisfaction and enjoyment in dependence on the five cords of sensual pleasure.”

(from MN 75: *Māgandiya Sutta*; 1 504-8)

### 3. Comment on the Selections

by Victor Gunasekara

The Buddha’s discourses are either directed either to lay persons who live and work in the world or to recluses (monks and aspirants) who have abandoned the world. To the former his advice is to keep the five precepts and engage in wholesome deeds like charity (mainly directed to monks), and to practice virtues like loving kindness, compassion, etc. abandoning evil actions. These were discussed in Ch. V of Bhikkhu Bodhi’s anthology. The householders acquire positive or negative karma, and depending on their karma they go to a non-human existence in divine or hellish realms in which they spend long periods, or are immediately reborn in this world according to their karma.

The present chapter (Ch. VI) is directed to those who desire to leave the world, and their goal should not be rebirth in extra-terrestrial or terrestrial realms, but to get out of the round of rebirth, i.e. to achieve Nibbāna. These extracts give the dangers of worldly life and justify the reasons for abandoning it.

The first selection (“Four Wonderful Things”) give the consequence of the appearance of a Buddha. The four wonderful things given are: (1) non-attachment, (2) abolition of pride (conceit), (3) non-restlessness (peace) and (4) abolition of ignorance. It is true that the Buddha preached these things but not everyone was persuaded by them. So the statement that people will wish to listen to this teaching, lend an ear, and understand it is probably true of a minority of the people who are aware of the Buddha’s teaching on these matters.

The second section gives three short extracts on gratification of sense pleasure, the danger that this leads to and finally the escape from this danger. These are illustrated in terms of the Buddha’s own experience. Here the gratification of sense pleasures is shown to the principle factor that keeps people bound to the round of rebirth (samsāra).

The third selection is a long sutta from the Majjhima Nikāya (No. 13 Mahādukkhakkhandhasutta). This deals with the three aspects considered earlier, i.e. gratification, danger and escape with reference to three things, sensual pleasures, form, and feelings. Of these the bulk of the sutta is devoted to gratification, danger and escape in relation to sensual **pleasures**.

**Sensual pleasure** is defined as pleasure that come from the five modes of contact through the eye, nose, ear, tongue and body. Clearly a physical mode of obtaining pleasure is considered. In the process of obtaining pleasure from these sources an ordinary person comes across many dangers. These are listed in sections 8-15 of the sutta.

It is difficult to see why **form** (rūpa) is considered separately from sensual pleasure as form too has to be apprehended by the five modes contact. But from the example given it would appear that the pleasure involved is more psychological than physical. The example given is that of a beautiful young girl. Then it is shown that as the girl ages, reached old age, and finally dies and the corpse too disintegrates the allure disappears. This is the “danger” that arises from pleasure derived from form.

The final source of gratification considered is “feeling”. The gratification considered here is the feeling that comes from jhanic contemplation. The four jhanas are outlined and it is shown that unlike sensual pleasure and form we have here some kind of wholesome gratification as it results in the removal of desire and lust.