

How to enjoy life¹

Why do we keep on craving for what we see as pleasurable, running after them, and clinging to them as if they are permanent and we can have them forever? The reason for this, from the early Buddhist teaching, is a simple one: we do not know how to really enjoy life. So, how do we *really* enjoy life, then?

First, we need to understand what we are enjoying, and how we can enjoy them. The two questions are closely related, as we shall soon see. Let us begin with the basics: we have a body (this is obvious enough: this is what we can touch, feel, and know), and we have a mind (that's how we know we have a body!)

The “what” and the “how” of our being are even more closely connected than that. Although “what” is out there is neither good nor bad, neither beautiful nor ugly -- the world is what it is and remains so – our mind decides “how” we experience it. In short, it is how we think. In this connection, the Buddha says in **the Nibbedhika Pariyāya Sutta**:

The thought of passion is a person's sensuality:

there is no sensuality in what are beautiful in the world.

The thought of passion is a person's sensuality:

The alluringly diverse in the world remain just as they are.

So here the wise remove desire (for them). (A 6.63 @ [SD 6.11](#))

Things out there are neutral. It's what we make of them, how we see them. In this sense, we create our own world, that is, our senses – eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind -- *are* our world. This is good news: since we are our own creators, we can decide what kind of world we want for ourselves (at least).

The next question is: How do we create our own happy world: how do we enjoy life? Now, we have noted that, as long as we keep feeding our senses, we are not likely to be able to stop: the senses do not think at all; they just go on feeding, like a swarm of locusts, or rust eating away at some unattended iron object.

We have to learn when to stop feeding the senses in this way. This is where the precepts come in. **The 5 precepts** do not so much as merely restrict us from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and clouding up our minds, as they are reminders for us to know when to *stop* indulging in our senses.²

We tend to surfeit, become bored, with even the best things in life (as we see them) if we keep on feeding them or feeding on them without knowing when to stop or take a break. Even with those we love the most, amongst those we deeply love, we must share understanding moments of silence and meaningful spaces. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, and grows the value of whom we love. Then we love wisely and well.

The 5 precepts remind us that there are others like us. The precepts are based on the natural and universal notion that we love life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom.³ When we understand and appreciate these values, we would naturally respond to others with compassion, charity, respect, beneficence and openness. In this way, not only are we happy ourselves, but we bring joy to others, too. Indeed, our purpose as practising Buddhists should

¹ This reflection is based on the Introduction to **(Sotāpanna) Nandiya Sutta** (S 55.40), [SD 47.1](#) (1.1.2).

² On the 5 precepts, see **Veḷu, dvāreyya Sutta** (S 55.7), [SD 1.5 \(2\)](#); **Sīlānussati**, SD 15.11 (2.2); [SD 21.6 \(1.2\)](#); [SD 37.8 \(2.2\)](#).

³ These are the 5 “values” underlying each of the 5 precepts, respectively.

be to bring as much happiness to as many people and beings as possible. This is how true Buddhists really enjoy life.⁴

As worldlings or those defined and deluded by the world, we are caught in the crowd of fun and fads. But even fun and fads run out of date, if not, we do; then, we do not see them as fun and fads any more. The fact that fun and fads fade away in time is telling us something vitally real about our lives.

The Buddha's two chief disciples, then rich youths, were enjoying themselves in a hill-top festival in northern India. Imagine all the singing, dancing and frolicking that we see in a fun Hindi movie. Suddenly, everything seems to fade into silence, and these chief disciples heard their own voices telling them: What is going on here? Why are we enjoying such frivolous pleasures when our lives are so short? We should be seeking self-knowledge and be truly free individuals!⁵

So they split up to look for the answer to happiness. Here, even the best of friends must part. Each going his own way to look for the truth, but with twice the chances to find the answer. When one of them found the answer, they met again at an appointed place and time, and knowing the truth, both become streamwinners (the first-stage saints).

They had given up all ideas of identifying with their bodies (not regarding them as permanent or better than what they really are). They stopped being superstitious, and looked within for true happiness. They have no doubt that they can work out their own salvation and true happiness, without any God, priest, religious dogmas or rituals.

The vision of reality is all around us: everyone and everything around us are telling us that they are impermanent, changing, becoming other than what we expect of them. If we cannot and do not want to see this, then we are blindsiding ourselves, living in an eternal night, where we run after dreams and nightmares of our own making.

Occasionally, a disappointment drags us back into reality, or a loss reminds us of life's uncertainty, a sickness or death betrays our own frailty -- or someone tries to wake us with something like this reflection. It depends on us whether we want to wake up and see in the true light of reality, or simply fall back into our cyclic slumber and sleep-walking. In such darkness and uneasy sleep, we can never really enjoy life. We cannot even see clearly.

What we "see" in such dream-lives are merely phantoms and passing shadows, or perhaps some fleeting glances of frivolous delights. Then come the nightmares and night terror. Notice how, in such dreams, we don't even think of getting out, because we have stopped thinking! This reflection is an invitation, a reminder, that we can think, and should do so wisely. We should occasionally look deep into our own hearts.

If we really want to look deep into our lives, we must close our eyes, so that we can see better. If we really look at ourselves, what are we really? Body and mind, remember? If we look deeper, our body is nothing but our breath: breathing in, breathing out.

This in-and-out breathing becomes more peaceful the more we attend to it. This is one of the best ways of caring for ourselves: by really paying attention to our breath. As we diligently stay in the presence of our breath, gladness (simple joy) arises in us. Then it deepens into zest (joyful interest): it seems that we can do this forever! Our body becomes tranquil

⁴ See [SD 19.1 \(7.1\)](#): Who is a "Buddhist"?

⁵ For this story of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, see *Dhammapada Commentary* (DhA 1:88-96), or Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, Singapore: The Minding Centre [2002], 2013 ch 5: [link](#).

(we are no more troubled by our senses), so that our mind is really happy, too. Then we attain a blissful inner stillness or samadhi.⁶

This is the kind of joy that is beyond the body, beyond the 5 physical senses: a joy we cannot see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or even think about, except feel with the heart. When we feel this joy, even for brief moments, we will never forget them. They will transform our lives if we constantly recall them. This is the joy that is so simple and direct, we wonder why we have taken so long to see it, and we want others to be happy like us, too. It's such fun to have a happy crowd!

When we are happy in this way, we find it easier to keep the precepts, to do good, be good, and be kind to others, even in the most trying situations. The happiness within keeps our minds clear and our hearts calm so that we are better listeners and able to look deeper into others, well below their masks of platitudes, pleasures and pains. We become better at helping and healing, and making others truly happy.

We can do this because we're not merely collecting experiences of the eye, but really seeing; we're not merely hearing, but truly listening; we're not merely smelling, but joyfully breathing; we're not merely eating but fully tasting; we're not merely thinking, but really minding. We don't merely "have" experiences: we *are* what we are doing. We put joy into it: we en-joy it. Then, we're truly and really enjoying life.⁷

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⁶ See **(Sotāpanna) Nandiya Sutta** (S 55.40,36), [SD 47.1](#).

⁷ See also Reflection, 'Two kinds of pain,' R71 ([Simple Joys 1](#): no 6.6), 2003.