

Does the Buddha have feelings?

There is a common misconception that the Buddha and the arhats do not have any feelings since they have overcome all defilements. But not all feelings are defilements. The Maha Saccaka Sutta (M 36), for example, records how the Buddha, recalling how he had meditated and attained dhyana as a 7-year-old child under a jambu tree during the ploughing festival, realizes that there is “a pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states” (M 36.32/1:246 f). [Note 1]

This wholesome pleasure is that of dhyana (Pali: jhana) or deep meditation, which the Buddha attains by using breath meditation. Coming out of the dhyana, in the stillness and clarity of his mind, the Buddha directly sees true reality and awakens to nirvana.

Even today, those who do Buddhist meditation of one kind or other, experiences great joy. Whether we use the so called Vipassana or Insight Meditation or the Forest Meditation, when we learn to see the present moment as it is, we feel a profound bliss. It is this kind of bliss that helps wisdom to arise when we see the joy as being impermanent.

From the Mahaparinibbana Sutta (D 16) [Note 2], which records the last days of the Buddha, we know that the Buddha feels pain. The 80-year-old Buddha describes how he is attacked by severe sickness and sharp pains, which he can only overcome through deep meditation (D 16.2.26/2:100 f).

The most interesting thing the discourses tell us about the Buddha is perhaps that he feels for his disciples. The Salayatana Vibhanga Sutta (M 137) [Note 3]—the discourse on the analysis of the six elements—for example, shows how the Buddha gives the teaching of the three bases of mindfulness (satipatthana). This is different from the better known set of four focusses of mindfulness.

The three bases of mindfulness are about how the Buddha responds to three types of situations when he teaches:

“Here, bhikshus, the Teacher teaches the Dharma to his disciples, out of compassion, for their happiness, moved by compassion, thinking, ‘This is for your welfare! This is for your happiness!’”

(1) His disciples do not wish to listen, do not pay attention, do not make an effort to understand the Teaching, and deviate from the Teaching.

As such, the Buddha is not pleased, but although not feeling pleased, he dwells untroubled, mindful and fully aware.

(2) Some of his disciples listen, pay attention, make an effort to understand the Teaching, and do not deviate from the Teaching.

As such, the Buddha is pleased, but although feeling pleased, he dwells untroubled, mindful and fully aware.

(3) His disciples listen, pay attention, make an effort to understand the Teaching, and do not deviate from the Teaching.

As such, the Buddha is pleased, but although feeling pleased, he dwells untroubled, mindful and fully aware.

Weekly reflections by Piya Tan

It is clear from this Salayatana Vibhanga Sutta passage that the Buddha (and other awakened beings) do have feelings towards how others behave. This is only natural, and indeed it would be very weird if the Buddha and the arhats had no feelings at all! The “negative” feelings are simply a reflection of the reality of the situation, but none of these feelings affect or trouble the Buddha or the saint in any way: they only see the arising of great compassion to remove the suffering and ignorance of these beings.

This is the true meaning of equanimity. We do feel disappointed when others do not seem to respond positively to the good we have done. Or, sometimes, people may seem overwhelmed by the kindness we have shown. Either way, we should be mindful and remain unaffected by them.

The meaning is that we should not depend of external conditions for our true happiness. We should cultivate the kind of inner happiness that is good in itself, that is independent of any condition. This is called unconditional love.

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Note 1: SD 1.12: <http://dharmafarer.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/1.12-Mahasaccaka-S-m36.17-44-piya.pdf>

Note 2: D 16 = SD 9: http://sites.google.com/site/dighanikaya/D16_Mahaparinibbana_S_sd9.pdf?attredirects=0

Note 3: M 137 = SD 29.5: <http://dharmafarer.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29.5-Salayatana-Vibhanga-S-m137-piya.pdf>