

Pleasure does not come from pain

Source: Bodhi Rāja,kumara Sutta, happiness cannot really come from suffering (M 85, SD 55.2), translated and annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2013, 2019¹.

1.3.2 Pleasure does *not* come from pain [§§10-57]

1.3.2.1 The Buddha’s teachings in **the Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 85) are given in response to prince Bodhi’s remark that pleasure comes from pain, or, as he puts it: “**Happiness [Pleasure] is not to be found through pleasure; happiness is to be found through pain**” [§10]. This wrong view is a key tenet in Jainism. However, it is unlikely that Bodhi was influenced by Jainism since we are told that he has twice gone for refuge in the 3 jewels before this meeting with the Buddha: the first time was while he was still in his mother’s womb [§62] and the second time as a young boy [§63].

It is possible that prince Bodhi’s wrong view—that happiness comes from pain—is what we today would call “reverse psychology.” He feels that he should be happy even though he is unable to have a child. As for himself, he is a royal prince (*raja,kumāra*), the son of king Udena and queen Vāsula,dattā, and his maternal grandfather is Caṇḍa-p,pajjota, king of Avantī. And now he has a fabulous palace, Koka-nada. He should be happy!

1.3.2.2 From the story of prince Bodhi given in **the Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Vatthu** (DhA 12.1), it is said that he is so impressed with his newly built Kokanada palace that he does not want anyone else to have such luxury—he plans to kill its architect! This dark trait of his suggests that he finds delight in the lack of others, such as those who do not have the grandeur of the likes of his fabulous palace.

1.3.2.3 In response to Bodhi’s wrong view that pleasure comes from pain, the Buddha tells him that when he was still an unawakened bodhisattva seeking awakening, he, too, held the same view. Then, he gives an autobiographical review of his life from his renunciation up to the awakening of the 5 monks [see Contents for a list of episodes].

1.3.2.4 The key account in this connection is, of course, that of the Bodhisattva’s **self-mortification** [§§18-28]. This account of his bodily deprivation is preceded by **the parable of the fire-sticks** [§§15-17], that reflects the necessity of moral virtue in spiritual growth, thus:

- (1) A sappy stick soaked in water when rubbed with an upper stick will never start a fire. This represents those who *think* sensual thoughts and *bodily* indulge in them. They lack the moral ground for the mind to free itself from the senses to attain dhyana to calm and clear the mind for higher cultivation.
- (2) A sappy stick left on dry ground, far away from water, when rubbed with an upper fire-stick will still not produce fire. This is like one who does not *bodily* indulge in sensual pleasures but still *thinks* about them. Their mind is still not free from the senses to attain dhyana to calm and clear the mind for higher cultivation.
- (3) A dry stick on dry land far away from water, when rubbed with an upper fire-stick will start a fire and produce heat. Even so, only when both the body and mind are free from sensual indulgence will it be able to attain dhyana to calm and clear the mind for higher cultivation.

¹ <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/55.2-Bodhi-Rajakumara-S-m85-piya.pdf>

1.3.2.5 The Bodhisattva has earlier on mastered the 2 highest meditations humanly or divinely possible. From Ālāra Kālāma² he learns the formless attainment of **the base of nothingness**³ [§12], and from Uddaka Rāma,putta, he learns the formless attainment of **the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception**⁴ taught by Uddaka's late father, Rāma.⁵ Despite attaining the highest meditations, the Bodhisattva is unable to realize awakening. This then is as far as the mind is able to transcend the body in meditation.

Despite mastering the mind, he fails to open the doors of liberation. Could it be, then, that he should conquer **the body**? With this rationale that the body must be purged of all pleasures, he embarked on self-mortification for 6 long years! As stated in **the Satta Vassa Sutta** (S 4.24), Māra shadows the Buddha throughout this period but is unable to find any fault in the Bodhisattva, and even a year after that, he is unable to see any wrong in the Buddha.⁶

1.3.2.6 The Bodhisattva at that time views (wrongly) that liberation, or at least happiness and pleasure, must surely come from pain. This is not just physical pain; it is *a self-deprivation* of all bodily pleasures. He describes the first and simplest of his self-mortifications, thus: "Suppose, **with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against my palate**, I beat down, hold back, and crush the mind with mind." [§18]. Great pain arose in him but it "did not invade my mind and remain." This is because he is already a master of dhyana, as we have noted [1.3.2.5].

His next self-mortifying practice is that of holding the breath, the very support of life itself: "... I stopped my in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose and ears." [§20 etc]. He describes the excruciating pains that attend such practices, but, as before he is able to withstand them [§§19-24].

Finally, he decides to deprive himself of food, such as, taking only a periodic handful of pulse soup. This deprivation leaves his body literally with only skin and bone, and rotting away at the very hair root! His whole body turns unhealthily dark. And when he squatted to do his toilet, he falls over on his face on account of his weakness [§26.3]. He has reached the extreme limits of physical endurance but is no nearer the path of salvation.

1.3.4 Full awakening (§§29-43)

1.3.4.1 The turning-point in the Bodhisattva's quest is his realization of **the middle way**. It is like we are travellers lost in a desert, all parched, thirsty, hungry and weak. Then, we discover that we have been moving around in a circle. Then, we see a bluff which we carefully climb and, from its top, look around. We see an oasis not too far away. Now we know where we should head for.

That "oasis" is **the dhyana meditation** that the 7-year-old child Gotama did under a jambul tree during the ploughing festival of the Sakyas. In fact, Gotama attained the 1st dhyana on that occasion. Recalling this experience after 6 years of self-mortification is like the darkest night suddenly becomes clear when the clouds move away and the full moon beams in the sky.

All this while, Gotama has been painfully striving with wrong views, and suffering for them, because he thinks that *all* pleasures are bad and must be avoided. It then occurs to him: "**I fear not the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome states!**" [§30.2].

This pleasure is, of course, that of **dhyana** (*jhāna*): **the 4 dhyanas**, to be exact. However, in order to progress spiritually, he has to gain some bodily strength and regain his health: he takes some proper

² See **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 16,15), SD 1.11.

³ See **Ākiñcaññ'āyatana Pañha S** (S 40.7), SD 24.17.

⁴ See **N'eva,saññā,nāsaññ'āyatana Pañha S** (S 40.8), SD 24.18.

⁵ See **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 16,16), SD 1.11.

⁶ S 4.24/1:122-124 (SD 36.5 (1.1.3)); SA 1:185.

food [§31.2]. Since Gotama is already an accomplished meditator, he easily gets into the dhyanas [§§32-35].

Emerging from them, he finds his mind supremely calm and clear, so that he is able to effectively direct it to **the 3 knowledges** of recalling his own past lives [§36], reviewing the arising and passing away of beings [§38], and, most importantly, gains the “knowledge of the destruction of the influxes” [§40], that is, he is freed from craving, from existence and from ignorance. With this, he gains true knowledge, that is, the 4 noble truths [§40.2], and so becomes **the Buddha**, the fully self-awakened [§42.2].

1.3.4.2 We should recall here that the Buddha is recounting his spiritual quest to prince Bodhi to correct his wrong view that pleasure comes from pain [1.3.2]. The Bodhisattva’s struggle with self-mortification clearly shows that we cannot be free from suffering by indulging in it. No pleasure arises from this bodily torment. Spiritual pleasure, on the other hand, is healing and instructive; it calms and clears the mind. **Dhyanic bliss** is the foundation for a clear mind that is able to see the path of awakening and reach nirvana.

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