

Renunciation is the path to true happiness

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.

1.3.3 Renunciation is the path to true happiness (§10)

1.3.3.1 Prince Bodhi believes that pleasure comes from pain. To correct this wrong view the Buddha relates how **he renounces the world**—he leaves behind all his family, friends, servants and worldly possessions—to be on his own, living on daily almsfood as a monk. If pain and hardship were to bring pleasure, surely such a life of renunciation would bring greater happiness than that of a prince with a fabulous palace!

1.3.3.2 An interesting point to note here is that the account of the Bodhisattva’s renunciation found in **the Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 85) only mentions that Gotama leaves home “**while still young, a black-haired young lad endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life**” right before his grieving parents² [§11]. There is no hint of Gotama being a royal prince like Bodhi. We only know that Gotama comes from the kshatriya clan, which, however, would place him in the same social class as Bodhi. But that’s about all we know from the suttas of Gotama’s social background. Anyway, from what is described of Gotama in **the Sukhumāla Sutta** (A 3.38), we can be certain that he comes from a family of means.³

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 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],

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

² Also at **D 4,6/1:115 = 5,6/1:129 = M 26,14/1:163 = 36,13/1:240 = 85,11/1:93 = S 1.20,4/1:9**; further see SD 49.18 (1.2.1.3); SD 51.15 (1.3.1.1 f).

³ A 3.38/1:145 f @ SD 5.16(19.4.2) (abr), SD 63.7 (full).

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.

1.3.5 The Dharma's depth (§§44-54)

1.3.5.1 The newly awakened Buddha in no way looks like any of the sacred images that conventionally depict him in some heroic Indian form or some ideal local figure or some quaint ethnic avatar. Historically, he should be depicted as **an emaciated skin-and-bone meditating figure**, of which we have today some 20 ancient sculptures, especially those from Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁴

1.3.5.2 Considering his severely emaciated body, the newly awakened Buddha would spend some time deep in dhyanic bliss to rest and recover from the effects of his 6 punishing years of self-mortification. It is said that he actually spends **7 straight weeks**, following the great awakening, meditating in various postures, taking only a short weekly break to stretch and refresh himself.⁵

It is at this time, too, that the Buddha reflects on **the Dharma's depth**, thus:

"This Dharma I have realized is deep, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, sublime, unattainable through discursive thought (or logic) ... (For) this generation revels in attachment, delights in attachment, rejoices in attachment, this state of reality is hard to see, that is to say, specific conditionality and dependent arising. ... if I were to teach the Dharma, and if others would not understand me, that would be tiresome and troubling for me." [§43.1]

These are the natural passing thoughts of a physically exhausted and recovering newly awakened one.

1.3.5.3 But this seeming inaction of the Buddha abiding in the bliss of meditation alarmed **Mahā Brahmā** (Sahampati), who construes this as a refusal on the Buddha's part to declare his awakening to the world of gods and humans for their benefit. After all, Brahmā Sahampati, dwelling in his form heaven, just beyond the grasp of sensual pleasures, has boundless compassionate concern for the well-being and spiritual progress of heaven and earth. Brahmā knows, too, that the Buddha is himself both wise and compassionate. Hence, he supplicates the Buddha to declare the Dharma to the world and for posterity, that is, for our sakes. (BA 13)

⁴ The most famous of which is the 2nd-cent CE Gandhara-style 84-cm high schist statue from Sikri, now in the Lahore Museum, Pakistan [SD 49.4, Fig 28]:

http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mea/la/pritchett/00routesdata/bce_499_400/thebuddha/fasting/fasting.html. Also <https://artmuseum.indiana.edu/online/highlights/view/entries/166>.

⁵ On the Buddha's 7 weeks after the great awakening, see **Bodhi Ss 1-3** (U 1.1-3), SD 83.13-15; **Nigrodha S** (U 1.4), SD 58.6; V 1:2 f; Comys: VA 5:951-960; MA 2:183-185; UA 51-53; BA 289-290; J 1:77-80; DhsA 12-15. Further see SD 26.1 (5).

Or, perhaps, Brahmā is profoundly excited at the arising of the Buddha in this universe. As a 1st-dhyana brahma, his lifespan is 1 aeon long (the duration of a world-cycle).⁶ Passing away in Kassapa Buddha's time [1.3.5.5], he arises as Mahā Brahmā. This means that he has seen the end of Kassapa's dispensation, and now joyfully anticipates the advent of Gotama's dispensation. [1.3.5.6]

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⁶ Since the end or collapse of the sense-world affects neither the form-world nor the formless world, the lifespans of the beings therein are independent of the actual duration of the universe. The "aeon" (*kappa*) that is their lifespan is simply a period of time different from the cosmic aeon.