

The quest for meaning

Vesak Day is a reminder of the most important of human quests – the quest for meaning. The Bodhisattva (the Buddha-to-be) Siddhattha is born into a powerful kshatriya (royal) family in what is today the region of the Nepalese Terai. His father so badly wants Siddhattha to become the future leader of his tribe, the Sakyas, that he builds three pleasure-palaces (for each of the northern Indian seasons) for Siddhattha.

Buddhist legend says that Siddhattha is a “great man” (*mahā purisa*), destined to be a world ruler (like Alexander the Great who almost conquered India about a century later) if he remains as a royal man of the world. Such a great man, it is said, possesses these 7 “jewels” (*satta ratana*), a term for the best things in worldly life.

The 7 jewels, the regalia of the world ruler (*cakka,vatti*), described in such texts as **the Mahā Sudassana Sutta** (D 17), comprise the wheel-jewel, the elephant-jewel, the horse-jewel, the gem-jewel, the woman-jewel, the steward-jewel, and the commander-jewel.¹ In simple terms, the wheel jewel a magical symbol of universal sovereignty: the wheel represents the world under the rule of the “great man.”

The elephant jewel is the most intelligent and powerful of bull elephants – like a great battle tank in modern warfare.² The horse jewel is the leading horse in the world ruler’s cavalry. The woman jewel, the fourth treasure of the great man, is the best of women to a man. The steward jewel is the wisest and most resourceful financier in the world, and he manages the world ruler’s immense wealth. And the seventh is the commander jewel, that is, the crown prince, who is in charge of the world ruler’s vast armies.

In the Bodhisattva’s traditional life as the great man, **the woman jewel** is a very fascinating person. Her sensual qualities are graphically described in **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129), thus: She is beautiful and graceful, of the best complexion, neither too tall nor too short, neither too thin nor too fat, neither too dark nor too fair, surpassing human beauty, though not reaching the beauty of the gods. Her touch is soft like a tuft of cotton-wool or of kapok (silk-cotton).

To the world ruler, when it is cool, her limbs are warm; when it is warm, her limbs are cool. Her body exudes the fragrance of sandalwood, and her mouth has the scent of lotuses. She rises before the world ruler and retires after him. She is eager to serve, agreeable in conduct, and sweet in speech. Even in thought, she is never unfaithful to the world ruler, how then could she be unfaithful in terms of her body?³

It is unlikely that Siddhattha has all these “jewels” because he does not become a world ruler – he chooses the path of a world teacher. However, the imagery of the woman jewel very well describes the kind of sensual life that Siddhattha lives in his pleasure palaces. The kinds of pleasures he enjoys are just like those described in the

¹ Respectively, *cakka, ratana, hatthi, ratana, assa, ratana, maṇi, ratana, itthī, ratana, gaha.pati, ratana*, and *pariṇāyaka, ratana*. See D 17,1.7-17 + [SD 36.12](#) (3); also [Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta](#) (M 129,33-41), SD 2.22.

² On the parable of elephant training, see [Danta Bhūmi Sutta](#) (M 125,12-14), SD 46.3.

³ M 129,39/3:174 f, ([SD 2.22](#)).

notorious erotic work, the Kāma Sūtra. It is not to be confused with **the Kāma Sutta** (Sn 766-771) which teaches the renunciation of worldliness.

The greatest sensual pleasures are those that satisfy us completely. In a real sense, we can say that the young Siddhattha is completely “fulfilled” (which his name means) in worldly terms. Yet, he is wise enough to know that there is still something seriously missing in his life.

He realizes, in a traumatic way, what is missing in his life, when he sees **the 4 sights** of an old man, a sick, a dead and a holy man. The first three sights respectively represent decay, disease and death – which inevitably dogs and devours us in time. Reflecting this truth, his intoxication with youth, health and life simply evaporate.⁴

This realization leaves a huge gap in his emotional life. Then, he sees the fourth sight – a profoundly happy and peaceful holy man. He seems, all at once, to represent the way out of all the unsatisfactoriness that has overwhelmed Siddhattha, who is then powerfully moved to seek the meaning of all this.

From this powerful story of the Bodhisattva’s vision, we learn a vital truth about humanity. Our life as humans has only one quest – the quest for meaning. Without meaning, nothing makes sense. Then, we have to rely on what others say, what we think science or religion says. When we find something we do not really understand, but seems to fit what we think, we conclude that we have found the answer. We keep twisting it to fit our ignorance, delusion, bias or hope.

Often we cheat our way around instead of learning for ourselves. Like schoolboys who, not having done their homework, we copy the answers from others. We hear some impressive or inspiring words and answers, and steal them for our own. We talk as if we are the authors of those words, which are but weak echoes of stolen half-truths.

Even when the true meaning of life appears before us, we are unable to see it. When we do see it, we are unable to understand it – because we think we already know. We ordain those we approve of as “Bodhisattvas.” We canonize those teachers whose words we approve as “arhats.” We claim to know all the great living teachers.

Knowledge is the greatest hindrance to learning, what more wisdom. This knowledge is nothing more than our faculties to see, hear, sense, think – but without feeling or understanding. The best knowledge is the ability to feel beauty and understand truth.

If we are unable to know beauty and truth, then our knowledge is but what our senses feed us. We are no different from other less evolved beings – asuras, pretas, animals and hell-beings – exploitative, addictive, fearful, and violent. So, we seek giants in whose shadows we think we feel safe. Then, we stand on their shoulders and see the distance. We think that we are giants ourselves.⁵ It’s a matter of time before we fall from the heights. Even if we survive the fall, we are likely to be maimed for a long time.

⁴ On the 3 intoxications (*mada*), see [Mada Sutta](#), A 3.39/1:146 f, SD 42.13. Also [Sukhumāla Sutta](#) (A 3.38), SD 1.11 (3.2).

⁵ See [Samana Gadrabha Sutta](#) (A 3.81), SD 24.10b.

Then, we may think that we are very small. So we form big ideas – God, Buddhas, Atom – to become big. This only seems to work when we will not see or have no freedom to see for ourselves. So, we continue our quest for bigness – by accumulating knowledge, power, pleasure or holiness. With what we have, we think we are giants: we lose sight of the very ground we stand on.

But small is beautiful. Small, we are able to see the ground more closely than any giant can. We are able to examine our path more carefully, and go where giants are unable to reach. We journey on, and notice how we keep returning to the same spot. With each return, we notice something has changed, grown, in us. We notice how we create our memories, we change them; we see things differently as we grow. All that is around us, too, never remains the same. The meaning of life is change.

Those of us who diligently journey on notice that we are growing. We are growing within: we now have more space for feeling and understanding. We have a purpose: to grow. We have ourselves become gods or even beyond: we see beyond the eye, hear beyond the ear, smell sweetness beyond the nose, taste beyond the tongue, feel more than the body does, we feel what thoughts never can.

We are hampered by the quest for bigness – our vision of a mighty self. This is what the Bodhisattva Siddhattha discovers in his great quest. He learns all that the two religious giants of his day – Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka, the great Rāma's son – have to teach, but their meditations are unable to transcend the phantom of the mighty self. Then, the Bodhisattva goes through 6 long years of painful self-mortification, like other great ascetics of his days. Never in the history of the human quest for meaning has so much pain been borne by a single person for so long a time.

The lesson is clear: neither pleasure nor pain opens our hearts to true reality. Not even the highest religions of his days (or even today) – those caught in a net of views and notions of some eternal bigness – could satisfactorily answer the riddle of life's meaning and purpose. Even at their best, they can only demand that we believe so that we can understand. The Buddha advises us to understand so that we may believe.⁶

The Buddha now turns to **the middle way** – beyond pleasure and pain – through self-effort he seeks the answer within. Looking deep into his own heart, Siddhattha becomes the Buddha, the most evolved of beings, earthly and divine. He discovers what all the religions and learning before him could not – that man's spiritual awakening lies on his own heart.

While the world religions and learning teach us to look outwards, upwards, all around, and beyond, the Buddha teaches us to simply look within. Life's answer is not out there, but it is *here*, in our own heart: the heart of meaning, and the meaning of the heart of things.

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⁶ See Reflection, "[God is a question](#)," R445, 2016.