

HAPPINESS, SENSUALITY, AND RENUNCIATION: *Sukha, Kama, Nekkhamma*

Introduction to the readings for February 6 class

Suttas 46, 59, 13, 14, 66, 75, 54
(Optional 10.32, 45, 137, 139)

If, by giving up a lesser happiness,
One could experience greater happiness,
A wise person would renounce the lesser
To behold the greater. Dhammapada 290

It is up to you to make strong effort; *Tathagatas* merely tell you how.
Dhammapada 276

For theistic religions, ultimate direction, meaning, and authority for human life come from God. With no such notion of God, the Buddha pointed to how we can find ultimate direction, meaning and confidence through our own powers of observation and discernment. By being able to distinguish between suffering and happiness, people can aim their life in a direction that leads to greater and greater happiness. The path of liberation culminates in *nibbana*, described as the foremost happiness (Dhammapada 203). The goal of ultimate happiness may seem selfish to people who don't understand that selfishness must be abandoned to be fully happy.

In the Middle Length Discourses the distinction between suffering and happiness appears in many of the Buddha's teachings. The concept of suffering is prominent and explicit in the Four Noble Truths, while happiness is both implicit and explicit (in the definition of Right Concentration). Prior to his Awakening, the Buddha is depicted as pursuing the path of suffering to the most extreme degrees until rejecting it (MN 36). It was the memory of joy and happiness he had at the age of six that suggested to him the path toward liberation (MN 36). In differentiating himself from the ascetics of his time, the Buddha stressed the great happiness that he experienced. In numerous passages the Buddha describes happiness as an important element on the path to liberation.

In the Buddha's teachings the concept of suffering and happiness is closely connected to the experience of pain and pleasure. In fact the words in Pali are the same for both pairs of concepts, i.e., *dukkha* and *sukha*. It is only in context that we know how to translate them into English. Bhikkhu Bodhi sometimes translates *sukha* as pleasure, at other times as bliss. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as pleasure, bliss, happiness, and ease. When it is an adjective it is usually translated as pleasant.

The distinction between pain and pleasure is fundamental. Suffering and happiness are particular variations of these two feeling tones (*vedana*). The first two readings for this month show some of the ways the Buddha analyzed experience according to feeling tones. This is followed by discourses that focus on a particular form of pleasure described as 'sensual pleasure' (*kāma sukha*). In the Middle Length Discourses the Buddha often teaches about the dangers associated with sensual pleasure. In this collection of suttas it was the most frequent theme when the Buddha taught

laypeople. Not surprising, many lay readers of the *Majjhima* react strongly to the Buddha's negative evaluation of sensual pleasure.

In teaching mindfulness practice in the *Satipatthana Sutta* the Buddha further distinguished pleasures which are of the "flesh" and those "not of the flesh" (MN 10.32). Those of the flesh are pleasures arising from pleasant sense contact with the world. Those not of the flesh – sometimes translated as 'spiritual' – are the pleasant feelings that arise from meditation. This non-sensual pleasure of meditation is said to surpass the pleasure of the senses.

Reflections:

Perhaps the closest Western parallels to the Buddha's teaching on pain and pleasure, suffering and happiness are found in the pleasure principle of Freud and in the philosophy of the good life championed by the third century Greek philosopher Epicurus. Freud theorized that the people's mental life was based on pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. He considered that even the noble pursuit of understanding reality and truth were variations of his pleasure principle. Epicurus taught that fundamentally it is pleasure and pain that guides us to a happy life free of pain and fear. Living a self-sufficient life together with good friends supports this.

The Buddha, Epicurus and Freud shared a non-theistic approach to trying to understand human life. In a sense all three were trying to explain a way of life that was built on empirical experience. Many people have criticized their attempts as being too reductionistic or being too hedonistic (a concept which meant something very different for Epicurus than its current meaning). **For the Buddha, the appropriate pursuit of happiness leads to wisdom (MN 135).** Besides pleasure and pain, what other empirical options do you think exist for living "the good life"?

As you read the selections for this month, please consider ways in which the distinction between pain and pleasure and between suffering and happiness are useful. How might they guide us to the noblest endeavors humans pursue?

Rouse yourself! Don't be negligent!
 Live the Dharma, a life of good conduct.
 One who lives the Dharma is happy
 In this world and the next. Dhammapada 168

The mind, hard to see,
 Subtle – alighting where it wishes –
 The sage protects.
 The watched mind brings happiness. Dhammapada 36

A *bhikkhu* filled with delight
 And pleased with the Buddha's teachings
 Attains happiness, the stilling of formations,
 The state of peace. Dhammapada 381