



The Potential of Pleasant Feelings

by Bhikkhu Anālayo

In this article I continue following up topics discussed in the course of the Vedanā Symposium convened by Martine Batchelor and held at BCBS from 13 to 16 July 2017. Whereas in the last issue of the Insight Journal I studied selected passages from the Pāli discourses relevant to an appreciation of neutral feelings, in what follows I turn to pleasant type of feelings.

The Buddha's Asceticism

For an appreciation of the distinct attitude in early Buddhist thought towards pleasant feelings, the account of the Buddha's own quest for awakening offers helpful indications. This is in particular the case for his pursuit of asceticism, described in the Greater Discourse to Saccaka, the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* (MN 36) and its parallels.¹

Before turning to this description, I need to mention that a description of various ascetic practices given in the Greater Discourse on a Lion's Roar, the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta* (MN 12), is not of direct relevance here. The description in this discourse appears to be rather concerned with past-life experiences of the Buddha-to-be. This can be appreciated on consulting the Hair-rais-

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ing Birth Story, the *Lomahaṃsa-jātaka* (*Jātaka* tale 94), which reports a whole past life spent by the bodhisattva in asceticism. Closer inspection of the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta* confirms that the range of practices described here are not easily accommodated within the period of a few years that the future Buddha spent in such pursuits in his present life. They would indeed fit better a whole life of asceticism at some time in the past.

Therefore of relevance to the Buddha's progress to awakening in his last life are three main modalities of asceticism, described in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta*:

- forceful mind control,
- breath control,
- fasting.

According to the description given of the first of these practices, the future Buddha clenched his teeth, pressed the tongue against the roof of his mouth, and tried to beat down his mind. This apparently was an attempt to force his mind to become liberated.

When this did not have the expected results, he continued by attempting in different ways to stop his breathing. After that also did not turn out to be successful, he drastically reduced his intake of food.

The final result of all these ascetic practices was that his body reached a condition of extreme emaciation and weakness. This made it clear to him that, although he had taken asceticism to its extremes, it had not led him to the final goal of liberation. He then wondered if there might be another path to awakening.

Pleasure Need not be Feared

The *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* reports that at this juncture the Buddha-to-be remembered an experience of the first

absorption he had had in his youth. This led him to the following reflection:

Why am I afraid of a type of happiness that is apart from sensuality and unwholesome states?²

The mode of thinking that can result in being afraid of pleasure is also reflected in the Discourse on Prince Bodhi, the *Bodhirājakumāra-sutta* (MN 85), which reports the Buddha stating:

Prince, before my awakening, when I was still an unawakened bodhisattva, I also thought thus: “Happiness is not to be gained by being happy; happiness is to be gained through pain.”³

The *Bodhirājakumāra-sutta* continues with a full account of the Buddha’s asceticism leading up to his crucial realization that there is no need to be afraid of happiness, as long as this is of a non-sensual type.

Differentiating Types of Happiness

The need to differentiate between sensual and non-sensual types of happiness shows that anything pleasant need not be rejected in principle as being inevitably an obstruction. This important clarification can be further explored by recourse to the Shorter Discourse with Questions and Answers, the *Cūlavedalla-sutta* (MN 44). According to this discourse, the arahant *bhikkhunī* Dhammadinnā offered the following clarification:

Friend Visākha, with pleasant feeling the underlying tendency to lust is to be abandoned ... [however], Friend Visākha, it is not with all pleasant feeling that the underlying tendency to lust is to be abandoned.⁴

In order to clarify the issue further, *bhikkhunī* Dhamma-dinnā then explains that with the attainment of the first absorption one leaves lust behind (a leaving behind that is in fact a precondition for being able to attain the first absorption). Therefore the tendency to lust does not underlie the pleasant feelings that arise during such an experience.

This appears to reflect the Buddha's own insight when recalling his experience of a first absorption when he was young. The pleasant feelings during such meditation experiences need not be feared, precisely because they do not trigger the tendency to sensual lust.

A Gradual Refinement of Happiness

The same crucial insight informs the early Buddhist conception of the path to awakening. An illustrative example is the account of the gradual path found in the *Kandaraka-sutta* (MN 51).

One type of happiness described in this discourse arises due to behaving in wholesome ways, resulting in a happiness that is “blameless”, *anavajja-sukha*. This manifests as the result of maintaining the basics of ethical conduct.

Another type is an “unimpaired” type of happiness, *avyāsekhasukha*. This relates to sense-restraint, which the *Kandaraka-sutta* describes as follows (taking the case of vision as an example):⁵

Having seen a form with the eye, one does not seize hold of its sign or seize hold of its secondary details. Since, on dwelling with the faculty of the eye unrestrained, covetousness and sadness, bad and unwholesome states would flow in, one practices for

the restraint of the faculty of the eye, one protects it and undertakes the restraint of the faculty of the eye.

Such sense restraint does not require just avoiding visual experiences (or those through the other senses). The task is rather to avoid that one is carried away by what one sees. One avoids latching on to what is experienced with a subjectively tinged bias and one does not allow the mind to proliferate things further based on the initial input provided by that bias.

The term rendered above as “sign” is *nimitta*. A *nimitta* is an indispensable ingredient for the functioning of perception, *saññā*. Therefore the task of sense restraint cannot be that all *nimittas* are just avoided. The net result of such avoidance would be to become dysfunctional.

In fact the *Indriyabhāvanā-sutta* (MN 152) explicitly criticizes the idea that cultivating the senses requires just avoiding seeing or hearing. The argument is that, if such were the case, the blind and deaf should be reckoned accomplished practitioners.

Instead, the seizing hold of a more specific type of *nimitta* is at stake, namely the type of “sign” that triggers lust or aversion. As noted in the Greater Discourse with Questions and Answers, the *Mahāvedalla-sutta* (MN 44):

Friend, lust is a maker of signs, anger is a maker of signs, and delusion is a maker of signs. These are abandoned in a monastic who has eradicated the influxes.⁶

Even well before becoming an arahant, by not seizing hold of the type of *nimitta* that is related to defilements, the mind can emerge at least temporarily from being under the control of what happens at any sense-door. In

this way it becomes possible to maintain an inner equilibrium and centeredness that at least to some degree emulates the inner freedom of arahants.

This can be achieved in particular through the cultivation of mindfulness. Whatever is seen can be received with mindfulness of simply that which is seen. The presence of such receptive mindfulness prevents the tendency of the mind to throw in biased evaluations and then proliferate them.

As a result of being well established in mindfulness in this way, a subtle form of happiness arises. This happiness is indeed “unimpaired”, in particular not impaired or spoiled by the impact of defilements tingeing experience with biases and proliferations.

Such unimpaired happiness in turn builds the foundation for the profound forms of happiness that come within reach through the attainment of absorption, *jhāna*, described subsequent to sense-restraint in the standard accounts of the gradual path. This is precisely the type of happiness that the Buddha-to-be recalled, after finding that his asceticism had been fruitless. Such happiness indeed need not be feared.

Practical Implications

From the viewpoint of actual practice, the indications that can be gathered in this way regarding the experience of pleasure and happiness put into perspective a tendency to think that, as long as our practice is really strenuous and demanding, it must be leading us forward on the path to liberation. This is not necessarily the case. Effort and dedication are indeed important requirements for progress in meditation practice, no doubt, but these come best in the company of an attitude that is not too pushy or goal-orientated.

The opposite of self-indulgence for the sake of feeling good falls equally short of being commendable. Happiness and pleasure need to be of a wholesome type in order to be productive of genuine personal growth and improvement.

In actual practice, the question then becomes: Does the type of pleasure and happiness, which I am now experiencing, lead to dispassion and freedom? Or does it rather lead me deeper into bondage and *dukkha*?

The Perspective of Cognitive Psychology

The progressive refinement of happiness in the *Kandaraka-sutta* shows that an intelligent cultivation of the basic drive for pleasure, innate in human beings, can be harnessed for progress to liberation. The significance of this indication can be explored further with the help of recent research in cognitive psychology.

During the *Vedanā Symposium* held at BCBS, Judson Brewer drew our attention to the basic neural mechanisms acquired during the evolution of species, which are responsible for ensuring that a possible supply of nourishment will be pursued and potential sources of danger be avoided.

In our modern day culture, these same mechanisms can lead to addictive behavior of various types. The pleasant feelings experienced when taking intoxicants or engaging in other types of addictive behavior lead to the formation of corresponding habits. Every instance of indulgence arouses the rewarding feeling of pleasure and thereby reinforces the habit. A vicious cycle ensues that is hard to break.

Yet, the same principle of reward-based learning can also be used in other ways. Positive reinforcement can be brought about through intentional cultivation of

the mind, in particular if this is done along the lines that emerge from the discourse passages discussed above.

Mindfulness of the Present Moment

A tool of particular relevance here is again the cultivation of mindfulness. Contemplation of feeling as a *sati-paṭṭhāna* offers a handy tool to recognize the hedonic tone of the present moment and thereby realize the degree to which this affects subsequent mental reactions and evaluations.

In addition, and in the present context perhaps even more importantly, the cultivation of mindfulness itself can become a source of joy. As already mentioned above, this relates to the second type of happiness mentioned in the *Kandaraka-sutta*, the “unimpaired” type of happiness, *avyāsekhasukha*.

Simply being with mindfulness established in the present moment, a subtle type of joy can be experienced. This joy manifests because the mind is not impaired, so to say, by being caught up in reactivity and proliferation of what has been experienced.

The subtle joy of being in the present moment can be aroused in any situation. All it requires is a moment of (perhaps even smilingly) turning inwards from whatever is happening and remaining aware of the present moment just as it is.

Mindfulness of Breathing

The practice of mindfulness of breathing furnishes a good example for the type of joy that can be cultivated through mindfulness established in the present moment. As already mentioned in my previous paper, since the experience of the breath usually calls up neutral feel-

ings, the tendency of the mind is to get bored and seek out something else that is more entertaining than the bland experience of the breath.

Yet, by consciously cultivating the subtle joy of being in the present moment, the principle of reward-based learning can be applied directly to meditation practice. The mind can be taught that it is rewarding to remain with the experience of the breath.

This key aspect of practice appears to be in fact recognized in the sixteen-step scheme of mindfulness of breathing, described in the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* (MN 118) as well as in discourses in the *Ānāpāna-saṃyutta* (SN 54.1–20). After the first four steps of being aware of long breaths, short breaths, the whole body, and calming the whole body, the next two steps are:⁷

One trains: ‘I breathe in experiencing joy’; one trains: ‘I breathe out experiencing joy’. One trains: ‘I breathe in experiencing happiness’; one trains: ‘I breathe out experiencing happiness.’

Once joy and happiness arise, the mind naturally tends to stay with the breath, rather than going out in search of something more entertaining. The description here need not be seen as confined to the experience of absorption, but can be considered of general relevance. This is in line with the importance given in other discourses to the potential of wholesome types of joy as well as with the findings of cognitive psychology about reward-based learning.

In this way, the tendency of pleasant feeling to attract the mind can be made use of in intelligent ways, in order to foster mental collectedness and counter the tendency to distraction. It can be so simple.

Abbreviation:

MN: *Majjhima-nikāya*

¹ A comparative study of these ascetic practices can be found in Anālayo 2017: *A Meditator's Life of the Buddha, Based on the Early Discourses*, Cambridge: Windhorse, pp. 51–77.

² MN I 246: *kiṃ nu kho ahaṃ tassa sukhasa bhāyāmi, yaṃ taṃ sukhaṃ aññatr'eva kāmehi aññatra akusalehi dhammehi ti?*

³ MN II 93: *mayham pi kho, rājakumāra, pubbeva sambodhā anabhisambuddhasa bodhisattass'eva sato etad ahoṣi: na kho sukkena sukhaṃ adhigantabbaṃ, dukkhena kho sukhaṃ adhigantabbaṃ ti.*

⁴ MN I 303: *sukhāya kho, āvuso visākha, vedanāya rāgānusayo pahātabbo ... na kho, āvuso visākha, sabbāya sukhāya vedanāya rāgānusayo pahātabbo.*

⁵ MN I 346: *so cakkhunā rūpaṃ disvā na nimittaggāhī hoti nānubyañjanaggāhī. yatvādhikaraṇaṃ enaṃ cakkhundriyaṃ asaṃvutaṃ viharantaṃ abhijjhādomanassā pāpakā akusalā dhammā anvāssaveyyuṃ tassa saṃvarāya paṭipajjati, rakkhati cakkhundriyaṃ, cakkhundriye saṃvaraṃ āpajjati.*

⁶ MN I 298: *rāgo kho, āvuso, nimittakaraṇo, doso nimittakaraṇo, moho nimittakaraṇo. te khīṇāsavassa bhikkhuno pahīnā.*

⁷ MN III 82: *pītipaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, pītipaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati; sukhapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī ti sikkhati, sukhapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī ti sikkhati.*