

The Buddha's Similes

The Buddha taught in the *Potaliya Sutta* the following similes of sensual pleasures,

[Chain of Bones](#) / [Lump of Flesh](#) / [Grass Torch](#) / [Pit of Glowing Embers](#) / [A Dream](#) / [Borrowed Goods](#)

/

[Fruits of a Tree](#)

/

Chain of Bones

"Suppose a dog, overcome with weakness & hunger, were to come across a slaughterhouse, and there a dexterous butcher or butcher's apprentice were to fling him a chain of bones -- thoroughly scraped, without any flesh, smeared with blood. What do you think: Would the dog, gnawing on that chain of bones -- thoroughly scraped, without any flesh, smeared with blood -- appease its weakness & hunger?"

"No, lord. And why is that? Because the chain of bones is thoroughly scraped, without any flesh, & smeared with blood. The dog would get nothing but its share of weariness & vexation."

"In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: 'The Blessed One has compared sensuality to a chain of bones, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.' Seeing this with right discernment, as it actually is, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace."

[Top](#)

Lump of Flesh

"Now suppose a vulture, a kite, or a hawk, seizing a lump of flesh, were to take off, and other vultures, kites, or hawks -- following right after it -- were to tear at it with their beaks & pull at it with their claws. What do you think: If that vulture, kite, or hawk were not quickly to drop that lump of flesh, would it meet with death from that cause, or with death-like pain?"

"Yes, lord."

"In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: 'The Blessed One has compared sensuality to a lump of flesh, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.' Seeing this with right discernment, as it actually is, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace."

[Top](#)

Grass Torch

"Now suppose a man were to come against the wind, carrying a burning grass torch. What do you think: If he were not quickly to drop that grass torch, would he burn his hand or his arm or some other part of his body, so that he would meet with death from that cause, or with death-like pain?"

"Yes, lord."

"In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: 'The Blessed One has compared sensuality to a grass torch, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.' Seeing this with right discernment, as it actually is, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace."

[Top](#)

Pit of Glowing Embers

"Now suppose there were a pit of glowing embers, deeper than a man's height, full of embers that were neither flaming nor smoking, and a man were to come along -- loving life, hating death, loving pleasure, abhorring pain -- and two strong men, grabbing him with their arms, were to drag him to the pit of embers. What do you think: Wouldn't the man twist his body this way & that?"

"Yes, lord. And why is that? Because he would realize, 'If I fall into this pit of glowing embers, I will meet with death from that cause, or with death-like pain.'"

"In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: 'The Blessed One has compared sensuality to a pit of glowing embers, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.' Seeing this with right discernment, as it actually is, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace."

[Top](#)

A Dream

"Now suppose a man, when dreaming, were to see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, & delightful lakes, and on awakening were to see nothing. In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: 'The Blessed One has compared sensuality to a dream, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.' Seeing this with right discernment, as it actually is, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace."

[Top](#)

Borrowed Goods

"Now suppose a man having borrowed some goods -- a manly carriage, fine jewels, & ear ornaments -- were to go into the market preceded & surrounded by his borrowed goods, and people seeing him would say, 'How wealthy this man is, for this is how the wealthy enjoy their possessions,' but the actual owners, wherever they might see him, would strip him then & there of what is theirs. What do you think: Should the man rightly be upset?"

"No, lord. And why is that? The owners are stripping him of what is theirs."

"In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: 'The Blessed One has compared sensuality to borrowed goods, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.' Seeing this with right discernment, as it actually is, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace."

[Top](#)

Fruits of a Tree

"Now suppose that, not far from a village or town, there were a dense forest grove, and there in the grove was a tree with delicious fruit, abundant fruit, but with no fruit fallen to the ground. A man would come along, desiring fruit, looking for fruit, searching for fruit. Plunging into the forest grove, he would see the tree... and the thought would occur to him, 'This is a tree with delicious fruit, abundant fruit, and there is no fruit fallen to the ground, but I know how to climb a tree. Why don't I climb the tree, eat what I like, and fill my clothes with the fruit?' So, having climbed the tree, he would eat what he liked and fill his clothes with the fruit. Then a second man would come along, desiring fruit, looking for fruit, searching for fruit and carrying a sharp ax. Plunging into the forest grove, he would see the tree... and the thought would occur to him, 'This is a tree with delicious fruit, abundant fruit, and there is no fruit fallen to the ground, and I don't know how to climb a tree. Why don't I chop down this tree at the root, eat what I like, and fill my clothes with the fruit?' So he would chop the tree at the root. What do you think: If the first man who climbed the tree didn't quickly come down, wouldn't the falling tree crush his hand or foot or some other part of his body, so that he would meet with death from that cause, or with death-like pain?"

"Yes, lord."

"In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: 'The Blessed One has compared sensuality to the fruits of a tree, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.' Seeing this with right discernment, as it actually is present, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace."

Sensual Objects

The Buddha taught in his first sermon (*Dhammacakka Sutta*),

"There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure with reference to sensual objects: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-mortification: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathagata -- producing vision, producing knowledge -- leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding."

There are five kinds of desirable sense-objects, namely: pleasurable sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. In brief, all the material objects, animate or inanimate, enjoyed by people in the world.

Delighting in a seemingly pleasurable sight and enjoying it constitute practice and pursuit of sensuality. Here the sense object of sight means not merely a source of light or colour that comes into contact with the seeing eye, but the man or woman or the whole of the object that forms the source or origin of that sight. Similarly, all sources of sound, smell, and touch; whether man, woman or instrumental objects, constitute sensuous objects. As regards taste, not only the various foods, fruits and delicacies, but also men, women and people who prepare and serve them are classified as objects of taste. Listening to a pleasant sound, smelling a sweet fragrant smell are as sensuous as enjoyment of good, delicious food, the luxury or a comfortable bed or physical contact with the opposite sex.

(from *THE GREAT DISCOURSE ON THE WHEEL OF DHAMMA* - Mahasi Sayadaw)

Base and Vulgar

Delighting in sensuous pleasures and relishing them is to be regarded as a vulgar practice because such enjoyments lead to formation of base desires, which are clinging and lustful. It tends to promote self-conceit, with the thought that no one else is in a position to enjoy such pleasures. At the same time, one becomes oppressed with thoughts of avarice, not wishing to share the good fortune with others or overcome by thoughts of jealousy, envy, anxious to deny similar pleasures to others.

It arouses ill-will towards those who are thought to be opposed to oneself. Flushed with success and affluence, one becomes shameless and unscrupulous, bold and reckless in one's behaviour, no longer afraid to do evil. One begins to deceive oneself with false impression (*moha*) of well-being and prosperity. The new informed worldling (*puthujana*) may also come to hold the wrong view of living soul or *atta* to entertain disbelief in the resultant effects of one's own actions, *Kamma*. Such being the outcome of delighting in and relishing of sensuous pleasures, they are to be regarded as low and base.

Furthermore, indulgence in sensual pleasures is the habitual practice of lower forms of creatures such as animals, *petas*, etc. The Bhikkhus and *Samanas*, belonging to the higher stages of existences should not stoop low to vie with the lower forms of life in the vulgar practice of base sensuality.

In ancient times, rulers and rich people engaged themselves in the pursuit of sensual pleasures. Wars were waged, and violent conquests made, all for the gratification of sense-desire.

In modern times too, similar conquests are still being made in some areas for the same objectives. But it is not only the rulers and the rich who seek sensual pleasures, the poor are also arduous in the pursuit of worldly goods and pleasures. As a matter of fact, as soon as adolescence is reached, the instinct for mating and sexual gratification makes itself felt. For the

worldly householder veiled from the Buddha Dhamma, gratification of sense desires appears to be indeed the acme of happiness and bliss.

(from *THE GREAT DISCOURSE ON THE WHEEL OF DHAMMA* - Mahasi Sayadaw)

Heavenly Bliss in This Very Life

Even before the time of the Buddha, there were people who held the belief that heavenly bliss could be enjoyed in this very life (*Ditthadhamma Nibbana Vada*). According to them, sensual pleasure was indeed blissful; there was nothing to surpass it. And that pleasure was to be enjoyed in this very life. It would be foolish to let precious moments for enjoyment pass, waiting for bliss in a future life, which does not exist. The time for full gratification of sensual pleasure is now, this very life. Such is the

Ditthadhamma Nibbana Vada

- Heavenly bliss in this very life. This is one of the 62 wrong views (

Micchaditthi

) expounded by the Buddha in the

Brahmajala Sutta

of

Silakkhandā

in the

Digha Nikaya.

Thus, enjoyment of sensual pleasure is the preoccupation of town and village people, not the concern of the recluses and Bhikkhus. For them, to go after sense desires would mean reverting to the worldly life which they have denounced. People show great reverence to them, believing they are leading a holy life, undisturbed by worldly distractions or allurements of the opposite sex. People make the best offer of food and clothing to the recluses, denying these to themselves, often at the sacrifice of the needs of their dear ones and their family. While living on the charity of the people, it would be most improper for Bhikkhus to seek worldly pleasures just like the householders.

In addition, Bhikkhus renounce the world with a vow to work for release from the sufferings inherent in the rounds of rebirth and for the realization of Nibbana. It is obvious that these noble ideals cannot be attained by the Bhikkhus if they go after sensual pleasures in the manner of householders. Thus, one who has gone forth from the worldly life should not indulge in delightful sensuous pleasures.

(from *THE GREAT DISCOURSE ON THE WHEEL OF DHAMMA* - Mahasi Sayadaw)

Not Noble's Practice and Welfare

Enjoyment of worldly pleasures is not the practice of the Noble Ones (*Ariyas*). One may ask here why the Ariyas like Visakha, Anathapindika and Sakka, the king of celestial beings, who had already reached the first stage of the Noble Life (*sotapanna*) engaged themselves in pursuit of sensuous pleasures. In Sotapannas, lust and passions are not yet overcome; there still lingers in them the incipient perception of agreeableness of carnal pleasures (*sukha sanna*). This point is illustrated in *Anguttara* by the example of a person who is fastidious in the habits of cleanliness, seeking shelter in a filthy place filled with excrement to avoid attack by an elephant in must.

This defiling, coarse habit being ignoble and unclean should be avoided by recluses and Bhikkhus.

The only way to escape from all forms of suffering is through development of morality (*sila*), mental concentration (*samadhi*) and Insight, wisdom (*panna*). Only these, namely, *sila, samadhi, panna* are to be sought in the true interest of oneself.

Pursuit of sensual pleasures cannot lead to the conquest of old age, disease, death or all forms of suffering. It only tends to breach morality codes, such as non-commitment of illegal sexual conduct. Seeking worldly amenities through killing, theft or deceit also amounts to violation of moral precepts. Not to speak of physical actions, the mere thought of enjoyment of sensual pleasures prohibits development of mental concentration and wisdom and thus forms a hindrance to the realization of Nibbana, cessation of all sufferings.

Failure to observe moral precepts is a sure step to the four netherworlds of intense suffering. It is to be noted, however, that maintenance of moral character alone without simultaneous development of *samadhi* and *panna* will not lead to Nibbana. It only encourages rebirth repeatedly in happier existences, where, however, manifold sufferings such as old age, disease and death are still encountered again and again.

Recluses and Bhikkhus, having renounced the world, with the avowed purpose of achieving Nibbana, where all sufferings cease, should have nothing to do with pursuits of sensuous pleasures that only obstruct development of *sila*, *samadhi* and *panna* .

To recapitulate, enjoyment of sensuous pleasures is low and vulgar, being the pre-occupation of common people; and is not practised by the Noble Ones. It is detrimental to progress in *sila*, *samadhi* and *panna* and thus works against the true interest of those intent on achievement of the unaged, undeceased, the deathless - Nibbana.

The text only says that 'one who has gone forth from the worldly life should not indulge in sensuous pleasures.' The question, therefore, arises whether ordinary householders who remain amidst the worldly surroundings could freely pursue sensuous pleasures without any restraint. Since the gratification of sense desires is the pre-occupation of common people, it would be pointless to enjoin them from doing so. But the householder intent on practising the Noble Dhamma, should advisedly avoid these pleasures to the extent necessary for the practice. Observance of the five precepts requires abstaining from commitment of sins of the flesh. Likewise, possession of worldly goods should not be sought through killing, theft or deceit.

(from *THE GREAT DISCOURSE ON THE WHEEL OF DHAMMA* - Mahasi Sayadaw)

Four Kinds of Indulgence

In *Pasadika Sutta* of *Pathika Vagga*, *Digha Nikaya*, the Buddha had stated four kinds of

indulgence in worldly enjoyment.

"Sunda, in this world there are some foolish, ignorant people who promote their own enrichment by the slaughter of animals - cattle, pigs, chicken, fish. This practice constitutes the first form of indulgence in worldly enjoyment.

Theft, dacoity and robbery constitute the second form of indulgence in worldly enjoyment while deceitful means of earning one's livelihood constitute the third. The fourth form of indulgence embraces other means besides these three, by which worldly wealth is gained."

The *Sutta* stated that Buddha's disciples, Bhikkhus, were free from these indulgences. Lay people, in observing the eight precepts and ten precepts have to maintain chastity and abstain from partaking of food after midday, dancing and singing, all these being forms of sensuous pleasure.

When one is engaged in meditation practices, one has to forego all kinds of sensuous enjoyment just like the Bhikkhus who have gone forth from the worldly life because they tend to hinder the development of *sila*, *samadhi* and *panna* . A meditator, even if he is a layman, must not, therefore, indulge in worldly enjoyment. This should suffice regarding one form of extreme practice, namely, indulgence in worldly enjoyment.

(from *THE GREAT DISCOURSE ON THE WHEEL OF DHAMMA* - Mahasi Sayadaw)