

# THE RENUNCIATION OF SENSE - PLEASURE IN CHRISTIAN AND THERAVADA BUDDHIST DOCTRINE

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## I. Introduction

Striking similarities exist between the teachings of Jesus, especially as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels, and those of the Buddha, as depicted in the Theravada *suttas*. Both sets of teachings impart the tenet that attainment of the ultimate human good – salvation, in Christianity, enlightenment (*nibbana*) in Theravada Buddhism – requires self - denial, destruction of the passions, and renunciation of the world. Both warn that worldly pleasures, especially sense-pleasure, are inherently unsatisfactory.

Christian and Buddhist denigration of sense-pleasure is based in part on the notion that a person who experiences sense-pleasure is subject to suffering and so cannot be truly happy. Consequently, it is better for a sensual desire not to arise at all than for it to arise and be satisfied. This notion is implicit in Thomas à Kempis's comment that there is "no peace in the heart of a carnal man," as well as in the Buddha's characterization of those who have not abandoned sense-pleasure as beings who are "consumed by craving for sense-pleasures, burning with the fever for sense-pleasures." Formulated in more contemporary philosophical idiom, the doctrine seems to be that complete absence of unsatisfied sensual desires is preferable to a balance between relative absence of unsatisfied sensual desires and presence of satisfied sensual desires.

My objective in this paper is not only to show the similarities between Christian and Theravada Buddhist doctrine regarding sense-pleasure, but also to subject the teaching to critical scrutiny. I examine some of the specific reasons for rejecting sense-pleasure given in the New Testament and other

Christian writings, as well as in some important Theravada Buddhist texts, particularly the *Magandiyasutta* and the *Potaliyasutta* (from the *Majjhima-Nikaya*). My primary aim is to determine whether these texts present a compelling case for the claim that sense-pleasure is incompatible with attainment of the ultimate human good; my conclusion is that there are a number of serious weaknesses in the case presented. I will concentrate primarily on the Buddhist texts since they have received less attention than those of Christianity.

## II. Self-Denial and Self-Interest in Christianity

The principle that it is the best to adopt a way of life characterized by self-denial, especially denial of one's desires for bodily satisfaction, might appear to be a recommendation that we live in a way that is not only unnatural but also contrary to self-interest. However, the scriptures of Christianity (as well as of Theravada Buddhism, as we shall see) recommend such a way of life with the motive of ultimate happiness for each individual. Selflessness is taught as the means to self-fulfillment.

In recommending selflessness and virtue, Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, promised a reward. He told his disciples to "love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High...." (Luke 6:35)<sup>1</sup> He advised that we humble ourselves like a little child, but only in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3) This idea is expressed in a more general (as well as paradoxical) manner in Jesus's teaching that "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matt. 10:39) The rewards of taking Jesus's "yoke" upon oneself are found not only in the hereafter—in entrance into the kingdom of heaven—but also here on earth in the form of, for example, "rest for your [weary] souls." (Matt. 11:29)

In a much later era, Thomas à Kempis (1427, p. 128) expressed the New Testament teaching that worldliness, which produces only that "felicity that is praised by the foolish lovers of the world" must be destroyed if "true felicity" is to be achieved. To attain this "true felicity," "we must set our axe



deep to the root of the tree" in order to be "purged from all passion" and to "have a quiet mind." (p. 43)

Likewise, Brother Lawrence (1666, p. 46) wrote, "God will not permit that a soul which desires to be devoted entirely to Him should take other pleasures than with Him." For Lawrence, a satisfied life requires deprivation of worldly pleasures unconnected to the experience of God's presence.

The New Testament teaches that the experience of worldly pleasures can be an obstacle to the attainment of salvation. In telling the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke of a farmer scattering seed, of which some "fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants." He then explained that "The seed is the word of God" and "the seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature." (Luke 8:5-14) Other passages in the New Testament describe worldly pleasures in even harsher terms. The author(s) of the letters to Timothy, for example, declared that "the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives" (1 Timothy 5:6) and warned that those who are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" are "loaded down with sins," rejected "as far as the faith is concerned." (2 Timothy 3:4 – 8)

The Christian rejection of worldly pleasures is based, in part, on the notion that they are inherently unsatisfactory. As Thomas à Kempis put it, "You can in no manner be satisfied with temporal goods, for you were not created to find your rest in them.... All worldly solace... is vain and short...." (p.128) He even implies that unless they are given up, a person is bound to be unhappy, for there is "no peace in the heart of a carnal man...." (p. 38) Thomas evidently thinks there are two mutually exclusive alternatives – worldly life and religious life. To choose the former is to be denied the benefits of the latter – true happiness – and to choose the latter is to give up the transient, ersatz pleasures of the former. Although Thomas qualifies this account by saying that what is incompatible with religious life is 'inordinate' coveting of temporal goods, he recommends that we ask God to be with us "in every place and at every time," suggesting that we ought to strive to be entirely

free from purely worldly pleasures. (p. 128) In another passage, he praises the renunciate as follows:

Blessed is the man who, for the Lord's sake, forgets all created things and learns truly to overcome himself, and who with fervor of spirit crucifies his flesh so that with a clean and pure conscience he may offer his prayers to You, and be worthy to have the company of the blessed angels, excluding and fully setting aside all earthly things. (pp. 175-6)

But why should the company of the angels require the crucifixion of the flesh? Why is it that a person who regularly indulges in worldly pleasures is unfit for the kingdom of heaven? In the case of sexual pleasures – which Christian doctrine forbids outside of marriage – an answer is suggested by Paul's statement:

An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs – how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – and his interests are divided. An married woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. (1 Cor. 7:32-35)

There is much to be said in defense of Paul's teaching in this passage. It is reasonable to think that 'undivided devotion to the Lord' is impossible unless one's passions are completely uprooted, for passion is a distraction from worship and meditation. If we assume that sexual activity – which requires sexual passions – is part of a genuine marriage, it follows that a passionless life is not possible within a genuine marriage. Thus, the unmarried state is necessary – and not simply more conducive than married life – for achieving the ultimate goal of Christian life insofar as 'undivided' devotion is part of that goal.



On a more practical level, a married man (in Paul's day) was responsible for providing food and shelter for his wife, and since married life often leads to the conception of children, a married man often must also worry about providing food and shelter for his children. Thus, a married man will in general have less time for spiritual pursuits than an unmarried man.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in a society in which married women often work and effective contraceptive devices are readily available, the inherent superiority of unmarried life with respect to the fulfillment of spiritual ambitions is less evident. Even if its inherent superiority is granted, the fact that many married men seem to be eminently pious and to live exemplary Christian lives suggests that although marriage may be incompatible with *undivided* devotion, it is compatible with a high degree of spiritual attainment.

Some of Jesus's statements suggest that the "undivided devotion" of which Paul spoke is not necessary for salvation — that mere faith will suffice.

"Everyone who believes in [Jesus] may have eternal life." (John 3:15) Nor does it seem that performance of "works" in addition to faith is necessary for salvation, for "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (John 6:29)

On the other hand, Jesus told a rich man, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Matt. 19:21) This seems to suggest there is a level of spiritual attainment — perfection — beyond salvation, which requires considerably more than mere faith, including self-denial in the form of voluntarily giving up one's wealth. But since Jesus went on to say that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God," (Matt. 19:24) there is some ground for construing the passage as implying that wealth precludes salvation itself, and not simply the apparently more lofty goal of perfection.<sup>3</sup> The passage under this interpretation, however, when conjoined with Jesus's teaching that everyone who believes in him will

have eternal life, has the improbable implication that a rich man cannot believe in Jesus. It may be more plausible, therefore, to interpret the passage as suggesting merely that wealth is a burden for a spiritual aspirant, lessening the chance of spiritual success but not precluding it altogether.

There is, however, some ground for maintaining that the New Testament is inconsistent in stating both that belief in Jesus is sufficient for salvation and, as in the following passage, that self-denial — which would seem to require more than mere belief in Jesus — is necessary for salvation:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? (Luke 9:23)

Moreover, since salvation is possible only for disciples of Jesus, the following passage implies that the self-denial necessary for salvation must be complete and absolute:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple ... any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26-33)

To reconcile these passages with Jesus's teaching that whoever believes in him will be saved, we would have to suppose that one truly believes in Jesus only if he denies himself completely. This is a plausible supposition to make, however, if we assume that a person who truly believes in Jesus also obeys him. Hence, if Jesus commands self-denial, a true believer is (among other things) a person who denies himself.



### III. The Buddha's Case against Sense-Pleasure in *Magandiyasutta* and *Potaliyasutta*

Jesus's view that self-denial is necessary for the reward of salvation is paralleled in the Buddha's teaching (as recorded in the Pali Theravada scriptures) that *nibbana* – the goal of the practicing Buddhist – is attained by destroying the passions along with any attachment to worldly things. In Buddhist doctrine, *nibbana* is the ultimate reality (*parama-sacca*), a state of perfection (*parisuddhi*), and the highest good (*paramakusala*). Just as salvation in Christianity has a paradoxical quality in that “whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for [Jesus's] sake will save it,” so too *nibbana* has a paradoxical quality, connoting both “extinction” and “the highest positive experience of happiness.” (Jayatilleke, 1975, pp. 117, 119)

But how could extinction turn out to be the highest happiness? The extinction connoted by the concept of *nibbana* is sometimes taken to be the extinction of the individual person himself. A person, according to Buddhist doctrine, is a process or stream (*bhava-sota*) continuing from life to life, causally conditioned in part by the operation of desires and beliefs. With the extinction of desires and beliefs comes the extinction of greed, hatred, and ignorance, and consequently (according to this interpretation) of the individual himself. Could non-existence be the highest good? Since existence is necessary for suffering, there is no suffering in a state of non-existence. If complete absence of suffering is the best possible state (or highest good) and is attainable only by ceasing to exist as an individual person, then non-existence is the best possible state. On the other hand, *nibbana* also connotes a positive experience of happiness, which suggests that *nibbana* could not be non-existence.

*Nibbana* is indeed a rather extraordinary state with peculiar properties. It is often characterized in a negative way in the scriptures, as, for example, not temporally or spatially located (*na katthaci, na kuhinci*), not causally conditioned (*na paticca-samuppannam*), and not even capable of conceptual formulation (*asankhiyo*). Jayatilleke (1975, p. 124)

mistakenly takes existence and non-existence to 'have a spatio-temporal connotation' and concludes that for this reason it is "misleading" to apply either of them to *nibbana*. Yet it is perfectly sensible to predicate existence of an object that is not spatio-temporal, as for example when we say there exists an integer greater than six. A better reason for denying the intelligibility of saying that *nibbana* is either a state of existence or non-existence is that it is *asankhiyo*, or not subject to conceptual formulation.<sup>4</sup>

Since according to the Theravada scriptures there are persons who have attained *nibbana* while living, *nibbana* would seem to be potentially a state of an existing thing and hence not a state of non-existence. However, while living, a liberated person — one who has attained *nibbana* — is still limited by his psychological and physical individuality (*namarupa*), and hence is capable only of a limited type of *nibbana* (*saupadisesa nibbana dhatu*). (Jayatilleke, 1975, p. 123) Only at death is true *nibbana* possible. Thus, in the Theravada scriptures, the question whether *nibbana* is itself a state of existence or non-existence is generally raised in terms of the question whether a liberated person completely ceases to exist at death.

The Buddha does not give a clear answer to the question raised in this form — it is treated in the scriptures as one of the 'unanswered questions' (*avyakata*), along with, for example, the questions whether self and world are eternal. A person who has attained *nibbana* is 'beyond measure' (*na pamanam atthi*) and cannot be described in language, as the following passage from the scriptures shows:

The Lord (Buddha): As flame blown out by wind goes to rest, and is lost to cognizance, just so the sage who is released from name and body, goes to rest and is lost to cognizance.

Upasiva: Does he who goes to rest not exist, or does he last forever without disease? That, O Sage, do well declare to me, since this *dharma* is known to you.

The Lord (Buddha): There is no measure to him who has gone to rest; he keeps nothing that could be named. When all *dharmas* are abolished, all paths of speech are



also abolished. (*Sutta-Nipata* 1073 – 1075, trans. in Conze, 1962, pp. 78-9.)

*Nibbana*, then, should not be regarded as the extinction of an individual person. Instead, it is the “extinction of the ‘three fires’ of greed, hatred, and delusion, or the destruction of the ‘corruptions’ (*asava*) of sense-desire, becoming, wrong view and ignorance.” (Walshe, 1987, pp. 28-9). As Narada puts it, “When all forms of craving are extirpated, *kammic* forces cease to operate, and one, in conventional terms, attains *Nibbana*...” *Nibbana*, then, is a bliss of relief from suffering that is attained by extinguishing the causes of suffering, i.e., worldly attachments and passions.<sup>5</sup> (Narada, pp. 317-8, 148).

Beyond the fact that each is attained, at least in part, through destruction of the passions, there are other important similarities between *nibbana* and Christian salvation. For example, a mark of progress toward *nibbana* is the experience of disgust toward the world, a disgust that is similar to the hatred of those worldly things to which under normal circumstances one is most attached – including the members of one’s family as well as one’s own life – that Jesus required of his disciples in Luke 14:26-33. Narada (p. 67) describes the final stage of the path to *nibbana* as follows:

The whole world appears to [the advanced aspirant] like a pit of burning embers, a source of danger. Subsequently he reflects on the wretchedness and vanity of the fearful world and feeling disgusted with it, wishes to escape therefrom. With this object in view, he meditates again on the three characteristics [of all conditioned things – transience (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), lack of an immortal soul (*anatta*)] and thereafter becomes completely indifferent to all conditioned things – having neither attachment nor aversion for any worldly object ... until... he realizes *nibbana*, his ultimate goal.

Among the chief dangers of the world (not only in Buddhist, but also, as we have seen, in Christian doctrine) are

pleasures of the senses. But what could be so dangerous about “agreeable, pleasant, liked, enticing” “shapes cognizable by the eye,” “sounds cognizable by the ear,” “smells cognizable by the nose,” “tastes cognizable by the tongue,” or “touches cognizable by the body”? (*Magandiyasutta*, *Majjhima-Nikaya* hereafter referred to as M I 504) Even if sense-pleasure were inferior to some other type of experience – e.g., the kind that occurs when one is meditating deeply – it seems odd to characterize it as positively harmful. Could not a fully healthy person experience sense-pleasure on a regular basis without thereby becoming less healthy? Indeed, is not sense-pleasure associated with what has proven to be of greatest biological benefit to the species? Those who denigrate sense-pleasure would seem, *prima facie*, to be in the midst of a flight from biology and genetics.

The Buddha arrived at his antipathy for sense-pleasure after having “formerly revelled” in them (M I 504).

I had three palaces, Magandiya.... I, Magandiya, during the four months of the rains being delighted in the palace for the rains by women musicians, did not come down from that palace. But after a time, having know the coming to be and passing away of sense-pleasure and the satisfaction and the peril of them and the escape as it really is, getting rid of the craving for sense-pleasures, I dwelt devoid of thirst, my mind inwardly calmed. I saw other beings not yet devoid of attachment to sense-pleasures who were pursuing sense-pleasures (although) they were being consumed by craving for sense-pleasures, burning with the fever for sense-pleasures. I did not envy them: I had no delight therein. What was the reason for this? It was, Magandiya, that there is this delight which, apart from pleasures of the senses, apart from unskilled states of mind, stands firm on reaching a *deva*-like happiness. Delighting in this delight, I do not envy what is low, I have no delight therein. (M I 504-5)

The reasons for rejecting sense-pleasure given by the Buddha in this passage are that (a) it is impermanent, (b) the



life of one who has not rejected it is characterized by craving (which is a form of suffering), and (c) from the perspective of one who has experienced another kind of delight through calmness, it seems 'low' and undesirable.

Let us examine these reasons one by one. In the first place, its impermanence certainly does not by itself constitute a peril. A person who is unaware of its impermanence might become disappointed upon initially encountering it, but many more experienced persons evidently live eminently happy lives despite frequent, though temporary, indulgence in sense-pleasure. An experienced drinker knows that the feeling of well-being that follows his consumption of two or three beers is merely temporary, and is thus saved from disappointment when the effect of the alcohol wears off.

The second reason given for rejecting sense-pleasure is that those who have not completely abandoned it necessarily suffer because of their craving for it.<sup>6</sup> But there are two important reasons for doubting that this is a good reason for rejecting sense-pleasure: (1) Those who deny their own desires and abandon sense-pleasure often suffer from craving for it to the same extent — and sometimes to an even greater extent — than those who do not. One cannot always destroy a desire by suppressing it — the desire may continue to exist and to exert itself in a new way. Indeed, self-denial often leads to frustration, pain, and neurosis.<sup>7</sup> (2) One fully rational method for deciding which course of action leads to the happiest state of affairs is to put in an order of preference the total situations that result from the various possible actions under consideration. It is very likely that many persons who agree with the Buddha that those who have not completely abandoned sense-pleasure will experience at least some suffering due to craving nevertheless prefer a life that contains sense-pleasure to one that does not.<sup>8</sup>

The third reason given for rejecting sense-pleasure is that from the perspective of one who has experienced another kind of delight through calmness, it seems "low" and undesirable. This does not provide much of a reason for rejecting sense-pleasure unless conjoined with the thesis that the superior kind of delight experienced through calmness can

be attained only by a person who has rejected sense-pleasure. If the delight reached through calmness is truly superior to sense-pleasure then it is more than adequate compensation for the sense-pleasure given up in the pursuit of calmness. Indeed, a Theravada Buddhist reasons that *nibbana* is the highest good, that other things are good only as a means to it, and that anything that is an obstacle to the attainment of it – e.g, sense-pleasure – must be rejected.<sup>9</sup> This argument is worth formulating in greater detail, as follows:

- I. *Nibbana* is the only intrinsic good; actions are good only insofar as they assist a person in his efforts to attain *nibbana*.
- II. Hence, it is better to do what is necessary to attain *nibbana* than not to do so.
- III. A necessary condition for attaining *nibbana* is that one deny one's desires and abandon sense-pleasure.
- IV. Hence, it is better to deny one's desires and abandon sense-pleasure than not to do so.

The Buddha's defense of premise (III) utilizes a variety of vivid similes to convey the notion that sense-pleasure is a danger that must be avoided if *nibbana* is to be attained. He claims in the *Potaliyasutta*, for example, that sense-pleasure is like a lump of flesh seized by a vulture who is then chased by other vultures. If the vulture does not let go, the others will kill it to get the lump of flesh.

Even so, householder, an *aryan* disciple reflects thus: "Pleasures of the senses have been likened to a lump of flesh by the Lord, of much pain, of much tribulation, wherein is more peril." (M I 364)

This simile suggests that a person who possesses the means to sense-pleasure will be harmed (or even killed) by others in their efforts to take these things for themselves. But surely this is not always the case; some people who enjoy sense-pleasure are never attacked by those who lack the means to such enjoyment. Furthermore, the possibility remains that the means to sense-pleasure are worth defending, i.e., that



sense-pleasure is itself adequate compensation for the suffering that results from having to defend the means to it.

Another simile used by the Buddha in the *Potaliyasutta* to warn of the danger of sense-pleasure is this:

Suppose you climb a tree to get some fruit, but somebody cuts the tree down while you are in its branches and you are crushed.

Even so, householder, an *aryan* disciple reflects thus: 'Pleasures of the senses have been likened by the Lord to the fruits of a tree, of much pain, of much tribulation, wherein is more peril.' (M I 364)

The Buddha further characterizes sense-pleasure as like a blazing grass torch carried against the wind. If a man does not quickly drop such a torch, it will burn his hand or burn his arm or burn another part of his body so that, from that cause, he would come to death or pain like unto death. (M I 365)

The comparison of sense-pleasure to fire is also made in another simile, according to which sense-pleasure is like a pit of glowing embers to which one is forcibly dragged and into which one is forcibly thrown. (M I 365) This simile suggests that we are compelled to seek sense-pleasure and must consciously struggle to resist the compulsion if we are to avoid extreme danger. While it may be granted that the urge to obtain sense-pleasure is a compulsion that can be resisted only with great effort, the similarity between enjoying sense-pleasure and being burned by a pit of glowing embers (or a grass torch) is far from evident and cannot simply be assumed. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine two experiences more dissimilar than these. Characterization of sense-pleasure as dangerous is not — at least *prima facie* — a plausible reason for rejecting it as an obstacle to the attainment of *nibbana*.

The question of whether renunciation of sense-pleasure is necessary for the attainment of *nibbana* is presumably an empirical one. A psychological study of all those who are enlightened might reveal whether renunciation was necessary; discovery of an enlightened person who had not renounced sense-pleasure would refute the Buddhist position. Carrying

out such a study would, of course, require observable criteria for determining whether someone was enlightened, and it is far from obvious what these might be. Some might even argue that renunciation should be included among the criteria.

If renunciation is not necessary for achieving *nibbana*, then the 'low'ness of sense-pleasure from the perspective of an enlightened person is not a very persuasive reason for renouncing it. Despite this, the Buddha's similes in support of his claim that sense-pleasure is 'low' illuminate the basis for his own negative attitude toward them. Consider, for example, his comparison of a man who enjoys sense-pleasure to a seriously ill person:

Magandiya, it is like a leper, a man with his limbs all ravaged and festering, and who, being eaten by vermin, tearing his open sores with his nails, might scorch his body over a charcoal pit; his friends and acquaintances, his kith and kin might procure a physician and surgeon; that physician and surgeon might make up a medicine; he taking that medicine, might be freed of that leprosy, he might be well, at ease, independent, his own master, going wherever he liked. He might see another leper, a man with his limbs all ravaged and festering, and who... might scorch his body over a charcoal pit ... Would that man envy that other leper man his charcoal pit ...? (M I 506)<sup>10</sup>

Thus, from the perspective of an enlightened being, a person seeks and enjoys sense-pleasure only if he is in a diseased state. A truly healthy person — one who has reached *nibbana* — finds sense-pleasure as distasteful as the experience of scorching his body over a charcoal pit.

The Buddha defends this view by claiming, paradoxically, that 'contact of sense-pleasures is painful, exceedingly hot and afflicting,' and that only a person whose sense-organs are injured 'may, from painful contact with sense-pleasures themselves, receive a change of sensation and think it pleasant.'<sup>11</sup> (M I 507) That is, sense-pleasure is inherently painful, and only appears pleasant to an abnormal person.



Since sensations typed as sensations of pleasure are, necessarily, inherently pleasant, the claim that are inherently painful is incoherent. It is therefore tempting to interpret the Buddha (rather charitably) as claiming merely that the sources of pleasant sensations in an ordinary person are sources of pain in a truly healthy person. The text does not seem to allow for such an interpretation, however, for the Buddha specifies that the “five strands of sense-pleasure” are “agreeable, pleasant” shapes, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches — that is, sensations themselves, rather than sources of sensations.<sup>12</sup> (M I 505)

There is, then, a serious difficulty with this particular way of defending the Buddha’s doctrine that the state of man prior to arrival on the path is a diseased condition, characterized by ‘craving’ and ‘fever’ for sense-pleasure, and that a healthy person who “dwell[s] devoid of thirst, his mind inwardly calmed” (M I 508) does not seek after or enjoy sense-pleasure. But it should be noted that the view that a person’s objective good consists in the cessation of his desires is closely related to the view, much more popular in Western philosophy, that it consists in the satisfaction of his desires. A satisfied desire is similar to a desire that has vanished due to meditation or other disciplined Buddhist behavior. In either case, the desire has ceased to exist. The difference consists in the distinction between recommending that we extinguish our desires by satisfying them, and proposing that we train ourselves not to have them in the first place.<sup>13</sup>

It is helpful at this point to introduce J. J. C. Smart’s distinction between contentment, i.e., the relative absence of unsatisfied desires, and pleasure, which he defines as a balance between absence of unsatisfied desires and presence of satisfied desires (Smart and Williams, 1973, p. 16). What the Buddha apparently values is contentment, rather than pleasure, in Smart’s senses of these terms.

Although there is an important similarity between Western and Theravada Buddhist views of the relationship between desire and human good, the Buddha’s denigration of sense-pleasure contrasts sharply with the long tradition in Western philosophy of taking pleasure to include, as a component, awareness of something good. Spinoza, for

example, held that “knowledge of good or evil is nothing but an idea of joy or sorrow.” (*Ethics*, Pt. IV, Prop. VIII, in Wild, 1930) Hobbes wrote, “Pleasure... is the appearance or sense of good.” (Molesworth, 1839, Vol. III, p. 42) Sidgwick defined pleasure as “feeling which the sentient individual at the time of feeling it... apprehends to be desirable...”<sup>14</sup> (1922, p. 131)

The Buddhist arguments which we have examined so far for rejecting this view and for regarding pleasure – at least in the form of sense-pleasure – as a danger to be avoided have turned out to be rather weak. But the Buddhist texts have some further grounds for rejecting sense-pleasure that deserve consideration: Although it appears to be both real and capable of providing satisfaction, these appearances are purely delusory.

The notion that sense-pleasure falsely presents itself as real is imparted, for example, through the Buddha’s comparison of sense-pleasure to a dream in the following passage:

And, householder, it is as if a man might see in a dream delightful parks, delightful woods, delightful stretches of level ground and delightful lakes; but on waking up could see nothing. Even so, householder, an *aryan* disciple reflects thus: ‘Pleasures of the senses have been likened by the Lord to a dream, of much pain, of much tribulation, wherein is more peril.’ (M I 365)

According to this simile, sense-pleasure is delusory. It appears as something delightful, but in fact it is nothing at all.

The defect in the simile is that the pleasure experienced in a dream is real, even if the dreamer is deluded as to the *source* of the pleasure. The dreamer may think, “Those parks are delightful,” falsely believing there to be parks whose appearance prompts him to feel pleasure. But the pleasure itself is not delusory – it cannot correctly be described as seeming to be real without actually being real. Indeed, there is no difference between experiencing pleasure and only seeming to experience pleasure; the appearance/reality distinction does not apply to sensations such as pleasure. The pleasure experienced



while one is dreaming is as real as pleasure experienced while one is awake.<sup>15</sup>

The final reason given by the Buddha for rejecting sense-pleasure that we shall consider is that while it appears to be capable of providing satisfaction, it is in fact incapable of doing so. This idea is expressed in the following passage:

It is, householder, as if a dog, overcome by hunger and exhaustion were to happen on a slaughtering place for cows, and the skilled cattle-butcher there or his apprentice were to fling him a bone, scraped and well scraped, fleshless, but with a smearing of blood.... Could that dog, gnawing such a bone... appease his hunger and exhaustion?...Even so, householder, an *aryan* disciple reflects thus: 'Pleasures of the senses have been likened to a skeleton by the Lord, of much pain, of much tribulation, wherein is more peril.' (M I 364)

But this simile does not indicate a way in which sense-pleasure itself is delusory. Just as the dreamer was deluded not about the pleasure he experienced, but rather about the source of the pleasure, the dog is deluded not about the power of sense-pleasure to satisfy, but instead about the bone's potential for providing sense-pleasure. The dog, insofar as he has any expectations, expects the bone to satisfy his hunger; the delusory component of the event is the bone, which falsely appears to be capable of doing so.

The rejection of sense-pleasure in these similes on the grounds that it falsely appears to be real and capable of providing satisfaction rests on a confusion between sense-pleasure and its potential sources. While they provide no reason for thinking sense-pleasure to be 'of much pain, of much tribulation, wherein is more peril,' they do illustrate the disappointment that may result from ignorance regarding its sources.

## V. Conclusions

My goal in this paper has been to examine critically some of the reasons given in the scriptures and other writings of Christianity and Theravada Buddhism for the doctrine that sense-pleasure is incompatible with attainment of the ultimate human good. I have concentrated particularly on the Buddhist arguments for the doctrine in the *Magandiyasutta* and the *Potaliyasutta* and identified several defects in the case presented in these texts. Some of the arguments involve a confusion between sense-pleasure and its sources: What the Buddhist texts take to be features of sense-pleasure are actually characteristics of the sources of sense-pleasure. I have also argued that even if the Buddhist texts are correct in maintaining that the life of a person who has not abandoned sense-pleasure contains some suffering, that is absent from the renunciate's life, this does not show that the life of the latter is the happier one. My arguments are far from conclusive, however, for the Buddhist case against sense-pleasure ultimately rests on a tenet that an unenlightened philosopher or religious scholar is in a poor position to evaluate, namely that renunciation is necessary for the attainment of *nibbana*.



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## ENDNOTES

1. All New Testament quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (1973); International Bible Society, East Brunswick, New Jersey.
2. Compare, from the Hindu tradition, Paramahansa Yogananda's statement, "I had analyzed the lives of many of my friends who, after undergoing certain spiritual discipline, had then married. Launched on the sea of worldly responsibilities, they had forgotten their resolutions to meditate deeply." (1946, p. 256)
3. An alternative interpretation is required, of course, if "eye of a needle" is a mistranslation of an expression that should be translated as "Eye of the Needle," the name of a mountain pass or a city gate. In that case, Jesus's point would seem to be that a rich man must give something up in order to enter heaven.
4. We may, however, be tempted to agree with Wittgenstein (1922, 6.522) that "Unsayable things do indeed exist." Wittgenstein's remark at the very end of the *Tractatus* (1922), "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," suggests that there are things of which we can say nothing.
5. Compare Epicurus's definition, "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul," as well as his remark that "The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain." (Bakewell, 1907, pp. 300, 302. These are from *Diogenes Laertius*, Book X, 122, 139; Hick (Trans), Vol. II, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard College, pp. 649 ff., pp. 663 ff. The definition is from Epicurus's letter to Menoeceus.)
6. Compare Plato's *Gorgias* at 494A: "[T]ell me whether one who suffers from the itch and longs to scratch himself, if he can scratch himself to his heart's content and continue scratching all his life, can be said to live happily." (Translation by W. D. Woodhead in Hamilton and Cairns, 1961, p. 276.)
7. On the other hand, as John Stuart Mill has observed, "With much tranquility, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure...." (Jones, 1962, p. 284. The remark is from Mill's *Utilitarianism*.)
8. Such persons regard sense-pleasure as adequate compensation for the suffering that is associated with it.
9. See, for example, Jayatilleke, pp. 229-238.

10. Compare Plato's remarks concerning the "pleasures of itching" in the *Philebus* at 46D – E : "When the irritation or inflammation is internal, and by rubbing and scratching you fail to reach it and merely tear the surface skin, then, by bringing the parts affected near a fire and seeking to reverse your condition by means of the heat it gives out, you procure.. immense pleasure..." (Translation by R. Hackforth in Hamilton and Cairns, 1961, p. 1127.)
11. Compare Book 9 of Plato's *Republic* at 583D – 584B: "And you hear those who are in great pain say that nothing is as pleasurable as cessation from pain.... So what we said stands between [pleasure and pain]... the calm, when side by side with pain, seems to be pleasant, while beside pleasure it seems to be pain, but there is nothing sound about these appearances as regards the truth; they are a kind of illusion." (Grube, 1974, pp. 230-1)
12. The notion that "contact of sense-pleasures is painful" may just be a particular case of the Buddha's general claim that whatever is felt is painful (in the sense of being *sankhara-dukkha*). This does not, however, remove the incoherence.
13. An important qualification must be made, however: The Buddha's view, as recorded in the above passages, is not that desire *per se* obstructs the attainment of a person's good, but rather that the desire for sense-pleasure in particular is such an obstruction. The Buddha would encourage some desires, such as the desire for *nibbana* and the desire for freedom from desire for sense-pleasure. Such desires differ from the desire for sense-pleasure in that typically they are not characterized by "craving" and "fever". Yet there are examples of yogis who apparently have become filled with craving for *nibbana* (though perhaps under a different name). Paramahansa Yogananda, from the Hindu tradition, wrote that he prayed, 'Merciful Mother of the Universe, teach me Thyself through visions, or through a guru sent by Thee!' The passing hours found my sobbing pleas without response. Suddenly I felt lifted as though bodily to a sphere uncircumscribed." (1946, p. 105) Another even more dramatic example, again from the Hindu tradition, is Paramahansa Ramakrishna, who is reported to have said, "I felt as if my heart were being squeezed like a wet towel. I was overpowered with a great restlessness and a fear that it might not be my lot to realize Her (that is, the Mother of the Universe, or God) in this life. I could not bear the separation from Her any longer. Life seemed to be not worth living. Suddenly my glance fell on the sword that was kept in the Mother's temple. When I jumped up like a madman and seized it, suddenly the blessed Mother revealed Herself.... I saw a limitless, infinite, effulgent Ocean of Consciousness." (Gupta, 1944, pp. 13-14) Craving for *nibbana* may, however, be excused on the ground that attainment of *nibbana* brings about a permanent end to all craving.



14. As Perry (1967, p. 200) has noted, however, Sidgwick's account would seem to be refuted by the very fact that an ascetic regards pleasure, at the time he feels it, to be undesirable.
15. The simile of the dream also seems to suggest that sense-pleasure should be rejected because of its impermanence. Since I have already discussed this rationale for abandoning sense-pleasure above, I will not return to it here.