

206hh- The Pleasure of Non-Activity

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(A Summarised Transcription Of A Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

Theragatha 19.1 -Talaputta:

"Oh, when will I stay in a mountain cave,
alone, with no companion,
discerning all states of existence as impermanent?
This hope of mine, when will it be?....

....For many years you begged me,
"Enough of living in a house for you!"
Why do you not urge me on, mind,
now that I've gone forth as an ascetic?

...Mind, when you urge me to the impermanent and unstable,
you're acting like someone who plants trees,
then, when they're about to fruit,
wishes to cut down the very same trees.
Incorporeal mind, far-traveller, lone-wanderer:
I won't do your bidding any more.
Sensual pleasures are suffering, painful, and very dangerous;
I'll wander with my mind focused only on Nibbana...

...The men and women who live under your will and command,
whatever pleasure they experience,
they are ignorant and fall under Māra's control;
loving life, they're your disciples, mind."

Nm: That's everyone's relationship with their mind, the only difference is how much perspective you have towards it or how much you identify with it. The mind presents you with these ideas which you accept and act out of and then you assume the ownership of them, but you didn't have a say in their creation, in their arising, the mind came up with it, so you can realise that it's not about "me" coming up with it or "me" owning or disowning that which is not in my control. What is up to me, is whether I choose to accept what the mind offers up. In the same sense whether you choose to go where the eyes want to see. The eyes want to go in a direction which you do not have to accept, but if people have no self awareness and perspective developed through sense restraint, then for them that pull is "theirs", and ironically, they are being pulled against their will but they believe that that's what they want to do. For Talaputta, in that sutta, he already had some wisdom because he was already able to see the mind as "this thing", as he said "Oh you urged me to do this, I did this, and now you want to go back". Now if he didn't have wisdom, he would have just thought "I want to go back", but he questioned the thought: "Is this what I want? No, this is what my mind wants and that's clear enough but is this what I want?...no, I do not want to eat what has been

“vomited up”, so to speak. I was miserable over there and that's why I left, so I don't want to do it, but the mind still wants it.” So there's a conflict, you have a choice, either give into the mind in order to not endure the conflict or tame the mind in order to resolve the conflict, there will be no more conflict when you(wisdom) are in charge.

Q: In the beginning the mind offered him something quite appealing...

Nm: Yes, due to his own contemplation and choices. He also met the Buddha and at that time his mind thought that this training was worth doing. Even his own mind was not happy in that environment, which is why it presented him with these romantic ideas about living in the forests, but when the reality of those romantic ideas sets in, the hardships, enduring the insects, etc, then the mind changed its mind: “Ohhh, I want to go back now”, but he questioned it: “My mind has changed but shall I follow it...No”. It's like when you start seeing yourself as this creature, this six sensed animal. Those senses will want to pull you in the direction they want to go but it's you who needs to stop gratuitously identifying with them and giving into their pressure and then they will obey eventually, and how long that will take depends on how much effort you put in.

The mind directs the other animals and it's the hardest to tame but it's still the same principle. You can recognise that when you have a thought, you can reflect further on it. For example, when the mind is interested in sensuality, it will not think about the ugly aspects which are simultaneously present there but you can make it do so, and that's what Talaputta decided to do: “No I will tie you down mind and I will stay here where you first told me to go, because it was a good idea, thank you, but now we are not changing this, we will stay here until you listen to me, not the other way around.” So it's not about not having those thoughts and trying to prevent them from arising, thinking: “Oh I shouldn't be thinking this”. No, it's not up to you what you think, it's up to your mind, but you should not be acting out of it, acting upon it and accepting it without further consideration, that's on you. You know exactly where the line is, you know where your responsibility lies, the mind can come up with whatever it wants, all you need to do is to not entertain or encourage it, if what it offers is unwholesome.

It's up to you to choose to accept the offer of the mind or not, to go with it or not, and it's also up to you to choose whether you allow it to keep dwelling and revolving around a particular subject. It needs your input and encouragement to keep revolving around sensuality or ill will. You can develop the perception of danger or the perception of abandoning, in those thoughts so that while the mind is thinking those thoughts of sensuality, you are not wanting them and abandoning them because they are dangerous. Instead of thinking: “I will have this mind, never think of that again!”. That might be the final outcome of you being completely dispassionate with what your mind presents you with, but until then the mind will be presenting you with stuff the same as any other

sense will be presenting you with things it wants to do. You must just not welcome thoughts if you know and see that it's rooted in sensuality, ill will or distraction. It doesn't mean that you should think: "I don't want it, so let me make these thoughts go away!". No, it means that you should think: "I don't want it, now let me endure this unruly mind that is trying to harass me with these thoughts."

Q: "...The Blessed One said, "Monks, if you are asked by wanderers of other sects, 'Friends, there are these three qualities. Which three? Lust, aversion, and delusion. These are the three qualities. Now what is the difference, what is the distinction, what is the distinguishing factor among these three qualities?'- when thus asked, you should answer those wanderers of other sects in this way: 'Friends, Lust carries little blame and is slow to fade. Aversion carries great blame and is quick to fade. Delusion carries great blame and is slow to fade...' -

[An.3.68](#)

Nm: Delusion is not a missing piece of information, it's an existential attitude that you have towards your senses. That's why I often refer to it as distraction because it's an active thing, it's something that you are liable to and doing here and now. Just like greed and aversion, delusion is something you welcome, act upon, accept and do not understand. It's not like something you don't know, it's something that you keep doing which is mistaken. It's the attitude of distraction, it's about the movement of distraction, the movement of having something to do to maintain your being. A good indicator would be to measure it with boredom. If you are easily bored, that means you have accumulated a lot of delusions that will be difficult to see and hard to fade. If you never get bored, then you are at least an Anagami or Arahant where there is no pressure of non-activity, no pressure to do anything or to distract yourself or look away from nothing happening, nothing being felt.

Practically speaking, boredom is a good way to practice. People don't see boredom as an indicator and certainly don't see delusion as an attitude that they cultivate, despite commitment to precepts, suttas, and meditation. They always try to deal with boredom. Even when they are practising, their meditation technique becomes something they do on account of avoiding boredom. Your reading suttas or scholarly work becomes something you do on account of avoiding boredom. Yes, you need to know the suttas and collect that information in order to know what to look for but sooner or later you need to start uprooting delusion for what it is, and for that you need to endure and not depend on some activity to keep you occupied and engaged and connected to the senses. For example, if you decide to get bored, switch your phone off, close the doors and curtains, it doesn't matter whether you sit, walk, stand or lay down, close your books, switch off the television, don't do your meditation technique, just abide in non-activity. The mind will then be presenting you with something to do, which is fine, you don't try to get rid of those thoughts, you just don't act upon them. However, if you decide to get up or go to the toilet, those are not the kind of activities that will distract you, but if you think: "Let me just check my email...", well that's an activity of a

kind that will distract you, and so you don't do that. Now if you do that for an hour, you will probably feel intense boredom, and that's why people fear solitude or confinement where there is nothing to distract their senses. That can be frightening, but in itself it's not frightening. It is frightening because you have always been depending on the momentum of action, but that's a gratuitous dependency that you have been cultivating because you didn't know any better and for as long you don't know any better you will be cultivating it.

Q: [SN 9.10 Sajjhāya Sutta](#):

"On one occasion a certain bhikkhu was dwelling among the Kosalans in a certain woodland thicket. Now on that occasion that bhikkhu had been excessively engrossed in recitation, but on a later occasion he passed the time living in non-activity (indifferent, withdrawn, at ease) and keeping silent. Then the devata that inhabited that woodland thicket, no longer hearing that bhikkhu recite the Dhamma, approached him and addressed him in verse: "Bhikkhu, why don't you recite Dhamma-stanzas, Living in communion with other bhikkhus? Hearing the Dhamma, one gains confidence; In this very life [the reciter] gains praise."

The bhikkhu replied: "In the past I was fond of reciting Dhamma-stanzas, so long as I had not achieved dispassion. But from the time I achieved dispassion, I dwell in what the good men call: "The laying down by final knowledge of whatever is seen, heard, or sensed."

Nm: Are you delighting in projects and work? If yes, that means you are delighting in distraction. Just try abide in true non-activity for an hour or two, no meditation techniques or trying to be mindful, just sit there, don't fall asleep, get up or walk back and forth if you are sleepy, and just allow your mind to come up with ideas and things to do, planning and then don't commit to them, just let those thoughts endure and just sit about. Do that for a few hours and you will see that there is going to be a space created between you and your senses, because that identification that people naturally jump into, i.e., "When eye wants to see = I want to see", that identification, that proximity with the senses needs maintenance. However, if you don't act upon impulse and create that space, then you will get to see this sense creature for what it is, the mind THERE with thoughts wanting to do this and that, the monkey mind, you get to see it because you stop getting driven by it. Now say that that is your practice for most of the day, abiding in non-activity, wakeful, watching your mind, and then when you commit to do something with body, speech or mind, you do so only on the level of that recognition that it will not cause further distraction. You do them through the mind of non-activity, non-distraction. That's why in jhana you can walk, eat, go to the toilet, etc, it's not like you're frozen motionless. Non-activity means no activity that is rooted in distraction. It will also then become clear what you are not distracting yourself from, which is - yourself, the six sensed creature, the pressure.

That's why people fear boredom, it will always turn into existential anxiety, because you start seeing how divorced from your own sense you are, from the things that you identify with, things that define who or what you are. It's just like if someone releases a balloon which floats away higher and

higher, that's your mind, there is no end to how high it can go, and there is no problem in how high it goes, the problem is from your expectation, need and dependence on being tethered to the senses, because you haven't been restraining yourself enough, you haven't been seeing the danger in the slightest fault, so you have been depending on action through your senses.

Everybody depends on having something to do, but some depend on it more than others, like when a person constantly needs to be active and when they are not active they get bored, restless and then anxiety sets in, and then no matter how insignificant something is, it becomes the most important thing that must be done. That anxiety and desperation is only there because they refuse to give up the gratuitous assumption that the senses belong to them and are worth holding onto. If you give that up then non-activity is the most sublime thing, but as I said, the pleasure of jhana, the pleasure of the neutral feeling needs to be understood and developed, it's not automatic. That's also why, let's say, if you have been confined in a room for a long time and then you are released, it doesn't matter how unpleasant a chore you would have to go and do, you will enjoy it because at least you feel that there is something for you to do, if you are still dependent on action. Now you can realise that having the pleasure of something to do is determined from how far your mind has withdrawn, but then you see people who never experience boredom because they always have something to do and to distract themselves with, they are people who really go into sensuality. There is nothing sensual about cleaning a toilet, you just enjoy the action in itself because the boredom was a bit too much to handle, but say you never experienced boredom or separation or withdrawal from the senses, no perspective in regard to them, all you do is engage in the senses, that's when you now need even more engagement for any sense of pleasure and that's why the more you engage in sensuality the less pleasure you feel and the more you need to engage. But say you have been withdrawn from sensuality for a long time then even just a little bit of mundane engagement with the senses will be agreeable, but that doesn't constitute sensuality. Engaging with a sense in itself does not constitute sensuality.

The Buddha describes the difference between pleasure that is underlined by more craving and pleasure that isn't. Pleasure of cleaning the toilet is not underlined by craving it's actually determined by the fact that you haven't been engaging in sensuality and you don't need to fear that pleasure but you need to be careful because you might then be trying to find random things to do because they are not sensual but they can become distracting and if they do, then your mind will start thinking sensual thoughts, and that's the same principle taken even further.

Now say you don't fear the boredom or neutral feeling anymore, it's not felt unpleasantly because you have understood it, you basically live withdrawn from sensuality, you have developed jhana, so your mind is now even more established on the separation from the senses and their pulls. That's why then from that perspective, even enduring discomfort will feel like divine pleasure. From the

point of view of boredom, cleaning the toilet will feel exhilarating, from the point of view of jhana, physical endurance like eating rough food, living at the root of a tree, wearing rough robes, using harsh medicines, will feel like the finest requisites. It's the same principle, determined by how much your mind is withdrawn that determines how pleasantly the engagement will be experienced. Not in itself, but for some people who get as much sensuality as they want, they feel numb because they have been engaging with that level for so long, their mind has not been withdrawn. It's the same principle of withdrawal, in boredom, if you work through it, if you don't act out of it and even endure that anxiety if it arises, then even chores will be felt as agreeable. Now if you develop that further into a jhana, then even if you don't do any chores, just enduring the elements will be agreeable, will be felt pleasantly from the point of view of being so withdrawn, and that's why the Buddha encouraged the venerable Anuruddha to develop jhana:

“...Now, when you think these eight thoughts of a great person and become a person who can attain at will, without trouble or difficulty, these four jhānas—heightened mental states providing a pleasant abiding in the here & now—then your robe of cast-off rags will seem to you to be just like the clothes chest of a householder or householder's son, full of clothes of many colors. As you live contented, it will serve for your delight, for a comfortable abiding, for non-agitation, & for reaching Nibbana.

“When you think these eight thoughts of a great person and become a person who can attain at will, without trouble or difficulty, these four jhānas—heightened mental states providing a pleasant abiding in the here & now—then your meal of almsfood will seem to you to be just like the rice & wheat of a householder or householder's son, cleaned of black grains, and served with a variety of sauces & seasonings....

...Your dwelling at the foot of a tree will seem to you to be just like the gabled mansion of a householder or householder's son, plastered inside & out, draft-free, bolted, and with its shutters closed.... your bed on a spread of grass will seem to you like the couch of a householder or householder's son, spread with long-haired coverlets, white woolen coverlets, embroidered coverlets, antelope-hide & deer-skin rugs, covered with a canopy, and with red cushions for the head & feet....

...Your medicine of fermented cows urine will seem to you to be just like the various tonics of a householder or householder's son: ghee, fresh butter, oil, honey, and molasses sugar. As you live contented, it will serve for your delight, for a comfortable abiding, for non-agitation, & for reaching Nibbana...” - [An 8.30](#)

You don't need to fear enjoying rough robes and thinking that it is sensuality. Only a person who is not free from sensuality would use that as a reference and think everything is sensuality because that's the only reference they have. Even the Buddha himself initially thought that the pleasure of withdrawal is unwholesome:

“I (the Buddha) thought: ‘I recall once, when my father the Sakyan was working, and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, then—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded

from unskillful qualities—I entered & remained in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by thought & evaluation. Could that be the path to awakening?’ Then there was the thought following that memory: ‘That is the path to awakening.’ I thought: ‘So why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unskillful qualities?’ I thought: ‘I am no longer afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unskillful qualities, but that pleasure is not easy to achieve with a body so extremely emaciated...’ - [Mn.36](#)

If you are enjoying living in the jungle wearing rough robes and enduring insects, if you find that agreeable, you don't need to fear that as though it was sensuality, because it is not. That agreeability of it is determined by your state of lofty mind. If you are not distracting yourself, you will inevitably find things enjoyable, and if you develop jhanas, even the extreme pain of disease can be endured because your mind can attain jhanas at will. In other words, if your mind can reestablish itself as fully withdrawn and independent of any sense at any time, then how could it be bothered by anything that comes through any sense?

“Then Venerable Mahākassapa went up to the Buddha, bowed, and sat down to one side. The Buddha said to him: “You’re old now, Kassapa. Those worn-out hempen rag robes must be a burden for you. So Kassapa, you should wear clothes given by householders, accept invitations for the meal, and stay in my presence.”

“For a long time, sir, I’ve lived in the wilderness, eaten only alms-food, worn rag robes, and owned just three robes; and I’ve praised these things. I’ve been one of few wishes, content, secluded, aloof, and energetic; and I’ve praised these things.”

“But seeing what benefit, Kassapa, have you long practiced these things?”

“Sir, seeing two benefits I have long practiced these things. I see a happy life for myself in the present. And I have compassion for future generations, thinking: ‘Hopefully those who come after might follow my example.’ For they may think: ‘It seems that the awakened disciples of the Buddha for a long time lived in the wilderness, ate only alms-food, wore rag robes, and owned just three robes; and they praised these things. They were of few wishes, content, secluded, aloof, and energetic; and they praised these things.’ They’ll practice accordingly, which will be for their lasting welfare and happiness. Seeing these two benefits I have long practiced these things.”

“Good, good, Kassapa! You’re acting for the welfare and happiness of the people, for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans. So Kassapa, wear worn-out hempen rag robes, walk for alms, and stay in the wilderness.” - [SN 16.5](#)

The relativity of hardship and endurance is determined by how much your mind is withdrawn from these things or not and that's why it's not incidental that boredom is that thing that nobody wants to deal with, even people who practice the dhamma, they do so to avoid sinking into that boredom.

Say you have been sitting for a few hours in your room, everything is switched off, no notifications, no activity, and then you want to get up and drink tea, that's fine, but now your mind starts to overthink it, wants to get into the details, that's what you do not welcome, which does not mean that you have to never drink tea again. You will not lose sight of yourself which means even the making of the tea will not become a basis for that self-deluding whereby you become unaware of yourself and fall into the identification of the senses you are engaging with, you still maintain that distance, that right perspective.

Q: If you are living in such a non-distracted way, your life naturally becomes simple and minimalistic.

Nm: The amount of proliferation and elaboration towards the senses and engagement with them will have to fade. That's why walking, talking and sleeping, is not sensual in itself, but can be the basis for slowing down the sotapannas progress. For one with the right view, if he were to practice sense restraint and learn to abide in non-activity even more, he can become an Arahant in this life, but some get distracted with work talk and sleep which becomes an obstruction to their own progress. That's why the Buddha admonished some of his ariyan disciples:

“..Now on that occasion the venerable Ānanda, along with many bhikkhus, were busy making robes at Ghāṭā the Sakyan's dwelling. Then, when it was evening, the Blessed One rose from retreat and went to Ghāṭā the Sakyan's dwelling. There he sat down on a seat made ready and asked the venerable Ānanda:

“Ānanda, there are many resting places prepared in Kāḷakhemaka the Sakyan's dwelling. Do many bhikkhus live there?”

“Venerable sir, many resting places have been prepared in Kāḷakhemaka the Sakyan's dwelling. Many bhikkhus are living there. This is our time for making robes, venerable sir.”

“Ānanda, a bhikkhu does not shine by delighting in company, by taking delight in company, by devoting himself to delight in company; by delighting in society, by taking delight in society, by rejoicing in society. Indeed, Ānanda, it is not possible that a bhikkhu who delights in company, takes delight in company, and devotes himself to delight in company, who delights in society, takes delight in society, and rejoices in society, will ever obtain at will, without trouble or difficulty, the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of peace, the bliss of enlightenment. But it can be expected that when a bhikkhu lives alone, withdrawn from society, he will obtain at will, without trouble or difficulty, the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of peace, the bliss of Nibbana...” - [Mn.122](#)

The amount of work that they were engaged with was obviously not necessary and the Buddha rebuked them even though that work was not sensual. If you lose the context and do not maintain your motivation behind your engagement with work, talk and sleep, it will then become a basis for maintaining delusion. Obviously for an Ariyan, he maintains that delusion much subtler than a

puthujjana would be doing but it's still a form of that self distraction and all he would need to do is not engage or not allow himself to be engaged with work, talk and sleep for the purpose of distraction, then he will progress towards Nibbana, there is no other effort he needs to make because he has already understood the Dhamma.

Q: He makes an effort in non-activity...

Nm: Well it's the effort in protecting the mind of non-activity, as it is praised in the suttas:

"...then the Blessed One addressed a certain bhikkhu thus: "Come, bhikkhu, tell that bhikkhu in my name that the Teacher calls him."

"Yes, venerable sir," that bhikkhu replied, and he went to that bhikkhu and told him: "The Teacher calls you, friend."

"Yes, friend," that bhikkhu replied, and he approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, and sat down to one side.

The Blessed One then said to him: "Is it true, bhikkhu, that after returning from the alms round you enter your dwelling after the meal and pass the time living in non-activity and keeping silent, and you do not render service to the bhikkhus at the time of making robes?"

"I am doing my own duty, venerable sir. "

Then the Blessed One, having known with his own mind the reflection in that bhikkhu's mind, addressed the bhikkhus thus:

"Bhikkhus, do not find fault with this bhikkhu. This bhikkhu is one who gains at will, without trouble or difficulty, the four jhanas that constitute the higher mind and provide a pleasant dwelling in this very life. And he is one who, by realising it for himself with direct knowledge, in this very life enters and dwells in that unsurpassed goal of the holy life for the sake of which clansmen rightly go forth from the household life into homelessness." - [Sn 21.4](#)

That pleasant abiding here and now paired with your right view is basically jhana that leads you to nibbana. But as I said many times, jhana is not a product of your activity, jhana is a product of withdrawal from the senses and engagement from the unwholesome, it's the pleasure and security that comes from that type of non-activity. But again, non-activity is whether you are motivated by distraction or not, and not whether you are motionless or moving about. You might jump to the conclusion that non-activity means being motionless for 3 hours, refusing to move because that will be a distraction from non-activity. No, non-activity means non-distraction (*devoted to vigilance/watchfulness/non-distraction - *jagariyam-anuyoga*).

Just sit in your room and you will see in just a short time the mind will present you with something to do. If you are relishing that offer, that is the activity, that is the distraction. However, not acting on the impulse to act is already creating some space between you and the senses, that's why none of this will be possible if you do not first get accomplished in the first few steps of the gradual training

(1-keeping the precepts, 2-guarding the senses, 3-moderation in eating, 4- devoted to watchfulness, ...). Non-activity is not using any type of action for the means of distracting yourself from yourself or for losing the perspective of this creature that needs to be contained, tamed and watched.

Q: And there's nothing like the maintaining of the right perspective for the diminishing of delusion.

Nm: Sure, if you start giving in to these distracting activities, the right perspective will diminish or will be more obscured, and if you don't give in to those acts of self-distraction, the right perspective is maintained. You don't need to try to keep the perspective, all you need to do is protect it from distraction. Once you stop being engaged with the world with work and whatever else you have to do, you can then realise that there is enough space for you here to see if the actions that you are about to do are being used for the pleasure of indolence and forgetting about this creature that you do need to keep an eye on. (You don't need to be choking that creature and tying it up, but you do need to not lose sight of it.)

So now that you have finished your work and return home to rest, does that include binge watching movies, having a drink, listening to music, etc? Why do you need to do that in order to relax? All you need to do for relaxation is not do any work. You can easily relax yourself by doing nothing or something non-distracting that will not result in you wanting to do more of it and losing sight of yourself. You want to relax but not to the point where you lose sight of the creature that you need to keep an eye on. Often people conflate the two, thinking: 'I have done my work, now I can relax', which means I can lose sight and become distracted. No, you can relax, but at no point does that mean that you should lose sight of the six-sensed creature. That's the difference between activity and non-activity. If you don't lose the sight of the creature, you will not be acting on the level of the creature even if you are doing chores, you will be doing them through the mind of non-activity, only to the minimal point of need and fulfilling the purpose and then you are back in non-activity abiding in jhana. Same with eating, you do it to the extent that you need it, and eating more than you need is no longer seen as pleasant because what is pleasurable is protecting the mind of non-distraction which makes everything else pleasurable from that higher stance. You realise that's the true pleasure, pleasure which is not underlied by craving for more. That type of pleasure is not unwholesome, it's safe and you are mindful in it, so it's a win-win.