

(Kosambī) Uṇṇābha Sutta¹
The Discourse to Uṇṇābha (of Kosambī)
 [Not all desires are bad, or the path to success]
 (Saṃyutta Nikāya 51.15/5:271-273)
 Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2004

1 Uṇṇābha

Uṇṇābha is probably the name of two different individuals,² one of Sāvattī (S 5:217 f), the other of Kosambī (S 5:272). Uṇṇābha of Sāvattī appears in **the (Sāvattī) Uṇṇābha Sutta** (S 48.41) where he asks the Buddha whether the five sense-faculties (*indriyāni*), that are of different scope and range, has any common resort (*paṭisaraṇa*). The Buddha replies that each of the physical senses has its own field (*go-cara*) and range (*visaya*), but have the mind as the common resort (*paṭisaraṇa*). When questioned further, the Buddha replies that there is nothing beyond nirvana: the holy life has nirvana as its end. When the elated Uṇṇābha leaves, the Buddha declares to the monks that the brahmin has become a non-returner.³

Uṇṇābha of Kosambī is recorded in the Brāhmaṇa Sutta or **(Kosambī) Uṇṇābha Sutta** as visiting Ānanda at Kosambī, and asks him regarding the purpose of the holy life. When told that the purpose of the holy life is to end desire (by way of the fourfold bases of success, *iddhi, pāda*) [10.3], he wonders if this would be a task “without end.” Using similes, Ānanda explains what he means and Uṇṇābha is satisfied.⁴

2 Misconceptions regarding “desire”

Buddhist psychology rests on the two notions of motivational roots (*mūla*) and of latent tendencies (*anusaya*) [3].⁵ The three unwholesome roots (*akusala, mūla*) of motivation are greed, hate and delusion, which, in simple terms, feed one’s latent tendencies so that one becomes virtual automatons propelled by karmic habits autopilotting one in the cycle of negative feelings and responses. The purpose of the Buddhist life is to displace these unwholesome roots with their wholesome counterparts: non-greed (generosity), non-hate (lovingkindness) and non-delusion (wisdom).

“Purpose” interestingly is also a synonym of “desire.” Both these words are neutral in moral tone, and depend on the motivation behind the purpose or desire. If the motivation (root) is unwholesome, then the action is unwholesome; if the motivation (root) is wholesome, then the action is wholesome. The neutral Pali term for “desire” is *chanda*, but by itself means “positive desire, initiative (for good), the will” and is the first of the fourfold bases of power (*iddhi, pāda*) or, more colloquially, the path to power. The Uṇṇābha Sutta shows how mental concentration works through desire, effort, the mind and investigation.

Despite the fact that “desire” (in its positive sense) is such a basic notion in the spiritual path, many students and scholars, observers and believers of Buddhism often have the wrong idea that Buddhism aims to end all desires. **Damien Keown**’s observation is instructive:

It is an oversimplification of the Buddhist position to assume that it seeks an end of all desire. Such a view, however, is not uncommon. Poussin succumbed to it confessing, “I believed for a long time that a Buddhist should not desire *Nirvāṇa* before coming to recognize that the desire for what is good (*kuśala, dharma-c, chanda*) is necessary and important” (1927:152).⁶

¹ Simply named **Brāhmaṇa S** at S 5:271 (PTS).

² CPD & DPPN concur here.

³ S 48.41/5:217 f.

⁴ S 51.15/5:271-273.

⁵ See eg **Sall’atthana S** (S 36.6/4:207-210) = SD 5.5.

⁶ Louis de la Vallée Poussin, *La Morale Bouddhique*. Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1927.

The complete eradication of desire would be a supposition of the affective side of human nature and result only in apathy. In Buddhist terminology it would be an exclusion of the capacity for feeling (*vedanā,k-khandha*) which is a fundamental part of a man's being, and the denial of the opportunity for this capacity to reach its own particular excellence. Buddhism does not seek this suppression of feeling: what Buddhism seeks an end of is desire *for what is not good*, namely things which cripple rather than promote spiritual growth. It seeks the end only of desires which are perverted by ignorance (*avijjā*). Its aim is not to exterminate feeling (*vedanā*) but to liberate it from its attachment to false values (*vipallāsa*). The goal is the replacement of worthless objective to an orientation of the entire personality towards what is truly good.

Even the Buddha was not free from desires, although he was, of course, free from desire motivated by delusion (selfish desire). His desire for the well-being of others remained throughout his life, and he tells us that as far as others are concerned he desires their good, welfare, and salvation.⁷

“Purposeful activity” (*saṅkheyya,kāro*) is said to be one of his characteristics (Sn 351), and there can be no effective purpose without affective commitment. Enlightenment itself must be desired like any other goal, and in the Canon (S 5:271 ff) Ānanda rejects the suggestion that desire for nirvana is a hindrance to its attainment.⁸ (Keown 1992:222 f)

Bruce Mathews' book, *Craving and Salvation: A study in Buddhist soteriology* (1983),⁹ is a thorough study of the function of desire and craving in Buddhism (from both the phenomenological and religious perspectives). According to Mathews, awakening arises not from suppressing and destroying desire, but by engaging and harnessing it:

It would be a misinterpretation of one of the major foci of Buddhism to read into any text a concept of “cutting off” of the senses....even in enlightenment there is still activity of the senses; there are still experiences of physical pain and pleasure. But at this stage, freed from egocentric craving, sensory stimulation of any kind has no real effect on spiritual equilibrium. One is neither troubled nor excited by the senses because complete control of their activity and their volitional resonance has been gained. (Mathews, *Craving and Salvation*, 1983:88)

3 A pleasure that is wholesome

The Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta (M 36) describes the vital turning-point in the recluse Siddhattha's efforts in his noble quest for awakening, when he realizes that neither sensual self-indulgence nor self-mortification is the way to spiritual liberation:

I thought thus, “In the past, recluses and brahmins have experienced painful, racking, piercing pains; in the future, recluses and brahmins will experience painful, racking, piercing pains; at present, recluses and brahmins are experiencing painful, racking, piercing pains—but this is the utmost extreme, there is none beyond this. But by these painful austerities, I did not attain any superhuman state, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to awakening?”

I thought thus, “I recall that [during the Ploughing Festival]¹⁰ when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first dhyana that is

⁷ “Monks, ‘the man desire welfare, desiring good, desiring security from the yoke (of suffering)’—this is a term for the Tathagata, worthy, fully self-awakened,” *puriso attha,kāmo hita,kāmo yoga-k,khema,kāmo ti kho bhikkhave Tathāgatassa etaṃ adhvācanāṃ arahato sammāsambuddhassa* (**Dvedhā,vitakka S**, M 19.26/1:118).

⁸ On the positive role of desire in the Nikāyas, see Mathews 1975; see foll para.

⁹ See biblio.

¹⁰ Ploughing festival, that is, the ritual sowing, *vappa,maṅgala* (MA 2:290; J 1:57). On this First Absorption episode (M 26.31 f/1:246 f) cf Chinese version, T1428.781a4-11.

accompanied by initial application and sustained application, zest and joy born of seclusion. Could that be the path to awakening?”

Then following on that memory,¹¹ I realized, “That is the path to awakening!”

I thought thus, “Why do I fear the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?” I thought thus, “**I do not fear the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states!**”¹² (M 36.31 f; M 100.29)¹³

The Buddha then describes how builds up his physical health by taking proper food (to the chagrin of the five monks who then leave him), and how he, cultivating the mindfulness of breathing, goes on to attain dhyanas, and finally spiritual liberation.¹⁴

The nature of the awakened mind is clearly described in **the Sall’atthena Sutta** (S 36.6)¹⁵ as experiencing the same kinds of feeling that the unawakened experience, but with a radical difference:

Monks, the uninstructed ordinary person feels pleasant feeling, painful feeling, neutral feeling.¹⁶

But, monks, the instructed noble disciple, too, feels pleasant feeling, painful feeling, neutral feeling.

Monks, what then is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the instructed noble disciple and the uninstructed ordinary person?...

Monks, when the uninstructed ordinary person is touched by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast, becomes confused. So he feels two feelings: the bodily and the mental.

Monks, it is just as if they were to wound a person with a dart [arrow],¹⁷ and then they were to wound him with a second dart. As such, monks, that person would feel the sensation of two darts.

Even so, monks, when the uninstructed ordinary person is touched by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, laments, beats his breast, becomes confused. So he feels two feelings: the bodily and the mental.

And being touched by that painful feeling, he shows aversion towards it. When he shows aversion towards the painful feeling, **the latent tendency of aversion** (*paṭighānusaya*) towards painful feeling lies latent [in him].

Being touched by painful feeling, he seeks delight in sensual pleasure.

Why is that so?

¹¹ That is, regarding the mindfulness of the in-and-out-breaths (MA 2:291).

¹² On the two kinds of pleasures—sensual pleasure and the pleasure of enlightenment—see **Araṇa, vibhaṅga S** (M139.9/3:233).

¹³ M 36.31-32/1:246 f = SD 1.12; M 100.29/2:212 = SD 10.9.

¹⁴ M 36.34-44/1:247-249 = SD 1.12; M 100.28-41/2:212 = SD 10.9.

¹⁵ See SD 5.5 (2004).

¹⁶ Comy to Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S says that it is not easy to be mindful of neutral feeling, and that it should be best approached by way of inference, by noting the absence of both pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Comy illustrates with the example of a hunter seeing tracks before and after a rock, thereby inferring the track of an animal (MA 1:277). **Dhamma,saṅgaṇī** says that only the sense of touch is accompanied by pain or pleasure, while feelings arising at the other four sense-doors are invariably neutral (Dhs 139-145; Abhds 2). The suttas however speak of pleasant and unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, and tastes, that in turn condition the arising of corresponding feelings of pleasure or displeasure (S 4:115, 119, 125, 126). “This *Abhidhammic* presentation offers an intriguing perspective on contemplation of feeling, since it invites an inquiry into the degree to which an experience of delight or displeasure in regard to sight, sound, smell or taste is simply the outcome of one’s own mental evaluation” (Anālayo, *Sati-paṭṭhāna*, 2003:171). See §8e n.

¹⁷ Comy: The second wound (*anugata, vedham*) would be just a finger’s breadth or two-fingers’ breadth away from the first one. For the one wounded, as such, would feel the subsequent worse than the first. (SA 3:76).

Because, monks, the uninstructed ordinary person knows no other escape than through sensual pleasure.¹⁸

And when he delights in sensual pleasure, **the latent tendency of lust** (*rāgānusaya*) towards pleasant feeling lies latent (in him).

He does not understand according to reality the arising, the passing away, the gratification, the danger and the escape with regards to feelings.¹⁹

Not understanding these things according to reality, **the latent tendency of ignorance** (*avijjā'nusaya*) towards neutral feeling lies latent (in him).²⁰

If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a painful feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him. If he feels a neutral feeling, he feels that it is yoked to him.

This, monks, is called an uninstructed ordinary person who is yoked to birth, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair—he is one who is yoked to suffering, I say!²¹
(S 36.6/4:207-210)

This sutta should be studied with **the (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī S** (A 4.159),²² where Ānanda exhorts a nun on how craving is abandoned through craving, conceit through conceit; that is, based on the present “craving” to become an arhat, one abandons the previous craving; hurt by one’s conceit that another had attained arhathood, one works towards arhathood oneself.

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¹⁸ Comy: The escape is mental concentration, the path and the fruit, but he does not know this, knowing only sensual pleasure. (SA 3:77).

¹⁹ Cf **Cūḷa Sihanāda S** (M 11.7/1:65), where the Comy says the arising (*samudaya*) of the views of being (*bhava, diṭṭhi*) and non-being (*vibhava, diṭṭhi*) are due to any of these eight conditions (*attha-ṭ, ṭhāna*): the five aggregates, ignorance, contact, perception, thought, unskillful consideration, evil friends and the voice of another [Pm 1:138]. The disappearance (*atthaṅgama*) of wrong views, by way of conditions (*paccaya*), is the path of stream-entry which removes wrong views. Both these arising and disappearance may also be momentary (*khaṇika*). Their gratification (*assāda*) may be understood as the satisfaction of psychological need that they provide; their danger (*ādīnava*) is the continual bondage that they entail; the escape (*nissaraṇa*) from them is nirvana (MA 2:11). See also **Cha, chakka S** (M 148) where the latent tendencies are explained in connection with each of the 6 senses (M 148.-28-39/3:285-287).

²⁰ The most important characteristic of neutral feelings to note is their impermanent nature (It 47). This is because a neutral feeling appears to be the most stable of the three types of feeling. When they are noted as impermanent, it will lead to the arising of wisdom, thereby countering the latent tendency of ignorance. See §3n. See Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, 2003:171.

²¹ **Mahā Taṇhā, saṅkhaya S** (M 38) concludes with an interesting, broader explanation of how an unawakened person delights all kinds of feelings—whether pleasant, painful or neutral—“he delights in that feeling, welcomes it, and remains clinging to it.” It also describes a Buddha responds to these feelings (M 38.30-41/ 1:266-271). See SD 5.5 Introd.

²² A 4.159.5/2:145 f = SD 10.14.

The Discourse to the brahmin Uṇṇābha

(S 51.15/5:271-273)

1 Thus have I heard.

Uṇṇābha questions Ānanda

At one time the venerable Ānanda was dwelling in Ghosita's Park near Kosambī. [272]

2 Then the brahmin Uṇṇābha approached the venerable Ānanda and exchanged greetings with him. When they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, the brahmin Uṇṇābha sat down at one side and said this to the venerable Ānanda:

3 "For what purpose, master Ānanda, is the holy life lived under the recluse Gotama?"

"It is for the sake of abandoning desire, brahmin, that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One."

The four bases of success

4 "But, master Ānanda, is there path, is there a way, for the abandoning of this desire?"

"There is a path, brahmin, there is a way, for the abandoning of this desire."

5 "But, master Ānanda, what is this path, what is this way, for the abandoning of this desire?"

"Here, brahmin, a monk develops the basis of success that possesses concentration due to desire (*chanda*) and volitional formations of striving.²³

He develops the basis of success that possesses concentration due to effort (*virīya*) and volitional formations of striving.

He develops the basis of success that possesses concentration due to mind (*citta*) and volitional formations of striving.

He develops the basis of success that possesses concentration due to investigation (*vīmaṃsā*) and volitional formations of striving.

This, brahmin, is the path, this is this way, for the abandoning of this desire."

Worldly desire

6 "Such being the case, master Ānanda, the situation is without an end, not with an end.²⁴ It is impossible that one can abandon desire by means of desire itself!"

"Well then, brahmin, I will question you about this matter. Answer as you see fit.

7 What do you think, brahmin, did you earlier have a desire, 'I will go to the park,' and after you have gone to the park, did the said desire subside?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you earlier rouse effort, thinking, 'I will go to the park,' and after you have gone to the park, did the said effort subside?"

"Yes, sir." [273]

"Did you earlier make up your mind, thinking, 'I will go to the park,' and after you have gone to the park, did the said thought²⁵ subside?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you earlier investigate, thinking, 'Shall I go to the park?' and after you have gone to the park, did the said investigation subside?"

"Yes, sir."

²³ "Volitional formations of striving" (*padhāna, saṅkhāra*), according to Comy, is a name for energy that accomplishes the fourfold function of right striving (SA 3:255; PmA 4:343 f; VbhA 306 f).

²⁴ "Without an end, not with an end," here the common reading (incl PTS) is *santakam hoti no asantakam* ("with an end, not without an end") which would be the same reading at the end of the sutta, when the brahmin accepts Ānanda's explanation. FL Woodward (S:W 5:244) notices that the correct reading is from Ce texts: *ananta-kam hoti no santakam*; so too S:B. Comy is silent. *Santakam* = *sa* + *antakam*.

²⁵ "Thought," *citta*, where the usual tr "mind" is out of context. Bodhi uses "resolution" (S:B 1945 n267).

Worldly desire

8 “It is exactly the same, brahmin, with a monk who is an arhat, one whose cankers are destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what needs to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, and is fully liberated through final knowledge.

He earlier had the desire for the attainment of arhathood, and when he had attained arhathood, the said desire subsided.

He had earlier roused effort for the attainment of arhathood, and when he had attained arhathood, the said effort subsided.

He had earlier made up his mind to attain arhathood, and when he had attained arhathood, the said thought subsided.

He earlier had investigated regarding the attainment of arhathood, and when he had attained arhathood, the said investigation subsided.²⁶

9 What do you think, brahmin, such being the case, is the situation with an end, or without an end?”
“Surely, master Ānanda, such being the case, the situation is with an end, not without an end.²⁷

Uṇṇābha takes refuge

10 Excellent, master Ānanda! Excellent, Master Ānanda! Venerable sir, just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were to reveal what was hidden, or were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way the master Ānanda has, in numerous ways, made the Dharma clear.

I go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May the master Ānanda remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth for life.”

—evaṃ—

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²⁶ Cf (Taṇhā) Bhikkhuṇī S (A 4.159.5/2:145 f) = SD 10.14, where Ānanda shows how craving is abandoned through craving, conceit through conceit; that is, based on the present “craving” to become an arhat, he abandons the previous craving; hurt by his conceit that another had attained arhathood, he himself works towards arhathood.

²⁷ *Santakaṃ hoti no asantakaṃ*. Cf *asantakaṃ hoti no santakaṃ* [§6] above.