

The Provenance Of Pleasure

MAITREYABANDHU

A poem, like the clitoris, is there
For pleasure and although some experts say
It can't be only pleasure it is there for
But must do something else to pay its way
But what that something else is can't agree
We leave them to their wrangling and say
The pleasure principle will do for you and me.

– David Constantine

David Constantine's poem 'Pleasure', from his 2004 collection *A Poetry Primer*, unambiguously asserts the motivating value of pleasure in poetry: "The pleasure principle will do for you and me". Constantine is well aware of the problems inherent in the word *pleasure*, its connotations of trivial satisfaction, entertainment and selfish gratification, so he goes on to define exactly what he means by pleasure: "End in itself, servant to nothing other / Than what it carries (love)". When I interviewed him for Poetry East he spoke approvingly of the motto Bertolt Brecht pinned above his door, "Truth is Concrete", so Constantine's poem continues by giving a concrete example of the delayed gratification we experience when the main verb comes at or near the end of a sentence, "A wanted realisation's long postponement / Over caesuras and line-endings [...]" The poem concludes:

They ask what the syntax of our pleasure does?
Makes with a rush of sense something that *is*.

I want to explore the kind of pleasure described in David Constantine's poem from a Buddhist point of view. I want to do this because I am a Buddhist myself and have been for twenty-five years, and because I believe Buddhism offers fresh insights into the spiritual value of poetry. I use as my model an ancient Buddhist Sutta (literally "thread of discourse") called the Honeyball Sutta, which describes how our mind is patterned and structured.¹ I'll need to beg your patience while I say something about the Buddhist vision of life and introduce some Sanskrit technical terms. What I hope to show is that the human and spiritual value of poetry is to be found in the end-in-itself pleasure that David Constantine's poem affirms.

Buddhism begins with Siddhartha Gautama gaining Enlightenment whilst, as tradition would have it, sitting in meditation under a peepal tree on the full moon night of April/May, two thousand five hundred years ago. In that moment Siddhartha became the Buddha: "one who is awake". The experience of Enlightenment transcends all egoistic clinging – it is a wordless, conceptless illumination. Most often is said to consist in wisdom, compassion and unlimited energy. All genuinely Buddhist thought and practice derive from that experience and from the teachings that followed it. So the first thing to make clear is the Buddha is not a theoretician; he is *thinker*, yes, but not a metaphysician. In fact the Buddha's teaching constitutes a radical departure from the abstract, metaphysical and speculative thought of his day: it is practical and pragmatic, method

1. Even though the *Madhupindika Sutta* (Majjhima Nikaya, 19, Pali Text Society) is the Pali source for this article; I am indebted to the series of brilliant seminars given on it by Dharmachari Subhuti at the London Buddhist Centre in 2009.

rather than doctrine. The Buddha taught individuals how to make progress towards Enlightenment. The model I introduce below is just one way of approaching the Buddha’s experience. It is not an explanatory theory, although it does rather look like one. The best approach to it is *suggestive* – what aspects of human experience does it illuminate? How might it help me make sense of my life?

According to the Honeyball Sutta, experience has three fundamental aspects. Firstly, we come into contact with things: we see things, hear things, touch things, smell things. Buddhism would say this experience of contact includes contact with mind-objects (the mind is the sixth sense in Buddhism). So we come into contact with a memory, an idea, with David Constantine’s poem. The Sanskrit word for this contact is *spāṛśa*. Secondly, everything we come into contact with – the snow on the roof beyond my window, the smell of toast, the thought of phoning a friend – *feels* like something: feels pleasant, unpleasant, or somewhere in between (i.e. neutral). All experience is hedonically tinged. The Sanskrit word for this is *vedanā*.² Thirdly, all experience entails some degree of interpretation or labelling – ‘mummy’, ‘warm’, ‘dark’. This capacity to make distinctions is called *saṃjñā*. These three aspects: contact, feeling-tone and naming constitute our primary reality – our “creaturely nature” as John Burnside puts it. We share this primary reality with the creaturely life around us. When a bird sees a cat, for instance, there is eye-contact (*spāṛśa*); that contact feels unpleasant (*vedanā*); and that unpleasant sensation is linked with the knowledge (*saṃjñā*) that this ginger tabby is a threat!

But we have something animals don’t have, or don’t have very much of: reflective consciousness. We can stand back from our mind – from worries about the rent, irritation with the neighbour, excitement at winning the *Poetry London* competition – and question ourselves about it. We can make ourselves the object of our own attention. We can ask “Why am I feeling anxious or threatened? How do I need to act just now?” Of course our self-awareness is often immature; we easily act blindly. But we can stand back and take stock. We can be mindful of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral sensations and try not to react unhelpfully to them in our mind. We can tell ourselves we need to calm down or talk to a friend. The Sanskrit for this precious faculty of ours is *vitarka*. *Vitarka* could be translated as intelligence. It is our capacity to reason with experience and decide how best to act. It is often under-developed, but it is our greatest gift.

Usually we’re stuck in thought – in repetitive inner narratives and circular thinking. In this state, our mind ranges around trying to make sense of experience, connecting this with that, going over things, rehearsing things, trying to come up with a settled view or explanation for what’s happening to us – “Why can’t I get a boyfriend?”, “Why did *PN Review* reject my poems?” It can feel like a tumble dryer with a fifty pence clattering around inside. Everyone experiences this. It varies from a pleasant background burbling to a painful inner cacophony. The Sanskrit name for the mind in this mode is *prapañca*. *Prapañca* means complication, mental proliferation, literally “spreading out”. It is a kind of alienated intelligence, broken away from the lived experience of creaturely life. This ruminative tendency of the mind is our attempt to solve the problem of pleasure and pain – how can I have more pleasure? Why am I experiencing pain? What is its cause? How can I avoid it in the future? The more complicated our life is, the more pleasant / unpleasant / neutral feelings we experience, the more we will feel compelled to make sense of it in our mind.³

2. Feeling-tone (*vedanā*) does not include “emotion” in its connotations. It’s more foundational than that. We could think of it as the underlying texture of life: whether that texture feels pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. We build our emotions out of this primary hedonic texture. For example, when we give a dinner party we try to provide guests with as many pleasant sensations as possible – tastes, sights, sounds, etc – in the hope these will help our guests get into a good mood. We know it won’t guarantee a successful evening, but it’s more likely to than burnt stroganoff!

3. Our mind, spreading out in *prapañca*, finally clicks into a pattern, into a settled view or construction (Skt. *Prapañca-saṃjñā-saṅghā*, “knowing together, constructed”). We then get stuck inside our own self-justifying, explanatory constructions. We

Poetry, like all the arts, has the capacity to give us a particular kind of pleasure: a pleasure that enhances our experience of primary reality (*spārśa-vedanā-saṃjñā*), and that releases us, at least momentarily, from the mental proliferations and settled constructions of *prapañca*. As I have said, feeling-tone (*vedanā*) is traditionally divided into pleasant, painful, and neutral. Everything we experience, from poetry to a back rub, has *vedanā*. But *vedanā* is further sub-divided into two kinds of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings: *sāmisa* or *nirāmisa vedanā*. *Āmisa* means “meat” or “flesh”, so *sāmisa* and *nirāmisa* mean “with, or without meat” (*nirāmisa* is still the word for “vegetarian” in contemporary India). *Sāmisa* therefore comes to mean “feelings related to the flesh” or “worldly feelings” and *nirāmisa*, “feelings connected to renunciation” or “unworldly feelings”. I’m aware this sounds rather moralistic, so let’s explore the experience of reading poems to see if we can get closer to what *nirāmisa* pleasure feels like.

I remember reading Seamus Heaney’s ‘District and Circle’ (the title poem of his 2006 collection). I was left with that difficult-to-verbalise sense of rightness; that intensified feeling of pleasure – the wow-factor of poetry – coupled with an equally difficult-to-verbalise sense of meaning and value. This could be a definition of beauty: pleasure and meaning comingled, completely at home with one another. And I’m reminded here of St Augustine saying that the word “beauty” means “no more can be said”: in valuable aesthetic experiences the inability to verbalise is a mark of the chattering mind (*prapañca*) being suspended. Heaney’s best poems express integrated intelligence, self-awareness (*vitarka*) turning towards and engaging with creaturely life (*spārśa-vedanā-saṃjñā*) as well as looking out from it. As so often in Heaney’s work, I’m struck by how ‘District and Circle’ returns me to my embodied experience. Take this description of stepping on to a tube train:

I reached to grab
The stubby black roof-wort and take my stand
From planted ball of heel to heel of hand
As sweet traction and heavy down-slump stayed me.

Or a few lines later: “that long between-times pause before the budge / and glaze-over”. Living in London for the last twenty-six years, I know this experience very well, and yet when I read the poem I saw that I hadn’t lived it deeply enough. I hadn’t been at home in the *spārśa-vedanā-saṃjñā* of primary reality. I’d been off somewhere in the whirligig of thought. Heaney’s poem brought me back to an enhanced sense of creaturely life. Take the absolute rightness of that word “budge” – how close it comes to the texture of direct experience.

Or take those stretcher-bearers in Heaney’s poem, ‘Miracle’:

Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop deeplocked
In their backs, the stretcher handles
Slippery with sweat.

Again the physicality: the accuracy of those “slippery handles”. Reading these lines, I’m brought back into contact with sensations of touch and with the feeling-tones associated with them (*spārśa-vedanā*) but in a newly enhanced and illumined way. My primary reality, so often take for

our experience into our constructions rather than having experiences and then coming up with explanations based upon them. As a consequence, our mental constructions govern the kinds of experience we have. As Marianne Moore would have it, “The Mind Is a Enchanting Thing // is a enchanted thing”. In other words, the mind both casts a spell – distorting, even contaminating our experience – and is at the same time *under* a spell: our settled convictions can be given to us from the outside, from the media, for instance. Interestingly, an early epithet for Enlightenment was *niṣprapañca*: no *prapañca*.

granted, is invested with aesthetic depth and meaning. This is the felt-sense of *nirāmisa vedanā*.
Or take, as another example, Alice Oswald’s poem ‘Daisy’:

I will not meet that quiet child
roughly my age but match-size
I will not kneel low enough to her lashes
to look her in her open eye
or feel her hairy wiry strength

The first thing that struck me was her authority, her surefootedness – the sense that she is speaking directly from lived experience rather than from the alienated proliferations of *prapañca*. The poem evokes that up-closeness, that being-in-experience of childhood, and this again brings me back to the *spārśa-vedanā-sañjñā* of creaturely life. It’s a physical as well as imaginative experience. The description of the stem, for instance, its “hairy wiry strength” provokes that feeling of “Yes, I’ve lived that, known that, *felt* that” and yet I hadn’t known it until she illumined it for me. Then the last line hits you:

I will push my nail
into her neck and make
a lovely necklace out of her green bones.

Reading it, I was left with that *prapañca*-suspending elation, that pause before the machinery of ruminative thought kicks in.

The suspension of self-as-narrative can happen at any time in a good reading of an achieved poem. In Oswald’s *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, moments of moon-like illumination occur over and over again. They seem to light up our direct experience of water, or moonlight, or “hundreds of wayfaring birds coming down at angles to their mirrors”. Take these three descriptions of the wind:

*Notice a fisherman walking home, with the Wind
in rustling clothes following.*

There’s the Wind on your ears like a hood.

Poor reeds
Standing in a draft in their night clothes

Reading this wonderful poem, I kept finding myself in a kind of moon-struck inner reverie. There is something mysterious about these moments of pleasure that both poet and reader contribute to. It is the experience of a healthy, concentrated subject (the reader) making contact with a valuable object (the poem). These moments of *nirāmisa* pleasure – wordless satisfaction, harmony, rightness – can be fleeting or sustained, shallow or deep. We can measure their depth by the absence of *prapañca*; the feeling of effortless attention; and the sense of abiding-in primary experience.⁴

Poetry then can be the occasion for *nirāmisa vedanā*: the kind of mental and emotional pleasure that is essential to spiritual and truly human life. Experiencing *this* kind of pleasure –

4. I’m not suggesting that Heaney is ‘a physical poet’, or Oswald ‘a nature poet’. All poets want to be a Poet, capital P. They may write about the natural world, for instance, but they do so because for them at least this is the best way of talking about *everything*. We experience life whole. Thinking, feeling, acting, remembering, perceiving, sensing, etc, are experientially indivisible. But to *think* about them, we have to break this whole experience into parts. We tend to forget that this is what

pleasure that makes us feel whole, that deepens our creaturely life, that liberates us from the ruminative maze – is the reason we read poetry (or at least *should* be the reason we read poetry; one of the hazards of writing poetry is you start reading with ulterior motives). At best, reading poetry is a completely non-appropriative act, an adult play that has no use or function other than itself. As David Constantine puts it, it is an “End in itself, servant to nothing other / Than what it carries (love).” Pleasant *nirāmisa vedanā* is deeper, less addictive, less narcotic than pleasant *sāmisa vedanā*. It doesn’t have a sting in its tail – the morning after the night before, the empty feeling after an evening of bad TV – it doesn’t make you want to *have* something or *hurt* something. Pleasant *nirāmisa vedanā* leaves us feeling enriched and content, while pleasurable *sāmisa vedanā* tends to fuel our endless compulsion to find and then repeat pleasure. This urge to repeat our pleasures vitiates the pleasure we experience. Given that our life is motivated by pleasure and pain, finding a source of pleasure that enhances our life is crucial.⁵

These are just a few examples of pleasant *nirāmisa vedanā* in poetry, examples that bring out the embodied nature of genuine imaginative power. And I’m not meaning to exclude other, more complex pleasures. Recently, for instance, I read David Constantine’s epic poem, *Caspar Hauser*. I was left in that state of mind, so difficult to describe, that feels richly pleasurable, satisfying and at the same time sobering. You want to linger in it, savour it. You feel you’ve understood something about life more deeply, but you can’t say what it is. It’s like the time you go to see *King Lear* and come away feeling sobered up (you hadn’t realised how intoxicated you were) and you want to stay with the after-feeling *Lear* leaves you with – epic, uniquely human, tragic. But the person you are with immediately starts talking about work, or the car they’re thinking of buying, or their daughter’s schoolwork. It’s almost painful. You want to stay in that deepened world of *spārśa-vedanā-sañjñā* but they drag you back to *prapañca* – it’s as though they hadn’t been watching at all.

In valuable aesthetic experiences, each element of *spārśa-vedanā-sañjñā* is deepened and enriched. *Spārśa* (contact with sense objects, including mind-objects) is more vividly felt and direct; *vedanā* (hedonic sensation) is fuller, richer, more textured and nuanced; and *sañjñā* deepens into a direct, intuitive perception of realities and values, unfettered by ruminative thought. In the midst of such experiences you want to resist the theorizing, chattering tendency of *prapañca*. You want to stay in that deeper world.

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One of the tragedies of Robert Frost’s life was his insatiable desire for praise and honour. The winner of no less than four Pulitzer Prizes, Frost once told a friend he didn’t care what people thought of his poetry “as long as they gave him prizes”. Despite Frost’s genius as a poet “he had always secretly hoped for more recognition than he had ever received”. Frost’s contemporary, the poet and literary critic Malcolm Cowley, said “Frost has been heaped with more official and academic honours than any other American poet, living or dead”. In later life, too much of Frost’s time was spent hob-nobbing with college presidents, collecting honorary doctorates and “gratifying the egos of complacent patrons”.⁶ It distracted him from his writing and dissipated his energy. This is the natural history of worldly pleasure (*sāmisa vedanā*): the more you get the more

we are doing, and, like Humpty Dumpty, we get into problems putting the parts back together again. Perhaps the power of poetry is to do with the sense that, at its best, it is the closest language gets to evoking *the whole* – the indivisible nature of being alive. A great poem seems to express what being alive feels like; it leaves us with a strong sense that “nothing more needs to be said”.

5. From a Buddhist point of view, it is also important to value painful *nirāmisa vedanā*. An example of this unpleasant but nevertheless positive state of mind is rational shame or remorse (as distinct from irrational guilt). Buddhism values this state of mind very highly.

6. *Robert Frost: a biography*. Jeffrey Meyers. pp.291-294. Constable and Company Ltd, London.

you want.⁷

I’ve had my own small experience of this. Not long after I started writing seriously, I was commended in the Yorkshire Open. I won £15. I arrived at the prize giving and sat at the front with the other winners (I was one of ten commendations). David Harsent, the judge that year, said something appreciative about my poem and I stood up to read. Then I had to nip away to catch my train back to London. It was a day of almost unalloyed happiness. Since then I have been fortunate enough to win bigger prizes, but none of them gave me as much pleasure as that first kiss of success. This is the law of diminishing returns, what psychologists call the “hedonic treadmill”.

We rapidly adapt to good things that happen to us by taking them for granted. We become habituated to winning prizes, for instance. This means our expectations rise. We need to win something bigger each time to give us anything like the same buzz of satisfaction. Of course once we do win, say, the Bridport Prize, our innate ability to adapt kicks in once more, so to get the same thrill again (or something like it), we need to win the T.S. Eliot or the Forward Prize. And so it goes on. Eventually, even winning the Pulitzer four times won’t do the trick! And remember, rising expectation means increased capacity for disappointment. Success becomes the taken-for-granted norm, un-success becomes especially galling and unjust.⁸

Then there’s the whole business of sending off poems for publication and competitions – how you tell yourself not to hope, not to think about the announcement date, not to plan what you might do with the money, not to speculate which of your six poems will be accepted by the editor. Then you’re preoccupied with the post, disappointed when your s.a.e. doesn’t show up, disappointed again when you finally get the rejection slip (how many weeks, months have you waited?), disappointed yet again when the announcement for Arvon or the National goes by; embarrassed to feel jealous when a friend gets commended. You tell yourself to concentrate on the work but then you get that competition email and you can’t resist, even though the poems are not quite there: you write another cheque and start hoping all over again. And however much you know all this, you just can’t stop doing it. It feels a bit like addiction.⁹

All of this is the legacy of “worldly” pleasure (*sāmisa vedanā*). There is pleasure, even joy and delight, but it casts a shadow. The more we yearn for pleasure, the more we get caught up in pleasure’s shadow – the addictive, diminishing returns of pleasant *sāmisa vedanā*. This is why *sāmisa* pleasure doesn’t make us happy, why it so easily turns into pain, and why *nirāmisa* (unworldly) pleasures are so vital to a well-lived life. We must have pleasure. Life is almost unlivable without it. But *sāmisa* pleasure contains a strongly addictive element: as soon as we’ve had it, we want to repeat it, and this will eventually lead to pain. There is an irreducible element of appropriation in *sāmisa* pleasure. We want to add something to our sense of self. We want to be thought a success. But this means we get ensnared in the machinations of *prapañca* – we ruminate about it, strategize, hob-nob – and this has the effect of alienating us from our primary

7. There is something compensatory about worldly pleasures (*sāmisa vedanā*). We hanker after them in the absence of a more genuine and sustaining sense of wellbeing. Part of the anatomy of worldly pleasures is how *mental* they are, how bound up with *prapañca*. Frost’s biographer Jeffrey Meyers says, “His public honors not only assuaged his long neglect, but also compensated for his disastrous personal life”. Of course by their very nature, prizes and honours can never assuage or compensate for anything, or if they do, they can only do so for a very short period of time – thus their addictive nature.

8. Even success can be rather febrile and alienated. We find ourselves wanting to mention it for no good reason; we gloat on it; turn it over in our mind; fantasise about glowing reviews. It can make us feel strangely separate from other people. In other words success can be a highly *prapañchic* experience.

9. One of the causes of addictive behaviour is the fact that sometimes whatever we are addicted to works (i.e. makes us feel happy, takes away our worries) and sometimes it doesn’t. If it never worked we wouldn’t get caught up in it; if it always worked we would become habituated to it. In the addictions psychology this is called “intermittent reinforcement”. Something analogous happens when we become preoccupied with poetry competitions or getting published: sometimes we win, sometimes we lose. This gambling aspect causes us to get hooked on it.

experience. Part of the addictive power of *sāmisa* pleasure is that we become willing to sacrifice actual happiness in the present for the possibility of success in the future. Our mind in *prapañca* locks on to prizes and publication as a solution to the problems of our life. The more it does that, the more we make ourselves unhappy in the present and the more we crave public recognition as the solution to that unhappiness.

So, what can we do about it? Looking at my own experience, I find I cannot persuade myself *not* to send poems to competitions and publications. This is partly because I’m not just writing for myself. I’m writing to give myself, and hopefully others, non-appropriative (*nirāmisa*) pleasure. I want to participate in that strange magic of poetry – its capacity to enhance creaturely life, mature *vitarka* (self-awareness) and suspend the ruminations of *prapañca*. But I’m also motivated by worldly ambition, and this is a source of both pleasure (*sāmisa vedanā*) and pain. I remember trying to get to the bottom of it once when I was in the grips of poetry-obsessed thinking. I asked myself “Why am I so preoccupied with success?” All I could come up with was I wanted to be *someone*. Of course this meant I didn’t feel like “a someone” already, and that success would somehow change that. But the desire to “be someone” can never be satisfied – it is an infinite regress, as Frost’s experience demonstrates.

Two things come to mind. The first is to practice mindfulness in the primary Buddhist sense of coming back to the directly lived experience of *spārśa-vedanā-sañjñā*. Emotions such as disappointment have their own natural history; they dissipate in time. It is our going over them again and yet again in *prapañca* that extends the narcotic afterlife of painful experience. Then there is coming back to the end-in-itself pleasure that David Constantine’s poem talks about. To use a Buddhist simile: to knock a wooded peg out of a piece of wood you need to knock in another peg. In other words positive states of mind ‘knock out’ negative states of mind and vice versa. *Sāmisa* pleasure – the intoxication of success, the preoccupation with getting published – knocks out *nirāmisa* pleasure; writing with an eye on publication undermines the intrinsically non-appropriative nature of *nirāmisa* satisfaction.

I remember a disappointed morning. I was sure my poem would win a prize. But no; not a squeak. I could have slipped into the whys and wherefores of *prapañca* – perhaps I’m no good after all? Perhaps I’ve lost my gift? Perhaps the judge has no taste! Instead I picked up my copy of James Merrill’s *Selected Poems* and read the first poem, ‘The Black Swan’. And there it was, The Poem! I lay in bed with my cup of tea and James Merrill changed my mind. He knocked out the peg of *sāmisa* pain and replaced it with *nirāmisa* pleasure. He reminded me what poetry is for.



Maitreyabandhu lives and works at the London Buddhist Centre and has been ordained into the Triratna Buddhist Order for twenty years. He has written two books on Buddhism.