

The Snake's Master (Sappadāsa)

A young man from a very wealthy, highly respected family heard the Buddha teach the Dharma, and he was so inspired by it that he decided to become one of the Buddha's monks. So, he was ordained and joined the Sangha of monks.

After he spent some time living as a monk, he was not at all content. He felt extremely unhappy as a monk. He thought,

"The life of a layman is not suited to a youth of status like me. But even death would be preferable to remaining a monk."

He knew he couldn't just return to his family after having left them to become a monk. And he couldn't just go out and find some work to do to support himself, because everyone knew he was from a high-caste family and wouldn't allow him to work as a laborer or in any other lower caste job. So, he spent his days considering ways of killing himself.

One day, very early in the morning, the monks went to the monastery after breakfast and saw a snake. They wanted to prevent the snake from biting anyone, but they wanted to act with compassion and not harm it in any way. Some of the monks very carefully caught the snake and put it into a jar. They closed the jar, trapping the snake inside, and carried it out of the monastery so they could let it live freely away from the monks.

The unhappy monk, after eating his breakfast, saw the group of monks holding the jar, and asked, "What do you have there, friend?"

They responded, "A snake, friend."

He asked, "What are you going to do with it?"

They answered, "Throw it away."

The unhappy monk thought to himself, "The snake is poisonous. I can commit suicide by letting the snake bite me."

So, he said to the other monks, "Let me take it; I'll throw it away."

He took the jar from their hands, sat down in a certain place, and tried to make the snake bite him. But the snake refused to bite him. He put his hand in the jar and waved it this way and that. Then he opened the snake's mouth and stuck his finger in. But the snake still refused to bite him. He said to himself, "It's not a poisonous snake, it's just a house-snake." He threw it away and returned to the monastery.

The other monks asked him, "Did you throw away the snake, friend?"

He said, "Friends, that was not a poisonous snake. It was only a house snake."

One of the other monks responded, "Friend, that was a poisonous snake. It spread its hood wide, hissed at us, and gave us a lot of trouble when we were trying to catch him. Why do you say it's only a house snake?"

The unhappy monk responded, "Friends, I tried to make it bite me and even stuck my finger into its mouth, but I couldn't make it bite."

When the other monks heard him say that, they didn't know how to respond. They were silent.

The unhappy monk served as the barber at the monastery. One day, he went to the monastery with two or three razors, and he put one razor on the floor. Then he proceeded to shave the hair of the monks with the other razors. When he picked up the razor from the floor, the thought occurred to him, "I will cut my throat with this razor and put myself out."

He went to a certain tree, leaned his neck against a branch, and held the blade of the razor to his windpipe. Remaining in this position, he reflected on his conduct from the time he was ordained as a monk. He perceived that his conduct was flawless, like the spotless shining moon or a cluster of transparent jewels. As he examined his conduct, a thrill of joy suffused his whole body. He subdued the feeling of joy and developed insight. At that moment, he became enlightened as an arahant, with analytical knowledge. He no longer wanted to die. He took his razor in his hand and entered the monastery enclosure.

The monks asked him, "Where did you go, friend?"

He responded, "Friends, I went out thinking to myself, 'I will cut my windpipe with this razor and put myself out.'"

One of the monks asked, "How did you escape death?"

The formerly unhappy monk responded, "I can no longer commit suicide. For I said to myself, 'With this razor I will sever my windpipe.' But instead of doing so, I severed the taints with the razor of knowledge."

The monks didn't believe he had eliminated his taints—the craving for pleasure, the craving for existence (to remain a separate individual), and ignorance of the true nature of things. They said to themselves, "This monk speaks falsely; he says what is untrue." They went to the Buddha and reported the matter to him.

A monk said, "Reverend sir, why didn't that snake bite him?"

The Buddha answered, “Monks, the simple fact is that the snake was his servant in a past life, his third previous existence, and therefore did not dare to bite the body of his own master.”

Thereafter, the monk was called Sappadāsa, which means “having a snake his servant.”

A monk asked a further question: “Reverend sir, this monk says that he became an arahant as he stood with the blade of his razor pressed against his windpipe. Is it possible to become an arahant in such a short period of time?”

The Buddha replied, “Yes, monks, a monk who strives with all his might may become an arahant while raising his foot, while setting his foot on the ground, or even before his foot touches the ground. For it is better for a man who strives with all his might to live but a single instant than for an idle man to live a hundred years.”

He spoke the following stanza:

Though one should live a hundred years
Lazy, of little effort,
Yet better is life for a single day
For one who makes a steady effort.

- Dhammapada 112

Dharma Discussion – Suicidal Thoughts:

We don’t know for certain why Sappadāsa was so unhappy as a monk. For some reason, he felt that he would rather die than continue living as a monk, yet he couldn’t give up the monk’s life and return to his family or start a job. His suicidal thoughts arose from being in a hopeless situation.

This story is instructive for all kinds of situations involving suicidal or self-harming thoughts. Whether you are thinking there’s no point in living, feeling worthless, or you are actively considering suicide, have attempted suicide or self-harmed (such as cutting your skin), or you have passive suicidal thoughts (such as no longer having motivation to live, not wanting to wake up, hoping to die in an accident or by recklessness, wishing you never were born, or thinking everyone would be better off without you), the Buddha’s teachings can help. These teachings also can help you advise another person who has these kinds of thoughts. In any case, it is crucial that you or the person you are advising immediately seek treatment with a professional therapist, or at least tell someone you can confide in, even if the suicidal thoughts have subsided lately. In an acute situation, contact a helpline. This discussion offers methods in addition to professional treatment to address suicidal and self-harming thoughts.

Sappadāsa induced a feeling of joy and cured himself of his suicidal thoughts by reflecting on his perfect conduct since he was a monk. It wasn't a feeling of personal pride, which would have hindered insight and enlightenment. Simply reflecting on his own virtuous conduct—with humility and gratitude to the Buddha, we might assume—generated positive thoughts that eliminated suicidal thoughts.

The Buddha's teaching in this story confirms that making effort practicing the Dharma even for a very short period of time is of great value, that is, makes great merit leading to enlightenment. And it makes life worthwhile again—or more than worthwhile—a great adventure, experiment, or journey toward ultimate happiness.

It isn't dependent upon having had perfect behavior or a huge accumulation of merit like the monk Sappadāsa. It doesn't matter at all what wrongdoing we have done before. (You can read the story of the serial murderer Angulimala for encouragement on this point.)

You can simply create a moment of perfect Dharmic behavior in this moment.

Contemplate that regardless of negative behavior you have engaged in, right now you are engaging in perfect conduct.

And create a "Moment of Merit" by thinking: "Right now, I am not doing anything that could harm myself or any other being. Right now, I think of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha," also known as the Three Jewels or Triple Gem.

Next, focus on the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, or just one of them, for a moment.

Focus on the Buddha by gazing at your favorite Buddha painting or statue, or your own mental image of Buddha. Close your eyes and see the image of the Buddha in your mind. Imagine that he looks at you very lovingly, with more love than you've ever experienced. He totally forgives you and understands you. His blessings are with you always, protecting and guiding you.

Focus on the Dharma by considering that you have a way out of misery with the Buddha's teachings. He gave us so many teachings and techniques, recorded in the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana scriptures, which are like timeless prescriptions for the many different types of people that exist, to heal our minds and lead us out of suffering and into peace and happiness.

Focus on the Sangha by contemplating that there are great monks and Dharma practitioners living today who have attained some level of enlightenment, and there are millions of others who are developing lovingkindness, compassion and other good qualities as they proceed on the path to enlightenment. Visualize them like millions of extremely bright points of light all around the Earth, shining out into the darkness of this degenerate age. Visualize that you are one of those lights.

You can also practice a "Moment of Mindfulness," keeping moment-by-moment full sensory awareness on your breathing or on ambient sounds around you with eyes closed, or on walking (i.e. walking meditation), eating, or sipping a beverage. This sharpens and trains your mind so you eventually can attain advanced states of meditation that are extremely blissful. Whenever you have a few seconds to practice mindfulness, you add to your accumulation of merit.

We can do these Moments of Merit and Moments of Mindfulness again and again, generating more and more merit, like accumulating money in a savings account. This merit cannot

disappear; it accumulates over lifetimes and gives us good fortune and happiness, and in addition, leads us toward enlightenment.

These are on-the-spot techniques to avoid negative or suicidal thoughts and to build up our reserves of good fortune. But we also need to understand these thoughts better so we can find a way to redirect them from being destructive to being constructive.

When we are hoping to die, what do we really want to accomplish?

We expect that if we destroy the body, the brain dies so the pain in our mind dies.

But how do we know that is true?

If we destroy our body, we don't destroy our pain. The Buddha teaches that after death (unless we have attained nirvana) there is rebirth in one of the six realms of samsara: as a human, animal, ghost, as a deva in a god-realm, as an asura in the jealous-god realm, or in a hell-realm. Regardless of which realm we are born into, we experience suffering to some degree. Even devas in the god-realms must be reborn to suffer human life on Earth again. There is no guarantee that in the next human life we will have access to the Dharma or have a healthy body or environment. Also, when rebirth occurs, we don't get a clean-slate new mind. There are certain energies that transmit from one birth to the next, including our karmas and strong mental habits. Whatever bad habits and negative karmas we had will carry to the next life as the cause of more suffering. In order to escape pain and suffering, while we are in human form we need to heal ourselves, accumulate merit, develop our good qualities, and overcome habits that hinder our path to enlightenment. We have the advantage now of having a human life with access to the Dharma to work on this. And if our circumstances are very difficult, we "burn off" more negative karmas in this life, propelling us forward on the path to happiness.

To end our pain is what the Buddha sought to accomplish when he left home and stayed in the forest for six years. He wanted to find the way to end suffering for everyone, and he found it—the attainment of nirvana.

Our wish to die is really our desire for the actual end of our suffering, which is nirvana.

So, we can reframe our suicidal thoughts as the longing for nirvana.

Whenever you notice you are having a wish to die, immediately transform it into a wish for nirvana. And remember that you are on the path to nirvana—all you have to do is take another step to get closer.

To take a step on the path, you can simply take a Moment of Merit or Moment of Mindfulness.

But we want a shortcut. The path to nirvana seems endless; it takes lifetimes to reach nirvana, so we feel exhausted and hopeless and don't want to make the effort.

We need encouragement—we want to feel happiness right now. How can we do that?

We're used to the typical "worldly" ways of seeking happiness—such as career success, social life, family life, getting and experiencing new things, entertainment, amusement, praise and attention from others.

When we try to make ourselves happy in these ways, we find they are temporary, short-lived or insufficient. One day we succeed, on another we fail; one day all goes well, on another things

go horribly wrong; one day we're elated, another day we're utterly defeated. There's always some degree of dissatisfaction, including knowing that the feeling of joy is going to end at some point.

Plus, many of us don't have a fulfilling romantic relationship, or we feel unloved, abandoned, abused, neglected or lonely, or we doubt we ever will find real love.

We need a way to real happiness that doesn't depend on another person's feelings for us or on the ups and downs, gains and losses, thrills and horrors of "worldly" ways of seeking happiness, where at any time, something can kill our happiness and take away our will to live.

Why are these ways of seeking happiness so unfulfilling and fraught with disaster?

They involve focusing on ourselves, "I," "me" and "my": "I deserve this," "my child should...," "I want to have...," "he doesn't care about me," "she left me."

Naturally when things go wrong, we want to know who was at fault, where we went wrong, what we can do better next time, how we can get a better result.

But in focusing on ourselves, we find reasons to be angry, or we feel we are lacking, which make us suffer mentally.

And when we ruminate over ourselves—harms done to us, our perceived failures, or feeling unworthy, hopeless or overly self-critical—we might start to feel that life is pointless.

We need to get our mind off of ourselves.

We can try some mindful movement, such as yoga, Tai Chi, Qi Gong, or walking in nature, all of which have been shown in studies to improve symptoms of anxiety and depression.

When we nurture something and watch it grow, it symbolizes our own self-nurturing and growth. You can try growing a couple of vegetable or herb plants in pots or start a garden.

You can find new healthy recipes to experiment with, or try a new arts and crafts or sports activity to take your mind off your troubles and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Love is the source of the greatest, most satisfying happiness, and takes our mind off of ourselves. We can learn to experience love without getting too involved with others—without attachment, and without expecting anything in return.

That is, we develop universal lovingkindness. This also builds up our reserves of merit.

We can start by practicing lovingkindness toward animals. For many of us, it's easier to love animals, innocent creatures, than to love people.

When we feed wild birds, observe wildlife, release an insect in our house to outdoors, rescue a living creature in distress, or play with our beloved pet, we're focused on other beings with unconditional love and without any expectation.

We can learn to love people in the same way, with detachment and without expectation of anything at all in return. We can do this in several ways:

1. Generate kind thoughts and well-wishes toward strangers.

For example, when seeing someone who looks stressed, unhappy, or in an unfortunate situation, wish that their problems be solved and that they feel happy and peaceful.

Whenever it's appropriate to greet or thank someone, speak with genuine heartfelt appreciation, while mentally wishing them well.

Express appreciation of someone's accomplishment or creation.
Make kind, appreciative comments online.

2. Try to be aware of how you can help, even in small ways, everywhere you go. Even simply being considerate in whatever you are doing is a way to spread kindness. Be aware of your surroundings, and you find a plethora of opportunities to assist. For example, at a temple you can offer to volunteer with cleaning, organizing, fixing, constructing or repairing; cooking, serving or other kitchen help; offering help with technology, computers, gardening or landscaping; or photographing and making videos of events.

3. Meditate on Lovingkindness.
Find a lovingkindness meditation technique that you like, and practice it regularly. When you are feeling very depressed, wish that no one else feel depressed like you do. Meditate on breathing by visualizing that as you breathe in, you inhale blessings of the Buddha, and as you breathe out, you spread love and happiness in the world.

4. Express kindness to acquaintances, when you feel ready to do so.
For example, visit an elderly or lonely relative, neighbor or friend.
Perhaps send a kind email or text to someone you haven't contacted in a while.

Helping others may be difficult when you feel your own needs aren't being met. It's important to take care of yourself. And don't let anyone abuse your kindness, so keep healthy boundaries and decline to help if it doesn't feel right to you. Don't engage in "people pleasing."
Helping or contacting others may be particularly difficult when they don't respond to you, don't appreciate you, or react negatively. Try not to take it personally; consider that the other person is unreceptive or unappreciative because of their own problems and suffering.
And consider that these are your opportunities to practice and develop detachment, courage, resilience and unconditional lovingkindness and compassion.
Be patient with yourself; it takes time to develop these qualities especially when you are coming from a place of dark and depressive thoughts.

After some time, we can see that seeking our own happiness doesn't lead to true happiness, but seeking others' happiness does.

Other than expressions of lovingkindness, even your general behavior can be an example, support or inspiration to others, and you might not know how much they appreciate it. For example, being thoughtful, kind, polite and humble; or listening and understanding. If you like to express humor, or even act silly, you uplift others' mood. If you're creative, such as with music or art, you enrich or inspire others and perhaps help them feel and process their emotions. If you do a sport activity, you may inspire others to do so. In your darkest times, you generate deep compassion in others, many of whom are unseen by you.
And those who have similar hardships don't feel so alone when they know of your pain.

See yourself as part of the web of life, connected with others and generating love in them and in yourself in ways you can't imagine. This is one way of practicing the Buddha's teaching on Interdependence. You are helping others, improving the world, and creating merit, simply by being yourself.

Be easy on yourself. To support your mental health, avoid being overcommitted, having too many responsibilities and obligations without adequate time to decompress.

Always go to sleep thinking, "I have done something good today," and think of the good things you did. Don't dwell on what you didn't do.

Suicidal thoughts and attempts should be neither a source of shame nor a source of pride, bravado or courage. Instead, they are part of your life journey that can be useful after you have conquered them. From your experiences, you will better understand and have deeper compassion for others who are going through extreme difficulties. The wisdom you will have gained from your experiences can be used to guide and counsel others. Thus, you can later look back on the dark times as having not only burned away your negative karmas but also as having enriched your life.

Also, even while you are experiencing suicidal ideation you can transform it into positive motivation. As mentioned above, suicidal thoughts can be sublimated into longing for the end of suffering, nirvana. Another way to reframe these thoughts is to understand that they are a wish for the deluded self to die and for pure wisdom to arise. In other words, these thoughts can be integrated into the philosophy of eradicating the "self" in the Buddhist sense.

In Buddhist philosophy, the actual source of our pain is our mind clinging to a self—a separate individual identity, the notion of "I," "me" and "mine," or the ego. It's not easy to see that as the source of our pain. We have intense feelings that seem to arise from events outside of ourselves—we are innocent; something out the world is the problem. But, we feel, "I have pain," "this awful thing happened to me," "that which was mine is gone." The events outside are experienced by our self. It's our personal experience—what goes on in our mind in response to the outer world—that gives us pain. An enlightened being can experience the same outer circumstances and not suffer any mental anguish.

From another angle, our pain comes from our loss of connectedness with our own deep wisdom and insight, which is revealed to us over time through practicing the Dharma.

We can realize that not only the cells of our body but also our self is constantly changing, like a flowing river is never exactly the same at any two points in time. As we learn, experience, develop, and respond and react to our environment, we are constantly changing. Our mind is a stream of thoughts anchoring us to our body and its environment, and when we stop this stream of conceptual thoughts in meditation, we lose our sense of an individual self and experience non-duality. Upon enlightenment, we understand that our individual self is only an illusion, a construct to navigate our lifetimes in the different realms of samsara. Therefore, it is

that illusion of self, the false self, that idea that we are a permanent, separate, individual self, that we really want to kill.

But while you are here on the Earth, your life is extremely valuable to yourself and to other beings. As described above, you help others in myriad ways even when you don't know it. We are all interdependent. The more people there are who really understand suffering and wish to attain true happiness and nirvana, the more we can help each other attain it. And every day there are millions of people around the world sending lovingkindness and well-wishes to all sentient beings including you, praying that you swiftly attain nirvana.