

## Gotama the Seeker Wrote a Very Strange Poem

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*dukkham*  
*samudayo*  
*nirodho*  
*maggo*

unease arising  
let go!  
here's how

Like haiku, it is complexity resolved, simply. Like Dada, it is a terse repudiation of those who would overvalue conventional norms of discourse and logic. It's subtly funny, too.

The topic of discussion in the current Forum is *nirodha*, the third line. It is a topic that causes scholars and Buddhists alike to burst into Germanic capitals: Cessation, The Absolute, The Transcendent, The Holy, The Wholly Other, The Sublime, The Sacred, The Ineffable Ultimate, Enlightenment — actual examples from a sampling of secondary sources. We also get the more sober English lower case translations, such as, cessation, destruction, stopping, and extinction. As all of these terms indicate, the topic at hand concerns something Big and Serious. And as all of these terms indicate, the matter at hand is confusing. Too often, attempts to clarify its meaning result in a case of *obscurum per obscuris*, explaining one murky matter with another. Gotama himself may have had a hand in this confusion when he used, as he so often did, the terms *nirodha* and *nirvana* synonymously. (I'll return to this equation below.) There's another thing: the wide-spread contemporary usage of the nonsensical phrase *Third Noble Truth* to express this important Buddhist technical term certainly does not help matters. Indeed, is there any

greater head-scratcher in all of our Buddhist-Hybrid-English than *noble truth* — and here, the third one of those? The Third Noble Truth: *nirodha*. What does it mean, and why should we care?

Fortunately for us, *Buddhadharma* has asked three contemporary Buddhist teachers of palpable clarity, warmth, and wisdom to help us out. Fortunately, too, the moderator of the discussion begins with a question of definition. And off we are. The discussion that follows is deeply edifying. It also has the fascinating quality of being, I suspect, an echo here and now of the kinds of dialogues that have been reverberating throughout the Buddhist world since thoughtful men and women gathered together to discuss the words of that remarkable teacher, the *tathagata*, the one who has come to an understanding of reality.

As our discussants make clear, *nirodha* is the good news of Buddhism. It says that that pervasive unease, tension, and discomfort — *dukkha* — that runs through your life like water, can be qualitatively affected. Imagine that. The claim of *nirodha* is that *dukkha* can be acted on, confined, held in check, stopped. These terms are precisely those covered in the lexical range of the Pali word *nirodha*, stemming from the Sanskrit prefix *ni* + verbal root  $\sqrt{rudh}$ . One Sanskrit dictionary even contains the tantalizing suggestion that *nirodha* also referred to a process of treating minerals, such as quicksilver, or mercury. There are in fact clear references in the pre-Buddhist Vedas equating gold with long life — a common alchemical trope throughout the world (see, for example, *Atharvaveda* 2.19.26). Who knows, maybe the Buddha — who certainly knew his Vedas, and who *loved* to tease the Brahmins — was playing with this alchemical imagery when he chose the term *nirodha*. In the alchemical *opus*, it is mercury, that most volatile, and,

hence, most spirited of substances that was distilled and transmuted. In the Buddha's teachings, what is to be directly acted on is the arising, or *samudaya*, (the second line above), of that acutely vivifying, powerfully compelling, force called craving.

If you have ever wondered, *what could possibly be fueling the unease that I so routinely experience in my daily life*, then you might want to take to heart the Buddha's suggestion: *it is the fact that you demand too much from the world*. You ask, he continues—you entreat, implore, intensely desire—that the world's objects yield abiding pleasure, satisfaction, and security. But how can they? Just look, listen, feel, touch, taste, and think. Observe with care. The world's pretty things are ephemeral, transparent, and unreliable, aren't they? "Asking too much" is an old-fashioned meaning, *via* the Anglo-Saxon *craftian*, of our English verb "to crave." So what fuels our unease? It is the perpetual and unrealistic demands that we make on the world. We ask too much of things. We ask too much of people. We ask too much of our relationships, our jobs, our fantasies. We ask too much of life. And we ask too much of ourselves. What we are asking, in short, is that reliant and contingent things behave as if they were otherwise. That is just not possible.

So what can we do? Given the preeminent realities (*aka.* noble truths) of *dukkha* and *samudaya*, how might we live? Well, all things want to float, says the poet Rilke, yet we go around like burdens/settling ourselves on everything/ravishing them with our weight/What deadly teachers we are/when things, in fact, have the gift/of forever being children. The Buddha, too, speaks of heavy loads, relinquishment, and freedom. "Just put down the heavy burden of craving!, he says, "putting down that burden is happiness; it is itself the very ease you seek."

And here we have the confluence of *nirodha* and *nirvana*. A medley of *suttas* may help. (The Buddha is speaking.) Unease in life can be abated, friend. It can be acted on, qualitatively transmuted. This is *nirodha*. It is a preeminent reality. It involves learning how to free yourself from your unquenchable thirst for sensory pleasures. There is a way, a path to help you along. Following it, you slowly discover that unease has a *terminus*, a limit; so, we may even speak of an end. How will you know that you have reached the secure refuge of this destination? You will stop exhausting yourself and making trouble for others with your childish infatuation, hostility, and delusion. You will unbind yourself from these overwhelming traits; and that unbinding will be palpable. How will you feel? You will be cooled, quenched, calmed, and deeply, deeply refreshed. Now, there are secluded places. Meditate. Do not be negligent! Do not have regrets later!