

The Four Worldly Winds

Gain and Loss, Praise and Blame, Status and Disrepute, Pleasure and Pain

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We cannot arrange life so that we experience only one side of each pair. The issue is not that gain, praise, status, or pleasure are bad, or that we should become indifferent to loss, criticism, disrepute, or pain. The difficulty arises when our well-being becomes dependent upon keeping the pleasant winds and preventing the unpleasant ones.

The Teaching

The Buddha named eight conditions that sweep through every life, arranged as four pairs of opposites: gain and loss, praise and blame, status and disrepute, pleasure and pain. The Lokavipatti Sutta (AN 8.6) calls them lokadhamma — worldly conditions, or “worldly winds.” They are not moral failings and not obstacles to be eliminated. They are simply what it is to be a person in a world of change. The sutta is direct about this: these winds “revolve around the world, and the world revolves around these worldly conditions.” Practice does not prevent them from arising.

What distinguishes an untrained mind from a trained one is not whether the winds blow, but what happens when they do. The uninstructed person is blown about — elated by gain, crushed by loss, inflated by praise, wounded by blame — and mistakes the resulting weather for a verdict on who they are. The practiced mind still feels the wind. It simply does not build a self-story out of it.

Why We Take the Hit So Personally

Notice what actually happens when praise or blame lands: a felt sense arises, and almost instantly a narrator appears to explain what it means about “me.” This is selfing in real time — not a self reacting to the wind, but the wind itself becoming the occasion on which a self gets constructed. Gain doesn't just feel pleasant; it becomes evidence of my worth. Blame doesn't just sting; it becomes proof of my inadequacy. The wind is what happens. How it lands is felt. The self-story is what gets constructed around it.

This is where the teaching goes beyond simply being stoic. The aim isn't to feel less, or to perform indifference. It's to see clearly that pleasure and pain, praise and blame, are conditioned events — arising from causes and conditions, changing as those causes and conditions change, and passing when they fall away. The self they seem to be reporting on is itself a construction, assembled fresh each time out of the same conditioned processes. There is no fixed self behind the winds for them to confirm or damage. There is only the ongoing, changeable process of a person meeting circumstances.

The four pairs that follow are not abstract categories. They are the specific shapes this pattern takes in ordinary life — the situations where gain and loss, praise and blame, status and disrepute, or pleasure and pain most directly test whether we can meet what arises without letting it define us.

The Four Pairs

Gain and Loss

We acquire things, and we lose things: money, possessions, opportunities, relationships, abilities, security, and even ideas about who we are. Gain can produce pleasure and a desire to hold on, while loss can produce disappointment, fear, anger, or grief. Neither condition remains fixed.

Praise and Blame

We like being appreciated and usually dislike being criticized. Praise can strengthen our sense that we are doing well or that others see us as we want to be seen. Blame can feel threatening even when the criticism is minor — or even when it is accurate.

The practice is not to ignore praise or criticism, but to examine them without automatically being controlled by them. Is this useful information? Is there something to learn? Or am I simply reacting to approval or disapproval?

Status and Disrepute

Human beings are social animals. Reputation, belonging, respect, and social standing matter to us. We may enjoy being noticed, respected, included, or thought well of, and suffer when we are ignored, misunderstood, embarrassed, rejected, or spoken badly about.

But reputation exists partly in the changing minds of other people. Trying to control those minds can become an endless project.

Pleasure and Pain

Some experiences feel pleasant, others unpleasant, and much of life is neither strongly pleasant nor unpleasant. Our nervous system naturally moves toward what feels good and away from what hurts. Buddhism does not require pretending otherwise.

The difficulty comes when the simple experience of pleasant or unpleasant quickly becomes: I need this to continue. I have to get rid of this. This shouldn't be happening to me. That additional struggle can create much of the friction we call dukkha.

The pairing matters across all four. Each favorable wind has its unfavorable twin built in from the start — not as punishment, but because anything that can arise can also cease. Wanting the gain without the possibility of loss, or the praise without the possibility of blame, is wanting half of a single conditioned process.

Equanimity Is Not Indifference

The traditional response to the worldly winds is often described as equanimity — *upekkhā*. Equanimity does not mean that nothing matters. It means being less pushed and pulled by changing conditions.

We can enjoy success without needing it to continue forever, appreciate praise without building our identity around it, listen to criticism without immediately becoming defensive, experience loss without pretending it does not hurt, and enjoy pleasure without demanding that life continually provide it.

Equanimity creates some space between what happens and how we respond.

Practicing With the Winds

This isn't a teaching to memorize and then apply after the fact. It's a lens for the middle of the experience itself, while the wind is still blowing:

- Notice the felt sense first, before the story. What is actually happening in the body when gain, praise, or pleasure arrives — or when their opposites do?
- Watch for the narrator. Catch the moment the mind moves from “this happened” to “this means something about me.” That move may happen automatically, but it too can be noticed as a conditioned process.
- Ask what's conditioned. What causes and conditions produced this gain, this praise, this pleasure? What happens as those conditions change or fall away? Seeing the causal picture loosens the grip of the personal one.
- Let equanimity be the orientation, not detachment. The point is not to stop caring about gain or praise. It's to hold them lightly enough that changing conditions do not flatten you.

Watching the Winds in Meditation

During meditation, the worldly winds appear in miniature. A pleasant sensation arises, and the mind says, I like this. An uncomfortable sensation arises, and the mind says, I want this to stop. The meditation seems concentrated, and we think, I'm doing well. The mind wanders repeatedly, and we think, I'm doing badly.

A familiar process becomes visible: experience → feeling tone → reaction. With mindfulness, another sequence can become available: experience → feeling tone → noticing → response.

We do not have to eliminate the reaction. Even the reaction is conditioned experience that can be noticed.

For Discussion and Reflection

Which of the eight winds has the strongest pull on you right now — and is it the favorable half or the unfavorable half that occupies more of your attention?

When a strong reaction arises during the day, ask: Which worldly wind is blowing? Is this gain or loss, praise or blame, status or disrepute, pleasure or pain? Then notice what you are feeling, what you want to happen next, what you are resisting, and what an appropriate response might be. The purpose is not to become untouched by life. It is to become less captive to its changing winds.

Think of one recent experience that fits this pattern. What actually happened, and what part was pleasant or unpleasant? What story did the mind add — and what did you want to hold onto, change, defend, or escape? Would anything have been different if there had been a little more space between the wind and your response?