

The Dharma of Pleasure

Early Buddhism as Refined Hedonism

Based in part on Bernat Font, “Early Buddhist Hedonism” (2026), with additional material on Epicurus.

A Different Way to Read the Buddhist Path

Buddhism is often presented as a tradition preoccupied with suffering: life is dukkha, pleasure is unreliable, desire is dangerous, and practice means learning not to want very much. That picture contains something real, but it can also distort the early texts. Bernat Font proposes a more provocative reading: the early Buddhist path does not oppose pleasure. It reorganizes pleasure. It trains us to become less impressed by pleasures that agitate, entangle, or harm, and more capable of enjoying states that are ethical, settled, clear, and free from disturbance.

Font calls the Buddha of the early discourses a “refined hedonist.” He is not saying the Buddha recommends indulgence. It is almost the reverse. Sensory pleasure is criticized because it is a poor bargain: the pursuit can generate craving, conflict, anxiety, dependency, and harm, while the pleasure itself is limited and unstable. Practice therefore works with the ordinary organism’s tendency to move toward what feels good and away from what feels bad, but educates that tendency. The question becomes not, “How do I stop liking pleasure?” but “What kinds of pleasure are actually worth learning to enjoy?”

Hedonism Does Not Have to Mean Indulgence

In ordinary English, “hedonism” often means sensual excess. Philosophically, it is a broader claim: pleasure has a central role in what makes a life good. That leaves open the crucial question of what pleasure is, which pleasures are worth choosing, and what their consequences are. Both early Buddhism, on Font’s reading, and Epicurus answer those questions in ways that are disciplined rather than indulgent.

Font emphasizes that early Buddhism does not abolish the basic hedonic structure of experience. Sukha — ease, happiness, pleasure or well-being — remains something toward which practice moves. Ethical conduct can be enjoyed. The absence of remorse can be enjoyed. The fading of the five hindrances can be enjoyed. Quiet can be enjoyed. Even a neutral state may become subtly pleasant when it is recognized as free of the disturbance that was present before. Across many early Buddhist maps of practice, pleasure becomes progressively less dependent on stimulation and progressively closer to ease and equanimity.

Cultivating the Taste for What's Skilful

Font's more provocative claim is that early Buddhism does not fight our drive toward pleasure and away from pain - it uses that drive. The goal of ending suffering is itself hedonic. The strategy is to redirect the drive: train the mind to find skilful states genuinely enjoyable, so that ethical conduct and meditative practice become self-reinforcing rather than merely effortful. If virtue only feels like restraint, we are unlikely to sustain it. If virtue starts to feel good, we will.

You can see the same hedonic curve running through several formulations of the path that are often treated as separate. The seven awakening factors, the four immeasurables, the development of satipatthana, and the jhanas all move through a similar arc: rising pleasure and clarity followed by a settling into equanimity. Font's suggestion is that these may be less like separate technologies than different descriptions of one underlying process.

The ACID Doctrine, Held Loosely

One useful reframe is Font's discussion of the ACID doctrine - 'Anything Conditioned and Impermanent is Dukkha.' It need not be taken as a metaphysical claim about reality, as though impermanence is suffering, full stop. It can instead be held as a practical strategy: a perception deliberately cultivated because it loosens clinging. You adopt the lens because of what it does, not because it is the last word on the nature of things. This fits comfortably with an anti-metaphysical reading of the discourses: teachings as tools, models, and practices, rather than final cosmological descriptions.

Epicurus: Pleasure as Freedom from Disturbance

Epicurus (341–270 BCE), who lived only a few generations after the period in which the early Buddhist tradition was developing, is one of the clearest Western examples of this refined form of hedonism. He explicitly called pleasure the beginning and end of the happy life, but he rejected the idea that pleasure means constant stimulation, luxury, or sensual excess. In his Letter to Menoeceus, he says that not every pleasure should be chosen and not every pain should be avoided. A pleasure that produces greater trouble may be a bad choice; a difficulty that produces greater wellbeing may be a good one.

Epicurean philosophy distinguished kinetic pleasure — the active pleasure involved in satisfying a desire — from katastematic pleasure, the more stable ease present when the disturbance of desire has subsided. Epicurus's ideal was not perpetual excitement but ataraxia — freedom from mental disturbance — together with aponia, freedom from bodily pain. Once hunger has been satisfied, for example, the important pleasure is not endless eating but the ease of no longer being hungry. This is why simple food can be enough. **When the disturbance of need has ended, adding more stimulation may add very little.**

This turns Epicureanism into a practice of subtraction as much as acquisition. What must be removed? Needless fear, status anxiety, unlimited desire, dependency on luxury, false beliefs about death and the gods, and the conviction that happiness always requires something more. The good life becomes surprisingly modest: bodily sufficiency, mental tranquility, prudent judgment, freedom from unnecessary fear, and dependable friendship.

Epicurus on Desire

Epicurus divided desires into categories. Some are natural and necessary: food, shelter, bodily security, and the conditions of a stable life. Some are natural but not necessary: richer food or extra comfort. Others are empty or groundless: desires for unlimited wealth, fame, power, or social status. The distinction matters because unlimited desires have no natural stopping point. If enough money means “more than I have now,” satisfaction is always deferred. A natural and necessary desire, by contrast, can actually be completed.

This is close to a Buddhist diagnosis of craving in one important respect: the problem is not that pleasant experience exists, but that the mind constructs a cycle of craving that cannot settle. The pleasure of completion is repeatedly displaced by the next acquisition, the next recognition, the next reassurance. Epicurus asks us to notice when desire serves life and when life has begun serving desire.

Epicurus on Prudence, Virtue, and Friendship

Epicurus made prudence central because pleasure has to be understood across time. Immediate gratification is an unreliable guide if tomorrow's cost is ignored. A good choice therefore asks about the whole sequence: anticipation, pursuit, attainment, aftermath. This closely resembles Font's

practical suggestion to observe pleasure as a process rather than merely noticing the pleasant moment at its peak.

For Epicurus, virtue and pleasure are not rival goals. A life of prudence, justice, and honorable conduct is inseparable from a pleasant life because deception, exploitation, and reckless appetite generate fear and disturbance. Friendship is especially important. Epicurean community was not incidental to happiness; trusted friends provided security, conversation, affection, and a setting in which simple pleasures could be fully enjoyed. The famous “Garden” was therefore both a philosophical school and a community of practice.

Where They Converge

The strongest overlap is not simply that both traditions value pleasure; it is that both discriminate among pleasures. Early Buddhism treats craving and clinging as sources of agitation and trains enjoyment toward skilful states. Epicurus distinguishes natural, limited desires from empty desires for wealth, fame, power, or endless acquisition. In both traditions, ethics is not an enemy of pleasure. Skilful conduct, prudence, and justice make a more settled form of wellbeing possible because they reduce remorse, fear, conflict, and dependency.

Both also shift attention from acquisition toward quiet wellbeing. Buddhist renunciation reduces dependence on stimulation and possession, while Epicurus points toward ataraxia and aponia - tranquility and freedom from bodily distress. Both ask us to examine the whole sequence of a pleasure: wanting, pursuit, attainment, aftermath. The common question is not how much stimulation can be accumulated, but what forms of enjoyment leave the mind less disturbed and less dependent on getting the world to cooperate.

But They Are Not the Same Philosophy

The comparison is useful precisely because the traditions are not identical. Epicurus gives pleasure an explicit philosophical status as the goal of a happy life. Early Buddhist texts contain a much larger vocabulary of liberation, awakening, non-clinging, ethical training, and insight, and Font’s claim that pleasure is the “highest good” is an interpretation of how those elements function together, not a standard formula used by the texts themselves.

Their intellectual settings also differ. Epicurus developed a materialist physics and argued that death is not something we experience and therefore should not be feared. Early Buddhist discourse usually approaches the problem through impermanence, conditionality, craving, and release rather than Epicurean atomism. Epicurus also makes friendship unusually explicit as one of the great securities of a happy life. While early Buddhism also places importance on wholesome friendship, it places greater institutional weight on sangha, ethical discipline, meditation, and liberation.

Still, the family resemblance is striking: neither tradition recommends maximizing stimulation. Both are interested in reducing the machinery that makes wellbeing conditional on getting the world to cooperate with our wants.

Dukkha-centrism

Font also makes a historical observation worth sitting with: the intense focus on suffering that characterizes much Western Buddhism may be less a feature of the original teaching than an artifact of who received it. He contrasts a Thai temple, centered on a serenely smiling Buddha, with a Christian church, centered on a figure in agony. When people from a largely Protestant background encountered a tradition organized around dukkha and its ending, the resulting modern synthesis may have doubled down on suffering and grown suspicious of joy.

We already evolved to pay close attention to pain - ordinary negativity bias. Cultural conditioning can add another layer on top of it. Font calls this 'dukkha-centrism.' The question worth asking is what practice looks like if we do not assume suffering deserves the microphone by default. A path

concerned with dukkha need not become a practice organized around feeling bad; it can also be a training in recognizing, cultivating, and trusting forms of wellbeing that do not depend on grasping.

Pleasure, Prediction, and Craving

There is a useful distinction between enjoyment and pursuit. Much of what we call pleasure may occur before the pleasurable event as anticipation, and much of our dissatisfaction may come from the gap between the predicted reward and the event that actually arrives. The mind can therefore become attached less to pleasure itself than to the cycle of wanting, imagining, acquiring, briefly settling, and wanting again.

Seen this way, both Epicurean and Buddhist practice ask us to become better students of the full hedonic process. What does wanting feel like in the body? Is the pursuit itself pleasant or tense? How long does satisfaction last? What new want is generated? What is the emotional cost of maintaining the thing acquired? And, just as importantly, what forms of wellbeing are already present when nothing is being added?

A Practice: Learning to Enjoy What Is Already Quiet

During meditation, notice moments when some disturbance has simply stopped: a thought sequence ends, irritation fades, the body settles, a sound disappears, an urge is no longer demanding attention. Instead of immediately moving on, notice the absence. What is the texture of experience when nothing needs to be fixed for this moment? There may be no dramatic pleasure. The point is to become sensitive to subtler forms of ease. A regular meditation practice can enhance this sensitivity, including the capacity to notice the subtle pleasure that can come simply from the absence of disturbance.

The same experiment can be used outside meditation. After hunger is satisfied, notice the state of no longer needing food. After finishing a task, notice the ending of pressure before opening the next task. During conversation with a trusted friend, notice whether well-being comes from stimulation or from the absence of defensiveness and demand. The training is not to manufacture a special state but to recognize forms of pleasure that are easy to overlook because they are quiet.

Questions for Discussion

- When you hear the word “pleasure,” what do you normally imagine — stimulation, satisfaction, relief, ease, connection, or something else?
- Can the absence of a disturbance genuinely be experienced as pleasure, or is it merely neutral?
- Which desires in your own life have a natural stopping point, and which tend to recreate themselves after being satisfied?
- Does judging a pleasure by its entire sequence — anticipation, pursuit, attainment, aftermath — change whether it looks worth pursuing?
- Where in your own practice or life do you notice the difference between kinetic pleasure (chasing, obtaining) and katastematic pleasure (the ease that follows when a disturbance simply isn’t there)?
- Is there a skilful state — generosity, kindness, stillness — that you’ve trained yourself to genuinely enjoy, rather than merely approve of?

Sources and Further Reading

- Bernat Font, *Early Buddhist Hedonism: The Role of Spiritual Pleasure in the Pali Discourses* (Bloomsbury, 2026), and his September 3, 2026 Substack summary.
- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* — on natural and necessary desires, weighing pleasures and pains, simple living, and pleasure as freedom from pain and disturbance.
- Background: Epicurean ethics on pleasure, ataraxia, aponia, prudence, desire, and friendship.