

THE PAIN OF AN ARAHANT: WHY ARAHANTS EXPERIENCE PHYSICAL SUFFERING



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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the particulars of an *arahant's* existence in that they do not suffer mentally, but do experience physical pain. Possible problems are presented in simply explaining the physical suffering of an *arahant* as the natural functions of the body. An alternative solution to approaching this issue is offered by suggesting clarification into why it is that *arahants* feel physical pain when they have overcome all mental suffering. One possible solution this paper presents is that the *arahants* physical pain is not simply a product of the natural functions of the body, rather it is a result of past *kamma* experienced as *vipāka*.

Keywords: Arahant, physical, pain, *vipāka*, results of *kamma*

INTRODUCTION

Arahants are those that have become enlightened and no longer have mental suffering, they have become liberated and will not be reborn. It is the highest goal and the ultimate escape of *samsara*. Though *arahants* don't suffer at all mentally and have broken the shackles of rebirth, they do suffer physically while still in their last rebirth. Why is this, that when an arahant has freed his mind of all suffering, one still feels the pain of the body? The Buddha taught that even physical pain is felt in the mind.¹ Why then would the *arahant* not have control over this particular sense of pain one feels, as it is suffering that is experienced mentally? This paper hopes to show that the reason enlightened ones continue to feel physical pain might be do to *vipāka*, and that this question should not be answered simply by saying it is the function of the body.

The bodily pain of an *arahant*, severe and debilitating pain in many cases, including the death of the Buddha,² may be due to the fact that an *arahant* must endure past unwholesome *kamma*. Thinking of physical pain as simply a normal function of the body the *arahant* cannot escape and nothing more may be faulty. This pain is still experienced by the mind even though the *arahant* has transcended mental suffering. A clearer answer to this question is explored and presented in this paper: that it is not the body in itself that is causing enlightened ones pain, but *vipāka* from past unwholesome *kamma* that is experienced as pain in the body.

ARAHANTS AND PAIN

While *arahants*, including the Buddha, do not suffer mentally, they do feel physical pain. There are numerous examples in the *Suttas* of enlightened ones having aches and pains, and even some instances where they are attacked and suffer injuries. In one such case, Devadatta attacked his cousin, the Buddha, out of jealousy and desire to control the *Saṅgha*.

¹F.L. Woodward (tr.), **The Book of the Kindred Sayings**, vol 4, (Bristol: Pāli Text Society, 1996), p. 137.

²T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (tr.), **Dialogues of the Buddha**, Vol. 2, (Bristol: Pāli Text Society, 1910), p. 139.

As told in the *Cullavagga* of the *Vinaya*:

Now at that time the lord was pacing up and down in the shade of Mount Vulture Peak. Then Devadatta, having climbed mount vulture peak, hurled down a great stone, thinking: “with this I will deprive the recluse Gotama of life.” But two mountain peaks, having met, crushed that stone, and a fragment of it, having fallen down, drew blood on the lord’s foot.³

The Buddha also suffered backaches throughout his life, due in part to the excess austerity and self mortification he put his body through when he first left society and meditated in the forest. Sometimes his back would hurt so much that he would ask one of his disciples to give the day’s lesson so that he could rest.

From the *Saṅgītisutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*:

And presently the Exalted One, surveying the company of brethren wrapped in silence wherever they sat, called to the venerable Sārīputta: ‘There is an absence, Sārīputta, of sloth and torpor in the company of brethren. Let a religious discourse occur to thee. My back is aching, I will stretch it.’⁴

The Buddha also had a very painful death during his *Parinibbāna* after eating bad mushrooms.

The *Mahāpirnibbānasutta*:

Now when the Exalted One had eaten the rice prepared by Chunda, the worker in metals, there fell upon him a dire sickness, the disease of dysentery, and sharp pain came upon him, even unto death. But the Exalted One, mindful and self-possessed, bore it without complaint.⁵

³I.B. Horner (tr.), **The Book of Discipline**, vol 5, (London: Luzac, 1963), p. 271.

⁴T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (tr.), **Dialogues of the Buddha**, vol 3, (Bristol: Pāli Text Society, 1921), p. 202.

⁵T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (tr.), **Dialogues of the Buddha**, vol 2, (Bristol: Pāli Text Society, 1910), p. 138.

VIPĀKA AND PAIN

Why *arahants* feel pain of the body is a complicated question. In order to explain the physical suffering of enlightened ones, we must first investigate how pain is experienced. Physical pain in the present moment appears to be the experience of *vipāka* of past *kamma*. The bad actions of the past are experienced as pain as the past *kamma* comes to fruition as *vipāka* in the present moment.

According to the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, bodily pain resides in the unwholesome resultant body consciousness.⁶ This resultant consciousness is consciousness that experiences the results of prior unwholesome acts. Nārada Thera, in *The Buddha and His Teachings*, says that “volition (*cetanā*) is the doer.” Meaning that ones volition is what produces *kamma* in a given act, and “feeling (*vedanā*) is the reaper of the fruits of action.”⁷

Buddagosa in the *Vissuddhimagga* states that:

It is fivefold according to the analysis of its individual essence into [bodily] pleasure, [bodily] pain, [mental] joy, [mental] grief, and equanimity. Herein, *pleasure* is associated with profitable resultant body-consciousness and pain with unprofitable resultant body-consciousness.⁸

The diagram below, from Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, is a representation of the 5-door process and explains that within the *citta vithi*, a physical object is experienced in the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th *cittas*. The resultant bodily consciousness would take the place of the eye consciousness in the event of physical pain and be experienced in the 5th *citta* of the *citta vithi*. As explained here, physical pain is a direct result of past *kamma*, and is experienced as *vipāka* in the resultant phase of the cognitive process.⁹

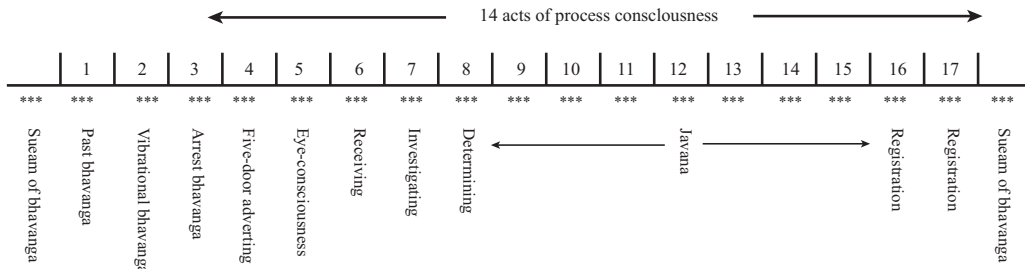
⁶Bhikkhu Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2012), p. 41.

⁷Nārada Thera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, (Colombo: Karunaratne and Sons, 1973), p. 200.

⁸Bhikkhu Nyanamoli (tr.), *The Path of Purification* (Visuddhimagga), (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2011), p. 476.

⁹Bhikkhu Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2012), p. 155.

The five door cognitive process, an explanation of how psychical phenomenon is experienced, is expressed bellow:

TABLE 1: A COMPLETE EYE-DOOR PROCESS

Source: Bhikkhu Bodhi, A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, p. 155.

Buddhagosa also explains that the suffering of pain is directly conditioned by past acts in the form of *vipāka*. In the *Vissuddhimagga* he states that bodily pain is a result of an unprofitable result in *kamma*.¹⁰

The Dhammasaṅgaṇī further explains:

When, as the result of bad karma having been wrought, having been stored up, visual cognition has arisen, accompanied by disinterestedness and having as its object a sight... auditory cognition has arisen accompanied by disinterestedness and having as its object a sound... olfactory cognition has arisen accompanied by disinterestedness and having as its object a smell... gustatory cognition has arisen, accompanied by disinterestedness and having as its object a taste... cognition of the body has arisen, accompanied by distress and having as its object something tangible, then there is...the bodily pain, the bodily distress which, on that occasion is born of contact with the appropriate element of cognition of body; the painful, distressful

¹⁰ Bhikkhu Nyanamoli (tr.), **The Path of Purification** (Visuddhimagga), (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2011), p. 791.

sensation which is born of contact with the body; the painful, distressful feeling which is born of contact with the body- this is the feeling that there then is.¹¹

ARAHANTS AND VIPĀKA

The reason *arahants* feel pain may be because *arahants* experience the results of past *kamma*. I appear that pain, according to the Tipiṭaka and commentaries, is caused by *vipāka* and that *vipāka* is sometimes experienced as physical pain. While an *arahant* does not make new *kamma*, one does experience past *kamma*.

The Buddha teaches in the Dhammapada:

Not in the sky, nor in mid-ocean nor entering a mountain cave is found that place on earth, where abiding one may escape from (the consequences) of an evil deed.¹²

The Buddha asserted, in Dasaka Nipāta of the Aṅguttaranikāya, that it is not possible to avoid experiencing the result of a karmic deed once it's been committed:

I declare, monks, that of intentional deeds done and accumulated there can be no wiping out without experiencing the result thereof, and that too whenever arising, either in this same visible state or in some other start hereafter. I declare, monks, that there is no ending of ill as regards intentional deeds done and accumulate without experiencing the results thereof.¹³

Aṅgulimāla realized this very function of *kamma* himself, as he became enlightened he understood that even *arahants* experience the *vipāka* of past deeds:

¹¹ C. A. F. Rhys Davids (tr.), **A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics**, (Bristol: Pāli Text Society, 1900), p. 151.

¹² J. Gray (tr.), **Dhammapada**, (Rangoon: American Mission Press, 1881), verse 127.

¹³ F. L. Woodward & E. M. Hare (tr.), **The Book of the Gradual Sayings**, Vol. 5, (Bristol: Pāli Text Society, 1936), p. 189.

Then Venerable Āṅgulimāla, early in the morning, having put on his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl, went into Sāvattthī for alms. Now at that time a clod thrown by one person hit Venerable Āṅgulimāla on the body, a stone thrown by another person hit him on the body, and a potsherd thrown by still another person hit him on the body. So Venerable Āṅgulimāla—his head broken open and dripping with blood, his bowl broken, and his outer robe ripped to shreds—went to the Blessed One. The Blessed One saw him coming from afar and on seeing him said to him: “Bear with it, brahman! Bear with it! The fruit of the kamma that would have burned you in hell for many years, many hundreds of years, many thousands of years, you are now experiencing in the here-and-now!”¹⁴

CONCLUSION

An *arahant*, though they have ended mental suffering and rebirth, is not completely free from pain. They have to endure the trials of a physical body: aches, cuts, bruises, even sickness. Though the body is physical, these pains are experienced mentally and on the side of consciousness, not the physical side of the body. The reason an *arahant* experiences physical pain within consciousness but not mental pain is a problem that may need more attention than just explaining that the body feels pain. It might not be consistent to say that the *arahant* has no mental suffering yet still experiences physical suffering within consciousness just because that is the function of the body. A possible resolution to this problem is that physical pain is the result of past unwholesome *kamma* that the *arahant* must endure until their final death.

I have brought attention to three points that I believe the Tipiṭaka makes. First: *vipāka* is experienced through the five physical senses. Second: that mental suffering is caused by cognitive action when new *kamma* is made. Third: the pain of the body is a result of past unwholesome *kamma*. These distinctions are important because it may show why the *arahant* has control over mental suffering but not that of the body. The suffering of the body seems to be the fruit of past unwholesome *kamma* that the *arahant* must face before there can be final release. While an *arahant* is perfect in action, they must still

¹⁴I.B. Horner (tr.), **The Book of Middle Length Sayings**, Vol. 2, (Bristol: Pāli Text Society, 1975), p. 290.

experience the results of past imperfect actions. Pain of the body might be one of the consequences of these past unwholesome deeds- pain *arahants* must face and deal with before they are completely free from suffering and die their final death.

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