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Aesthetic Emotions: The Existential and Soteriological Value of *saṃvega/Pasāda* in Early Buddhism

Lisa Liang and Brianna K. Morseth¹

Abstract

Across the globe, our continued existence in light of present conditions is uncertain. Rapid spread of disease and risk of complications endanger the human population. Such challenging circumstances may shock and devastate us, inducing mass panic and pandemonium amid the pervasive threat of pandemic. Yet according to Buddhist philosophy, existential unease can also spawn deep transformation. In this paper, we examine a pair of aesthetic emotions (*saṃvega/pasāda*) from the early Buddhist tradition that together hold the potential to induce critical reflection and productive engagement in response to existential threat. By referring to *saṃvega/pasāda* as aesthetic emotions, we intend to draw out their distinctive, often visually-oriented soteriological function. While initially

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disorienting and perhaps even paralyzing, *saṃvega* and *pasāda* are ultimately reorienting and motivating factors on the path to liberation from the suffering entailed by cyclic existence.

Introduction

Disease is nothing new to human civilization. Previous deadly outbreaks such as SARS, H1N1, MERS, and others have plagued our fragile existence. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus virus (COVID-19) outbreak a pandemic. An unprecedented declaration in the twenty-first century, plagues, famines, wars, and other disastrous events have nonetheless long ravaged the globe. Now, however, we are uniquely positioned in an interconnected era of international travel, record high population density, and other such factors that have contributed to the wide and rapid spread of the virus. According to the WHO Director General, “Pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly. It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death.” Such fear is especially visceral. Humanity is thus left in dire straits as we collectively face growing threats to public and private health as well as life itself. We remain particularly vulnerable to the deadly spread of the virus. Measures taken thus far—sheltering in place and social distancing—leave many without employment, coping networks, and other sources of stability.

According to Buddhist philosophy and practice, *saṃvega*, the existential shock and urgency that arises around societal challenges, holds the potential to transform individuals and society by giving rise to *pasāda*, serene confidence to embark on the path to liberation in the face of disease and death. While the world braces itself amidst the ongoing danger of

COVID-19, *saṃvega* and *pasāda*, key emotions that directly address the existential condition, may offer relief. We contend that *saṃvega* and *pasāda* function as crucial aesthetic emotions in addressing the forms of crisis that psychologically threaten individuals and society, providing the soteriological means to transcend suffering with immediate relevance to modernity.

To the best of our knowledge, the primary textual tradition does not explicitly link *saṃvega* and *pasāda* in any direct capacity and the two are never mentioned together in compound form. We couple them as *saṃvega/pasāda* on the basis of work by contemporary writers like Ṭhānisaro Bhikkhu who associates them closely in “Affirming the Truths of the Heart.” Their pairing illuminates the importance of titrating a careful balance between the two. *Saṃvega* devoid of *pasāda* can feel meaningless, like the anxious itch of agitation, a debilitating ache without purpose. *Pasāda* helps regulate and redirect *saṃvega*’s oppressive dismay and dissatisfaction, harnessing and channeling those energies into purposeful practice. We contend that *saṃvega* and *pasāda* function best when coupled, as both serve to motivate cultivation, preventing the practitioner from turning away from the harsh realities of life and death. Further research beyond the scope of this article is necessary in order to identify the precise origins of the linking of *saṃvega* and *pasāda* in either the commentarial tradition or modern interpretations.

Of these aesthetic emotions, *saṃvega* (existential shock and urgency) may initially seem negative in affective valence, within the same realm as clinically maladaptive states. Contrary to appearances, however, *saṃvega* is a stirring, motivating force. In combination with its “better half,” *pasāda*, a positive valence prevails and the pair’s function as liberating emotions is maintained. These emotions arise from encounters with images of the unattractive (e.g., old age, sickness, and death) and the attractive (e.g., the embodied virtues of a renunciant), respectively. We

refer to *saṃvega/pasāda* as aesthetic emotions due to their capacity to motivate progress on the contemplative path as a result of the emotional impact of such aesthetic encounters.

Methodology

In this paper, we focus primarily on the mechanics of *saṃvega* and *pasāda* in the Pāli suttas and Theravāda commentaries, occasionally referring to Mahāyāna doctrines in order to supplement our analysis. Rather than provide a comprehensive overview, we specifically investigate their aesthetic and emotional dimensions, drawing from a representative subset of the relevant literature. While several scholars—for instance, Coomaraswamy (1943), Trainor (1989, 1997, 2003), and Brekke (1999a, 1999b)—have attempted to illustrate the meaning and relevance of *saṃvega/pasāda* in the context of Pāli literature, few have concerned themselves with the modern applications of *saṃvega/pasāda*, particularly in relation to existential threats spanning environmental, economic, and epidemiological scales. As emotions, *saṃvega* and *pasāda* are constituents of human suffering. While troubling, they are not inherently oppressive. In fact, they serve us on the path to liberation. Importantly, when *saṃvega* is mishandled, it may contribute to maladaptive states, ranging from depression to catatonia. However, if properly handled, *saṃvega* serves as an enriching, aesthetic process that motivates the individual to skillfully manage her suffering, thereby inspiring the search for liberation in the form of *pasāda*. In order to begin our treatment of *saṃvega/pasāda*, we assess the appropriateness of classifying these experiences as emotions in the first place, especially given the lack of clarity and consensus around the role of “emotions” in Buddhism, broadly.

Notions of Emotions: Classifying *Samvega/Pasāda*

In Buddhist philosophy and practice, the term “emotion” is a contested category. As scholarship shows, *saṃvega* and *pasāda* by no means fit neatly into either “emotions,” “feelings,” or “mental factors.”² This is partly due to the limitations of English, which lacks suitable terms for capturing their nuances without importing the baggage connoted by terms in their ordinary usage. Designating *saṃvega/pasāda* as any one of these classifications, without ample justification, may prove problematic.

Although *saṃvega/pasāda* concern affective qualities of mind, there appears to be no place for “emotions,” at least with its colloquial connotations, in Buddhism. Instead, Buddhist texts refer to feelings (*vedanā*), latent tendencies (*anusaya*), and mental formations (*saṅkhāra*). Trainor, for instance, argues that *pasāda* cannot be reduced to “either a quality of emotion or an intellectual state” given that “it embraces both cognitive and affective dimensions of consciousness” (*Relics, Ritual* 167). The term “emotion” alone may be limiting, presenting *saṃvega/pasāda* in a unidimensional capacity that neglects their multifacetedness. On another difficult to categorize set of experiences, McRae observes that equanimity (*upekkha*) is a “moral emotion” that facilitates liberating action, freeing the practitioner from accumulated habit energy and preconceived biases. She admits, however:

Calling these [four boundless] qualities [i.e., lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity] “emotions” is slightly misleading since there is no word for emotion in the traditional languages of Buddhism, no concept

²According to Bhikkhu Anālayo, emotions are not feelings (*vedanā*), but are “a more complex phenomenon and would find a better placing under the rubric of mental states.” See Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna Meditation* 103. See also De Silva’s article “The Psychology of Emotions in Buddhist Perspective” for a discussion of the place and psychology of emotions in Buddhism.

of emotions in Buddhist philosophy, and, therefore, no dichotomy between reason and emotion (Dreyfus 1994; de Silva 1995; Heim 2008). But because these are states with clear affective, cognitive, and volitional components, I refer to them as moral emotions. (107)

Indeed, this challenge pervades the philosophical study of “emotions” in Buddhism. Heim has further noted that the Pāli term for “feeling” (*vedanā*) is a wider category than the English term for “emotion” (532). Heim cites Nussbaum, a contemporary moral philosopher whose work has changed the understanding of emotions in moral philosophy. In particular, Nussbaum highlights the relationship between emotions and moral action. Nussbaum regards emotions as having an “intimate connection” with motivation (Heim 534).³ Moreover, emotions are morally valuable as they sustain well-being and contain “cognitive content” and “empirical beliefs” (534). Given these claims, “emotion” in Buddhist contexts is still a rather difficult category to pin down. We agree with McRae and Heim’s point that categorizing experiences such as *saṃvega* and *pasāda* as emotions can be misleading. However, we also acknowledge that a fundamental function of emotion is to motivate activity.⁴ While not ideal, we refer to *saṃvega* and *pasāda* as emotions in a preliminary capacity given that they motivate behavioral change in the Buddhist soteriological framework.

Indeed, emotions may be understood in terms of soteriological value. They may either contribute to freedom and ease, or to suffering and

³ See also Nussbaum 135-136.

⁴ The term “emotion” is derived from the Latin *emovere*, wherein *e-* (a variant of the prefix *ex-*) designates the orientation ‘out,’ while *movere* and its cognate form ‘move’ connote activity. More recently, the English “emotion” was imported from the French “*émotion*,” with both words expressing physical disturbance and bodily movement. See Dixon 340.

dis-ease. In the entry on emotion in the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Premasiri notes,

Buddhist tradition has tended to investigate emotion under the broad category of mental phenomena (*dharmas*) and to classify specific emotions as pragmatically ‘skillful’ or ‘unskillful’ based on their conformity with Buddhist ethical norms and their relative utility in helping Buddhists progress along the path to nirvana. (58)

The category of “mental phenomena” (*dharma-s*) refers to domains of experience. Emotions may thus be broadly understood as either serving a liberating function—promoting conduct conducive toward freedom from suffering—or as afflictive and hence restrictive on the path.

The liberating function of *saṃvega/pasāda* is illustrated by the Buddha’s traditional encounter with the four sights, namely old age, sickness, death, and a renunciant. Shielded from these sights, Prince Siddhārtha, the Buddha-to-be, lived a sumptuous life adorned with enchanting sensual pleasures (Olivelle 63-85). Escaping the confines of the castle walls, the prince was one day driven by his charioteer on a tour of the world beyond, revealing previously unknown truths concealed by his father, King Śuddhodana. His first-hand encounter with suffering triggered a fundamental shift in perspective that left him in a state of shock. Alarmed and distressed, he then encountered a meditating renunciant, inspiring him to venture in search of solace through contemplative practice (Olivelle 331-371). The four sights (i.e., old age, sickness, death, and a renunciant) that the young prince encountered upon leaving the palace left a deeply aesthetic impression on the Buddha-to-be, instilling in him a profound experience of *saṃvega/pasāda*.⁵ Of these four sights, the first three

⁵“Aesthetics,” derived from the Greek *aesthesis*, refers broadly to perceptual or sensory knowledge. On the detailed meaning of “aesthetics,” see Koren 15. Based on Santayana’s

were aesthetically repulsive, while only the last could be classed as beautiful. Left with only the images of old age, sickness, and death, the prince was struck with *saṃvega*. With the addition of the fourth sight, a renunciant, he experienced *pasāda* which then propelled him forward onto the contemplative path.

Meaning and Application of *Saṃvega*

With these broad reflections in mind, we now turn to the specific meanings of *saṃvega* in the Pāli texts. The Pāli and Sanskrit term *saṃvega* is often, somewhat misleadingly, denoted “fear” or “terror,” occasionally and more aptly “shock.” Etymologically, *saṃvega* is derived from √vij, for which Monier-Williams provides a broad range of definitions: “to move with a quick darting motion, speed, heave (said of waves); to start back, recoil, flee from; to speed, accelerate; to increase; to terrify, to tremble at, start or flee from” (959). The nominal stem *vega* is defined as “rush, dash, impetus, momentum, onset; impetuosity, vehemence, haste, speed, rapidity, quickness, velocity; to go from speed to speed, increase one’s speed; outbreak, outburst (of passion), excitement, agitation, emotion” (1013). Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu glosses *saṃvega* as “a clear acceptance of the meaninglessness of the cycle of birth, aging, and death,” occasionally opting for the translation “stir up” (“Affirming the Truths”). Bhikkhu Bodhi uses “a sense of urgency,” often in association with “stir up,” while Bhikkhu Sujāto opts for variations of “inspire” or “stir up.”

Far from being an existential nihilism, *saṃvega* conveys an embodied aesthetic quality. Coomaraswamy provides a detailed etymology of

formalization of aesthetic theory, aesthetics is concerned with the perception of values. For further discussion on aesthetic theory, see Santayana 14. We invoke the term “aesthetics” in references to these meanings.

saṃvega via reference to its usage in Vedic and early Buddhist contexts, noting that in many such cases, the root *vij* suggests a trembling at or swift recoiling from something feared (174). He characterizes *saṃvega* as an aesthetic, embodied experience: “the shock of conviction that only an intellectual art can deliver, the body-blow that is delivered by any perfect and therefore convincing statement of truth” (178). Given the positive connotations of this “shock of conviction” which contains an embodied and aesthetic element associated with perfection and truth, we contend that shock better characterizes *saṃvega* than some of the alternative renderings. Fear, on the other hand, carries negative connotations and perhaps even conjures the image of prey desperately fleeing a predator. *Saṃvega* indeed entails a movement away from something else, often sensual pleasures and other stimuli that threaten to ensnare beings in the cycle of birth, old age, sickness, and death. However, *saṃvega* is not mere fight or flight on instinct alone, but meaningful reorientation.

Such reorientation requires honest introspection. Indeed, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu characterizes *saṃvega* (and its partner, *pasāda*) as affirming the truths of the heart, referencing Prince Siddhārtha, the Buddha-to-be, and his first-hand encounters with the precarious nature of existence.⁶

⁶On the multifacetedness of *saṃvega* in existential context and the difficulty with rendering it in English, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu writes,

Samvega was what the young Prince Siddhartha felt on his first exposure to aging, illness, and death. It’s a hard word to translate because it covers such a complex range — at least three clusters of feelings at once: the oppressive sense of shock, dismay, and alienation that come with realizing the futility and meaninglessness of life as it’s normally lived; a chastening sense of our own complacency and foolishness in having let ourselves live so blindly; and an anxious sense of urgency in trying to find a way out of the meaningless cycle. This is a cluster of feelings we’ve all experienced at one time or another in the process of growing up, but I don’t know of a single English term that

These encounters had an irreversible effect on the prince's determination to seek an end to suffering, stirring an existential motivation within him and set him out on the contemplative path. As Mrozik remarks, "*Samvega* arises when the truth of Buddhist teachings finally hits home and becomes personally relevant" (90). When one realizes these truths intimately, one may then comprehend their broader scope. Indeed, given recent events, the sense of *saṃvega* is particularly salient. Environmental crisis and epidemiological concerns may strike us with shock and prompt retreat. However, such "recoiling," as *saṃvega*, occurs not through sheer fearful avoidance and distraction in the form of precarious living, but through what is arguably a courageous step onto a more liberating path. This move entails directly facing these existential threats in contemplative practice. Thus, *saṃvega* is characterized by an intentional reorientation away from paths that lead to suffering and toward paths better aligned with the goal of liberation.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, whose translations we invoke most frequently in this paper, offers a slightly different perspective on *saṃvega*. Referring to the sights witnessed by the Buddha as "divine messengers," Bhikkhu Bodhi reflects that "ageing, sickness and death are not only emblems of the unsatisfactory nature of mundane existence but pointers to a deeper reality that lies beyond" ("Meeting the Divine" 146). By inducing *saṃvega* in the observer, these messengers stir one out of complacency, prompting the search for freedom. Indeed, Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that the Buddha's purpose in teaching about aspects of existence we otherwise attempt to conceal from ourselves is to provoke this sense of urgency (*saṃvega*) (*The Numerical Discourses* 41). In other words, the state of *saṃvega* allows one to

adequately covers all three. It would be useful to have such a term, and maybe that's reason enough for simply adopting the word *saṃvega* into our language.

See Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Affirming the Truths of the Heart."

reflect on limitations of sensual comforts in mundane existence. As Bhikkhu Bodhi observes:

This quality, called in Pali *saṃvega*, is a sense of urgency, an inner commotion or shock which does not allow us to rest content with our habitual adjustment to the world. Instead, it drives us on, out of our cosy palaces and into unfamiliar jungles, to work out with diligence an authentic solution to our existential plight. (“Meeting the Divine Messengers” 145)

Such urgency characterizes the force of *saṃvega* in pushing one out of complacency and towards actively pursuing the spiritual life. These few examples suggest that *saṃvega* is a skillful strategy to uncover the transient and painful experience that is disguised by the illusion of worldly enchantment. *Saṃvega* thereby functions as a catalyst, prodding us to realize the danger in complacency. Combining these two perspectives, *saṃvega* functions not as fearful recoiling, but as a reorienting pivot in perspective induced through the shock of witnessing existential, often unpleasant truth.

Pāli Sutta Analysis of *Saṃvega*

In particular, the Pāli suttas, early discourses attributed to the Buddha and his close disciples, provide narrative documentation of the functioning and operation of *saṃvega* across contemplative contexts. For instance, in the *Aṭṭhikamahapphala Sutta* (SN 46.57), *saṃvega* is listed as one of the results of meditating on the perception of a skeleton, a practice usually intended for monastics that is deemed beneficial for inducing dispassion toward the senses (Bhikkhu Bodhi *The Numerical Discourses* 1619). Here and elsewhere, *saṃvega* is intentionally cultivated as a desirable emotion on

the contemplative path, as it instills in the practitioner a sense of urgency and hence the motivation to practice for the purpose of ultimate freedom.

Such renunciant practices induce *saṃvega* in order to redirect the mind away from the sensual sphere and toward the spiritual sphere. Illustrating these effects, in the *Viveka Sutta* (SN 9.1), a monk is depicted undertaking austerities (*dhutaṅga*). However, he lets his mind wander, lapsing into sensual fantasy as if he were a lay practitioner. Fortunately, he is rescued and rebuked by a deity who reminds him of his renunciant status (Bhikkhu Bodhi *The Connected Discourses* 197). The arising of *saṃvega* upon being reprimanded by the deity prompts the monk to reform his mental conduct. The deity, out of compassion, wishes to arouse a sense of urgency (*saṃvejetukāma*) in the mind of the monk so that he refrains from indulging in drowsiness and distracted thoughts. The deity succeeds in placing him firmly back on the path.

Indeed, *saṃvega* can assist in rousing the practitioner from various states of demotivation. Further illustrating the function of *saṃvega*, the Buddha in the *Kaṭuviya Sutta* (AN 3.128) teaches a monk who is “muddle-minded, without clear comprehension, unconcentrated, with a wandering mind and loose sense faculties” by exhorting him to acquire a sense of urgency (*saṃvega*) to cultivate wholeheartedly. The Buddha exhorts that if the monk continues to indulge his wandering mind, he will have polluted himself and will be tainted by a stench which will cause rotting flies to pursue and attack him. The Buddha further clarifies that ‘pollution’ represents longing, ‘stench’ represents ill will, and ‘flies’ represent unwholesome thoughts based on lust (Bhikkhu Bodhi *The Numerical Discourses* 358-359). Here, the emotional and aesthetic quality of these descriptions is particularly noteworthy. For instance, a lack of control over one’s mind is associated with an unpleasant odor which has the potential to attract flies, thus appealing to the senses as a means of motivating the practitioner. Such threat of pollution is enough to stir the monk out of his

muddled-mindedness and to inspire him to reform his mental conduct. In our modern context, the environmental crisis, replete with images of land razed by fire, as well as epidemiological news in which images of the sick and dying have come to the foreground, are likewise aesthetically moving sights, evoking emotions via the visual faculty, much like *saṃvega*.

During such times of crisis, the immediacy of existential threat seems to determine the extent to which one experiences *saṃvega*. Those at a distance are less likely to feel as stirred by environmental and epidemiological uncertainty relative to those “on the battleground” or “in the field” where the crisis is most salient. Reflecting these trends is the *Patoda Sutta* (AN 4.113), which compares training horses to the way the Buddha trains his monastic disciples. The sutta recounts that a thoroughbred horse is stirred and acquires a sense of urgency (*saṃvega*) when (i) it sees a shadow of the whip, (ii) it is struck by the whip, (iii) its hide is struck by the whip, or (iv) its bone is struck by the whip. In the same way, a monk is stirred and acquires a sense of urgency (*saṃvega*) when (i) he hears a stranger in town has fallen ill or died, (ii) he sees a woman or man who has fallen ill or died, (iii) his relative or family member has fallen ill or died, or (iv) he is stricken by bodily feelings that are “painful, racking, sharp, piercing, harrowing, disagreeable, sapping one’s vitality” (Bhikkhu Bodhi *The Numerical Discourses* 494-496). Like the thoroughbred horse stirred by the whip, a thoroughbred monk is stirred and acquires a sense of urgency (*saṃvega*) by encountering illness and death at various levels of intimacy. The same can be said for the arising of *saṃvega* despite the degrees of removal separating us from the existential threats already mentioned. We should strive to become like the thoroughbred horse, who, even at the mere sight of the whip, is stirred by a sense of urgency (*saṃvega*) to reform its conduct.

The arising of *saṃvega* under these circumstances may indeed be physically jarring, leaving a profound emotional aftershock that may

transform one's being. Coomaraswamy comments that *saṃvega* "refers to the experience that may be felt in the presence of a work of art, when we are struck by it, as a horse may be struck by a whip" (177). He continues, "It is, however, assumed that like the good horse we are more or less trained, and hence that more than a merely physical shock is involved" (177). Beyond the sting of the whip itself, a deeply aesthetic experience characterizes *saṃvega*, stirring an emotional response. Coomaraswamy comments further, "the blow has a *meaning* for us, and the realization of that meaning, in which nothing of the physical sensation survives, is still part of the shock" (177). The initially visceral aspect of the shock translates into a greater, emotional shock, prompting behavioral modification. In response to the shock, we correct our mistakes, right our wrongs, and make forward progress. In like manner to the term emotion, which denotes outward motion or movement, *saṃvijjati*, and its closely related form *saṃvega*, are emotions insofar as their function is to move one to act, like a thoroughbred horse stirred to act by the whip and the noble disciple stirred to act by the impending realities of illness and death. We should be similarly stirred to reform our conduct in response to the shock of contemporary crises across the world.

Further Commentaries on *Saṃvega*

Buddhist philosophers have variously analyzed *saṃvega*, extolling its function as a motivating factor in spiritual cultivation. Referencing the *Patoda Sutta* (AN 4.113) and its discussion of *saṃvega* in relation to the analogy of the horses, Buddhaghosa, a fifth century C.E. commentator of the Pāli Tipiṭaka, provides further clarification. In the *Atthasālinī* (his auto-commentary to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*), he writes:

The term 'agitation' [*saṃvega*] refers to fear arisen in connection with birth, etc. [i.e., old age, sickness, death]. The

causes, namely, birth, etc. [i.e., old age, sickness, death], productive of agitation, are termed ‘occasions for agitation.’ By ‘the proper effort of the agitated’ is meant his adequate exertions. (Tin and Rhys Davids 72)

Here, proper effort is generated on account of the agitating force of *saṃvega*, suggesting a connection to motivation. Interestingly, Buddhaghosa mentions birth explicitly, which is not included in the three sights (old age, sickness, and death) witnessed by the Buddha-to-be. Birth nonetheless features in the first of the four noble truths in the very definition of suffering (*dukkha*). All such existential events, ranging from birth to death, agitate the mind with *saṃvega*. In the *Atthasālini*, Buddhaghosa further states: “‘Agitation’ is a throwing about of mind” (Tin and Rhys Davids 346). Such throwing about of mind may refer to shaking the foundations of our presumed reality, often sugarcoated to seem aesthetically pleasing to the senses. This agitation experienced via *saṃvega*, functioning as a jarring movement of the mind, allows us to see beyond ordinary ways of thinking and witness the painful truths often hidden from us, thereby motivating us to take urgent action.

The emotionally agitating quality of *saṃvega* is in fact desirable for contemplatives. In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa further notes that when a monk is sluggish in exercising understanding or incapable of attaining peace of mind, he can evoke the emotion of *saṃvega* to counteract this sluggish state (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 129). Trainor likewise comments on *saṃvega*, which is “the powerful emotion that arises when one contemplates the arising and dissolution of the constituents of experience” (“*Pasanna/Pasāda*” 185). Insight into impermanence instigates the arising of *saṃvega*. Importantly, *saṃvega*’s emotional power derives largely from its energizing potential.

In most cases, *saṃvega* is associated with exertion or energy. For instance, Buddhaghosa explicitly characterizes *saṃvega* in relation to energy (*virīya*) in his *Atthasālinī*:

Energy has exerting as its characteristic, strengthening the co-existent states as function, and opposition to giving way as manifestation. It has been said: 'He being agitated, makes a rational effort,' hence it has agitation, or the basic condition of making energy as proximate cause. Right energy should be the root of all attainments. (Tin and Rhys Davids 159)

In other words, when one has been stirred by *saṃvega*, one then gives rise to energetic application. Energy is the foundation for progress, turning what might otherwise be a state of stupor into productive spiritual activity. Reflecting the same sentiment, Buddhaghosa further comments in the *Visuddhimagga*:

Energy (*virīya*) is the state of one who is vigorous (*vīra*). Its characteristic is marshalling (driving). Its function is to consolidate conascent states. It is manifested as non-collapse. Because of the words: "Bestirred, he strives wisely" (A II 115), its proximate cause is a sense of urgency; or its proximate cause is grounds for the initiation of energy. When rightly initiated, it should be regarded as the root of all attainments. (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 471)

A far cry from the immobility of emotional numbness, here *saṃvega* is mobilizing and rousing. As Bhikkhu Anālayo writes, "Only once death has become a natural part of life will it be possible to go beyond the influence of existential fear and thereby come fully alive to life as it unfolds in the present moment" (*Mindfully Facing* 204). Rather than a depressive or catatonic

lack of motivation, *saṃvega*, in its association with energy, functions to motivate productive effort on the contemplative path.

Indeed, properly functioning *saṃvega* is characterized by energetic application, thereby turning emotion into motivation. Brons explicitly notes that *saṃvega* is a morally motivating state of shock (83). He observes:

Saṃvega is (obviously) a disturbing experience—disturbing enough to result in a profound change in the attitudes, beliefs, and/or values of the person experiencing it—but its beneficial effects are reason to seek rather than to avoid it. Towards this end, Buddhaghosa recommends meditating on the subject of death. One may accidentally experience *saṃvega* in the course of ordinary life (in encountering death and suffering particularly), but meditation is the primary means to intentionally achieve *saṃvega* (85).

While *saṃvega* may feel uncomfortable and unsettling, it is essential to the contemplative path, as such a fundamental shift in perspective enables one to see beyond what one may otherwise ordinarily take for granted. Intentionally undertaking specific contemplative exercises is crucial to the process of cultivating *saṃvega* in order to induce a transformative shift in perspective. Buddhaghosa, for instance, recommends meditating on death. Importantly, Brons observes that *saṃvega* may arise accidentally through encounters with death or stories of suffering but can also be “intentionally induced” in engaged purposive activity such as meditation (84-85). In fact, Buddhaghosa acknowledges that *saṃvega* is an explicit goal of meditation, suggesting that a disturbing experience can instigate a process of reflection and the search for a path towards freedom from suffering. Buddhaghosa further advises that a monk should first develop loving-kindness towards others and then take up meditation on death, perhaps as a buffer against the otherwise challenging emotions

characterizing *saṃvega*. In this way, a monk can reduce attachments, advancing him onto the proper path. Buddhaghosa writes:

With mindfulness of death, thinking, “I have got to die,” he gives up improper search, and with a growing sense of urgency he comes to live without attachment. When his mind is familiar with the perception of foulness, then even divine objects do not tempt his mind to greed. (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 93)

Knowing that one will certainly die, one is motivated to relinquish unwholesome habits and attachments. The sense of *saṃvega* induced by such mortality salience, the awareness of inevitable death, and related insights such as the decrepit nature of the body functions to free the practitioner from bonds. Buddhaghosa further reflects:

He announced the truth of suffering first to instill a sense of urgency into living beings caught up in the enjoyment of the pleasure of becoming; and next to that, the truth of origin . . . [and] after that, cessation, to instill comfort by showing the escape to those who seek the escape from suffering with a sense of urgency because overwhelmed by suffering with its cause. And after that, the path that leads to cessation. (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 509)

Even the sequence of the four noble truths begins with *saṃvega*, setting the stage for the entirety of the contemplative path to follow.

Given the importance of *saṃvega* in stimulating spiritual progress, an understanding of its basis for arising may assist in discerning how to intentionally cultivate it for the sake of liberation. In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa suggests reviewing the eight bases of spiritual urgency as encouraging stimuli for the mind when it becomes agitated or sluggish (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 129). The eight bases are birth (*jāti*), aging (*jarā*),

sickness (*vyādhi*), death (*marāṇa*), suffering from the states of loss (*apāyadukkha*), suffering rooted in one's saṃsāric past (*atīte vaṭṭamūlaka dukkha*), the suffering to be encountered in one's saṃsāric future (*anāgate vaṭṭamūlaka dukkha*), and the suffering rooted in the search for nutriment in one's present (*pacuppanne āhārapariyeṭṭimūlaka dukkha*) (Bhikkhu Bodhi *The Numerical Discourses* 1617). The first five pertain directly to existential events, while the latter three relate broadly to past, future, and presently arisen suffering, all of which may instigate *saṃvega*. Once these eight bases of spiritual urgency are reviewed, Buddhaghosa further suggests recollecting the wholesome qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 129). In turn, these qualities give rise to *pasāda*, an emotion we discuss in the next section.

Given its existential associations, *saṃvega* is depicted as the impetus for religious motivation. Hence, the “ugly” may lead to the “beautiful” insofar as the shock delivered through encounter with the unappealing truths of existence may propel the practitioner forward. In fact, at every opportunity, the Buddha employs various means to induce “fear,” the “ultimate weapon,” to convert ascetics from other factions (Brekke “The Role of Fear” 455).

Although Brekke asserts that the Buddha employed various means to “induce fear,” this does not imply that fear is inherent to the Buddha's teachings (“The Role of Fear” 456). Rather, the Buddha revealed a reality whose nature is likely to provoke a sense of fear that functions to guide beings in a more wholesome direction. Brekke clarifies, “expectation of horrors should cause a motivating fear that sets the mind firmly on the right path” (“The Role of Fear” 453). He further notes, “people embraced the solutions offered by a few charismatic leaders who were able to define the problems and point the way out” (“The Religious Motivation” 853). If fear evoked through the content of the Buddha's teaching is effectively translated into religious motivation, then the recipient of such fearful

teaching will strive for liberation (“The Role of Fear” 457). Such realities may be unpleasant to face but confronting them is necessary for spiritual growth.

Indeed, once one has seen the truth of suffering, the Buddha reveals how to transcend its hold. It is necessary to bear in mind that *saṃvega* must be paired with *pasāda* for sustainable spiritual transformation to unfold. Brekke further notes that in early Buddhist texts, “references to ‘fire and brimstone preaching’ are not at all prominent compared to the references to mendicants who light up the world with their holiness” (“The Role of Fear” 457). Such language reflects the aesthetic qualities of *saṃvega* and *pasāda*, where *saṃvega* stands for the unaesthetic “fire and brimstone preaching” and *pasāda* for aesthetic “holiness.” While *saṃvega* may seem to reveal an existentially dark reality, its emotional effects are tempered through the brightening function of *pasāda*. The shock generated by *saṃvega*’s fiery dynamic is relieved by *pasāda*’s cooling quality.

Meaning and Etymology of *Pasāda*

The Pāli term *pasāda* means “clearness, brightness, purity” (Rhys Davids and Stede 446). Monier-Williams relates the Sanskrit equivalent *prasāda* to *pra* *√sad*, which means “to settle down, grow clear and bright, become placid or tranquil; to become clear or distinct; to make serene, gladden (the heart); to render calm, soothe, appease” (696). For the Buddha, *pasāda* constituted the feeling of hope and confidence that set him out on the path to transcend suffering. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu translates *pasāda* as “clarity and serene confidence,” adding that it is “what keeps *saṃvega* from turning into despair” (“Affirming the Truths”). Bhikkhu Bodhi uses “confidence,” “confirmed confidence,” “mental placidity,” and other variations, while Bhikkhu Sujāto uses “joy and clarity.” We use “serene confidence” given that *pasāda* (S: *prasāda*) inspires a level-headed sense of

empowerment on the contemplative path. The state of *pasāda* galvanizes the practitioner into steady action, enabling her to overcome obstacles along the path to liberation.

Scholars have further suggested that *pasāda* conveys aesthetic and emotional qualities. Trainor traces the term *pasāda* to Pāli *Vaṃsa* literature. He renders *pasāda* as “serenely joyful” but admits that this translation fails to capture the powerful reaction of some who witness a marvel performed by a relic of the Buddha and does not make explicit the attitude of confidence or trust (“*Pasanna/Pasāda*” 187-188). Trainor stresses that *pasāda* and the closely related term *pasanna* function not only within the framework of ritual veneration, but also serve a prescriptive function for those who hear the Buddhist teachings (“*Pasanna/Pasāda*” 185). Moreover, he aptly observes that *saṃvega* and *pasāda* arise “in the heart of the hearers” (*sotūnaṃ hadaye*) (“*Pasanna/Pasāda*” 185). Such imagery conveys aesthetic qualities as religious emotions, moving the heart and reorienting intentions from the sensual sphere and onto the spiritual path. Further, he observes that the *Mahāvāṃsa* commentary relates *pasāda* to the experience of *saddhā*, which arises on account of having confidence, trust, and faith in the Triple Jewel (“*Pasanna/Pasāda*” 185). We may even draw inspiration from sources of confidence to guide one’s responses to the challenges of modernity. When other emotions arise and overwhelm or paralyze us, they may prevent us from acting, but with *pasāda*, we are mobilized to act in order to overcome afflictive states.

Moreover, *prasāda* (P: *pasāda*) inspires beautiful conduct and virtuous deeds. Mroziak notes that “even a single experience of *prasāda* can set in motion many lifetimes of virtuous deeds” (76). Such commitment is especially relevant in the context of the *bodhisattva* path, wherein one vows to serve all beings, but may further extend to devotional practice across Buddhist traditions. For instance, Mroziak provides an account from the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃ* of King Aśoka’s *prasāda*-based conversion upon seeing

the monk Nigrōdha, whose beautiful deportment he found inspiring (76). His conversion inspired a multi-generational legacy of Buddhism in South Asia, leaving behind edicts inscribed with Buddhist passages, which in turn inspired future generations. Hence, even a single practitioner's beautiful form can catalyze aesthetic pleasure. The recipients of such pleasure derive *prasāda* and so devote themselves to the path. Their deeds then serve as aesthetic examples that inspire others. Relatedly, Mrozik also references Ludowyk-Gyömrői's work on *pasīdati*, the verbal form of *pasāda*. Ludowyk-Gyömrői observes that *pasīdati* "unites deep feeling, intellectual appreciation and satisfaction, clarification of thought and attraction towards the teacher" (167), highlighting that *pasāda* is an expression of "aesthetic pleasure" (77). Hence, *pasāda* is a multifaceted experience that combines both emotional and aesthetic elements.

Pāli Sutta Analysis of *Pasāda*

Several passages from the Pāli suttas highlight the importance of cultivating *pasāda* along the contemplative path. In the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* (MN 18), *pasāda* is said to arise from careful examination of the Buddha's teaching (*dhamma*), which in this case is deemed particularly sweet and delectable:

The venerable Ānanda said to the Blessed One: "Venerable sir, just as if a man exhausted by hunger and weakness came upon a honeyball, wherever he would taste it he would find a sweet delectable flavour; so too, venerable sir, any able-minded bhikkhu, wherever he might scrutinize with wisdom the meaning of this discourse on the Dhamma, would find satisfaction and confidence of mind." (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi *The Middle Length Discourses* 205-206)

Here, the teaching and the practitioner's examination thereof function to inspire *pasāda*. Like a honeyball whose taste is aesthetically pleasing to the sense faculties, the teaching (*dhamma*) inspires a pleasant emotional response and state of mind. Thus, *pasāda* adds ease to one's otherwise strenuous search for liberation.

Not just any *pasāda*, however, will do. In the *Cūḷasihanāda Sutta* (MN 11), confidence (*pasāda*) must be directed toward a teacher and teaching with certain aesthetic qualities. For instance, confidence in the teacher is inappropriate if the teacher is not fully enlightened. Moreover, confidence in the teaching is deemed insufficient if the teaching has not been well-proclaimed, has not been well-expounded, and does not lead to emancipation and peace. Only when the teacher is fully enlightened and the teaching has been well-proclaimed and well-expounded, leading to emancipation and peace, is *pasāda* rightly directed:

Bhikkhus, when a Tathāgata, accomplished and fully enlightened, claims to propound the full understanding of all kinds of clinging, he completely describes the full understanding of all kinds of clinging: he describes the full understanding of clinging to sensual pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to rules and observances, and clinging to a doctrine of self.

Bhikkhus, in such a Dhamma and Discipline as that, it is plain that confidence in the Teacher is rightly directed, that confidence in the Dhamma is rightly directed, that fulfilment of the precepts is rightly directed, and that the affection among companions in the Dhamma is rightly directed. Why is that? Because that is how it is when the Dhamma and Discipline is well-proclaimed and well-expounded, emancipating, conducive to peace, expounded by one who is fully enlightened. (162)

Aesthetic qualities characterize both a fully enlightened teacher and a well-proclaimed, well-expounded teaching that proves to be emancipating and conducive to peace. Although this text does not describe in detail the qualities of a fully enlightened teacher, the chant of the “Buddha *Vandanā*” whose features are listed in texts such as the *Sakka Sutta* (SN 40.10) describe the Buddha in spiritually aesthetic terms:

Good, lord of the devas, is the possession of confirmed confidence in the Buddha thus: ‘The Blessed One is an arahant, fully enlightened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unsurpassed leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, the Enlightened One, the Blessed One.’ (Bhikkhu Bodhi *The Connected Discourses* 1309-1310)

Similar references are made to “confirmed confidence” (*pasāda*) in the Dhamma and Saṅgha. In particular, a teaching that is well-proclaimed and well-expounded is consistent with the aesthetically pleasing quality of the honeyball-like teaching in the above-mentioned *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*, which inspires *pasāda*. Cultivating *pasāda* for an aesthetically inferior teacher and teaching will not suffice. In fact, the very quality of *pasāda* in such a case will itself be inferior. *Pasāda* must therefore be cultivated only for the highest quality teacher and teaching in order to procure its intended results on the contemplative path.

Pasāda also functions to improve one’s conditions on the path to liberation, serving as the cause for positive outcomes in the next life. According to the *Sakka Sutta*, a mind imbued with *pasāda* ensures that beings experience a favorable rebirth: “Because of possessing confirmed confidence in the Buddha, some beings here, with the breakup of the body, after death, are reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world” (Bhikkhu Bodhi *The Connected Discourses* 1310). A similarly sentiment is echoed in section forty-four of the *Paṇihitāccha Vaggo* in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN

1.44) and elsewhere (Bhikkhu Bodhi *The Numerical Discourses* 96). Hence, cultivating *pasāda* is explicitly named a cause (*hetu*) for rebirth in a good destination, a spiritually aesthetic outcome.

Another means of achieving this state of *pasāda* is through recollection of the Buddha. For instance, according to the *Uposatha Sutta* (AN 3.70):

The defiled mind is cleansed by exertion. And how is the defiled mind cleansed by exertion? Here, Visākhā, a noble disciple recollects the Tathāgata thus: ‘The Blessed One is an arahant, perfectly enlightened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, the Enlightened One, the Blessed One.’ When a noble disciple recollects the Tathāgata, his mind becomes placid, joy arises, and the defilements of the mind are abandoned in the same way that one’s head, when dirty, is cleansed by exertion. (Bhikkhu Bodhi *The Numerical Discourses* 295)

By recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, one’s mind “becomes placid” (*pasīdati*) and gives rise to joy, while mental defilements, which may be understood as unaesthetic qualities of mind, are cleansed. The cleansing of the defiled mind entails an aesthetic brightening, as might occur to a mirror when polished clean.

Indeed, multiple discourses, ranging from the *Bāhiya Sutta* (Ud 1.10) to the *Doṇa Sutta* (AN 4.36) and *Soṇa Sutta* (Ud 5.6), recount that encountering the Buddha and beholding his serene appearance inspired confidence in onlookers. For instance, the *Doṇa Sutta* (AN 4.36) describes an aesthetically moving experience:

On one occasion the Blessed One was traveling along the highway between Ukkattha and Setavya. The brahmin Dona was also traveling along the highway between Ukkattha and Setavya. The brahmin Dona then saw the thousand-spoked wheels of the Blessed One's footprints, with their rims and hubs, complete in all respects, and thought: "It is astounding and amazing! These surely could not be the footprints of a human being!"

Then the Blessed One left the highway and sat down at the foot of a tree, folding his legs crosswise, straightening his body, and establishing mindfulness in front of him. Tracking the Blessed One's footprints, the brahmin Dona saw the Blessed One sitting at the foot of the tree—graceful, inspiring confidence, with peaceful faculties and peaceful mind, one who had attained to the highest taming and serenity, [like] a tamed and guarded bull elephant with controlled faculties (Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* 425).

Doṇa's encounter with the Buddha's footprint inspires an aesthetic experience, prompting him to seek out its source. Upon encountering the Buddha himself, seated peacefully in meditation beneath a tree, Doṇa is further inspired. The Buddha's outwardly serene faculties reflect the inwardly serene quality of his mind. Witnessing aesthetic cues such as the Buddha's footprint and peaceful faculties is a cause for the arising of *pasāda*.

Further Commentaries on *Pasāda*

Given that the sight of a renunciant catalyzed *pasāda* in the Buddha-to-be, Buddhist monastics should aspire to conduct themselves in ways that

likewise inspire *pasāda* in others. In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa explicitly relates *pasāda* to monastic aesthetics:

[A] bhikkhu is respectful, deferential, possessed of conscience and shame, wears his inner robe properly, wears his upper robe properly, his manner inspires confidence whether in moving forwards or backwards, looking ahead or aside, bending or stretching, his eyes are downcast, he has (a good) deportment, he guards the doors of his sense faculties, knows the right measure in eating, is devoted to wakefulness, possesses mindfulness and full awareness, wants little, is contented, is strenuous, is a careful observer of good behaviour, and treats the teachers with great respect. This is called (proper) conduct. (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 21)

Proper conduct is a cause for a monastic's pleasing appearance. Similarly, a practitioner's pleasing behaviors can serve as an outward reflection of her inward cultivation of mind. Furthermore, Pāli Vinaya literature states that the behaviors of monastics often inspire *pasāda* in non-believers and increase the number of believers (Wijayaratna 130). *Pasāda* therefore functions as an aesthetic emotion attracting beings onto the contemplative path.

Pasāda can be internally cultivated through various contemplative practices. In particular, *pasāda* is self-generated when one cultivates an aesthetic appreciation for the Triple Jewel,⁷ namely by contemplating the beautiful qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha. Indeed, Buddhaghosa states that a monk who recollects the qualities of the Buddha,

⁷ The Triple Jewel—the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha—serve as aesthetic sources of refuge in Buddhism. More broadly, they represent principles and ideals that inspire and lead Buddhists onto and along the path to liberation.

Dhamma, and Saṅgha gives rise to confidence or joy (*pasāda*) (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 129). It is this state of *pasāda* that impels Buddhists to take refuge in the Triple Jewel and ultimately commit to the path that leads to liberation from suffering.

Moreover, *pasāda* is also generated through encounters with aesthetic iconography. Rotman argues that in Sanskrit Buddhist narratives, inspiring physical objects, such as images of the Buddha, arhats, and *stūpas*, can induce *prasāda* (Pāli: *pasāda*) (557). Rotman refers to these objects as “agents of *prasāda*” (*prāsādika*). When the practitioner comes into visual contact with these objects, *prasāda* arises in them and they feel “[instilled with] faith, properly grateful, or favorably disposed,” which motivates them to act with generosity (557). Similarly, Trainor argues that ritual veneration of the Buddha’s relics generates *pasāda*, manifesting the response to make material offerings and perform gestures of obeisance (“Pasanna/Pasāda” 188-189). As such, one may even combine means of internally generating *pasāda*, such as through recollection of the Buddha in meditation, with external methods, including veneration of iconography or relics, thereby fortifying the experience of *pasāda*.

Integrating *Samvega* and *Pasāda*

Given these reflections on the cultivation of *saṃvega* and *pasāda* individually, we turn now to their integration. Rather than provide a comprehensive treatment of *saṃvega/pasāda*, we instead highlight the core themes supporting their association, thus illuminating their synergy. For the best possible soteriological results, *saṃvega* and *pasāda* must be cultivated together, as neither one alone is complete in itself.

Buddhist contemplative practice aims to integrate these two emotions for optimal soteriological benefits. “Hence the recommendation,”

writes Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “that all Buddhists, both men and women, lay or ordained, should reflect daily on the facts of aging, illness, separation, and death—to develop feelings of *saṃvega*—and on the power of one’s own actions, to take *saṃvega* one step further, to *pasāda*” (“Affirming the Truths”). As *saṃvega* arises in the practitioner’s confrontation with old age, sickness, and death, it must be channeled in service of nourishing its better half, *pasāda*. Otherwise, one may stagnate in unpleasant emotions such as depression and catatonia. When the stirring quality of *saṃvega* is harnessed through energetic application (*virīya*), the serene confidence of *pasāda* blooms in its wake. The practitioner, endowed with a sense of clarity and joy, is then able to take charge of her life and orient it onto a wholesome path. As a pair, the pragmatic utility of *saṃvega* and *pasāda* is thus indispensable. They function to motivate the practitioner, enabling her to face the existential realities behind suffering and to tread the contemplative path to freedom. Only in synergy can the soteriological effects of *saṃvega/pasāda* be fully felt and experienced.

This sequence of cultivation maps onto an experiential realization of the four noble truths (P: *cattāri-ariya-saccāni*; S: *catvāri-ārya-satyāni*). Rather than mere doctrine, such truths are to be internalized in practice. As Bhikkhu Bodhi writes:

To become ‘divine messengers,’ the facts of ageing, illness and death must jolt us into an awareness of the fragile, precarious nature of our normal day-to-day lives. They must impress upon our minds the radical deficiency that runs through all our worldly concerns, extending to conditioned existence in its totality. Thereby they become windows opening upon the first noble truth, the noble truth of suffering, which the Buddha says comprises not only birth, ageing, illness and death, not only sorrow, grief, pain and

misery, but all the ‘five aggregates of clinging’ that make
up our being-in-the-world. (“Meeting the Divine” 145)

Even more broadly, the experience of *saṃvega* corresponds to the first and second truths, those of suffering (P: *dukkha*; S: *duḥkha*) and its cause (P, S: *samudaya*). Realization of these truths—the pervasive nature of dissatisfaction and its origins in habituated craving—can be emotionally taxing, much like the existential shock of *saṃvega*. Meanwhile, the experience of *pasāda* corresponds to the third and fourth truths, the end of suffering (P, S: *nirodha*) and the path (P: *magga*; S: *marga*). With the realization that the cycle of dissatisfactory existence can be brought to a halt, and that doing so requires traversing a comprehensive path to freedom, comes the relief of *pasāda*. Such a path is encompassed by eight facets, which are collectively termed the “noble eightfold path” (P: *ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*; S: *ārya-aṣṭāṅga-mārga*): right view, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Together, *saṃvega/pasāda* enable the skillful navigation of this path to its completion.

The emotional aesthetics underlying *saṃvega/pasāda* are the key to their effectiveness. We first witness the aesthetically unpleasing existential truths that evoke *saṃvega*, namely the first three sights (old age, sickness, and death) beheld by the Buddha-to-be. Encountering the aesthetically pleasing fourth sight (a renunciant) triggers the experience of *pasāda*, enabling one to step onto the noble eightfold path which culminates in “the deathless,” complete liberation from suffering. As Bhikkhu Anālayo writes, “Having reached the deathless through full awakening, one is no longer affected by the mortality of one’s own body or that of others” (*Mindfully Facing* 117). This deathless state refers to an absolute freedom beyond birth, old age, sickness, and death. Such conditions no longer emotionally move us off center. Instead, we remain equanimous in their midst. Along this path to the deathless, *saṃvega* and *pasāda* are

revived at multiple intervals, as deemed appropriate by the practitioner, functioning in synergy in support of forward progress until freedom is attained.

Conclusion

Returning to the story guiding this paper, we pause again to reflect on the Buddha's encounters with *saṃvega* and *pasāda* as aesthetic emotions. After being led out from the castle, the young prince was deeply disturbed by aging, sickness, and death. Upon seeing a renunciant, however, he was motivated to leave mundane existence and pursue the spiritual life. The impact of these sights suggests that aesthetic (and unaesthetic) encounters, as well as the emotions they evoke, are crucial motivating factors. Having seen the unpleasant existential realities of worldly life and knowing an alternative way is possible, the aspirant is inspired to pursue that which is spiritually beautiful, drawing her onto the contemplative path that culminates in the deathless.

Likewise, in our everyday, modern contexts, when we witness the ravages of pandemic or other such sights, we may recoil in repulsion, experiencing a visceral sense of disgust. In moving away from these "ugly" sights, we may be drawn toward alternatives that we deem "beautiful." Most beings seek comfort in sense pleasures, finding them an attractive distraction, yet they too are subject to decay. The spiritual path nourished by *saṃvega* and *pasāda*, however, offers a sustainable route to freedom from suffering, the ultimate source of beauty in the Buddhist soteriological framework.

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