

# Ruminating on desires and on the absence of pain....

Post by "Godfrey" of June 7, 2021 at 9:10 PM

Quote

"...and of the necessary [desires], **some are necessary for happiness** and some for freeing the body from troubles and some for life itself." Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus 127

I was surprised to find this quote which exactly expressed my thoughts concerning the relatively ascetic existence during the pandemic restrictions and fulfilled my curiosity as to what Epicurus might have to say about it. Thinking of asceticism inevitably led me as well to thoughts of the absence of pain.

Firstly, it seems that the "absence of pain" proponents are ignoring the first desire in this quote and focusing on the last two. I can see how this might lead one to asceticism. But the desires that are necessary for happiness are what Epicurus places in the position of importance in this quote. Personally, I had either missed this or forgotten it and so was quite pleasantly surprised to read it! (For clarity, I wasn't thinking of becoming an ascetic 😊 )

Thinking further on the practicalities of the absence of pain, hopefully without provoking any rants:

The fears that Epicurus addresses in LM and in the PDs are "macro" fears, those of death and the gods. But there are and always have been "micro" fears that I don't recall reading about in the surviving literature. To me, for Epicurus to posit a complete therapeutic philosophy he would need to address these "micro" fears, and I assume that he did so through frank speech in the garden, one person at a time or perhaps in small groups. These micro, everyday fears are more personal fears, specific to everyday situations, although there are common threads to them. And I'm mentioning them partly because they don't lead to asceticism but to immediate pleasures of the non-fancy type. Nothing mystical here! (Is mystical related to "mystified?")

An example that comes to mind is from my early childhood, learning to swim. After I had become proficient at swimming and at diving off the diving board, my teacher tried to get me to jump off of the high dive. I was scared out of my wits! I stood up there, looking down and trembling... climbed down off the board, climbed back up... it took quite a long time and lots of encouragement, but finally I went up and jumped off. It was so exhilarating that I spent the rest of the afternoon repeatedly experiencing the sheer joy of climbing up and jumping off: the removal of pain (fear) was definitely pleasure!

Another example might be of a mythical land surveyor working in alligator country. He might be terrified of alligators as evil spirit animals, or afraid of being attacked. Either of these could be addressed through reason: thinking through the implications of a material universe for the first, learning about proper safety protocols in alligator country for the second. Removing the pain of fear in these ways would allow for the pleasure of doing his job and enjoying being out in nature; it wouldn't lead him to avoid his work and sit in his room on a zafu cushion.

Could/should the pain/pleasure dichotomy be used in this way as an Epicurean "exercise" or "practice" to maximize one's pleasure? At the very least, to me, thinking in this way is a useful and direct tool for understanding the relationship between pleasure and the absence of pain.

---

### Post by "Cassius" of June 8, 2021 at 7:57 AM

To comment on your last question first, I definitely think the answer is yes, with your illustration of how much fun it is to dive off the high board, once you have overcome your fear, being a very good example.

#### [Quote from Godfrey](#)

Firstly, it seems that the "absence of pain" proponents are ignoring the first desire in this quote and focusing on the last two. I can see how this might lead one to asceticism. But the desires that are necessary for happiness are what Epicurus places in the position of importance in this quote. Personally, I had either missed this or forgotten it and so was quite pleasantly surprised to read it!

As to that part, the difficulty seems to be not so much that the AOP position ignores the prominent position of "happiness" in that section, but rather they look to other nearby sections of the same letter which can be read to equate happiness with absence of pain. For example, the very next sentence: *"The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul's) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness. For it is to obtain this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear."*

Epicurus at the beginning has said "We must then meditate on the things that make our happiness, seeing that when that is with us we have all, but when it is absent we do all to win it." *So when he again talks about refer all choice and avoidance.... and aim of the life .... and to obtain this end we always act* it is easy to see how they can do that.

So in the end I don't think it is possible to win an argument against AOP by isolating one section of text and saying it's clear, because the AOP position can do exactly the same thing in a way that ends up defining pleasure and happiness as absence of pain and implicitly asceticism.

What the AOP can't do is satisfactorily account for a common-sense definition of pleasure and happiness that includes joy and delight as part of the end -- and those are the kind of 'active pleasures that both the "common person" and Epicurus himself recognizes as the ordinary definition of pleasure. The AOP position tries to say that the joy and delight may be necessary for complete absence of pain (resting / katastematic pleasure) but most common sense people are going to find that unpersuasive.

Reason and logic can be used to analyze Epicurus' position in a way that is consistent with recognizing pleasure and happiness as including the active pleasures in the way ordinary people do, or reason and logic can be used to turn the system into super-asceticism. I think people have commented earlier that the issue becomes kind of a "Rorschach test" - which position they end up taking shows more about themselves than it shows about Epicurus.

It would really be mysterious and strange for Epicurus to have used this kind of phraseology without a good reason, and that's why I don't think it's possible to persuasively analyze this question without looking for that reason. The best explanation I can find is that the reason stems from Plato's logic-based argument that pleasure has no limit, and that happiness or pleasure cannot therefore qualify as the ultimate goal of life or greatest good, since they allegedly can always be made better. I don't think it's sufficient to dismiss that as an argument based on abstract logic and say that it fails for the reason alone.

There's good reason in the texts, including this letter, to conclude that Epicurus was working with a sound and common sense definition of pleasure and happiness, but he does seemingly depart from that at times, so we need an overall theory of what he is doing and why he actually has not. If we just line up the "pleasure" passages against the "absence of pain" passages we're still left with resolving why they can so easily be made to appear to be in conflict, and why redefining "pleasure" as "absence of pain" is not the answer to figuring out the puzzle.

I hope I did that without too much of a rant! 😊

---

**Post by “Don” of June 8, 2021 at 8:04 AM**

You're absolutely right that if Epicurus didn't address "everyday fears" there wouldn't be any use to his philosophy. So, that being said, I think you're on track in that we have to assume he did. In my view, Epicurus was adamant that philosophy had to have practical applications for one's whole life; otherwise, it was useless.

In my reading of your post, it seems to me to go back to assessing what will happen if this desire is fulfilled and what if it is not. Your diving example is a good example of this practical application. Philosophy doesn't need to be Capital-P Philosophical. There's no ultimate cosmic outcome either way in jumping. It's not a meaning of life epiphany if you jump or don't jump. BUT (unbeknownst to you at the time), you weighed the benefits of jumping against jumping and found you were curious enough to overcome your fear to see if jumping vs not jumping provided more pleasure. I'm sure there was an aspect of peer pressure too that could have brought some pain. Jumping eliminated that too.

It's important to remember too from that excerpt from the Letter that Epicurus didn't write "happiness" with the baggage that English word has. It's part of it, but the word he used is eudaimonia. I've gone through and pulled out other occurrences to give maybe a better idea what that word means:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eudaimonia>

VS 33. The body cries out to not be hungry, not be thirsty, not be cold. Anyone who has these things, and who is confident of continuing to have them, can rival the gods for **\*\*happiness\*\***.  
σαρκὸς φωνὴ τὸ μὴ πεινῆν, τὸ μὴ διψῆν, τὸ μὴ ῥιγοῦν· ταῦτα γὰρ ἔχων τις καὶ ἐλπίζων ἔξειν [hope or expect to have] κἂν <διὸ [dative of Zeus]> ὑπὲρ **\*\*εὐδαιμονίας\*\*** μαχέσαιτο. [contend/compete]

Letter to Menoikeus: Someone who says that the time to love and practice wisdom has not yet come or has passed is like someone who says that the time for **\*\*happiness\*\*** has not yet come or has passed.

ὁ δὲ λέγων ἢ μήπω τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν ὑπάρχειν ὥραν ἢ παρεληλυθῆναι τὴν ὥραν, ὁμοίός ἐστιν τῷ λέγοντι πρὸς **\*\*εὐδαιμονίαν\*\*** ἢ μὴ παρεῖναι τὴν ὥραν ἢ μηκέτι εἶναι.

Therefore, you **\*must\*** study and meditate on those things which produce **\*\*eudaimonia!\*\*** For if that is present, we truly have everything; but if that is not present, we will do everything to have it.

μελετᾶν οὖν χρὴ τὰ ποιοῦντα τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν, εἴπερ παρούσης μὲν αὐτῆς πάντα ἔχομεν, ἀπούσης δὲ πάντα πράττομεν εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν.

Letter to Pythocles: DL X[116]

[116] For such folly as this would not possess the most ordinary being if ever so little enlightened, much less one who enjoys **perfect felicity**.

"All this, Pythocles, you should keep in mind ;

οὐδὲ γὰρ εἰς τὸ τυχὸν ζῶον, κὰν <εἰ> μικρὸν χαριέστερον εἶη, ἢ τοιαύτη μωρία ἐμπέσοι, μὴ ὅτι εἰς παντελεῖ **εὐδαιμονίαν** κεκτημένον [acquire, possess, own].

"Ταῦτα δὴ πάντα, Πυθόκλεις, μνημόνευσον:

Laërtius commentary not Epicurus: DL X [121]

[121] Two sorts of **happiness** can be conceived, the one the highest possible, such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be augmented, the other admitting addition and subtraction of pleasures.

We must now proceed to his letter.

"Epicurus to Menoeceus, greeting.

Τὴν **εὐδαιμονίαν** διχῆ νοεῖσθαι, τὴν τε ἀκροτάτην, οἷα ἐστὶ περὶ τὸν θεόν, ἐπίτασιν οὐκ ἔχουσιν: καὶ τὴν <κατὰ τὴν> προσθήκην καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν ἡδονῶν.

Μετιτέον δ' ἐπὶ τὴν ἐπιστολήν.

"Ἐπίκουρος Μενοικεῖ χαίρειν.

Paragraph directly before DL gives the Kuriai Doxai: Come, then, let me set the seal, so to say, on my entire work as well as on this philosopher's life by citing his Sovran Maxims,<sup>138</sup> therewith bringing the whole work to a close and making the end of it to coincide with the beginning of happiness.

Καὶ φέρε οὖν δὴ νῦν τὸν κολοφῶνα, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, ἐπιθῶμεν τοῦ παντὸς συγγράμματος καὶ τοῦ βίου τοῦ φιλοσόφου, τὰς Κυρίας αὐτοῦ δόξας παραθέμενοι καὶ ταύταις τὸ πᾶν σύγγραμμα κατακλείσαντες, τέλει χρησάμενοι τῇ τῆς **εὐδαιμονίας** ἀρχῇ.

548. **Happiness** and bliss# are produced not by great riches nor vast possessions nor exalted occupations nor positions of power, but rather by peace of mind, freedom from pain, and a disposition of the soul that sets its limits in accordance with nature. τὸ **εὐδαιμον** καὶ μακάριον οὐ χρημάτων πλῆθος οὐδὲ πραγμάτων ὄγκος οὐδ' ἀρχαί τινες ἔχουσιν οὐδὲ δυνάμεις, ἀλλ' ἀλυπία καὶ πραότης παθῶν καὶ διάθεσις ψυχῆς τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ὀρίζουσα.

#The same word is used here as the word describing the gods in Principal Doctrine 1 and is usually translated blessed, blissful there.

There's a lot going on and translating it happiness does the word/concept a disservice.

Finally, your point about "

it wouldn't lead him to avoid his work and sit in his room on a zafu cushion" seems to me a non sequitur. Meditation does not mean avoiding work. I'm not soapboxing here, but I see no issue with incorporating meditation ("on a zafu cushion") into an Epicurean practice. It can be a way of bringing clarity to one's mind, calming thoughts, and being better able to assess "what will happen if this desire is fulfilled/unfulfilled" in the moment.

Thanks for the thought-provoking post!!

---

## Post by "Godfrey" of June 8, 2021 at 4:38 PM

Cassius you're absolutely right about Epicurus responding to Plato (also to Aristotle) and about the other passages in LM; I'm just having a go at it from another angle to see if there's any more clarity. But it's not like I'm the first to do that, so there's probably a limited payoff, particularly in parsing passages!

Don thanks for compiling those quotes! My bad with the zafu example, you make an excellent point. To put it more clearly, I was attempting to illustrate that absence of pain can be active and is not necessarily passive. But of course meditation is quite active, so point taken.

### [Quote from Don](#)

548. **\*\*Happiness\*\*** and bliss# are produced not by great riches nor vast possessions nor exalted occupations nor positions of power, but rather by peace of mind, freedom from pain, and **a disposition of the soul that sets its limits in accordance with nature.**

Ruminating some more... regarding the "Rorschach test" I think the phrase "a disposition of the soul that sets its limits in accordance with nature" sums up part of it quite well. Is nature governed by a logos and ideal forms or is it atoms and void doing what they do? Are there gods that affect our lives? When we die, is that it for us? Does a person fully accept Epicurean physics and its implications? Even if they do, the extant texts can be confusing.

### [Quote from Don](#)

Therefore, you **\*must\*** study and meditate on those things which produce **\*\*eudaimonia!\*\*** For if that is present, we truly have everything; but if that is not present, we will do everything to have it.

I guess that, to me, the problem we face is elevating absence of pain to "the goal," and the problem is twofold. First, it can lead to asceticism. Second, reacting against this can lead to minimizing absence of pain in relation to pleasure as part of the toolkit for choices and avoidances. Understanding both the positive and negative attributes of pleasure can lead to a deeper, fuller and more pleasurable life.

And sometimes the practice of sitting on a zafu can aid in this understanding, particularly by revealing *pathe* of which one wasn't even aware 😊

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of June 8, 2021 at 7:04 PM**

A zafu?

---

### **Post by “Don” of June 8, 2021 at 7:23 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

A zafu?

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zafu?wprov=sfla1>

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of June 8, 2021 at 8:04 PM**

I was hoping Godfrey would choose to illustrate it by sending us a picture of him sitting on one! 😊

---

### **Post by “Don” of June 8, 2021 at 8:08 PM**

I'll break my lopsided homemade one out 😊

---

**Post by “Cassius” of June 8, 2021 at 8:14 PM**

I knew I was surrounded with Zen Buddhists! All we had to do was mention a "zafu" and they come flooding out of the woodwork! 😊

---

**Post by “Godfrey” of June 8, 2021 at 8:28 PM**

It's one of the gateway drugs to Epicurus 😊