

## The concept of *sukha* in the ascetic traditions of Ancient India

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### Introduction

This paper deals with the concept of *sukha* in early ascetic and yogic literature of Ancient India, with specific reference to different types and hierarchies of *sukha*.

The word *sukha* can be variously translated as “pleasure, bliss, happiness, being at ease”, and the wide semantic range of this term underlies some of the rhetoric uses of *sukha* in ascetic poetry that will be discussed below. Thus, no single translation of *sukha* will be used throughout this paper.

By ascetic literature I here mean literature associated with wandering mendicants, known in the early Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina traditions as *bhikṣus*. In the Brahmanical tradition the concept of *sukha* is especially prominent in the ascetic poetry describing or attributed to wandering sages in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* as well as other religio-philosophical texts included in the *Mahābhārata*, such as the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Anugītā*. Many of the *Mahābhārata*'s ascetic passages that discuss *sukha* find parallels in collections of ascetic verses of the Buddhist and Jaina traditions. Within the Buddhist tradition, *sukha* is prominent in such texts as the *Thera-* and *Therīgāthā*<sup>1</sup> and the *Suttanipāta*. A section on *sukha* is commonly included in the works of the *Dharmapada* type such as the various *Dharmapadas* in Middle-Indic languages as well as the Sanskrit *Udānavarga*. Of related interest is the Mucalinda section (*vagga*) of the Pāli *Udāna*, which is built around verses on *sukha* and might have been a source for the *sukha* section of the *Udānavarga*. All of these are united by a rhetorical usage of the term *sukha* to praise renunciation.

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<sup>1</sup> Anālayo has already noted that ‘references to the experience of happiness are a recurring theme in the verses of awakened monks and nuns collected in the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā*’ (Anālayo 2012:153).

*Sukha* is a term that is often used to describe sages or their goal in these texts. Thus, for example, the legendary Sāṃkhya sage Pañcaśikha ‘was looking for the eternal, exceeding and hard-to-get *sukha*’ (*śāśvatam sukham atyantam anvicchā sa sudurlabham; Mahābhārata 12.211.8*). About other sages it is said that ‘happy (*sukhinaḥ*) people wander around the world liberated and free from fear’ (*muktā vītabhayā loke caranti sukhino narāḥ; Mahābhārata 12.277.13*). Elsewhere in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* we find such statements as ‘she sleeps blissfully’ (*sukhaṃ svapiti; 12.168.52*), ‘I am happy’ (*ahaṃ sukhi; 12.171.52*), and so forth. In the *Mahājanakajātaka* king Janaka observes certain sages (*paccekabuddhas*) who are seeking *sukha* (*sukhakāmā; verse 142*). Thus we have a number of narrative episodes where sages are described as seeking *sukha*, seeking permanent *sukha*, or already possessing such *sukha* as they practice a peripatetic lifestyle devoid of possessions or desires.

### ***Sukha* and *duḥkha* in Ancient Indian thought**

The ascetic discussions of *sukha* are a part of a rich discourse on *sukha* in Ancient Indian literature, which cannot be fully analysed here. Texts from the Brahmanical tradition, such as the *Mahābhārata*, include many instructions about the conduct that is expected lead to *sukha* in this life and the next. There is no unitary view on the source of *sukha*. It is typical to find *sukha* in this world and the next linked with adherence to certain virtues or to *dharma* in general. It is expected that a virtuous king will experience *rājyasukha*, “*sukha* of kingship”. While some passages portray the pursuit of happiness (*sukha*) or of sensual pleasure (*sukha*) as a legitimate undertaking, other passages claim that *sukha* has to be abandoned in this life so that it can be obtained in the next. This is sometimes known as *svargasukha*<sup>2</sup>, “the *sukha* experienced in heaven”. This heavenly *sukha*, obtained through *tapas*, is contrasted with “vulgar” *sukha* (*grāmyasukha; Mahābhārata 12.9.2-4*). A particularly radical passage says that

Surely, the body of a Brahmin is not burn for the purpose of pleasure. Heat [your body] for hardship in this world. When you die there will be *sukha* beyond comparison.

*brāhmaṇasya hi deho 'yaṃ na kāmārthāya jāyate  
iha kleśāya tapase pretya tv anupamaṃ sukham (Mahābhārata 12.309.22)*

<sup>2</sup> This compound is used in *Mahābhārata* 3.247.1.

Such ideas about *sukha* being found mainly in the afterlife are based on the notion that difficulty or hardship, known as *tapas*, *duḥkha*, *kṛcchā*, and so on, is one of if not the most prominent source of dharmic merit. This idea is expressed most clearly in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which says that

Having strenuously emaciated the body with various ascetic disciplines, merit (*dharma*) is obtained by skillful people. Happiness is not obtained through happiness.<sup>3</sup>

*ātmānaṃ niyamais tais taiḥ karṣayitvā prayatnataḥ  
prāpyate nipuṇair dharmo na sukhāl labhyate sukham (Rāmāyaṇa 3.8.27)*

The goal of heavenly *dharma* is challenged by what the renunciate traditions of Ancient India that are often commonly labelled as the *śramaṇa* traditions. According to their assessment, even the heavenly *sukha* is not the ultimate human good. Instead, they claim that life in heaven is limited, and that an even more permanent good must be pursued. A criticism of the *tapas/svargasukha* paradigm is found, for example, in Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*. The Buddha-to-be visits an *āśrama* of *tapasvins*, who practice a variety of physical ascetic practices (*tapas*) to achieve heaven. After noting the same ideology that 'through a painful path one reaches happiness' (*duḥkhena mārgeṇa sukhaṃ hy upaiti*; 7.18), it is concluded that such *tapasvins* really seek pain (*duḥkha*) through pain (*duḥkha*). This is because even a rebirth in heaven still takes place within *saṃsāra*. As such, it is impermanent and thereby necessarily includes suffering.

Aśvaghōṣa must be drawing on earlier Buddhist canonical sources for his criticism of *tapas*. A similar discussion is found in the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*, where the Buddha observes that early Jaina practitioners are trying to reach *sukha* through *duḥkha*. This paradigm of "sukha by means of duḥkha" appears to have been shared by the Jainas and certain Brhmanical groups. The Buddha then argues that painful feelings are irrelevant for the attainment of liberation. He presents the Buddhist path as reaching *sukha* through *sukha*. Of particular interest here is the Buddhist notion of *nirāmisā sukha*, "sukha which is free from sensuality" (*Theragāthā* 16).

Thus, the orientation towards *sukha* is an important feature in Buddhist self-understanding in relation to other religious groups of Ancient India. It should be emphasised here that a similar rhetoric about *sukha* is also found in Brahmanical and Jaina texts. Brahmanical literature in particular presents us with different systems of value and practice. A common

<sup>3</sup> Cf. MBh 3.223.4: *sukhaṃ sukhenena na jātu labhyaṃ; duḥkhena sādhvī labhate sukhāni*.

dichotomy used in some *Mahābhārata* passages is that between *pravṛtti* (“active”) and *nivṛtti* (“renunciate”) *dharma*. While it is possible to find *Mahābhārata* passages that reject the attainment of heaven in favour of *mokṣa* (e.g. 3.247), I am not aware of passages that criticise the assumption that hardship is a source of merit. Nevertheless, there are a number of *Mahābhārata* passages that portray sages as blissful and make no reference to them engaging in any painful practices such as *tapas*.

### **Everything is suffering**

Given how the liberation-seeking traditions of Ancient India are usually portrayed, it is surprising to find the strong presence of *sukha* in the ascetic works mentioned above. The goal of the liberation-seeking ascetic traditions of Ancient India is usually the removal of suffering. This is most strongly the case with the Buddhist tradition, which formulates its four “noble truths” around the concept of suffering (*duḥkha*) and its final removal. Indeed, everything is said to be ultimately suffering. The same that in fact ‘all is but suffering’ (*duḥkham eva sarvaṃ*) is found in *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* 2.15. The *Bhagavadgītā* characterises this world (*loka*) as impermanent (*anitya*) and not-*sukha* (*asukha*) (9.33). Despite this, we find that all these texts posit some kind of positive *sukha*.

### **Ordinary and ascetic *sukha***

In the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, *sukha* is most often mentioned alongside its opposite, *duḥkha*, in a list of opposites that are to be abandoned or treated as equal (*sama*) by the sage in his pursuit of complete equanimity (*samatva*) and freedom from dualities (being *nirdvaṃdva*). This *samatva* ideal of sagehood is especially prominent in the *Mahābhārata*, including the *Bhagavadgītā*, as well as Jaina ascetic poetry (e.g. the *Uttarādhyayanāsūtra*) although it is also possible to find Buddhist verses that call for an abandonment of pairs of opposites (e.g. *Suttanipāta* 363).

Moreover, some *Mahābhārata* passages point out that ‘One obtains neither permanent suffering nor permanent happiness’ (*na nityaṃ labhate duḥkhaṃ na nityaṃ labhate sukham*;

12.168.19=12.26.23). The same idea is also expressed by saying that ‘Suffering is continuous with happiness and happiness is continuous with suffering’ (*sukhasyānantaraṃ duḥkhaṃ duḥkhasyānantaraṃ sukham*; 12.168.18=12.26.23). Thus, a human being experiences *sukha* and *duḥkha* in turn, and this process is beyond his or her control.

In some instances these statements about the impermanence of ordinary *sukha* appear to be made only to introduce a stoic vision of happiness. The very understanding (*buddhi*) of the fact that one experiences *sukha* and *duḥkha* in a manner that is not subject to our own power is sometimes presented as a key to living happily (*sukham*) (e.g. *Mahābhārata* 12.168.38-39). This is designated with the unique compound *buddhisukha* (12.168.26).

Elsewhere, however, it is stated that it is in fact possible to obtain a permanent *sukha*. This special “ascetic” *sukha* is often designated by special compounds ending in *-sukha*.

In some cases final liberation itself is designated as *sukha*. Thus, we find *mokṣasukha* in the *Mahābhārata* (12.277.5) and *nirvāṇasukha* in the Buddhist texts. It is also claimed that *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa* is supreme bliss (*mokṣaṃ sukham anuttamam*; *Mahābhārata* 12.284.33; *nirvāṇaṃ paramaṃ sukham*; *Mahābhārata* 12.327.5; cf. *The Dhammapada: nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ* (15.7d = 15.8d).

There are other types of ascetic *sukha* that are not necessarily identified with liberation (*mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*) itself, such as *santoṣasukha*, “the *sukha* of contentment”, *dhyānasukha*, “the *sukha* of meditative absorption”, or *tyāgasukha*, “the *sukha* of renunciation”.

These and other kinds of ascetic *sukha* are often contrasted with some ordinary or inferior type of *sukha*. Thus, the *mokṣasukha* of *Mahābhārata* 12.277 is contrasted to simply *sukha*. More often we find that ascetic *sukha* is contrasted to *kāmasukha*, “sensual *sukha*”<sup>4</sup>. In Aśvaghōṣa’s *Saundarananda sambodhisukha* is contrasted with *kāmasukha* (18:46). *Kāmasukha* is also downplayed in a particularly popular verse:

The erotic bliss on earth and the great divine bliss are not worth one sixteenth part of the bliss of destruction of craving.

*yac ca kāmasukhaṃ loke yac ca divyaṃ mahat sukham  
trṣṇākṣayasukhasyaite nārhatāḥ ṣoḍaśīṃ kalām.*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A definition of *kāmasukha* is provided in *Mahābhārata* 12.184.16A.

<sup>5</sup> This verse is repeated three times in the *Mahābhārata* - 12.168.36=12.171.51=12.268.6. This verse also appears in the *Udānavarga* 30.31 with insignificant variations. It also appears in the *Rājasutta* of the *Udānapāli*. The same verse is cited in the *bhāṣya* to *Yogasūtra* 2.42, which will be discussed below. Śaṅkara cites this verse to discuss various

This verse extolls another type of *sukha* – the *sukha* of *tr̥ṣṇākṣaya*, “destruction of craving”. While in the *Mahābhārata* context it is possible to interpret this verse in a more stoic context<sup>6</sup>, in the Buddhist literature *tr̥ṣṇākṣaya* is a common synonym of *nirvāṇa*. This verse, however, is more than a simple claim that *nirvāṇa* is the greatest good, the *summum bonum*. It serves a particular rhetorical purpose by putting three possible goods on the same plane by labelling all of them *sukha*. The ascetic *sukha* is contrasted with two types of inferior *sukha*. One of these is the *kāmasukha*, the sensual pleasure that can be experienced in this world. The other is the divine pleasure that can be enjoyed in heaven after accumulating religious merit.

The claim that *tr̥ṣṇākṣaya*, destruction of craving, is *sukha* is paradoxical. *Kāmasukha* and *divya sukha* both depend on the enjoyment of some external object. The *sukha* of the destruction of craving is of a different type altogether since it depends not upon the enjoyment of something but rather on the absence of any desire for anything in the first place. Because of this, one presumes that the *tr̥ṣṇākṣayasukha* cannot be interrupted because it does not depend on anything external.

A similar paradox is found in other statements about ascetic *sukha* and may be highlighted by the narrative that surrounds the ascetic verse. For example, the *Mahābhārata* tells about a certain Mañki who lost his wealth. Rather than making him despair, it triggered an internal transformation as ‘he cut off the root of desire (*kāma*) and thereby obtained great *sukha*’ (*acchinat kāmamūlaṃ sa tena prāpa mahat sukham*; 12.171.54).

Several hierarchies of *sukhas* are also found in the *Sukhavagga* of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*. This short textual unit consists of 12 formulaic statements each of which introduces a pair of *sukhas*. Each statement first distinguishes between two types of *sukha* and then claims that one of these *sukhas* is superior. The first statement claims that the *sukha* of the renouncer (*pabajjitasukha*) is superior to the *sukha* of the householder (*gihisukha*). Here we again meet with *kāmasukha*, although in this case its counterpart is *nekkhammasukha*. The latter is probably intended as a pun since it can correspond to Sanskrit *naiṣkāmyasukha* (*sukha* of desirelessness) or to *naiṣkrāmyasukha* (*sukha* of renunciation).

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degrees of *ānanda* in his commentary to *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.33. Finally, this verse is cited in treatises on aesthetics to theorise *sāntarasa* with reference to the *Mahābhārata* (see Tubb 1985).

<sup>6</sup> This is argued in my unpublished DPhil thesis “Ascetic Teachings for Householder Kings in the *Mahābhārata*”.

### ***Sukha* as a rhetorical tool: Householder vs. renouncer**

Passages such as those cited in the preceding paragraphs were probably composed as religious rhetoric and in particular to attract new followers by offering a *sukha* that is better or superior than the *sukha* people experience in daily life. One would assume that living a celibate life in a forest (or perhaps a monastery) the monk has no *sukha*. The painfulness of the forest life is emphasised in the *Mahābhārata* when the Pāṇḍavas are exiled. In a paradoxical way, ascetic rhetoric on *sukha* claims that despite appearances it is in fact the forest recluse who experiences a vastly superior *sukha*.

In some instances the householder is represented by the king, who is the householder *par excellence*. According to conventional wisdom, the king would presumably experience the greatest *sukha* possible on earth. Royal and ascetic *sukha* are compared, for example, in 2.10 of the Pāli *Udāna*. A king renounces and as a monk in the forest exclaims again and again *aho sukham* (“What bliss!”). While the other monks assume that he remembers his previous *sukha*, it turns out that his present state of *sukha* is greatly superior to anything he experienced as a king. The former king further explains that when he was a king he was protected by guards but nevertheless was always afraid. Now that he is a renouncer in the wilderness he is free from fear. Thus, contrary to all expectation, the king did not really experience *sukha* before but experiences it now as he lives in a forest.

### **Sukha as freedom**

In addition to being another example of the paradoxical superiority of ascetic *sukha*, the passage just discussed highlights what I believe to be an important semantic aspect of *sukha*. One notices that many passages or individual verses that describe a person as experiencing *sukha* or sleeping happily (*sukham*) link such experiences with being free from a certain negative state. Thus, in many cases *sukha* seems to mean the feeling of ease and freedom that is opposed to being agitated by a certain unwelcome mental state. The link between *sukha* and freedom is expressed in the following statement: ‘Everything not subject to one’s control is suffering. Everything subject to one’s control is *sukha*’ (*sabbaṃ paravasam dukkham, sabbaṃ issariyam sukham; Udāna 2.9*).

This aspect of *sukha* as peace and freedom from unwanted feelings makes it easier to understand why ascetic lifestyle is associated with *sukha* even when all life in *saṃsāra* is characterised as *duḥkha*. The renouncer may experience, as it were, a taster of the ultimate freedom from *saṃsāra*. Ascetic lifestyle is praised, for example, by the sage Śāmyāka, who claims that ‘Wondering around without possessions you will taste bliss’ (*akimcanaḥ paripatan sukham āsvādayiṣyasi*; 12.170.7) and declares that ‘being without possessions is *sukha*’ (*ākimcanyaṃ sukhaṃ*; 12.170.8). For Śāmyāka the source of *sukha* is not just giving up desire for wealth, but rather giving up wealth itself. Presumably, the *sukha* that he and other renouncers experience should be understood as freedom from agitation that accumulating and guarding property entails. This additional shade of *sukha* as being at ease or freedom from agitation is employed in ascetic poetry and religious rhetoric.

### Sukha for monks

I have suggested above that the gnomic verses that praise ascetic *sukha* as superior to ordinary householder’s *sukha* might have been partly motivated by a desire to attract new followers. In some textual passages it is not the householder but rather the backsliding monk who is presented as the audience for such claims about *sukha*.

For example, in the *Indriyajātaka* the sage Nārada loses control over himself and enjoys erotic pleasure (*kāmasukha*). He is then urged to seek the best kind of *sukha* (*paṭikaṃkha varaṃ sukham*; verse 2). The *Indriyajātaka* never says what this higher *sukha* is. One may infer that it must be the *sukha* which is experienced in the *jhānas* (meditative absorptions) because at the end of the story Nārada returns to the practice of the *jhānas*. The commentary also glosses the “superior or best (*vara*) *sukha*” as *jhānasukha*<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *tad eva varaṃ uttamaṃ jhānasukhaṃ iccha patthehi* (*Jātaka* vol.III p.465.1.9-10)



## Permanent *sukha*

One of the basic ideas underlying different manifestations of ascetic *sukha* in the *Mahābhārata* and early Buddhist literature is a search for a source of permanent happiness or bliss (*sukha*) in contrast to the ups and downs of ordinary human life.<sup>8</sup> For example, *Theragāthā* 264 talks about the pursuit of “unshakable” (*acala*) *sukha*. In some systems of thought there is an ontological ground that guarantees the possibility of the experience of perpetual bliss. Such a basis for bliss (*ānanda* or *sukha*) is, for example, the *Brahman/ātman* of the Vedānta tradition. It is unclear whether similar metaphysical assumptions underline statements about *sukha* even when they are found in Brahmanical texts such as the *Mahābhārata*. For example, the above-mentioned character Mañki finds *sukha* within himself (*ātmany upalabhe sukham*; 12.171.24). And yet there is little to suggest that *ātman* should here be understood as the Self. The point of contrast here again is *kāma*. Mañki is able to find *sukha* within himself (*ātman*), a *sukha* that is independent of external circumstances and his ability to successfully carry out the whims of *kāma*.

The notion of finding *sukha* in oneself is also found in the *Bhagavadgītā*:

He who find happiness in himself, not attached to external sensations, is engaged in *brahmayoga* and enjoys imperishable *sukha*.

*bāhyasparśeṣv asaktātmā vindaty ātmani yat sukham  
sa brahmayogayuktātmā sukham akṣayam aśnute* (5.21)

Here we see the same opposition between *sukha* that depends on transitory external sensations and a *sukha* which is felt without reference to anything external and is therefore permanent and superior. The mention of brahman in this verse suggests that in this case metaphysical assumptions about the blissful nature of ultimate really might be at play.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the Buddhist *Theragāthā* speaks about sages who “touch” the ‘imperishable state’ (*accutaṃ padaṃ*; 212). Verse 725 of the same text speaks about “touching” ‘the unconditioned state of *nibbāna* (= Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*)’ (*nibbānapadaṃ asaṅkhatam*), whereas verse 525 informs us that those who reach the unconditioned state (*asaṅkhatam padaṃ*) experience the highest bliss (*rati*, here used just like *sukha* in other passages).

## *Ānanda and sukha*

It is sometimes said that there is a difference between *ānanda* and *sukha*, so that only *ānanda* means “bliss” whereas *sukha* has a more mundane meaning such as “happiness”. I believe that such a distinction does not apply to the texts considered in this paper. Patrick Olivelle has studied the term *ānanda*, “bliss”, which is an important theological concept in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Taittirīya* Upaniṣads and in the later Vedānta tradition. In this study Olivelle concludes that ‘after the composition of the BU and the TU *ānanda* as an attribute of *brahman* and as signifying the final state of bliss remained a technical usage confined to a somewhat narrow circle’ (1997:173). To arrive at this conclusion, Olivelle observes that despite its prominence in these two Upaniṣads, the term *ānanda* only becomes prominent later, ‘at least from around the 5th century C.E.’ (1997:153). Meanwhile, ‘[a]n examination of the non-Vedāntic literature shows that *sukha* was, in fact, the most common term for both ordinary and ultimate happiness. Besides the *Gītā* and the Buddhist and Jain literature, *sukha* is the preferred term for the bliss of the liberated state in Sāṃkhya-Yoga theology’ (1997:172). Thus, Olivelle finds a terminological rupture between the early Upaniṣads and virtually all other extant early discourses on liberation in Ancient India, including those found in Brahmanical texts.

As a footnote, it may be added that the Vedānta thinker Śaṅkara quotes the previously discussed *Mahābhārata* verse about *tṛṣṇākṣayasukha* when commenting upon the word *ānanda* in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Upaniṣad 4.3.33. Śaṅkara uses this verse to claim that reaching the highest *ānanda* is linked to being without craving (*vitṛṣṇa*). Thus, rather than there being a clear distinction between *ānanda* and *sukha*, the *sukha* of the early ascetic traditions informs the understanding of *ānanda* in at least some of the Vedānta tradition, which is the main source for the theology of *ānanda*.

## *Samtoṣasukha*

In the final section of the paper I will trace the development of the theme of *saṃtoṣasukha* from the *Mahābhārata* and early Buddhism to *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*. The concept of “contentment” *saṃtoṣa* or *saṃtuṣṭi* is found in the early Buddhist literature where it refers primarily to the monk

being content with whatever is obtained during the begging round or other religiously sanctioned means of obtaining the essentials of daily life.

In the *Mahābhārata*, *saṃtoṣa* becomes associated with both *sukha* and being without desire. Thus, it is claimed that ‘there is no end to thirst, but *saṃtoṣa* is the supreme *sukha*’ *anto nāsti pipāsāyāḥ saṃtoṣaḥ paramaṃ sukha* (3.2.44 = 12.317.21 with variations) or that ‘*saṃtoṣa* is indeed the most heavenly thing. *Saṃtoṣa* is the supreme *sukha*’ (12.21.2). When the ideal of the *sthitaprajña* person is put forth in the *Bhagavadgītā*, it refers to *sthitaprajña* as ‘one who is satisfied with himself in himself’ (*ātmany evātmanā tuṣṭaḥ*) as he ‘abandons all pleasures/desires’ (*prajahāti yadā kāmān sarvān*; 2.55).

*Saṃtoṣa* is listed in the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* as one of the *niyamas* (“disciplines” or “observances”) alongside such items as *śauca* (purity) and *tapas*. The *niyamas* are the second *aṅga* (“limb” or “auxiliary”) in the system of eight *yogāṅgas* taught in the text. This suggests that *saṃtoṣa* is but a preparatory practice in the path of yoga. The definition of *saṃtoṣa* in the commentary to YS 2.32 reminds of the monastic context of being satisfied with whatever one obtains: ‘Contentment is the lack of desire for acquiring anything additional because of getting by with what is available’ (*saṃtoṣaḥ saṃnihitasādhanād adhikasyānupāditsā*).

The immediate goal of *saṃtoṣa* is said to be ‘the unsurpassed obtainment of happiness’ (*saṃtoṣād anuttamaḥ sukhālābhaḥ*; 2.42), and to explain this *sūtra* the commentary attributed to Vyāsa<sup>9</sup> merely cites the *trṣṇākṣaya* verse cited above without further comment. The bliss of contentment (*saṃtoṣasukha*) appears again in the commentary to 3.18. The commentary tells a tale (*ākhyāna*) about Jaigīṣavya who claims that ‘(...) whatever I experienced being born again and again among gods and humans, I take that to be nothing but suffering’ (*devamanuṣyeṣu punaḥ punar utpadyamānena yat kiṃcid anubhūtaṃ tat sarvaṃ duḥkham eva pratyavaimi*). His interlocutor Āvatya then wonders about the unsurpassed bliss of satisfaction (*anuttama saṃtoṣasukha*) – should it also be classified as a form of suffering (*duḥkhapakṣe nikṣiptam*)? Jaigīṣavya answers by positing a threefold hierarchy of *sukha*: ‘The bliss of satisfaction is said to be unsurpassed only in relation to sensual bliss. Relative to the bliss of *kaivalya* (liberation), [the bliss

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<sup>9</sup> Maas has argued that the *Yogasūtra* and the commentary traditionally attributed to Vyāsa were most probably written by the same author (2013). While his arguments are plausible, they are not conclusive, and his thesis about the identity of Patañjali and Vyāsa is not accepted by all scholars. Most notably, this thesis is not accepted by Gokhale: ‘I do not accept the advocacy of complete hermeneutic unity between *Yogasūtra* and *Yogabhāṣya*. I feel there must have been a considerable gap – an ideological and hermeneutical gap at least, and perhaps a chronological gap as well—between them’ (2020:9).

of satisfaction] is just suffering' (*viṣayasukhāpekṣayaivedam anuttamaṃ saṃtoṣasukham uktam. kaivalyasukhāpekṣayā duḥkham eva*). This classification of *sukha* creates a middle ground for the *saṃtoṣasukha*, the *sukha* experienced when craving is diminished. This *sukha* falls short of the ultimate bliss of liberation but apparently can be experienced in this life.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that *sukha* is an important concept in the ascetic poetry of Ancient India, where it is particularly prominent in religious rhetoric and negotiation. Most of the time ascetic *sukha* is contrasted with some inferior *sukha* in an attempt to create a hierarchy of *sukhas*.

Most often there are just two members of the hierarchy, such as “ordinary” *sukha* or sensual (*kāmasukha*) and ascetic *sukha*. A contrast between sensual *sukha* and heavenly *sukha* (*svargasukha*) is already found Brahmanical discourses that present heaven rather than *mokṣa* as the goal of human life. This pair is superseded in a tripartite hierarchy of *sukhas* where the *sukha* of the destruction of craving supersedes both sensual and divine *sukha*.

Another threefold hierarchy of *sukhas* is found in the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, which has *kaivalyasukha*, “the *sukha* of liberation”, on top and *saṃtoṣasukha*, “the *sukha* of contentment” in the middle position. *saṃtoṣasukha* is related to the destruction of craving (*tṛṣṇā*) and its analysis in the commentarial part of the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* can be traced back to Buddhist rhetoric about destruction of craving, i.e. *nirvāṇa*, as the highest *sukha*. In the *Mahābhārata* such rhetoric is used in more general contexts that argue for the eradication of desire without claiming that this is the same as final liberation. Thus, *saṃtoṣasukha* becomes a middle ground between sensual *sukha* and the ultimate *sukha* of liberation. The *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* lists *saṃtoṣa* as a preparatory practice. By claiming that *saṃtoṣasukha* is *sukha* only in relation to the inferior *kāmasukha* the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* stays faithful to the dictum that everything is suffering while also drawing on earlier ascetic literature that describe sages as experiencing *sukha* here and now.

The concept of *sukha* is important to the householder-renouncer dichotomy. A householder who already experiences *sukha* might wonder why it should be renounced. The ascetic traditions respond that they can offer a better *sukha*. One of the reasons for its superiority

is that it is permanent because it does not depend on any external object for its experience. It is a *sukha* that is found within oneself (*ātman*).

Unique to the Buddhist tradition is the notion of *dhyānasukha*, the *sukha* experienced in meditative absorption. Most occurrences of the term *sukha* in Buddhist scholastic literature are in a context of *dhyānasukha*. When simply the word *sukha* is used in Buddhist ascetic poetry or narratives about sages it is by no means clear that this refers to *dhyānasukha*. At least the Pali commentators mostly gloss *sukha* as *jhānasukha* (Skt. *dhyānasukha*) or *nibbānasukha* (Skt. *nirvāṇasukha*).

The *sukha* experienced by the renouncers is paradoxical. The forest or wilderness (*araṇya*) is the typical antithesis of the royal life of *sukha* in the Sanskrit epics which depict their main protagonists undergoing an exile in the forest. While according to conventional wisdom the renouncer is deprived of all normal sources of *sukha*, the renouncer claims to have a superior *sukha*. Rather than following from the satisfaction of one's desires, the renouncer's *sukha* is experienced when there are no desires in the first place. While some people use their wealth (*dhana*) as a means to obtain sensual *sukha*, the renouncer feels *sukha* precisely because he has no possessions whatsoever and does not have to worry about them.

An important feature of the semantics of *sukha* is that *sukha* is used to talk about the feeling of being at ease. In this sense *sukha* is closely related to *śānti*. The experience of *sukha* often follows when a source of agitation is removed. Thus, one feels *sukha* when one is no longer agitated by desire or tormented by fear. Being removed from the society, the renouncer is also freed from the troubles that social life and responsibilities bring. It is in this sense that the renouncer can be said to experienced *sukha* here and now, even if everything in *saṃsāra* is said to be suffering.

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