

Keats and the Dharma

Case Histories of Liberation



Reading Edition

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About This Edition

This book presents a sequence of **case histories of liberation**, pairing poems by John Keats with selected early Buddhist discourses. The pairings are designed for slow, comparative reading rather than critical commentary. Explanatory material has therefore been kept to a minimum so as not to interrupt the reader's direct engagement with the texts.

Buddhist passages are rendered with attention to clarity, internal coherence, and contemplative use; in some instances, functional readability has been favored over strict literalism while preserving the order and sense of the original sources.

Textual Note

The poems of Keats are presented in lightly normalized reading editions. Case and punctuation have occasionally been adjusted for readability and alignment. These changes do not alter wording.

On Terminology

A small number of Pali and Sanskrit terms are left untranslated where no single English equivalent is adequate or where usage is well established. Examples include *Buddha*, *Dharma*, *Nibbana/Nibbāna*, *Karma/Kamma Samsāra*, *Arahant*, *Sutta/Sūtra*. These terms are used sparingly and consistently.

On the Use of Historical Titles

The expressions *the Buddha* and *Tathāgata* are used in their historical and textual sense, as they appear in early sources, to refer to the awakened teacher traditionally known as Siddhattha Gotama. Their use is descriptive rather than devotional.

Reader's Note

This book is intended to be read slowly. Readers may wish to pause between pairings or return to a single pairing over time. No prior knowledge of the Dharma, nonduality or Romantic Period poetry is assumed.

Reading Edition, 2026

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Case Histories of Liberation



1 encountering suffering

Yet poesy, Then
though a fine thing, as now,
cannot be deep or true I speak
 only
 of suffering
and the poet be a sage and
 the end
 of suffering.
 of suffering.

On Suffering

- 1 *encountering suffering*
from the Fall of Hyperion
Alagaddūpama Sutta (Simile of the Snake)
- 2 *fear of time*
When I Have Fears
Bhaddekaratta Sutta (An Auspicious Day)
- 3 *giving sorrow a name*
To—
Salla Sutta (The Dart)
- 4 *limps of awakening*
Hymn to Delphic Apollo
Buddha Sutta (The Awakened One)
- 5 *what the teacher bears*
On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair
Bhāra Sutta (The Burden)

On the Making of Suffering

- 6 *making and remaking experience*
Cularedalla Sutta (Inquiry on Fabrications)
Physician Nature
- 7 *sensing and reacting*
Cularedalla Sutta (Inquiry on Perception and Feeling)
Fanny
- 8 *building a self*
Cularedalla Sutta (Inquiry on Self-Identification)
To Hope

Capability (the mind at work)

- 9 *habit and inheritance*
To Maia
Brāmajāla Sutta (The All-Embracing Net)
- 10 *shaping the moral self*
Ode to Olympian Apollo
Brāmajāla Sutta (The All-Embracing Net)
- 11 *memory and continuity*
Bards of Passion and of Mirth
Brāmajāla Sutta (The All-Embracing Net)
- 12 *speculations at the tavern*
Lines on the Mermaid Tavern
Brāmajāla Sutta (The All-Embracing Net)
- 13 *when constructions fail*
Robin Hood
Brāmajāla Sutta (The All-Embracing Net)
- 14 *false freedoms of imagination*
Fancy
Brāmajāla Sutta (The All-Embracing Net)

15 conditi oning
O Goddess
Brāhmajāla Sutta (The All-Embracing Net)

Negative Capability

16 the mind as fan e
Ode to Psyche
Karāṇīyamettā Sutta (Loving-Kindness)

17 comp osure and non-interference
On Indolence
Nibbāna Sutta (Unbinding)

18 no refuge in pleasure
Ode on Melancholy
Dharmacakkappavattana Sutta
(Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion)

19 the edge of absorption
Ode to the Nightingale
Eight Realizations of Accomplished Beings

Unbinding (with residue)

20 form and stillness
Ode on a Grecian Urn
Perfection of Wisdom Sutta

21 remains of the day
To Autumn
Kaccānagotta Sutta (Right View Beyond Extremes)

When
I have fears
that I may cease to be
before my pen
has gleaned my teeming brain;

before high-piled books
in charactery hold,
like rich garners,
the full-ripened grain;

When I behold,
upon the night's starrèd face,
huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
and think that I may never live to trace
their shadows
with the magic hand of chance;

And when I feel,
fair creature of an hour,
that I shall never look upon thee more—

never have relish
in the faery power
of unreflecting
love—

then on the shore
of the wide world

I
stand
alone

and
think
till love
and fame

to nothingness do sink.

To those gathered at Sāvatthī,
the Buddha said,

“I will describe to you an auspicious day.”

‘One such as this,
on that day,
does not strain
toward what has not yet come
nor cling to what has passed—

be it with unsatisfied desire
regret,
or hunger
for fulfilment.

thoughts and feelings
are recognized
as fabrications—

not promises to be fulfilled,
nor expectations
to be met.

When tremors of passion
rise and fall,
one realizes how swiftly contact dissolves,

that the ache of loss
is felt as sensation,
and not a tale
of ‘my’ or ‘mine’.

Still,
not becoming,
One such as this drifts
Neither forward into hope
nor backward into regret;

There is nothing to add
and nothing to carry.
Thus craving
and sense of self
are quieted.’

3 giving sorrow a name

Without a sign,
the life of each
is difficult and short,
suffused with unsatisfactoriness.

What
can I do
to drive away remembrance
from my eyes?
For they have seen—
ay, an hour ago—

O my brilliant queen.

Touch has a memory.

What can I do to kill it
and be free
in my old liberty?

when every fair one that I saw
was fair enough to catch me
in but half a snare—
not keep me there?

when,
howe'er poor
or particolour'd things,
my muse had wings
and, ever ready,
was to take her course,
whither I bent her,
force unintellectual, yet divine—

Once born,
there is no escape
from distress, unease,
or affliction.
Such is the fate
of all who exist.

What the potter throws
become shards;
Just as when fruit ripens
there is fear of its falling,
so do mortals,
always becoming,
fear death.

Knowledge of mortality
is a burden
not easily endured.

All are destined for death:
Young and old,
foolish
and wise.

When
afflicted
or dying,
stories
of leaving this world
for the next
do not protect anybody,
parents, children, friends or family.

Divine
what
sea-bird
o'er the sea
is a philosopher
the while he goes
winging along
where the great water throes.

How shall I
do to get anew
those moulted feathers?
O mount once more above—

above the reach
of fluttering Love
and make him cower lowly
while I soar?

Shall I
gulp
wine?
O
That is vulgarism—
a heresy and schism
foisted
into the canon law of Love.

No.
Wine is only sweet to happy men.
More dismal cares seize on me unawares.
Where shall I learn to get my peace again?

All
sit in mourning.
Yet all are mortal,
ambling
like cows
to slaughter
on a path
toward old age and death.

Perceiving neither the path
by which one comes or goes,
nor its beginning or end,
one laments without purpose.

The wise, therefore,
do not sorrow,
having understood
the way of the world.

A confused person
might derive benefit from lamenting
even while injuring himself.
A wise person might do the same.
But peace of mind is not obtained.

Weeping and sorrowing
create even more suffering,
harming both body and mind.

One becomes thin and pale,
inflicting injury
upon
oneself.

to banish thoughts
of that most hateful land,
dungeoner
of my friends?

that wicked strand
where they were wreck'd
and live a wretched life?

that monstrous region,
whose dull rivers pour ever
from their sordid urns unto the shore,
unown'd of any weedy-haired gods?

whose winds, all zephyrless,
hold scourging rods
iced in the great lakes
to afflict mankind?

whose rank-grown forests,
frosted black and blind,
would fright a dryad?

whose harsh, herbagèd mead
makes lean and lank
the starv'd ox while he feeds?

There, bad flowers have no scent,
birds no sweet song
and great, unerring Nature
once seems wrong.

For some sunny spell
to dissipate the shadows of this hell!
Say
they are gone!

Such action
will not sustain peace.
Lamentation
is useless.

Sorrowing
incurs
even greater suffering

until one is
overcome
by the flood
of distress.

Those
about to depart
will fare
according to their karma

and all who live
in the shadow of death
now tremble.

Whatever is expected
or conceived
is otherwise.

Loss
then absence
is the way
of the world.

One may live
for a hundred years or more.
Only the sense of loss persists
when they are gone.

With the new dawning light
steps forth my lady bright,
O Let me once more
rest my soul
upon that dazzling breast!

Let once again
these aching arms be placed—
tender gaolers of that waist—
and let me
feel that warm breath
here and there
to spread a rapture in my very hair.

The sweetness of the pain:
Give me those lips again.
Enough!
Enough.

It is enough for me
to dream
of Thee.

Having understood,
one should stop lamentation
and, having witnessed departure,
recognise that one cannot
bring back the dead.

Just as if one's home were on fire
they would extinguish the blaze with water,
a sensible person—
wise, learned, skilled—
would quickly blow away arisen sorrow,
as does the wind
a tuft of cotton.

Lamentation, complaint and dejection:
Dispel them.
Seek happiness for oneself.
From one's self draw out the dart.

Having thus overcome sorrow
and attained peace of mind,
one is quenched.

Those gathered at Sāvatthī
asked the Buddha,
“What is the difference
between one who is self-awakened
and one who is wisdom-liberated?”

The Buddha replied,

God of the golden bow
and of the golden lyre
and of the golden hair
and of the golden fire:

Charioteer
round the patient year:
Where—
where slept Thine ire
when, like a blank idiot,
I put on Thy wreath,
Thy laurel, Thy glory,
the light
of Thy story?

Or was I
a worm
too low,
creeping
for death,
O
Delphic
Apollo?

“The Buddha is the One
who gives rise to the path
where none had arisen,
who reveals the path
where none had been revealed,
who teaches the path
previously unseen.

One liberated independently of a teacher
and who establishes the path;
who, through dispassion,
is disenchanted with form;
who is released through dispassion,
stilled through cessation,
and freed from clinging to form
is considered
‘self-awakened’.

One liberated through guidance
is wisdom-released;
who, through dispassion,
is disenchanted with form;
who is released through dispassion,
stilled through cessation,
and freed from clinging to form
is considered ‘wisdom-liberated’.

The Thunderer grasp'd and grasp'd,
the Thunderer frown'd and frown'd,
 the Eagle's feathery mane
 for wrath became stiffen'd;
the sound of breeding thunder
 went drowsily under,
 muttering
 to be unbound.

O

 Why didst Thou
pity and beg for a worm?
 Why touch Thy soft lute
til the thunder was mute?
Why was I not crush'd—
 so ignorant a germ—
 O Delphic Apollo?

 The Pleiades were up
 watching the silent air;
The seeds and roots in Earth
were swelling for summer fare;
 The Ocean, its neighbour,
 was at
 his old labour.

 When—
 who, who did dare
 to tie like a madman
Thy plant round his brow?
 and grin and look proudly
 and blaspheme so loudly
 and live for that honour
 to stoop to Thee now,

O

 Delphic
 Apollo.

One 'self-awakened',
disenchanted with feeling,
perception and mental fabrication,
released through dispassion,
unbound through cessation,
and freed from clinging
to feeling, perception, and fabrication
is thus rightly liberated.

One wisdom-released,
disenchanted with feeling,
perception and fabrication,
released through dispassion,
unbound through cessation,
and freed from clinging
to feeling, perception, and fabrication
is considered 'wisdom-liberated'.

One rightly liberated,
disenchanted with consciousness,
released through dispassion,
unbound through cessation,
and freed
from all clinging to consciousness,
is thus rightly self-awakened.

One wisdom-released,
disenchanted with consciousness,
released through dispassion,
completed through cessation,
and freed from all clinging to
consciousness,
is considered
'wisdom-liberated'.

The rightly liberated One,
knows the path,
is expert in the path,
and brings others to it.

Those who keep to the path
become endowed with the path."

Chief
of organic numbers,
Old Scholar of the Spheres:
Thy spirit never slumbers
but rolls about our ears
forever.

And forever O
What a mad
endeavour
worketh he who,
to Thy sacred
and ennobled hearse,
would offer
a burnt sacrifice
of verse and melody?

How heavenward
Thou soundedst,
live Temple of sweet noise
and discord unconfoundedst,
giving delight new joys
and pleasure nobler pinions.

O
Where
are Thy dominions?
Lend Thine ear
to a young Delian's oath:
"Ay, by Thy soul; By all
that from Thy mortal lips did roll
and by the kernel
of Thine earthly love:
Beauty in things on earth
and things above.

When
craving
faded
into
desirelessness,
and cessation

Unbinding,
subtle,
deep,
fine
and
hard
to see;
Those stained
by desire,

whose view
is obscured
by the veil of self,
will not see
what goes
against the stream.

I
considered
this Dharma
I have attained:
profound,
difficult
to recognise,
difficult
to realise,
quiet and
excellent.

When every
childish
fashion
has vanish'd from
my rhyme

will I,
grey-gone in passion,
give to an after-time
hymning and harmony of Thee
and of Thy words
and of Thy life.

But vain
is now the burning
and the strife.
Pangs are in vain.
until I grow high-rife
with old philosophy
and mad with glimpses
at futurity.

For many years my offerings
must be hush'd.
When I do speak,
I'll think upon this hour.

because I feel
my forehead hot
and flush'd, even
at the simplest vassal
of Thy power.

Coupled so,
unaware
yet at the moment,
temperate
was my blood:

A lock
of Thy bright hair!
Sudden it came
and
I was startled
when I heard Thy name.

Methought
I had beheld it from the flood.

Clear
to the wise,
subtle,
unconstrained by
thought:

It would be
tiring
if I were to teach this Dharma
to others,
and be misunderstood
or ignored.

Most
are attached
to time and place,
and take pleasure in it.
With such attachment,
it is difficult
to see the Dharma
of conditionality and dependent arising.

Also difficult is
the cessation of inclination,
and the relinquishing
of the sense-bases:
Why should I now reveal,
to those governed
by desire, ignorance
and aversion,
this Dharma?

That which I attained with difficulty
is not easily realised.
On thinking this over,
my mind inclined
to inaction, to not teach.

But upon seeing that a house
is a place of dust,
I went
out into
the open
air
and
wandered.