

Vakkali Refractions

Thus have I heard.

The Siddhārtha Gautama, also known as the Blessed One, heard that Venerable Vakkali was unwell. Vakkali later saw the Blessed One coming and stirred in his bed.

In one translated version, Vakkali had been attracted to the Buddha's teachings; united, through his eyes, to the Buddha's physical form. At the Sangha, Vakkali followed his teacher around to watch the Blessed One's body. The Buddha commanded Vakkali to leave on account of this. Vakkali was so sad he tried to leap off a mountain. The Blessed One intervened, whispered some verses, and Vakkali walked on air.

Almost all scriptures in the Pali Canon open with such words (roughly translated here). Some suggest that they refer to how the sutta is more "hearsay" than anything heard directly from the Buddha. Others say it's a matter of rhetorical convention, a distancing of "I" from the account, signifying the non-absolutism of both selfhood and all dhamma. (I prefer how this suggests that the story might or mightn't have occurred, at least not in the way it's being told; its ambiguity insisting that we take it both lightly and seriously—not so much as historical record but as an invitation to gentle analysis, even insight—like how it haunts me now.)

I think you can see why this story enthralls me (I know you don't think much about Buddhism when, for you, Hinduism is far more embracive.) Vakkali's "stirring" sinks its teeth into me. Is this blasphemy? I mean, if I believe Vakkali was queer?

(Of course, queerness was not understood in the same way during that time. But if you think homoeroticism is profane, what does this say about you?)

Why did the Buddha ask him to leave? Homophobia (whatever that looked like)? Probably not, I wish. Probably that he saw "leaving" as a transition in the direction of Vakkali's future transcendence (attachment to literal beauty being necessary in order for this monk to surpass it). I like to think so. Anything is possible.

(When Vakkali hears the Buddha's voice on the precipice, I'm reminded of how my own voice returns to me, renewed, both stranger and lover, only when I'm singing beside you in your car—I used to enjoy singing in public; not anymore, since my broken voice has grown too *familiar*—with my hand in your lap; a voice from elsewhere, fuller when mingled with the tonality of your attention—or riding it like a wave.)

According to the Theragāthā, Vakkali didn't try to kill himself on Gijjhakūta. After his dismissal, he had tried to calm himself on its slopes, but was too emotional to meditate.

Somebody writes that the Blessed One appeared, stretched out his hand and said, "Come, monk." Ecstatic Vakkali floated into space.

When Vakkali yearned for the Buddha, the Blessed One arrived and told him: "Enough, Vakkali, do not stir on your bed. These seats are available, I will sit here."

"For a long time, venerable sir, I have wanted to come see you, but I haven't been fit enough," Vakkali confessed.

Can you blame queers for being "too emotional"? Even when we pretend to surf the centrifugal whirlpool of our feelings, is it so hard to realise that the *success* of our pretence is derived from how much we know (consciously or otherwise) that we have failed our society, or how much its heterosexist culture has failed us?

Nobody speaks about the tenderness that I recognise in the Buddha's (telepathic) voice, his enticement to elevation like a call to arousal; his ethereal hand like a hand in marriage.

(I take off into nothingness, too, when I'm singing beside you, your listening its own kind of bidding.

Or I'm never more myself during such moments in your car: rising, arising—your silence is my air.)

Don't overreact. Be still. Don't cling (too much; or to the point of total distortion of all reason.) Good health is impermanent. Desire is impermanent.

Yet why be ashamed of it? If craving brings us suffering, why shouldn't we enjoy the edge of our unhappiness?

More accurately, if the pain transcends us and not vice versa, so why not savour it anyway, knowing that we could be abandoned on an island of serenity?

I love this moment when the Buddha sits before his disciple, the space between them filling with love and serenity (flowing from one end), blending and merging with hope and the pain of yearning (from the other).

What is transcendence when there is nothing to transcend?

Why "unfit"? Not just the state of physical health that Vakkali refers to, I like to think. We spend our queer little lives thinking we must be unfit (when we realise we don't belong.)

I know now that the real sickness is in thinking that we were ever incomplete.

The Blessed One replied: “Enough, Vakkali! Why do you want to see this foul body? One who sees the Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees the Dhamma.” (In another translation: “... this stinking, rotten body.” In another: “... this vile body.”)

After a time, bhikkhus approached the Blessed One to deliver news about the end of Vakkali. The Blessed One addressed them: “Come, bhikkhus, then let us go to the Isigili Slope, where the clansman Vakkali has used the knife.”

The body might be “vile” but it’s not separate from the order of infinity. With one, you perceive the other. Not a trick of the light, but a paradoxical double-image we *see* not with our eyes but the widening socket of the mind.

Suicide is a topic that makes many Buddhist monks uncomfortable. There are commentaries that make no comment about Vakkali “using the knife” as being a euphemism for taking one’s own life.

Another commentary adds that Vakkali was conceited in thinking he might rid himself of suffering through suicide; however, the knife caused him such pain that he realised his present state of puthujjana (the cycle of worldly fetters), and exerting great effort (presumably, meditative analysis), entered arahantship (perfection).

Suicide is acceptable if performed with the right intentions, goes one form of reasoning. Suicide is *always* unacceptable—this other reasoning is probably more sweeping, less rational and (hence, perhaps) more pervasive.

Being uncomfortable with suicide is still an attachment to the notion that physicality is worth preserving (past the point of reason.)

If everything is a dream, why not enjoy the dream before we leave it? In deciding to leave the cliff and reach for that invisible hand that lifts you into air, who is anyone else (other than the people you love) to judge (as if they really cared)?

And would it be so wrong to kiss the ground and caress the cliff’s jagged edge (in gratitude) before taking that first step into nothingness?

It remains unclear to me, in the end,

whether Vakkali died of illness or by his own hand.

In any case, queer suicides have been commonplace and can never be fully understood.

“Have you any doubts, Vakkali? Have you any cause for regret?”

“Indeed, Lord, I have many doubts, much cause for regret.”

“Have you nothing to reproach yourself about as regards morals?”

“No, nothing to reproach myself about as regards morals.”

In one translation, this almost-rapidfire conversation between the Buddha and Vakkali (before the latter reveals that his only pre-death worry is not being able to *see* his teacher) fascinates me for its possible ambivalences; they remain unresolved past the narrative’s conclusion, in spite of the storyteller’s and the translator’s best intentions. In my reading, doubt dwindles like a shadow across the floor of a moment about whether Vakkali can fully relinquish his sense of self-hatred.

The body might be foul, but I’d still love to see you/yours till the end.

The Buddha didn’t actually have to come to Vakkali’s bedside. Not coming to see him could have been a Zen-lesson in itself; a long-distance missive bearing a challenge to attain insight.

But the Blessed One came. Imagine that.

If morality is a dream, a vapour arising from a steaming bog of conditions and circumstances. If beauty is a dream.

Somebody recounts the Buddha’s last words as thus: “All conditioned things are impermanent. Strive on with diligence.”

This is my favourite version of the end, in which the Blessed One distantly saw Vakkali in his bed with his shoulder turned away. He also saw smoke, an accompanying darkness, sliding to the east, then spreading in all directions. He then addressed his disciples: “Do you see, bhikkhus, that cloud of smoke, that darkness?”

“Yes, venerable one.”

“That is Mara, the Evil One, searching for the consciousness of our Vakkali, wondering: ‘Where now has the

Mara, Buddhism’s Lucifer (another misunderstood angel)—the darkness in every religious story painted with light—without whom there would be no understanding of non-duality. The Mara of conditioning and endless craving. It’s not craving that is the problem but the inability to appreciate that what we crave is already changing as we speak; the body of the one you love is not just a body but an ever-shifting encounter between a fundamental uncertainty and your still-rewarding idealisation of presence (knowing this,

consciousness of Vakkali gone?’ But know this, dear bhikkhus, with consciousness unestablished, our Vakkali has attained final Nibbāna.”

what is there not to enjoy, albeit briefly?)

Love our bodies and where they take us.

Kiss the finger, even when it is pointing at the moon.

Vakkali is our metaphor for that homoerotic struggle with physical beauty and its transience. We are Vakkali.

Beauty is in the details—in many accounts, the Buddha had a beautiful body. Even in old age, deterioration can also be beautiful. Even suicide (dare you imagine this.) What is meditation but an expansion of our imagination, a semantic widening, the opening of every window in the room of a word so the warm night of darkness can blow straight through.