

# We're Being Trained NOT To See

I was reflecting today on the life of Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha.

According to Buddhist myth, Siddhartha was born under a prophecy that he would either become a great military ruler or a supremely enlightened holy man. His father wanted the former, so he raised Siddhartha in a bubble of sorts, filling his life with nothing but pleasure and keeping from his eyes all instances of pain and suffering.

Eventually, though, Siddhartha came to see the world of suffering. More than that, he *wanted* to see it. And, in seeing it, he renounced his life of bountiful pleasure in favor of extreme asceticism—almost to the point of death (which of course later developed into his middle path of moderation). Siddhartha saw the world and responded to it by forsaking the pleasures of his life.

In modern “developed” countries, we tend to pride ourselves upon our ability to see the world. We live in a scientific age. On the macroscopic level, we’ve peered deeper into space than anyone before us. This year, Hubble spotted a galaxy 13.4 billion light years away (just a few hundred million years after our universe rolled out). On the microscopic level, we’ve seen (or at least detected) photons, neutrinos, bosons, etc. Additionally, we’ve mapped the human genome and classified many life forms and identified the ecosystems of which they are a part.

But for all our seeing, it seems to me that in some ways we’re trained not to see. This point is especially true for us as consumers, I think. Try an experiment: Go into a grocery store and count all the faces you see in the snack aisle. You’ll

find faces on cookies, candies, crackers, etc. Next, go to the meat aisle and count the number of faces you see there. My guess is that you won't see too many faces. That's odd, though, isn't it? We put faces on foods that never had faces and remove faces from foods that did. In a similar fashion, few clothing companies are exceedingly transparent about how they provide the clothes they do at the prices they do. Tags don't clearly divulge labor practices.

In short, we don't see the true cost behind our products. But it's more than that. I think we're *trained* not to see it—the suffering, whether human or nonhuman. Much like Siddhartha's father, there are forces—in these cases, market forces—that don't want us to see. They benefit from our not seeing.

And maybe we (and I include myself here) are quite happy not to see. Ignorance is bliss, after all. We can gorge ourselves on meat because we don't have to see the conditions (for both humans and nonhumans) that make our levels of consumption possible. We can live happily with great wealth because we don't see the conditions of poverty around the world—in some cases upon which our wealth is built. For all the greatness of our scientific advances predicated upon our empirical senses, we are often so happy not to see. Indeed, many of those advances come at a cost we don't want to see—medicines tested on animals is just one example among many.

As I reflected on the Buddha, I thought how his life is a great lesson for people like me. He teaches that the cost of happiness in extravagant living is too high. To attain it, we must pay with our sight. The cost of truth, as it were, is seeing, which robs us of our happiness in extravagance and mandates moderation. Seeing beckons us to take a different path, a path that would spell disadvantage for those invested in our not seeing.

I'm not a Buddhist, but I find Siddhartha's life an extremely powerful and convicting one.

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