AN 5.166 — AN 5:166 Cessation | Nirodha Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

Cessation

Nirodha Sutta (AN 5:166)

This sutta focuses primarily on how an elder monk should be treated, and what qualities an elder should have to be worthy of respect. However, the discussion also touches on the topic of the cessation of perception and feeling, making an important statement on the topic.

Some suttas, such as AN 9:33, when describing this attainment, state simply, “There is the case where a monk, with the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, enters & remains in the cessation of perception & feeling.” Others, such as AN 9:34, add, “And as he sees (that) with discernment, effluents are

completely ended." The description of this attainment in AN 9:33 leaves open the possibility that the ending of the effluents does not automatically accompany this attainment in this lifetime. This sutta explicitly states that that is so. It leaves open the possibility, however, that the person reaching this attainment can later be reborn as a mind-made deva, transcending those devas who feed on material food and, in that state of becoming, reach this attainment again.

The Commentary to this sutta states that the mind-made devas in question are the inhabitants of any of the Pure Abodes, which are the destinations of non-returners, those destined to gain full awakening without returning to this world. However, this sutta simply states the possibility of attaining the cessation of perception and feeling from that state of becoming, and does not state that the person in question will have to reach that attainment or have to gain full awakening in that state. It's also noteworthy that the Buddha here, after making clear in no uncertain terms who those mind-made devas are not, ends the discussion abruptly before clarifying who they are. When he meets with the monks again later, he drops the topic and returns to the real issue at hand, how a competent elder should be treated.

The way in which this sutta raises a number of questions about the cessation of perception and feeling and its relationship to awakening but then leaves them unanswered has a parallel in AN 9:36. That sutta details how the various concentration attainments up through the dimension of nothingness can be used as a basis for the ending of the effluents. Beyond that point, it simply says, "Thus, as far as the perception-attainments go, that is as far as gnosis-penetration goes. As for these two dimensions—the attainment of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception & the attainment of the cessation of perception & feeling—I tell you that they are to be rightly explained by those monks who are meditators, skilled at attainment, skilled at attainment-emergence, who have attained & emerged in dependence on them."

* * *

There Ven. Sāriputta addressed the monks, "Friends!"

"Yes, friend," the monks responded to him.

Ven. Sāriputta said, "Friends, there is the case where a monk—consummate in virtue, consummate in concentration, consummate in discernment—might enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling.1 There is the possibility that if he does not gain gnosis in the here & now, then—going beyond companionship with the devas who feed on material food, and arising in a certain mind-made group—he might [there] enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is that possibility."

When this was said, Ven. Udāyin said to Ven. Sāriputta, "That is impossible, friend Sāriputta. It cannot happen that a monk—going beyond companionship with the devas who feed on material food, and arising in a certain mind-made group—might [there] enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is not that possibility."

A second time… A third time, Ven. Sāriputta addressed the monks, “Friends, there is the case where a monk—consummate in virtue, consummate in concentration, consummate in discernment—might enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is the possibility that if he does not gain gnosis in the here & now, then—going beyond companionship with the devas who feed on material food, and arising in a certain mind-made group—he might [there] enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is that possibility.”

A third time, Ven. Udāyin said to Ven. Sāriputta, “That is impossible, friend Sāriputta. It cannot happen that a monk—going beyond companionship with the devas who feed on material food, and arising in a certain mind-made group—might [there] enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is not that possibility.”

Then the thought occurred to Ven. Sāriputta, “Venerable Udāyin contradicts me up to three times, yet no monk stands up for me. What if I were to go to the Blessed One?”

So Ven. Sāriputta went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he addressed the monks, “Friends, there is the case where a monk—consummate in virtue, consummate in concentration, consummate in discernment—might enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is the possibility that if he does not gain gnosis in the here & now, then—going beyond companionship with the devas who feed on material food, and arising in a certain mind-made group—he might [there] enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is that possibility.”

When this was said, Ven. Udāyin said to Ven. Sāriputta, “That is impossible, friend Sāriputta. It cannot happen that a monk—going beyond companionship with the devas who feed on material food, and arising in a certain mind-made group—might [there] enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is not that possibility.”

A second time… A third time, Ven. Sāriputta addressed the monks, “Friends, there is the case where a monk—consummate in virtue, consummate in concentration, consummate in discernment—might enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is the possibility that if he does not gain gnosis in the here & now, then—going beyond companionship with the devas who feed on material food, and arising in a certain mind-made group—he might [there] enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is that possibility.”

A third time, Ven. Udāyin said to Ven. Sāriputta, “That is impossible, friend Sāriputta. It cannot happen that a monk—going beyond companionship with the devas who feed on material food, and arising in a certain mind-made group—might [there] enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is not that possibility.”

Then the thought occurred to Ven. Sāriputta, “Even in the presence of the Blessed One, Ven. Udāyin contradicts me up to three times, yet no monk stands up for me. What if I were to be silent?” So he was silent.

Then the Blessed One addressed Ven. Udāyin, "But what, Udāyin, do you recognize as a mind-made group?"

"Lord, those devas that are formless and made of perception."

"Udāyin, what's the worth of your speech of an incompetent fool? And yet you conceive yourself as worthy to speak!"

Then the Blessed One addressed Ven. Ānanda, "Ānanda, do you look on passively when an elder monk is being harassed? Don't you have any compassion for a competent elder monk who's being harassed?"

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, "Monks, there is the case where a monk—consummate in virtue, consummate in concentration, consummate in discernment—might enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is the possibility that if he does not gain gnosis in the here & now, then—going beyond companionship with the devas who feed on material food, and arising in a certain mind-made group—he might [there] enter & emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling. There is that possibility."

That is what the Blessed One said. Having said that, the One Well-gone got up from his seat and entered his dwelling.

Then, not long after the Blessed One had left, Ven. Ānanda went to Ven. Upavāna and, on arrival, said to him, "Just now, friend Upavāna, they were harassing another elder monk, and we didn't question them. It won't be amazing if the Blessed One, arising from his seclusion in the late afternoon, should take this up for a talk and have you speak to it. Right now I've fallen into embarrassment."

Then the Blessed One, arising from his seclusion in the late afternoon, went to the meeting hall and sat down on a seat laid out. Having sat down, he said to Ven. Upavāna, "Endowed with how many qualities is an elder monk dear & appealing to his fellows in the holy life, respected & esteemed by them?"

"Endowed with five qualities, lord, an elder monk is dear & appealing to his fellows in the holy life, respected & esteemed by them. Which five?

"There is the case where an elder monk is virtuous. He dwells restrained in accordance with the Pāṭimokkha, consummate in his behavior & sphere of activity. He trains himself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults.

"He has heard much, has retained what he has heard, has stored what he has heard. Whatever teachings are admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end, that—in their meaning & expression—proclaim the holy life that is entirely perfect, surpassingly pure: Those he has listened to often, retained, discussed, accumulated, examined with his mind, & well-penetrated in terms of his views.

“He is a fine speaker, with fine delivery, endowed with polite words, distinct, free from phlegm, making the meaning clear.

“He attains—whenever he wants, without strain, without difficulty—the four jhānas that are heightened mental states, pleasant abidings in the here & now.

“He—with the ending of effluents—remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now.

“Endowed with these five qualities, lord, an elder monk is dear & appealing to his fellows in the holy life, respected & esteemed by them.”

“Excellent, Upavāna! Excellent! Endowed with these five qualities, an elder monk is dear & appealing to his fellows in the holy life, respected & esteemed by them. If these five qualities are not found in an elder monk, why should his fellows in the holy life honor, respect, revere, & venerate him—for his broken teeth, gray hair, & wrinkled skin? But it’s because these five qualities are found in an elder monk that his fellows in the holy life honor, respect, revere, & venerate him.”

Note

1. Not to be confused with the concentration that would lead one to be reborn among the devas called Non-percipient Beings, mentioned in DN 1, DN 15, DN 33, and DN 34. As DN 1 makes clear, that concentration does not lead to a noble attainment, as birth as a Non-percipient Being can actually lead one to develop wrong view in a subsequent birth.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 43; MN 44; MN 111; AN 10:17–18; Dhp 260–261