DN 9 — DN 9 About Poṭṭhapāda | Poṭṭhapāda Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

About Poṭṭhapāda

Poṭṭhapāda Sutta (DN 9)

Introduction

This sutta portrays two modes by which the Buddha responded to the controversial issues of his day. The first mode—illustrated by his contribution to the discussion on the ultimate cessation of perception—was to adopt the terms of the discussion but to invest them with his own meanings, and then to try to direct the discussion to the practice leading to the cessation of suffering & stress. The second mode—illustrated by his treatment of whether the cosmos is eternal, etc.—was to declare the issues as unconducive to awakening, and to refuse to take a position on them.

Several other suttas—such as MN 63, MN 72, and AN 10:93—portray the Buddha and his disciples adopting the second mode. This sutta is unusual in its extended portrait of the Buddha's adopting the first. Many of the technical terms he uses here—such as the perception of a refined truth, the peak of perception, the alert step-by step attainment of the ultimate cessation of perception, the appropriation of a self—are found nowhere else in the Canon. At the end of the sutta, he describes them as "the world's designations, the world's expressions, the world's ways of speaking, the world's descriptions, with which the Tathāgata expresses himself but without grasping at them." In other words, he picks them up for the purpose at hand and then lets them go. Thus they are not to be regarded as central to his teaching. Instead, they should be read as examples of his ability to adapt the language of his interlocutors to his own purposes. For this reason, this sutta is best read only after you have read other suttas and are familiar with the more central concepts of the Buddha's teachings.

Of particular interest here is the Buddha's treatment of the three "appropriations of a self." The first—the gross self—refers to the ordinary, everyday sense of identifying with one's body. The latter two—the mind-made appropriation and the formless appropriation—refer to the sense of self that can be developed in meditation. The mind-made appropriation can result from an experience of the mind-made body—the "astral body"—that constitutes one of the powers that can be developed through concentration practice. The formless appropriation can result from any of the formless states of concentration—such as an experience of infinite space, infinite consciousness, or nothingness. Although meditators, on experiencing these states, might assume that they have encountered their "true self," the Buddha is careful to note that these are appropriations, and that they are no more one's true self than the body is. They are one's appropriation of a self only for the time that one identifies with them. The Buddha goes on to say that he teaches the Dhamma for the sake of abandoning every appropriation of a self "such that, when you practice it, defiling mental qualities will be abandoned, bright mental qualities will grow, and you will enter & remain in the culmination & abundance of discernment, having known & realized it for yourself in the here & now."

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. Now on that occasion Poṭṭhapāda the wanderer, together with a large following of about 300 wanderers, had taken up residence in the debating hall near the Tiṇḍuka tree in the single-pavilion park of Queen Mallikā. Then the Blessed One, early in the morning—having adjusted his lower robe and taking his bowl & outer robe—entered Sāvatthī for alms. Then the thought occurred to him, "While it's still too early to go into Sāvatthī for alms, why don't I go to the debating hall near the Tiṇḍuka tree in the single-pavilion park of Queen Mallikā to see Poṭṭhapāda the wanderer?" So he went to the debating hall near the Tiṇḍuka tree in the single-pavilion park of Queen Mallikā.

Now on that occasion Poṭṭhapāda the wanderer was sitting with his large following of wanderers, all making a great noise & racket, discussing many kinds of bestial topics of

conversation: conversation about kings, robbers, & ministers of state; armies, alarms, & battles; food & drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, & scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women & heroes; the gossip of the street & the well; tales of the dead; tales of diversity, the creation of the world & of the sea; talk of whether things exist or not. Then Poṭṭhapāda the wanderer saw the Blessed One coming from afar, and on seeing him, hushed his following: "Be quiet, good sirs. Don't make any noise. Here comes the contemplative Gotama. He is fond of quietude and speaks in praise of quietude. Maybe, if he perceives our group as quiet, he will consider it worth his while to come our way." So the wanderers fell silent.

Then the Blessed One went to Poṭṭhapāda, and Poṭṭhapāda said to him, "Come, Blessed One. Welcome, Blessed One. It's been a long time since the Blessed One has gone out of his way to come here. Sit down, Blessed One. This seat has been prepared." So the Blessed One sat on the prepared seat. Poṭṭhapāda, taking a lower seat, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "For what topic of conversation are you gathered together here? In the midst of what topic of conversation have you been interrupted?"

When this was said, Poṭṭhapāda replied, "Never mind, lord, about the topic of conversation for which we have gathered here. It won't be difficult for the Blessed One to hear about that later. For the past few days a discussion has arisen among the many sects of contemplatives & brahmans gathered and sitting together in the debating hall, concerning the ultimate cessation of perception: 'How is there the ultimate cessation of perception?' With regard to this, some said, 'A person's perception arises and ceases without cause, without reason. When it arises, one is percipient. When it ceases, one is not percipient.'1 That's how one group described the ultimate cessation of perception.

"Then someone else said, 'No, that's not how it is. Perception is a person's self, which comes and goes. When it comes, one is percipient. When it goes, one is not percipient.' That's how one group described the ultimate cessation of perception.

"Then someone else said, 'No, that's not how it is, for there are contemplatives & brahmans of great power, great potency. They draw perception in and out of a person. When they draw it in, one is percipient. When they draw it out, one is not percipient.' That's how one group described the ultimate cessation of perception.

"Then someone else said, 'No, that's not how it is, for there are devas of great power, great potency. They draw perception in and out of a person. When they draw it in, one is percipient. When they draw it out, one is not percipient.' That's how one group described the ultimate cessation of perception.

"Then the memory of the Blessed One arose within me: 'Ah, the Blessed One! Ah, the One Well-Gone—who surely is well-skilled in these matters.' The Blessed One is skilled and expert in the ultimate cessation of perception. So what, lord, is the ultimate cessation of perception?"

“In this regard, Poṭṭhapāda, those contemplatives & brahmans who say that a person’s perception arises & ceases without cause, without reason, are wrong from the very start. Why is that? Because a person’s perception arises & ceases with a cause, with a reason. With training, one perception arises and with training another perception ceases. And what is that training?

“There is the case where a Tathāgata appears in the world, worthy and rightly self-awakened. [as in DN 2] …

“This is how a monk is consummate in virtue….

“Seeing that these five hindrances have been abandoned within him, he becomes glad. Glad, he becomes enraptured. Enraptured, his body grows tranquil. His body tranquil, he is sensitive to pleasure. Feeling pleasure, his mind becomes concentrated.

“Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, the monk enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. His earlier perception of sensuality ceases, and on that occasion there is a perception of a refined truth of rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. On that occasion he is one who is percipient of a refined truth of rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. And thus it is that with training one perception arises and with training another perception ceases.

“Then, with the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, the monk enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. His earlier perception of a refined truth of rapture & pleasure born of seclusion ceases, and on that occasion there is a perception of a refined truth of rapture & pleasure born of concentration. On that occasion he is one who is percipient of a refined truth of rapture & pleasure born of concentration. And thus it is that with training one perception arises and with training another perception ceases.

“And further, with the fading of rapture, the monk remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’ His earlier perception of a refined truth of rapture & pleasure born of concentration ceases, and on that occasion there is a perception of a refined truth of equanimity. On that occasion he is one who is percipient of a refined truth of equanimity. And thus it is that with training one perception arises and with training another perception ceases.

“And further, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—the monk enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. His earlier perception of a refined truth of equanimity ceases, and on that occasion there is a perception of a refined truth of neither pleasure nor pain. On that occasion he is one who is percipient of a refined truth of neither pleasure nor pain. And thus it is that with training one perception arises and with training

another perception ceases.

“And further, with the complete transcending of perceptions of (physical) form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not heeding perceptions of multiplicity, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite space,’ the monk enters & remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space. His earlier perception of form ceases, and on that occasion there is a perception of a refined truth of the dimension of the infinitude of space. On that occasion he is one who is percipient of a refined truth of the dimension of the infinitude of space. And thus it is that with training one perception arises and with training another perception ceases.

“And further, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite consciousness,’ the monk enters & remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. His earlier perception of a refined truth of the dimension of the infinitude of space ceases, and on that occasion there is a perception of a refined truth of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. On that occasion he is one who is percipient of a refined truth of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. And thus it is that with training one perception arises and with training another perception ceases.

“And further, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) ‘There is nothing,’ enters & remains in the dimension of nothingness. His earlier perception of a refined truth of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness ceases, and on that occasion there is a perception of a refined truth of the dimension of nothingness. On that occasion he is one who is percipient of a refined truth of the dimension of nothingness. And thus it is that with training one perception arises and with training another perception ceases.2

“Now, when the monk is percipient of himself here, then from there to there, step by step, he touches the peak of perception. As he remains at the peak of perception, the thought occurs to him, ‘Thinking is bad for me. Not thinking is better for me. If I were to think and will, this perception of mine would cease, and a grosser perception would appear. What if I were neither to think nor to will?’3 So he neither thinks nor wills, and as he is neither thinking nor willing, that perception ceases4 and another, grosser perception does not appear. He touches cessation. This, Poṭṭhapāda, is how there is the alert5 step-by step attainment of the ultimate cessation of perception.

“Now what do you think, Poṭṭhapāda? Have you ever before heard of such an alert step-by step attainment of the ultimate cessation of perception?”

“No, lord. And here is how I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One: ‘When the monk is percipient of himself here, then from there to there, step by step, he touches the peak of perception. As he remains at the peak of perception, the thought occurs to him, ”Thinking is bad for me. Not thinking is better for me. If I were to think and will, this perception of mine would cease, and a grosser perception would appear. What if I were neither to think nor to will?” So he neither thinks nor wills, and as he is neither thinking nor willing, that perception ceases and another, grosser perception does not appear. He touches cessation. This, Poṭṭhapāda, is how there is the alert step-by step attainment of

the ultimate cessation of perception.'"

"That's right, Poṭṭhapāda."

"But, lord, does the Blessed One describe one peak of perception or many peaks of perception?"

"Poṭṭhapāda, I describe one peak of perception and many peaks of perception."

"And how does the Blessed One describe one peak of perception and many peaks of perception?"

"In whatever way one touches cessation, Poṭṭhapāda, that's the way I describe the peak of perception.6 That's how I describe one peak of perception and many peaks of perception."

"Now, lord, does perception arise first, and knowledge after; or does knowledge arise first, and perception after; or do perception & knowledge arise simultaneously?"

"Poṭṭhapāda, perception arises first, and knowledge after. And the arising of knowledge comes from the arising of perception. One discerns, 'It's in dependence on this7 that my knowledge has arisen.' Through this line of reasoning one can realize how perception arises first, and knowledge after, and how the arising of knowledge comes from the arising of perception."

"Now, lord, is perception a person's self, or is perception one thing and self another?"

"What self do you posit, Poṭṭhapāda?"

"I posit a gross self, possessed of form, made up of the four great elements [earth, water, fire, and wind], feeding on physical food."

"Then, Poṭṭhapāda, your self would be gross, possessed of form, made up of the four great elements, feeding on physical food. That being the case, then for you perception would be one thing and self another. And it's through this line of reasoning that one can realize how perception will be one thing and self another: Even as there remains this gross self—possessed of form, made up of the four great elements, and feeding on food—then for that person, perception arises as other, perception passes away as other. It's through this line of reasoning that one can realize how perception will be one thing and self another."

"Then, lord, I posit a mind-made self complete in all its parts, not inferior in its faculties."8

"Then, Poṭṭhapāda, your self would be mind-made, complete in all its parts, not inferior in its faculties. That being the case, then for you perception would be one thing and self another. And it's through this line of reasoning that one can realize how perception will be one thing and self another: Even as there remains this mind-made self—complete in all its

parts, not inferior in its faculties—then for that person, perception arises as other, perception passes away as other. It's through this line of reasoning that one can realize how perception will be one thing and self another."

"Then, lord, I posit a formless self made of perception."

"Then, Poṭṭhapāda, your self would be formless and made of perception. That being the case, then for you perception would be one thing and self another. And it's through this line of reasoning that one can realize how perception will be one thing and self another: Even as there remains this formless self made of perception, then for that person, perception arises as other, perception passes away as other. It's through this line of reasoning that one can realize how perception will be one thing and self another."

"Is it possible for me to know, lord, whether perception is a person's self or if perception is one thing and self another?"

"Poṭṭhapāda—having other views, other practices, other satisfactions, other aims, other teachers—it's hard for you to know whether perception is a person's self or if perception is one thing and self another."

"Well then, lord, if—having other views, other practices, other satisfactions, other aims, other teachers—it's hard for me to know whether perception is a person's self or if perception is one thing and self another, then is it the case that the cosmos is eternal, that only this is true and anything otherwise is worthless?"

"Poṭṭhapāda, I haven't expounded that the cosmos is eternal, that only this is true and anything otherwise is worthless."

"Then is it the case that the cosmos is not eternal, that only this is true and anything otherwise is worthless?"

"Poṭṭhapāda, I haven't expounded that the cosmos is not eternal, that only this is true and anything otherwise is worthless."

"Then is it the case that the cosmos is finite… the cosmos is infinite… the soul & the body are the same… the soul is one thing and the body another… after death a Tathāgata exists… after death a Tathāgata does not exist… after death a Tathāgata both exists & does not exist… after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist, that only this is true and anything otherwise is worthless?"

"Poṭṭhapāda, I haven't expounded that after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist, that only this is true and anything otherwise is worthless."

"But why hasn't the Blessed One expounded these things?"

“Because they are not conducive to the goal, are not conducive to the Dhamma, are not basic to the holy life. They don’t lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding. That’s why I haven’t expounded them.”

“And what has the Blessed One expounded?”

“I have expounded that, ‘This is stress’ … ‘This is the origination of stress’ … ‘This is the cessation of stress’ … ‘This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.’

“And why has the Blessed One expounded these things?”

“Because they are conducive to the goal, conducive to the Dhamma, and basic to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding. That’s why I have expounded them.”

“So it is, Blessed One. So it is, O One Well-Gone. Well now, it’s time for the Blessed One to do as he sees fit.”

Then the Blessed One got up from his seat and left.

Not long after he had left, the wanderers, with sneering words, jeered at Poṭṭhapāda the wanderer from all sides: “So, whatever the contemplative Gotama says, Sir Poṭṭhapāda rejoices in his every word: ‘So it is, Blessed One. So it is, O One Well-Gone.’ But we don’t understand the contemplative Gotama as having taught any categorical teaching as to whether the cosmos is eternal or the cosmos is not eternal or… whether after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist.”

When this was said, Poṭṭhapāda the wanderer replied to the wanderers, “I, too, don’t understand the contemplative Gotama as having taught any categorical teaching as to whether the cosmos is eternal or the cosmos is not eternal or… whether after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist. But the contemplative Gotama describes a genuine, authentic, and accurate practice, grounded in the Dhamma and consonant with the Dhamma. And when a genuine, authentic, and accurate practice, grounded in the Dhamma and consonant with the Dhamma is being explained, why shouldn’t a knowledgeable person such as myself rejoice in the well-spokenness of the contemplative Gotama’s well-spoken words?”

Then two or three days later, Citta the elephant trainer’s son and Poṭṭhapāda the wanderer went to the Blessed One. On their arrival, Citta bowed down to the Blessed One and sat to one side, while Poṭṭhapāda the wanderer greeted the Blessed One courteously. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One: “The other day, not long after the Blessed One had left, the wanderers, with sneering words, jeered at me from all sides: ‘So, whatever the contemplative Gotama says, Sir Poṭṭhapāda rejoices in his every word: “So it is, Blessed One. So it is, O One Well-Gone.” But we don’t understand the contemplative Gotama as

having taught any categorical teaching as to whether the cosmos is eternal or the cosmos is not eternal or … whether after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist.'

"When this was said, I replied to the wanderers, 'I, too, don't understand the contemplative Gotama as having taught any categorical teaching as to whether the cosmos is eternal or the cosmos is not eternal or… whether after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist. But the contemplative Gotama describes a genuine, authentic, and accurate practice, grounded in the Dhamma and consonant with the Dhamma. And when a genuine, authentic, and accurate practice, grounded in the Dhamma and consonant with the Dhamma is being explained, why shouldn't a knowledgeable person such as myself rejoice in the well-spokenness of the contemplative Gotama's well-spoken words?'"

[The Buddha:] "Poṭṭhapāda, all those wanderers are blind and have no eyes. You alone among them have eyes. I have taught and declared some teachings to be categorical, and some teachings to be not categorical. And what are the teachings that I have taught and declared to be not categorical? (The statement that) 'The cosmos is eternal' I have taught and declared to be a not categorical teaching. (The statement that) 'The cosmos is not eternal' … 'The cosmos is finite' … 'The cosmos is infinite' … 'The soul & the body are the same' … 'The soul is one thing and the body another' … 'After death a Tathāgata exists' … 'After death a Tathāgata does not exist' … 'After death a Tathāgata both exists & does not exist' … 'After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist' I have taught and declared to be a not categorical teaching. And why have I taught and declared these teachings to be not categorical? Because they are not conducive to the goal, are not conducive to the Dhamma, are not basic to the holy life. They don't lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding. That's why I have taught and declared them to be not categorical.

"And what have I taught and declared to be categorical teachings? (The statement that) 'This is stress' I have taught and declared to be a categorical teaching. (The statement that) 'This is the origination of stress' … 'This is the cessation of stress' … 'This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress' I have taught and declared to be a categorical teaching. And why have I taught and declared these teachings to be categorical? Because they are conducive to the goal, conducive to the Dhamma, and basic to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding. That's why I have taught and declared them to be categorical.

"There are some contemplatives & brahmans with a doctrine & view like this: 'After death, the self is exclusively happy and free from disease.' I approached them and asked them, 'Is it true that you have a doctrine & view like this: "After death, the self is exclusively happy and free from disease"?' When asked this, they replied, 'Yes.' So I asked them, 'But do you dwell having known or seen an exclusively happy world?' When asked this, they said, 'No.' So I asked them, 'But have you ever been aware of a self exclusively happy for a day or a night, or for half a day or half a night?' When asked this, they said, 'No.' So I asked them,

‘But do you know that “This is the path, this is the practice for the realization of an exclusively happy world”?’ When asked this, they said, ‘No.’ So I asked them, ‘But have you heard the voices of devas reborn in an exclusively happy world, saying, “Practice well, my dears. Practice straightforwardly, my dears, for the realization of an exclusively happy world, because it was through such a practice that we ourselves have been reborn in an exclusively happy world”?’ When asked this, they said, ‘No.’

“So what do you think, Poṭṭhapāda? When this is the case, don’t the words of those contemplatives & brahmans turn out to be unconvincing?”

“Yes, lord. When this is the case, the words of those contemplatives & brahmans turn out to be unconvincing.”

“Poṭṭhapāda, it’s as if a man were to say, ‘I’m in love with the most beautiful woman in this country,’ and other people were to say to him, ‘Well, my good man, this most beautiful woman in this country with whom you are in love: do you know if she’s of the warrior caste, the brahman caste, the merchant caste, or the laborer caste?’ and, when asked this, he would say, ‘No.’ Then they would say to him, ‘Well then, do you know her name or clan name? Whether she’s tall, short, or of medium height? Whether she’s dark, fair, or ruddy-skinned? Do you know what village or town or city she’s from?’ When asked this, he would say, ‘No.’ Then they would say to him, ‘So you’ve never known or seen the woman you’re in love with?’ When asked this, he would say, ‘Yes.’

“So what do you think, Poṭṭhapāda? When this is the case, don’t the words of that man turn out to be unconvincing?”

“Yes, lord….”

“In the same way, there are some contemplatives & brahmans with a doctrine & view like this: ‘After death, the self is exclusively happy and free from disease.’ … Don’t the words of those contemplatives & brahmans turn out to be unconvincing?”

“Yes, lord….”

“Poṭṭhapāda, it’s as if a man at a crossroads were to build a staircase for ascending to a palace, and other people were to say to him, ‘Well, my good man, this palace for which you are building a staircase: Do you know whether it’s east, west, north, or south of here? Whether it’s high, low, or in between?’ and, when asked this, he would say, ‘No.’ Then they would say to him, ‘So you don’t know or see the palace for which you are building a staircase?’ When asked this, he would say, ‘Yes.’

“So what do you think, Poṭṭhapāda? When this is the case, don’t the words of that man turn out to be unconvincing?”

“Yes, lord….”

“In the same way, there are some contemplatives & brahmans with a doctrine & view like this: ‘After death, the self is exclusively happy and free from disease.’ … Don’t the words of those contemplatives & brahmans turn out to be unconvincing?”

“Yes, lord. When this is the case, the words of those contemplatives & brahmans turn out to be unconvincing.”

“Poṭṭhapāda, there are these three appropriations of a self: the gross appropriation of a self, the mind-made appropriation of a self, and the formless appropriation of a self.9 And what is the gross appropriation of a self? Possessed of form, made up of the four great elements, feeding on physical food: this is the gross appropriation of a self. And what is the mind-made appropriation of a self? Possessed of form, mind-made, complete in all its parts, not inferior in its faculties: this is the mind-made appropriation of a self. And what is the formless appropriation of a self? Formless and made of perception: this is the formless appropriation of a self.

“I teach the Dhamma for the abandoning of the gross appropriation of a self, such that, when you practice it, defiling mental qualities will be abandoned, bright mental qualities will grow, and you will enter & remain in the culmination & abundance of discernment, having known & realized it for yourself in the here & now. If the thought should occur to you that, when defiling mental qualities are abandoned and bright mental qualities have grown, and one enters & remains in the culmination & abundance of discernment, having known & realized it for oneself in the here & now, one’s abiding is stressful/painful, you should not see it in that way. When defiling mental qualities are abandoned and bright mental qualities have grown, and one enters & remains in the culmination & abundance of discernment, having known & realized it for oneself in the here & now, there is joy, rapture, calm, mindfulness, alertness, and a pleasant/happy abiding.

“I also teach the Dhamma for the abandoning of the mind-made appropriation of a self… for the abandoning of the formless appropriation of a self, such that, when you practice it, defiling mental qualities will be abandoned, bright mental qualities will grow, and you will enter & remain in the culmination & abundance of discernment, having known & realized it for yourself in the here & now…. When defiling mental qualities are abandoned and bright mental qualities have grown, and one enters & remains in the culmination & abundance of discernment, having known & realized it for oneself in the here & now, there is joy, rapture, calm, mindfulness, alertness, and a pleasant/happy abiding.

“In the past, I have been asked, ‘What, friend, is the gross appropriation of a self for whose abandoning you teach the Dhamma such that, when you practice it, defiling mental qualities will be abandoned, bright mental qualities will grow, and you will enter & remain in the culmination & abundance of discernment, having known & realized it for yourself in the here & now?’ When asked this, I would answer, ‘This, friend, is that gross appropriation of a self for whose abandoning I teach the Dhamma….’

“In the past, I have been asked, ‘What, friend, is the mind-made appropriation of a self… the formless appropriation of a self for whose abandoning you teach the Dhamma…?’

When asked this, I would answer, 'This, friend, is that gross appropriation of a self for whose abandoning I teach the Dhamma....'

"What do you think, Poṭṭhapāda? When this is the case, don't those words turn out to be convincing?"

"Yes, lord. When this is the case, those words turn out to be convincing."

"Poṭṭhapāda, it's as if a man at a crossroads were to build a staircase for ascending to a palace, and other people were to say to him, 'Well, my good man, this palace for which you are building a staircase: Do you know whether it's east, west, north, or south of here? Whether it's high, low, or in between?' He would say, 'This, friends, is the palace to which I am building a staircase. The staircase is right under the palace.'

"So what do you think, Poṭṭhapāda? When this is the case, don't the words of that man turn out to be convincing?"

"Yes, lord...."

"In the same way, in the past I have been asked, 'What, friend, is the gross appropriation of a self... the mind-made appropriation of a self... the formless appropriation of a self for whose abandoning you teach the Dhamma...?' When asked this, I would answer, 'This, friend, is that gross appropriation of a self for whose abandoning I teach the Dhamma....'

"What do you think, Poṭṭhapāda? When this is the case, don't those words turn out to be convincing?"

"Yes, lord. When this is the case, those words turn out to be convincing."

When this was said, Citta the elephant trainer's son said to the Blessed One: "When there is a gross appropriation of a self, is it the case then that one's mind-made appropriation of a self and formless appropriation of a self are null & void, and only one's gross appropriation of a self is true? And when there is a mind-made appropriation of a self, is it the case then that one's gross appropriation of a self and formless appropriation of a self are null & void, and only one's mind-made appropriation of a self is true? And when there is a formless appropriation of a self, is it the case then that one's gross appropriation of a self and mind-made appropriation of a self are null & void, and only one's formless appropriation of a self is true?"

"Citta, when there is a gross appropriation of a self, it's not classified either as a mind-made appropriation of a self or as a formless appropriation of a self. It's classified just as a gross appropriation of a self. When there is a mind-made appropriation of a self, it's not classified either as a gross appropriation of a self or as a formless appropriation of a self. It's classified just as a mind-made appropriation of a self. When there is a formless appropriation of a self, it's not classified either as a gross appropriation of a self or as a mind-made appropriation of a self. It is classified just as a formless appropriation of a self.

“Suppose they were to ask you: ‘Did you exist in the past? Did you not not exist? Will you exist in the future? Will you not not exist? Do you exist now? Do you not not exist?’ Thus asked, how would you answer?”

“… Thus asked, lord, I would answer: ‘I existed in the past. I did not not exist. I will exist in the future. I will not not exist. I exist now. I do not not exist.’ …. That’s how I would answer.”

“Suppose, Citta, they were to ask you: ‘Whatever your past appropriation of a self: Is that alone your true appropriation of self, while the future & present ones are null & void? Whatever your future appropriation of a self: Is that alone your true appropriation of a self, while the past & present ones are null & void? Whatever your present appropriation of a self: Is that alone your true appropriation of a self, while the past & future ones are null & void?’ Thus asked, how would you answer?”

“…Thus asked, lord, I would answer: ‘Whatever my past appropriation of a self: on that occasion, that alone was my true appropriation of a self, while future & present ones were null & void. Whatever my future appropriation of a self: on that occasion, that alone will be my true appropriation of a self, while the past & present ones will be null & void. Whatever my present appropriation of a self: on that occasion, that alone is my true appropriation of a self, while the past & future ones are null & void.

“In the same way, Citta, when there is a gross appropriation of a self … it’s classified just as a gross appropriation of a self. When there is a mind-made appropriation of a self…. When there is a formless appropriation of a self, it’s not classified either as a gross appropriation of a self or as a mind-made appropriation of a self. It’s classified just as a formless appropriation of a self.

“Just as when milk comes from a cow, curds from milk, butter from curds, ghee from butter, and the skimmings of ghee from ghee. When there is milk, it’s not classified as curds, butter, ghee, or skimmings of ghee. It’s classified just as milk. When there are curds…. When there is butter…. When there is ghee…. When there are the skimmings of ghee, they’re not classified as milk, curds, butter, or ghee. They’re classified just as the skimmings of ghee.

“In the same way, when there is a gross appropriation of a self… it’s classified just as a gross appropriation of a self. When there is a mind-made appropriation of a self…. When there is a formless appropriation of a self, it’s not classified either as a gross appropriation of a self or as a mind-made appropriation of a self. It’s classified just as a formless appropriation of a self.

“Citta, these are the world’s designations, the world’s expressions, the world’s ways of speaking, the world’s descriptions, with which the Tathāgata expresses himself but without grasping to them.”10

When this was said, Poṭṭhapāda the wanderer said to the Blessed One: "Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has Master Gotama—through many lines of reasoning—made the Dhamma clear. I go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Saṅgha of monks. May Master Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge, from this day forward, for life."

But Citta the elephant trainer's son said to the Blessed One: "Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned… in the same way has Master Gotama—through many lines of reasoning—made the Dhamma clear. I go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Saṅgha of monks. Let me obtain the going forth in the Blessed One's presence! Let me obtain acceptance!"11

So Citta the elephant trainer's son obtained the going forth in the Blessed One's presence; he obtained acceptance. And not long after his Acceptance—dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, & resolute—he in no long time reached & remained in the supreme goal of the holy life, for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing & realizing it for himself in the here & now. He knew: "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world." And thus Ven. Elephant-trainer's Son12 became another one of the arahants.

Notes

1. Non-percipient (asaññī): This term is sometimes translated as "unconscious," but because the Buddha is so strict throughout this sutta in referring to saññā as it functions in other suttas—as "perception," i.e., the labels one attaches to experience—translating asaññī as "unconscious" creates needless confusion, especially as some readers might assume that the term would mean the absence of viññāṇa. An asaññī person might better be conceived as one in a mentally blank state.

2. The discussion does not include the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception because the topic here is perception and, as AN 9:36 points out, the dimension of nothingness is the highest perception-attainment.

3. See MN 140.

4. LDB mistakenly has "arises" here.

5. LDB omits "alert" here. (There are many other mistakes in the LDB translation of this sutta, but as it would be tedious to note them all, I am noting only these two, to alert the reader to the fact that the sloppiness that unfortunately mars much of LDB is particularly evident in its translation of this sutta.)

6. As AN 9:36 points out, one can attain cessation based on any of the levels of jhāna or the formless attainments. Thus, although the specific level from which cessation is attained might differ from person to person, its role in functioning as the basis for cessation is the same in every person's awakening.

7. According to the Commentary, the word "this" here refers to the perception characterizing the level of jhāna from which one attained the knowledge of cessation.

8. See the section on the mind-made body in DN 2.

9. Appropriation of a self (atta-paṭilābho): According to the Commentary, this refers to the appropriation of an individual identity (atta-bhāva-paṭilābho) on any of the three levels of becoming: the sensual level, the level of form, and the formless level. The term atta-bhāva-paṭilābho is used in a number of suttas—among them AN 4:192—where it definitely refers to the type of identity one assumes on experiencing rebirth in a particular level of being. However, there are two reasons for not following the Commentary's equation of atta-paṭilābho with atta-bhāva-paṭilābho. (1) As AN 4:72 makes clear, there is a type of atta-bhāva-paṭilābho—rebirth in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception—that would not be covered by any of the three types of appropriation of a self mentioned in this sutta. Thus the Buddha seems to be limiting his discussion here to the alternative selves posited by Poṭṭhapāda. (2) In a later passage in this sutta, the Buddha refers to the appropriation of a self as something he can point to directly in his listeners' immediate range of experience. Thus the term would seem to refer to the sense of self one can attain as a result of different levels of experience in meditation here and now.

10. The Commentary takes this is as the Buddha's affirmation of the idea—which in later centuries was accepted in all schools of Buddhism—that he spoke truth on two levels: conventional and ultimate. In context, though, the Buddha seems to be referring merely to the fact that he has adopted the linguistic usages of his interlocutors simply for the sake of discussion, and that they should not be interpreted out of context.

11. Full ordination as a monk.

12. Mv.I.74 indicates that it was considered a sign of respect to refer to a monk by his clan name.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 15; MN 109; SN 22:59; SN 44; AN 4:42; AN 10:95–96