DN 15 — DN 15 The Great Causes Discourse | Mahā Nidāna Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Great Causes Discourse

Mahā Nidāna Sutta (DN 15)

Introduction

This is one of the most profound discourses in the Pali Canon. It gives an extended treatment of the teachings of dependent co-arising (paṭicca samuppāda) and not-self (anattā) in an outlined context of how these teachings function in practice.

The first part of the discourse takes the factors of dependent co-arising in sequence from effect to cause, tracing them down to the mutual dependency of name-&-form (mental and

physical activity) on the one hand, and consciousness on the other. In connection with this point, it is worth noting that the word “great” in the title of the discourse may have a double meaning: modifying the word “discourse”—it’s a long discourse—and modifying “causes,” referring to the fact that name-&-form and consciousness as causal factors can account for everything describable in the cosmos.

After tracing the basic sequence of factors in the causal pattern, the discourse then reviews their inter-relationships, showing how they can explain stress and suffering both on the individual and on the social level.

The second part of the discourse, taking up the teaching of not-self, shows how dependent co-arising gives focus to this teaching in practice. It begins with a section on Delineations of a Self, classifying the various ways in which a sense of “self” might be defined in terms of form. The scheme of analysis introduced in this section—classifying views of the self according to the variables of form and formless; finite and infinite; already existing, naturally developing in the future, and alterable through human effort—covers all the theories of the self proposed in the classical Upaniṣads, as well as all theories of self or soul proposed in more recent times. The inclusion of an infinite self in this list gives the lie to the belief that the Buddha’s teachings on not-self were denying nothing more than a sense of “separate” or “limited” self. The discourse points out that even a limitless, infinite, all-embracing sense of self is based on an underlying tendency in the mind that has to be abandoned.

The following section, on Non-delineations of a Self, shows that it is possible for the mind to function without reading a “self” into experience. The remaining sections focus on ways in which this can be done by treating the sense of self as it relates to different aspects of name-&-form. The first of these sections—Assumptions of a Self—focuses on the sense of self as it relates to feeling, one of the “name” factors in name-&-form. The next section—Seven Stations of Consciousness—focuses on form, formlessness, and perception, which is another one of the “name” factors that allows a place for consciousness to land and grow on the “macro” level in the cycle of death and rebirth. The last section—Eight Emancipations—focuses on form, formlessness, and perception on the “micro” level in the practice of meditative absorption (jhāna).

In each of these cases, once the sense of attachment and identification with name-&-form can be broken, the mutual dependency between consciousness and name-&-form is broken as well. This brings about total freedom from the limits of “the extent to which there are means of designation, expression, and delineation… the extent to which the dimension of discernment extends, the extent to which the cycle revolves for the manifesting (discernibility) of this world—i.e., name-&-form together with consciousness.” This is the release at which the Buddha’s teachings are aimed.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was living among the Kurus. Now, the Kurus have a town named Kammāsadhamma. There Ven. Ānanda approached the Blessed

One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "It's amazing, lord, it's astounding, how deep this dependent co-arising is, and how deep its appearance, and yet to me it seems as clear as clear can be."

(The Buddha:) "Don't say that, Ānanda. Don't say that. Deep is this dependent co-arising, and deep its appearance. It's because of not understanding and not penetrating this Dhamma that this generation is like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, & bad destinations.

"If one is asked, 'Is there a demonstrable requisite condition for aging & death?' one should answer, 'There is.'

"If one is asked, 'From what requisite condition do aging & death come?' one should say, 'Aging & death come from birth as their requisite condition.'

"If one is asked, 'Is there a demonstrable requisite condition for birth?' one should answer, 'There is.'

"If one is asked, 'From what requisite condition does birth come?' one should say, 'Birth comes from becoming as its requisite condition.'

"If one is asked, 'Is there a demonstrable requisite condition for becoming?' one should answer, 'There is.'

"If one is asked, 'From what requisite condition does becoming come?' one should say, 'Becoming comes from clinging as its requisite condition.'

"If one is asked, 'Is there a demonstrable requisite condition for clinging?' one should answer, 'There is.'

"If one is asked, 'From what requisite condition does clinging come?' one should say, 'Clinging comes from craving as its requisite condition.'

"If one is asked, 'Is there a demonstrable requisite condition for craving?' one should answer, 'There is.'

"If one is asked, 'From what requisite condition does craving come?' one should say, 'Craving comes from feeling as its requisite condition.'

"If one is asked, 'Is there a demonstrable requisite condition for feeling?' one should answer, 'There is.'

"If one is asked, 'From what requisite condition does feeling come?' one should say, 'Feeling comes from contact as its requisite condition.'

“If one is asked, ‘Is there a demonstrable requisite condition for contact?’ one should answer, ‘There is.’

“If one is asked, ‘From what requisite condition does contact come?’ one should say, ‘Contact comes from name-&-form as its requisite condition.’

“If one is asked, ‘Is there a demonstrable requisite condition for name-&-form?’ one should answer, ‘There is.’

“If one is asked, ‘From what requisite condition does name-&-form come?’ one should say, ‘Name-&-form comes from consciousness as its requisite condition.’

“If one is asked, ‘Is there a demonstrable requisite condition for consciousness?’ one should answer, ‘There is.’

“If one is asked, ‘From what requisite condition does consciousness come?’ one should say, ‘Consciousness comes from name-&-form as its requisite condition.’

“Thus, Ānanda, from name-&-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness. From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form. From name-&-form as a requisite condition comes contact. From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling. From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving. From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging. From clinging as a requisite condition comes becoming. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. From birth as a requisite condition, aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress.

Aging-&-Death

“‘From birth as a requisite condition comes aging-&-death.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how from birth as a requisite condition come aging & death. If there were no birth at all, in any way, of anything anywhere—i.e., of devas in the state of devas, of celestials in the state of celestials, of spirits in the state of spirits, of demons in the state of demons, of human beings in the human state, of quadrupeds in the state of quadrupeds, of birds in the state of birds, of snakes in the state of snakes, or of any being in its own state—in the utter absence of birth, from the cessation of birth, would aging-&-death be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for aging-&-death, i.e., birth.

Birth

“‘From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how from becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. If there were no becoming at all, in any way, of anything anywhere—i.e., sensual becoming, form becoming, or formless becoming—in the utter absence of becoming, from the cessation of becoming, would birth be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for birth, i.e., becoming.

Becoming

“‘From clinging as a requisite condition comes becoming.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how from clinging as a requisite condition comes becoming. If there were no clinging at all, in any way, of anything anywhere—i.e., clinging to sensuality, clinging to precepts and practices, clinging to views, or clinging to doctrines of the self—in the utter absence of clinging, from the cessation of clinging, would becoming be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for becoming, i.e., clinging.

Clinging

“‘From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how from craving as a requisite condition comes clinging. If there were no craving at all, in any way, of anything anywhere—i.e., craving for forms, craving for sounds, craving for aromas, craving for flavors, craving for tactile sensations, craving for ideas—in the utter absence of craving, from the cessation of craving, would clinging be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for clinging, i.e., craving.

Craving

“‘From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how from feeling as a requisite condition comes craving. If there were no feeling at all, in any way, of anything anywhere—i.e., feeling born of contact at the eye, feeling born of contact at the ear, feeling born of contact at the nose, feeling born of contact at the tongue, feeling born of contact at the body, or feeling born of contact at the

intellect—in the utter absence of feeling, from the cessation of feeling, would craving be discerned?"

"No, lord."

"Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for craving, i.e., feeling.

Dependent on Craving

"Now, craving is dependent on feeling,

seeking is dependent on craving,

acquisition is dependent on seeking,

ascertainment is dependent on acquisition,

desire and passion is dependent on ascertainment,

attachment is dependent on desire and passion,

possessiveness is dependent on attachment,

stinginess is dependent on possessiveness,

defensiveness is dependent on stinginess,

and because of defensiveness, dependent on defensiveness, various evil, unskillful phenomena come into play: the taking up of sticks and knives; conflicts, quarrels, and disputes; accusations, divisive speech, and lies.

"And this is the way to understand how it is that because of defensiveness various evil, unskillful phenomena come into play: the taking up of sticks and knives; conflicts, quarrels, and disputes; accusations, divisive speech, and lies. If there were no defensiveness at all, in any way, of anything anywhere, in the utter absence of defensiveness, from the cessation of defensiveness, would various evil, unskillful phenomena—the taking up of sticks and knives; conflicts, quarrels, and disputes; accusations, divisive speech, and lies—come into play?"

"No, lord."

"Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for the coming-into-play of various evil, unskillful phenomena—the taking up of sticks and knives; conflicts, quarrels, and disputes; accusations, divisive speech, and lies—i.e., defensiveness.

“‘Defensiveness is dependent on stinginess.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how defensiveness is dependent on stinginess. If there were no stinginess at all, in any way, of anything anywhere, in the utter absence of stinginess, from the cessation of stinginess, would defensiveness be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for defensiveness, i.e., stinginess.

(Similarly back through the chain of conditions: stinginess, attachment, possessiveness, desire and passion, ascertainment, acquisition, and seeking.)

“‘Seeking is dependent on craving.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how seeking is dependent on craving. If there were no craving at all, in any way, of anything anywhere—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for no becoming—in the utter absence of craving, from the cessation of craving, would seeking be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for seeking, i.e., craving. Thus, Ānanda, these two phenomena (the chain of conditions leading from craving to birth, aging, and death, and the chain of conditions leading from craving to quarrels, etc.), as a duality, flow back into one place at feeling.

Feeling

“‘From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how from contact as a requisite condition comes feeling. If there were no contact at all, in any way, of anything anywhere—i.e., contact at the eye, contact at the ear, contact at the nose, contact at the tongue, contact at the body, or contact at the intellect—in the utter absence of contact, from the cessation of contact, would feeling be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for feeling, i.e., contact.

Contact

“‘From name-&-form as a requisite condition comes contact.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how, from name-&-form as a requisite condition comes contact. If the permutations, signs, themes, & indicators by which there is a description of name-group (mental activity) were all absent, would designation-contact with regard to the

form-group (the physical body) be discerned?"

"No, lord."

"If the permutations, signs, themes, & indicators by which there is a description of form-group were all absent, would resistance-contact with regard to the name-group be discerned?"

"No, lord."

"If the permutations, signs, themes, & indicators by which there is a description of name-group and form-group were all absent, would designation-contact or resistance-contact be discerned?"

"No, lord."

"If the permutations, signs, themes, \& indicators by which there is a description of name-\&-form were all absent, would contact be discerned?"

"No, lord."

"Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for contact, i.e., name-&-form.

Name-&-Form

"'From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.' Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how from consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form. If consciousness were not to descend into the mother's womb, would name-&-form take shape in the womb?"

"No, lord."

"If, after descending into the womb, consciousness were to depart, would name-&-form be produced for this world?"

"No, lord."

"If the consciousness of the young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name-&-form ripen, grow, and reach maturity?"

"No, lord."

"Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for name-&-form, i.e., consciousness.

Consciousness

“From name-&-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness.’ Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how from name-&-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness. If consciousness were not to gain a foothold in name-&-form, would a coming-into-play of the origination of birth, aging, death, and stress in the future be discerned?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus this is a cause, this is a reason, this is an origination, this is a requisite condition for consciousness, i.e., name-&-form.

“This is the extent to which there is birth, aging, death, passing away, and re-arising. This is the extent to which there are means of designation, expression, and delineation. This is the extent to which the dimension of discernment extends, the extent to which the cycle revolves for the manifesting [discernibility] of this world—i.e., name-&-form together with consciousness.

Delineations of a Self

“To what extent, Ānanda, does one delineate when delineating a self? Either delineating a self possessed of form & finite, one delineates that ‘My self is possessed of form & finite.’ Or, delineating a self possessed of form & infinite, one delineates that ‘My self is possessed of form & infinite.’ Or, delineating a self formless & finite, one delineates that ‘My self is formless & finite.’ Or, delineating a self formless & infinite, one delineates that ‘My self is formless & infinite.’

“Now, the one who, when delineating a self, delineates it as possessed of form & finite, either delineates it as possessed of form & finite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become possessed of form & finite [in the future/after death/when falling asleep], or the thought occurs to him that ‘Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.’ This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self possessed of form & finite obsesses him.

“The one who, when delineating a self, delineates it as possessed of form & infinite, either delineates it as possessed of form & infinite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become possessed of form & infinite, or the thought occurs to him that ‘Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.’ This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self possessed of form & infinite obsesses him.

“The one who, when delineating a self, delineates it as formless & finite, either delineates it as formless & finite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become formless & finite, or the thought occurs to him that ‘Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.’ This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self formless & finite obsesses him.

“The one who, when delineating a self, delineates it as formless & infinite, either delineates it as formless & infinite in the present, or of such a nature that it will (naturally) become formless & infinite [in the future/after death], or the thought occurs to him that ‘Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.’ This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self formless & infinite obsesses him.1

Non-Delineations of a Self

“To what extent, Ānanda, does one not delineate when not delineating a self? Either not delineating a self possessed of form and finite, one does not delineate that ‘My self is possessed of form and finite.’ Or, not delineating a self possessed of form and infinite, one does not delineate that ‘My self is possessed of form and infinite.’ Or, not delineating a self formless and finite, one does not delineate that ‘My self is formless and finite.’ Or, not delineating a self formless and infinite, one does not delineate that ‘My self is formless and infinite.’

“Now, the one who, when not delineating a self, does not delineate it as possessed of form and finite, does not delineate it as possessed of form and finite in the present, nor does he delineate it as of such a nature that it will (naturally) become possessed of form and finite [in the future/after death], nor does the thought occur to him that ‘Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.’ This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self possessed of form and finite does not obsess him.

“The one who, when not delineating a self, does not delineate it as possessed of form and infinite, does not delineate it as possessed of form and infinite in the present, nor does he delineate it as of such a nature that it will (naturally) become possessed of form and infinite [in the future/after death], nor does the thought occur to him that ‘Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.’ This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self possessed of form and infinite does not obsess him.

“The one who, when not delineating a self, does not delineate it as formless and finite, does not delineate it as formless and finite in the present, nor does he delineate it as of such a nature that it will (naturally) become formless and finite [in the future/after death], nor does the thought occur to him that ‘Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.’ This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self formless and finite does not obsess him.

“The one who, when not delineating a self, does not delineate it as formless and infinite, does not delineate it as formless and infinite in the present, nor does he delineate it as of such a nature that it will (naturally) become formless and infinite [in the future/after death], nor does the thought occur to him that ‘Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.’ This being the case, it is proper to say that speculation about a self formless and infinite does not obsess him.

Assumptions of a Self

“To what extent, Ānanda, does one assume when assuming a self? Assuming feeling to be the self, one assumes that ‘Feeling is my self’ (or) ‘Feeling is not my self: My self is oblivious (to feeling)’ (or) ‘Neither is feeling my self, nor is my self oblivious to feeling, but rather my self feels, in that my self is subject to feeling.’

“Now, one who says, ‘Feeling is my self,’ should be addressed as follows: ‘There are these three feelings, my friend—feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, and feelings of neither pleasure nor pain. Which of these three feelings do you assume to be the self? At a moment when a feeling of pleasure is sensed, no feeling of pain or of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed. Only a feeling of pleasure is sensed at that moment. At a moment when a feeling of pain is sensed, no feeling of pleasure or of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed. Only a feeling of pain is sensed at that moment. At a moment when a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed, no feeling of pleasure or of pain is sensed. Only a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed at that moment.

“Now, a feeling of pleasure is inconstant, fabricated, dependent on conditions, subject to passing away, dissolution, fading, and cessation. A feeling of pain is inconstant, fabricated, dependent on conditions, subject to passing away, dissolution, fading, and cessation. A feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is inconstant, fabricated, dependent on conditions, subject to passing away, dissolution, fading, and cessation. Having sensed a feeling of pleasure as ‘my self,’ then with the cessation of one’s very own feeling of pleasure, ‘my self’ has perished. Having sensed a feeling of pain as ‘my self,’ then with the cessation of one’s very own feeling of pain, ‘my self’ has perished. Having sensed a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain as ‘my self,’ then with the cessation of one’s very own feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, ‘my self’ has perished.

“Thus he assumes, assuming in the immediate present a self inconstant, entangled in pleasure and pain, subject to arising and passing away, he who says, ‘Feeling is my self.’ Thus in this manner, Ānanda, one does not see fit to assume feeling to be the self.

“As for the person who says, ‘Feeling is not the self: My self is oblivious (to feeling),’ he should be addressed as follows: ‘My friend, where nothing whatsoever is sensed [experienced] at all, would there be the thought, “I am”?’”

“No, lord.”

“Thus in this manner, Ānanda, one does not see fit to assume that ‘Feeling is not my self: My self is oblivious (to feeling).’

“As for the person who says, ‘Neither is feeling my self, nor is my self oblivious (to feeling), but rather my self feels, in that my self is subject to feeling,’ he should be addressed as follows: ‘My friend, should feelings altogether and every way stop without remainder, then with feeling completely not existing, owing to the cessation of feeling, would there be the thought, “I am”?’”

“No, lord.”

“Thus in this manner, Ānanda, one does not see fit to assume that ‘Neither is feeling my self, nor is my self oblivious (to feeling), but rather my self feels, in that my self is subject to feeling.’

“Now, Ānanda, in as far as a monk doesn’t assume feeling to be the self, nor the self as oblivious, nor that ‘My self feels, in that my self is subject to feeling,’ then, not assuming in this way, he is not sustained by [does not cling to] anything in the world. Unsustained, he is not agitated. Unagitated, he is totally unbound right within. He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’

The Monk Released

“If anyone were to say with regard to a monk whose mind is thus released that ‘The Tathāgata exists after death,’ is his view, that would be mistaken; that ‘The Tathāgata does not exist after death’ … that ‘The Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death’ … that ‘The Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death’ is his view, that would be mistaken. Why? Having directly known the extent of designation and the extent of the objects of designation, the extent of expression and the extent of the objects of expression, the extent of description and the extent of the objects of description, the extent of discernment and the extent of the objects of discernment, the extent to which the cycle revolves: Having directly known that, the monk is released.2 The view that, ‘Having directly known that, the monk released does not see, does not know’: That would be mistaken.3

Seven Stations of Consciousness

“Ānanda, there are these seven stations of consciousness and two dimensions. Which seven?

“There are beings with multiplicity of body and multiplicity of perception,4 such as human beings, some devas, and some beings in the lower realms. This is the first station of consciousness.

“There are beings with multiplicity of body and singularity of perception, such as the Devas of Brahmā’s Retinue generated by the first (jhāna) and (some) beings in the four realms of deprivation.5 This is the second station of consciousness.

“There are beings with singularity of body and multiplicity of perception, such as the Radiant Devas. This is the third station of consciousness.

“There are beings with singularity of body and singularity of perception, such as the Beautiful Black Devas. This is the fourth station of consciousness.

“There are beings who, 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,’ arrive at the dimension of the infinitude of space.

This is the fifth station of consciousness.

“There are beings who, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite consciousness,’ arrive at the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. This is the sixth station of consciousness.

“There are beings who, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) ‘There is nothing,’ arrive at the dimension of nothingness. This is the seventh station of consciousness.

“The dimension of non-percipient beings and, second, the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. [These are the two dimensions.]

“Now, as for the first station of consciousness—beings with multiplicity of body and multiplicity of perception, such as human beings, some devas, and some beings in the lower realms: If one discerns that (station of consciousness), discerns its origination, discerns its passing away, discerns its allure, discerns its drawbacks, discerns the escape from it, would it be proper, by means of that [discernment] to take delight there?”

“No, lord.”

[Similarly with each of the remaining stations of consciousness and two dimensions.]

“Ānanda, when knowing—as they have come to be—the origination, passing away, allure, drawbacks of—and escape from—these seven stations of consciousness and two dimensions, a monk is released through lack of clinging, he is said to be a monk released through discernment.

Eight Emancipations

“Ānanda, there are these eight emancipations. Which eight?

“Possessed of form, one sees forms. This is the first emancipation.

“Not percipient of form internally, one sees forms externally. This is the second emancipation.

“One is intent only on the beautiful. This is the third emancipation.

“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,’ one enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space. This is the fourth emancipation.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite consciousness,’ one enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. This is the fifth emancipation.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) ‘There is nothing,’ one enters and remains in the dimension of nothingness. This is the sixth emancipation.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, one enters and remains in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. This is the seventh emancipation.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, one enters and remains in the cessation of perception and feeling. This is the eighth emancipation.

“Now, when a monk attains these eight emancipations in forward order, in reverse order, in forward and reverse order, when he attains them and emerges from them wherever he wants, however he wants, and for as long as he wants, when through the ending of effluents he enters and remains in the effluent-free release of awareness and release of discernment, having directly known it and realized it for himself in the here and now, he is said to be a monk released in both ways. And as for another release in both ways, higher or more sublime than this, there is none.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Ven. Ānanda delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

Notes

1. Some scholars, in an attempt to place the Buddha’s teachings in an historical context, have maintained that his not-self teaching was meant to apply specifically to the Upaniṣadic self-doctrine. In other words, the Buddha’s intention was to deny the truth of the Upaniṣadic doctrine of the universal self; he was not denying other, more common-sense doctrines of the self. This understanding of the non-self teaching has partial support in MN 22—which subjects the idea of a universal self to specific ridicule.

Other scholars take an opposite tack, saying that the Buddha was refuting the existence of a perduring individual self, but not the existence of a universal or inter-connected self.

Neither position does justice to the wide variety of self doctrines that the Buddha rejects in this passage—whether finite or infinite (or endless—ananta); whether possessed of form or formless—for the act of holding to any of these doctrines involves clinging, and thus suffering and stress.

The first position, in particular, also fails to take into account two aspects of the Buddha’s actual historical context:

a) The Upaniṣadic tradition was not the only tradition at the Buddha’s time espousing doctrines of the self. DN 2 cites—and refutes—the self-doctrines of other, non-Vedic schools of the time.

b) No single self-doctrine can claim to be “the” Upaniṣadic doctrine of the self. The Upaniṣads were a diverse body of texts, offering a wide variety of teachings on the topic. Some, such as the Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad and Kaṭha Upaniṣad, state explicitly that each person has two selves, finite and infinite; and the major Upaniṣads differ on the nature of these two selves and how the infinite self can be attained.

In fact, it is instructive to classify the various Upaniṣadic self-doctrines in light of the twelve categories listed in this passage. A survey of the major Upaniṣads reveals self-doctrines falling into eight—and perhaps nine—of these categories, as follows: (Passage numbers are taken from S. Radhakrishnan, The Principal Upaniṣads. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969.)

1) Already possessed of form and finite:

Bṛhad-āraṇyaka II.5.1

Maitrī VI.11

2) Naturally becoming possessed of form and finite:

Bṛhad-āraṇyaka IV.3.19-21

3) Can be made possessed of form and finite:

—

4) Already possessed of form and infinite:

Bṛhad-āraṇyaka I.4.7-10

Bṛhad-āraṇyaka I.5.20

Chāndogya III.14.2-3

Muṇḍaka III.1.7

5) Naturally becoming possessed of form and infinite:

Chāndogya VIII.3.4

Chāndogya VIII.12.2-3

6) Can be made possessed of form and infinite:

Praśna IV.6-11

Subāla III

Kaivalya VI

7) Already formless and finite:

Kaṭha I.3.1-4 (?—the description here suggests, but does not explicitly state, that the self is formless)

8) Naturally becoming formless and finite:

—

9) Can be made formless and finite:

—

10) Already formless and infinite:

Bṛhad-āraṇyaka III.8.8-11

11) Naturally becoming formless and infinite:

Praśna IV.6-11

12) Can be made formless and infinite:

Kaṭha I.3.13-15

Subāla III

Subāla IX.15

Paiṅgala III.6

There is no way of knowing if these Upaniṣads, as we have them, were composed before or after the Buddha's time. Thus, the classifications here may or may not have been formulated in response to them. Nevertheless, the sheer variety of their teachings shows that there was no single Upaniṣadic doctrine of the self, and that the Buddha did not formulate his not-self teaching in response to only one doctrine. As the framework here shows, the not-self teaching was formulated in such a way as to counteract the act of clinging to any self-doctrine, regardless of how the self might be defined.

2. The relationship between the limitations of language and the question of the existence of the Tathāgata after death is indicated by SN 23:2. There the Buddha notes that one defines oneself as a being through passion and delight for any of the five aggregates. Once there is no passion or delight for the aggregates, one can no longer be defined as a

being. Once one is no longer defined, there is no way of describing one as existing, not existing, neither, or both—regardless of whether one is alive or dead (see SN 22:85–86).

3. The various readings for this sentence all seem corrupt. The sense of the paragraph, read in light of AN 10:96, demands that the view expressed in the last sentence be about the monk released, unlike the four earlier views, which are wrongly attributed to the monk released. In other words, the monk released has no opinion on the question of whether the Tathāgata does, doesn't, etc., exist after death. This might lead to the supposition that his lack of opinion comes from a lack of knowledge or vision. The description of what he comes to know in the course of gaining release shows that this supposition is inappropriate. He does know, he does see, and what he knows and sees about the limitations of language and concepts shows him that the question of the existence of the Tathāgata after death should be set aside.

Thus I would reconstruct the Pali of the final sentence in this paragraph as: Tadabhiññā vimutto bhikkhu na jānāti nā passati iti sā diṭṭhi tadakallaṁ.

4. MN 137 indicates that perceptions of multiplicity deal with the six senses, whereas perceptions of singularity form the basis of the four formless attainments.

5. This last phrase—"and (some) beings in the four realms of deprivation" is in the Thai edition of the Canon, but not in the PTS or Burmese editions. It seems required by the context in order to cover the beings in the lower realms not included in the first station of consciousness.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 109; MN 148; SN 12:2; SN 12:15; SN 12:20; SN 12:65; SN 12:67; SN 12:70; SN 22:1; SN 22:85–86; AN 2:30; AN 4:199; AN 7:11–12; AN 9:43–45; AN 10:96; Sn 3:12; Sn 4:11