DN 26 — DN 26 The Wheel-turning Emperor (Excerpt) | Cakkavatti Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Wheel-turning Emperor (Excerpt)

Cakkavatti Sutta (DN 26)

Introduction

The body of this sutta consists of a narrative illustrating the power of skillful action. The narrative states that, in the past, unskillful behavior was unknown among the human race. As a result, people lived for an immensely long time—80,000 years—endowed with great beauty, wealth, pleasure, and strength. Over the course of time, though, they began behaving in various unskillful ways. This caused the human life span gradually to shorten, to the point where it now stands at 100 years, with human beauty, wealth, pleasure, and strength decreasing proportionately. In the future, as morality continues to degenerate, human life will continue to shorten to the point were the normal life span is ten years, with

people reaching sexual maturity at five. “Among those human beings, the ten courses of action (see AN 10:176) will have entirely disappeared.... The word ‘skillful’ will not exist, so from where will there be anyone who does what is skillful? Those who lack the honorable qualities of motherhood, fatherhood, contemplative-hood, & brahman-hood will be the ones who receive homage.... Fierce hatred will arise, fierce malevolence, fierce rage, & murderous thoughts: mother for child, child for mother, father for child, child for father, brother for sister, sister for brother.”

Ultimately, conditions will deteriorate to the point of a “sword-interval,” in which swords appear in the hands of all human beings, and they hunt one another like game. A few people, however, will take shelter in the wilderness to escape the carnage, and when the slaughter is over, they will come out of hiding and resolve to take up a life of skillful and virtuous action again. With the recovery of virtue, the human life span will gradually increase again until it reaches 80,000 years, with people attaining sexual maturity at 500. Only three diseases will be known at that time: desire, lack of food, and old age. Another Buddha—Metteyya (Maitreya)—will gain awakening, his monastic Saṅgha numbering in the thousands. The greatest king of the time, Saṅkha, will go forth into homelessness and attain arahantship under Metteyya’s guidance.

The story, after chronicling the ups and downs of human wealth, life span, etc., concludes with the following lesson on kamma and skillful action.

* * *

... “Monks, live with yourself as your island, yourself as your refuge, with nothing else as your refuge. Live with the Dhamma as your island, the Dhamma as your refuge, with nothing else as your refuge.1 And how does a monk live with himself as his island, himself as his refuge, with nothing else as his refuge; with the Dhamma as his island, the Dhamma as his refuge, with nothing else as his refuge? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. This is how a monk lives with himself as his island, himself as his refuge, with nothing else as his refuge; with the Dhamma as his island, the Dhamma as his refuge, with nothing else as his refuge.

“Wander, monks, in your proper range, your own ancestral territory. When you wander in your proper range, your own ancestral territory, you will grow in long life, beauty, pleasure, wealth, & strength.

“And what constitutes a monk’s long life?2 There is the case where a monk develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on desire & the fabrications of exertion. He develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on persistence.... founded on intent.... He develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on discrimination & the fabrications of exertion. From the development & pursuit of these four bases of power, he can stay (alive) for an eon, if he

wants, or for the remainder of an eon.3 This constitutes a monk's long life.

"And what constitutes a monk's beauty? There is the case where a 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. This constitutes a monk's beauty.

"And what constitutes a monk's pleasure? There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. With the fading of rapture he 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.' With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This constitutes a monk's pleasure.

"And what constitutes a monk's wealth? There is the case where a monk keeps pervading the first direction [the east]—as well as the second direction, the third, & the fourth—with an awareness imbued with good will. Thus he keeps pervading above, below, & all around, everywhere & in every respect the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with good will: abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.

"He keeps pervading the first direction—as well as the second direction, the third, & the fourth—with an awareness imbued with compassion.... imbued with empathetic joy....

"He keeps pervading the first direction—as well as the second direction, the third, & the fourth—with an awareness imbued with equanimity. Thus he keeps pervading above, below, & all around, everywhere & in every respect the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with equanimity: abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.

"This constitutes a monk's wealth.

"And what constitutes a monk's strength? There is the case where a monk, through the ending of the mental fermentations, enters & remains in the fermentation-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now. This constitutes a monk's strength.

"Monks, I don't envision any other single strength so hard to overcome as this: the strength of Māra.4 And the adopting of skillful qualities is what causes this merit to increase."5

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One's words.

Notes

1. This can also be translated as: "Live with mental qualities (dhammas) as your island, mental qualities as your refuge, with nothing else as your refuge."

2. Literally, "what is in a monk's long life?" This appears to be an idiomatic usage of the locative case. The commentary interprets this idiom as meaning, what causes a monk's long life, beauty, etc. From this reading, it explains, for example, that a monk attracts wealth if he develops the four sublime attitudes. While this is true, it seems to cheapen the message of this passage. For a discussion of the four bases of power listed here, see SN 51:15 and SN 51:20.

3. See DN 16, notes 24 and 25.

4. This last passage is related to the opening passage of the sutta, in which the Buddha says, "Wander, monks, in your proper range, your own ancestral territory. When one wanders in his proper range, his own ancestral territory, Māra gains no opening, Māra gains no foothold. And it is because of adopting skillful qualities that this merit increases." See also SN 47:6–7.

5. This is the refrain repeated with each stage in the account of how human life will improve in the aftermath of the sword-interval. Here, "merit" seems to have the meaning it has in Iti 22: "Don't be afraid of acts of merit. This is another way of saying what is blissful, desirable, pleasing, endearing, charming—i.e., acts of merit."