Snp 5.6 — Sn 5:6 Upasīva’s Questions

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: ABBREVIATED. Every source-unit character is preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure. Thanissaro's collection-level note explicitly states that repetitions were cut: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/about.html. This is evidence about the translation method, not an assertion that every individual unit contains an omission; no repetitions reconstructed.

Text

5:6 Upasīva’s Questions

Alone, Sakyan, with nothing to rely on,

I can’t venture across

the great flood.

Tell me, All-around Eye,

the support to rely on

for crossing over this flood.

The Buddha:

Mindfully focused on nothingness,1
relying on ‘There isn’t,’
you should cross over the flood.
Abandoning sensuality,
abstaining from conversations,
keep watch for the ending of
craving, night & day.

Upasīva:
One free from passion
for all sensuality
relying on nothingness, letting go of all else,
released in the highest emancipation of perception:
Does he stay there unaffected?

The Buddha:
One free from passion
for all sensuality
relying on nothingness, letting go of all else,
released in the highest emancipation of perception:
He stays there unaffected.

Upasīva:
If, All-around Eye, he stays there,
unaffected for many years,
right there
would he be cooled & released?
Would his consciousness be like that?2

The Buddha:
As a flame overthrown by the force of the wind
goes to an end

that cannot be classified,3

so the sage freed from the name-body4

goes to an end

that cannot be classified.

Upasīva:

One who has reached the end:

Does he not exist,

or is he for eternity

free from dis-ease?

Please, sage, declare this to me

as this phenomenon has been known by you.

The Buddha:

One who has reached the end

has no criterion5

by which anyone would say that—6

for him it doesn't exist.

When all phenomena are done away with,7

all means of speaking

are done away with as well.

vv. 1069–1076

Notes

1. "Nothingness" here denotes the dimension of nothingness, one of the four levels of mental absorption on formless themes. One attains this level, after surmounting the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, by focusing on the perception, "There is nothing." MN 26 tells us that Āḷāra Kālāma, the Buddha's first teacher when the latter was still a Bodhisatta, had attained this level of mental absorption and had thought that it was the highest possible attainment. The Bodhisatta left him upon realizing that it was not true liberation from stress and suffering. Nevertheless, the dimension of nothingness can be used as a basis for the insight leading to that liberation. On this point, see Sn 5:14, below, and AN 9:36. On the strategy of relying on the formless states to cross over the flood, see MN 52, MN 106, MN 111, and AN 9:36.

2. Reading bhavetha viññāṇaṁ tathāvidhassa with the Thai edition, interpreting tathāvidhassa as an elision of tathāvidhaṁ (of that sort) and assa (his). The Burmese and Sri Lankan editions read cavetha (would fall; would die) instead of bhavetha (would be). It's also possible to read tathāvidhassa as the genitive form of tathāvidha. Combined with cavetha, this would yield: Would the consciousness of such a one fall?

3. For a discussion of this passage in light of early Buddhist theories of fire, see The Mind Like Fire Unbound, chapter 1.

4. Nāma-kāya = mental activities of all sorts.

5. For a discussion of the meaning of "criterion" in this passage, see The Mind Like Fire Unbound, chapter 1. On the Tathāgata as being undescribable, see Skill in Questions, chapter 8 and appendix 4.

6. Reading vajjā (he would say/one would say), with the Sri Lankan edition. The Thai has vajju, which is irregular; the Burmese, vajjaṁ (they would say). Vajjā seems to be the best reading here for at least three textual reasons: (a) It fits into the meter better than vajjaṁ. (b) There has been no mention of any "they" up to this point in the dialogue. (c) The same line appears in SN 1:20, and there all the major editions of the Canon read vajjā.

From an interpretive standpoint, vajjā allows for the Buddha's answer to respond both to Upasīva's explicit question—does such a person not exist, or is he for eternity free from disease?—and for his implicit one: What has the Buddha's own experience been of this state? Reading vajjā as meaning "one would say," the answer tells of how the state of the person in question would appear to someone else. Reading it as meaning "he would say," the answer tells of how the person himself would describe the experience of that state. In neither case is there any criterion by which anyone could say, looking from within or without, that such a person doesn't exist or that he exists for eternity free from disease.

7. This is one of the passages in the Canon that treats unbinding, not as a phenomenon (dhamma), but as the end of phenomena. On this point, see AN 3:137, note 1.