MN 1 — MN 1 The Root Sequence | Mūlapariyāya Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Root Sequence

Mūlapariyāya Sutta (MN 1)

Introduction

The Buddha listed clinging to views as one of the four forms of clinging that tie the mind to the processes of suffering. He thus recommended that his followers relinquish their clinging, not only to views in their full-blown form as specific positions, but also in their rudimentary form as the categories & relationships that the mind reads into experience. This is a point he makes in the following discourse, which is apparently his response to a particular school of Brahmanical thought that was developing in his time—the Sāṅkhya, or classification school.

This school had its beginnings in the thought of Uddālaka, a ninth-century B.C. philosopher who posited a “root”: an abstract principle out of which all things emanate and which remains immanent in all things. Philosophers who carried on this line of thinking offered a variety of theories, based on logic and meditative experience, about the nature of the ultimate root and about the hierarchy of the emanation. Many of their theories were recorded in the Upaniṣads and eventually developed into the classical Sāṅkhya system around the time of the Buddha.

Although the present discourse says nothing about the background of the monks listening to it, the Commentary states that before their ordination they were brahmans, and that even after their ordination they continued to interpret the Buddha’s teachings in light of their previous training, which may well have been proto-Sāṅkhya. If this is so, then the Buddha’s opening lines —“I will teach you the sequence of the root of all phenomena”—would have them prepared to hear his contribution to their line of thinking. And, in fact, the list of topics he covers reads like a Buddhist Sāṅkhya. Paralleling the classical Sāṅkhya, it contains 24 items, begins with the physical world (here, the four physical properties), and leads back through ever more refined & inclusive levels of being & experience, culminating with the ultimate Buddhist concept: unbinding (nibbāna). In the pattern of Sāṅkhya thought, unbinding would thus be the ultimate “root” or ground of being immanent in all things and out of which they all emanate.

However, instead of following this pattern of thinking, the Buddha attacks it at its very root: the notion of a principle in the abstract, the “in” (immanence) & “out of” (emanation) superimposed on experience. Only an uninstructed run of the mill person, he says, would read experience in this way. In contrast, a person in training should look for a different kind of “root”—the root of suffering experienced in the present—and find it in the act of delight. Developing dispassion for that delight, the trainee can then comprehend the process of coming-into-being for what it is, drop all participation in it, and thus achieve true awakening.

If the listeners present at this discourse were indeed interested in fitting Buddhist teachings into a Sāṅkhyan mold, then it’s small wonder that they were displeased—one of the few places where we read of a negative reaction to the Buddha’s words. They had hoped to hear his contribution to their project, but instead they hear their whole pattern of thinking & theorizing attacked as ignorant & ill-informed. The Commentary tells us, though, they were later able to overcome their displeasure and eventually attain awakening on listening to the discourse reported in AN 3:126.

Although at present we rarely think in the same terms as the Sāṅkhya philosophers, there has long been—and still is—a common tendency to create a “Buddhist” metaphysics in which the experience of emptiness, the Unconditioned, the Dharma-body, Buddha-nature, rigpa, etc., is said to function as the ground of being from which the “All”—the entirety of our sensory & mental experience—is said to spring and to which we return when we meditate. Some people think that these theories are the inventions of scholars without any direct meditative experience, but actually they have most often originated among meditators, who label (or in the words of the discourse, “perceive”) a particular meditative

experience as the ultimate goal, identify with it in a subtle way (as when we are told that "we are the knowing"), and then suppose that level of experience to be the ground of being out of which all other experience comes.

Any teaching that follows these lines would be subject to the same criticism that the Buddha directed against the monks who first heard this discourse.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Ukkaṭṭhā, in the shade of a royal Sal tree in the Very Blessed Forest. There he addressed the monks, "Monks!"

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

The Blessed One said, "Monks, I will teach you the sequence of the root of all phenomena [or: the root sequence of all phenomena]. Listen & pay close attention. I will speak."

"As you say, lord," they responded to him.

The Blessed One said: "There is the case, monks, where an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for people of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—perceives earth as earth. Perceiving earth as earth, he supposes (things) about earth, he supposes (things) in earth, he supposes (things) coming out of earth, he supposes earth as 'mine,' he delights in earth. Why is that? Because he has not comprehended it, I tell you.

"He perceives water as water… fire as fire… wind as wind1… beings as beings… devas as devas… Pajāpati as Pajāpati… Brahmā as Brahmā… the Radiant devas as Radiant devas… the Beautiful Black devas as Beautiful Black devas… the Sky-fruit devas as Sky-fruit devas… the Conqueror as the Conqueror2… the dimension of the infinitude of space as the dimension of the infinitude of space… the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness as the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness… the dimension of nothingness as the dimension of nothingness… the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception as the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception3… the seen as the seen… the heard as the heard… the sensed as the sensed… the cognized as the cognized4… singleness as singleness… multiplicity as multiplicity5… the All as the All6…

"He perceives unbinding as unbinding.7 Perceiving unbinding as unbinding, he supposes things about unbinding, he supposes things in unbinding, he supposes things coming out of unbinding, he supposes unbinding as 'mine,' he delights in unbinding. Why is that? Because he has not comprehended it, I tell you.

The Trainee

“A monk who is a trainee—yearning for the unexcelled relief from bondage, his aspirations as yet unfulfilled—directly knows earth as earth. Directly knowing earth as earth, let him not suppose things about earth, let him not suppose things in earth, let him not suppose things coming out of earth, let him not suppose earth as ‘mine,’ let him not delight in earth. Why is that? So that he may comprehend it, I tell you.

“He directly knows water as water… fire as fire… wind as wind… beings as beings… devas as devas… Pajāpati as Pajāpati… Brahmā as Brahmā… the Radiant devas as Radiant devas… the Beautiful Black devas as Beautiful Black devas… the Sky-fruit devas as Sky-fruit devas… the Conqueror as the Conqueror… the dimension of the infinitude of space as the dimension of the infinitude of space… the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness as the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness… the dimension of nothingness as the dimension of nothingness… the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception as the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception… the seen as the seen… the heard as the heard… the sensed as the sensed… the cognized as the cognized… singleness as singleness… multiplicity as multiplicity… the All as the All…

“He directly knows unbinding as unbinding. Directly knowing unbinding as unbinding, let him not suppose things about unbinding, let him not suppose things in unbinding, let him not suppose things coming out of unbinding, let him not suppose unbinding as ‘mine,’ let him not delight in unbinding. Why is that? So that he may comprehend it, I tell you.

The Arahant

“A monk who is a Worthy One, devoid of effluents—who has attained completion, finished the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, destroyed the fetters of becoming, and is released through right knowledge—directly knows earth as earth. Directly knowing earth as earth, he doesn’t suppose things about earth, doesn’t suppose things in earth, doesn’t suppose things coming out of earth, doesn’t suppose earth as ‘mine,’ doesn’t delight in earth. Why is that? Because he has comprehended it, I tell you.

“He directly knows water as water… fire as fire… wind as wind… beings as beings… devas as devas… Pajāpati as Pajāpati… Brahmā as Brahmā… the Radiant devas as Radiant devas… the Beautiful Black devas as Beautiful Black devas… the Sky-fruit devas as Sky-fruit devas… the Conqueror as the Conqueror… the dimension of the infinitude of space as the dimension of the infinitude of space… the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness as the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness… the dimension of nothingness as the dimension of nothingness… the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception as the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception… the seen as the seen… the heard as the heard… the sensed as the sensed… the cognized as the cognized… singleness as singleness… multiplicity as multiplicity… the All as the All…

“He directly knows unbinding as unbinding. Directly knowing unbinding as unbinding, he doesn’t suppose things about unbinding, doesn’t suppose things in unbinding, doesn’t suppose things coming out of unbinding, doesn’t suppose unbinding as ‘mine,’ doesn’t delight in unbinding. Why is that? Because he has comprehended it, I tell you.

“A monk who is a Worthy One, devoid of effluents… directly knows earth as earth. Directly knowing earth as earth, he doesn’t suppose things about earth, doesn’t suppose things in earth, doesn’t suppose things coming out of earth, doesn’t suppose earth as ‘mine,’ doesn’t delight in earth. Why is that? Because, with the ending of passion, he is devoid of passion, I tell you.

“He directly knows water as water… the All as the All…

“He directly knows unbinding as unbinding. Directly knowing unbinding as unbinding, he doesn’t suppose things about unbinding, doesn’t suppose things in unbinding, doesn’t suppose things coming out of unbinding, doesn’t suppose unbinding as ‘mine,’ doesn’t delight in unbinding. Why is that? Because, with the ending of passion, he is devoid of passion, I tell you.

“A monk who is a Worthy One, devoid of effluents… directly knows earth as earth. Directly knowing earth as earth, he doesn’t suppose things about earth, doesn’t suppose things in earth, doesn’t suppose things coming out of earth, doesn’t suppose earth as ‘mine,’ doesn’t delight in earth. Why is that? Because, with the ending of aversion, he is devoid of aversion, I tell you.

“He directly knows water as water… the All as the All…

“He directly knows unbinding as unbinding. Directly knowing unbinding as unbinding, he doesn’t suppose things about unbinding, doesn’t suppose things in unbinding, doesn’t suppose things coming out of unbinding, doesn’t suppose unbinding as ‘mine,’ doesn’t delight in unbinding. Why is that? Because, with the ending of aversion, he is devoid of aversion, I tell you.

“A monk who is a Worthy One, devoid of effluents… directly knows earth as earth. Directly knowing earth as earth, he doesn’t suppose things about earth, doesn’t suppose things in earth, doesn’t suppose things coming out of earth, doesn’t suppose earth as ‘mine,’ doesn’t delight in earth. Why is that? Because, with the ending of delusion, he is devoid of delusion, I tell you.

“He directly knows water as water… the All as the All…

“He directly knows unbinding as unbinding. Directly knowing unbinding as unbinding, he doesn’t suppose things about unbinding, doesn’t suppose things in unbinding, doesn’t suppose things coming out of unbinding, doesn’t suppose unbinding as ‘mine,’ doesn’t delight in unbinding. Why is that? Because, with the ending of delusion, he is devoid of delusion, I tell you.

The Tathāgata

“The Tathāgata—a worthy one, rightly self-awakened—directly knows earth as earth. Directly knowing earth as earth, he doesn’t suppose things about earth, doesn’t suppose

things in earth, doesn't suppose things coming out of earth, doesn't suppose earth as 'mine,' doesn't delight in earth. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata has comprehended it to the end, I tell you.

"He directly knows water as water… fire as fire… wind as wind… beings as beings… devas as devas… Pajāpati as Pajāpati… Brahmā as Brahmā… the Radiant devas as Radiant devas… the Beautiful Black devas as Beautiful Black devas… the Sky-fruit devas as Sky-fruit devas… the Conqueror as the Conqueror… the dimension of the infinitude of space as the dimension of the infinitude of space… the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness as the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness… the dimension of nothingness as the dimension of nothingness… the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception as the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception… the seen as the seen… the heard as the heard… the sensed as the sensed… the cognized as the cognized… singleness as singleness… multiplicity as multiplicity… the All as the All…

"He directly knows unbinding as unbinding. Directly knowing unbinding as unbinding, he doesn't suppose things about unbinding, doesn't suppose things in unbinding, doesn't suppose things coming out of unbinding, doesn't suppose unbinding as 'mine,' doesn't delight in unbinding. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata has comprehended it to the end, I tell you.

"The Tathāgata—a worthy one, rightly self-awakened—directly knows earth as earth. Directly knowing earth as earth, he doesn't suppose things about earth, doesn't suppose things in earth, doesn't suppose things coming out of earth, doesn't suppose earth as 'mine,' doesn't delight in earth. Why is that? Because he has known that delight is the root of suffering & stress, that from coming-into-being there is birth, and that for what has come into being there is aging & death. Therefore, with the total ending, fading away, cessation, letting go, relinquishment of craving, the Tathāgata has totally awakened to the unexcelled right self-awakening, I tell you.

"He directly knows water as water… the All as the All…

"He directly knows unbinding as unbinding. Directly knowing unbinding as unbinding, he doesn't suppose things about unbinding, doesn't suppose things in unbinding, doesn't suppose things coming out of unbinding, doesn't suppose unbinding as 'mine,' doesn't delight in unbinding. Why is that? Because he has known that delight is the root of suffering & stress, that from coming-into-being there is birth, and that for what has come into being there is aging & death. Therefore, with the total ending, fading away, cessation, letting go, relinquishment of craving, the Tathāgata has totally awakened to the unexcelled right self-awakening, I tell you."

That is what the Blessed One said. Displeased, the monks did not delight in the Blessed One's words.

Notes

1. Earth, water, fire, and wind are the four properties that comprise the experience of physical form.

2. In this section of the list, "beings" denotes all living beings below the level of the gods. "Devas" denotes the beings in the sensual heavens. The remaining terms— Pajāpati, Brahmā, the Radiant devas, the Beautiful Black devas, the Sky-fruit devas, & the Conqueror—denote devas in the heavens of form & formlessness.

3. The dimension of the infinitude of space, the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, the dimension of nothingness, & the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception are four formless states that can be attained in concentration.

4. "The seen, the heard, the sensed, & the cognized" is a set of terms to cover all things experienced through the six senses.

5. Singleness = experience in states of intense concentration (jhāna). Multiplicity = experience via the six senses. See MN 137.

6. "What is the All? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & aromas, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, intellect & ideas. This is termed the All. Anyone who would say, 'Repudiating this All, I will describe another,' if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his assertion, would be unable to explain and, furthermore, would be put to grief. Why is that? Because it lies beyond range." —SN 35:23

For more on this topic, see The Mind Like Fire Unbound, Chapter 1.

7. Unbinding = nibbāna (nirvāṇa).

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 49; MN 72; MN 140; SN 12:23; AN 4:24; AN 4:199; AN 4:200; AN 9:36; AN 10:81; Ud 1:10