MN 102 — The Five and Three

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Text

Middle Discourses 102

The Five and Three

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. There the Buddha addressed the mendicants, "Mendicants!"

"Venerable sir," they replied. The Buddha said this:

"Mendicants, there are some ascetics and brahmins who speculate and theorize about the final end, and propose various hypotheses concerning the final end. Some propose this: 'The self is percipient and healthy after death.' Some propose this: 'The self is non-percipient and healthy after death.' Some propose this: 'The self is neither percipient nor non-percipient and healthy after death.' But some assert the annihilation, eradication, and nonexistence of an existing being, while others propose extinguishment in this life. Thus they assert an existent self that is healthy after death; or they assert the annihilation of an existing being; while some propose extinguishment in this life. In this way five become three, and three become five. This is the summary recital of the five and three.

Now, the ascetics and brahmins who propose a self that is percipient and healthy after death describe it as formed, or formless, or both formed and formless, or neither formed nor formless. Or they propose a self of unified perception, or of diverse perception, or of limited perception, or of limitless perception. Or some among those who go beyond this propose universal consciousness, limitless and imperturbable.

The Realized One understands this as follows. There are ascetics and brahmins who assert a self that is percipient and healthy after death, describing it as formed, or formless, or both formed and formless, or neither formed nor formless. Or they describe it as of unified perception, or of diverse perception, or of limited perception, or of limitless perception. Or some, aware that 'there is nothing at all', propose the dimension of nothingness, limitless and imperturbable. They declare that this is the purest, highest, best, and supreme of all those perceptions, whether of form or of formlessness or of unity or of diversity. 'That much is conditioned and crude. But there is the cessation of conditions—that is real.' Understanding this and seeing the escape from it, the Realized One has gone beyond all that.

Now, the ascetics and brahmins who assert a self that is non-percipient and healthy after death describe it as formed, or formless, or both formed and formless, or neither formed nor formless.

So they reject those who assert a self that is percipient and healthy after death. Why is that? Because they believe that perception is a disease, a boil, a dart, and that the state of non-perception is peaceful and sublime.

The Realized One understands this as follows. There are ascetics and brahmins who assert a self that is non-percipient and healthy after death, describing it as formed, or formless, or both formed and formless, or neither formed nor formless. But if any ascetic or brahmin should say this: 'Apart from form, feeling, perception, and choices, I will describe the coming and going of consciousness, its passing away and reappearing, its growth, increase, and maturity.' That is not possible. 'All that is conditioned and crude. But there is the cessation of conditions—that is real.' Understanding this and seeing the escape from it, the Realized One has gone beyond all that.

Now, the ascetics and brahmins who assert a self that is neither percipient nor non-percipient and healthy after death describe it as formed, or formless, or both formed and formless, or neither formed nor formless.

So they reject those who assert a self that is percipient and healthy after death, as well as those who assert a self that is non-percipient and healthy after death. Why is that? Because they believe that perception is a disease, a boil, a dart; that non-perception is a stupor; and that the state of neither perception nor non-perception is peaceful and sublime.

The Realized One understands this as follows. There are ascetics and brahmins who assert a self that is neither percipient nor non-percipient and healthy after death, describing it as formed, or formless, or both formed and formless, or neither formed nor formless. Some ascetics or brahmins assert the embracing of that dimension merely through the conditioned phenomena of what ought be seen, heard, thought, and known. But that is said to be a disastrous approach. For that dimension is said to be not attainable by means of conditioned phenomena, but only with a residue of conditioned phenomena. 'All that is conditioned and crude. But there is the cessation of conditions—that is real.' Understanding this and seeing the escape from it, the Realized One has gone beyond all that.

Now, the ascetics and brahmins who assert the annihilation, eradication, and nonexistence of an existing being reject those who assert a self that is healthy after death, whether percipient or non-percipient or neither percipient nor non-percipient. Why is that? Because they think: 'All of those ascetics and brahmins only propose their attachment to heading upstream: "After death we shall be like this! After death we shall be like that!"

Suppose a trader was going to market, thinking: "With this, that shall be mine! This way, I shall get that!" In the same way, those ascetics and brahmins seem to be like traders when they say: "After death we shall be like this! After death we shall be like that!"' The Realized One understands this as follows. The ascetics and brahmins who assert the annihilation, eradication, and nonexistence of an existing being; from fear and disgust with substantial reality, they just keep running and circling around substantial reality. Suppose a mutt on a leash was tethered to a strong post or pillar. It would just keeping running and circling around that post or pillar. In the same way, those ascetics and brahmins, from fear and disgust with substantial reality, just keep running and circling around substantial reality.

‘All that is conditioned and crude. But there is the cessation of conditions—that is real.’ Understanding this and seeing the escape from it, the Realized One has gone beyond all that.

Whatever ascetics and brahmins speculate and theorize about the final end, and propose various hypotheses concerning the final end, all of them propose one or other of these five topics.

There are some ascetics and brahmins who speculate and theorize about the first beginning, and propose various hypotheses concerning the first beginning. They propose the following, each insisting that theirs is the only truth and that everything else is wrong. ‘The self and the cosmos are eternal.’ ‘The self and the cosmos are not eternal.’ ‘The self and the cosmos are both eternal and not eternal.’ ‘The self and the cosmos are neither eternal nor not eternal.’ ‘The self and the cosmos are finite.’ ‘The self and the cosmos are infinite.’ ‘The self and the cosmos are both finite and infinite.’ ‘The self and the cosmos are neither finite nor infinite.’ ‘The self and the cosmos are unified in perception.’ ‘The self and the cosmos are diverse in perception.’ ‘The self and the cosmos have limited perception.’ ‘The self and the cosmos have limitless perception.’ ‘The self and the cosmos experience nothing but happiness.’ ‘The self and the cosmos experience absolute suffering.’ ‘The self and the cosmos experience both happiness and suffering.’ ‘The self and the cosmos experience neither happiness nor suffering.’

Now, consider the ascetics and brahmins whose view is as follows. ‘The self and the cosmos are eternal. This is the only truth, anything else is futile.’ It’s simply not possible for them to have personal knowledge of this that is pure and bright, apart from faith, endorsement, oral transmission, reasoned train of thought, or acceptance of a view after deliberation. But in the absence of personal knowledge that is pure and bright, even the portion of knowledge they illuminate is said to be grasping on their part. ‘All that is conditioned and crude. But there is the cessation of conditions—that is real.’ Understanding this and seeing the escape from it, the Realized One has gone beyond all that.

Now, consider the ascetics and brahmins whose view is as follows. The self and the cosmos are not eternal, or both eternal and not eternal, or neither eternal nor not-eternal, or finite, or infinite, or both finite and infinite, or neither finite nor infinite, or of unified perception, or of diverse perception, or of limited perception, or of limitless perception, or experience nothing but happiness, or experience absolute suffering, or experience both happiness and suffering, or experience neither happiness nor suffering. It’s simply not possible for them to have personal knowledge of this that is pure and bright, apart from faith, endorsement, oral transmission, reasoned train of thought, or acceptance of a view after deliberation. But in the absence of personal knowledge that is pure and bright, even the portion of knowledge they illuminate is said to be grasping on their part. ‘All that is conditioned and crude. But there is the cessation of conditions—that is real.’ Understanding this and seeing the escape from it, the Realized One has gone beyond all that.

Now, some ascetics and brahmins, letting go of theories about the first beginning and the final end, not fixating on the fetters of sensuality, enter and remain in the rapture of

seclusion: ‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, entering and remaining in the rapture of seclusion.’ But that rapture of seclusion of theirs ceases. When the rapture of seclusion ceases, sadness arises; and when sadness ceases, the rapture of seclusion arises.

It’s like how the sunlight fills the space when the shadow leaves, or the shadow fills the space when the sunshine leaves. In the same way, when the rapture of seclusion ceases, sadness arises; and when sadness ceases, the rapture of seclusion arises. The Realized One understands this as follows. This good ascetic or brahmin, letting go of theories about the first beginning and the final end, not fixating on the fetters of sensuality, enters and remains in the rapture of seclusion: ‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, entering and remaining in the rapture of seclusion.’ But that rapture of seclusion of theirs ceases. When the rapture of seclusion ceases, sadness arises; and when sadness ceases, the rapture of seclusion arises. ‘All that is conditioned and crude. But there is the cessation of conditions—that is real.’ Understanding this and seeing the escape from it, the Realized One has gone beyond all that.

Now, some ascetics and brahmins, letting go of theories about the first beginning and the final end, not fixating on the fetters of sensuality, going beyond the rapture of seclusion, enter and remain in pleasure not of the flesh. ‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, entering and remaining in pleasure not of the flesh.’ But that pleasure not of the flesh of theirs ceases. When pleasure not of the flesh ceases, the rapture of seclusion arises; and when the rapture of seclusion ceases, pleasure not of the flesh arises.

It’s like how the sunlight fills the space when the shadow leaves, or the shadow fills the space when the sunshine leaves. … The Realized One understands this as follows. This good ascetic or brahmin, letting go of theories about the first beginning and the final end, not fixating on the fetters of sensuality, going beyond the rapture of seclusion, enters and remains in pleasure not of the flesh. ‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, entering and remaining in pleasure not of the flesh.’ But that pleasure not of the flesh of theirs ceases. When pleasure not of the flesh ceases, the rapture of seclusion arises; and when the rapture of seclusion ceases, pleasure not of the flesh arises. ‘All that is conditioned and crude. But there is the cessation of conditions—that is real.’ Understanding this and seeing the escape from it, the Realized One has gone beyond all that.

Now, some ascetics and brahmins, letting go of theories about the first beginning and the final end, not fixating on the fetters of sensuality, going beyond the rapture of seclusion and pleasure not of the flesh, enter and remain in neutral feeling. ‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, entering and remaining in neutral feeling.’ Then that neutral feeling ceases. When neutral feeling ceases, pleasure not of the flesh arises; and when pleasure not of the flesh ceases, neutral feeling arises.

It’s like how the sunlight fills the space when the shadow leaves, or the shadow fills the space when the sunshine leaves. … The Realized One understands this as follows. This good ascetic or brahmin, letting go of theories about the first beginning and the final end, not fixating on the fetters of sensuality, going beyond the rapture of seclusion and pleasure not of the flesh, enters and remains in neutral feeling. ‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, entering and remaining in neutral feeling.’ Then that neutral feeling ceases. When neutral feeling ceases, pleasure not of the flesh arises; and when pleasure

not of the flesh ceases, neutral feeling arises. ‘All that is conditioned and crude. But there is the cessation of conditions—that is real.’ Understanding this and seeing the escape from it, the Realized One has gone beyond all that.

Now, some ascetics and brahmins, letting go of theories about the first beginning and the final end, not fixating on the fetters of sensuality, go beyond the rapture of seclusion, pleasure not of the flesh, and neutral feeling. They regard themselves like this: ‘I am at peace; I am quenched; I am free of grasping.’

The Realized One understands this as follows. This good ascetic or brahmin, letting go of theories about the first beginning and the final end, not fixating on the fetters of sensuality, goes beyond the rapture of seclusion, pleasure not of the flesh, and neutral feeling. They regard themselves like this: ‘I am at peace; I am quenched; I am free of grasping.’ Clearly this venerable speaks of a practice that’s conducive to extinguishment. Nevertheless, they still grasp at theories about the first beginning or the final end, or the fetters of sensuality, or the rapture of seclusion, or pleasure not of the flesh, or neutral feeling. And when they regard themselves like this: ‘I am at peace; I am quenched; I am free of grasping,’ that’s also said to be grasping on their part. ‘All that is conditioned and crude. But there is the cessation of conditions—that is real.’ Understanding this and seeing the escape from it, the Realized One has gone beyond all that.

But the Realized One has awakened to the supreme state of sublime peace, that is, liberation by not grasping after truly understanding the six fields of contact’s origin, disappearance, gratification, drawback, and escape.”

That is what the Buddha said. Satisfied, the mendicants approved what the Buddha said.