MN 102 — MN 102 Five & Three | Pañcattaya Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

Five & Three

Pañcattaya Sutta (MN 102) (Excerpt)

Introduction

This discourse has two striking features. The first is that it seems to contain an interpolation. The introduction summarizes the topic of the discourse: five alternative ways in which a person might theorize or speculate about the future state of a person after death. What seems to be the interpolation begins after the first four ways have been discussed, and there are two reasons for regarding it as a later addition. (1) It announces that all five alternatives mentioned in the summary have been discussed, whereas only four have. (2) It then treats a topic not mentioned in the summary at all: alternatives ways

in which a person might speculate about the past. Only when this section is finished does the discourse pick up the fifth alternative mentioned in the introductory summary.

Because this apparent interpolation interrupts the flow of the discourse, I have here translated just the remaining parts, to give some sense of how they fit together without the interruption.

The second striking feature of the discourse is its resemblance to DN 1 in covering two of the three main topics covered by that discourse: speculations about the future and false views of unbinding here-and-now. This resemblance, in fact, may have been what inspired the apparent interpolation, for the third topic covered by DN 1—speculations about the past—is precisely the topic covered in that passage. Perhaps the monks who collected, organized, and memorized the Majjhima Nikāya wanted their own discourse treating the same range of topics covered in DN 1, and so inserted the section on speculations about the past here. (This, by the way, is not to say that this section is less authentic than the rest of the discourse; just that its insertion is awkward. The redactors may have simply borrowed an authentic teaching from another Dhamma talk.)

At any rate, a comparison of the remaining sections with their parallels in DN 1 shows that the Buddha's approach here differs in 3 ways from the approach taken there.

1) To begin with, DN 1 focuses primary attention on the source of the various speculative views about the future, based on ways in which the self is defined in the present. The Buddha then rejects these views, both on the basis of their sources and on the basis of the future destinations that such views, as actions, lead to after death. Here, however, the Buddha focuses on (a) the ways in which people who hold these views refute one another's views; (b) the Buddha's own refutation of these views, showing either why they make no sense or why they do not lead to freedom from clinging.

2) In DN 1, speculations about the future and false views of unbinding here-and-now are treated as two separate categories. Here, false views of unbinding here-and-now are treated as a type of speculation about the future. The reason for this may be that the claim of having attained unbinding carries an implicit claim about the future: There is no further birth for that person (see DN 29, quoted in Skill in Questions).

3) The most interesting difference between the two discourses, however, centers on the final claim to unbinding given here. All the views listed in DN 1, and all the preceding theories given in this discourse, are attributed to contemplatives who are not followers of the Buddha's teachings. In contrast, this final view could easily be one of a person who has followed the Buddha's instructions but has simply misread his/her ability to complete those instructions, mistaking a state that still harbors some clinging for one that is totally free of it.

It's easy to imagine that the monks listening to this discourse might have been brought up short by this last example. After hearing of the failings of contemplatives outside the Buddha's teachings, they are presented with a failing to which they themselves could easily

fall prey.

This discourse thus contains a useful warning for Buddhist meditators today.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. There he addressed the monks, "Monks!"

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

The Blessed One said: "Monks, there are some contemplatives & brahmans who theorize about the future state, who speculate about the future state. They assert many various beliefs concerning the future state. Some assert that 'The self is percipient & free from disease after death.' Some assert that 'The self is non-percipient & free from disease after death.' Some assert that 'The self is neither percipient nor non-percipient & free from disease after death.' Or they describe the destruction, annihilation, & non-becoming of the existing being after death. Or some assert unbinding in the here & now.

"Thus, being five, these become three. Being three, they become five. This is the summary of the five-&-three.

"Now, monks, as for those contemplatives & brahmans who describe the self as percipient & free from disease after death, they describe the self that is percipient & free from disease after death as possessed of form... as formless... as both possessed of form & formless... as neither possessed of form nor formless... as percipient of singleness... as percipient of multiplicity1... as percipient of what is limited... or as percipient of what is immeasurable. Or some, among the few who go beyond this, assert the consciousness-totality: immeasurable & imperturbable.2

"With regard to this, the Tathāgata discerns3 that 'Those venerable contemplative & brahmans who describe the self as percipient & free from disease after death, describe the self that is percipient & free from disease after death as possessed of form... as formless... as both possessed of form & formless... as neither possessed of form nor formless... as percipient of singleness... as percipient of multiplicity... as percipient of what is limited... or as percipient of what is immeasurable. Or some assert the dimension of nothingness, "There is nothing"—which is declared the purest, foremost, highest, most unexcelled of (all) perceptions, whether perceptions of form, perceptions of formlessness, perceptions of singleness, or perceptions of multiplicity—as immeasurable & imperturbable.4 With regard to that—fabricated, gross—there is still the cessation of fabrications: There is this.' Knowing that, seeing the escape from it, the Tathāgata has gone beyond it.

"Now, as for those contemplatives & brahmans who describe the self as non-percipient & free from disease after death, they describe the self that is non-percipient & free from disease after death as possessed of form... as formless... as both possessed of form & formless... as neither possessed of form nor formless. They criticize those contemplatives

& brahmans who describe the self as percipient & free from disease after death. For what reason? (They say,) 'Perception is a disease, perception is a tumor, perception is an arrow. This is peaceful, this is exquisite: non-perception.'

"With regard to this, the Tathāgata discerns that 'Those venerable contemplative & brahmans who describe the self as non-percipient & free from disease after death, describe the self that is non-percipient & free from disease after death as possessed of form... as formless... as both possessed of form & formless... as neither possessed of form nor formless. But if any contemplative or brahman were to say, "I will describe a coming, a going, a passing away, an arising, a growth, an increase, or a proliferation of consciousness apart from form, apart from feeling, apart from perception, apart from fabrications," that would be impossible.5 With regard to that—fabricated, gross—there is still the cessation of fabrications: There is this.' Knowing that, seeing the escape from it, the Tathāgata has gone beyond it.

"Now, as for those contemplatives & brahmans who describe the self as neither percipient nor non-percipient & free from disease after death, they describe the self that is neither percipient nor non-percipient & free from disease after death as possessed of form... as formless... as both possessed of form & formless... as neither possessed of form nor formless. They criticize those contemplatives & brahmans who describe the self as percipient & free from disease after death and they criticize those contemplatives & brahmans who describe the self as non-percipient & free from disease after death. For what reason? (They say,) 'Perception is a disease, perception is a tumor, perception is an arrow. Non-perception is dullness. This is peaceful, this is exquisite: neither perception nor non-perception.'

"With regard to this, the Tathāgata discerns that 'Those venerable contemplative & brahmans who describe the self as neither percipient nor non-percipient & free from disease after death, describe the self that is neither percipient nor non-percipient & free from disease after death as possessed of form... as formless... as both possessed of form & formless... as neither possessed of form nor formless. But if any contemplative or brahman were to describe the entry into that dimension as based on a modicum of fabrication with regard to what is seen, heard, sensed, or cognized, that, monks, is declared to be a disaster for the entry into that dimension. For that dimension is said not to be attained as a fabrication-attainment. It is to be attained as a remnant-of-fabrication-attainment. With regard to that—fabricated, gross—there is still the cessation of fabrications: There is this.' Knowing that, seeing the escape from it, the Tathāgata has gone beyond it.

"Now, as for those contemplatives & brahmans who describe the destruction, annihilation, & non-becoming of the existing being after death, they criticize the contemplatives & brahmans who describe the self as percipient & free from disease after death and they criticize the contemplatives & brahmans who describe the self as non-percipient & free from disease after death and they criticize the contemplatives & brahmans who describe the self as neither percipient nor non-percipient & free from disease after death. For what reason? (They say,) 'These venerable contemplatives & brahmans, rushing ahead, assert nothing but their attachment: "I will be this after death. I will be this after death." Just as

when a merchant going to market thinks, "From this, that will be mine. By means of this I will get that"; in the same way, these venerable contemplatives & brahmans act like merchants, as it were: "I will be this after death. I will be this after death.'"

"With regard to this, the Tathāgata discerns that 'Those venerable contemplative & brahmans who describe the destruction, annihilation, & non-becoming of the existing being after death, they—through fear of self-identity, through disgust for self-identity—(nevertheless) keep running & circling around self-identity.6 Just as a dog, tied by a leash to a post or stake, keeps running around and circling around that very post or stake; in the same way, these venerable contemplative & brahmans—through fear of self-identity, through disgust for self-identity—(nevertheless) keep running & circling around self-identity. With regard to that—fabricated, gross—there is still the cessation of fabrications: There is this.' Knowing that, seeing the escape from it, the Tathāgata has gone beyond it. …

"There is the case, monks, where a certain contemplative or brahman, with the relinquishing of speculations about the past and the relinquishing of speculations about the future, from being totally not determined on the fetters of sensuality, enters & remains in the rapture of seclusion [the first jhāna]. (He thinks,) 'This is peaceful, this is exquisite, that I enter & remain in the rapture of seclusion.' His rapture of seclusion ceases. With the cessation of the rapture of seclusion, sadness arises; with the cessation of sadness, the rapture of seclusion arises. Just as what the shade leaves the sunlight pervades, and what the sunlight leaves the shade pervades; in the same way, with the cessation of the rapture of seclusion, sadness arises; with the cessation of sadness, the rapture of seclusion arises.

"With regard to this, the Tathāgata discerns that 'This venerable contemplative or brahman, with the relinquishing of speculations about the past and the relinquishing of speculations about the future, from being totally not determined on the fetters of sensuality, enters & remains in the rapture of seclusion. (He thinks,) "This is peaceful, this is exquisite, that I enter & remain in the rapture of seclusion." His rapture of seclusion ceases. With the cessation of the rapture of seclusion, sadness arises; with the cessation of sadness, the rapture of seclusion arises. With regard to that—fabricated, gross—there is still the cessation of fabrications: There is this.' Knowing that, seeing the escape from it, the Tathāgata has gone beyond it.

"There is the case, monks, where a certain contemplative or brahman, with the relinquishing of speculations about the past and the relinquishing of speculations about the future, from being totally not determined on the fetters of sensuality, and surmounting the rapture of seclusion, enters & remains in pleasure not-of-the-flesh [the third jhāna]. (He thinks,) 'This is peaceful, this is exquisite, that I enter & remain in pleasure not-of-the-flesh.' His pleasure not-of-the-flesh ceases. With the cessation of pleasure not-of-the-flesh, the rapture of seclusion arises; with the cessation of the rapture of seclusion, pleasure not-of-the-flesh arises. Just as what the shade leaves the sunlight pervades, and what the sunlight leaves the shade pervades; in the same way, with the cessation of pleasure not-of-the-flesh, the rapture of seclusion arises; with the cessation of the rapture of seclusion, pleasure not-of-the-flesh arises.

“With regard to this, the Tathāgata discerns that ‘This venerable contemplative or brahman, with the relinquishing of speculations about the past and the relinquishing of speculations about the future, from being totally not determined on the fetters of sensuality, and surmounting the rapture of seclusion, enters & remains in pleasure not-of-the-flesh. (He thinks,) “This is peaceful, this is exquisite, that I enter & remain in pleasure not-of-the-flesh.” His pleasure not-of-the-flesh ceases. With the cessation of pleasure not-of-the-flesh, the rapture of seclusion arises; with the cessation of the rapture of seclusion, pleasure not-of-the-flesh arises. With regard to that—fabricated, gross—there is still the cessation of fabrications: There is this.’ Knowing that, seeing the escape from it, the Tathāgata has gone beyond it.

“There is the case, monks, where a certain contemplative or brahman, with the relinquishing of speculations about the past and the relinquishing of speculations about the future, from being totally not determined on the fetters of sensuality, surmounting the rapture of seclusion, surmounting pleasure not-of-the flesh, enters & remains in a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain [the fourth jhāna]. (He thinks,) ‘This is peaceful, this is exquisite, that I enter & remain in a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain.’ His feeling of neither pleasure nor pain ceases. With the cessation of the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, the pleasure not-of-the flesh arises; with the cessation of pleasure not-of-the flesh, the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain arises. Just as what the shade leaves the sunlight pervades, and what the sunlight leaves the shade pervades; in the same way, with the cessation of the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, the pleasure not-of-the flesh arises; with the cessation of pleasure not-of-the flesh, the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain arises.

“With regard to this, the Tathāgata discerns that ‘This venerable contemplative or brahman, with the relinquishing of speculations about the past and the relinquishing of speculations about the future, from being totally not determined on the fetters of sensuality, surmounting the rapture of seclusion, surmounting pleasure not-of-the flesh, enters & remains in a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain. (He thinks,) “This is peaceful, this is exquisite, that I enter & remain in a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain.” His feeling of neither pleasure nor pain ceases. With the cessation of the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, the pleasure not-of-the flesh arises; with the cessation of pleasure not-of-the flesh, the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain arises. With regard to that—fabricated, gross—there is still the cessation of fabrications: There is this.’ Knowing that, seeing the escape from it, the Tathāgata has gone beyond it.

“There is the case, monks, where a certain contemplative or brahman, with the relinquishing of speculations about the past and the relinquishing of speculations about the future, from being totally not determined on the fetters of sensuality, surmounting the rapture of seclusion, surmounting pleasure not-of-the-flesh, and surmounting the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, envisions that ‘I am at peace, I am unbound, I am without clinging/sustenance!’

“With regard to this, the Tathāgata discerns that ‘This venerable contemplative or brahman, with the relinquishing of speculations about the past and the relinquishing of

speculations about the future, from being totally not determined on the fetters of sensuality, surmounting the rapture of seclusion, surmounting pleasure not-of-the-flesh, and surmounting the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, envisions that "I am at peace, I am unbound, I am without clinging/sustenance!" Yes, he affirms a practice conducive to unbinding. But still he clings, clinging to a speculation about the past; or he clings, clinging to a speculation about the future; or he clings, clinging to a fetter of sensuality; or he clings, clinging to the rapture of seclusion; or he clings, clinging to pleasure not-of-the-flesh; or he clings, clinging to a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain. And the fact that he envisions that "I am at peace, I am unbound, I am without clinging/sustenance!"—that in itself points to his clinging.7 With regard to that—fabricated, gross—there is still the cessation of fabrications: There is this.' Knowing that, seeing the escape from it, the Tathāgata has gone beyond it.

"Thus, monks, the Tathāgata has awakened to the unexcelled state of foremost peace: liberation through lack of clinging/sustenance, having known, as they have come to be, the origination, passing away, allure, drawbacks of—and escape from—the six media of contact."8

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

Notes

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

2. This is apparently equivalent to the formless attainment of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, which MN 106 classes as imperturbable. AN 10:29 has this to say about the consciousness-totality:

"There are these ten totality-dimensions. Which ten? One perceives the earth-totality above, below, all-around: non-dual [advayaṁ], immeasurable. One perceives the water-totality… the fire-totality… the wind-totality… the blue-totality… the yellow-totality… the red-totality… the white-totality… the space-totality… the consciousness-totality above, below, all-around: non-dual, immeasurable. These are the ten totality-dimensions. Now, of these ten totality-dimensions, this is supreme: when one perceives the consciousness-totality above, below, all-around: non-dual, immeasurable. And there are beings who are percipient in this way. Yet even in the beings who are percipient in this way there is still aberration, there is change. Seeing this, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with that. Being disenchanted with that, he becomes dispassionate toward what is supreme, and even more so toward what is inferior."

3. Reading pajānāti with the Thai edition. The Burmese edition here, and in all the following passages describing what the Buddha knows about the various contemplatives and brahmans, has abhijānāti: "directly knows."

4. Both MLS and MLDB mistakenly insert a quotation mark after this statement, here and in all the parallel passages in this discourse. This changes the meaning of the last sentence in each of these passages with regard to what is meant by "that" in the phrase, "Knowing that."

Unlike the contemplatives and brahmans quoted in this passage, the Buddha—in MN 106—does not apply the adjective "imperturbable" to the dimension of nothingness. See note 1 to that sutta.

5. See SN 22:54.

6. Craving for non-becoming (vibhava-taṇhā) is one of the three types of craving that lead to becoming. On this point, see, The Paradox of Becoming.

7. The "I am," here, is what points to the clinging. It shows that conceit, one of the ten fetters, has not been cut—"conceit," here, not meaning pride, but simply a sense of what one's identity consists of. As MN 52 and AN 9:36 point out, it is possible, even when experiencing the deathless, to develop a sense of passion and delight for it, thus giving rise to a subtle sense of "I am" that prevents full awakening. The passage here gives useful directions as to where to look for the lurking clinging that may contribute to that sense of "I am."

Actual, spontaneous expressions of full awakening are phrased in impersonal terms. See, for instance, MN 4, SN 56:11, AN 6:49, and AN 6:55.

8. Compare this passage with the refrain in DN 1:

"This, monks, the Tathāgata discerns. And he discerns that these standpoints, thus seized, thus grasped at, lead to such & such a destination, to such & such a state in the world beyond. And he discerns what is higher than this. And yet discerning that, he does not grasp at that act of discerning. And as he is not grasping at it, unbinding [nibbuti] is experienced right within. Knowing, as they have come to be, the origin, ending, allure, & drawbacks of feelings, along with the escape from feelings, the Tathāgata, monks—through lack of clinging/sustenance—is released."

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 2; MN 106; SN 36:31