MN 105 — MN 105 To Sunakkhatta | Sunakkhatta Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

To Sunakkhatta

Sunakkhatta Sutta (MN 105)

This discourse gives guidance on how to judge whether another person’s claim to enlightenment might be true or false. It ends with a warning: Anyone who claims enlightenment as license for unrestrained behavior is like someone who (1) has undergone surgery but does not follow doctor’s orders for healing the wound; (2) knowingly drinks a cup of poison; (3) extends his hand or finger to a deadly poisonous snake.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Vesālī at the Gabled Hall in the Great Forest. Now at that time a large number of monks had declared final gnosis in the Blessed One's presence: "We discern that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world.'"

Sunakkhatta the Licchavi heard that "A large number of monks, it seems, have declared final gnosis in the Blessed One's presence: 'We discern that "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world."'" Then Sunakkhatta the Licchavi went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "I have heard, lord, that a large number of monks have declared final gnosis in the Blessed One's presence: 'We discern that "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world."' Now, have they rightly declared final gnosis, or is it the case that some of them have declared final gnosis out of over-estimation?"

"Sunakkhatta, of the monks who have declared final gnosis in my presence... it is the case that some have rightly declared final gnosis, whereas others have declared final gnosis out of over-estimation. As for those who have rightly declared final gnosis, that is their truth. As for those who have declared final gnosis out of over-estimation, the thought occurs to the Tathāgata, 'I will teach them the Dhamma.' But there are cases when the thought has occurred to the Tathāgata, 'I will teach them the Dhamma,' but there are worthless men who come to him having formulated question after question, so that his thought, "I will teach them the Dhamma," changes into something else."

"Now is the time, O Blessed One. Now is the time, O One Well-Gone, for the Blessed One to teach the Dhamma. Having heard the Blessed One, the monks will remember it."

"Then in that case, Sunakkhatta, listen & pay close attention. I will speak."

"As you say, lord," Sunakkhatta the Licchavi responded to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said: "Sunakkhatta, there are these five strands of sensuality. Which five? Forms cognizable via the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, enticing, linked to sensual desire. Sounds cognizable via the ear... Aromas cognizable via the nose... Flavors cognizable via the tongue... Tactile sensations cognizable via the body—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, enticing, linked to sensual desire. These are the five strands of sensuality.

"Now there's the possible case where a certain person is intent on the baits of the world. When a person is intent on the baits of the world, that sort of talk interests him, his thinking & evaluating follow along those lines, he feels at home with that sort of person, and his mind gets along with that sort of person. But when talk concerning the imperturbable [the fourth jhāna and the dimensions of the infinitude of space & the infinitude of consciousness] is going on, he does not listen, does not lend ear, and does not exert his mind to know. He does not get along with that sort of person; his mind does not feel at home with him.

“Suppose that there were a man who had left his home village or town a long time ago. And he were to meet with a man who had left the village or town only a short time ago. He would ask if the people in the village or town were secure, well-fed, & free of disease, and the second man would tell him if they were secure, well-fed, & free of disease. Now, what do you think, Sunakkhatta? Would the first man listen to the second man, lend ear, and exert his mind to know? Would he get along with the second man; would his mind feel at home with him?”

“Yes, lord.”

“In the same way, it is possible that there is the case where a certain person is intent on the baits of the world. When a person is intent on the baits of the world, that sort of talk interests him, his thinking & evaluating follow along those lines, he feels at home with that sort of person, and his mind gets along with that sort of person. But when talk concerning the imperturbable [the fourth jhāna and the dimensions of the infinitude of space and the infinitude of consciousness] is going on, he does not listen, does not lend ear, and does not exert his mind to know. He does not get along with that sort of person; his mind does not feel at home with him. This is how it can be known that ‘This person is intent on the baits of the world.’

“Now, there’s the possible case where a certain person is intent on the imperturbable. When a person is intent on the imperturbable, that sort of talk interests him, his thinking & evaluating follow along those lines, he feels at home with that sort of person, and his mind gets along with that sort of person. But when talk concerning the baits of the world is going on, he does not listen, does not lend ear, and does not exert his mind to know. He does not get along with that sort of person; his mind does not feel at home with him.

“Just as a yellow leaf released from its stem is incapable of ever again becoming green, in the same way, when a person is intent on the imperturbable, he is released from the fetter of the baits of the world. This is how it can be known that ‘This person, disjoined from the fetter of the baits of the world, is intent on the imperturbable.’

“Now, there’s the possible case where a certain person is intent on the dimension of nothingness. When a person is intent on the dimension of nothingness, that sort of talk interests him, his thinking & evaluating follow along those lines, he feels at home with that sort of person, and his mind gets along with that sort of person. But when talk concerning the imperturbable is going on, he does not listen, does not lend ear, and does not exert his mind to know. He does not get along with that sort of person; his mind does not feel at home with him.

“Just as a thick rock broken in two cannot be put back together again, in the same way, when a person is intent on the dimension of nothingness, he has broken the fetter of the imperturbable. This is how it can be known that ‘This person, disjoined from the fetter of the imperturbable, is intent on the dimension of nothingness.’

“Now, there’s the possible case where a certain person is intent on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. When a person is intent on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, that sort of talk interests him, his thinking & evaluating follow along those lines, he feels at home with that sort of person, and his mind gets along with that sort of person. But when talk concerning the dimension of nothingness is going on, he does not listen, does not lend ear, and does not exert his mind to know. He does not get along with that sort of person; his mind does not feel at home with him.

“Sunakkhatta, suppose that a person, having eaten some delicious food, were to vomit it up. What do you think? Would he have any desire for that food?”

“No, lord. Why is that? Because he would consider that food to be disgusting.”

“In the same way, when a person is intent on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, he has vomited up the fetter of the dimension of nothingness. This is how it can be known that ‘This person, disjoined from the fetter of the dimension of nothingness, is intent on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.’

“Now, there’s the possible case where a certain person is rightly intent on unbinding. When a person is rightly intent on unbinding, that sort of talk interests him, his thinking & evaluating follow along those lines, he feels at home with that sort of person, and his mind gets along with that sort of person. But when talk concerning the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception is going on, he does not listen, does not lend ear, and does not exert his mind to know. He does not get along with that sort of person; his mind does not feel at home with him.

“Just as a palm tree with its top cut off is incapable of further growth, in the same way, when a person is rightly intent on unbinding, he has destroyed the fetter of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, has destroyed it by the root, made like a palmyra stump deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. This is how it can be known that ‘This person, disjoined from the fetter of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, is intent on unbinding.’

“Now, there’s the possible case where a certain monk thinks, ‘Craving is said by the Contemplative [the Buddha] to be an arrow. The poison of ignorance spreads its toxin through desire, passion, & ill will. I have abandoned the arrow. I have expelled the poison of ignorance. I am rightly intent on unbinding.’ Because this is not true of him, he might pursue those things that are unsuitable for a person rightly intent on unbinding. He might pursue unsuitable forms & sights with the eye. He might pursue unsuitable sounds with the ear… unsuitable aromas with the nose… unsuitable flavors with the tongue… unsuitable tactile sensations with the body. He might pursue unsuitable ideas with the intellect. When he pursues unsuitable forms & sights with the eye… pursues unsuitable ideas with the intellect, lust invades the mind. With his mind invaded by lust, he incurs death or death-like suffering.

“Suppose that a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends & companions, kinsmen & relatives would provide him with a surgeon. The surgeon would cut around the opening of the wound with a knife and then would probe for the arrow with a probe. He then would pull out the arrow and extract the poison, leaving a residue behind. Knowing that a residue was left behind, he would say, ‘My good man, your arrow has been pulled out. The poison has been extracted, with a residue left behind, but it is not enough to do you harm. Eat suitable food. Don’t eat unsuitable food, or else the wound will fester. Wash the wound frequently, smear it with an ointment frequently, so that blood & pus don’t fill the opening of the wound. Don’t walk around in the wind & sun, or else dust & dirt may contaminate the opening of the wound. Keep looking after the wound, my good man, and work for its healing.’

“The thought would occur to the man: ‘My arrow has been pulled out. The poison has been extracted, with a residue left behind, but it is not enough to do me harm.’ He would eat unsuitable food, so the wound would fester. He wouldn’t wash the wound or smear it with an ointment frequently, so blood & pus would fill the opening of the wound. He would walk around in the wind & sun, so dust & dirt would contaminate the opening of the wound. He wouldn’t keep looking after the wound or work for its healing. Now, both because of these unsuitable actions of his and because of the residue of the dirty poison left behind, the wound would swell. With the swelling of the wound he would incur death or death-like suffering.

“In the same way, there’s the possible case where a certain monk thinks, ‘Craving is said by the Contemplative to be an arrow. The poison of ignorance spreads its toxin through desire, passion, & ill will. I have abandoned the arrow. I have expelled the poison of ignorance. I am rightly intent on unbinding.’ Because this is not true of him, he might pursue those things that are unsuitable for a person rightly intent on unbinding. He might pursue unsuitable forms & sights with the eye. He might pursue unsuitable sounds with the ear… unsuitable aromas with the nose… unsuitable flavors with the tongue… unsuitable tactile sensations with the body. He might pursue unsuitable ideas with the intellect. When he pursues unsuitable forms & sights with the eye… pursues unsuitable ideas with the intellect, lust invades the mind. With his mind invaded by lust, he incurs death or death-like suffering. For this is death in the discipline of the noble ones: when one renounces the training and returns to the lower life. And this is death-like suffering: when one commits a defiled offense.

“Now, there’s the possible case where a certain monk thinks, ‘Craving is said by the Contemplative to be an arrow. The poison of ignorance spreads its toxin through desire, passion, & ill will. I have abandoned the arrow. I have expelled the poison of ignorance. I am rightly intent on unbinding.’ Because he is rightly intent on unbinding, he wouldn’t pursue those things that are unsuitable for a person rightly intent on unbinding. He wouldn’t pursue unsuitable forms & sights with the eye. He wouldn’t pursue unsuitable sounds with the ear… unsuitable aromas with the nose… unsuitable flavors with the tongue… unsuitable tactile sensations with the body. He wouldn’t pursue unsuitable ideas with the intellect. When he doesn’t pursue unsuitable forms & sights with the eye… doesn’t pursue unsuitable ideas with the intellect, lust doesn’t invade the mind. With his mind not

invaded by lust, he doesn't incur death or death-like suffering.

"Suppose that a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends & companions, kinsmen & relatives would provide him with a surgeon. The surgeon would cut around the opening of the wound with a knife and then would probe for the arrow with a probe. He then would pull out the arrow and extract the poison, leaving no residue behind. Knowing that no residue was left behind, he would say, 'My good man, your arrow has been pulled out. The poison has been extracted, with no residue left behind, so it is not enough to do you harm. Eat suitable food. Don't eat unsuitable food, or else the wound will fester. Wash the wound frequently, smear it with an ointment frequently, so that blood & pus don't fill the opening of the wound. Don't walk around in the wind & sun, or else dust & dirt may contaminate the opening of the wound. Keep looking after the wound, my good man, and work for its healing.'

"The thought would occur to the man: 'My arrow has been pulled out. The poison has been extracted with no residue left behind, so it is not enough to do me harm.' He would eat suitable food, so the wound wouldn't fester. He would wash the wound and smear it with an ointment frequently, so blood & pus wouldn't fill the opening of the wound. He would not walk around in the wind & sun, so dust & dirt wouldn't contaminate the opening of the wound. He would keep looking after the wound and would work for its healing. Now, both because of these suitable actions of his and because of there being no residue of the poison left behind, the wound would heal. With the healing of the wound and its being covered with skin, he wouldn't incur death or death-like suffering.

"In the same way, there's the possible case where a certain monk thinks, 'Craving is said by the Contemplative to be an arrow. The poison of ignorance spreads its toxin through desire, passion, & ill will. I have abandoned the arrow. I have expelled the poison of ignorance. I am rightly intent on unbinding.' Because he is rightly intent on unbinding, he wouldn't pursue those things that are unsuitable for a person rightly intent on unbinding. He wouldn't pursue unsuitable forms & sights with the eye. He wouldn't pursue unsuitable sounds with the ear… unsuitable aromas with the nose… unsuitable flavors with the tongue… unsuitable tactile sensations with the body. He wouldn't pursue unsuitable ideas with the intellect. When he doesn't pursue unsuitable forms & sights with the eye… doesn't pursue unsuitable ideas with the intellect, lust doesn't invade the mind. With his mind not invaded by lust, he doesn't incur death or death-like suffering.

"I have given this simile to convey a meaning. The meaning is this: the wound stands for the six internal sense media; the poison, for ignorance; the arrow, for craving; the probe, for mindfulness; the knife, for noble discernment; the surgeon, for the Tathāgata, worthy & rightly self-awakened.

"Now, when a monk—maintaining restraint over the six spheres of contact, knowing that 'Acquisition is the root of stress'—is free from acquisition, released in the total ending of acquisition, it's not possible that, with regard to acquisition, he would stir his body or arouse his mind.

“Suppose there were a beverage in a bronze cup—consummate in its color, smell, & flavor—but mixed with poison. And suppose a man were to come along, wanting to live, not wanting to die, desiring pleasure, & abhorring pain. What do you think, Sunakkhatta? Would he drink the beverage in the bronze cup knowing that ‘Having drunk this, I will incur death or death-like suffering’?”

“No, lord.”

“In the same way, when a monk—maintaining restraint over the six spheres of contact, knowing that ‘Acquisition is the root of stress’—is free from acquisition, released in the total ending of acquisition, it’s not possible that, with regard to acquisition, he would stir his body or arouse his mind.

“Suppose there were a deadly poisonous viper, and a man were to come along, wanting to live, not wanting to die, desiring pleasure, & abhorring pain. What do you think, Sunakkhatta? Would he give his hand or finger to the snake knowing that ‘Having been bitten by this, I will incur death or death-like suffering’?”

“No, lord.”

“In the same way, when a monk—maintaining restraint over the six spheres of contact, knowing that ‘Acquisition is the root of stress’—is free from acquisition, released in the total ending of acquisition, it’s not possible that, with regard to acquisition, he would stir his body or arouse his mind.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Sunakkhatta the Licchavi delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 75; AN 6:49; AN 6:55; AN 9:7; AN 10:24