MN 108 — MN 108 Moggallāna the Guardsman | Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

Moggallāna the Guardsman

Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta (MN 108)

This discourse presents a picture of life in the early Buddhist community shortly after the Buddha’s passing away. On the one hand, it shows the relationship between the monastic community and the political powers that be: the monks are polite and courteous to political functionaries, but the existence of this discourse shows that they had no qualms about depicting those functionaries as a little dense. On the other hand, it shows that early Buddhist practice had no room for many practices that later developed in Buddhist traditions, such as appointed lineage holders, elected ecclesiastical heads, or the use of mental defilements as a basis for concentration practice.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion Ven. Ānanda was staying near Rājagaha in the Bamboo Forest, the Squirrels' Sanctuary, not long after the Blessed One's total unbinding.

Now at that time King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha, suspicious of King Pajjota, was having Rājagaha fortified.

Then in the early morning, Ven. Ānanda, having adjusted his lower robe and taking his bowl & outer robe, went into Rājagaha for alms. The thought occurred to him, "It's too early to go for alms in Rājagaha. What if I were to go to the brahman Moggallāna the Guardsman at his construction site?" So he went to Moggallāna the Guardsman at his construction site. Moggallāna the Guardsman saw him coming from afar, and on seeing him said to him, "Come, Master Ānanda. Welcome, Master Ānanda. It has been a long time since Master Ānanda has found the time to come here. Sit down, Master Ānanda. Here is a seat made ready for you."

So Ven. Ānanda sat down on the seat made ready. Moggallāna the Guardsman, taking a lower seat, sat to one side.

As he was sitting there, he said to Ven. Ānanda: "Master Ānanda, is there any one monk endowed in each & every way with the qualities with which Master Gotama—worthy & rightly self-awakened—was endowed?"

"No, brahman, there isn't any one monk endowed in each & every way with the qualities with which the Blessed One—worthy & rightly self-awakened—was endowed. For the Blessed One was the arouser of the unarisen path, the begetter of the unbegotten path, the expounder of the unexpounded path, the knower of the path, the expert with regard to the path, adept at the path. And now his disciples follow the path and become endowed with it after him."

And then Ven. Ānanda's discussion with Moggallāna the Guardsman was interrupted in mid-course, for the brahman Vassakāra, the Magadhan administrator, on an inspection tour of the construction sites in Rājagaha, went to Ven. Ānanda at Moggallāna the Guardsman's construction site. On arrival, he exchanged courteous greetings with Ven. Ānanda. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to Ven. Ānanda, "Just now, for what discussion were you sitting together when you were interrupted in mid-course?"

"Just now, brahman, Moggallāna the Guardsman said to me, 'Master Ānanda, is there any one monk endowed in each & every way with the qualities with which Master Gotama—worthy & rightly self-awakened—was endowed?' And when this was said, I said to him, 'No, brahman, there isn't any one monk endowed in each & every way with the qualities with which the Blessed One—worthy & rightly self-awakened—was endowed. For the Blessed One was the arouser of the unarisen path, the begetter of the unbegotten path, the expounder of the unexpounded path, the knower of the path, the expert with

regard to the path, adept at the path. And now his disciples follow the path and become endowed with it after him.' This was my discussion with the brahman Moggallāna the Guardsman that was interrupted in mid-course when you arrived."

"Master Ānanda, is there any one monk appointed by Master Gotama (with the words), 'He will be your arbitrator after I am gone,' to whom you now turn?"

"No, brahman. There isn't any one monk appointed by the Blessed One—the one who knows, the one who sees, worthy & rightly self-awakened—(with the words), 'He will be your arbitrator after I am gone,' to whom we now turn."

"Then is there any one monk authorized by the Saṅgha and appointed by a large body of elder monks (with the words), 'He will be our arbitrator after the Blessed One is gone,' to whom you now turn?"

"No, brahman. There isn't any one monk authorized by the Saṅgha and appointed by a large body of elder monks (with the words), 'He will be our arbitrator after the Blessed One is gone,' to whom we now turn."

"Being thus without an arbitrator, Master Ānanda, what is the reason for your concord?"

"It's not the case, brahman, that we're without an arbitrator. We have an arbitrator. The Dhamma is our arbitrator."

"When asked, 'Master Ānanda, is there any one monk appointed by Master Gotama (with the words), "He will be your arbitrator after I am gone," to whom you now turn?' you said, 'No, brahman. There isn't any one monk appointed by the Blessed One... to whom we now turn.'

"When asked, 'Then is there any one monk authorized by the Saṅgha... to whom you now turn?' you said, 'No, brahman. There isn't any one monk authorized by the Saṅgha... to whom we now turn.'

"When asked, 'Being thus without an arbitrator, Master Ānanda, what is the reason for your concord?' you said, 'It's not the case, brahman, that we're without an arbitrator. We have an arbitrator. The Dhamma is our arbitrator.' Now how is the meaning of what you have said to be understood?"

"Brahman, there is a training rule laid down by the Blessed One—the one who knows, the one who sees, worthy & rightly self-awakened—a Pāṭimokkha that has been codified. On the uposatha day, all of us who live dependent on a single township gather together in one place. Having gathered together, we invite the one to whom it falls (to recite the Pāṭimokkha). If, while he is reciting, a monk remembers an offense or transgression, we deal with him in accordance with the Dhamma, in accordance with what has been instructed. We're not the ones who deal with that venerable one. Rather, the Dhamma is what deals with us."

“Is there, Master Ānanda, any one monk you now honor, respect, revere, & venerate, on whom—honoring & respecting—you live in dependence?”

“Yes, brahman, there is1 a monk we now honor, respect, revere, & venerate, on whom—honoring & respecting—we live in dependence.”

“When asked, ‘Master Ānanda, is there any one monk appointed by Master Gotama (with the words), “He will be your arbitrator after I am gone,” to whom you now turn?’ you said, ‘No, brahman. There isn’t any one monk appointed by the Blessed One… to whom we now turn.’

“When asked, ‘Then is there any one monk authorized by the Saṅgha… to whom you now turn?’ you said, ‘No, brahman. There isn’t any one monk authorized by the Saṅgha… to whom we now turn.’

“When asked, ‘Is there, Master Ānanda, any one monk you now honor, respect, revere, & venerate, on whom—honoring & respecting—you live in dependence?’ you said, ‘Yes, brahman, there is a monk we now honor, respect, revere, & venerate, on whom—honoring & respecting—we live in dependence.’ Now how is the meaning of what you have said to be understood?”

“Brahman, there are ten inspiring qualities expounded by the Blessed One—the one who knows, the one who sees, worthy & rightly self-awakened. In whoever among us those ten qualities are found, we now honor, respect, revere, & venerate him; honoring & respecting him, we live in dependence on him. Which ten?

“[1] There is the case where a monk is virtuous. He dwells restrained in accordance with the Pāṭimokkha, consummate in his behavior & sphere of activity. He trains himself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults.

“[2] He has heard much, has retained what he has heard, has stored what he has heard. Whatever teachings are admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end, that—in their meaning & expression—proclaim the holy life entirely perfect & pure: those he has listened to often, retained, discussed, accumulated, examined with his mind, and well-penetrated in terms of his views.

“[3] He is content with robes, alms food, lodgings, & medicinal requisites for curing the sick.

“[4] He attains—whenever he wants, without strain, without difficulty—the four jhānas that are heightened mental states, pleasant abidings in the here & now.

“[5] He experiences manifold supranormal powers. Having been one he becomes many; having been many he becomes one. He appears. He vanishes. He goes unimpeded through walls, ramparts, & mountains as if through space. He dives in & out of the earth as if it were water. He walks on water without sinking as if it were dry land. Sitting

crosslegged he flies through the air like a winged bird. With his hand he touches & strokes even the sun & moon, so mighty & powerful. He exercises influence with his body even as far as the Brahmā worlds.

"[6] He hears—by means of the divine ear-element, purified & surpassing the human—both kinds of sounds: divine & human, whether near or far.

"[7] He knows the awareness of other beings, other individuals, having encompassed it with his own awareness. He discerns a mind with passion as 'a mind with passion,' and a mind without passion as 'a mind without passion.' He discerns a mind with aversion as 'a mind with aversion,' and a mind without aversion as 'a mind without aversion.' He discerns a mind with delusion as 'a mind with delusion,' and a mind without delusion as 'a mind without delusion.' He discerns a restricted mind as 'a restricted mind,' and a scattered mind as 'a scattered mind.' He discerns an enlarged mind as 'an enlarged mind,' and an unenlarged mind as 'an unenlarged mind.' He discerns a surpassed mind [one that is not at the most excellent level] as 'a surpassed mind,' and an unsurpassed mind as 'an unsurpassed mind.' He discerns a concentrated mind as 'a concentrated mind,' and an unconcentrated mind as 'an unconcentrated mind.' He discerns a released mind as 'a released mind,' and an unreleased mind as 'an unreleased mind.'

"[8] He recollects his manifold past lives [lit: previous homes], i.e., one birth, two births, three births, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, one hundred, one thousand, one hundred thousand, many eons of cosmic contraction, many eons of cosmic expansion, many eons of cosmic contraction & expansion, (recollecting,) 'There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.' Thus he remembers his manifold past lives in their modes & details.

"[9] He sees—by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human—beings passing away and re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their kamma: 'These beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, & mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. But these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech, & mind, who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a good destination, a heavenly world.' Thus—by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human—he sees beings passing away and re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their kamma.

“[10] Through the ending of effluents, he remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having known & realized them for himself right in the here & now.

“These, brahman, are the ten inspiring qualities expounded by the Blessed One—the one who knows, the one who sees, worthy & rightly self-awakened. In whoever among us these ten qualities are found, we now honor, respect, revere, & venerate him; honoring & respecting him, we live in dependence on him.”

When this was said, the brahman Vassakāra, the Magadhan administrator, turned to General Upananda and said, “What do you think, general? Do these venerable ones honor what should be honored, respect what should be respected, revere what should be revered, venerate what should be venerated? Of course they honor what should be honored, respect what should be respected, revere what should be revered, venerate what should be venerated. For if they did not honor, respect, revere, or venerate a person like this, then what sort of person would they honor, respect, revere, & venerate; on what sort of person, honoring & respecting, would they live in dependence?”

Then the brahman Vassakāra, the Magadhan administrator, said to Ven. Ānanda, “But where are you staying now, Master Ānanda?”

“I am now staying at the Bamboo Forest, brahman.”

“I trust, Master Ānanda, that the Bamboo Forest is delightful, with few noises or sounds of voices, with an air of isolation, private from human beings, & appropriate for seclusion.”

“Certainly, brahman, the Bamboo Forest is delightful, with few noises or sounds of voices, with an air of isolation, private from human beings, & appropriate for seclusion because of guardians & protectors like yourself.”

“Certainly, Master Ānanda, the Bamboo Forest is delightful, with few noises or sounds of voices, with an air of isolation, private from human beings, & appropriate for seclusion because of venerable ones who are endowed with mental absorption [jhāna], who make mental absorption their habit. You venerable ones are both endowed with mental absorption & make mental absorption your habit.

“Once, Ven. Ānanda, Master Gotama was staying near Vesālī in the Gabled Pavilion in the Great Forest. I went to him at the Gabled Pavilion in the Great Forest, and there he spoke in a variety of ways on mental absorption. Master Gotama was both endowed with mental absorption & made mental absorption his habit. In fact, he praised mental absorption of every sort.”

“It wasn’t the case, brahman, that the Blessed One praised mental absorption of every sort, nor did he criticize mental absorption of every sort. And what sort of mental absorption did he not praise? There is the case where a certain person dwells with his awareness overcome by sensual passion, seized with sensual passion. He does not discern the escape, as it has come to be, from sensual passion once it has arisen. Making that sensual passion

the focal point, he absorbs himself with it, besorbs, resorbs, & supersorbs himself with it.

"He dwells with his awareness overcome by ill will....

"He dwells with his awareness overcome by sloth & drowsiness....

"He dwells with his awareness overcome by restlessness & anxiety....

"He dwells with his awareness overcome by uncertainty, seized with uncertainty. He does not discern the escape, as it has come to be, from uncertainty once it has arisen. Making that uncertainty the focal point, he absorbs himself with it, besorbs, resorbs, & supersorbs himself with it. This is the sort of mental absorption that the Blessed One did not praise.

"And what sort of mental absorption did he praise? There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.' With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This is the sort of mental absorption that the Blessed One praised.

"It would seem, Ven. Ānanda, that Master Gotama criticized the mental absorption that deserves criticism, and praised that which deserves praise.

"Well, now, Master Ānanda, I must be going. Many are my duties, many the things I must do."

"Then do, brahman, what you think it is now time to do."

So the brahman Vassakāra, the Magadhan administrator, delighting & rejoicing in what Ven. Ānanda had said, got up from his seat & left.

Then, not long after he had left, Moggallāna the Guardsman said to Ven. Ānanda, "Master Ānanda, you still haven't answered what I asked you."

"Didn't I just tell you, brahman? There isn't any one monk endowed in each & every way with the qualities with which the Blessed One—worthy & rightly self-awakened—was endowed. For the Blessed One was the arouser of the unarisen path, the begetter of the unbegotten path, the expounder of the unexpounded path, the knower of the path, the expert with regard to the path, adept at the path. And now his disciples follow the path and become endowed with it after him."

Note

1. Reading atthi with the Thai edition. The Sri Lankan and Burmese editions read n'atthi, "No, there isn't," both here and below when Vassakāra repeats what Ven. Ānanda has said. The Thai reading seems more correct because Vassakāra is perplexed by the answer, in that it seems to contradict Ven. Ānanda's answers to the two previous questions. If Ven. Ānanda had answered, "No," to this third question, there would have been nothing perplexing about the answer.

Ven. Ānanda proceeds to define the monk whom the other monks respect, and he does so using a figure of speech: The "one monk" is actually one ideal monk whose profile may fit any number of monks. The editors of the Sri Lankan and Burmese edition may have chosen to read n'atthi to convey the idea that there was more than one monk whom the other monks respected. But, as noted above, this reading does not explain why Vassakāra was perplexed by Ven. Ānanda's answer.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: SN 22:90; AN 6:12; AN 7:21; AN 11:10