MN 109 — MN 109 The Great Full-Moon Night Discourse | Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta

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Text

The Great Full-Moon Night Discourse

Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta (MN 109)

This sutta provides a thorough discussion of issues related to the five aggregates. Toward the end of the discussion, a monk thinks that he has found a loophole in the teaching. The way the Buddha handles this incident shows the proper use of the teachings on the aggregates: not as a metaphysical theory, but as a tool for questioning clinging and so gaining release.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in the Eastern Monastery, the palace of Migāra's mother. And on that occasion—the uposatha of the fifteenth, the night of a very full moon—he was sitting out in the open with the Saṅgha of monks.

Then a certain monk, rising from his seat, arranging his robe over one shoulder, and placing his hands palm-to-palm over the heart, said to the Blessed One: "Venerable sir, there is an area where, if the Blessed One would give me leave, I would like the answer to a question."

"Very well, then, monk. Sit back down in your seat and ask whatever you want."

Responding to the Blessed One, "Yes, lord," the monk sat back down in his seat and said to the Blessed One, "Aren't these the five clinging-aggregates, i.e., the form clinging-aggregate, the feeling clinging-aggregate, the perception clinging-aggregate, the fabrications clinging-aggregate, the consciousness clinging-aggregate."

"Monk, these are the five clinging-aggregates, i.e., the form clinging-aggregate, the feeling clinging-aggregate, the perception clinging-aggregate, the fabrications clinging-aggregate, the consciousness clinging-aggregate."

Saying, "Very good, lord," the monk delighted & approved of the Blessed One's words and then asked him a further question: "But in what, lord, are these five clinging-aggregates rooted?"

"Monk, these five clinging-aggregates are rooted in desire."1

Saying, "Very good, lord," the monk… asked him a further question: "Is clinging the same thing as the five clinging-aggregates, or is clinging separate from the five clinging-aggregates?"

"Monk, clinging is neither the same thing as the five clinging-aggregates, nor is it separate from the five clinging-aggregates. Just that whatever passion & delight is there, that's the clinging there."

Saying, "Very good, lord," the monk… asked him a further question: "Might there be diversity in the desire & passion for the five clinging-aggregates?"

"There might, monk. There is the case where the thought occurs to someone, 'May I be one with such a form in the future. May I be one with such a feeling… perception… fabrications… such a consciousness in the future. This is how there would be diversity in the desire & passion for the five clinging-aggregates."

Saying, "Very good, lord," the monk… asked him a further question: "To what extent does the designation 'aggregate' apply to the aggregates?"

“Monk, whatever form is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the form aggregate. Whatever feeling is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the feeling aggregate. Whatever perception is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the perception aggregate. Whatever fabrications are past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Those are called the fabrications aggregate. Whatever consciousness is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: That is called the consciousness aggregate.2 This is the extent to which the term ‘aggregate’ applies to the aggregates.”

Saying, “Very good, lord,” the monk… asked him a further question: “Lord, what is the cause, what the condition, for the delineation3 of the form aggregate? What is the cause, what the condition, for the delineation of the feeling aggregate… the perception aggregate… the fabrications aggregate… the consciousness aggregate?”

“Monk, the four great elements [earth, water, fire, & wind] are the cause, the four great elements the condition, for the delineation of the form aggregate. Contact is the cause, contact the condition, for the delineation of the feeling aggregate. Contact is the cause, contact the condition, for the delineation of the perception aggregate. Contact is the cause, contact the condition, for the delineation of the fabrications aggregate. Name-&-form is the cause, name-&-form the condition, for the delineation of the consciousness aggregate.”

Saying, “Very good, lord,” the monk… asked him a further question: “Lord, how does self-identification view come about?”

“There is the case, monk, 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—assumes form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form.

“He assumes feeling to be the self, or the self as possessing feeling, or feeling as in the self, or the self as in feeling. He assumes perception to be the self, or the self as possessing perception, or perception as in the self, or the self as in perception. He assumes fabrications to be the self, or the self as possessing fabrications, or fabrications as in the self, or the self as in fabrications. He assumes consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness.

“This, monk, is how self-identification view comes about.”

Saying, “Very good, lord,” the monk… asked him a further question: “Lord, how does self-identification view no longer come about?”

“There is the case, monk, where a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—who has regard for noble ones, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma; who has regard for people of integrity, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma—doesn’t assume form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form. He doesn’t assume feeling to be the self.... doesn’t assume perception to be the self.... doesn’t assume fabrications to be the self.... He doesn’t assume consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness.

“This, monk, is how self-identification view no longer comes about.”

Saying, “Very good, lord,” the monk... asked him a further question: “What, lord, is the allure of form? What is its drawback? What is the escape from it? What is the allure of feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness? What is its drawback? What is the escape from it?”

“Monk, whatever pleasure & joy arises dependent on form: That is the allure of form. The fact that form is inconstant, stressful, subject to change: That is the drawback of form. The subduing of desire & passion, the abandoning of desire & passion for form: That is the escape from form.

“Whatever pleasure & joy arises dependent on feeling: That is the allure of feeling....

“Whatever pleasure & joy arises dependent on perception: That is the allure of perception....

“Whatever pleasure & joy arises dependent on fabrications: That is the allure of fabrications....

“Whatever pleasure & joy arises dependent on consciousness: That is the allure of consciousness. The fact that consciousness is inconstant, stressful, subject to change: That is the drawback of consciousness. The subduing of desire & passion, the abandoning of desire & passion for consciousness: That is the escape from consciousness.”

Saying, “Very good, lord,” the monk... asked him a further question: “Knowing in what way, seeing in what way, is there—with regard to this body endowed with consciousness, and with regard to all external signs—no longer any I-making, or my-making, or obsession with conceit?”

“Monk, one sees any form whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near—every form, as it has come to be with right discernment: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“One sees any feeling whatsoever... any perception whatsoever... any fabrications whatsoever...

“One sees any consciousness whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near—every consciousness—as it has come to be with right discernment: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’”

“Monk, knowing in this way, seeing in this way is there—with regard to this body endowed with consciousness, and with regard to all external signs—no longer any I-making, or my-making, or obsession with conceit.”

Now at that moment this line of thinking appeared in the awareness of a certain monk: “So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?”

Then the Blessed One, realizing with his awareness the line of thinking in that monk’s awareness, addressed the monks: “It’s possible that a senseless person—immersed in ignorance, overcome with craving—might think that he could outsmart the Teacher’s message in this way: ‘So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?’ Now, monks, haven’t I trained you in counter-questioning with regard to this & that topic here & there? What do you think? Is form constant or inconstant?”—“Inconstant, lord.”—“And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?”—“Stressful, lord.”—“And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am’?”

“No, lord.”

“… Is feeling constant or inconstant?”—“Inconstant, lord.” …

“… Is perception constant or inconstant?”—“Inconstant, lord.” …

“… Are fabrications constant or inconstant?”—“Inconstant, lord.” …

“What do you think, monks? Is consciousness constant or inconstant?”—“Inconstant, lord.”—“And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?”—“Stressful, lord.”—“And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am’?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus, monks, any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every form is to be seen as it has come to be with right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“Any feeling whatsoever…

“Any perception whatsoever…

“Any fabrications whatsoever…

“Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every consciousness is to be seen as it has come to be with right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“Seeing thus, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is released. With release, there is the knowledge, ‘Released.’ He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One’s words. And while this explanation was being given, the minds of sixty-some monks, through lack of clinging/sustenance, were released from effluents.

Notes

1. As AN 10:58 notes, all phenomena (dhamma) are rooted in desire.

2. One form of consciousness apparently does not come under the aggregate of consciousness. This is termed viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ—consciousness without surface, or consciousness without feature. MN 49 says specifically that this consciousness is not experienced through the “allness of the all,” the “all” being conterminous with the six sense media and the five aggregates (SN 35:23). DN 11 states that in this consciousness name and form—which are also conterminous with the five aggregates—are not found. Because the aggregate of consciousness cannot arise apart from the other aggregates (SN 22:53–54), viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ would not fit under the aggregate of consciousness.

Furthermore, the standard definition of the aggregate of consciousness states that this aggregate includes all consciousness, “past, present, or future… near or far.” However, because viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ stands outside of space and time it would not be covered by these terms. Similarly, where SN 22:97 says that no consciousness is eternal, “eternal” is a concept that applies only within the dimension of time, and thus would not apply to this form of consciousness.

3. Delineation (paññāpana) literally means, “making discernible.” This apparently refers to the intentional aspect of perception, which takes the objective side of experience and fabricates it into discernible objects. In the case of the aggregates, the four great elements, contact, and name-&-form provide the objective basis for discerning them, while the process of fabrication takes the raw material provided by the objective basis and turns it into discernible instances of the aggregates. This process is described in slightly different terms in SN 22:79.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 28; MN 122; SN 1:25; SN 22