MN 117 — MN 117 The Great Forty | Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta

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Text

The Great Forty

Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta (MN 117)

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, I will teach you noble right concentration with its supports & requisite conditions. Listen, and pay close attention. I will speak."

“Yes, lord,” the monks responded to him.

The Blessed One said: “Now what, monks, is noble right concentration with its supports & requisite conditions? Any singleness of mind equipped with these seven factors—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, & right mindfulness—is called noble right concentration with its supports & requisite conditions.1

“[1] Of those, right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong view as wrong view, and right view as right view. This is one’s right view. And what is wrong view? ‘There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed. There is no fruit or result of good or bad actions. There is no this world, no next world, no mother, no father, no spontaneously reborn beings; no contemplatives or brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.’ This is wrong view.

“And what is right view? Right view, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right view with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions [of becoming]; there is right view that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“And what is the right view with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions? ‘There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives & brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.’2 This is the right view with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions.

“And what is the right view that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The discernment, the faculty of discernment, the strength of discernment, analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening, the path factor of right view3 in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is without effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the right view that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“One makes an effort for the abandoning of wrong view & for entering right view: This is one’s right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong view & to enter & remain in right view: This is one’s right mindfulness.4 Thus these three qualities—right view, right effort, & right mindfulness—run & circle around right view.

“[2] Of those, right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong resolve as wrong resolve, and right resolve as right resolve. This is one’s right view. And what is wrong resolve? Being resolved on sensuality, on ill will, on harmfulness. This is wrong resolve.

“And what is right resolve? Right resolve, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right resolve with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions; there is right resolve that is

noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“And what is the right resolve with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions? Resolve for renunciation, resolve for freedom from ill will, resolve for harmlessness. This is the right resolve with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions.

“And what is the right resolve that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The thinking, directed thinking, resolve, mental fixity, mental transfixion, focused awareness, & verbal fabrications5 in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is without effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the right resolve that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“One makes an effort for the abandoning of wrong resolve & for entering right resolve: This is one’s right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong resolve & to enter & remain in right resolve: This is one’s right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities—right view, right effort, & right mindfulness—run & circle around right resolve.

“[3] Of those, right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong speech as wrong speech, and right speech as right speech. This is one’s right view. And what is wrong speech? Lying, divisive tale-bearing, abusive speech, & idle chatter. This is wrong speech.

“And what is right speech? Right speech, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right speech with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions; there is right speech that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“And what is the right speech with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions? Abstaining from lying, from divisive tale-bearing, from abusive speech, & from idle chatter. This is the right speech with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions.

“And what is the right speech that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The abstaining, desisting, abstinence, avoidance of the four forms of verbal misconduct in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is without effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the right speech that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“One makes an effort for the abandoning of wrong speech & for entering right speech: This is one’s right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong speech & to enter & remain in right speech: This is one’s right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities—right view, right effort, & right mindfulness—run & circle around right speech.

“[4] Of those, right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong action as wrong action, and right action as right action. This is one’s right view. And what is wrong action? Killing, taking what is not given, illicit sex. This is wrong action.

“And what is right action? Right action, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right action with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions; there is right action that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“And what is the right action with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions? Abstaining from killing, from taking what is not given, & from illicit sex.6 This is the right action with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions.

“And what is the right action that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The abstaining, desisting, abstinence, avoidance of the three forms of bodily misconduct in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is without effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the right action that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“One makes an effort for the abandoning of wrong action & for entering right action: This is one’s right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong action & to enter & remain in right action: This is one’s right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities—right view, right effort, & right mindfulness—run & circle around right action.

“[5] Of those, right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong livelihood as wrong livelihood, and right livelihood as right livelihood. This is one’s right view. And what is wrong livelihood? Scheming, persuading, hinting, belittling, & pursuing gain with gain.7 This is wrong livelihood.

“And what is right livelihood? Right livelihood, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right livelihood with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions; there is right livelihood that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“And what is the right livelihood with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones abandons wrong livelihood and maintains his life with right livelihood. This is the right livelihood with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions.

“And what is the right livelihood that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The abstaining, desisting, abstinence, avoidance of wrong livelihood in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is without effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the right livelihood that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

“One makes an effort for the abandoning of wrong livelihood & for entering right livelihood: This is one’s right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong livelihood & to enter & remain in right livelihood: This is one’s right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities—right view, right effort, & right mindfulness—run & circle around right livelihood.

“Of those, right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? In one of right view, right resolve comes into being. In one of right resolve, right speech comes into being. In one of right speech, right action.... In one of right action, right livelihood.... In one of right livelihood, right effort.... In one of right effort, right mindfulness.... In one of right mindfulness, right concentration.... In one of right concentration, right knowledge.... In one of right knowledge, right release comes into being.8 Thus the learner is endowed with eight factors, and the arahant with ten.

“Of those, right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? In one of right view, wrong view is abolished. The many evil, unskillful qualities that come into play with wrong view as their condition are also abolished, while the many skillful qualities that have right view as their condition go to the culmination of their development. In one of right resolve, wrong resolve is abolished.... In one of right speech, wrong speech is abolished.... In one of right action, wrong action is abolished.... In one of right livelihood, wrong livelihood is abolished.... In one of right effort, wrong effort is abolished.... In one of right mindfulness, wrong mindfulness is abolished.... In one of right concentration, wrong concentration is abolished.... In one of right knowledge, wrong knowledge is abolished.... In one of right release, wrong release is abolished. The many evil, unskillful qualities that come into play with wrong release as their condition are also abolished, while the many skillful qualities that have right release as their condition go to the culmination of their development.

“Thus, monks, there are twenty factors siding with skillfulness, and twenty with unskillfulness.

“This Dhamma discourse on the Great Forty has been set rolling and cannot be stopped by any contemplative or brahman or deva or Māra or Brahmā or anyone at all in the world.

“If any contemplative or brahman might think that this Great Forty Dhamma discourse should be censured & rejected, there are ten legitimate implications of his statement that would form grounds for censuring him here & now. If he censures right view, then he would honor any contemplatives & brahmans who are of wrong view; he would praise them. If he censures right resolve... right speech... right action... right livelihood... right effort... right mindfulness... right concentration... right knowledge.... If he censures right release, then he would honor any contemplatives & brahmans who are of wrong release; he would praise them. If any contemplative or brahman might think that this Great Forty Dhamma discourse should be censured & rejected, there are these ten legitimate implications of his statement that would form grounds for censuring him here & now.

“Even Vassa & Bhañña—those teachers from Ukkala who were proponents of no-causality, no-action, & no-existence—would not think that this Dhamma discourse on the Great Forty should be censured & rejected. Why is that? For fear of criticism, opposition, & reproach.”

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

Notes

1. It has been argued that this definition of right concentration differs from the standard definition that equates right concentration with the four jhānas. This argument, however, misses two points. The first is that this definition differs in no way from the opening part of the definition of the first jhāna: "There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—enters & remains in the first jhāna." The "unskillful qualities" in this passage are identified by SN 45:22 as "wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, wrong concentration." And of course, sensuality is renounced through mundane right resolve. In fact, MN 78 indicates a direct connection between right resolve and jhāna, stating that the first jhāna is where all unskillful resolves cease without trace. This means that any concentration truly endowed with right resolve would have to be at least the first jhāna.

The second point is that this sutta defines noble right resolve as the resolves present in the first jhāna. See note 5, below.

So there is nothing to indicate that this definition of right concentration refers to anything but jhāna.

2. See MN 41, note 5.

3. These various factors are all equivalent to knowledge in terms of the four noble truths. The relationship between these four truths and the issue of skillful and unskillful action is shown in SN 46:51, which notes that analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening is fed by paying appropriate attention to qualities as to whether they are skillful or unskillful. See also MN 9.

4. Notice that mindfulness plays an active role here and with all the path factors. It is not simply a receptive acceptance of wrong and right views. Instead—in its canonical sense of keeping something in mind—it keeps remembering to abandon the factors of the wrong path, and to enter and remain in the factors of the right path. For more on the active role of mindfulness in the practice of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones, see AN 4:245 and AN 7:63.

5. According to MN 44, verbal fabrications are directed thought and evaluation. The definition of noble right resolve here appears to refer to the resolves present in the first jhāna (see MN 78), thus connecting noble right resolve with right concentration.

6. SN 45:8 defines right action as abstaining from killing, abstaining from taking what is not given, & abstaining from uncelibacy.

7. This definition appears to refer to wrong livelihood for monks and nuns.

8. SN 48:46 equates noble release with the faculty of concentration (see also SN 48:10).

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: SN 12:15; SN 45:1; SN 45:8; SN 48:46; AN 5:25; AN 5:28