MN 121 — MN 121 The Shorter Discourse on Emptiness | Cūḷa Suññata Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Shorter Discourse on Emptiness

Cūḷa Suññata Sutta (MN 121)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in the Eastern Monastery, the palace of Migāra's mother. Then Ven. Ānanda, emerging from his seclusion in the evening, 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: "On one occasion, when the Blessed One was staying among the Sakyans in a Sakyan town named Nagaraka, there—face-to-face with the Blessed One—I heard this, face-to-face I learned this: 'I now remain fully in a dwelling of emptiness.' Did I hear that correctly, learn it correctly, attend to it correctly, remember it correctly?"

[The Buddha:] "Yes, Ānanda, you heard that correctly, learned it correctly, attended to it correctly, remembered it correctly. Now, as well as before, I remain fully in a dwelling of emptiness. Just as this palace of Migāra's mother is empty of elephants, cattle, & mares, empty of gold & silver, empty of assemblies of women & men, and there is only this non-emptiness—the singleness based on the Saṅgha of monks; even so, Ānanda, a monk—not attending to the perception (mental note) of village, not attending to the perception of human being—attends to the singleness based on the perception of wilderness. His mind leaps up, grows confident, stands fast, & grows resolute in its perception of wilderness.

"He discerns that 'Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of village are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of human being are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.' He discerns that 'This mode of perception is empty of the perception of village. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of human being. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure.

The Perception of Earth

"Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of human being, not attending to the perception of wilderness—attends to the singleness based on the perception of earth. His mind leaps up, grows confident, stands fast, & grows resolute in its perception of earth. Just as a bull's hide is stretched free from wrinkles with a hundred stakes, even so—without attending to all the ridges & hollows, the river ravines, the tracts of stumps & thorns, the craggy irregularities of this earth—he attends to the singleness based on the perception of earth. His mind leaps up, grows confident, stands fast, & grows resolute in its perception of earth.

"He discerns that 'Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of human being are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of wilderness are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of earth.' He discerns that 'This mode of perception is empty of the perception of human being. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of wilderness. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of earth.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure.

The Infinitude of Space

"Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of wilderness, not attending to the perception of earth—attends to the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space. His mind leaps up, grows confident, stands fast, &

grows resolute in its perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space.

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of wilderness are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of earth are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is empty of the perception of wilderness. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of earth. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space.’ Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: ‘There is this.’ And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure.

The Infinitude of Consciousness

“Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of earth, not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space—attends to the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. His mind leaps up, grows confident, stands fast, & grows resolute in its perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness.

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of earth are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is empty of the perception of earth. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness.’ Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: ‘There is this.’ And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure.

Nothingness

“Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space, not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness—attends to the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness. His mind leaps up, grows confident, stands fast, & grows resolute in its perception of the dimension of nothingness.

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is

empty of the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of space. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure.

Neither Perception nor Non-perception

"Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness—attends to the singleness based on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. His mind leaps up, grows confident, stands fast, & grows resolute in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.

"He discerns that 'Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness are not present. There is only this modicum of disturbance: the singleness based on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.' He discerns that 'This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of nothingness. There is only this non-emptiness: the singleness based on the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure.

Theme-less Concentration

"Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception—attends to the singleness based on the theme-less concentration of awareness. His mind leaps up, grows confident, stands fast, & grows resolute in its theme-less concentration of awareness.

"He discerns that 'Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of nothingness are not present. Whatever disturbances that would exist based on the perception of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, are not present. And there is only this modicum of disturbance: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.' He discerns that 'This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of nothingness. This mode of perception is empty of the perception of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. There is only this non-emptiness: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.' Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'There is this.' And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, & pure.

Release

“Further, Ānanda, the monk—not attending to the perception of the dimension of nothingness, not attending to the perception of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception—attends to the singleness based on the theme-less concentration of awareness. His mind leaps up, grows confident, stands fast, & grows resolute in its theme-less concentration of awareness.

“He discerns that ‘This theme-less concentration of awareness is fabricated & mentally fashioned.’ And he discerns that ‘Whatever is fabricated & mentally fashioned is inconstant & subject to cessation.’ Thus knowing, thus seeing, his heart is released from the effluent of sensuality, released from the effluent of becoming, released from the effluent of ignorance. 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.’

“He discerns that ‘Whatever disturbances would exist based on the effluent of sensuality…the effluent of becoming…the effluent of ignorance, are not present. And there is only this modicum of disturbance: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.’ He discerns that ‘This mode of perception is empty of the effluent of sensuality…becoming…ignorance. And there is just this non-emptiness: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.’ Thus he regards it as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: ‘There is this.’ And so this, his entry into emptiness, accords with actuality, is undistorted in meaning, pure—superior & unsurpassed.

“Ānanda, whatever contemplatives and brahmans who in the past entered & remained in an emptiness that was pure, superior, & unsurpassed, they all entered & remained in this very same emptiness that is pure, superior, & unsurpassed. Whatever contemplatives and brahmans who in the future will enter & remain in an emptiness that will be pure, superior, & unsurpassed, they all will enter & remain in this very same emptiness that is pure, superior, & unsurpassed. Whatever contemplatives and brahmans who at present enter & remain in an emptiness that is pure, superior, & unsurpassed, they all enter & remain in this very same emptiness that is pure, superior, & unsurpassed.

“Therefore, Ānanda, you should train yourselves: ‘We will enter & remain in the emptiness that is pure, superior, & unsurpassed.’”

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

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 22; MN 43; MN 61; MN 106; MN 122; MN 140; SN 5:10; SN 12:15; SN 35:85; Ud 1:10; Sn 5:15