

MN 121
Cūla Suññatā Sutta
“Shorter Discourse on Emptiness”
Translated by Bhikkhu Candana

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I have personally heard this.

At one time, The Blessed One was staying in the palace-monastery donated by Migāra’s Mother in the City of Sāvattī, at the Eastern Grove. Then, when it was nearly evening, the Venerable Ānanda came out from his meditative seclusion, and went to The Blessed One. After paying his respects, he sat to one side and said:

“Bhante, I remember one time, when The Blessed One was living within the Sākya district at a town called Nagaraka, The Blessed One Himself spoke to me these words, and said:

‘Nowadays, Ānanda, I primarily practice the meditation on emptiness.’

“Bhante, did I hear You correctly? Am I recalling and relating back accurately to the Teacher what The Blessed One had spoken to me Himself? For I do not want to be misspeaking the words of the Tathāgata, nor misrepresenting Him.”

“Yes, Ānanda, you did hear me correctly, for you are recalling and relating back accurately to the Teacher what I had spoken to you myself. Therefore, you are not misspeaking the words of the Tathāgata, nor misrepresenting Him.

“Indeed Ānanda, as in the past, now also I primarily practice the meditation on emptiness.

“Ānanda, just as you see here in this palace-monastery of Migāra’s mother, which is empty of elephants, cattle, horses, gold, or silver, empty of any assemblies of men and women, yet the non-emptiness or presence of something else, namely, the Sangha of Bhikkhus *is* here, the only single presence here.

1. “In the same manner, the Bhikkhu, by not thinking about nor becoming lost in memories of village life or the people in it, gives attention instead to the single perception: that of being in a remote wilderness.

“By having only this single perception of being in a remote wilderness, his mind springs forward to it with confidence, becomes bright, and gets settled in it. And he understands that, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of the village, now is no longer present in him. Similarly, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of people, now is no longer present in him.

“Then, the only agitation that he would notice within him would be that of the single perception of being in a remote wilderness.

“He then knows and sees that this agitation is empty of the perception of village and the people in it. However, he also understands that there nevertheless is agitation, but that it is due to being in a remote wilderness. So, he sees and understands that when the agitation causing factors are not present, then emptiness is perceived, and whatever remains there he perceives as: ‘This is still present.’

“Ānanda, in this manner, the genuine, un-perverted, and pure experience of emptiness comes forth within him.

2. “Furthermore, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu, by not thinking about people or of being in a remote wilderness, gives attention instead to the single perception: that of solid earth.

“By having only this single perception of solid earth, his mind springs forward to it with confidence, becomes bright, and gets settled in it.

“Just as the bull’s hide becomes free from any crinkles or creases, turning smooth when stretched by a hundred pins fastening it, in a similar manner, the Bhikkhu, by not paying attention to the various terrains, hills, inaccessible gorges, rivers, ravines, thick forests, rugged mountains, and other uneven topographical features of earth, gives attention instead to the single perception: that of solid earth.

“And he understands that, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of people, now is no longer present in him. Similarly, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of being in a remote wilderness, now is no longer present in him either.

“Then, the only agitation that he would notice within him would be that of the single perception of solid earth.

“He then knows and sees that his perceiving is empty of the perception of people, as well as the perception of being in a remote wilderness. However, he also understands that there nevertheless is agitation, but that it is due to the perception of solid earth. So, he sees and understands that when the agitation causing factors are not present, then emptiness is perceived, and whatever remains there he perceives as: ‘This is still present.’

“Ānanda, in this manner also, the genuine, un-perverted, and pure experience of emptiness comes forth within him.

3. “Again, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu, by not giving attention to the perception of being in a remote wilderness, nor to the perception of solid earth, gives attention instead to the single perception: that of infinity of space.

“By having only this single perception of infinity of space, his mind springs forward to it with confidence, becomes bright, and gets settled in it.

“And he understands that whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of being in a remote wilderness, now is no longer present in him. Similarly, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of solid earth, now is no longer present in him either.

“Then, the only agitation that he would notice within him would be that of the single perception of infinity of space.

“He then knows and sees that his perceiving is empty of the perception of being in a remote wilderness and is empty of the perception of solid earth. However, he also understands that there nevertheless is agitation, but that it is due to the perception of infinity of space. So, he sees and understands that when the agitation causing factors are not present, then emptiness is perceived, and whatever remains there he perceives as: ‘This is still present.’

“Ānanda, in this manner also, the genuine, un-perverted, and pure experience of emptiness comes forth within him.

4. “Further, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu, by not giving attention to the perception of solid earth, nor paying attention to the perception of infinity of space, gives attention instead to the single perception: that of infinity of consciousness.

“By having only this single perception of infinity of consciousness, his mind springs forward to it with confidence, becomes bright, and gets settled in it.

“And he understands that whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of solid earth, now is no longer present in him. Similarly, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of infinity of space, now is no longer present in him either.

“Then, the only agitation that he would notice within him would be that of the single perception of infinity of consciousness.

“He then knows and sees that his perceiving is empty of the perception of solid earth, as well as the perception of infinity of space. However, he also understands that there nevertheless is agitation, but that it is due to the perception of infinity of consciousness. So, he sees and understands that when the agitation causing factors are not present, then emptiness is perceived, and whatever remains there he perceives as: ‘This is still present.’

“Ānanda, in this manner also, the genuine, un-perverted, and pure experience of emptiness comes forth within him.

5. “Further, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu, by not giving attention to the perception of infinity of space, nor paying attention to the perception of infinity of consciousness, gives attention instead to the single perception: that of the base of nothingness.

“By having only this single perception of the base of nothingness, his mind springs forward to it with confidence, becomes bright, and gets settled in it.

“And he understands that whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of infinity of space, now is no longer present in him. Similarly, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of infinity of consciousness, now is no longer present in him either.

“Then, the only agitation that he would notice within him would be that of the single perception of the base of nothingness.

“He then knows and sees that his perceiving is empty of the perception of infinity of space, as well as of the perception of infinity of consciousness. However, he also understands that there nevertheless is agitation, but that it is due to the perception of the base of nothingness. So, he sees and understands that when the agitation causing factors are not present, then emptiness is perceived, and whatever remains there he perceives as: ‘This is still present.’

“Ānanda, in this manner also, the genuine, un-perverted, and pure experience of emptiness comes forth within him.

6. “Further, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu, by not giving attention to the perception of infinity of consciousness, nor paying attention to the perception of the base of nothingness, gives attention instead to the single perception: that of the base of neither perception, nor non-perception.

“By having only this single perception of the base of neither perception, nor non-perception, his mind springs forward to it with confidence, becomes bright, and gets settled in it.

“And he understands that whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of infinity of consciousness, now is no longer present in him. Similarly, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of the base of nothingness, now is no longer present in him either.

“Then, the only agitation that he would notice within him would be that of the single perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

“He then knows and sees that his perceiving is empty of the perception of infinity of consciousness, as well as of the perception of the base of nothingness. However, he also understands that there nevertheless is agitation, but that it is due to the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. So, he sees and understands that when the agitation causing factors are not present, then emptiness is perceived, and whatever remains there he perceives as: ‘This is still present.’

“Ānanda, in this manner also, the genuine, un-perverted, and pure experience of emptiness comes forth within him.

7. “Further, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu, by not giving attention to the perception of the base of nothingness, nor paying attention to the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, gives attention instead to the single perception: that of the signless collectedness of the heart.

“By having only this single perception of the signless collectedness of the heart, his mind springs forward to it with confidence, becomes bright, and gets settled in it.

“And he understands that whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of the base of nothingness, now is no longer present in him. Similarly, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, now is no longer present in him either.

“Then, the only agitation that he would then notice within him would be that of the six sense spheres that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life itself.

“He then knows and sees that his perceiving is empty of the perception of the base of nothingness, as well as of the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. However, he also understands that there nevertheless is agitation, but that it is due to the perception of the six sense spheres that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life itself. So, he sees and understands that when the agitation causing factors are not present, then emptiness is perceived, and whatever remains there he perceives as: ‘This is still present.’

“Ānanda, in this manner also, the genuine, un-perverted, and pure experience of emptiness comes forth within him.

8. “Further, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu, by not giving attention to the perception of the base of nothingness, nor paying attention to the perception of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, gives attention instead to the single perception: that of the signless collectedness of the heart.

“By having only this single perception of the signless collectedness of the heart, his mind springs forward to it with confidence, becomes bright, and gets settled in it.

“And he sees and understands that even this state of signless collectedness of the heart is dependent on conditions, being artificially prepared and thus made possible through the volitional means of thought. Knowing full well that, whatever is conditioned and volitionally produced is inevitably impermanent and, sooner or later, will come to end, and on seeing this directly through understanding, his heart finds release from the mental contaminant of sensual desire, the mental contaminant of becoming, and the mental contaminant of ignorance.

“Being released thus, the direct knowledge arises in him: *‘I am released,’* as he understands and knows it for himself:

‘Now, birth is finally destroyed; the Holy Life is fully lived; what should be done is now done, and there is no more coming to any state of becoming.’

“And he understands that, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the mental contaminants of sensual lust, now are no longer present in him. Similarly, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the mental contaminant of becoming, now are no longer present in him. Similarly, whatever agitation there might have been in him on account of the mental contaminant of ignorance, now are no longer present in him either.

“Then, the only agitation that he would notice within him would be that of the six sense spheres that are dependent on this body and conditioned by life itself.

“He then knows and sees that his perceiving is empty of the mental contaminant of sensual lust, which is no longer present in him; empty of the mental contaminant of becoming, which is no longer present in him; and empty of the mental contaminant of ignorance, that is no longer present in him either.

“He, therefore, understands that there is in him this state of non-empty presence, that is due to the perception of the six sense spheres which are dependent on this body and conditioned by life itself. So, he sees and understands that whatever is thus not present, then due to that, emptiness is perceived, and whatever remains there he perceives as: ‘This is still present.’

“Ānanda, this itself is the Bhikkhu’s genuine, un-perverted, and pure experience of emptiness that comes forth within him, which is Transcending and Supreme.

“Ānanda, whatever recluses and brahmins, who in the past have entered into and remained in the transcending state of genuine, un-perverted, pure, and supreme emptiness, all have done so by entering into and remaining in this same transcending state of genuine, un-perverted, pure, and supreme emptiness. Whatever recluses and brahmins, who in the future will enter into and remain in the transcending state of genuine, un-perverted, pure, and supreme emptiness, all will do so by entering into and remaining in this same transcending state of genuine, un-perverted, pure, and supreme emptiness. Whatever recluses and brahmins, who currently enter into and remain in the transcending state of genuine, un-perverted, pure, and supreme emptiness, all do so by entering into and remaining in this same transcending state of genuine, un-perverted, pure, and supreme emptiness.

“Therefore Ānanda, you should train yourselves in this manner, by reflecting:

‘We too will enter into and remain in the transcending state of genuine, un-perverted, pure, and supreme emptiness.’”

This is what The Blessed One said, and the Venerable Ānanda was delighted in listening to The Blessed One’s words.

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