MN 122 — Maha-suññata Sutta: The Greater Discourse on Emptiness

English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

Translator's Introduction

This sutta gives many valuable lessons on practical issues surrounding the attempt to develop an internal meditative dwelling of emptiness, to maintain it, and to see it through to Awakening. Some of these issues include the need for seclusion as a conducive setting for the practice, types of conversation and thinking that are beneficial and harmful for the practice, the dangers of being distracted by visitors, and the proper attitude to have toward one's teacher. However, for an explanation of emptiness in and of itself, it's necessary to look elsewhere in the Canon.

There you find emptiness approached from three perspectives, treating it (1) as a meditative dwelling, (2) as an attribute of objects, and (3) as a type of awareness-release. The first approach is obviously the most immediately relevant to the discussion in this sutta, but in fact all three approaches play a role here.

Emptiness as a meditative dwelling is most fully discussed in MN 121. Essentially, it boils down to the ability to center the mind in a particular mode of perception, to maintain it

there, and then to notice the absence and presence of disturbance within that mode. The process starts with perceptions of one's external surroundings — village, wilderness, the earth property — and then moves internally to the four formless states, the "themeless concentration of awareness," and finally to release from all mental fermentation. Each step is compared to the one preceding it to see how its more refined perception engenders less disturbance. For instance, if you move from a perception of the wilderness to a perception of earth, the first step is to settle and "indulge" in that perception. Then you notice what types of disturbance have been abandoned in the move from the perception of wilderness to the perception of earth — for example, all thought of the dangers of wilderness are gone — and then to see what disturbances remain based on the latter perception. Then you abandon the perception causing those disturbances and move on to a more refined level of perception. This process is pursued until it arrives at the "themeless concentration of awareness." When noting that even this refined level of concentration is fabricated, inconstant, and subject to cessation, one gains total release from all mental fermentations and the disturbances that would arise based on them. This is the level of emptiness that is "superior and unsurpassed," and is apparently what the Buddha is referring to in this sutta when he says that by "not attending to any themes, he enters & remains in internal emptiness."

Notice that in every step along the way of this process, the emptiness is the lack of disturbance experienced in a particular mind state. This means that the mind state is to be perceived simply as an example of the presence and absence of stress. In other words, emptiness in this sense relates directly to the second of the three characteristics — stress or suffering. The pursuit of this emptiness relates to the four noble truths, as it looks for the causes of stress and uses tranquility together with insight to abandon those causes in a quest to put a total end to suffering.

Emptiness in its second meaning, as an attribute of objects, is most fully discussed in SN 35.85. That sutta describes emptiness as meaning the lack of self or anything pertaining to a self in the internal and external sense media. Whatever sense of self that may surround these objects is not inherent in them, and is instead simply the result of one's own penchant for "I-making" and "my-making." Seeing the artificiality of "I-making" and "my-making" in this way helps lead to a sense of disenchantment with these "makings," thus helping to abandon any clinging associated with them.

Thus emptiness in this sense relates directly to the third of the three characteristics: not-self. However, just as the three characteristics are not radically separate from one another — everything stressful is for that reason not-self — the practical application of this sense of emptiness is not radically different from the first. As SN 12.15 points out, when one no longer latches onto any idea of "my self," one sees phenomena within and without simply as examples of stress arising and passing away. To practice meditation from this perspective — seeing each state of concentration as an example of stress arising and passing away — is to develop emptiness as a meditative dwelling.

Emptiness in its third meaning, as a type of awareness-release, is an application of emptiness in its second. MN 43 describes this state of concentration as follows: "There is

the case where a monk — having gone into the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or into an empty dwelling — considers this: 'This is empty of self or of anything pertaining to self.'" It adds that this awareness-release is different from the awareness-release that results when one doesn't attend to any themes. Thus this state of concentration cannot be entirely equated with the emptiness as a meditative dwelling mentioned in this sutta. MN 106 further adds that if one frequently abides in the emptiness awareness-release, one may either attain the dimension of nothingness — one of the formless states — or be committed to the discernment that will lead to Awakening. The first of these two alternatives is another way in which emptiness as an awareness-release differs from emptiness as a meditative dwelling as defined in MN 121. However, because the standard definition of discernment is seeing phenomena in terms of the four noble truths, the second alternative — being committed to discernment — would apparently follow the same pattern suggested by SN 12.15, above. In other words, as one no longer perceives phenomena in terms of self, one tends to view them simply as examples of stress arising and passing away. So, again, this third meaning of emptiness, like the second, eventually leads in practice back to the first. As MN 43 notes, when one attains full awakening, the themeless awareness-release and the emptiness awareness-release come to differ only in name, and not in actuality.

In reading the following sutta, you will notice that the various meanings of emptiness will fit some contexts better than others. Still, it is important to remember that in the course of practice, all three meanings are related and all will inevitably play a role in Awakening.

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying among the Sakyans at Kapilavatthu in the Banyan Park. Then in the early morning, the Blessed One, having put on his robes and carrying his bowl and outer robe, went into Kapilavatthu for alms. Having gone for alms in Kapilavatthu, after the meal, returning from his alms round, he went to the dwelling of Kala-khemaka the Sakyan for the day's abiding. Now at that time many resting places had been prepared in Kala-khemaka the Sakyan's dwelling. The Blessed One saw the many resting places prepared there and, on seeing them, the thought occurred to him, "There are many resting places prepared here. Do many monks live here?"

Now at that time Ven. Ananda, together with many other monks, was making robes at the dwelling of Ghata the Sakyan. Then, when it was evening, the Blessed One rose from seclusion and went to the dwelling of Ghata the Sakyan. On arrival, he sat down on a seat made ready. Having sat down, he asked Ven. Ananda, "There are many resting places prepared in Kala-khemaka the Sakyan's dwelling. Do many monks live there?"

"Yes, lord, there are many resting places prepared in Kala-khemaka the Sakyan's dwelling. Many monks live there. Our time for making robes has come around."

"Ananda, a monk does not shine if he delights in company, enjoys company, is committed to delighting in company; if he delights in a group, enjoys a group, rejoices in a group. Indeed, Ananda, it is impossible that a monk who delights in company, enjoys company, is committed to delighting in company; who delights in a group, enjoys a group, rejoices in a group, will obtain at will — without difficulty, without trouble — the pleasure of

renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of self-awakening. But it is possible that a monk who lives alone, withdrawn from the group, can expect to obtain at will — without difficulty, without trouble — the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of self-awakening.

"Indeed, Ananda, it is impossible that a monk who delights in company, enjoys company, is committed to delighting in company; who delights in a group, enjoys a group, rejoices in a group, will enter & remain in the awareness-release that is temporary and pleasing, or in the awareness-release that is not-temporary and beyond provocation. But it is possible that a monk who lives alone, withdrawn from the group, can expect to enter & remain in the awareness-release that is temporary and pleasing, or in the awareness-release that is not-temporary and beyond provocation.

"Ananda, I do not envision even a single form whose change & alteration would not give rise to sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair in one who is passionate for it and takes delight in it.

"But there is this (mental) dwelling discovered by the Tathagata where, not attending to any themes, he enters & remains in internal emptiness. If, while he is dwelling there by means of this dwelling, he is visited by monks, nuns, lay men, lay women, kings, royal ministers, sectarians & their disciples, then — with his mind bent on seclusion, tending toward seclusion, inclined toward seclusion, aiming at seclusion, relishing renunciation, having destroyed those qualities that are the basis for mental fermentation — he converses with them only as much as is necessary for them to take their leave.[1]

"So, Ananda, if a monk should wish, 'May I enter & remain in internal emptiness,' then he should get the mind steadied right within, settled, unified, & concentrated. And how does the monk get the mind steadied right within, settled, unified, & concentrated? There is the case where a monk — quite withdrawn from sensual pleasures, withdrawn from unskillful qualities — enters & remains in the first jhana... the second jhana... the third jhana... the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure-nor-pain. That is how a monk gets the mind steadied right within, settled, unified, & concentrated.

"He attends to internal emptiness. While he is attending to internal emptiness, his mind does not take pleasure, find satisfaction, grow steady, or indulge in internal emptiness. When this is the case, he discerns, 'While I am attending to internal emptiness, my mind does not take pleasure, find satisfaction, grow steady, or indulge in internal emptiness.' In this way he is alert there.

"He attends to external emptiness...[2]

"He attends to internal & external emptiness...

"He attends to the imperturbable.[3] While he is attending to the imperturbable, his mind does not take pleasure, find satisfaction, grow steady, or indulge in the imperturbable.

When this is the case, he discerns, 'While I am attending to the imperturbable, my mind does not take pleasure, find satisfaction, grow steady, or indulge in the imperturbable.' In this way he is alert there.

"When that is the case, he should get the mind steadied right within, settled, unified, & concentrated in his first theme of concentration.

"He then attends to internal emptiness. While he is attending to internal emptiness, his mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, grows steady, & indulges in internal emptiness. When this is the case, he discerns, 'While I am attending to internal emptiness, my mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, grows steady, & indulges in internal emptiness.' In this way he is alert there.

"He attends to external emptiness...

"He attends to internal & external emptiness...

"He attends to the imperturbable. While he is attending to the imperturbable, his mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, grows steady, & indulges in the imperturbable. When this is the case, he discerns, 'While I am attending to the imperturbable, my mind takes pleasure, finds satisfaction, grows steady, & indulges in the imperturbable.' In this way he is alert there.

"If, while the monk is dwelling by means of this dwelling, his mind inclines to walking back & forth, he walks back & forth [thinking,] 'While I am walking thus, no covetousness or sadness, no evil, unskillful qualities will take possession of me.' In this way he is alert there.

"If, while he is dwelling by means of this dwelling, his mind inclines to standing... to sitting... to lying down, he lies down, [thinking,] 'While I am lying down thus, no covetousness or sadness, no evil, unskillful qualities will take possession of me.' In this way he is alert there.

"If, while he is dwelling by means of this dwelling, his mind inclines to speaking, he resolves that 'I will not engage in talk that is base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unbeneficial, that does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calm, direct knowledge, self-awakening, or Unbinding — i.e., talk about kings, robbers, & ministers of state; armies, alarms, & battles; food & drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, & scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women & heroes; the gossip of the street & the well; tales of the dead; tales of diversity, the creation of the world & of the sea; talk of whether things exist or not.' In this way he is alert there.

"'But,' [he resolves,] 'I will engage in talk that is scrupulous, conducive to release of awareness, and leads exclusively to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calm, direct knowledge, self-awakening, & Unbinding — i.e., talk on modesty, contentment, seclusion, non-entanglement, arousing persistence, virtue, concentration, discernment, release, and the knowledge & vision of release.' In this way he is alert there.

"If, while he is dwelling by means of this dwelling, his mind inclines to thinking, he resolves that 'I will not think thoughts that are base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unbeneficial, that do not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calm, direct knowledge, self-awakening, or Unbinding — i.e., thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of harmfulness.' In this way he is alert there.

"'But,' [he resolves,] 'I will think thoughts that are noble, onward-leading, that lead to the right ending of stress for the person who acts on them — i.e., thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of no ill will, thoughts of harmlessness.' In this way he is alert there.

"Ananda, there are these five strings of sensuality. Which five? Forms cognizable via the eye — agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. Sounds cognizable via the ear... Aromas cognizable via the nose... Flavors cognizable via the tongue... Tactile sensations cognizable via the body — agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. These are the five strings of sensuality where a monk should reflect on his mind repeatedly: 'Is there within me, in any circumstance or another, any engagement of awareness that arises with regard to these five strings of sensuality?' If, on reflection, the monk discerns, 'There is within me, in one circumstance or another, an engagement of awareness that arises with regard to these five strings of sensuality,' then — this being the case — he discerns that 'Desire-passion for the five strings of sensuality has not been abandoned by me.' But if, on reflection, he discerns, 'There is not within me, in any circumstance or another, any engagement of awareness that arises with regard to these five strings of sensuality,' then — this being the case — he discerns that 'Desire-passion for the five strings of sensuality has been abandoned by me.' In this way he is alert there.

"There are these five clinging-aggregates where a monk should stay, keeping track of arising & passing away (thus): 'Such is form, such its origination, such its disappearance. Such is feeling... Such is perception... Such are fabrications... Such is consciousness, such its origination, such its disappearance.' As he stays keeping track of arising & passing away with regard to these five clinging-aggregates, he abandons any conceit that 'I am' with regard to these five clinging-aggregates. This being the case, he discerns, 'I have abandoned any conceit that "I am" with regard to these five clinging-aggregates.' In this way he is alert there.

"These qualities, Ananda, are exclusively skillful in their grounding, noble, transcendent, inaccessible to the Evil One.

"What do you think, Ananda: When envisioning what aim is it proper for a disciple to follow after the Teacher even when being rebuked?"

"For us, lord, the teachings have the Blessed One as their root, their guide, & their arbitrator. It would be good if the Blessed One himself would explicate the meaning of this statement. Having heard it from the Blessed One, the monks will remember it."

"Ananda, it's not proper for a disciple to follow after the Teacher to hear discourses, verses, or catechisms. Why is that? For a long time, Ananda, have you listened to the teachings, retained them, discussed them, accumulated them, examined them with your mind, and penetrated them well in terms of your views. But as for talk that is scrupulous, conducive to release of awareness, and leads exclusively to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, calm, direct knowledge, self-awakening, & Unbinding — i.e., talk on modesty, contentment, seclusion, non-entanglement, arousing persistence, virtue, concentration, discernment, release, and the knowledge & vision of release: It's for the sake of hearing talk of this sort that it is proper for a disciple to follow after the Teacher as if yoked to him.

"This being the case, there is the teacher's undoing, there is the student's undoing, there is the undoing of one who leads the holy life.

"And how is there the teacher's undoing? There is the case where a certain teacher[4] resorts to a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw. While he is living thus secluded, brahmans & householders from town & countryside visit him. When they visit him, he gets smitten with things that infatuate, falls into greed, and reverts to luxury. This is called a teacher undone with a teacher's undoing. He has been struck down by evil, unskillful qualities that defile, that lead to further becoming, are troublesome, ripen in pain, and lead to future birth, aging, & death. Such is the teacher's undoing.[5]

"And how is there the student's undoing? A student of that teacher, imitating his teacher's seclusion, resorts to a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, the shade of a tree... a heap of straw. While he is living thus secluded, brahmans & householders from town & countryside visit him. When they visit him, he gets smitten with things that infatuate, falls into greed, and reverts to luxury. This is called a student undone with a student's undoing. He has been struck down by evil, unskillful qualities that defile, that lead to further becoming, are troublesome, ripen in pain, and lead to future birth, aging, & death. Such is the student's undoing.

"And how is there the undoing of one who leads the holy life? There is the case where a Tathagata arises in the world, worthy and rightly self-awakened, consummate in knowledge & conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to the world, unexcelled as a trainer for those people fit to be tamed, the Teacher of divine & human beings, awakened, blessed. He resorts to a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw. While he is living thus secluded, brahmans & householders from town & countryside visit him. When they visit him, he doesn't get smitten with things that infatuate, doesn't fall into greed, doesn't revert to luxury. A student of that teacher, imitating his teacher's seclusion, resorts to a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, the shade of a tree... a heap of straw. While he is living thus secluded, brahmans & householders from town & countryside visit him. When they visit him, he gets smitten with things that infatuate, falls into greed, and reverts to luxury. This is called one following the holy life who is undone with the undoing of one who leads the holy life. He has been struck down by evil, unskillful qualities that defile, that lead to further becoming, are troublesome, ripen in pain, and lead to future birth, aging, &

death. Such is the undoing of one who leads the holy life.

"And in this regard, Ananda, the undoing of one who leads the holy life ripens in more pain, more bitterness, than the teacher's undoing or the student's undoing. It leads even to the states of deprivation.

"Therefore, Ananda, engage with me in friendliness, and not in opposition. That will be for your long-term well-being & happiness.

"And how do students engage with the teacher in opposition and not in friendliness? There is the case where a teacher teaches the Dhamma to his students sympathetically, seeking their well-being, out of sympathy: 'This is for your well-being; this is for your happiness.' His disciples do not listen or lend ear or apply their minds to gnosis. Turning aside, they stray from the Teacher's message. This is how students engage with the teacher as opponents and not as friends.[6]

"And how do students engage with the teacher in friendliness and not in opposition? There is the case where a teacher teaches the Dhamma to his students sympathetically, seeking their well-being, out of sympathy: 'This is for your well-being; this is for your happiness.' His disciples listen, lend ear, & apply their minds to gnosis. Not turning aside, they don't stray from the Teacher's message. This is how students engage with the teacher as friends and not as opponents.

"Therefore, Ananda, engage with me in friendliness, and not in opposition. That will be for your long-term well-being & happiness.

"I won't hover over you like a potter over damp, unbaked clay goods. Scolding again & again, I will speak. Urging you on again & again, I will speak. Whatever is of essential worth will remain."

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Ven. Ananda delighted in the Blessed One's words.

Notes

1.

See AN 8.86.

2.

Because all three types of emptiness apply both internally and externally, it would seem that when the Buddha mentions external emptiness here, he could be referring to the way any of the three types of emptiness applies to external phenomena. Similarly, when he mentions internal emptiness, he could be referring to the way any of them applies within. In all of these cases, the issue is whether the meditator's concentration is strong enough

to support the sort of contemplation that any of the emptiness themes would involve. If it's not, he/she should revert to the theme of concentration to strengthen it before trying to contemplate emptiness again.

3.

See MN 106.

4.

I.e., a non-Buddhist teacher.

5.

See Iti 109.

6.

See MN 137.

See also: MN 121; SN 35.85; AN 5.30; AN 6.42; AN 8.30; Sn 1.3