

MN 122
Mahā Suññata Sutta
“Greater Discourse on Emptiness”
Translated by Bhikkhu Candana

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I have personally heard this.

At one time, The Blessed One was living in the Sakyan city of Kapilavatthu, at Nigrodha’s monastery. Then, when it was morning, The Blessed One put on His robes and by taking His alms bowl and outer robe, He entered Kapilavatthu for alms. Later, having returned from the alms round and already eaten His meal, The Blessed One went to the estate of the Sakyan Kālakhemaka, to spend the rest of the day.

During that time, many beds and other accommodations were arranged on the estate of the Sakyan Kālakhemaka’s property. On noticing this, The Blessed One reflected:

“There are many beds and other accommodations arranged within the Sakyan Kālakhemaka’s estate. Many Bhikkhus must be staying here.”

Meanwhile, the Venerable Ānanda was at the home of the Sakyan Ghātā, working on preparing robes. Then in the evening, having come out from His meditative seclusion, The Blessed One went to the home of the Sakyan Ghātā, and once there, He sat on the prepared seat and addressed the Venerable Ānanda:

“Ānanda, many beds and other accommodations have been arranged within the Sakyan Kālakhemaka’s estate. Are many Bhikkhus currently staying there?”

“Bhante, yes, many beds and other accommodations have been arranged within the Sakyan Kālakhemaka’s estate, for there are indeed many Bhikkhus currently staying there, because it happens to be the time for the preparation of robes, Blessed One.”

“Ānanda, the Bhikkhu does not shine when he longs for companionship, or when he is attached to, delights in, indulges in, is fond of, or yoked to being with company, or wanting to surround himself with social activities and settings, rejoicing in and enjoying being within society’s noise.

“Because, Ānanda, for a Bhikkhu who longs for companionship, or when he is attached to, delights in, indulges in, is fond of, or yoked to being with company, or who wants to surround himself with social activities and settings, rejoicing in and enjoying being within society’s noise, it is definitely impossible for him to easily and quickly experience the happiness that comes from seclusion and from renouncing the world, the delight of enjoying true peace that is the serene contentment of Awakening.

“But, for a Bhikkhu who does not long for companionship, or when he is neither attached to, nor delights in, nor indulges in, nor is fond of, nor yoked to being with company, nor wanting to surround himself with social activities and settings, neither rejoicing in nor enjoying being within

society's noise, it is definitely possible for him to easily and quickly experience the happiness that comes from seclusion and from renouncing the world, the delight of enjoying true peace that is the serene contentment of Awakening.

“Therefore, Ānanda, for a Bhikkhu who longs for companionship, or who is attached to, delights in, indulges in, is fond of, or yoked to being with company, or wanting to surround himself with social activities and settings, rejoicing and enjoying being within society's noise, it is certainly impossible for him to enter into and remain in the state of freedom of the heart that takes place in stages and is temporary, let alone the state of freedom of the heart that is both unshakable and permanent.

“But, Ānanda, for a Bhikkhu who does not long for companionship, or when he is neither attached to, nor delights in, nor indulges in, nor is fond of, nor is yoked to being with company, nor wants to surround himself with social activities and settings, neither rejoicing in nor enjoying being within society's noise, it is definitely possible for him to enter not only into and remain in the state of freedom of the heart that takes place in stages and is temporary, but the state of freedom of the heart that is both unshakable and permanent, as well.

“Ānanda, I do not see a single thing that, in one way or another, does not cause the person delightedly attached to it or longing for it, a sense of grief, lamentation, pain, and suffering, due to the fact that the thing in question will never remain the same; it will degenerate and come to perish.

“However, Ānanda, The Tathāgata has discovered a state of being, where the Bhikkhu, by not attending to any signs or interests whatsoever taking place in the heart, establishes himself internally in the state of utterly serene emptiness.

“Now, whenever The Tathāgata is in this state of being and is visited by Bhikkhus, Bhikkhunis, male or female lay disciples, kings, chief ministers of kings, or those representing other faiths or their disciples, The Tathāgata speaks with the intention of dismissing them. This, because The Tathāgata's heart strongly leans towards being secluded, turning away from engaging with the noise of crowds or company, delighting in renunciation.

“Therefore Ānanda, the Bhikkhu's inner longing should be:

‘May I enter into and stay within myself, in that state of utterly serene emptiness.’

“In order to accomplish this, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu must be settled and relaxed internally, without creating any internal tension, as he brings the heart to a restful single point, becoming entirely collected and without any agitation.

“And how, Ānanda, does the Bhikkhu become settled and relaxed internally, without creating any internal tension, as he brings the heart to a restful single point, becoming entirely collected and without any agitation?

“The Bhikkhu, by secluding the heart from any sensual desire, free from all possible unwholesome thoughts, with thinking and pondering still working in the background, enters upon and remains in the first *jhāna*, with joy and pleasure being experienced throughout, as the result of his seclusion.

Later, with the stilling of thinking and pondering, he enters upon and remains in the second *jhāna*, which brings with it self-confidence and singleness of mind, in the absence of thinking and pondering, but with joy and pleasure born of the growing collectedness of mind.

Then, with the fading away of joy as well, his experience of equanimity becomes more pronounced than before, while remaining mindful and fully aware, still feeling some pleasure within the body, he enters upon and abides in the third *jhāna*, on account of which Noble Ones announce: *‘Mindful throughout, he dwells equanimously in bliss.’*

Afterwards, with the abandoning of both pleasure and pain, and by having already gone beyond joy and worry, he enters upon and remains in the fourth *jhāna*, which has neither pain nor pleasure within it, except for the purity of mindfulness, due to the strong presence of equanimity.

“Ānanda, it is in this manner that the Bhikkhu becomes settled and relaxed internally, without creating any internal tension, as he brings the heart to a restful single point, becoming entirely collected, without any agitation.

“It is at this point that the Bhikkhu begins giving attention to the inner quiet state of emptiness. But while doing so, it may so happen that his mind neither springs forward to it with confidence, nor becomes settled in it, nor is freed by it. When this is the case, the Bhikkhu should be fully aware of this fact by reflecting:

‘As I am giving attention to the inner quiet state of emptiness, my mind neither springs forward to it with confidence, nor is becoming settled in it, nor is it, therefore, freed by it.’

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“Becoming aware of this, the Bhikkhu then begins giving attention to the external quiet state of emptiness, followed by him giving attention to both the internal and external quiet state of emptiness, combined.

“This is followed by him giving attention to the imperturbable state of the heart. But while doing so, it may so happen that his mind neither springs forward to it with confidence, nor becomes settled in it, nor is freed by it. When this is the case, the Bhikkhu should be fully aware of this fact by reflecting:

‘As I am giving attention to the imperturbable state of the heart, my mind neither springs forward to it with confidence, nor is becoming settled in it, nor is it, therefore, freed by it.’

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“At this point, the Bhikkhu should use as his object of attention whatever sign he had previously used, which helped him to become settled and relaxed internally, without creating any internal tension, allowing him to bring the heart to a restful single point, becoming entirely collected, without any agitation.

“Then, the Bhikkhu again begins giving attention to the inner quiet state of emptiness. And while doing so, his mind springs forward to it with confidence, becomes settled in it, and is freed by it. “When this is the case, the Bhikkhu should be fully aware of this fact by reflecting: *‘As I am giving attention to the inner quiet state of emptiness, my mind springs forward to it with confidence, becoming settled in it, and is, therefore, freed by it.’* In this manner, he becomes aware of this fact.

“Becoming aware of this, the Bhikkhu then begins giving attention to the external quiet state of emptiness, followed by him giving attention to both the internal and external quiet state of emptiness, combined.

“This is followed by him giving attention to the imperturbable state of the heart. And while doing so, his mind springs forward to it with confidence, becoming settled in it, and is freed by it. When this is the case, the Bhikkhu should be fully aware of this fact by reflecting: *‘As I am giving attention to the imperturbable state of the heart, my mind springs forward to it with confidence, becoming settled in it, and is, therefore, freed by it.’*

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“While the Bhikkhu stays with whatever is being experienced, if he feels like walking, then he walks, while remaining continuously alert, as he reflects:

‘During my walking, no wrong or unwholesome desires of coveting or of harm will seep into my heart and overwhelm me.’

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“And if he feels like standing, then he stands, while remaining continuously alert, as he reflects:

‘During my standing, no wrong or unwholesome desires of coveting or of harm will seep into my heart and overwhelm me.’

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“And if he feels like sitting, then he sits, while remaining continuously alert, as he reflects:

‘During my sitting, no wrong or unwholesome desires of coveting or of harm will seep into my heart and overwhelm me.’

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“And if he feels like lying down, then he lies down, while remaining continuously alert, as he reflects:

‘During my lying down, no wrong or unwholesome desires of coveting or of harm will seep into my heart and overwhelm me.’

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“And if he feels like talking, then while remaining continuously alert, he reflects:

‘During my talking, I will not converse on such low and vulgar topics as ordinary people do; talk that is not noble, unbeneficial, and thus pointless. I will not engage in talk that does not lead to relinquishing, to disenchantment, to cessation, to contentment, to direct understanding, to enlightenment, and to Nibbāna. I will not talk about kings, robbers, ministers, armies, fearful dangers, wars, food and drinks, clothes, beds, flower garlands, fragrances, relatives, chariots, villages, cities, towns, kingdoms, women, heroes, gossip at the street corner or at wells. I will not engage in talking about those who are dead and gone or discuss the beginning or ending of the world or the ocean, nor talking about things that should or should not happen.’

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“Instead Ānanda, the Bhikkhu resolves:

‘During my talking, I will converse about abstaining, as I talk on things that are beneficial and helpful. Thus, I will engage in talk that leads to relinquishing, to disenchantment, to cessation, to contentment, to direct understanding, to enlightenment, and to Nibbāna. In this manner, I will talk about having fewness of desires, contentment, seclusion, non-attachment, and withdrawal from seeking company and social interactions; talk that inspires, arouses effort, develops virtuous character, collectedness of mind, and wisdom, all leading to the full understanding of freedom and the vision of freedom.’

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“And if he feels like thinking, then while remaining continuously alert, he reflects:

‘During my thinking, I will not dwell on such low and vulgar thoughts as ordinary people do; thoughts and concepts that are not noble, unbeneficial, and thus pointless. I will not engage in thoughts that do not lead to relinquishing, to disenchantment, to cessation, to contentment, to direct understanding, to enlightenment, and to Nibbāna. In this way, I will not entertain thoughts of sensuality, of hatred, and of harming.’

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“Instead Ānanda, the Bhikkhu resolves:

‘During my thinking, I will engage in thoughts that are beneficial, noble, and emancipating, that help lead one out of suffering, out of Samsāra. That is, thoughts of relinquishing, of non-harming, and of loving kindness.’

“Thus, he becomes fully aware of his state of being.

“Further, Ānanda, there are these five strands of sensual pleasure. What are these five?

“Forms that are recognized by the awareness of the eyes that are enjoyed, are pleasurable, agreeable and which provoke lust to arise in the heart; Sounds recognized by the awareness of the ears that are enjoyed, are pleasurable, agreeable and which provoke lust to arise in the heart; Odors recognized by the awareness of the nose that are enjoyed, are pleasurable, agreeable and which provoke lust to arise in the heart; Flavors recognized by the awareness of the tongue that are enjoyed, are pleasurable, agreeable and which provoke lust to arise in the heart; Touches recognized by the awareness of the body that are enjoyed, are pleasurable, agreeable and which provoke lust to arise in the heart.

These, therefore, are the five strands of sensual pleasure.

“To this end, the Bhikkhu should strive by constantly checking in and scrutinizing the state of his heart, while asking himself:

‘Is there any delight or subtle excitement whatsoever arising within me, effecting my behavior, whenever there is an interaction with any of these five strands of sensual pleasure?’

“And if there is, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu then knows immediately:

‘There is in fact delight and excitement arising within me, effecting my behavior, whenever there is an interaction with any of these five strands of sensual pleasure!’

“By becoming fully aware of this, the Bhikkhu reflects:

‘This means that desiring or lusting after the five strands of sensual pleasure has not yet been given up in me, completely.’

“In this manner, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu becomes fully aware of his state of mind.

“However, when having reflected and known for himself that:

‘There is in fact no delight or excitement arising within me, none effecting my behavior, whenever there is an interaction with any of these five strands of sensual pleasure!’

“Then, Ānanda, by becoming fully aware of this, the Bhikkhu reflects:

‘This means that desiring or lusting after the five strands of sensual pleasure has been given up in me, completely.’

“In this manner, Ānanda, the Bhikkhu becomes fully aware of his state of mind.

“Further, Ānanda, there are these five grabbing aggregates, which the Bhikkhus must closely observe, carefully examining them, to see them clearly, their point of appearance and disappearance, as they arise and cease.

“Thus, while closely observing a tangible form, the Bhikkhu knows and understands:
‘This is a tangible form. It is in this way that tangible forms arise. It is in this way, that tangible forms cease and disappear.’

“Similarly, the Bhikkhu closely observes feelings, as he knows and understands:
‘This is a feeling. It is in this way that feelings arise. It is in this way, that feelings cease and disappear.’

“Similarly, the Bhikkhu closely observes memories or thoughts, as he knows and understands:
‘This is a memory or a thought. It is in this way that memories and thoughts arise. It is in this way, that memories and thoughts cease and disappear.’

“Similarly, the Bhikkhu closely observes habitual tendencies, as he knows and understands:
‘This is a habitual tendency. It is in this way that habitual tendencies arise. It is in this way, that habitual tendencies cease and disappear.’

“Similarly, the Bhikkhu closely observes sense awareness, as he knows and understands:
‘This is sense awareness. It is in this way that sense awareness arises. It is in this way, that sense awareness ceases and disappears.’

While observing and closely seeing in this manner, the appearance and disappearance, the arising and ceasing of the five grabbing aggregates, the conceit “*I am*” gets dispelled within the Bhikkhu. As this occurs, he becomes aware of his state of mind, while understanding:

‘The conceit “*I am*,” connecting me to the five grabbing aggregates is dispelled within me.’

“Ānanda, you must know that these things are completely wholesome and good, with entirely wholesome and good outcomes, for they are noble, transcending this world, inaccessible to those that are evil.”

“Further, Ānanda, what do you think? What could lead a disciple to eagerly want to follow the Teacher, even if the Teacher were to chase him away?”

“Bhante, our understanding of the Dhamma is rooted in The Blessed One! For He is our Refuge and Guide. It would therefore be excellent if The Blessed One could explain the meaning of this to us. Then, on listening to it being taught by The Blessed One, the Bhikkhus will all remember it and keep it close to their hearts.”

“Ānanda, it is not correct for the disciple to follow the Teacher for the sake of mere explanations or for listening to His discourses, or to hear inspiring verses from Him. And why is that?

“For a long time now, Ānanda, you all have been listening to me teach you the Dhamma, which you then recite verbally yourselves, committing them to heart, intellectually examining them and practicing them so to penetratingly see their truth, for yourselves.

“However, these are not enough, for disciples should follow their Teacher *because* he instructs them with talks that lead to relinquishing, to disenchantment, to cessation, to contentment, to direct understanding, to enlightenment, and to Nibbāna. In this manner, the Teacher inspires and encourages them to have fewness of desires, to have contentment, seclusion, non-attachment, and withdrawal from seeking company and social interactions; with teachings that inspire, arousing effort, developing virtuous character, collectedness of mind, and wisdom, all leading to the full understanding of freedom and the vision of freedom.

“Therefore, Ānanda, it is for the sake of *these* things that a disciple should eagerly want to follow the Teacher, even when the Teacher were to chase him away.

“But in spite of this, there may come a time when a teacher faces his undoing, or the disciple may face his undoing, or when the Holy Life becomes undone.

“And how can a teacher face his undoing?

“It is when a teacher, while living secluded in a remote place, at the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a mountain cave, a charnel ground, in a jungle or forest, in an open space or while sitting on a heap of straws, being thus alone, is visited by brahmin householders of various towns and regions. In their presence, the teacher becomes enticed by what he witnesses, which wake in him old tendencies of being infatuated, with constant longing, and unwholesome desires being reignited, all leading him to experience a life of luxury. As a result, he is ruined, falling back into his old ways, becoming corrupted again, ending up in future rebirths, experiencing more and more suffering, with unending cycles of ageing and death for him to face. This is what is meant by a teacher facing his undoing.

“And how does a disciple face his undoing?

“It is when a disciple, living by the example of his teacher, dwells secluded, in a remote place, at the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a mountain cave, a charnel ground, in a jungle or forest, in an open space or while sitting on a heap of straws, being thus alone, is visited by brahmin householders of various towns and regions. In their presence, the disciple becomes enticed by what he witnesses, which wake in him old tendencies of being infatuated, with constant longing, and unwholesome desires being reignited, all leading him to experience a life of luxury. As a result, he is ruined, falling back into his old ways, becoming corrupted again, ending up in future rebirths, experiencing more and more suffering, with unending cycles of ageing and death for him to face. This is what is meant by a disciple facing his undoing.

“And how does the Holy Life become undone?

“It is when a Tathāgata appears in the world, an Arahant, a Perfectly Awakened One, endowed with Sublime Knowledge and Supremely Pure Conduct, the Well-Gone, the Knower of worlds, the Incomparable Tamer of those to be tamed, the Teacher of gods and humans, Enlightened and Blessed. And He lives secluded, in remote places, at the root of trees, a mountain, a ravine, a mountain cave, a charnel ground, in a jungle or forest, in an open space or while sitting on a heap

of straws. Then, while being thus alone, he is visited by brahmin householders of various towns and regions. But the Tathāgata does not become enticed nor succumbs to any thoughts pertaining to desiring a life of luxury. However, someone being inspired by the Tathāgata, wanting to emulate Him, starts living secluded, dwelling in remote places, at the root of trees, a mountain, a ravine, a mountain cave, a charnel ground, in a jungle or forest, in an open space or while sitting on a heap of straws. Then, while being thus alone, he is visited by brahmin householders of various towns and regions. In their presence, he becomes enticed by what he witnesses, which wake in him old tendencies of being infatuated, with constant longing, and unwholesome desires being reignited, all leading him to experience a life of luxury. As a result, he is ruined, falling back into his old ways, becoming corrupted again, ending up in future rebirths, experiencing more and more suffering, with unending cycles of ageing and death for him to face. This is what is meant by the Holy Life becoming undone.

“It must be said here, Ānanda, that the undoing of the Holy Life is the worst among all three, for it has much more painful and bitter outcomes, even leading one into rebirths in the miserable hell realms.

“So, Ānanda, behave towards me with friendliness and *not* with resentment and anger. As a result, you will gain much happiness and enjoy wellbeing for a very long time.

“And how, Ānanda, do the disciples of the Teacher behave with resentment and anger towards their Teacher, instead of behaving with friendliness?

“Here, The Teacher generously shares with them the Dhamma, as He does so with care and loving compassion, while encouraging and advising them:

‘This will result in you gaining much happiness, as you enjoy wellbeing for a very long time.’

“But His disciples neither attentively listen or lend an ear to him, nor put the effort to understand what is being taught to them. Instead, they keep their hearts closed and thus turn away from the dispensation of the Teacher. In this way, Ānanda, the disciples of the Teacher behave with resentment and anger towards their Teacher, instead of behaving with friendliness.

“And how, Ānanda, do the disciples of the Teacher behave with friendliness towards their Teacher, instead of behaving with resentment and anger?

“Here, The Teacher generously shares with them the Dhamma, as He does so with care and loving compassion, while encouraging and advising them:

‘This will result in you gaining much happiness, as you enjoy wellbeing for a very long time.’

“And His disciples attentively listen or lend an ear to him, putting the effort to understand what is being taught to them. Thus, they keep their hearts open and do not turn away from the dispensation of the Teacher. In this way, Ānanda, the disciples of the Teacher behave with friendliness towards their Teacher, instead of behaving with resentment and anger.

“So, Ānanda, behave towards me with friendliness and *not* with resentment and anger. As a result, you will gain much happiness and enjoy wellbeing for a very long time.

“But remember this, Ānanda, I ***will not*** pamper or ***baby*** you like the potter works with fresh and wet clay. I ***will*** constantly press you, admonishing and chastising you, ***as often as necessary!***

“As your Teacher, I will speak to you and instruct you in ***this*** manner, Ānanda, so long as your core can withstand my admonishment, and you learn to grow and develop through it!”

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

Sadhu

Sadhu

Sadhu