# MN 125 — MN 125 The Level of the Tamed | Dantabhūmi Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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## Text

The Level of the Tamed

Dantabhūmi Sutta (MN 125)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Rājagaha in the Bamboo Forest, the Squirrels’ Sanctuary. And on that occasion the novice Aciravata was living in the wilderness in a hut. Then Prince Jayasena—walking back & forth & around to exercise his legs—went to the novice Aciravata and exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to him, “I have heard, Master Aggivessana [Aciravata’s clan name], that a monk who remains heedful, ardent, & resolute can touch singleness of mind.”

“So it is, prince. So it is. A monk who remains heedful, ardent, & resolute can touch singleness of mind.”

“It would be good if Master Aggivessana would teach me the Dhamma as he has heard & memorized it.”

“Prince, I can’t teach you the Dhamma as I have heard & memorized it. If I were to teach you the Dhamma as I have heard & memorized it, you wouldn’t understand the meaning of my words. That would be wearisome & aggravating for me.”

“May Master Aggivessana teach me the Dhamma as he has heard & memorized it. Perhaps I might understand the meaning of his words.”

“If I were to teach you the Dhamma as I have heard & memorized it, then if you understand the meaning of my words, well & good. If you don’t understand the meaning of my words, leave it to each his own. Don’t question me any further about it.”

“May Master Aggivessana teach me the Dhamma as he has heard & memorized it. If I understand the meaning of his words, well & good. If I don’t understand the meaning of his words, I’ll leave it to each his own. I won’t question Master Aggivessana any further about it.”

Then the novice Aciravata taught Prince Jayasena the Dhamma as he had heard & memorized it. When this was said, Prince Jayasena said to him, “It’s impossible, it’s unfeasible, that a monk who remains heedful, ardent, & resolute could touch singleness of mind.” Then, having declared the impossibility and unfeasibility (of that attainment) to the novice Aciravata, Prince Jayasena got up from his seat and left.

Then the novice Aciravata, not long after Prince Jayasena’s departure, went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he told the Blessed One the entirety of his conversation with Prince Jayasena.

When this was said, the Blessed One said to the novice Aciravata: “What did you expect, Aggivessana? For Prince Jayasena—living in the midst of sensuality, consuming sensuality, chewed on by thoughts of sensuality, burning with the fever of sensuality, intent on the search for sensuality—to know or see or realize that which is to be known through renunciation, seen through renunciation, attained through renunciation, realized through renunciation: That’s impossible.

“Aggivessana, it’s as if there were two tamable elephants, tamable horses, or tamable oxen that were well-tamed & well-trained; and two tamable elephants, tamable horses, or tamable oxen that were untamed & untrained. What do you think? Would the two tamable elephants, tamable horses, or tamable oxen that were well-tamed & well-trained, being tamed, acquire the behavior of the tamed and arrive at the level of the tamed?”

“Yes, lord.”

“And would the two tamable elephants, tamable horses, or tamable oxen that were untamed & untrained, being untamed, acquire the behavior of the tamed and arrive at the level of the tamed like the two tamable elephants, tamable horses, or tamable oxen that were well-tamed & well-trained?”

“No, lord.”

“In the same way, for Prince Jayasena—living in the midst of sensuality, consuming sensuality, chewed on by thoughts of sensuality, burning with the fever of sensuality, intent on the search for sensuality—to know or see or realize that which is to be known through renunciation, seen through renunciation, attained through renunciation, realized through renunciation: That’s impossible.

“Aggivessana, it’s as if there were a great mountain not far from a village or town, and two companions, leaving the village or town, were to go hand in hand to the mountain. On arrival, one of the companions would stay at the foot of the mountain, and one would climb to the top of the mountain. The companion staying at the foot of the mountain would ask the companion standing on top of the mountain, ‘What do you see, my friend, standing on top of the mountain?’

“He would say, ‘I see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, & delightful lakes.’

“The other would say, ‘It’s impossible, my friend. It’s unfeasible, that standing on top of the mountain you would see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, & delightful lakes.’

“Then the companion standing on top of the mountain, descending to the foot of the mountain and grabbing his companion by the arm, would make him climb to the top of the mountain. After letting him catch his breath for a moment, he would ask him, ‘What do you see, my friend, standing on top of the mountain?’

“He would say, ‘I see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, & delightful lakes.’

“The other would say, ‘But just now didn’t I understand you to say, “It’s impossible, my friend. It’s unfeasible, that standing on top of the mountain you would see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, & delightful lakes”? Yet now I understand you to say, “I see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, & delightful lakes.”’

“The other would say, ‘But that’s because I was standing blocked by this great mountain and didn’t see.’

“In the same way, Aggivessana, Prince Jayasena is blocked, obstructed, impeded, and enveloped by the even greater mass of ignorance. For him—living in the midst of

sensuality, consuming sensuality, chewed on by thoughts of sensuality, burning with the fever of sensuality, intent on the search for sensuality—to know or see or realize that which is to be known through renunciation, seen through renunciation, attained through renunciation, realized through renunciation: That's impossible.

"Aggivessana, if these two similes had occurred to you in the presence of Prince Jayasena, he would have naturally felt confidence in you and—feeling confidence—would have shown his confidence in you."

"But, lord, how could these two similes have occurred to me in the presence of Prince Jayasena, as they are natural to the Blessed One and have never before been heard from him?"

"Suppose, Aggivessana, that a head-anointed noble warrior king addresses his elephant woodsman, 'Come, my good elephant woodsman. Mount a royal elephant, enter the elephant wood, and when you spy a wilderness elephant, bind it by the neck to the royal elephant.'

"Responding, 'Yes, your majesty,' to the head-anointed noble warrior king, the elephant woodsman mounts a royal elephant, enters the elephant wood and, spying a wilderness elephant, binds it by the neck to the royal elephant. Then the royal elephant leads it out into the open air. It's to this extent that the wilderness elephant has come into the open air, for wilderness elephants long for the elephant wood.

"Then the elephant woodsman informs the head-anointed noble warrior king, 'Your majesty, the wilderness elephant has come into the open air.'

"The head-anointed noble warrior king then addresses his elephant tamer, 'Come, my good elephant tamer. Tame the wilderness elephant. Break it of its wilderness habits, its wilderness memories & resolves, its distraction, fatigue, & fever over leaving the wilderness. Make it delight in the town and inculcate in it habits congenial to human beings.'

"Responding, 'Yes, your majesty,' to the head-anointed noble warrior king, the elephant tamer plants a large post in the ground and binds the wilderness elephant to it by the neck in order to break it of its wilderness habits, its wilderness memories & resolves, its distraction, fatigue, & fever over leaving the wilderness, to make it delight in the town and to inculcate in it habits congenial to human beings.

"The elephant tamer then speaks to the wilderness elephant words that are soothing, pleasing to the ear, affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing to people at large. When the wilderness elephant is spoken to with words that are soothing, pleasing to the ear, affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing to people at large, it listens, lends ear, and exerts its mind to understand. The elephant tamer then further rewards it with grass, fodder, & water. When the wilderness elephant accepts the elephant tamer's grass, fodder, & water, that's when the elephant

tamer knows, 'Now the wilderness elephant will live!'

"Then the elephant tamer makes the wilderness elephant perform further tasks: 'Pick this up, sir. Put this down, sir.' When the wilderness elephant obeys the elephant tamer's instructions to pick up & put down as it is told, the elephant tamer makes it perform further tasks: 'Go forward, sir. Go back, sir.' When the wilderness elephant obeys the elephant tamer's instructions to go forward & go back as it is told, the elephant tamer makes it perform further tasks: 'Get up, sir. Lie down, sir.'1

"When the wilderness elephant obeys the elephant tamer's instructions to get up & lie down as it is told, the elephant tamer makes it perform further the task called imperturbability. The elephant tamer ties a giant shield to its trunk. A man with a lance in his hand sits on its neck. Men with lances in their hands stand surrounding it on all sides, while the elephant tamer, with a long lance pole in his hand, stands in front of it. As it is made to perform the task of imperturbability, it doesn't move its forefeet or its hindfeet, it doesn't move its forequarters or its hindquarters, it doesn't move its head, it doesn't move its ears, it doesn't move its tusks, it doesn't move its tail, it doesn't move its trunk. It is a royal elephant that endures blows from spears, swords, arrows, & axes; the resounding din of drums, cymbals, conchs, & tom-toms. Rid of all faults & defects, purged of flaws, it is worthy of the king, an asset to the king, and counts as a very limb of the king.

"In the same way, Aggivessana, there is the case where a Tathāgata appears in the world, worthy & rightly self-awakened. He teaches the Dhamma admirable in its beginning, admirable in its middle, admirable in its end. He proclaims the holy life both in its particulars and in its essence, entirely perfect, surpassingly pure.

"A householder or householder's son or one born in one clan or another hears that Dhamma. Having heard the Dhamma, he gains conviction in the Tathāgata. Being endowed with a gain in conviction, he reflects: 'Household life is confining, a dusty path. Life gone forth is the open air. It isn't easy, living at home, to practice the holy life totally perfect, totally pure, a polished shell. What if I, having shaved off my hair & beard and putting on the ochre robe, were to go forth from the household life into homelessness?'

"So after some time he abandons his mass of wealth, large or small; leaves his circle of relatives, large or small; shaves off his hair & beard, puts on the ochre robes, and goes forth from the household life into homelessness. It's to this extent, Aggivessana, that the disciple of the noble ones has come into the open air, for devas & human beings long for the five strings of sensuality.

"The Tathāgata then trains him further: 'Come, monk. Be virtuous. Dwell restrained in accordance with the Pāṭimokkha, consummate in your behavior & sphere of activity. Train yourself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults.'

"When the disciple of the nobles ones is virtuous... seeing danger in the slightest faults, the Tathāgata then trains him further: 'Come, monk. Be one who is guarded in the doors of your sense faculties. On seeing a form with the eye, don't grasp at any theme or details by

which—if you were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail you. Practice for its restraint. Protect the faculty of the eye. Attain restraint with regard to the faculty of the eye. On hearing a sound with the ear.... On smelling an aroma with the nose.... On tasting a flavor with the tongue.... On touching a tactile sensation with the body.... On cognizing an idea with the intellect, don't grasp at any theme or details by which—if you were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the intellect—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail you. Practice for its restraint. Protect the faculty of the intellect. Attain restraint with regard to the faculty of the intellect.'

"When the disciple of the nobles ones is one who is guarded in the doors of his sense faculties... the Tathāgata then trains him further: 'Come, monk. Be one who is moderate in eating. Considering it appropriately, take your food not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on bulk, nor for beautification, but simply for the survival & continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking, "I will destroy old feelings (of hunger) & not create new feelings (from overeating). Thus I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in comfort."'

"When the disciple of the nobles ones is one who is moderate in eating... the Tathāgata then trains him further: 'Come, monk. Be one who is devoted to wakefulness. During the day, sitting & pacing back & forth, cleanse your mind of any qualities that would hold the mind in check. During the first watch of the night [dusk to 10 p.m.], sitting & pacing back & forth, cleanse your mind of any qualities that would hold the mind in check. During the second watch of the night [10 p.m. to 2 a.m.], reclining on your right side, take up the lion's posture, one foot placed on top of the other, mindful, alert, with your mind set on getting up [either as soon as you awaken or at a particular time]. During the last watch of the night [2 a.m. to dawn], sitting & pacing back & forth, cleanse your mind of any qualities that would hold the mind in check.'

"When the disciple of the nobles ones is one who is devoted to wakefulness... the Tathāgata then trains him further: 'Come, monk. Be one who is possessed of mindfulness & alertness. When going forward & returning, make yourself alert. When looking toward & looking away.... When bending & extending your limbs.... When carrying your outer cloak, upper robe, & bowl.... When eating, drinking, chewing, & tasting.... When urinating & defecating.... When walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, & remaining silent, make yourself alert.'

"When the disciple of the nobles ones is one who is possessed of mindfulness & alertness... the Tathāgata then trains him further: 'Come, monk. Seek out 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.'

"He seeks out 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. After his meal, returning from his alms round, he sits down, crosses his legs, holds his body erect, and brings mindfulness to the fore.2

“Abandoning covetousness with regard to the world, he dwells with an awareness devoid of covetousness. He cleanses his mind of covetousness. Abandoning ill will & anger, he dwells with an awareness devoid of ill will, sympathetic to the welfare of all living beings. He cleanses his mind of ill will & anger. Abandoning sloth & drowsiness, he dwells with an awareness devoid of sloth & drowsiness, mindful, alert, percipient of light. He cleanses his mind of sloth & drowsiness. Abandoning restlessness & anxiety, he dwells undisturbed, his mind inwardly stilled. He cleanses his mind of restlessness & anxiety. Abandoning uncertainty, he dwells having crossed over uncertainty, with no perplexity with regard to skillful qualities. He cleanses his mind of uncertainty.

“Having abandoned these five hindrances—imperfections of awareness that weaken discernment—he remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings… mind… mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world.3 Just as when the elephant tamer plants a large post in the ground and binds the wilderness elephant to it by the neck in order to break it of its wilderness habits, its wilderness memories & resolves, its distraction, fatigue, & fever over leaving the wilderness, to make it delight in the town and to inculcate in it habits congenial to human beings; in the same way, these four establishings of mindfulness are bindings for the awareness of the disciple of the noble ones, to break him of his household habits, his household memories & resolves, his distraction, fatigue, & fever over leaving the household life, for the attainment of the right method and the realization of unbinding.

“Then the Tathāgata trains him further: ‘Come, monk, remain focused on the body in & of itself, but do not think any thoughts connected with the body.4 Remain focused on feelings in & of themselves, but do not think any thoughts connected with feelings. Remain focused on the mind in & of itself, but do not think any thoughts connected with mind. Remain focused on mental qualities in & of themselves, but do not think any thoughts connected with mental qualities.’ With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance.

“With the fading of rapture he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’

“With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.

“With his mind thus concentrated, purified, & bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, he directs and inclines it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives [lit: previous homes]. He recollects his manifold past lives, i.e., one birth, two births, three births, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, one hundred, one thousand, one hundred thousand, many eons of cosmic contraction,

many eons of cosmic expansion, many eons of cosmic contraction & expansion, (recollecting,) 'There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.' Thus he recollects his manifold past lives in their modes & details.

"With his mind thus concentrated, purified, & bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, he directs & inclines it to knowledge of the passing away and re-appearance of beings. He sees—by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the human—beings passing away & re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their kamma: 'These beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, and mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. But these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech, and mind, who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a good destination, a heavenly world.' Thus—by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the human—he sees beings passing away & re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their kamma.

"With his mind thus concentrated, purified, & bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, he directs & inclines it to the knowledge of the ending of effluents. He discerns, as it has come to be, that 'This is stress… This is the origination of stress… This is the cessation of stress… This is the way leading to the cessation of stress… These are effluents… This is the origination of effluents… This is the cessation of effluents… This is the way leading to the cessation of effluents.' His heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, 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.'

"This monk tolerates cold, heat, hunger, & thirst; the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, & reptiles; ill-spoken, unwelcome words & bodily feelings that, when they arise, are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, displeasing, & menacing to life. Rid of all passion, aversion, & delusion, purged of flaws, he is deserving of gifts, deserving of hospitality, deserving of offerings, deserving of respect, an incomparable field of merit for the world.

"If, Aggivessana, an old royal elephant dies untamed & untrained, it is reckoned as an old royal elephant that has died an untamed death. If a middle-aged royal elephant dies untamed & untrained, it is reckoned as a middle-aged royal elephant that has died an untamed death. If a young royal elephant dies untamed & untrained, it is reckoned as a

young royal elephant that has died an untamed death.

“In the same way, if an elder monk dies with his effluents unended, he is reckoned as an elder monk who has died an untamed death. If a monk of middle standing dies with his effluents unended, he is reckoned as a monk of middle standing who has died an untamed death. If a newly-ordained monk dies with his effluents unended, he is reckoned as a newly-ordained monk who has died an untamed death.

“But if, Aggivessana, an old royal elephant dies tamed & trained, it is reckoned as an old royal elephant that has died a tamed death. If a middle-aged royal elephant dies tamed & trained, it is reckoned as a middle-aged royal elephant that has died a tamed death. If a young royal elephant dies tamed & trained, it is reckoned as a young royal elephant that has died a tamed death.

“In the same way, if an elder monk dies with his effluents ended, he is reckoned as an elder monk who has died a tamed death. If a monk of middle standing dies with his effluents ended, he is reckoned as a monk of middle standing who has died a tamed death. If a newly-ordained monk dies with his effluents ended, he is reckoned as a newly-ordained monk who has died a tamed death.”

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

Notes

1. The trainer addresses the elephant as bho, which is an example of the soothing, affectionate, and polite words he uses to tame the elephant.

2. To the fore (parimukhaṁ): An Abhidhamma text, Vibhaṅga 12:1, when discussing mindfulness of breathing, defines this term as meaning “the tip of the nose or the sign of the mouth.” However, the term appears as part of a stock phrase describing a person engaged in meditation, even for themes that have nothing to do with the body at all, such as sublime-attitude (brahma-vihāra) meditation (AN 3:64). Thus it seems more likely that the term is used in an idiomatic sense, indicating either that mindfulness is placed face-to-face with its object, or that it is made prominent, which is how I have translated it here.

3. Here the four establishings of mindfulness occupy the place usually taken by the first jhāna in similar accounts of the stages of the practice (see, for example, DN 2, MN 38, and AN 10:99). As we will see below, the monk then goes straight from these establishings of mindfulness to the second jhāna. Because the establishings of mindfulness are themes of right concentration (see MN 44), this passage suggests that when mindfulness is rightly established, it puts the mind in the first jhāna. See the book, Right Mindfulness, Chapter 1.

4. Reading kāyūpasaṁhitaṁ… dhammūpasaṁhitaṁ with the Thai and PTS editions. The Sri Lankan and Burmese editions read kāmūpasaṁhitam, “connected to sensuality,” in both

places. There are two reasons for following the Thai and PTS editions here. (1) As SN 47:6 and SN 47:7 point out, sensual thoughts connected with the five strings of sensuality are considered "out of range" when one is practicing the establishings of mindfulness. For this reason, thoughts connected with sensuality should have already been abandoned at that stage, and not at the stage of entering the second jhāna. (2) In the standard descriptions of the four jhānas, thoughts directed at sensuality are abandoned prior to entering the first jhāna; all directed thought is abandoned on entering the second. The simple instruction to not think thoughts connected with sensuality would not be enough to end all directed thoughts—it leaves open the possibility of thinking thoughts connected to the object of mindfulness—and so it would not serve to bring the mind all the way to the second jhāna. However, once thoughts of sensuality have been abandoned with the practice of the four establishings of mindfulness, the only remaining directed thoughts in the meditator's mind would be those directed at the objects of mindfulness. For that reason, the instruction at this point not to think thoughts connected with those objects would be enough to bring the mind to the second jhāna.

## Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: AN 3:97; AN 4:111; AN 5:139–140; AN 8:13; AN 11:10; Thig 3:4