MN 13 — Maha-dukkhakkhandha Sutta: The Great Mass of Stress

English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: ABBREVIATED. Every source-unit character is preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure. Thanissaro's collection-level note explicitly states that repetitions were cut: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/about.html. This is evidence about the translation method, not an assertion that every individual unit contains an omission; no repetitions reconstructed.

Text

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Savatthi at Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery. Then, early in the morning, several monks put on their robes and, carrying their bowls and outer robes, went into Savatthi for alms. The thought occurred to them, "It's still too early to go into Savatthi for alms. What if we were to visit the park of the wanderers of other persuasions?"

So they headed to the park of the wanderers of other persuasions. On arrival, they exchanged courteous greetings with the wanderers of other persuasions. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, they sat to one side. As they were sitting there, the wanderers of other persuasions said to them, "Friends, Gotama the contemplative describes the comprehension of sensuality. We, too, describe the comprehension of sensuality. He describes the comprehension of forms. We, too, describe the comprehension of forms. He describes the comprehension of feelings. We, too, describe the comprehension of feelings. So what is the difference, what the distinction, what the distinguishing factor between him and us in terms of his teaching and ours, his message and ours?"

The monks, neither delighting nor disapproving of the words of the wanderers of other persuasions, got up from their seats, [thinking,] "We will learn the meaning of these words in the Blessed One's presence."

Then, having gone for alms in Savatthi, after their meal, returning from their alms round, the monks went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they [told him what had happened].

"Monks, when the wanderers of other persuasions say this, they are to be told, 'What, friends, with regard to sensuality, is the allure, what the drawback, what the escape? What, with regard to forms, is the allure, what the drawback, what the escape? What, with regard to feelings, is the allure, what the drawback, what the escape?' When asked this, they will not manage an answer and, what is more, will get themselves into trouble. Why is that? Because it lies outside their range. Monks, in this world with its devas, maras, and brahmas, in this people with its contemplatives & brahmans, its royalty & commonfolk, I do not see anyone who can satisfy the mind with an answer to these questions, aside from a Tathagata, a Tathagata's disciples, or someone who has heard it from them.

Sensuality

"Now what, monks, is the allure of sensuality? 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. Now whatever pleasure or joy arises in dependence on these five strands of sensuality, that is the allure of sensuality.

"And what is the drawback of sensuality? There is the case where, on account of the occupation by which a clansman makes a living — whether checking or accounting or calculating or plowing or trading or cattle-tending or archery or as a king's man, or whatever the occupation may be — he faces cold, he faces heat, being harassed by mosquitoes & flies, wind & sun & creeping things, dying from hunger & thirst.

"Now this drawback in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"If the clansman gains no wealth while thus working & striving & making effort, he sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught: 'My work is in vain, my efforts are fruitless!' Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"If the clansman gains wealth while thus working & striving & making effort, he experiences pain & distress in protecting it: 'How will neither kings nor thieves make off with my property, nor fire burn it, nor water sweep it away, nor hateful heirs make off with

it?' And as he thus guards and watches over his property, kings or thieves make off with it, or fire burns it, or water sweeps it away, or hateful heirs make off with it. And he sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught: 'What was mine is no more!' Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"Again, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source, sensuality for the cause, the reason being simply sensuality, that kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmans with brahmans, householders with householders, mother with child, child with mother, father with child, child with father, brother with brother, sister with sister, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend. And then in their quarrels, brawls, & disputes, they attack one another with fists or with clods or with sticks or with knives, so that they incur death or deadly pain. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"Again, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source... that (men), taking swords & shields and buckling on bows & quivers, charge into battle massed in double array while arrows & spears are flying and swords are flashing; and there they are wounded by arrows & spears, and their heads are cut off by swords, so that they incur death or deadly pain. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"Again, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source... that (men), taking swords & shields and buckling on bows & quivers, charge slippery bastions while arrows & spears are flying and swords are flashing; and there they are splashed with boiling cow dung and crushed under heavy weights, and their heads are cut off by swords, so that they incur death or deadly pain. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"Again, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source... that (men) break into windows, seize plunder, commit burglary, ambush highways, commit adultery, and when they are captured, kings have them tortured in many ways. They flog them with whips, beat them with canes, beat them with clubs. They cut off their hands, cut off their feet, cut off their hands & feet. They cut off their ears, cut off their noses, cut off their ears & noses. They subject them to the 'porridge pot,' the 'polished-shell shave,' the 'Rahu's mouth,' the 'flaming garland,' the 'blazing hand,' the 'grass-duty (ascetic),' the 'bark-dress (ascetic),' the 'burning antelope,' the 'meat hooks,' the 'coin-gouging,' the 'lye pickling,' the 'pivot on a stake,' the 'rolled-up bed.' They have them splashed with boiling oil, devoured by dogs, impaled alive on stakes. They have their heads cut off with swords, so that they incur death or deadly pain. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"Again, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source... that (people) engage in bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, mental misconduct. Having engaged in bodily, verbal, and mental misconduct, they — on the break-up of the body, after death — re-appear in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress in the future life, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"And what, monks, is the escape from sensuality? The subduing of desire-passion for sensuality, the abandoning of desire-passion for sensuality: That is the escape from sensuality.

"That any brahmans or contemplatives who do not discern, as it actually is, the allure of sensuality as allure, the drawback of sensuality as drawback, the escape from sensuality as escape, would themselves comprehend sensuality or would rouse another with the truth so that, in line with what he has practiced, he would comprehend sensuality: That is impossible. But that any brahmans or contemplatives who discern, as it actually is, the allure of sensuality as allure, the drawback of sensuality as drawback, the escape from sensuality as escape, would themselves comprehend sensuality or would rouse another with the truth so that, in line with what he has practiced, he would comprehend sensuality: That is possible.

Form

"Now what, monks, is the allure of forms? Suppose there were a maiden of the noble caste, the brahman caste, or the householder class, fifteen or sixteen years old, neither too tall nor too short, neither too thin nor too plump, neither too dark nor too pale. Is her beauty & charm at that time at its height?"

"Yes, lord."

"Whatever pleasure & joy arise in dependence on that beauty & charm: That is the allure of forms."

"And what is the drawback of forms? There is the case where one might see that very same woman at a later time, when she's eighty, ninety, one hundred years old: aged, roof-rafter crooked, bent-over, supported by a cane, palsied, miserable, broken-toothed, gray-haired, scanty-haired, bald, wrinkled, her body all blotchy. What do you think: Has her earlier beauty & charm vanished, and the drawback appeared?"

"Yes, lord."

"This, monks, is the drawback of forms.

"Again, one might see that very same woman sick, in pain, & seriously ill, lying soiled with her own urine & excrement, lifted up by others, laid down by others. What do you think:

Has her earlier beauty & charm vanished, and the drawback appeared?"

"Yes, lord."

"This too, monks, is the drawback of forms.

"Again, one might see that very same woman as a corpse cast away in a charnel ground — one day, two days, three days dead, bloated, livid, & oozing. What do you think: Has her earlier beauty & charm vanished, and the drawback appeared?"

"Yes, lord."

"This too, monks, is the drawback of forms.

"Again, one might see that very same woman as a corpse cast away in a charnel ground picked at by crows, vultures, & hawks, by dogs, hyenas, & various other creatures... a skeleton smeared with flesh & blood, connected with tendons... a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, connected with tendons... a skeleton without flesh or blood, connected with tendons... bones detached from their tendons, scattered in all directions — here a hand bone, there a foot bone, here a shin bone, there a thigh bone, here a hip bone, there a back bone, here a rib, there a breast bone, here a shoulder bone, there a neck bone, here a jaw bone, there a tooth, here a skull... the bones whitened, somewhat like the color of shells... piled up, more than a year old... decomposed into a powder. What do you think: Has her earlier beauty & charm vanished, and the drawback appeared?"

"Yes, lord."

"This too, monks, is the drawback of forms.

"And what, monks, is the escape from forms? The subduing of desire-passion for forms, the abandoning of desire-passion for forms: That is the escape from form.

"That any brahmans or contemplatives who do not discern, as it actually is, the allure of forms as allure, the drawback of forms as drawback, the escape from forms as escape, would themselves comprehend form or would rouse another with the truth so that, in line with what he has practiced, he would comprehend form: That is impossible. But that any brahmans or contemplatives who discern, as it actually is, the allure of forms as allure, the drawback of forms as drawback, the escape from forms as escape, would themselves comprehend form or would rouse another with the truth so that, in line with what he has practiced, he would comprehend form: That is possible.

Feeling

"Now what, monks, is the allure of feelings? There is the case where a monk — quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful (mental) qualities — enters & remains in the first jhana: rapture & pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by

directed thought & evaluation. At that time he does not intend his own affliction, the affliction of others, or the affliction of both. He feels a feeling totally unafflicted. The unafflicted, I tell you, is the highest allure of feelings.

"Again the monk, with the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, enters & remains in the second jhana: rapture & pleasure born of composure, 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 jhana, 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 jhana: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. At that time he does not intend his own affliction, the affliction of others, or the affliction of both. He feels a feeling totally unafflicted. The unafflicted, I tell you, is the highest allure of feelings.

"And what is the drawback of feelings? The fact that feeling is inconstant, stressful, subject to change: This is the drawback of feelings.

"And what is the escape from feelings? The subduing of desire-passion for feelings, the abandoning of desire-passion for feelings: That is the escape from feelings.

"That any brahmans or contemplatives who do not discern, as it actually is, the allure of feelings as allure, the drawback of feelings as drawback, the escape from feelings as escape, would themselves comprehend feeling or would rouse another with the truth so that, in line with what he has practiced, he would comprehend feeling: That is impossible. But that any brahmans or contemplatives who discern, as it actually is, the allure of feelings as allure, the drawback of feelings as drawback, the escape from feelings as escape, would themselves comprehend feeling or would rouse another with the truth so that, in line with what he has practiced, he would comprehend feeling: That is possible."

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

See also: MN 54; SN 35.63; SN 35.115; SN 35.189; AN 6.63; AN 9.34; AN 9.36; Thig 13.1.