MN 136 — MN 136 The Greater Analysis of Action | Mahā Kamma-vibhaṅga Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Greater Analysis of Action

Mahā Kamma-vibhaṅga Sutta (MN 136)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Rājagaha at the Bamboo Forest in the Squirrels’ Sanctuary. And on that occasion Ven. Samiddhi was staying in a wilderness hut. Then Potaliputta the wanderer, while walking & wandering around to exercise his legs, went to Ven. Samiddhi 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 Ven. Samiddhi, “Face to face with Gotama the contemplative have I heard this, face to face have I learned this: ‘Bodily action is barren, verbal action is barren, only mental action is true. And there is an attainment in which, on being attained,

nothing is felt.'"

"Don't say that, friend. Don't slander the Blessed One. For it's not good to slander the Blessed One; the Blessed One would not say that: 'Bodily action is barren, verbal action is barren, only mental action is true.' But there is, friend, an attainment in which, on being attained, nothing is felt."1

"How long has it been, friend Samiddhi, since you went forth (into homelessness)?"

"Not long, friend. Three years."

"Then what now should I say about the elder monks, when a junior monk would suppose that his Teacher is to be defended in this way? Having intentionally done an action with body, with speech, or with mind, what does one experience?"

"Having intentionally done an action with body, with speech, or with mind, one experiences stress."

Then Potaliputta the wanderer neither delighted in nor scorned Ven. Samiddhi's words. Neither delighting nor scorning, he got up from his seat and left.

Then, not long after Potaliputta the wanderer had left, Ven. Samiddhi went to Ven. Ānanda and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he reported to Ven. Ānanda the Elder2 the entirety of his discussion with Potaliputta the wanderer. When this was said, Ven. Ānanda said to him, "Friend Samiddhi, there is warrant here for seeing the Blessed One. Let's go to the Blessed One and, on arrival, report this matter to him. However he explains it to us, that's how we should bear it in mind."

"As you say, friend, Ven. Samiddhi responded to Ven. Ānanda.

So Ven. Samiddhi and Ven. Ānanda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As they were sitting there, Ven. Ānanda reported to the Blessed One the entirety of the discussion between Ven. Samiddhi and Potaliputta the wanderer.

When this was said, the Blessed One said, "I do not recall even having seen Potaliputta the wanderer, much less having that sort of discussion. And his question, which deserved an analytical answer, has been given a categorical answer by this worthless man, Samiddhi."

When this was said, Ven. Udāyin said to the Blessed One, "But what if Ven. Samiddhi was speaking in reference to this: 'Whatever is felt comes under stress'?"

When this was said, the Blessed One said to Ven. Ānanda, "Look, Ānanda, at how this worthless Udāyin interrupts. I knew just now that he would interrupt in an inappropriate way. From the very beginning, Potaliputta the wanderer was asking about the three kinds

of feeling. When this worthless Samiddhi was asked by him in this way, he should have answered, 'Having intentionally done—with body, with speech, or with mind—an action that is to be felt as pleasure, one experiences pleasure. Having intentionally done—with body, with speech, or with mind—an action that is to be felt as pain, one experiences pain. Having intentionally done—with body, with speech, or with mind—an action that is to be felt as neither-pleasure-nor-pain, one experiences neither-pleasure-nor-pain.' Answering this way, this worthless Samiddhi would have rightly answered Potaliputta the wanderer. But then who3 are these wanderers of other sects, foolish & inexperienced? And who would understand the Tathāgata's greater analysis of action—if you were to listen, Ānanda, to the Tathāgata analyzing the greater analysis of action?"

"This is the time, O Blessed One. This is the time, O One Well-Gone, for the Blessed One to analyze the greater analysis of action. Having heard the Blessed One, the monks will bear it in mind."

"In that case, Ānanda, listen and pay close attention. I will speak."

"As you say, lord," Ven. Ānanda responded to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said, "Ānanda, there are four kinds of persons to be found in the world. Which four? There is the case where a certain person is one who takes life, takes what is not given [steals], engages in illicit sex, lies, speaks divisively, speaks abusively, engages in idle chatter; is covetous, malevolent, & holds wrong view. With the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell.

"But there is also the case where a certain person is one who takes life, takes what is not given, engages in illicit sex, lies, speaks divisively, speaks abusively, engages in idle chatter; is covetous, malevolent, & holds wrong view, (yet) with the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world.

"And there is the case where a certain person is one who abstains from taking life, abstains from taking what is not given, abstains from illicit sex, abstains from lying, abstains from speaking divisively, abstains from speaking abusively, abstains from idle chatter, is not covetous, not malevolent, & holds right view. With the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world.

"But there is also the case where a certain person is one who abstains from taking life, abstains from taking what is not given, abstains from illicit sex, abstains from lying, abstains from speaking divisively, abstains from speaking abusively, abstains from idle chatter, is not covetous, not malevolent, & holds right view, (yet) with the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell.

"There is the case, Ānanda, where a certain contemplative or brahman—through ardency, exertion, commitment, heedfulness, & right attention—touches the sort of concentration of awareness that, when his mind is thus concentrated, he sees with the divine eye, pure

and surpassing the human, that person—the case where one who takes life, takes what is not given, engages in illicit sex, lies, speaks divisively, speaks abusively, engages in idle chatter, is covetous, malevolent, & holds wrong view, with the breakup of the body, after death, has reappeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell.

"He says, 'So there really are evil actions, there really is the result of misconduct. For I saw the case where a person who took life… & held wrong view, with the breakup of the body, after death, has reappeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell.' He says, 'Anyone who takes life… & holds wrong view: They all, on the breakup of the body, after death, reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Whoever knows this, knows rightly. Whoever knows otherwise, their knowledge is wrong.' Insisting through obstinacy & grasping right there on what was seen by himself, known by himself, understood by himself, he states: 'Only this is true. Everything otherwise is worthless.'

"Then there is the case, Ānanda, where a certain contemplative or brahman—through ardency, exertion, commitment, heedfulness, & right attention—touches the sort of concentration of awareness that, when his mind is thus concentrated, he sees with the divine eye, pure and surpassing the human, that person—the case where one who takes life, takes what is not given, engages in illicit sex, lies, speaks divisively, speaks abusively, engages in idle chatter, is covetous, malevolent, & holds wrong view, with the breakup of the body, after death, has reappeared in a good destination, a heavenly world.

"He says, 'So there really are no evil actions, there really is no result of misconduct. For I saw the case where a person who took life… & held wrong view, with the breakup of the body, after death, has reappeared in a good destination, a heavenly world.' He says, 'Anyone who takes life… & holds wrong view: They all, on the breakup of the body, after death, reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world. Whoever knows this, knows rightly. Whoever knows otherwise, their knowledge is wrong.' Insisting through obstinacy & grasping right there on what was seen by himself, known by himself, understood by himself, he states: 'Only this is true. Everything otherwise is worthless.'

"Then there is the case, Ānanda, where a certain contemplative or brahman—through ardency, exertion, commitment, heedfulness, & right attention—touches the sort of concentration of awareness that, when his mind is thus concentrated, he sees with the divine eye, pure and surpassing the human, that person—the case where one who abstains from taking life, abstains from taking what is not given, abstains from illicit sex, abstains from lying, abstains from speaking divisively, abstains from speaking abusively, abstains from idle chatter, is not covetous, not malevolent, & holds right view, with the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world.

"He says, 'So there really are fine actions, there really is the result of good conduct. For I saw the case where a person who abstained from taking life… & held right view, with the breakup of the body, after death, has reappeared in a good destination, a heavenly world.' He says, 'Anyone who abstains from taking life… & holds right view: They all, on the breakup of the body, after death, reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world.

Whoever knows this, knows rightly. Whoever knows otherwise, their knowledge is wrong.' Insisting through obstinacy & grasping right there on what was seen by himself, known by himself, understood by himself, he states: 'Only this is true. Everything otherwise is worthless.'

"Then there is the case, Ānanda, where a certain contemplative or brahman—through ardency, exertion, commitment, heedfulness, & right attention—touches the sort of concentration of awareness that, when his mind is thus concentrated, he sees with the divine eye, pure and surpassing the human, that person—the case where one who abstains from taking life, abstains from taking what is not given, abstains from illicit sex, abstains from lying, abstains from speaking divisively, abstains from speaking abusively, abstains from idle chatter, is not covetous, not malevolent, & holds right view, with the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell.

"He says, 'So there really are no fine actions, there really is no result of good conduct. For I saw the case where a person who abstained from taking life… & held right view, with the breakup of the body, after death, has reappeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell.' He says, 'Anyone who abstains from taking life… & holds right view: They all, on the breakup of the body, after death, reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Whoever knows this, knows rightly. Whoever knows otherwise, their knowledge is wrong.' Insisting through obstinacy & grasping right there on what was seen by himself, known by himself, understood by himself, he states: 'Only this is true. Everything otherwise is worthless.'

"Now, Ānanda, in the case where the contemplative or brahman says, 'So there really are evil actions, there really is the result of misconduct,' I allow him that. When he says, 'For I saw the case where a person who took life… & held wrong view, with the breakup of the body, after death, has reappeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell,' I allow him that, too. But when he says, 'Anyone who takes life… & holds wrong view: They all, on the breakup of the body, after death, reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell,' I don't allow him that. And when he says, 'Whoever knows this, knows rightly; whoever knows otherwise, their knowledge is wrong,' I don't allow him that. When, insisting through obstinacy & grasping right there on what was seen by himself, known by himself, understood by himself, he states: 'Only this is true. Everything otherwise is worthless,' I don't allow him that, either. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata's knowledge with regard to the greater analysis of action is otherwise.

"Now, Ānanda, in the case where the contemplative or brahman says, 'So there really are no evil actions, there really is no result of misconduct,' I don't allow him that. But when he says, 'For I saw the case where a person who took life… & held wrong view, with the breakup of the body, after death, has reappeared in a good destination, a heavenly world,' I do allow him that. But when he says, 'Anyone who takes life… & holds wrong view: They all, on the breakup of the body, after death, reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world,' I don't allow him that. And when he says, 'Whoever knows this, knows rightly.

Whoever knows otherwise, their knowledge is wrong,' I don't allow him that. When, insisting through obstinacy & grasping right there on what was seen by himself, known by himself, understood by himself, he states: 'Only this is true. Everything otherwise is worthless,' I don't allow him that, either. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata's knowledge with regard to the greater analysis of action is otherwise.

"Now, Ānanda, in the case where the contemplative or brahman says, 'So there really are fine actions, there really is the result of good conduct,' I allow him that. And when he says, 'For I saw the case where a person who abstained from taking life… & held right view, with the breakup of the body, after death, has reappeared in a good destination, a heavenly world,' I allow him that, too. But when he says, 'Anyone who abstains from taking life… & holds right view: They all, on the breakup of the body, after death, reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world,' I don't allow him that. And when he says, 'Whoever knows this, knows rightly. Whoever knows otherwise, their knowledge is wrong,' I don't allow him that. When, insisting through obstinacy & grasping right there on what was seen by himself, known by himself, understood by himself, he states: 'Only this is true. Everything otherwise is worthless,' I don't allow him that, either. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata's knowledge with regard to the greater analysis of action is otherwise.

"Now, Ānanda, in the case where the contemplative or brahman says, 'So there really are no fine actions, there really is no result of good conduct,' I don't allow him that. But when he says, 'For I saw the case where a person who abstained from taking life… & held right view, with the breakup of the body, after death, has reappeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell,' I do allow him that. But when he says, 'Anyone who abstains from taking life… & holds right view: They all, on the breakup of the body, after death, reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell,' I don't allow him that. And when he says, 'Whoever knows this, knows rightly. Whoever knows otherwise, their knowledge is wrong,' I don't allow him that. When, insisting through obstinacy & grasping right there on what was seen by himself, known by himself, understood by himself, he states: 'Only this is true. Everything otherwise is worthless,' I don't allow him that, either. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata's knowledge with regard to the greater analysis of action is otherwise.

"Now, Ānanda, in the case of the person who takes life… & holds wrong view and, with the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell: Either earlier he performed evil action that is to be felt as painful, or later he performed evil action that is to be felt as painful, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out wrong view. Because of that, with the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. And as for the results of taking life… holding wrong view, he will feel them either right here & now, or in the next (lifetime), or following that.

"In the case of the person who takes life… & holds wrong view (yet), with the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world: Either earlier he performed fine action that is to be felt as pleasant, or later he performed fine action that is to be felt as pleasant, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out right view. Because

of that, with the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world. But as for the results of taking life… holding wrong view, he will feel them either right here & now, or in the next (lifetime), or following that.

"In the case of the person who abstains from taking life… & holds right view and, with the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world: Either earlier he performed fine action that is to be felt as pleasant, or later he performed fine action that is to be felt as pleasant, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out right view. Because of that, with the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world. And as for the results of abstaining from taking life… holding right view, he will feel them either right here & now, or in the next (lifetime), or following that."

"In the case of the person who abstains from taking life… & holds right view (yet) with the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell: Either earlier he performed evil action that is to be felt as painful, or later he performed evil action that is to be felt as painful, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out wrong view. Because of that, with the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. But as for the results of abstaining from taking life… holding right view, he will feel them either right here & now, or in the next (lifetime), or following that.

"Thus, Ānanda, there is action that is ineffectual and apparently ineffectual. There is action that is ineffectual but apparently effectual. There is action that is both effectual and apparently effectual. There is action that is effectual but apparently ineffectual."

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

Notes

1. See AN 9:34. The Buddha, when later criticizing Ven. Samiddhi's answer, does not criticize this part of it.

2. This is the one place in this discourse where Ven. Ānanda is called Ānanda the Elder.

3. Reading ke ca with the Burmese and PTS editions of the Canon. The Sri Lankan edition here reads keci; the Thai edition, te.

For a discussion of this discourse as an example of an analytical answer to a question, see Skill in Questions, chapter four.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 41; MN 135; SN 42:13; AN 3:61; AN 4:77; AN 6:63; AN 8:40