MN 14 — MN 14 The Lesser Mass of Stress | Cūḷa Dukkhakkhandha Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Lesser Mass of Stress

Cūḷa Dukkhakkhandha Sutta (MN 14)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying among the Sakyans at Kapilavatthu in the Banyan Park. Then Mahānāma the Sakyan1 went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One, “For a long time now, lord, I have understood the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One thus: ‘Greed is a defilement of the mind; aversion is a defilement of the mind; delusion is a defilement of the mind.’ Yet even though I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One that greed is a defilement of the mind, aversion is a defilement of the mind, delusion is a defilement of the mind, there are still times when the quality of

greed invades my mind and remains, when the quality of aversion… the quality of delusion invades my mind and remains. The thought occurs to me: What quality is unabandoned within me so that there are times when the quality of greed invades my mind and remains, when the quality of aversion… the quality of delusion invades my mind and remains?"

"Mahānāma, that very quality [i.e., greed, aversion, or delusion] is what is unabandoned within you so that there are times when the quality of greed… the quality of aversion… the quality of delusion invades your mind and remains.2 For if that quality were abandoned in you, you would not live the household life and would not partake of sensuality. It's because that quality is not abandoned in you that you live the household life and partake of sensuality.

"Even though a disciple of the noble ones has clearly seen as it has come to be with right discernment that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, still—if he has not attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful qualities, or something more peaceful than that3—he can be tempted by sensuality. But when he has clearly seen as it has come to be with right discernment that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, and he has attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful qualities, or something more peaceful than that, he cannot be tempted by sensuality.

"I myself, before my self-awakening, when I was still just an unawakened bodhisatta, saw as it had come to be with right discernment that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, but as long as I had not attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful qualities, or something more peaceful than that, I did not claim that I could not be tempted by sensuality. But when I saw as it had come to be with right discernment that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, and I had attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful qualities, or something more peaceful than that, that was when I claimed that I could not be tempted by sensuality.

"Now what, Mahānāma, is the allure of sensuality? These five strings of sensuality. Which five? Forms cognizable via the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, enticing, linked to sensual desire. 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, enticing, linked to sensual desire. Now whatever pleasure or happiness 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 ‘Rāhu’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.

“Once, Mahānāma, when I was staying near Rājagaha on Vulture Peak Mountain, a number of Nigaṇṭhas were at Black Rock on the slopes of Isigili, practicing continuous standing: rejecting seats, experiencing fierce, sharp, racking pains due to exertion. So, emerging from my seclusion in the evening, I went to the Nigaṇṭhas at Black Rock on the slopes of Isigili and on arrival asked them, ‘Why are you practicing continuous standing: rejecting seats, experiencing fierce, sharp, racking pains due to exertion?’ When this was said, the Nigaṇṭhas said to me, ‘Friend, the Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta4 is all-knowing, all-seeing, and claims total knowledge & vision thus: “Whether I am walking or standing, sleeping or awake, knowledge & vision are continuously & continually established in me.” He has told us, “Nigaṇṭhas, there are evil actions that you have done in the past. Exhaust them with these painful austerities. When in the present you are restrained in body, restrained in speech, and restrained in mind, that is the non-doing of evil action for the future. Thus, with the destruction of old actions through asceticism, and with the non-doing of new actions, there will be no flow into the future. With no flow into the future, there is the ending of action. With the ending of action, the ending of stress. With the ending of stress, the ending of feeling. With the ending of feeling, all suffering & stress will be exhausted.”5 We approve of that (teaching), prefer it, and are gratified by it.’

“When this was said, I asked them, ‘But friends, do you know that you existed in the past, and that you did not not exist?’

“‘No, friend.’

“‘And do you know that you did evil actions in the past, and that you did not not do them?’

‘“No, friend.’

‘“And do you know that you did such-and-such evil actions in the past?’

‘“No, friend.’

‘“And do you know that so-and-so much stress has been exhausted, or that so-and-so much stress remains to be exhausted, or that with the exhaustion of so-and-so much stress all stress will be exhausted?’

‘“No, friend.’

‘“But do you know what is the abandoning of unskillful qualities and the attainment of skillful qualities in the here & now?’

‘“No, friend.’

‘“So, friends, it seems that you don’t know that you existed in the past, and that you did not not exist; you don’t know that you did evil actions in the past, and that you did not not do them; you don’t know that you did such-and-such evil actions in the past; you don’t know that so-and-so much stress has been exhausted, or that so-and-so much stress remains to be exhausted, or that with the exhaustion of so-and-so much stress all stress will be exhausted; you don’t know what is the abandoning of unskillful qualities and the attainment of skillful qualities in the here & now. That being the case, those in the world who are murderers, bloody-handed doers of what is cruel, when they are later reborn among human beings, go forth with the Nigaṇṭhas.’

‘“But, friend Gotama, it’s not the case that pleasure is to be attained through pleasure. Pleasure is to be attained through pain. For if pleasure were to be attained through pleasure, then King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha would attain pleasure, for he lives in greater pleasure than you, friend Gotama.’

‘“Surely the venerable Nigaṇṭhas said that rashly and without reflecting… for instead, I should be asked, ‘Who lives in greater pleasure: King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha or master Gotama?’”

‘“Yes, friend Gotama, we said that rashly and without reflecting… but let that be. We now ask you, master Gotama: Who lives in greater pleasure: King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha or master Gotama?’

‘“In that case, Nigaṇṭhas, I will question you in return. Answer as you like. What do you think? Can King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha—without moving his body, without uttering a word—dwell sensitive to unalloyed pleasure for seven days & nights?’

‘“No, friend.”

“‘… for six days & nights…. for five days & nights… for a day & a night?’

“‘No, friend.”

“‘Now, I—without moving my body, without uttering a word—can dwell sensitive to unalloyed pleasure for a day and a night… for two days & nights… for three… four… five… six… seven days & nights.6 So what do you think? That being the case, who dwells in greater pleasure: King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha or me?’

“‘That being the case, master Gotama dwells in greater pleasure than King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha.’”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Mahānāma the Sakyan delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

Notes

1. A cousin of the Buddha. The Commentary claims that he was already a once-returner when this discourse took place, but there is nothing in the Canon to indicate that this is so.

2. This sentence is mistranslated in both MLS and MLDB. Its point is that the qualities that invade Mahānāma’s mind are precisely the ones he has not yet abandoned. In practical terms, this means that he does not have to look for another quality lurking behind them, but instead can focus his attention on abandoning these qualities directly as they arise. The remainder of the sutta gives a lesson in how greed, aversion, and delusion can be abandoned by understanding the object on which they most frequently focus: sensuality.

3. The rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful qualities, is a factor of the first or second jhāna. “Something more peaceful than that” would be any attainments higher than the second jhāna.

4. See DN 2.

5. One of the great ironies in the history of Buddhism is the extent to which teachings that the Buddha clearly disapproved of, such as this one, have later been taught as quintessentially Buddhist. In some circles, a teaching similar to this one—that non-reactivity to pain burns away the impurity of past kamma and creates no new kamma for the future—is still taught as Buddhist to this day.

6. The Buddha here is apparently referring to the concentration attainment called the cessation of perception and feeling. As to how the cessation of feeling could be called unalloyed pleasure, MN 59 says this:

“Now it’s possible, Ānanda, that some wanderers of other sects might say, ‘Gotama the contemplative speaks of the cessation of perception & feeling, and yet describes it as pleasure. What is this? How is this?’ When they say that, they are to be told, ‘It’s not the

case, friends, that the Blessed One describes only pleasant feeling as included under pleasure. Wherever pleasure is found, in whatever terms, the Blessed One describes it as pleasure.'"

This is one of several passages in the Canon indicating that not all experience is limited to the aggregates. Others include DN 15, MN 49, and SN 35:117.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 36; MN 54; MN 59; MN 101; SN 35:63; SN 35:115; SN 35:189; SN 36:6; AN 2:30; AN 3:35; AN 6:63; AN 9:13; AN 9:34