MN 18 — MN 18 The Ball of Honey | Madhupiṇḍika Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

Source: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN18.html

Source revision: sha256:06db98f11dbe5b66e3b290b0f8bcaa44ec5f2fe3d1e1b74062fcf0baea044036

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Text

The Ball of Honey

Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (MN 18)

Introduction

This discourse plays a central role in the early Buddhist analysis of conflict. As might be expected, the blame for conflict lies within, in the unskillful habits of the mind, rather than without. The culprit in this case is a habit called papañca. Unfortunately, none of the early texts give a clear definition of what the word papañca means, so it’s hard to find a precise English equivalent for the term. However, they do give a clear analysis of how papañca arises, how it leads to conflict, and how it can be ended. In the final analysis, these are the questions that matter—more than the precise definition of terms—so we will deal with

them first before proposing a few possible translation equivalents for the word.

Three passages in the discourses—DN 21, MN 18, and Sn 4:11—map the causal processes that give rise to papañca and lead from papañca to conflict. Because the Buddhist analysis of causality is generally non-linear, with plenty of room for feedback loops, the maps vary in some of their details. In DN 21, the map reads like this:

the perceptions & categories of papañca > thinking > desire > dear-&-not-dear > envy & stinginess > rivalry & hostility

In Sn 4:11, the map is less linear and can be diagrammed like this:

perception > the categories of papañca

perception > name & form > contact > appealing & unappealing > desire > dear-&-not-dear > stinginess/divisiveness/quarrels/disputes

In MN 18, the map is this:

contact > feeling > perception > thinking > the perceptions & categories of papañca

In this last case, however, the bare outline misses some of the important implications of the way this process is phrased. In the full passage, the analysis starts out in an impersonal tone:

“Dependent on eye & forms, eye-consciousness arises [similarly with the rest of the six senses]. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling.”

Starting with feeling, the notion of an “agent”—in this case, the feeler—acting on “objects,” is introduced:

“What one feels, one perceives [labels in the mind]. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one ‘papañcizes.’”

Through the process of papañca, the agent then becomes a victim of his/her own patterns of thinking:

“Based on what a person papañcizes, the perceptions & categories of papañca assail him/her with regard to past, present, & future forms cognizable via the eye [as with the remaining senses].”

What are these perceptions & categories that assail the person who papañcizes? Sn 4:14 states that the root of the categories of papañca is the perception, “I am the thinker.” From this self-reflexive thought—in which one objectifies a “self,” a thing corresponding to the concept of “I”— a number of categories can be derived: being/not-being, me/not-me, mine/not-mine, doer/done-to, signifier/signified. Once one’s self becomes a thing under

the rubric of these categories, it's impossible not to be assailed by the perceptions & categories derived from these basic distinctions. When there's the sense of identification as a being that needs to feed (see Khp 4), then based on the feelings arising from sensory contact, some feelings will seem appealing—worth feeding on—and others will seem worth pushing away. From this there grows desire, which comes into conflict with the desires of others who are also feeding because they, too, engage in papañca. This is how inner objectification breeds external contention.

How can this process be ended? Through a shift in perception, caused by the way one attends to feelings, using the categories of appropriate attention (see MN 2). As the Buddha states in DN 21, rather than viewing a feeling as an appealing or unappealing thing, one should look at it as part of a causal process: When a particular feeling is pursued, do skillful or unskillful qualities increase in the mind? If skillful qualities increase, the feeling may be pursued. If unskillful qualities increase, it shouldn't. When comparing feelings that lead to skillful qualities, notice that those endowed with thinking (directed thought) and evaluation are less refined than those free of thinking and evaluation, as in the higher stages of mental absorption, or jhāna. When seeing this, there is a tendency to opt for the more refined feelings, and this cuts through the act of thinking that, according to MN 18, provides the basis for papañca.

In following this program, the notion of agent and victim is avoided, as is self-reflexive thinking in general. There is simply the analysis of cause-effect processes. One is still making use of dualities—distinguishing between unskillful and skillful (and affliction/lack of affliction, the results of unskillful and skillful qualities)—but the distinction is between processes, not things. Thus one's analysis avoids the type of thinking that, according to DN 21, depends on the perceptions and categories of papañca, and in this way the vicious cycle by which thinking and papañca keep feeding each other is cut.

Ultimately, by following this program to greater and greater levels of refinement through the higher levels of mental absorption, one finds less and less to relish and enjoy in the six senses and the mental processes based on them. With this sense of disenchantment, the processes of feeling and thought are stilled, and there is a breakthrough to the cessation of the six sense spheres. When these spheres cease, is there anything else left? Ven. Sāriputta, in AN 4:173 warns us not to ask, for to ask if there is, isn't, both-is-and-isn't, neither-is-nor-isn't anything left in that dimension is to papañcize what is free from papañca. However, this dimension is not a total annihilation of experience. It's a type of experience that DN 11 calls consciousness without surface, luminous all around, where water, earth, fire, & wind have no footing, where long/short, coarse/fine, fair/foul, name/form are all brought to an end. This is the fruit of the path of arahantship—a path that makes use of dualities but leads to a fruit beyond them.

It may come as cold comfort to realize that conflict can be totally overcome only with the realization of arahantship, but it's important to note that by following the path recommended in DN 21—learning to avoid references to any notion of "self" and learning to view feelings not as things but as parts of a causal process affecting the qualities in the mind—the basis for papañca is gradually undercut, and there are fewer and fewer

occasions for conflict. In following this path, one reaps its increasing benefits all along the way.

Translating papañca: As one writer has noted, the word papañca has had a wide variety of meanings in Indian thought, with only one constant: In Buddhist philosophical discourse it carries negative connotations, usually of falsification and distortion. The word itself is derived from a root that means diffuseness, spreading, proliferating. The Pali Commentaries define papañca as covering three types of thought: craving, conceit, and views. They also note that it functions to slow the mind down in its escape from saṁsāra. Because its categories begin with the objectifying thought, "I am the thinker," I have chosen to render the word as "objectification," although some of the following alternatives might be acceptable as well: self-reflexive thinking, reification, proliferation, complication, elaboration, distortion. The word offers some interesting parallels to the postmodern notion of logocentric thinking, but it's important to note that the Buddha's program of deconstructing this process differs sharply from that of postmodern thought.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying among the Sakyans near Kapilavatthu in the Banyan Park. Then in the early morning, having adjusted his lower robe and taking his bowl & outer robe, he went into Kapilavatthu for alms. Having gone for alms in Kapilavatthu, after the meal, returning from his alms round, he went to the Great Forest for the day's abiding. Plunging into the Great Forest, he sat down at the root of a young clump of bamboo for the day's abiding.

Daṇḍapānin ["Stick-in-hand"] the Sakyan, out roaming & rambling for exercise, also went to the Great Forest. Plunging into the Great Forest, he went to the Blessed One under the young clump of bamboo. On arrival, he exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he stood to one side. As he was standing there, he said to the Blessed One, "What is the contemplative's doctrine? What does he proclaim?"

"The sort of doctrine, friend, where one does not keep quarreling with anyone in the cosmos with its devas, Māras, & Brahmās, with its contemplatives & brahmans, its royalty & commonfolk; the sort (of doctrine) where perceptions no longer obsess the brahman who remains dissociated from sensuality, free from perplexity, his uncertainty cut away, devoid of craving for becoming & non-. Such is my doctrine; such is what I proclaim."

When this was said, Daṇḍapānin the Sakyan—shaking his head, wagging his tongue, raising his eyebrows so that his forehead was wrinkled in three furrows—left, leaning on his stick.

Then the Blessed One, emerging from his seclusion in the evening, went to the Banyan Park and, on arrival, sat down on a seat made ready. Having sat down, he [told the monks what had happened]. When this was said, a certain monk said to the Blessed One, "Lord, what sort of doctrine is it where one does not keep quarreling with anyone in the cosmos

with its devas, Māras, & Brahmās, with its contemplatives & brahmans, its royalty & commonfolk; where perceptions no longer obsess the brahman who remains dissociated from sensuality, free from perplexity, his uncertainty cut away, devoid of craving for becoming & non-?"

"If, monk, with regard to the cause whereby the perceptions & categories of objectification assail a person, there is nothing there to relish, welcome, or remain fastened to, then that is the end of the obsessions of passion, the obsessions of resistance, the obsessions of views, the obsessions of uncertainty, the obsessions of conceit, the obsessions of passion for becoming, & the obsessions of ignorance. That is the end of taking up rods & bladed weapons, of arguments, quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive speech, & false speech. That is where these evil, unskillful things cease without remainder." That is what the Blessed One said. Having said it, he—the One Well-Gone—got up from his seat and went into his dwelling.

Then, not long after the Blessed One had left, this thought occurred to the monks: "This brief statement the Blessed One made, after which he went into his dwelling without analyzing the detailed meaning—i.e., 'If, with regard to the cause whereby the perceptions & categories of objectification assail a person, there is nothing to relish... that is where these evil, unskillful things cease without remainder': Now who might analyze the unanalyzed detailed meaning of this brief statement?" Then the thought occurred to them, "Ven. Mahā Kaccāna is praised by the Teacher and esteemed by his observant companions in the holy life. He is capable of analyzing the unanalyzed detailed meaning of this brief statement. Suppose we were to go to him and, on arrival, cross-question him about this matter."

So the monks went to Ven. Mahā Kaccāna and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, they sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they [told him what had happened, and added,] "Analyze the meaning, Ven. Mahā Kaccāna!"

(He replied:) "Friends, it's as if a man needing heartwood, looking for heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood—passing over the root & trunk of a standing tree possessing heartwood—were to imagine that heartwood should be sought among its branches & leaves. So it is with you, who—having bypassed the Blessed One when you were face to face with him, the Teacher—imagine that I should be asked about this matter. For knowing, the Blessed One knows; seeing, he sees. He is the Eye, he is Knowledge, he is Dhamma, he is Brahmā. He is the speaker, the proclaimer, the elucidator of meaning, the giver of the deathless, the lord of the Dhamma, the Tathāgata. That was the time when you should have cross-questioned him about this matter. However he answered, that was how you should have remembered it."

"Yes, friend Kaccāna: Knowing, the Blessed One knows; seeing, he sees. He is the Eye, he is Knowledge, he is Dhamma, he is Brahmā. He is the speaker, the proclaimer, the elucidator of meaning, the giver of the deathless, the lord of the Dhamma, the Tathāgata. That was the time when we should have cross-questioned him about this matter. However he

answered, that was how we should have remembered it. But you are praised by the Teacher and esteemed by your observant companions in the holy life. You are capable of analyzing the unanalyzed detailed meaning of this brief statement. Analyze the meaning, Ven. Mahā Kaccāna, without making it difficult!"

"In that case, my friends, listen & pay close attention. I will speak."

"As you say, friend," the monks responded to him.

Ven. Mahā Kaccāna said this: "Friends, concerning the brief statement the Blessed One made, after which he went into his dwelling without analyzing the detailed meaning—i.e., 'If, with regard to the cause whereby the perceptions & categories of objectification assail a person, there is nothing there to relish, welcome, or remain fastened to, then that is the end of the obsessions of passion, the obsessions of resistance, the obsessions of views, the obsessions of uncertainty, the obsessions of conceit, the obsessions of passion for becoming, & the obsessions of ignorance. That is the end of taking up rods & bladed weapons, of arguments, quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive speech, & false speech. That is where these evil, unskillful things cease without remainder'—I understand the detailed meaning to be this:

"Dependent on eye & forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives [labels in the mind]. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates. Based on what a person complicates, the perceptions & categories of objectification assail him/her with regard to past, present, & future forms cognizable via the eye.

"Dependent on ear & sounds, ear-consciousness arises....

"Dependent on nose & aromas, nose-consciousness arises....

"Dependent on tongue & flavors, tongue-consciousness arises....

"Dependent on body & tactile sensations, body-consciousness arises....

"Dependent on intellect & ideas, intellect-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates. Based on what a person complicates, the perceptions & categories of objectification assail him/her with regard to past, present, & future ideas cognizable via the intellect.

"Now, when there is the eye, when there are forms, when there is eye-consciousness, it is possible that one will delineate a delineation of contact.1 When there is a delineation of contact, it is possible that one will delineate a delineation of feeling. When there is a delineation of feeling, it is possible that one will delineate a delineation of perception. When there is a delineation of perception, it is possible that one will delineate a delineation

of thinking. When there is a delineation of thinking, it is possible that one will delineate a delineation of being assailed by the perceptions & categories of objectification.

“When there is the ear….

“When there is the nose….

“When there is the tongue….

“When there is the body….

“When there is the intellect, when there are ideas, when there is intellect-consciousness, it is possible that one will delineate a delineation of contact. When there is a delineation of contact, it is possible that one will delineate a delineation of feeling. When there is a delineation of feeling, it is possible that one will delineate a delineation of perception. When there is a delineation of perception, it is possible that one will delineate a delineation of thinking. When there is a delineation of thinking, it is possible that one will delineate a delineation of being assailed by the perceptions & categories of objectification.

“Now, when there is no eye, when there are no forms, when there is no eye-consciousness, it is impossible that one will delineate a delineation of contact. When there is no delineation of contact, it is impossible that one will delineate a delineation of feeling. When there is no delineation of feeling, it is impossible that one will delineate a delineation of perception. When there is no delineation of perception, it is impossible that one will delineate a delineation of thinking. When there is no delineation of thinking, it is impossible that one will delineate a delineation of being assailed by the perceptions & categories of objectification.

“When there is no ear….

“When there is no nose….

“When there is no tongue….

“When there is no body….

“When there is no intellect, when there are no ideas, when there is no intellect-consciousness, it is impossible that one will delineate a delineation of contact. When there is no delineation of contact, it is impossible that one will delineate a delineation of feeling. When there is no delineation of feeling, it is impossible that one will delineate a delineation of perception. When there is no delineation of perception, it is impossible that one will delineate a delineation of thinking. When there is no delineation of thinking, it is impossible that one will delineate a delineation of being assailed by the perceptions & categories of objectification.

“So, concerning the brief statement the Blessed One made, after which he entered his dwelling without analyzing the detailed meaning—i.e., ‘If, with regard to the cause whereby the perceptions & categories of objectification assail a person, there is nothing there to relish, welcome, or remain fastened to, then that is the end of the obsessions of passion, the obsessions of resistance, the obsessions of views, the obsessions of uncertainty, the obsessions of conceit, the obsessions of passion for becoming, & the obsessions of ignorance. That is the end of taking up rods & bladed weapons, of arguments, quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive speech, & false speech. That is where these evil, unskillful things cease without remainder’—this is how I understand the detailed meaning. Now, friends, if you wish, having gone to the Blessed One, cross-question him about this matter. However he answers is how you should remember it.”

Then the monks, delighting in & approving of Ven. Mahā Kaccāna’s words, got up from their seats and went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to him, they sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they [told him what had happened after he had gone into his dwelling, and ended by saying,] “Then Ven. Mahā Kaccāna analyzed the meaning using these words, these statements, these phrases.”

“Mahā Kaccāna is wise, monks. He is a person of great discernment. If you had asked me about this matter, I too would have answered in the same way he did. That is its meaning, and that is how you should remember it.”

When this was said, Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One, “Lord, it’s as if a man—overcome with hunger, weakness, & thirst—were to come across a ball of honey. Wherever he might taste it, he would experience a sweet, delectable flavor. In the same way, wherever a monk of capable awareness might investigate the meaning of this Dhamma discourse with his discernment, he would experience gratification, he would experience confidence. What is the name of this Dhamma discourse?”

“Then, Ānanda, you can remember this Dhamma discourse as the ‘Ball of Honey Discourse.’”

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

Note

1. The artificiality of this phrase—“delineate a delineation”—seems intentional. It underlines the artifice implicit in the process by which the mind, in singling out events, turns them into discrete things. See MN 109, note 2.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 21; MN 138; SN 35:207; AN 3:73; AN 8:30; Sn 4:11