MN 22 — MN 22 The Water-Snake Simile | Alagaddūpama Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Water-Snake Simile

Alagaddūpama Sutta (MN 22)

Introduction

This is a discourse about clinging to views (diṭṭhi). Its central message is conveyed in two similes, among the most famous in the Canon: the simile of the water-snake and the simile of the raft. Taken together, these similes focus on the skill needed to grasp right view properly as a means of leading to the cessation of suffering, rather than an object of clinging, and then letting it go when it has done its job.

The first section of the discourse, leading up to the simile of the water-snake, focuses on the danger of misapprehending the Dhamma in general, and particularly the teachings on sensuality. The discourse doesn't explain how the offending monk, Ariṭṭha, formulated his misapprehension of the Dhamma, but the Commentary suggests a plausible scenario:

"Here the monk… having gone into seclusion, reasons as follows: 'There are people living the household life, enjoying the five pleasures of the senses, who are stream-winners, once-returners, and non-returners. As for monks, they see pleasurable forms cognizable via the eye, hear… smell… taste… feel (pleasurable) tactile sensations cognizable via the body. They use soft carpets and clothing. All this is proper. Then why shouldn't the sight, sound, smell, taste, and feel of a woman be proper? They too are proper!' Thus… comparing a mustard seed with Mount Sineru, he gives rise to the evil viewpoint, 'Why did the Blessed One—binding the ocean, as it were, with great effort—formulate the first pārājika training rule (against sexual intercourse)? There is nothing wrong with that act.'"

Regardless of how Ariṭṭha actually arrived at his position, the Commentary's suggestion makes an important point: that just because an idea can be logically inferred from the Dhamma does not mean that the idea is valid or useful. The Buddha himself makes the same point in AN 2:25:

"Monks, these two slander the Tathāgata. Which two? He who explains a discourse whose meaning needs to be inferred as one whose meaning has already been fully drawn out. And he who explains a discourse whose meaning has already been fully drawn out as one whose meaning needs to be inferred."

Having established this point, the discourse illustrates it with the simile of the water-snake, which in turn is an introduction to the simile of the raft. It is important to underline the connection between these two similes, for it is often missed. Many a casual reader has concluded from the simile of the raft simply that the Dhamma is to be let-go. In fact, one major Mahāyāna text—the Diamond Sūtra—interprets the raft simile as meaning that one has to let go of the raft in order to cross the river. However, the simile of the water-snake makes the point that the Dhamma has to be grasped; the trick lies in grasping it properly. When this point is then applied to the raft simile, the implication is clear: One has to hold onto the raft properly in order to cross the river. Only when one has reached the safety of the further shore can one let go.

Taken together, these two similes set the stage for the remainder of the discourse, which focuses on the teaching of not-self. This is one of the most easily misapprehended teachings in the Canon largely because it is possible to draw the wrong inferences from it.

Two mistaken inferences are particularly relevant here. The first concerns the range of the not-self teaching. Some have argued that, because the Buddha usually limits his teachings on not-self to the five aggregates—form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness—he leaves open the possibility that something else may be regarded as self. Or, as the argument is often phrased, he denies the limited, temporal self as a means of pointing to one's identity with the larger, unlimited, cosmic self. However, in this

discourse the Buddha explicitly phrases the not-self teaching in such a way as to refute any notion of cosmic self. Instead of centering his discussion of not-self on the five aggregates, he focuses on the first four aggregates plus two other possible objects of self-identification, both more explicitly cosmic in their range: (1) all that can be seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, pondered by the intellect; and (2) the cosmos as a whole, eternal and unchanging. In fact, the Buddha holds this last view up to particular ridicule, as the teaching of a fool, for two reasons that are developed at different points in this discourse: (1) If the cosmos were "me," then it must also be "mine," which is obviously not the case. (2) There is nothing in the experience of the cosmos that fits the bill of being eternal, unchanging, or that deserves to be clung to as "me" or "mine."

The second mistaken inference is that, given the thoroughness with which the Buddha teaches not-self, one should draw the inference that there is no self. This inference is treated less explicitly in this discourse, although it is touched upon briefly in terms of what the Buddha teaches here and how he teaches.

In terms of what: He explicitly states he cannot envision a doctrine of self that, if clung to, would not lead to sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair. He does not list all the possible doctrines of self included under this statement, but MN 2 provides at least a partial list:

I have a self … I have no self … It is precisely by means of self that I perceive self … It is precisely by means of self that I perceive not-self … It is precisely by means of not-self that I perceive self… or … This very self of mine—the knower that is sensitive here & there to the ripening of good & bad actions—is the self of mine that is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity. This is called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, & death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. He is not freed, I tell you, from suffering & stress.

Thus the view "I have no self" is just as much a doctrine of self as the view "I have a self." Because the act of clinging involves what the Buddha calls "I-making"—the creation of a sense of self—if one were to cling to the view that there is no self, one would be creating a very subtle sense of self around that view (see AN 4:24). But, as he says, the Dhamma is taught for "the elimination of all view-positions, determinations, biases, inclinations, & obsessions; for the pacification of all fabrications; for the relinquishing of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding."

Thus it is important to focus on how the Dhamma is taught: Even in his most thoroughgoing teachings about not-self, the Buddha never recommends replacing the assumption that there is a self with the assumption that there is no self. Instead, he only goes so far as to point out the drawbacks of various ways of conceiving the self and then to recommend dropping them. For example, in his standard series of questions building on the logic of the inconstancy and stress of the aggregates, he does not say that because the aggregates are inconstant and stressful there is no self. He simply asks, When they are

inconstant and stressful, is it proper to assume that they are “me, my self, what I am”? Now, because the sense of self is a product of “I-making,” this question seeks to do nothing more than to induce disenchantment and dispassion for that process of I-making, so as to put a stop to it. Once that is accomplished, the teaching has fulfilled its purpose in putting an end to suffering and stress. That’s the safety of the further shore. As the Buddha says in this discourse, “Both formerly and now, monks, I declare only stress and the cessation of stress.” As he also says here, when views of self are finally dropped, one is free from agitation; and as MN 140 points out, when one is truly unagitated one is unbound. The raft has reached the shore, and one can leave it there—free to go where one likes, in a way that cannot be traced.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. Now on that occasion this evil viewpoint [diṭṭhigata] had arisen in the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers: “As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those acts the Blessed One says are obstructive, when indulged in, are not genuine obstructions.” A large number of monks heard, “They say that this evil viewpoint has arisen in the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers: ‘As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those acts the Blessed One says are obstructive, when indulged in, are not genuine obstructions.’” So they went to the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers and on arrival said to him, “Is it true, friend Ariṭṭha, that this evil viewpoint has arisen in you—‘As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those acts the Blessed One says are obstructive, when indulged in, are not genuine obstructions’?”

“Yes, indeed, friends. I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, and those acts the Blessed One says are obstructive, when indulged in are not genuine obstructions.”

Then those monks, desiring to pry the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers away from that evil viewpoint, quizzed him back and forth and rebuked him, saying, “Don’t say that, friend Ariṭṭha. Don’t slander the Blessed One, for it is not good to slander the Blessed One. The Blessed One would not say anything like that. In many ways, friend, the Blessed One has described obstructive acts, and when indulged in they are genuine obstructions. The Blessed One has said that sensual pleasures are of little satisfaction, much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks. The Blessed One has compared sensual pleasures to a chain of bones: of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks. The Blessed One has compared sensual pleasures to a lump of flesh… a grass torch… a pit of glowing embers… a dream… borrowed goods… the fruits of a tree… a butcher’s ax and chopping block… swords and spears… a snake’s head: of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.”1 And yet even though he was quizzed back & forth and rebuked by those monks, the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers, through stubbornness and attachment to that very same evil viewpoint, continued to insist, “Yes, indeed, friends. I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, and those acts the Blessed One says are obstructive, when indulged in are not genuine obstructions.”

So when the monks were unable to pry the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers away from that evil viewpoint, they 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].

So the Blessed One told a certain monk, "Come, monk. In my name, call the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers, saying, 'The Teacher calls you, friend Ariṭṭha.'"

"As you say, lord," the monk responded and, having gone to the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers, on arrival he said, "The Teacher calls you, friend Ariṭṭha."

"As you say, my friend," the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers responded. Then he went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "Is it true, Ariṭṭha, that this evil viewpoint has arisen in you—'As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those acts the Blessed One says are obstructive, when indulged in, are not genuine obstructions'?"

"Yes, indeed, lord. I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, and those acts the Blessed One says are obstructive, when indulged in are not genuine obstructions."

"Worthless man, from whom have you understood that Dhamma taught by me in such a way? Worthless man, haven't I in many ways described obstructive acts? And when indulged in they are genuine obstructions. I have said that sensual pleasures are of little satisfaction, much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks. I have compared sensual pleasures to a chain of bones: of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks. I have compared sensual pleasures to a lump of flesh… a grass torch… a pit of glowing embers… a dream… borrowed goods… the fruits of a tree… a butcher's ax and chopping block… swords and spears… a snake's head: of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks. But you, worthless man, through your own wrong grasp (of the Dhamma), have both slandered us as well as injuring yourself and accumulating much demerit for yourself, for that will lead to your long-term harm & suffering."2

Then the Blessed One said to the monks, "What do you think, monks? Is this monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers even warm3 in this Dhamma & Vinaya?"

"How could he be, lord? No, lord."

When this was said, the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers sat silent, abashed, his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding, at a loss for words.

Then the Blessed One, seeing that the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers was sitting silent, abashed, his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding, at a loss for words, said to him, "Worthless man, you will be recognized for your own evil viewpoint. I will cross-examine the monks on this matter."

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, "Monks, do you, too, understand the Dhamma as taught by me in the same way that the monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers does when, through his own wrong grasp, he both slanders us as well as injuring himself and accumulating much demerit for himself?"

"No, lord, for in many ways the Blessed One has described obstructive acts to us, and when indulged in they are genuine obstructions. The Blessed One has said that sensual pleasures are of little satisfaction, much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks. The Blessed One has compared sensual pleasures to a chain of bones: of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks. The Blessed One has compared sensual pleasures to a lump of flesh... a grass torch... a pit of glowing embers... a dream... borrowed goods... the fruits of a tree... a butcher's ax and chopping block... swords and spears... a snake's head: of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks."

"It's good, monks, that you understand the Dhamma taught by me in this way, for in many ways I have described obstructive acts to you, and when indulged in they are genuine obstructions. I have said that sensual pleasures are of little satisfaction, much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks. I have compared sensual pleasures to a chain of bones: of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks. I have compared sensual pleasures to a lump of flesh... a grass torch... a pit of glowing embers... a dream... borrowed goods... the fruits of a tree... a butcher's ax and chopping block... swords and spears... a snake's head: of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks. But this monk Ariṭṭha Formerly-of-the-Vulture-Killers, through his own wrong grasp (of the Dhamma), has both slandered us as well as injuring himself and accumulating much demerit for himself, and that will lead to this worthless man's long-term harm & suffering. For a person to indulge in sensual pleasures without sensual passion, without sensual perception, without sensual thinking: That isn't possible.4

The Water-snake Simile

"Monks, there is the case where some worthless men study the Dhamma: dialogues, narratives of mixed prose and verse, explanations, verses, spontaneous exclamations, quotations, birth stories, amazing events, question & answer sessions [the earliest classifications of the Buddha's teachings]. Having studied the Dhamma, they don't ascertain the meaning [or: the purpose] of those Dhammas5 with their discernment. Not having ascertained the meaning of those Dhammas with their discernment, they don't come to an agreement through pondering. They study the Dhamma both for attacking others and for defending themselves in debate. They don't reach the goal for which (people) study the Dhamma. Their wrong grasp of those Dhammas will lead to their long-term harm & suffering. Why is that? Because of the wrong-graspedness of the Dhammas.

"Suppose there were a man needing a water-snake, seeking a water-snake, wandering in search of a water-snake. He would see a large water-snake and grasp it by the coils or by the tail. The water-snake, turning around, would bite him on the hand, on the arm, or on one of his limbs, and from that cause he would suffer death or death-like suffering. Why is

that? Because of the wrong-graspedness of the water-snake. In the same way, there is the case where some worthless men study the Dhamma.... Having studied the Dhamma, they don't ascertain the meaning of those Dhammas with their discernment. Not having ascertained the meaning of those Dhammas with their discernment, they don't come to an agreement through pondering. They study the Dhamma both for attacking others and for defending themselves in debate. They don't reach the goal for which (people) study the Dhamma. Their wrong grasp of those Dhammas will lead to their long-term harm & suffering. Why is that? Because of the wrong-graspedness of the Dhammas.

"But then there is the case where some clansmen study the Dhamma.... Having studied the Dhamma, they ascertain the meaning of those Dhammas with their discernment. Having ascertained the meaning of those Dhammas with their discernment, they come to an agreement through pondering. They don't study the Dhamma either for attacking others or for defending themselves in debate. They reach the goal for which people study the Dhamma. Their right grasp of those Dhammas will lead to their long-term welfare & happiness. Why is that? Because of the right-graspedness of the Dhammas.

"Suppose there were a man needing a water-snake, seeking a water-snake, wandering in search of a water-snake. He would see a large water-snake and pin it down firmly with a cleft stick. Having pinned it down firmly with a forked stick, he would grasp it firmly by the neck. Then no matter how much the water-snake might wrap its coils around his hand, his arm, or any of his limbs, he would not from that cause suffer death or death-like suffering. Why is that? Because of the right-graspedness of the water-snake. In the same way, there is the case where some clansmen study the Dhamma.... Having studied the Dhamma, they ascertain the meaning of those Dhammas with their discernment. Having ascertained the meaning of those Dhammas with their discernment, they come to an agreement through pondering. They don't study the Dhamma either for attacking others or for defending themselves in debate. They reach the goal for which people study the Dhamma. Their right grasp of those Dhammas will lead to their long-term welfare & happiness. Why is that? Because of the right-graspedness of the Dhammas.6

"Therefore, monks, when you understand the meaning of my statements, that is how you should remember them. But when you don't understand the meaning of my statements, then right there you should ask me or the experienced monks.

The Raft Simile

"Monks, I will teach you the Dhamma compared to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding onto. Listen & pay close attention. I will speak."

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

The Blessed One said: "Suppose a man were traveling along a path. He would see a great expanse of water, with the near shore dubious & risky, the further shore secure & free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. The thought would occur to him, 'Here is this great expanse of water, with the near shore

dubious & risky, the further shore secure & free from risk, but with neither a ferryboat nor a bridge going from this shore to the other. What if I were to gather grass, twigs, branches, & leaves and, having bound them together to make a raft, were to cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with my hands & feet?' Then the man, having gathered grass, twigs, branches, & leaves, having bound them together to make a raft, would cross over to safety on the other shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with his hands & feet.7 Having crossed over to the further shore, he might think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having hoisted it on my head or carrying it on my back, go wherever I like?' What do you think, monks? Would the man, in doing that, be doing what should be done with the raft?"

"No, lord."

"And what should the man do in order to be doing what should be done with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over, would think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?' In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft. In the same way, monks, I have taught the Dhamma compared to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding onto. Understanding the Dhamma as taught compared to a raft, you should let go even of Dhammas, to say nothing of non-Dhammas."

Six View-positions

"Monks, there are these six view-positions [diṭṭhiṭṭhāna]. Which six? There is the case where an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for people of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—assumes about form: 'This is me, this is my self, this is what I am.'

"He assumes about feeling: 'This is me, this is my self, this is what I am.'

"He assumes about perception: 'This is me, this is my self, this is what I am.'

"He assumes about fabrications: 'This is me, this is my self, this is what I am.'

"He assumes about what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, pondered by the intellect: 'This is me, this is my self, this is what I am.'

"He assumes about the view-position—'This cosmos is the self.8 After death this I will be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change. I will stay just like that for an eternity': 'This is me, this is my self, this is what I am.'

“Then there is the case where a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—who has regard for noble ones, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma; who has regard for people of integrity, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma assumes about form: ‘This is not me, this is not my self, this is not what I am.’

“He assumes about feeling: ‘This is not me, this is not my self, this is not what I am.’

“He assumes about perception: ‘This is not me, this is not my self, this is not what I am.’

“He assumes about fabrications: ‘This is not me, this is not my self, this is not what I am.’

“He assumes about what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, pondered by the intellect: ‘This is not me, this is not my self, this is not what I am.’

“He assumes about the view-position—‘This cosmos is the self. After death this I will be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change. I will stay just like that for an eternity’: ‘This is not me, this is not my self, this is not what I am.’

“Seeing thus, he is not agitated over what is not present.”9

When this was said, a certain monk said to the Blessed One, “Lord, might there be agitation over what is externally not present?”

“There might, monk,” the Blessed One said. “There is the case where someone thinks, ‘O, it was mine! O, what was mine is not! O, may it be mine! O, I don’t obtain it!’ He grieves & is tormented, weeps, beats his breast, & grows delirious. It’s thus that there is agitation over what is externally not present.”

“But, lord, might there be non-agitation over what is externally not present?”

“There might, monk,” the Blessed One said. “There is the case where someone doesn’t think, ‘O, it was mine! O, what was mine is not! O, may it be mine! O, I don’t obtain it!’ He doesn’t grieve, isn’t tormented, doesn’t weep, beat his breast, or grow delirious. It’s thus that there is non-agitation over what is externally not present.”

Agitation & Non-agitation

“But, lord, might there be agitation over what is internally not present?”

“There might, monk,” the Blessed One said. “There is the case where someone has this view: ‘This cosmos is the self. After death this I will be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change. I will stay just like that for an eternity.’ He hears a Tathāgata or a Tathāgata’s disciple teaching the Dhamma for the elimination of all view-positions, determinations, biases, inclinations, & obsessions; for the pacification of all fabrications; for the relinquishing of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding. The thought occurs to him, ‘So it might be that I will be annihilated! So it might

be that I will perish! So it might be that I will not exist!' He grieves & is tormented, weeps, beats his breast, & grows delirious. It's thus that there is agitation over what is internally not present."

"But, lord, might there be non-agitation over what is internally not present?"

"There might, monk," the Blessed One said. "There is the case where someone doesn't have this view: 'This cosmos is the self. After death this I will be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change. I will stay just like that for an eternity.' He hears a Tathāgata or a Tathāgata's disciple teaching the Dhamma for the elimination of all view-positions, determinations, biases, inclinations, & obsessions; for the pacification of all fabrications; for the relinquishing of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding. The thought doesn't occur to him, 'So it might be that I will be annihilated! So it might be that I will perish! So it might be that I will not exist!' He doesn't grieve, isn't tormented, doesn't weep, beat his breast, or grow delirious. It's thus that there is non-agitation over what is internally not present."

"Monks, you would do well to possess that possession, the possession of which would be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change, that would stay just like that for an eternity. But do you see that possession, the possession of which would be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change, that would stay just like that for an eternity?"

"No, lord."

Abandoning Possessions & Views

"Very good, monks. I, too, do not envision a possession, the possession of which would be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change, that would stay just like that for an eternity.

"Monks, you would do well to cling to that clinging to a doctrine of self, clinging to which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair. But do you see a clinging to a doctrine of self, clinging to which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair?"

"No, lord."

"Very good, monks. I, too, do not envision a clinging to a doctrine of self, clinging to which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair.

"Monks, you would do well to depend on a view-dependency [diṭṭhi-nissaya], depending on which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair. But do you see a view-dependency, depending on which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair?"

"No, lord."

“Very good, monks. I, too, do not envision a view-dependency, depending on which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair.

“Monks, where there is a self, would there be (the thought,) ‘belonging to my self’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Or, monks, where there is what belongs to self, would there be (the thought,) ‘my self’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Monks, where a self or what belongs to self are not pinned down as a truth or reality, then the view-position—‘This cosmos is the self. After death this I will be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change. I will stay just like that for an eternity’—Isn’t it utterly & completely a fool’s teaching?”

“What else could it be, lord? It’s utterly & completely a fool’s teaching.”

“What do you think, monks? Is form constant or inconstant?” “Inconstant, lord.” “And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?” “Stressful, lord.” “And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am’?”

“No, lord.”

“… Is feeling constant or inconstant?” “Inconstant, lord.” …

“… Is perception constant or inconstant?” “Inconstant, lord.” …

“… Are fabrications constant or inconstant?” “Inconstant, lord.” …

“What do you think, monks? Is consciousness constant or inconstant?” “Inconstant, lord.” “And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?” “Stressful, lord.” “And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am’?”

“No, lord.”

“Thus, monks, any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every10 form is to be seen as it has come to be with right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“Any feeling whatsoever….

“Any perception whatsoever….

“Any fabrications whatsoever….

“Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every consciousness is to be seen as it has come to be with right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“Seeing thus, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is released. 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, monks, is called a monk whose cross-bar is thrown off,11 whose moat is filled in, whose pillar is pulled out, whose bolt is withdrawn, a noble one with banner lowered, burden placed down, unfettered.

“And how is a monk one whose cross-bar is thrown off? There is the case where a monk’s ignorance is abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. This is how a monk is one whose cross-bar is thrown off.

“And how is a monk one whose moat is filled in? There is the case where a monk’s wandering-on to birth, leading on to further-becoming, is abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. This is how a monk is one whose moat is filled in.

“And how is a monk one whose pillar is pulled out? There is the case where a monk’s craving is abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. This is how a monk is one whose pillar is pulled out.

“And how is a monk one whose bolt is withdrawn? There is the case where a monk’s five lower fetters are abandoned, their root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. This is how a monk is one whose bolt is withdrawn.

“And how is a monk a noble one with banner lowered, burden placed down, unfettered? There is the case where a monk’s conceit ‘I am’ is abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. This is how a monk is a noble one with banner lowered, burden placed down, unfettered.

“And when the devas, together with Indra, the Brahmās, & Pajāpati, search for the monk whose mind is thus released, they cannot find that ‘The consciousness of the one truly

gone [tathāgata]12 is dependent on this.' Why is that? The one truly gone is untraceable even in the here & now.13

"Speaking in this way, teaching in this way, I have been erroneously, vainly, falsely, unfactually slandered by some contemplatives & brahmans (who say), 'Gotama the contemplative is one who misleads. He declares the annihilation, destruction, extermination of the existing being.' But as I am not that, as I do not say that, so I have been erroneously, vainly, falsely, unfactually slandered by those venerable contemplatives & brahmans (who say), 'Gotama the contemplative is one who misleads. He declares the annihilation, destruction, extermination of the existing being.'14

"Both formerly and now, monks, I declare only stress and the cessation of stress.15 And if others insult, abuse, taunt, bother, & harass the Tathāgata for that, he feels no hatred, no resentment, no dissatisfaction of heart because of that. And if others honor, respect, revere, & venerate the Tathāgata for that, he feels no joy, no happiness, no elation of heart because of that. And if others honor, respect, revere, & venerate the Tathāgata for that, he thinks, 'They do me such service at this that has already been comprehended.'16

"Therefore, monks, if others insult, abuse, taunt, bother, & harass you as well, you should feel no hatred, no resentment, no dissatisfaction of heart because of that. And if others honor, respect, revere, & venerate you as well, you should feel no joy, no gladness, no elation of heart because of that. And if others honor, respect, revere, & venerate you, you should think, 'They do us17 such service at this that has already been comprehended.'

"Therefore, monks, whatever isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare & happiness. And what isn't yours? Form isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare & happiness. Feeling isn't yours… Perception… Fabrications… Consciousness isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare & happiness.

"What do you think, monks? If a person were to gather or burn or do as he likes with the grass, twigs, branches & leaves here in Jeta's Grove, would the thought occur to you, 'It's us that this person is gathering, burning, or doing with as he likes'?"

"No, lord. Why is that? Because those things are not our self, nor do they belong to our self."

"Even so, monks, whatever isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare & happiness. And what isn't yours? Form isn't yours… Feeling isn't yours… Perception… Fabrications… Consciousness isn't yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare & happiness.

The Well-proclaimed Dhamma

"The Dhamma thus well-proclaimed by me is clear, open, evident, stripped of rags. In the Dhamma thus well-proclaimed by me—clear, open, evident, stripped of rags—there is for

those monks who are arahants—whose effluents are ended, who have reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, totally destroyed the fetter of becoming, and who are released through right gnosis—no (future) cycle for manifestation. This is how the Dhamma well-proclaimed by me is clear, open, evident, stripped of rags.18

“In the Dhamma thus well-proclaimed by me—clear, open, evident, stripped of rags—those monks who have abandoned the five lower fetters are all due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world. This is how the Dhamma well-proclaimed by me is clear, open, evident, stripped of rags.

“In the Dhamma thus well-proclaimed by me—clear, open, evident, stripped of rags—those monks who have abandoned (the first) three fetters, with the attenuation of passion, aversion, & delusion, are all once-returners who, on returning only one more time to this world, will make an ending to stress. This is how the Dhamma well-proclaimed by me is clear, open, evident, stripped of rags.

“In the Dhamma thus well-proclaimed by me—clear, open, evident, stripped of rags—those monks who have abandoned (the first) three fetters, are all stream-winners, certain, never again destined for the lower realms, headed for self-awakening. This is how the Dhamma well-proclaimed by me is clear, open, evident, stripped of rags.

“In the Dhamma thus well-proclaimed by me—clear, open, evident, stripped of rags—those monks who are Dhamma-followers and conviction-followers19 are all headed for self-awakening. This is how the Dhamma well-proclaimed by me is clear, open, evident, stripped of rags.

“In the Dhamma thus well-proclaimed by me—clear, open, evident, stripped of rags—those monks who have a (sufficient) measure of conviction in me, a (sufficient) measure of love for me, are all headed for heaven. This is how the Dhamma well-proclaimed by me is clear, open, evident, stripped of rags.”

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

Notes

1. The first seven of these comparisons are treated in detail in MN 54. The simile of the butcher’s ax and chopping block is mentioned in MN 23, the simile of swords and spears in SN 5:1, and the simile of the snake’s head in Sn 4:1.

2. Apart from a few minor details, this story up to this point is identical with the origin story for Pācittiya 68 and the origin story for the rules concerning the act of suspension given in Cullavagga (CvI.32.1-3.) Ariṭṭha was the first monk to be suspended from the Saṅgha. Cv I.34 reports that, instead of making an effort to mend his ways so that the act of suspension might be rescinded, he simply disrobed.

3. The image here is apparently that of trying to start a fire with the friction of a fire stick. Ariṭṭha hasn't even been able to create any warmth, much less the spark of insight that would create light.

4. According to the Commentary, "indulge in sensual pleasures" here means indulging in sexual intercourse; the Sub-commentary adds that other acts expressing sexual desire—such as hugging and petting—should be included under this phrase as well.

5. The Pali switches from the singular (Dhamma) to the plural (Dhammas) here. This is one of the few discourses that uses the plural form to mean "teachings" rather than "phenomena." This same use of "Dhammas" to mean "teachings" reoccurs in the raft simile, below.

6. These last two sentences are missing in MLDB but are present in MLS.

7. According to SN 35:197: "The great expanse of water stands for the fourfold flood: the flood of sensuality, the flood of becoming, the flood of views, & the flood of ignorance. The near shore, dubious & risky, stands for self-identification. The further shore, secure and free from risk, stands for unbinding. The raft stands for just this noble eightfold path: right view… right concentration. Making an effort with hands & feet stands for the arousing of persistence."

8. The Pali here reads, so loko so attā. The translation given here follows the interpretation of Nyanaponika Thera in his translation of this discourse. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his notes to the translation of this discourse in MLDB, calls this interpretation hypothetical, and instead suggests that this phrase indicates the Sāṅkhya theory of the changeless "person" as opposed to unchanging "nature." However, in his later translation of SN 22:81, which contains an identical passage, he adopts Nyanaponika's interpretation as well.

9. On non-agitation, see MN 138 and MN 140.

10. The word "every" here and in all parallel passages is sabba, which is the same as the word for "all." On the range of meaning covered by the word "all," see SN 35:23. DN 11, DN 15, MN 49, and AN 10:81 indicate that there is a type of consciousness that lies outside the range of "all," and so would not fall under the aggregate of consciousness. This apparently corresponds to the dimension mentioned in SN 35:117 and Ud 8:1.

11. See Dhp 398.

12. The term "Tathāgata" is often, but not always, reserved for the Buddha. Sometimes, as in the case here, it is used to refer to the arahant.

13. See SN 22:85 and SN 22:86. Compare Dhp 92–93.

14. Annihilationism is one of the two extremes of wrong view criticized most heavily by the Buddha (the other is eternalism, as represented by the sixth of the six view-positions).

Some interpreters, citing this passage, have tried to limit the meaning of annihilationism simply to the idea of the annihilation of an existing being. The teaching that there is no self, they then argue, does not count as annihilationism because there is no self to be annihilated. This interpretation ignores SN 44:10, which counts the statement "there is no self" as siding with annihilationism.

As for the term, "existing being": SN 22:36 and SN 23:2 state that a being is defined by his/her/its objects of clinging. SN 5:10 indicates that one of the ways of overcoming clinging is to focus on how the concept of "being" arises, without assuming the truth of the concept. And as MN 72, SN 22:85, and SN 22:86 maintain, when clinging is gone, one is called not a being but a Tathāgata—who, freed from clinging, cannot be classified as or identified with anything at all.

15. Some have suggested, citing SN 12:15, that this passage means that there are only two things happening in reality: stress and the cessation of stress. However, in the context of SN 22:86, where this statement also occurs, it clearly means simply that the Buddha is selective in the topics he chooses to address. In that discourse, he is refusing to take a stand on questions regarding the ontological status of the Tathāgata after death. Here he is refusing to take a stand on the related question of the status of the "existing being" (see note 13). In every case, the Buddha chooses to take a stand only on questions where the process of answering would be conducive to awakening. On this point, see MN 63 and SN 56:31.

16. According to the Commentary, "this" here refers to the five aggregates. As SN 22:23 points out, "comprehension" means the ending of passion, aversion, and delusion with regard to the object comprehended. In other words, the Buddha sees that the honor and respect he receives is aimed at the five aggregates; because he has no passion, aversion, or delusion with regard to those aggregates, he is not overjoyed by any honor paid to them.

17. The Thai edition of the Pali Canon has the word "us" here, whereas the Burmese, Sinhalese, and PTS editions have "me."

18. This last sentence is missing from this paragraph and all the following paragraphs both in MLDB and in MLS.

19. Dhamma-followers and conviction-followers are apparently those who are following the path to stream entry but have yet to reach the fruit of stream entry. See MN 70.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 9; DN 15; MN 2; MN 38; MN 70; SN 25:1–10; SN 35:99; SN 44:10; AN 3:87–88