MN 25 — MN 25 Poison-grass | Nivāpa Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

Poison-grass

Nivāpa Sutta (MN 25)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. There he addressed the monks: “Monks!”

“Yes, lord,” the monks responded to him.

The Blessed One said, “The poison-grass sower doesn’t sow poison-grass for a herd of deer, (thinking,) ‘May the herd of deer, having enjoyed the poison-grass I have sown, be long-lived & handsome, and last for a long time.’ Actually, the poison-grass sower sows poison grass for a herd of deer, (thinking,) ‘The herd of deer, venturing unwarily into the

poison-grass I have sown, will eat food. Having eaten food after venturing unwarily, they will become intoxicated. Being intoxicated, they will become heedless. When they've become heedless, I can do with them as I like, on account of this poison-grass.'

"Now, the first herd of deer, venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, ate food. Having eaten food after venturing unwarily, they became intoxicated. Being intoxicated, they became heedless. When they became heedless, the poison-grass sower did with them as he liked, on account of that poison-grass.

"A second herd of deer reasoned thus: 'That first herd of deer, venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, ate food. Having eaten food after venturing unwarily, they became intoxicated. Being intoxicated, they became heedless. When they became heedless, the poison-grass sower did with them as he liked, on account of that poison-grass. That's why that first herd of deer didn't escape from the poison-grass sower's power & control. What if we were to entirely avoid that poison-grass food, and—avoiding that dangerous enjoyment—were to dwell having plunged into a wilderness area?'

"So, they entirely avoided that poison-grass food. Avoiding that dangerous enjoyment, they dwelled having plunged into a wilderness area. But in the last month of the hot season, when the grass & water were used up, their bodies became extremely gaunt. Their bodies having become extremely gaunt, they lost their strength & energy. Having lost their strength & energy, they returned to the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower. Venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, they ate food. Having eaten food after venturing unwarily, they became intoxicated. Being intoxicated, they became heedless. When they became heedless, the poison-grass sower did with them as he liked, on account of that poison-grass. That, monks, is why that second herd of deer didn't escape from the poison-grass sower's power & control.

"A third herd of deer reasoned thus: 'That first herd of deer, venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, ate food… That's why that first herd of deer didn't escape from the poison-grass sower's power & control. The second herd of deer reasoned thus: "That first herd of deer, venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, ate food… That's why that first herd of deer didn't escape from the poison-grass sower's power & control…." So, they entirely avoided that poison-grass food. Avoiding that dangerous enjoyment, they dwelled having plunged into a wilderness area. But in the last month of the hot season, when the grass & water were used up, their bodies became extremely gaunt. Their bodies having become extremely gaunt, they lost their strength & energy. Having lost their strength & energy, they returned to the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower. Venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, they ate food…. That's why that second herd of deer didn't escape from the poison-grass sower's power & control.

"'What if we were to take up residence near where poison-grass has been sown by the poison-grass sower and—having taken up residence there—were to eat food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower? By eating food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, we

won’t become intoxicated. Not being intoxicated, we won’t become heedless. When we aren’t heedless, the poison-grass sower won’t be able to do with us as he likes on account of that poison-grass.’

“So the third herd of deer took up residence near where poison-grass had been sown by the poison-grass sower and—having taken up residence there—ate food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower. By eating food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, they didn’t become intoxicated. Not being intoxicated, they didn’t become heedless. When they weren’t heedless, the poison-grass sower wasn’t able to do with them as he liked on account of that poison-grass.

“The thought occurred to the poison-grass sower & his followers, ‘How crafty & powerful is this third herd of deer! They must be wizards! How can they eat where the poison-grass has been sown without our knowing their coming or going! What if we were to have the sown poison-grass surrounded on all sides over a large area with stick snares? Perhaps we would see the third herd of deer’s dwelling, where they go to hide.’ So they had the sown poison-grass surrounded on all sides over a large area with stick snares. The poison-grass sower & his followers saw the third herd of deer’s dwelling, where they went to hide. That, monks, is why that third herd of deer didn’t escape from the poison-grass sower’s power & control.

“A fourth herd of deer reasoned thus: ‘That first herd of deer, venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, ate food… That’s why that first herd of deer didn’t escape from the poison-grass sower’s power & control. The second herd of deer… their bodies having become extremely gaunt, lost their strength & energy. Having lost their strength & energy, they returned to the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower. Venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, ate food…. That’s why that second herd of deer didn’t escape from the poison-grass sower’s power & control. The third herd of deer… took up residence near where poison-grass had been sown by the poison-grass sower and—having taken up residence there—ate food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower…. But the poison-grass sower & his followers… had the sown poison-grass surrounded on all sides over a large area with stick snares. They saw the third herd of deer’s dwelling, where they went to hide. That’s why that third herd of deer didn’t escape from the poison-grass sower’s power & control.

“‘What if we were to take up residence where the poison-grass sower & his followers can’t go and—having taken up residence there—were to eat food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower? By eating food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, we won’t become intoxicated. Not being intoxicated, we won’t become heedless. When we aren’t heedless, the poison-grass sower won’t be able to do with us as he likes on account of that poison-grass.’

“So the fourth herd of deer took up residence where the poison-grass sower & his followers couldn’t go and—having taken up residence there—ate food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower. By eating food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass sown by the poison-grass sower, they didn’t become intoxicated. Not being intoxicated, they didn’t become heedless. When they weren’t heedless, the poison-grass sower wasn’t able to do with them as he liked on account of that poison-grass.

“The thought occurred to the poison-grass sower & his followers, ‘How crafty & powerful is this fourth herd of deer! They must be wizards! How can they eat where the poison-grass has been sown without our knowing their coming or going! What if we were to have the sown poison-grass surrounded on all sides over a large area with stick snares? Perhaps we would see the fourth herd of deer’s dwelling, where they go to hide.’ So they had the sown poison-grass surrounded on all sides over a large area with stick snares. But the poison-grass sower & his followers didn’t see the fourth herd of deer’s dwelling, where they went to hide.

“So the thought occurred to the poison-grass sower & his followers, ‘If we scare off the fourth herd of deer, they, scared off, will scare off others, and in that way all the herds of deer will abandon this sown poison-grass. Why don’t we show no concern for the fourth herd of deer?’ So the poison-grass sower & his followers showed no concern for the fourth herd of deer. That’s why that fourth herd of deer escaped from the poison-grass sower’s power & control.

“This simile, monks, I have given to convey a message. The message is this: The poison-grass stands for the five strings of sensuality. The poison-grass sower stands for Māra, the Evil One. The poison-grass sower’s followers stand for Māra’s followers.1 The herds of deer stand for contemplatives & brahmans.

“The first group of contemplatives & brahmans, venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra, ate food. They, eating food after venturing unwarily, became intoxicated. Being intoxicated, they became heedless. When they were heedless, Māra was able to do with them as he liked, on account of that poison-grass & those baits of the world. That’s why that first group of contemplatives & brahmans didn’t escape from Māra’s power & control.

“This first group of contemplatives & brahmans, I tell you, is just like the first herd of deer.

“A second group of contemplatives & brahmans reasoned thus: ‘That first group of contemplatives & brahmans, venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra, ate food. They, eating food after venturing unwarily, became intoxicated. Being intoxicated, they became heedless. When they were heedless, Māra was able to do with them as he liked, on account of that poison-grass & those baits of the world. That’s why that first group of contemplatives & brahmans didn’t escape from Māra’s power & control. What if we were to entirely avoid that poison-grass food, the baits of the world, and—avoiding that dangerous enjoyment—were to dwell having plunged into a

wilderness area?' So, they entirely avoided that poison-grass food, the baits of the world. Avoiding that dangerous enjoyment, they dwelled having plunged into a wilderness area.

"There they were eaters of greens or millet or wild rice or hide-parings or moss or rice-bran or the discarded scum of boiled rice or sesame flour or grass or cow dung or forest roots & fruits or fallen fruits. But in the last month of the hot season, when the grass & water were used up, their bodies became extremely gaunt. Their bodies having become extremely gaunt, they lost their strength & energy. Having lost their strength & energy, they lost their awareness-release2. Having lost their awareness-release, they returned to the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra. Venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra, they ate food. Having eaten food after venturing unwarily, they became intoxicated. Being intoxicated, they became heedless. When they became heedless, Māra did with them as he liked, on account of that poison-grass and those baits of the world. That's why that second group of contemplatives & brahmans didn't escape from Māra's power & control.

"This second group of contemplatives & brahmans, I tell you, is just like the second herd of deer.

"A third group of contemplatives & brahmans reasoned thus: 'That first group of contemplatives & brahmans, venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra, ate food.... That's why that first group of contemplatives & brahmans didn't escape from Māra's power & control.

"'The second group of contemplatives & brahmans... entirely avoided that poison-grass food, the baits of the world. Avoiding that dangerous enjoyment, they dwelled having plunged into a wilderness area.... But in the last month of the hot season, when the grass & water were used up, their bodies became extremely gaunt.... Having lost their strength & energy, they lost their awareness-release. Having lost their awareness-release, they returned to the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra.... That's why that second group of contemplatives & brahmans didn't escape from Māra's power & control.

"'What if we were to take up residence near where poison-grass & the baits of the world have been sown by Māra and—having taken up residence there—were to eat food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & the baits of the world sown by Māra? By eating food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & the baits of the world sown by Māra, we won't become intoxicated. Not being intoxicated, we won't become heedless. When we aren't heedless, Māra won't be able to do with us as he likes on account of that poison-grass & the baits of the world.'

"So they took up residence near where poison-grass & the baits of the world had been sown by Māra and—having taken up residence there—ate food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & the baits of the world sown by Māra. By eating food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & the baits of the world sown by Māra, they didn't become intoxicated. Not being intoxicated, they didn't become heedless. When they weren't heedless, Māra wasn't able to do with them as he liked on account of that

poison-grass & the baits of the world.

"But they came to hold views like this: 'The cosmos is eternal.' 'The cosmos is not eternal.' 'The cosmos is finite.' 'The cosmos is infinite.' 'The soul is the same thing as the body.' 'The soul is one thing and the body is another.' 'After death a Tathāgata exists.' 'After death a Tathāgata does not exist.' 'After death a Tathāgata both exists & does not exist.' 'After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist.' That's why that third group of contemplatives & brahmans didn't escape from Māra's power & control.

"This third group of contemplatives & brahmans, I tell you, is just like the third herd of deer.

"A fourth group of contemplatives & brahmans reasoned thus: 'That first group of contemplatives & brahmans, venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra, ate food.... That's why that first group of contemplatives & brahmans didn't escape from Māra's power & control.

"'The second group of contemplatives & brahmans... entirely avoided that poison-grass food, the baits of the world. Avoiding that dangerous enjoyment, they dwelled having plunged into a wilderness area.... But in the last month of the hot season, when the grass & water were used up, their bodies became extremely gaunt.... Having lost their strength & energy, they lost their awareness-release. Having lost their awareness-release, they returned to the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra.... That's why that second group of contemplatives & brahmans didn't escape from Māra's power & control.

"The third group of contemplatives & brahmans... took up residence near where poison-grass & the baits of the world had been sown by Māra and—having taken up residence there—ate food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & the baits of the world sown by Māra.... But they came to hold views like this: 'The cosmos is eternal.' ... 'After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist.' That's why that third group of contemplatives & brahmans didn't escape from Māra's power & control.

"'What if we were to take up residence where Māra & his followers can't go and—having taken up residence there—were to eat food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra? By eating food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra, we won't become intoxicated. Not being intoxicated, we won't become heedless. When we aren't heedless, Māra won't be able to do with us as he likes on account of that poison-grass & the baits of the world.'

"So the fourth group of contemplatives & brahmans took up residence where Māra & his followers couldn't go and—having taken up residence there—ate food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra. By eating food without venturing unwarily into the poison-grass & baits of the world sown by Māra, they didn't become intoxicated. Not being intoxicated, they didn't become heedless. When they weren't heedless, Māra wasn't able to do with them as he liked on account of that

poison-grass & the baits of the world. That's why that fourth group of contemplatives & brahmans escaped from Māra's power & control.

"This fourth group of contemplatives & brahmans, I tell you, is just like the fourth herd of deer.

"And how is there the place where Māra & his followers can't go?

"There is the case where a monk, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. This is said to be a monk who has blinded Māra, who has destroyed the path of Māra's eye and has gone where Māra the Evil One can't see him.3

"With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, the monk enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. This is said to be a monk who has blinded Māra...

"With the fading of rapture, the monk remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.' This is said to be a monk who has blinded Māra...

"With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joy & distress—the monk enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This is said to be a monk who has blinded Māra...

"With the complete transcending of perceptions of (physical) form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity, (perceiving,) 'Infinite space,' the monk enters & remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space. This is said to be a monk who has blinded Māra...

"With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of space, (perceiving,) 'Infinite consciousness,' the monk enters & remains in the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. This is said to be a monk who has blinded Māra...

"With the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, (perceiving,) 'There is nothing,' the monk enters & remains in the dimension of nothingness. This is said to be a monk who has blinded Māra...

"With the complete transcending of the dimension of nothingness, the monk enters & remains in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. This is said to be a monk who has blinded Māra, who has destroyed the path of Māra's eye and has gone where Māra the Evil One can't see him.

“With the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, the monk enters & remains in the cessation of perception & feeling. And as he sees (that) with discernment, effluents are completely ended. This is said to be a monk who has blinded Māra, who has destroyed the path of Māra’s eye and has gone where Māra the Evil One can’t see him—and has crossed over attachment to the world.”4

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

Notes

1. Sn 3:2 lists Māra’s followers as sensual passions, discontent, hunger & thirst, craving, sloth & torpor, cowardice, uncertainty, dismissiveness & stubbornness; gains, offering, fame, and status wrong gained; and self-praise coupled with disparagement of others.

2. According to the Commentary, “awareness-release” (ceto-vimutti) here means their intention to stay in the wilderness, but it could also mean any concentration attainment based on the four sublime abidings (brahmavihāra). See AN 6:13.

3. This passage means that the monk has temporarily escaped from Māra through the power of his concentration by going beyond the five strings of sensuality. See AN 9:38 and the essay, “Silence Isn’t Mandatory.”

4. The fact that this last monk’s effluents are ended through an act of discernment is what has put him totally beyond Māra’s reach. AN 9:36, however, shows that this act of discernment can occur based on any of the nine concentration attainments, and not just the last one.