# MN 28 — MN 28 The Great Elephant Footprint Simile | Mahā Hatthipadopama Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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## Text

The Great Elephant Footprint Simile

Mahā Hatthipadopama Sutta (MN 28)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. There Ven. Sāriputta addressed the monks, “Friend monks!”

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

Ven. Sāriputta said, “Friends, just as the footprints of all legged animals are encompassed by the footprint of the elephant, and the elephant’s footprint is reckoned the foremost

among them in terms of size; in the same way, all skillful qualities are included in the four noble truths. In which four? In the noble truth of stress, in the noble truth of the origination of stress, in the noble truth of the cessation of stress, and in the noble truth of the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.

“And what is the noble truth of stress? Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful. And which are the five clinging-aggregates? The form clinging-aggregate, the feeling clinging-aggregate, the perception clinging-aggregate, the fabrication clinging-aggregate, and the consciousness clinging-aggregate.

“And what is the form clinging-aggregate? The four great existents and the form derived from them. And what are the four great elements? The earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, & the wind property.

The Earth Property

“And what is the earth property? The earth property may be either internal or external. What is the internal earth property? Whatever internal, within oneself, is hard, solid, & sustained (by craving): head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, contents of the stomach, feces, or whatever else internal, within oneself, is hard, solid, & sustained: This is called the internal earth property. Now both the internal earth property and the external earth property are simply earth property. And that should be seen as it has come to be with right discernment: ‘This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not my self.’ When one sees it thus as it has come to be with right discernment, one becomes disenchanted with the earth property and makes the mind dispassionate toward the earth property.

“Now there comes a time, friends, when the external liquid property is provoked,1 and at that time the external earth property vanishes. So when even in the external earth property—so vast—inconstancy will be discerned, destructibility will be discerned, a tendency to decay will be discerned, changeability will be discerned, then what of this short-lasting body, sustained by clinging, is ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘what I am’? It has here only a ‘no.’

“Now if other people insult, malign, exasperate, & harass a monk (who has discerned this), he discerns that ’A painful feeling, born of ear-contact, has arisen within me. And that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact.’ And he sees that contact is inconstant, feeling is inconstant, perception is inconstant, consciousness is inconstant. His mind, with the (earth) property as its object/support, leaps up, grows confident, steadfast, & released.

“And if other people attack the monk in ways that are undesirable, displeasing, & disagreeable—through contact with fists, contact with stones, contact with sticks, or

contact with knives—the monk discerns that 'This body is of such a nature that contacts with fists come, contacts with stones come, contacts with sticks come, & contacts with knives come. Now the Blessed One has said, in his exhortation of the simile of the saw [MN 21], "Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely into pieces with a two-handled saw, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding." So my persistence will be aroused & untiring, my mindfulness established & unconfused, my body calm & unaroused, my mind centered & unified. And now let contact with fists come to this body, let contact with stones, with sticks, with knives come to this body, for this is how the Buddha's bidding is done.'

"And if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established, he feels apprehensive at that and gives rise to a sense of urgency: 'It is a loss for me, not a gain; ill-gotten for me, not well-gotten, that when I recollect the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established within me.' Just as when a daughter-in-law, on seeing her father-in-law, feels apprehensive and gives rise to a sense of urgency (to please him), in the same way, if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established, he feels apprehensive at that and gives rise to a sense of urgency: 'It is a loss for me, not a gain; ill-gotten for me, not well-gotten, that when I recollect the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established within me.'

"But if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is established, then he is gratified at that. And even to this extent, friends, the monk has accomplished a great deal.

The Liquid Property

"And what is the liquid property? The liquid property may be either internal or external. What is the internal liquid property? Whatever internal, within oneself, is liquid, watery, & sustained: bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-oil, saliva, mucus, fluid in the joints, urine, or whatever else internal, within oneself, is liquid, watery, & sustained: This is called the internal liquid property. Now both the internal liquid property and the external liquid property are simply liquid property. And that should be seen as it has come to be with right discernment: 'This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not my self.' When one sees it thus as it has come to be with right discernment, one becomes disenchanted with the liquid property and makes the mind dispassionate toward the liquid property.

"Now there comes a time, friends, when the external liquid property is provoked and washes away village, town, city, district, & country. There comes a time when the water in the great ocean drops down one hundred leagues, two hundred… three hundred… four hundred… five hundred… six hundred… seven hundred leagues. There comes a time when the water in the great ocean stands seven palm-trees deep, six… five… four… three… two palm-trees deep, one palm-tree deep. There comes a time when the water in the great ocean stands seven fathoms deep, six… five… four… three… two fathoms deep, one fathom deep. There comes a time when the water in the great ocean stands half a fathom deep,

hip-deep, knee-deep, ankle deep. There comes a time when the water in the great ocean is not even the depth of the first joint of a finger.

“So when even in the external liquid property—so vast—inconstancy will be discerned, destructibility will be discerned, a tendency to decay will be discerned, changeability will be discerned, then what of this short-lasting body, sustained by clinging, is ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘what I am’? It has here only a ‘no.’

“Now if other people insult, malign, exasperate, & harass a monk (who has discerned this), he discerns that ’A painful feeling, born of ear-contact, has arisen within me. And that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact.’ And he sees that contact is inconstant, feeling is inconstant, perception is inconstant, consciousness is inconstant. His mind, with the (liquid) property as its object/support, leaps up, grows confident, steadfast, & released.

“And if other people attack the monk in ways that are undesirable, displeasing, & disagreeable—through contact with fists, contact with stones, contact with sticks, or contact with knives—the monk discerns that ‘This body is of such a nature that contacts with fists come, contacts with stones come, contacts with sticks come, & contacts with knives come. Now the Blessed One has said, in his exhortation of the simile of the saw, “Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely into pieces with a two-handled saw, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding.” So my persistence will be aroused & untiring, my mindfulness established & unconfused, my body calm & unaroused, my mind centered & unified. And now let contact with fists come to this body, let contact with stones, with sticks, with knives come to this body, for this is how the Buddha’s bidding is done.’

“And if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established, he feels apprehensive at that and gives rise to a sense of urgency: ‘It is a loss for me, not a gain; ill-gotten for me, not well-gotten, that when I recollect the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established within me.’ Just as when a daughter-in-law, on seeing her father-in-law, feels apprehensive and gives rise to a sense of urgency (to please him), in the same way, if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established, he feels apprehensive at that and gives rise to a sense of urgency: ‘It is a loss for me, not a gain; ill-gotten for me, not well-gotten, that when I recollect the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established within me.’

“But if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is established, then he is gratified at that. And even to this extent, friends, the monk has accomplished a great deal.

The Fire Property

“And what is the fire property? The fire property may be either internal or external. What is the internal fire property? Whatever internal, within oneself, is fire, fiery, & sustained: that by which (the body) is warmed, aged, & consumed with fever; and that by which what is eaten, drunk, chewed, & savored gets properly digested, or whatever else internal, within oneself, is fire, fiery, & sustained: This is called the internal fire property. Now both the internal fire property and the external fire property are simply fire property. And that should be seen as it has come to be with right discernment: ‘This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not my self.’ When one sees it thus as it has come to be with right discernment, one becomes disenchanted with the fire property and makes the mind dispassionate toward the fire property.

“Now there comes a time, friends, when the external fire property is provoked and consumes village, town, city, district, & country; and then, coming to the edge of a green district, the edge of a road, the edge of a rocky district, to the water’s edge, or to a lush, well-watered area, goes out from lack of sustenance. There comes a time when people try to make fire using a wing-bone & tendon parings.2

“So when even in the external fire property—so vast—inconstancy will be discerned, destructibility will be discerned, a tendency to decay will be discerned, changeability will be discerned, then what of this short-lasting body, sustained by clinging, is ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘what I am’? It has here only a ‘no.’

“Now if other people insult, malign, exasperate, & harass a monk (who has discerned this), he discerns that ’A painful feeling, born of ear-contact, has arisen within me. And that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact.’ And he sees that contact is inconstant, feeling is inconstant, perception is inconstant, consciousness is inconstant. His mind, with the (fire) property as its object/support, leaps up, grows confident, steadfast, & released.

“And if other people attack the monk in ways that are undesirable, displeasing, & disagreeable—through contact with fists, contact with stones, contact with sticks, or contact with knives—the monk discerns that ‘This body is of such a nature that contacts with fists come, contacts with stones come, contacts with sticks come, & contacts with knives come. Now the Blessed One has said, in his exhortation of the simile of the saw, “Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely into pieces with a two-handled saw, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding.” So my persistence will be aroused & untiring, my mindfulness established & unconfused, my body calm & unaroused, my mind centered & unified. And now let contact with fists come to this body, let contact with stones, with sticks, with knives come to this body, for this is how the Buddha’s bidding is done.’

“And if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established, he feels apprehensive at that and gives rise to a sense of urgency: ‘It is a loss for me, not a gain; ill-gotten for me, not well-gotten, that when I recollect the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established within me.’ Just as when a daughter-in-law, on seeing her

father-in-law, feels apprehensive and gives rise to a sense of urgency (to please him), in the same way, if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established, he feels apprehensive at that and gives rise to a sense of urgency: 'It is a loss for me, not a gain; ill-gotten for me, not well-gotten, that when I recollect the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established within me.'

"But if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is established, then he is gratified at that. And even to this extent, friends, the monk has accomplished a great deal.

The Wind Property

"And what is the wind property? The wind property may be either internal or external. What is the internal wind property? Whatever internal, within oneself, is wind, windy, & sustained: up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the stomach, winds in the intestines, winds that course through the body, in-&-out breathing, or whatever else internal, within oneself, is wind, windy, & sustained: This is called the internal wind property. Now both the internal wind property and the external wind property are simply wind property. And that should be seen as it has come to be with right discernment: 'This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not my self.' When one sees it thus as it has come to be with right discernment, one becomes disenchanted with the wind property and makes the mind dispassionate toward the wind property.

"Now there comes a time, friends, when the external wind property is provoked and blows away village, town, city, district, & country. There comes a time when, in the last month of the hot season, people try to start a breeze with a fan or bellows, and even the grass at the fringe of a thatch roof doesn't stir.

"So when even in the external wind property—so vast—inconstancy will be discerned, destructibility will be discerned, a tendency to decay will be discerned, changeability will be discerned, then what of this short-lasting body, sustained by clinging, is 'I' or 'mine' or 'what I am'? It has here only a 'no.'

"Now if other people insult, malign, exasperate, & harass a monk (who has discerned this), he discerns that 'A painful feeling, born of ear-contact, has arisen within me. And that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact.' And he sees that contact is inconstant, feeling is inconstant, perception is inconstant, consciousness is inconstant. His mind, with the (wind) property as its object/support, leaps up, grows confident, steadfast, & released.

"And if other people attack the monk in ways that are undesirable, displeasing, & disagreeable—through contact with fists, contact with stones, contact with sticks, or contact with knives—the monk discerns that 'This body is of such a nature that contacts with fists come, contacts with stones come, contacts with sticks come, & contacts with knives come. Now the Blessed One has said, in his exhortation of the simile of the saw,

“Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely into pieces with a two-handled saw, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding.” So my persistence will be aroused & untiring, my mindfulness established & unconfused, my body calm & unaroused, my mind centered & unified. And now let contact with fists come to this body, let contact with stones, with sticks, with knives come to this body, for this is how the Buddha’s bidding is done.’

“And if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established, he feels apprehensive at that and gives rise to a sense of urgency: ‘It is a loss for me, not a gain; ill-gotten for me, not well-gotten, that when I recollect the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established within me.’ Just as when a daughter-in-law, on seeing her father-in-law, feels apprehensive and gives rise to a sense of urgency (to please him), in the same way, if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established, he feels apprehensive at that and gives rise to a sense of urgency: ‘It is a loss for me, not a gain; ill-gotten for me, not well-gotten, that when I recollect the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is not established within me.’

“But if, in the monk recollecting the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on what is skillful is established, then he is gratified at that. And even to this extent, friends, the monk has accomplished a great deal.

Dependent Co-arising

“Friends, just as when—in dependence on timber, vines, grass, & clay—space is enclosed and is gathered under the term ‘house,’ in the same way, when space is enclosed in dependence on bones, tendons, muscle, & skin, it is gathered under the term, ‘form.’

“Now if internally the eye is intact but externally forms do not come into range, nor is there a corresponding engagement, then there is no appearing of the corresponding type of consciousness. If internally the eye is intact and externally forms come into range, but there is no corresponding engagement, then there is no appearing of the corresponding type of consciousness. But when internally the eye is intact and externally forms come into range, and there is a corresponding engagement, then there is the appearing of the corresponding type of consciousness.

“The form of what has thus come into being is gathered under the form clinging-aggregate. The feeling of what has thus come into being is gathered under the feeling clinging-aggregate. The perception of what has thus come into being is gathered under the perception clinging-aggregate. The fabrications of what has thus come into being are gathered under the fabrication clinging-aggregate. The consciousness of what has thus come into being is gathered under the consciousness clinging-aggregate. One discerns, ‘This, it seems, is how there is the gathering, meeting, & convergence of these five clinging-aggregates. Now, the Blessed One has said, “Whoever sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma; whoever sees the Dhamma sees dependent co-arising.”3 And

these things—the five clinging-aggregates—are dependently co-arisen.4 Any desire, embracing, grasping, & holding-on to these five clinging-aggregates is the origination of stress. Any subduing of desire & passion, any abandoning of desire & passion for these five clinging-aggregates is the cessation of stress.'5 And even to this extent, friends, the monk has accomplished a great deal.

"Now if internally the ear is intact....

"Now if internally the nose... the tongue... the body is intact....

"Now if internally the intellect is intact but externally ideas do not come into range, nor is there a corresponding engagement, then there is no appearing of the corresponding type of consciousness. If internally the intellect is intact and externally ideas come into range, but there is no corresponding engagement, then there is no appearing of the corresponding type of consciousness. But when internally the intellect is intact and externally ideas come into range, and there is a corresponding engagement, then there is the appearing of the corresponding type of consciousness.

"The form of what has thus come into being is gathered under the form clinging-aggregate. The feeling of what has thus come into being is gathered under the feeling clinging-aggregate. The perception of what has thus come into being is gathered under the perception clinging-aggregate. The fabrications of what has thus come into being are gathered under the fabrication clinging-aggregate. The consciousness of what has thus come into being is gathered under the consciousness clinging-aggregate. One discerns, 'This, it seems, is how there is the gathering, meeting, & convergence of these five clinging-aggregates. Now, the Blessed One has said, "Whoever sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma; whoever sees the Dhamma sees dependent co-arising." And these things—the five clinging-aggregates—are dependently co-arisen. Any desire, embracing, grasping, & holding-on to these five clinging-aggregates is the origination of stress. Any subduing of desire & passion, any abandoning of desire & passion for these five clinging-aggregates is the cessation of stress.' And even to this extent, friends, the monk has accomplished a great deal."

That is what Ven. Sāriputta said. Gratified, the monks delighted in Ven. Sāriputta's words.

Notes

1. The compilers of the Pali Canon used a common theory to explain the physics of heat & motion, meteorology, and the etiology of diseases. That theory centered on the concept of dhātu: property or potential. The physical properties presented in this theory were four: those of earth (solidity), liquid, fire, & wind (motion). Three of them—liquid, fire, & wind—were viewed as potentially active. When they were aggravated, agitated or provoked—the Pali term here, 'pakuppati', was used also on the psychological level, where it meant angered or upset—they acted as the underlying cause for activity in nature. For more on this topic, see The Mind Like Fire Unbound, Chapter 2.

2. AN 7:46 (quoted in The Mind Like Fire Unbound) cites a wing bone and tendon parings as examples of items that will not catch fire. Perhaps the passage was meant as a comical parody of someone who, having seen another person start fire with a fire stick, tried to imitate that person without understanding the basic principle involved. If you used a fire stick and wood shavings, you would get fire. If you used a wing bone instead of a fire stick, and tendon parings instead of wood shavings, you wouldn't.

3. This statement has not been traced in any other part of the extant Pali Canon.

4. See SN 12:2.

5. Although the fourth noble truth—the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress—is not explicitly mentioned in this discussion, it is implicit as the path of practice leading to the subduing of desire & passion, the abandoning of desire & passion for the five clinging-aggregates.

## Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 22; MN 9; MN 43; MN 140; MN 147