MN 33 — MN 33 The Greater Cowherd Discourse | Mahā Gopālaka Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Greater Cowherd Discourse

Mahā Gopālaka Sutta (MN 33)

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, “Monks, a cowherd endowed with eleven factors is incapable of looking after a herd so that it prospers & grows. Which eleven? There is the case where a cowherd is not well-versed in forms [appearances], unskilled in characteristics,1 doesn’t

pick out flies' eggs, doesn't dress wounds, doesn't fumigate (the cattle pen), doesn't know fords, doesn't know what it is (for the cattle) to have drunk, doesn't know the road, isn't skilled in pastures, milks dry, and shows no extra respect for the bulls who are fathers & leaders of the herd. A cowherd endowed with these eleven factors is incapable of looking after a herd so that it prospers & grows.

"A monk endowed with these eleven factors is incapable of attaining growth, increase, & abundance in this Dhamma-Vinaya. Which eleven? There is the case where a monk is not well-versed in forms, unskilled in characteristics, doesn't pick out flies' eggs, doesn't dress wounds, doesn't fumigate, doesn't know fords, doesn't know what it is to have drunk, doesn't know the road, is not skilled in pastures, milks dry, and shows no extra respect for the elder monks with seniority, who have been ordained long, who are fathers & leaders of the Saṅgha.

"And how is a monk not well-versed in forms? There is the case where a monk doesn't discern, as it has come to be, that every form whatsoever is composed of the four great elements [earth, water, fire, & wind] and the forms dependent on them. This is how a monk is not well-versed in forms.

"And how is a monk unskilled in characteristics? There is the case where a monk doesn't discern, as it has come to be, that a fool is characterized by his actions, a wise person is characterized by his actions.2 This is how a monk is unskilled in characteristics.

"And how does a monk not pick out flies' eggs? There is the case where a monk acquiesces with an arisen thought of sensuality. He doesn't abandon it, dispel it, demolish it, or wipe it out of existence. He acquiesces with an arisen thought of ill will... an arisen thought of harmfulness. He doesn't abandon it, dispel it, demolish it, or wipe it out of existence. He acquiesces with arisen evil, unskillful qualities. He doesn't abandon them, dispel them demolish them, or wipe them out of existence. This is how a monk doesn't pick out flies' eggs.

"And how does a monk not dress wounds? There is the case where a monk, on seeing a form with the eye, grasps at themes or details by which—as he dwells without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. He doesn't practice for its restraint. He doesn't protect the faculty of the eye. On hearing a sound with the ear... On smelling an aroma with the nose... On tasting a flavor with the tongue... On touching a tactile sensation with the body... On cognizing an idea with the intellect, he grasps at themes or details by which—as he dwells without restraint over the faculty of the intellect—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. He doesn't practice for its restraint. He doesn't protect the faculty of the intellect. This is how a monk doesn't dress wounds.

"And how does a monk not fumigate? There is the case where a monk doesn't teach others in detail the Dhamma as he has heard and mastered it. This is how a monk doesn't fumigate.

“And how does a monk not know fords? There is the case where a monk goes time & again to the monks who are learned, well-versed in the tradition, who have memorized the Dhamma, the Vinaya, and the Mātikās,3 but doesn’t question them, doesn’t present them with his problems: ‘How is this, venerable sir? What is the meaning of this?’ These venerable ones do not reveal what has not been revealed to him, do not make plain what has not been made plain to him, do not resolve his doubts about the many teachings that might give rise to doubt. This is how a monk doesn’t know fords.

“And how does a monk not know what it is to have drunk? There is the case where a monk, when the Dhamma-Vinaya proclaimed by the Tathāgata is being taught, doesn’t gain understanding of the meaning, doesn’t gain understanding of the Dhamma, doesn’t gain joy connected with the Dhamma. This is how a monk doesn’t know what it is to have drunk.

“And how does a monk not know the road? There is the case where a monk doesn’t discern, as it has come to be, the noble eightfold path. This is how a monk doesn’t know the road.

“And how is a monk unskilled in pastures? There is the case where a monk doesn’t discern, as they have come to be, the four establishings of mindfulness.4 This is how a monk is unskilled in pastures.

“And how does a monk milk dry? There is the case where a monk—when faithful householders invite him to accept gifts of cloth, alms food, lodgings, and medicinal requisites for curing the sick—knows no moderation in taking. This is how a monk milks dry.

“And how does a monk show no extra respect for the elder monks with seniority, who have been ordained long, who are fathers & leaders of the Saṅgha? There is the case where a monk doesn’t establish himself in bodily acts of goodwill, in public & in private, toward the elder monks with seniority, who have been ordained long, who are fathers & leaders of the Saṅgha. He doesn’t establish himself in verbal acts of goodwill… in mental acts of goodwill, in public & in private, toward the elder monks with seniority, who have been ordained long, who are fathers & leaders of the Saṅgha.

“A monk endowed with these eleven factors is incapable of attaining growth, increase, & abundance in this Dhamma-Vinaya.

“Monks, a cowherd endowed with eleven factors is capable of looking after a herd so that it prospers & grows. Which eleven? There is the case where a cowherd is well-versed in forms (appearances), skilled in characteristics, picks out flies’ eggs, dresses wounds, fumigates, knows fords, knows what it is to have drunk, knows the road, is skilled in pastures, doesn’t milk dry, and shows extra respect for the bulls who are fathers & leaders of the herd. A cowherd endowed with these eleven factors is capable of looking after a herd so that it prospers & grows.

“A monk endowed with these eleven factors is capable of attaining growth, increase, & abundance in this Dhamma-Vinaya. Which eleven? There is the case where a monk is well-versed in forms, skilled in characteristics, picks out flies’ eggs, dresses wounds, fumigates, knows fords, knows what it is to have drunk, knows the road, is skilled in pastures, doesn’t milk dry, and shows extra respect for the elder monks with seniority, who have been ordained long, who are fathers & leaders of the Saṅgha.

“And how is a monk well-versed in forms? There is the case where a monk discerns, as it has come to be, that every form whatsoever is composed of the four great elements and the forms dependent on them. This is how a monk is well-versed in forms.

“And how is a monk skilled in characteristics? There is the case where a monk discerns, as it has come to be, that a fool is characterized by his actions, a wise person is characterized by his actions. This is how a monk is skilled in characteristics.

“And how does a monk pick out flies’ eggs? There is the case where a monk doesn’t acquiesce with an arisen thought of sensuality. He abandons it, dispels it, demolishes it, & wipes it out of existence. He doesn’t acquiesce with an arisen thought of ill will… an arisen thought of harmfulness. He abandons it, dispels it, demolishes it, & wipes it out of existence. He doesn’t acquiesce with arisen evil, unskillful qualities. He abandons them, dispels them, demolishes them, & wipes them out of existence. This is how a monk picks out flies’ eggs.

“And how does a monk dress wounds? There is the case where a monk, on seeing a form with the eye, doesn’t grasp at any theme or details by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. He practices for its restraint. He protects the faculty of the eye. On hearing a sound with the ear… On smelling an aroma with the nose… On tasting a flavor with the tongue… On touching a tactile sensation with the body… On cognizing an idea with the intellect, he doesn’t grasp at any theme or details by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the intellect—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. He practices for its restraint. He protects the faculty of the intellect. This is how a monk dresses wounds.

“And how does a monk fumigate? There is the case where a monk teaches others in detail the Dhamma as he has heard and mastered it. This is how a monk fumigates.

“And how does a monk know fords? There is the case where a monk goes time & again to the monks who are learned, well-versed in the tradition, who have memorized the Dhamma, the Vinaya, and the Mātikās. He questions them, presents them with his problems: ‘How is this, venerable sir? What is the meaning of this?’ These venerable ones reveal what has not been revealed to him, make plain what has not been made plain to him, resolve his doubts about the many teachings that might give rise to doubt. This is how a monk knows fords.

“And how does a monk know what it is to have drunk? There is the case where a monk, when the Dhamma-Vinaya proclaimed by the Tathāgata is being taught, gains understanding of the meaning, gains understanding of the Dhamma, gains joy connected with the Dhamma. This is how a monk knows what it is to have drunk.

“And how does a monk know the road? There is the case where a monk discerns, as it has come to be, the noble eightfold path. This is how a monk knows the roads.

“And how is a monk skilled in pastures? There is the case where a monk discerns, as they have come to be, the four establishings of mindfulness. This is how a monk is skilled in pastures.

“And how does a monk not milk dry? There is the case where a monk—when faithful householders invite him to accept gifts of cloth, alms food, lodgings, and medicinal requisites for curing the sick—knows moderation in taking. This is how a monk doesn’t milk dry.

“And how does a monk show extra respect for the elder monks with seniority, who have been ordained long, who are fathers & leaders of the Saṅgha? There is the case where a monk establishes himself in bodily acts of goodwill, in public & in private, toward the elder monks with seniority, who have been ordained long, who are fathers & leaders of the Saṅgha. He establishes himself in verbal acts of goodwill… in mental acts of goodwill, in public & in private, toward the elder monks with seniority, who have been ordained long, who are fathers & leaders of the Saṅgha.

“A monk endowed with these eleven factors is capable of attaining growth, increase, & abundance in this Dhamma-Vinaya.”

Notes

1. According to the Commentary, a cowherd “unskilled in characteristics” is one who doesn’t recognize the branding marks used on cattle.

2. See AN 3:2.

3. The Mātikā are lists of Dhamma topics that eventually were developed into the Abhidhamma.

4. See SN 47:6–7.