MN 39 — MN 39 The Greater Discourse at Assapura | Mahā Assapura Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Greater Discourse at Assapura

Mahā Assapura Sutta (MN 39)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying among the Aṅgas. Now, the Aṅgas have a town named Assapura. There the Blessed One addressed the monks, “Monks!”

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

The Blessed One said, “‘Contemplatives, contemplatives’: That is how people perceive you. And when asked, ‘What are you?’ you claim that ‘We are contemplatives.’ So, with this

being your designation and this your claim, this is how you should train yourselves: 'We will undertake & practice those qualities that make one a contemplative, that make one a brahman, so that our designation will be true and our claim accurate; so that the services of those whose robes, alms-food, lodging, and medicinal requisites we use will bring them great fruit & great reward; and so that our going forth will not be barren, but fruitful & fertile.'1

Shame & Compunction

"And what, monks, are the qualities that make one a contemplative, that make one a brahman? 'We will be endowed with shame (at the idea of wrong-doing) & compunction (for the consequences of wrong-doing)': That's how you should train yourselves. Now the thought may occur to you, 'We are endowed with shame & compunction. That much is enough, that much means we're done, so that the goal of our contemplative state has been reached. There's nothing further to be done,' and you may rest content with just that. So I tell you, monks. I exhort you, monks. Don't let those of you who seek the contemplative state fall away from the goal of the contemplative state when there is more to be done.

Purity of Conduct

"And what more is to be done? 'Our bodily conduct will be pure, clear & open, unbroken & restrained. We will not exalt ourselves nor disparage others on account of that pure bodily conduct': That's how you should train yourselves. Now the thought may occur to you, 'We are endowed with shame & compunction. Our bodily conduct is pure. That much is enough, that much means we're done, so that the goal of our contemplative state has been reached. There's nothing further to be done,' and you may rest content with just that. So I tell you, monks. I exhort you, monks. Don't let those of you who seek the contemplative state fall away from the goal of the contemplative state when there is more to be done.

"And what more is to be done? 'Our verbal conduct… our mental conduct will be pure, clear & open, unbroken & restrained. We will not exalt ourselves nor disparage others on account of that pure verbal… mental conduct': That's how you should train yourselves. Now the thought may occur to you, 'We are endowed with shame & compunction. Our bodily conduct is pure. Our verbal conduct… our mental conduct is pure. That much is enough, that much means we're done, so that the goal of our contemplative state has been reached. There's nothing further to be done,' and you may rest content with just that. So I tell you, monks. I exhort you, monks. Don't let those of you who seek the contemplative state fall away from the goal of the contemplative state when there is more to be done.

"And what more is to be done? 'Our livelihood will be pure, clear & open, unbroken & restrained. We will not exalt ourselves nor disparage others on account of that pure livelihood': That's how you should train yourselves. Now the thought may occur to you, 'We are endowed with shame & compunction. Our bodily conduct is pure. Our verbal conduct… our mental conduct is pure. Our livelihood is pure. That much is enough, that

much means we're done, so that the goal of our contemplative state has been reached. There's nothing further to be done,' and you may rest content with just that. So I tell you, monks. I exhort you, monks. Don't let those of you who seek the contemplative state fall away from the goal of the contemplative state when there is more to be done.

Restraint of the Senses

"And what more is to be done? 'We will guard the doors to our sense faculties. On seeing a form with the eye, we will not grasp at any theme or variations by which—if we were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail us. We will practice for its restraint. We will protect the faculty of the eye. We will achieve restraint with regard to 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 feeling a tactile sensation with the body… On cognizing an idea with the intellect, we will not grasp at any theme or variations by which—if we were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the intellect—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail us. We will practice for its restraint. We will protect the faculty of the intellect. We will achieve restraint with regard to the faculty of the intellect': That's how you should train yourselves. Now the thought may occur to you, 'We are endowed with shame & compunction. Our bodily conduct is pure. Our verbal conduct… our mental conduct is pure. Our livelihood is pure. We guard the doors to our sense faculties. That much is enough, that much means we're done, so that the goal of our contemplative state has been reached. There's nothing further to be done,' and you may rest content with just that. So I tell you, monks. I exhort you, monks. Don't let those of you who seek the contemplative state fall away from the goal of the contemplative state when there is more to be done.

Moderation in Eating

"And what more is to be done? 'We will have a sense of moderation in eating. Considering it appropriately, we will take food not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on bulk, nor for beautification, but simply for the survival & continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking, "I will destroy old feelings (of hunger) & not create new feelings (from overeating). Thus I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in comfort"': That's how you should train yourselves. Now the thought may occur to you, 'We are endowed with shame & compunction. Our bodily conduct is pure. Our verbal conduct… our mental conduct is pure. Our livelihood is pure. We guard the doors to our sense faculties. We have a sense of moderation in eating. That much is enough, that much means we're done, so that the goal of our contemplative state has been reached. There's nothing further to be done,' and you may rest content with just that. So I tell you, monks. I exhort you, monks. Don't let those of you who seek the contemplative state fall away from the goal of the contemplative state when there is more to be done.

Wakefulness

"And what more is to be done? 'We will be devoted to wakefulness. During the day, sitting & pacing back & forth, we will cleanse the mind of any qualities that would hold it in check.

During the first watch of the night [dusk to 10 p.m.], sitting & pacing back & forth, we will cleanse the mind of any qualities that would hold it in check. During the second watch of the night [10 p.m. to 2 a.m.], reclining on our right side, we will take up the lion's posture, one foot placed on top of the other, mindful, alert, with the mind set on getting up [either as soon as we awaken or at a particular time]. During the last watch of the night [2 a.m. to dawn], sitting & pacing back & forth, we will cleanse the mind of any qualities that would hold it in check': That's how you should train yourselves. Now the thought may occur to you, 'We are endowed with shame & compunction. Our bodily conduct is pure. Our verbal conduct... our mental conduct is pure. Our livelihood is pure. We guard the doors to our sense faculties. We have a sense of moderation in eating. We are devoted to wakefulness. That much is enough, that much means we're done, so that the goal of our contemplative state has been reached. There's nothing further to be done,' and you may rest content with just that. So I tell you, monks. I exhort you, monks. Don't let those of you who seek the contemplative state fall away from the goal of the contemplative state when there is more to be done.

Mindfulness & Alertness

"And what more is to be done? We will be possessed of mindfulness & alertness. When going forward and returning, we will act with alertness. When looking toward and looking away... when bending and extending our limbs... when carrying our outer cloak, upper robe, & bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, & tasting... when urinating & defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, & remaining silent, we will act with alertness': That's how you should train yourselves. Now the thought may occur to you, 'We are endowed with shame & compunction. Our bodily conduct is pure. Our verbal conduct... our mental conduct is pure. Our livelihood is pure. We guard the doors to our sense faculties. We have a sense of moderation in eating. We are devoted to wakefulness. We are possessed of mindfulness & alertness. That much is enough, that much means we're done, so that the goal of our contemplative state has been reached. There's nothing further to be done,' and you may rest content with just that. So I tell you, monks. I exhort you, monks. Don't let those of you who seek the contemplative state fall away from the goal of the contemplative state when there is more to be done.

Abandoning the Hindrances

"And what more is to be done? There is the case where a monk seeks out a secluded dwelling: a forest, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw. After his meal, returning from his alms round, he sits down, crosses his legs, holds his body erect, and brings mindfulness to the fore.

"Abandoning covetousness with regard to the world, he dwells with an awareness devoid of covetousness. He cleanses his mind of covetousness. Abandoning ill will and anger, he dwells with an awareness devoid of ill will, sympathetic with the welfare of all living beings. He cleanses his mind of ill will and anger. Abandoning sloth and drowsiness, he dwells with an awareness devoid of sloth and drowsiness, mindful, alert, percipient of light. He cleanses his mind of sloth and drowsiness. Abandoning restlessness and anxiety, he dwells

undisturbed, his mind inwardly stilled. He cleanses his mind of restlessness and anxiety. Abandoning uncertainty, he dwells having crossed over uncertainty, with no perplexity with regard to skillful qualities. He cleanses his mind of uncertainty.

“Suppose that a man, taking a loan, invests it in his business affairs. His business affairs succeed. He repays his old debts and there is extra left over for maintaining his wife. The thought would occur to him, ‘Before, taking a loan, I invested it in my business affairs. Now my business affairs have succeeded. I have repaid my old debts and there is extra left over for maintaining my wife.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

“Now suppose that a man falls sick—in pain and seriously ill. He does not enjoy his meals, and there is no strength in his body. As time passes, he eventually recovers from that sickness. He enjoys his meals and there is strength in his body. The thought would occur to him, ‘Before, I was sick… Now I am recovered from that sickness. I enjoy my meals and there is strength in my body.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

“Now suppose that a man is bound in prison. As time passes, he eventually is released from that bondage, safe and sound, with no loss of property. The thought would occur to him, ‘Before, I was bound in prison. Now I am released from that bondage, safe and sound, with no loss of my property.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

“Now suppose that a man is a slave, subject to others, not subject to himself, unable to go where he likes. As time passes, he eventually is released from that slavery, subject to himself, not subject to others, freed, able to go where he likes. The thought would occur to him, ‘Before, I was a slave… Now I am released from that slavery, subject to myself, not subject to others, freed, able to go where I like.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

“Now suppose that a man, carrying money and goods, is traveling by a road through desolate country. As time passes, he eventually emerges from that desolate country, safe and sound, with no loss of property. The thought would occur to him, ‘Before, carrying money and goods, I was traveling by a road through desolate country. Now I have emerged from that desolate country, safe and sound, with no loss of my property.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

“In the same way, when these five hindrances are not abandoned in himself, the monk regards it as a debt, a sickness, a prison, slavery, a road through desolate country. But when these five hindrances are abandoned in himself, he regards it as unindebtedness, good health, release from prison, freedom, a place of security. When he sees that they have been abandoned within him, gladness is born. In one who is gladdened, rapture is born. Enraptured at heart, his body grows calm. His body calm, he is sensitive to pleasure. Feeling pleasure, his mind becomes concentrated.

The Four Jhānas

“Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, he enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Just as if a dexterous bathman or bathman’s apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again and again with water, so that his ball of bath powder—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within and without—would nevertheless not drip; even so, the monk permeates… this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. There’s nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of seclusion.

“Furthermore, with the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters and remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation—internal assurance. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. Just like a lake with spring-water welling up from within, having no inflow from the east, west, north, or south, and with the skies supplying abundant showers time and again,2 so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate and pervade, suffuse and fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; even so, the monk permeates… this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. There’s nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of concentration.

“And furthermore, with the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters and remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’ He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. Just as in a lotus pond, some of the lotuses, born and growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated and pervaded, suffused and filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water; even so, the monk permeates… this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. There’s nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure divested of rapture.

“And furthermore, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joy & distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure nor stress. He sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; even so, the monk sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There’s nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness.

The Three Knowledges

“With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs and inclines it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives [lit: previous homes]. He recollects his manifold

past lives, i.e., one birth, two births, three births, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, one hundred, one thousand, one hundred thousand, many eons of cosmic contraction, many eons of cosmic expansion, many eons of cosmic contraction and expansion, (recollecting,) 'There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.' Thus he recollects his manifold past lives in their modes and details.

"Just as if a man were to go from his home village to another village, and then from that village to yet another village, and then from that village back to his home village. The thought would occur to him, 'I went from my home village to that village over there. There I stood in such a way, sat in such a way, talked in such a way, and remained silent in such a way. From that village I went to that village over there, and there I stood in such a way, sat in such a way, talked in such a way, and remained silent in such a way. From that village I came back home.' In the same way—with his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability—the monk directs and inclines it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. He recollects his manifold past lives... in their modes and details.

"With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs and inclines it to knowledge of the passing away and re-appearance of beings. He sees—by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the human—beings passing away and re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their kamma: 'These beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, and mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. But these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech, and mind, who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a good destination, a heavenly world.' Thus—by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the human—he sees beings passing away and re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their kamma.

"Just as if there were a tall building in the central square (of a town), and a man with good eyesight standing on top of it were to see people entering a house, leaving it, walking along the street, and sitting in the central square. The thought would occur to him, 'These people are entering a house, leaving it, walking along the streets, and sitting in the central square.' In the same way—with his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability—the monk directs and inclines it to knowledge of the passing away and re-appearance of beings. He sees—by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the

human—beings passing away and re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their kamma....

“With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, the monk directs and inclines it to the knowledge of the ending of the effluents. He discerns, as it is has come to be, that ‘This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress... These are effluents... This is the origination of effluents... This is the cessation of effluents... This is the way leading to the cessation of effluents.’ His heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, is released from the effluent of sensuality, released from the effluent of becoming, released from the effluent of ignorance. 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.’

“Just as if there were a pool of water in a mountain glen—clear, limpid, and unsullied—where a man with good eyesight standing on the bank could see shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also shoals of fish swimming about and resting, and it would occur to him, ‘This pool of water is clear, limpid, and unsullied. Here are these shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also these shoals of fish swimming about and resting.’ In the same way—with his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability—the monk directs and inclines it to the knowledge of the ending of the effluents. He discerns, as it has come to be, that ‘This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress... These are effluents... This is the origination of effluents... This is the cessation of effluents... This is the way leading to the cessation of effluents.’ His heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, is released from the effluent of sensuality, released from the effluent of becoming, released from the effluent of ignorance. 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 who is a contemplative, a brahman, washed, a master, learned, noble, an arahant.3

“And how is a monk a contemplative [samaṇa]? His evil, unskillful qualities that are defiled, that lead to further becoming, create trouble, ripen in stress, and lead to future birth, aging, & death have been calmed [samita]. This is how a monk is a contemplative.

“And how is a monk a brahman? His evil, unskillful qualities that are defiled, that lead to further becoming, create trouble, ripen in stress, and lead to future birth, aging, & death have been expelled [bahita]. This is how a monk is a brahman.

“And how is a monk washed? His evil, unskillful qualities that are defiled, that lead to further becoming, create trouble, ripen in stress, and lead to future birth, aging, & death have been washed away. This is how a monk is washed.

“And how is a monk a master? His evil, unskillful qualities that are defiled, that lead to further becoming, create trouble, ripen in stress, and lead to future birth, aging, & death have been mastered. This is how a monk is a master.

“And how is a monk learned [sottiya]? His evil, unskillful qualities that are defiled, that lead to further becoming, create trouble, ripen in stress, and lead to future birth, aging, & death have streamed away [nissuta]. This is how a monk is learned.

“And how is a monk noble [ariya]? His evil, unskillful qualities that are defiled, that lead to further becoming, create trouble, ripen in stress, and lead to future birth, aging, & death have gone far away [ārakā]. This is how a monk is noble.

“And how is a monk an arahant? His evil, unskillful qualities that are defiled, that lead to further becoming, create trouble, ripen in stress, and lead to future birth, aging, & death have gone far away [ārakā]. This is how a monk is an arahant.”

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

Notes

1. Given the widespread misperception that arahantship is a selfish goal, it’s important to take note of this statement—that part of the motivation to become an arahant is how it will benefit other people.

2. Reading, Devo ca kālena kālaṁ sammādhāraṁ anuppaveccheyya, with the Thai edition.

3. The following passages are all based on word play in the Pali.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 2; MN 29–30