MN 43 — MN 43 The Greater Set of Questions & Answers | Mahā Vedalla Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Greater Set of Questions & Answers

Mahā Vedalla Sutta (MN 43)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s Monastery. Then Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita, emerging from his seclusion in the evening, went to Ven. Sāriputta and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side.

Discernment

As he was sitting there, he said to Ven. Sāriputta, "Friend, 'One of poor discernment, one of poor discernment': Thus is it said. To what extent is one said to be 'one of poor discernment'?"

"'One doesn't discern, one doesn't discern': Thus, friend, one is said to be 'one of poor discernment.' And what doesn't one discern? One doesn't discern, 'This is stress.' One doesn't discern, 'This is the origination of stress.' One doesn't discern, 'This is the cessation of stress.' One doesn't discern, 'This is the practice leading to the cessation of stress.' 'One doesn't discern, one doesn't discern': Thus one is said to be 'one of poor discernment.'"

Saying, "Very good, friend," Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita—delighting in & approving of Ven. Sāriputta's statement—asked him a further question: "Discerning, discerning': Thus is it said. To what extent, friend, is one said to be 'discerning'?"

"'One discerns, one discerns': Thus, friend, one is said to be 'discerning.' And what does one discern? One discerns, 'This is stress.' One discerns, 'This is the origination of stress.' One discerns, 'This is the cessation of stress.' One discerns, 'This is the practice leading to the cessation of stress.' 'One discerns, one discerns': Thus one is said to be 'discerning.'"

Consciousness

"'Consciousness, consciousness': Thus is it said. To what extent, friend, is it said to be 'consciousness'?"

"'It cognizes, it cognizes': Thus, friend, it is said to be 'consciousness.' And what does it cognize? It cognizes 'pleasant.' It cognizes 'painful.' It cognizes 'neither painful nor pleasant.' 'It cognizes, it cognizes': Thus it is said to be 'consciousness.'"

"Discernment & consciousness, friend: Are these qualities conjoined or disjoined? Is it possible, having separated them one from the other, to delineate the difference between them?"

"Discernment & consciousness are conjoined, friend, not disjoined. It's not possible, having separated them one from the other, to delineate the difference between them. For what one discerns, that one cognizes. What one cognizes, that one discerns. Therefore these qualities are conjoined, not disjoined, and it is not possible, having separated them one from another, to delineate the difference between them."

"Discernment & consciousness, friend: What is the difference between these qualities that are conjoined, not disjoined?"

"Discernment & consciousness, friend: Of these qualities that are conjoined, not disjoined, discernment is to be developed, consciousness is to be fully comprehended."1

Feeling

“‘Feeling, feeling’: Thus is it said. To what extent, friend, is it said to be ‘feeling’?”

“‘It feels, it feels’: Thus, friend, it is said to be ‘feeling.’ And what does it feel? It feels pleasure. It feels pain. It feels neither pleasure nor pain. ‘It feels, it feels’: Thus it is said to be ‘feeling.’”

Perception

“‘Perception, perception’: Thus is it said. To what extent, friend, is it said to be ‘perception’?”

“‘It perceives, it perceives’: Thus, friend, it is said to be ‘perception.’ And what does it perceive? It perceives blue. It perceives yellow. It perceives red. It perceives white. ‘It perceives, it perceives’: Thus it is said to be ‘perception.’”

“Feeling, perception, & consciousness, friend: Are these qualities conjoined or disjoined? Is it possible, having separated them one from another, to delineate the difference among them?”

“Feeling, perception, & consciousness are conjoined, friend, not disjoined. It is not possible, having separated them one from another, to delineate the difference among them. For what one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one cognizes. Therefore these qualities are conjoined, not disjoined, and it is not possible, having separated them one from another, to delineate the difference among them.”

The Eye of Discernment

“Friend, what can be known with the purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five (sense) faculties?”

“Friend, with the purified intellect-consciousness divorced from the five faculties, the dimension of the infinitude of space can be known (as) ‘infinite space,’ the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness can be known (as) ‘infinite consciousness,’ the dimension of nothingness can be known (as) ‘There is nothing.’2

“With what does one know a quality that can be known?”

“One knows a quality that can be known with the eye of discernment.”

“And what is the purpose of discernment?”

“The purpose of discernment is direct knowledge, its purpose is full comprehension, its purpose is abandoning.”

Right View

“Friend, how many conditions are there for the arising of right view?”

“Friend, there are two conditions for the arising of right view: the voice of another and appropriate attention. These are the two conditions for the arising of right view.”

“And assisted by how many factors does right view have awareness-release as its fruit & reward, and discernment-release as its fruit & reward?”

“Assisted by five factors, right view has awareness-release as its fruit & reward, and discernment-release as its fruit & reward. There is the case where right view is assisted by virtue, assisted by learning, assisted by discussion, assisted by tranquility, assisted by insight. Assisted by these five factors, right view has awareness-release as its fruit & reward, and discernment-release as its fruit & reward.”

Becoming

“Friend, how many kinds of becoming are there?”

“Friend, there are these three kinds of becoming: sensual becoming, form becoming, formless becoming.“

“And how is further becoming in the future brought about?”

“The delight, now here, now there, of beings hindered by ignorance & fettered by craving: That’s how further becoming in the future is brought about.”

“And how is further becoming in the future not brought about?”

“Through the fading of ignorance, the arising of clear knowing, & the cessation of craving: That’s how further becoming in the future is not brought about.”

The First Jhāna

“What, friend, is the first jhāna?”

“There is the case, friend, 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 called the first jhāna.”

“And how many factors does the first jhāna have?”

“The first jhāna has five factors. There is the case where, in a monk who has attained the five-factored first jhāna, there occurs directed thought, evaluation, rapture, pleasure, & singleness of mind. It’s in this way that the first jhāna has five factors.”

“And how many factors are abandoned in the first jhāna, and with how many is it endowed?”

“Five factors are abandoned in the first jhāna, and with five is it endowed. There is the case where, in a monk who has attained the first jhāna, sensual desire is abandoned, ill will is abandoned, sloth & torpor is abandoned, restlessness & anxiety is abandoned, uncertainty is abandoned. And there occur directed thought, evaluation, rapture, pleasure, & singleness of mind. It’s in this way that five factors are abandoned in the first jhāna, and with five it is endowed.”

The Five Faculties

“Friend, there are these five faculties each with a separate range, a separate domain, and they do not experience one another’s range & domain: the eye-faculty, the ear-faculty, the nose-faculty, the tongue-faculty, & the body-faculty. Now what do these five faculties—each with a separate range, a separate domain, not experiencing one another’s range & domain: the eye-faculty, the ear-faculty, the nose-faculty, the tongue-faculty, & the body-faculty—have as their (common) arbitrator? What experiences (all) their ranges & domains?”

“Friend, these five faculties—each with a separate range, a separate domain, not experiencing one another’s range & domain: the eye-faculty, the ear-faculty, the nose-faculty, the tongue-faculty, & the body-faculty—have the intellect as their (common) arbitrator. The intellect is what experiences (all) their ranges & domains.”

“Now, these five faculties—the eye-faculty, the ear-faculty, the nose-faculty, the tongue-faculty, & the body-faculty: In dependence on what do they remain standing?”

“These five faculties—the eye-faculty, the ear-faculty, the nose-faculty, the tongue-faculty, & the body-faculty—remain standing in dependence on vitality.”3

“And vitality remains standing in dependence on what?”

“Vitality remains standing in dependence on heat.”

“And heat remains standing in dependence on what?”

“Heat remains standing in dependence on vitality.”

“Just now, friend Sāriputta, we understood you to say, ‘Vitality remains standing in dependence on heat.’ And just now we understood you to say, ‘Heat remains standing in dependence on vitality.’ Now how is the meaning of these statements to be seen?”

“In that case, friend, I will give you analogy, for there are cases where it is through an analogy that an intelligent person understands the meaning of a statement. Suppose an oil lamp is burning. Its radiance is discerned in dependence on its flame, and its flame is discerned in dependence on its radiance. In the same way, vitality remains standing in dependence on heat, and heat remains standing in dependence on vitality.

Vitality-fabrications

“Friend, are vitality-fabrications4 the same thing as feeling-states? Or are vitality-fabrications one thing, and feeling-states another?”

“Vitality-fabrications are not the same thing as feeling-states, friend. If vitality-fabrications were the same thing as feeling-states, the emergence of a monk from the attainment of the cessation of feeling & perception would not be discerned. It’s because vitality-fabrications are one thing and feeling-states another that the emergence of a monk from the attainment of the cessation of perception & feeling is discerned.”

“When this body lacks how many qualities does it lie discarded & forsaken, like a senseless log?”

“When this body lacks these three qualities—vitality, heat, & consciousness—it lies discarded & forsaken like a senseless log.”

“What is the difference between one who is dead, who has completed his time, and a monk who has attained the cessation of perception & feeling?”

“In the case of the one who is dead, who has completed his time, his bodily fabrications have ceased & subsided, his verbal fabrications… his mental fabrications have ceased & subsided, his vitality is exhausted, his heat subsided, & his faculties are scattered. But in the case of a monk who has attained the cessation of perception & feeling, his bodily fabrications have ceased & subsided, his verbal fabrications… his mental fabrications have ceased & subsided, his vitality is not exhausted, his heat has not subsided, & his faculties are exceptionally clear. This is the difference between one who is dead, who has completed his time, and a monk who has attained the cessation of perception & feeling.”

Awareness-release

“Friend, how many conditions are there for the attainment of the neither-pleasant-nor-painful awareness-release?”

“Friend, there are four conditions for the attainment of the neither-pleasant-nor-painful awareness-release. There is the case where a monk, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. These are the four conditions for the attainment of the neither-pleasant-nor-painful awareness-release.

“How many conditions are there for the attainment of the theme-less awareness-release?”5

“There are two conditions for the attainment of the theme-less awareness-release: lack of attention to all themes and attention to the theme-less property. These are the two conditions for the attainment of the theme-less awareness-release.”

“And how many conditions are there for the persistence of the theme-less awareness-release?”

“There are three conditions for the persistence of the theme-less awareness-release: lack of attention to all themes, attention to the theme-less property, and a prior act of will. These are the three conditions for the persistence of the theme-less awareness-release.”

“And how many conditions are there for the emergence from the theme-less awareness-release?”

“There are two conditions for the emergence from the theme-less awareness-release: attention to all themes and lack of attention to the theme-less property. These are the two conditions for the emergence from the theme-less awareness-release.”

“The immeasurable awareness-release, the nothingness awareness-release, the emptiness awareness-release, the theme-less awareness-release: Are these qualities different in meaning & different in name, or are they one in meaning and different only in name?”

“The immeasurable awareness-release, the nothingness awareness-release, the emptiness awareness-release, the theme-less awareness-release: There is a way of explanation by which these qualities are different in meaning & different in name, and there is a way of explanation by which these qualities are one in meaning and different only in name.

“And what is the way of explanation by which these qualities are different in meaning & different in name? There is the case where a monk keeps pervading the first direction [the east]—as well as the second direction, the third, & the fourth—with an awareness imbued with goodwill. Thus he keeps pervading above, below, & all around, everywhere & in every respect the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill: abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.

“He keeps pervading the first direction—as well as the second direction, the third, & the fourth—with an awareness imbued with compassion… an awareness imbued with empathetic joy….

“He keeps pervading the first direction—as well as the second direction, the third, & the fourth—with an awareness imbued with equanimity. Thus he keeps pervading above, below, & all around, everywhere & in every respect the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with equanimity: abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.

“This is called the immeasurable awareness-release.

“And what is the nothingness awareness-release? There is the case where a monk, with the complete transcending of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, thinking, ‘There is nothing,’ enters & remains in the dimension of nothingness. This is called the nothingness awareness-release.

“And what is the emptiness awareness-release? There is the case where a monk, having gone into the wilderness, to the root of a tree, or into an empty dwelling, considers this: ‘This is empty of self or of anything pertaining to self.’6 This is called the emptiness awareness-release.

“And what is the theme-less awareness-release? There is the case where a monk, through not attending to all themes, enters & remains in the theme-less concentration of awareness. This is called the theme-less awareness-release.

“This is the way of explaining by which these qualities are different in meaning & different in name.

“And what is the way of explaining whereby these qualities are one in meaning and different only in name?

“Passion, friend, is a making of measurement. Aversion is a making of measurement. Delusion is a making of measurement. In a monk whose effluents are ended, these have been abandoned, their root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Now, to the extent that there is immeasurable awareness-release, the unprovoked awareness-release is declared the foremost. And this unprovoked awareness-release is empty of passion, empty of aversion, empty of delusion.

“Passion is a something. Aversion is a something. Delusion is a something. In a monk whose effluents are ended, these have been abandoned, their root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Now, to the extent that there is nothingness awareness-release, the unprovoked awareness-release is declared the foremost. And this unprovoked awareness-release is empty of passion, empty of aversion, empty of delusion.

“Passion is a making of themes. Aversion is a making of themes. Delusion is a making of themes. In a monk whose effluents are ended, these have been abandoned, their root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Now, to the extent that there is theme-less awareness-release, the unprovoked awareness-release is declared the foremost. And this unprovoked awareness-release is empty of passion, empty of aversion, empty of delusion.

“This, friend, is the way of explaining whereby these qualities are one in meaning and different only in name.”

That is what Ven. Sāriputta said. Gratified, Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita delighted in Ven. Sāriputta’s words.

Notes

1. Discernment is to be developed because it is part of the fourth noble truth, the path of practice leading to the end of suffering. Consciousness is to be fully comprehended because, as an object of clinging, it is part of the first noble truth, the truth of suffering & stress. See SN 56:11.

2. The import of this passage is that while one is in any of these three formless states, one can analyze them with discernment in a way that can lead to release. On the fact that this cannot be done with regard to the fourth formless state, see MN 111. On the fact that the external senses can fall silent while one is in these states, see AN 9:37.

3. Vitality (āyu) is the force that determines the length of one's life.

4. Vitality-fabrications are the intentions to continue living. The Buddha entered total nibbāna three months after abandoning his vitality-fabrications. See DN 16.

5. See MN 121.

6. See MN 106.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: AN 9:37; MN 44; MN 122; SN 22:23; SN 22:79