MN 44 — MN 44 The Shorter Set of Questions & Answers | Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Shorter Set of Questions & Answers

Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta (MN 44)

The Buddha praised Dhammadinnā the nun as the foremost Dhamma teacher among his nun disciples. In this discourse she answers questions put to her by a layman—Visākha—who, according to the commentary, was her former husband, a merchant of Rājagaha, and a non-returner.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Rājagaha in the Bamboo Forest, the Squirrels' Sanctuary. Then Visākha the lay follower went to Dhammadinnā the nun and, on arrival, having bowed down to her, sat to one side.

Self-identification

As he was sitting there he said to her, "'Self-identification, self-identification,' it is said, lady. Which self-identification is described by the Blessed One?"

"There are these five clinging-aggregates, friend Visākha: the form clinging-aggregate, the feeling clinging-aggregate, the perception clinging-aggregate, the fabrications clinging-aggregate, the consciousness clinging-aggregate. These five clinging-aggregates are the self-identification described by the Blessed One."

Saying, "Yes, lady," Visākha the lay follower delighted & rejoiced in what Dhammadinnā the nun had said. Then he asked her a further question: "'The origination of self-identification, the origination of self-identification,' it is said, lady. Which origination of self-identification is described by the Blessed One?"

"The craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there—i.e., craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming: This, friend Visākha, is the origination of self-identification described by the Blessed One."

"'The cessation of self-identification, the cessation of self-identification,' it is said, lady. Which cessation of self-identification is described by the Blessed One?"

"The remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving: This, friend Visākha, is the cessation of self-identification described by the Blessed One."

"'The way of practice leading to the cessation of self-identification, the way of practice leading to the cessation of self-identification,' it is said, lady. Which way of practice leading to the cessation of self-identification is described by the Blessed One?"

"Precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration: This, friend Visākha, is the way of practice leading to the cessation of self-identification described by the Blessed One."

"Is it the case, lady, that clinging is the same thing as the five clinging-aggregates or is it something separate?"

"Friend Visākha, neither is clinging the same thing as the five clinging-aggregates, nor is it something separate. Whatever desire & passion there is with regard to the five clinging-aggregates, that is the clinging there."

“But, lady, how does self-identification view come about?”

“There is the case, friend Visākha, where an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for people of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—assumes form [e.g., the body] to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form.

“He assumes feeling to be the self….

“He assumes perception to be the self….

“He assumes fabrications to be the self….

“He assumes consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness. This is how self-identification view comes about.”

“But, lady, how does self-identification view not come about?”

“There is the case where a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—who has regard for noble ones, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma; who has regard for people of integrity, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma— doesn’t assume form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form.

“He doesn’t assume feeling to be the self….

“He doesn’t assume perception to be the self….

“He doesn’t assume fabrications to be the self….

“He doesn’t assume consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness. This is how self-identification view does not come about.”

The Noble Eightfold Path

“Now, again, lady, what is the noble eightfold path?”

“This is the noble eightfold path, friend Visākha: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.”

“Is the noble eightfold path fabricated or unfabricated?”

“The noble eightfold path is fabricated.”

“And are the three aggregates [of virtue, concentration, & discernment] included under the noble eightfold path, lady, or is the noble eightfold path included under the three aggregates?”

“The three aggregates are not included under the noble eightfold path, friend Visākha, but the noble eightfold path is included under the three aggregates. Right speech, right action, & right livelihood come under the aggregate of virtue. Right effort, right mindfulness, & right concentration come under the aggregate of concentration. Right view & right resolve come under the aggregate of discernment.”

“Now what is concentration, lady, what qualities are its themes, what qualities are its requisites, and what is its development?”

“Singleness of mind is concentration, friend Visākha; the four establishings of mindfulness are its themes; the four right exertions are its requisites; and any cultivation, development, & pursuit of these qualities is its development.”

Fabrications

“Now, lady, what are fabrications?”

“These three fabrications, friend Visākha: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, & mental fabrications.”

“But what are bodily fabrications? What are verbal fabrications? What are mental fabrications?”

“In-&-out breaths are bodily fabrications. Directed thought & evaluation are verbal fabrications. Perceptions & feelings are mental fabrications.”

“But why are in-&-out breaths bodily fabrications? Why are directed thought & evaluation verbal fabrications? Why are perceptions & feelings mental fabrications?”

“In-&-out breaths are bodily; these are things tied up with the body. That’s why in-&-out breaths are bodily fabrications. Having first directed one’s thoughts and made an evaluation, one then breaks out into speech. That’s why directed thought & evaluation are verbal fabrications. Perceptions & feelings are mental; these are things tied up with the mind. That’s why perceptions & feelings are mental fabrications.”

“Now, lady, how does the attainment of the cessation of perception & feeling come about?”

“The thought does not occur to a monk as he is attaining the cessation of perception & feeling that ‘I am about to attain the cessation of perception & feeling’ or that ‘I am attaining the cessation of perception & feeling’ or that ‘I have attained the cessation of perception & feeling.’ Instead, the way his mind has previously been developed leads him to that state.”

“But when a monk is attaining the cessation of perception & feeling, which things cease first: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, or mental fabrications?”

“When a monk is attaining the cessation of perception & feeling, friend Visākha, verbal fabrications cease first, then bodily fabrications, then mental fabrications.”1

“Now, lady, how does emergence from the cessation of perception & feeling come about?”

“The thought does not occur to a monk as he is emerging from the cessation of perception & feeling that ‘I am about to emerge from the cessation of perception & feeling’ or that ‘I am emerging from the cessation of perception & feeling’ or that ‘I have emerged from the cessation of perception & feeling.’ Instead, the way his mind has previously been developed leads him to that state.”

“But when a monk is emerging from the cessation of perception & feeling, which things arise first: bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, or mental fabrications?”

“When a monk is emerging from the cessation of perception & feeling, friend Visākha, mental fabrications arise first, then bodily fabrications, then verbal fabrications.”

“When a monk has emerged from the cessation of perception & feeling, lady, how many contacts make contact?”

“When a monk has emerged from the cessation of perception & feeling, friend Visākha, three contacts make contact: contact with emptiness, contact with the theme-less, & contact with the undirected.”2

“When a monk has emerged from the cessation of perception & feeling, lady, to what does his mind lean, to what does it tend, to what does it incline?”

“When a monk has emerged from the cessation of perception & feeling, friend Visākha, his mind leans to seclusion, tends to seclusion, inclines to seclusion.”3

Feeling

“Now, lady, how many kinds of feeling are there?”

“These three kinds of feeling: pleasant feeling, painful feeling, & neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling.”

“What is pleasant feeling? What is painful feeling? What is neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling?”

“Whatever is experienced physically or mentally as pleasant & gratifying is pleasant feeling. Whatever is experienced physically or mentally as painful & hurting is painful feeling. Whatever is experienced physically or mentally as neither gratifying nor hurting is

neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling."

"In what way is pleasant feeling pleasant, lady, and in what way painful? In what way is painful feeling painful, and in what way pleasant? In what way is neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling pleasant, and in what way painful?"

"Pleasant feeling is pleasant in remaining, & painful in changing, friend Visākha. Painful feeling is painful in remaining & pleasant in changing. Neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling is pleasant in occurring together with knowledge, and painful in occurring without knowledge."

"What obsession gets obsessed with pleasant feeling? What obsession gets obsessed with painful feeling? What obsession gets obsessed with neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling?"

"Passion-obsession gets obsessed with pleasant feeling. Resistance-obsession gets obsessed with painful feeling. Ignorance-obsession gets obsessed with neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling."

"Does passion-obsession get obsessed with all pleasant feeling? Does resistance-obsession get obsessed with all painful feeling? Does ignorance-obsession get obsessed with all neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling?"

"No...."

"But what is to be abandoned with regard to pleasant feeling? What is to be abandoned with regard to painful feeling? What is to be abandoned with regard to neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling?"

"Passion-obsession is to be abandoned with regard to pleasant feeling. Resistance-obsession is to be abandoned with regard to painful feeling. Ignorance-obsession is to be abandoned with regard to neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling."

"Is passion-obsession to be abandoned with regard to all pleasant feeling? Is resistance-obsession to be abandoned with regard to all painful feeling? Is ignorance-obsession to be abandoned with regard to all neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling?"

"No .... 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. With that he abandons passion. No passion-obsession gets obsessed there.4 There is the case where a monk considers, 'O when will I enter & remain in the dimension that those who are noble now enter & remain in?' And as he thus nurses this yearning for the unexcelled liberations, there arises within him sorrow based on that yearning. With that he abandons resistance. No resistance-obsession gets obsessed there.5 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. With that he abandons ignorance. No ignorance-obsession gets obsessed there."6

"Now what, lady, lies on the other side of pleasant feeling?"

"Passion lies on the other side of pleasant feeling."

"And what lies on the other side of painful feeling?"

"Resistance lies on the other side of painful feeling."7

"What lies on the other side of neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling?"

"Ignorance lies on the other side of neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling."

"What lies on the other side of ignorance?"

"Clear knowing lies on the other side of ignorance."

"What lies on the other side of clear knowing?"

"Release lies on the other side of clear knowing."

"What lies on the other side of release?"

"Unbinding lies on the other side of release."

"What lies on the other side of unbinding?"

"You've gone too far, friend Visākha. You can't keep holding on up to the limit of questions. For the holy life gains a footing in unbinding, culminates in unbinding, has unbinding as its final end. If you wish, go to the Blessed One and ask him the meaning of these things. Whatever he says, that's how you should remember it."

Then Visākha the lay follower, delighting & rejoicing in what Dhammadinnā the nun had said, bowed down to her and, keeping her to his right, went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he told the Blessed One the full extent of the conversation he had had with Dhammadinnā the nun. When this was said, the Blessed One said to him, "Dhammadinnā the nun is wise, Visākha, a woman of great discernment. If you had asked me those things, I would have answered you in the same way she did. That is the meaning of those things. That is how you should remember it."

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Visākha the lay follower delighted in the Blessed One's words.

Notes

1. Verbal fabrication grows still on attaining the second jhāna; bodily fabrication grows still on attaining the fourth jhāna; mental fabrication grows still on attaining the cessation of perception & feeling.

2. Emptiness, the theme-less, & the undirected are names for a state of concentration that lies on the threshold of unbinding. They differ only in how they are approached. According to the commentary, they color one's first apprehension of unbinding: a meditator who has been focusing on the theme of inconstancy will first apprehend unbinding as theme-less; one who has been focusing on the theme of stress will first apprehend it as undirected; one who has been focusing on the theme of not-self will first apprehend it as emptiness.

3. According to the commentary, "seclusion" here stands for unbinding. On emerging from the cessation of perception & feeling, and having had contact with emptiness/the theme-less/the undirected, the mind inclines naturally to a direct experience of unbinding.

4. In other words, once the pleasure of the first jhāna has been used as a basis for giving rise to the discernment that leads to arahantship, the mind has no further passion-obsession with pleasant feeling. (The commentary says that this is true at attainment of non-returning, but this must be a mistake, as non-returners are still subject to passion for form and formless phenomena.)

5. Once this sorrow has been used as a basis for giving rise to the discernment that leads to non-returning, the mind has no further resistance-obsession with painful feeling.

6. Once this feeling of neither pleasure nor pain has been used as a basis for giving rise to the discernment that leads to arahantship, the mind has no further ignorance-obsession with feelings of neither pleasure nor pain.

7. This reading follows the Thai edition of the Pali Canon. The PTS edition gives the first two questions and answers of this exchange as follows:

"Now what, lady, lies on the other side of pleasant feeling?"

"Painful feeling lies on the other side of pleasant feeling."

"And what lies on the other side of painful feeling?"

"Pleasant feeling lies on the other side of painful feeling."

For some reason, the editors of neither edition seem to have been aware of the reading in the other edition.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 109; MN 111; MN 148; SN 22:121; SN 36:6; SN 36:11; AN 5:200; AN 7:11–12; AN 8:70