MN 45 — MN 45 The Shorter Discourse on Taking on Practices | Cūḷa Dhammasamādāna Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Shorter Discourse on Taking on Practices

Cūḷa Dhammasamādāna Sutta (MN 45)

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.

"Monks, there are these four ways of taking on practices. Which four? There is the taking on of a practice that is pleasant in the present but yields pain in the future. There is the taking on of a practice that is painful in the present and yields pain in the future. There is

the taking on of a practice that is painful in the present but yields pleasure in the future. There is the taking on of a practice that is pleasant in the present and yields pleasure in the future.

“Now, what is the taking on of a practice that is pleasant in the present but yields pain in the future? There are some contemplatives & brahmans who hold to a doctrine, a view like this: ‘There is no harm in sensual pleasures.’ Thus they meet with their downfall through sensual pleasures. They consort with women wanderers who wear their hair coiled in a topknot.

“The thought occurs to them: ‘Now what future danger concerning sensual pleasures do those (other) contemplatives & brahmans foresee that they have spoken of the relinquishment of sensual pleasures and describe the full comprehension of sensual pleasures? It’s pleasant, the touch of this woman wanderer’s soft, tender, downy arm.’

“Thus they meet with their downfall through sensual pleasures. Then, having met with their downfall through sensual pleasures, with the break-up of the body, after death, they go to a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. There they experience sharp, burning pains. They say: ‘This was the future danger concerning sensual pleasures those contemplatives & brahmans foresaw that they spoke of the relinquishment of sensual pleasures and described the full comprehension of sensual pleasures. It’s because of sensual pleasures, as a result of sensual pleasures, that we’re now experiencing these sharp, burning pains.’

“Just as if a māluvā creeper pod were to burst open in the last month of the hot season, and a māluvā creeper seed were to fall at the foot of a Sal tree. The deva living in the tree would become frightened, apprehensive, & anxious. Her friends & companions, relatives & kin—garden devas, forest devas, tree devas, devas living in herbs, grass, & forest monarchs—would gather together to console her: ‘Have no fear, have no fear. In all likelihood a peacock is sure to swallow this māluvā creeper seed, or a deer will eat it, or a brush fire will burn it up, or woodsmen will pick it up, or termites will carry it off, and anyway it probably isn’t really a seed.’

“And then no peacock swallowed it, no deer ate it, no brush fire burned it up, no woodsmen picked it up, no termites carried it off, and it really was a seed. Watered by a rain-laden cloud, it sprouted properly and curled its soft, tender, downy tendril around the Sal tree.

“The thought occurred to the deva living in the Sal tree: ‘Now what future danger did my friends & companions, relatives & kin—garden devas, forest devas, tree devas, devas living in herbs, grass, & forest monarchs—foresee in that māluvā creeper seed that they gathered together to console me: “Have no fear, have no fear. In all likelihood a peacock is sure to swallow this māluvā creeper seed, or a deer will eat it, or a brush fire will burn it up, or woodsmen will pick it up, or termites will carry it off, and anyway it probably isn’t really a seed.” It’s pleasant, the touch of this māluvā creeper’s soft, tender, downy tendril.’

“Then the creeper, having enwrapped the Sal tree, having made a canopy over it, & cascading down around it, caused the massive limbs of the Sal tree to come crashing down. The thought occurred to the deva living in the tree: ‘This was the future danger my friends… foresaw in that māluvā creeper seed, that they gathered together to console me…. It’s because of that māluvā creeper seed that I’m now experiencing sharp, burning pains.’

“In the same way, monks, there are some contemplatives & brahmans who hold to a doctrine, a view like this: ‘There is no harm in sensual pleasures.’ Thus they meet with their downfall through sensual pleasures. They consort with women wanderers who wear their hair coiled in a topknot.

“The thought occurs to them: ‘Now, what future danger do those (other) contemplatives & brahmans foresee that they speak of the abandoning of sensual pleasures and describe the comprehension of sensual pleasures? It’s pleasant, the touch of this woman wanderer’s soft, tender, downy arm.’

Thus they meet with their downfall through sensual pleasures. Then, having met with their downfall through sensual pleasures, with the break-up of the body, after death, they reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. There they experience sharp, burning pains. They say: ‘This was the future danger concerning sensual pleasures those contemplatives & brahmans foresaw that they spoke of the abandoning of sensual pleasures and described the comprehension of sensual pleasures. It’s because of sensual pleasures, as a result of sensual pleasures, that we’re now experiencing these sharp, burning pains.’

“This is called the taking on of a practice that is pleasant in the present but yields pain in the future.

“And what is the taking on of a practice that is painful in the present and yields pain in the future?

“There is the case where someone is a cloth-less1 ascetic, rejecting conventions, licking his hands, not coming when called, not staying when asked. He doesn’t consent to food brought to him or food dedicated to him or to an invitation to a meal. He accepts nothing from the mouth of a pot or from the mouth of a bowl. He accepts nothing from across a threshold, across a stick, across a pestle, from two eating together, from a pregnant woman, from a nursing woman, from a woman living with a man, from where it is announced that food is to be distributed, from where a dog is waiting or flies are buzzing. He takes no fish or meat. He drinks no liquor, wine, or fermented drink. He limits himself to one house & one morsel a day, or two houses & two morsels… seven houses & seven morsels. He lives on one saucerful a day, two… seven saucerfuls a day. He takes food once a day, once every two days… once every seven days, and so on up to a fortnight, devoted to regulating his intake of food. He is an eater of greens, millet, wild rice, hide-parings, moss, rice bran, rice-scum, sesame flour, grass, or cow dung. He lives on forest roots & berries. He feeds on fallen fruits. He wears hemp, canvas, shrouds, refuse rags, tree bark,

antelope hide, strips of antelope hide, kusa-grass garments, bark garments, wood-shaving garments, head-hair garments, animal wool, owl's wings. He is a hair-&-beard puller, one devoted to the practice of pulling out his hair & beard. He is a stander, one who rejects seats. He is a hands-around-the-knees sitter, one devoted to the exertion of sitting with his hands around his knees. He is a spike-mattresser, one who makes his bed on a bed of spikes. He is a third-time-in-the-evening bather, one who stays devoted to the practice of bathing in water. Thus in a variety of ways he stays devoted to the practice of tormenting & afflicting the body. With the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell.

"This is called the taking on of a practice that is painful in the present and yields pain in the future.

"And what is the taking on of a practice that is painful in the present but yields pleasure in the future? There is the case of a person who is normally strongly passionate by nature and frequently experiences pain & grief born of passion; a person who is normally strongly aversive by nature and frequently experiences pain & grief born of aversion; a person who is normally strongly deluded by nature and frequently experiences pain & grief born of delusion. Even though touched with pain & grief, crying with a tearful face, he lives the holy life that is utterly perfect, surpassingly pure. With the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world. This is called the taking on of a practice that is painful in the present but yields pleasure in the future.

"And what is the taking on of a practice that is pleasant in the present and yields pleasure in the future? There is the case of a person who is not normally strongly passionate by nature and doesn't frequently experience pain & grief born of passion; who is not normally strongly aversive by nature and doesn't frequently experience pain & grief born of aversion; who is not normally strongly deluded by nature and doesn't frequently experience pain & grief born of delusion. Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, he enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.' With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. With the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world. This is called the taking on of a practice that is pleasant in the present and yields pleasure in the future.

"And these are the four ways of taking on practices."

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

Note

1. Acelaka: “One without cloth.” Often translated as “naked,” but as the description shows, such a person might wear garments made of something other than cloth.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 13; MN 14; SN 36:11; AN 4:115; AN 4:192; AN 6:63; AN 10:20