MN 54 — MN 54 To Potaliya (Excerpt) | Potaliya Sutta

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Text

To Potaliya (Excerpt)

Potaliya Sutta (MN 54)

In this passage, the Buddha teaches Potaliya the householder what it means, in the discipline of a noble one, to have entirely cut off one’s worldly affairs.

* * *

…. “Suppose a dog, overcome with weakness & hunger, were to come across a slaughterhouse, and there a dexterous butcher or butcher’s apprentice were to fling him a chain of bones—thoroughly scraped, without any flesh, smeared with blood. What do you think? Would the dog, gnawing on that chain of bones—thoroughly scraped, without any flesh, smeared with blood—appease its weakness & hunger?”

“No, lord. And why is that? Because the chain of bones is thoroughly scraped, without any flesh, & smeared with blood. The dog would get nothing but its share of weariness & vexation.”

“In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: ‘The Blessed One has compared sensuality to a chain of bones, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.’ Seeing this with right discernment, as it has come to be, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness,1 where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace.

“Now suppose a vulture, a kite, or a hawk, seizing a lump of flesh, were to take off, and other vultures, kites, or hawks—following right after it—were to tear at it with their beaks & pull at it with their claws. What do you think? If that vulture, kite, or hawk were not quickly to drop that lump of flesh, would it meet with death from that cause, or with death-like pain?”

“Yes, lord.”

“In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: ‘The Blessed One has compared sensuality to a lump of flesh, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.’ Seeing this with right discernment, as it has come to be, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace.

“Now suppose a man were to come against the wind, carrying a burning grass torch. What do you think? If he were not quickly to drop that grass torch, would he burn his hand or his arm or some other part of his body, so that he would meet with death from that cause, or with death-like pain?”

“Yes, lord.”

“In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: ‘The Blessed One has compared sensuality to a grass torch, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.’ Seeing this with right discernment, as it has come to be, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace.

“Now suppose there were a pit of glowing embers, deeper than a man’s height, full of embers that were neither flaming nor smoking, and a man were to come along—loving life, hating death, loving pleasure, abhorring pain—and two strong men, grabbing him with their arms, were to drag him to the pit of embers. What do you think? Wouldn’t the man twist his body this way & that?”

“Yes, lord. And why is that? Because he would realize, ‘If I fall into this pit of glowing embers, I will meet with death from that cause, or with death-like pain.’”

“In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: ‘The Blessed One has compared sensuality to a pit of glowing embers, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.’ Seeing this with right discernment, as it has come to be, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace.

“Now suppose a man, when dreaming, were to see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, & delightful lakes, and on awakening were to see nothing. In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: ‘The Blessed One has compared sensuality to a dream, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.’ Seeing this with right discernment, as it has come to be, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace.

“Now suppose a man having borrowed some goods—a manly carriage, fine jewels, & ear ornaments—were to go into the market preceded & surrounded by his borrowed goods, and people seeing him would say, ‘How wealthy this man is, for this is how the wealthy enjoy their possessions,’ but the actual owners, wherever they might see him, would strip him then & there of what is theirs. What do you think? Should the man rightly be upset?”

“No, lord.2 And why is that? The owners are stripping him of what is theirs.”

“In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: ‘The Blessed One has compared sensuality to borrowed goods, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.’ Seeing this with right discernment, as it has come to be, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace.

“Now suppose that, not far from a village or town, there were a dense forest grove, and there in the grove was a tree with delicious fruit, abundant fruit, but with no fruit fallen to the ground. A man would come along, desiring fruit, looking for fruit, searching for fruit. Plunging into the forest grove, he would see the tree… and the thought would occur to him, ‘This is a tree with delicious fruit, abundant fruit, and there is no fruit fallen to the ground, but I know how to climb a tree. Why don’t I climb the tree, eat what I like, and fill my clothes with the fruit?’ So, having climbed the tree, he would eat what he liked and fill his clothes with the fruit. Then a second man would come along, desiring fruit, looking for fruit, searching for fruit and carrying a sharp ax. Plunging into the forest grove, he would see the tree… and the thought would occur to him, ‘This is a tree with delicious fruit, abundant fruit, and there is no fruit fallen to the ground, and I don’t know how to climb a tree. Why don’t I chop down this tree at the root, eat what I like, and fill my clothes with the

fruit?' So he would chop the tree at the root. What do you think? If the first man who climbed the tree didn't quickly come down, wouldn't the falling tree crush his hand or foot or some other part of his body, so that he would meet with death from that cause, or with death-like pain?"

"Yes, lord."

"In the same way, householder, a disciple of the noble ones considers this point: 'The Blessed One has compared sensuality to the fruits of a tree, of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks.' Seeing this with right discernment, as it has come to be, then avoiding the equanimity coming from multiplicity, dependent on multiplicity, he develops the equanimity coming from singleness, dependent on singleness, where sustenance/clinging for the baits of the world ceases without trace.

"Now when the disciple of the noble ones has arrived at this purity of equanimity & mindfulness, he recollects his manifold past lives, i.e., one birth, two... five, ten... fifty, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand, many eons of cosmic contraction, many eons of cosmic expansion, many eons of cosmic contraction & expansion: 'There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & 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 & 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 & details.

"When the disciple of the noble ones has arrived at this purity of equanimity & mindfulness, he sees—by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human—beings passing away & re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their kamma: 'These beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech & mind, who reviled 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, & mind, who did not revile 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 & surpassing the human—he sees beings passing away & re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their kamma.

"When the disciple of the noble ones has arrived at this purity of equanimity & mindfulness, he enters & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now.

“It’s to this extent, householder, that there is the all-around in-every-way cutting off of one’s affairs in the discipline of a noble one”....

Notes

1. MN 137 (passage 179 in The Wings to awakening) identifies “equanimity based on multiplicity” as equanimity with regard to forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. It identifies “equanimity based on singleness” as the four formless attainments. In the context of this sutta, however, the Commentary defines equanimity based on singleness as the fourth jhāna, and this interpretation seems correct. Toward the end of this passage, the equanimity based on singleness functions as the basis for the three knowledges, a function normally filled by the fourth jhāna.

2. Following the Thai edition. The Burmese and PTS editions say, “Yes, lord,” apparently reading the Buddha’s question as meaning, “Would that be enough for the man to be upset?” This, however, ignores the monks’ reason for their answer. The fact that the owners are taking what is theirs does not relate to the question of whether the man would be upset, but it does relate to the question of whether he would rightly be upset.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 13; MN 14; MN 22; MN 82; AN 5:76; AN 7:70; Dhp 146–156; Sn 4:1; Thig 13:1; Thig 13:5; Thig 14