MN 60 — MN 60 A Safe Bet | Apaṇṇaka Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

Source: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN60.html

Source revision: sha256:06db98f11dbe5b66e3b290b0f8bcaa44ec5f2fe3d1e1b74062fcf0baea044036

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Text

A Safe Bet

Apaṇṇaka Sutta (MN 60)

Introduction

The Buddha often likened himself to a doctor, offering a treatment for the sufferings of the heart. Unlike ordinary doctors, however, he could not show newcomers the state of health—nibbāna—that his teaching was supposed to produce. If they followed his teaching, they would see it for themselves. But until they followed his teaching, he could offer them no empirical proof that nibbāna was a genuine possibility. As he stated in MN 27, the proof that he was awakened—and that awakening was a good thing—came with one’s first taste of the deathless, at the first level of awakening, called stream-entry.

However, stream-entry could be attained only through a serious commitment to the practice. Thus he had to provide other, non-empirical, means of persuasion to induce his listeners to give his teachings a serious try.

One of these means was the pragmatic argument, which differs from empirical arguments as follows. An empirical argument presents facts that logically imply that A must be true or false. A pragmatic argument focuses not on the facts related to A, but on the behavior that can be expected from a person who believes or rejects A. The Buddha's main pragmatic argument is that if one accepted his teachings, one would be likely to pay careful attention to one's actions, so as to do no harm. This in & of itself is a worthy activity regardless of whether the rest of the path was true. When applying this argument to the issue of rebirth and karmic results, the Buddha sometimes coupled it with a second pragmatic argument that resembles Pascal's wager: If one practices the Dhamma, one leads a blameless life in the here-and-now. Even if the afterlife and karmic results do not exist, one has not lost the wager, for the blamelessness of one's life is a reward in & of itself. If there is an afterlife with karmic results, then one has won a double reward: the blamelessness of one's life here and now, and the good rewards of one's actions in the afterlife. These two pragmatic arguments form the central message of this sutta.

The Pali title of this sutta is an adjective that has no exact equivalent in English. It is used in two different contexts. In the context of gambling, it describes a die that has not been loaded to favor one side or the other. In the context of an argument, it describes a position that is true regardless of which side of the argument is right. In other words, if there is an argument as to whether A or not-A is true, if C is true regardless of whether A is true or not, C is an apaṇṇaka position.

Although this sutta is primarily concerned with the second context, the Buddha implicitly makes the connection between this context and the first in stating that a person who rightly grasps the apaṇṇaka position has made a lucky throw, whereas a person who has wrongly grasped it has made an unlucky throw. Thus, to preserve this double context, I have translated apaṇṇaka as "safe-bet." "Cover-your-bets" might have been a more accurate translation, but it would have been unwieldy.

The sutta falls into two parts, the first part covering his "safe-bet" arguments, and the second part extolling the person who practices the Dhamma for tormenting neither himself nor others. The two parts are connected in that they both present pragmatic arguments for accepting the Buddha's teaching.

The safe-bet arguments in the first part of the sutta follow two patterns. The first pattern covers controversies over whether there is a life after death, whether actions bear results, and whether there is a causal connection between one's actions and one's experience of pleasure and pain. The pattern here is as follows:

(A) a statement of the anti-Dhamma position;

(B) a rejection of the anti-Dhamma position;

(A1) a pragmatic argument against holding to A—a person who does so is likely to act, speak, and think in unskillful ways;

(A2) further unfortunate consequences that follow from holding to A, given that A is wrong;

(A3) further unfortunate consequences that come from holding to A whether or not it is right;

(B1) a pragmatic argument for holding to B—a person who does so is likely to act, speak, and think in skillful ways;

(B2) further fortunate consequences that follow from holding to B, given that B is right;

(B3) further fortunate consequences that come from holding to B whether or not it is right.

It's noteworthy that the arguments in A2 and B2 are not safe-bet arguments, for they assume that A is wrong and B is right. Whether these arguments date from the Buddha or were added at a later date, no one knows.

The second pattern in the first part covers two controversies: whether or not a person can attain a total state of formlessness, and whether or not a person can attain total cessation of becoming. In the context of the first controversy, the safe-bet position is that even if there is no total attainment of formlessness, that still opens the possibility that one could become a deva on the level of form. In the context of the second, the safe-bet position is that even if there is no total cessation of becoming, that still leaves open the possibility that one could become a deva on the formless level. One further reflects that total formlessness would open the way to greater peace than the level of form; and that the cessation of becoming would open the way to greater freedom than formlessness. These last observations in no way prove that there is total formlessness or total cessation of becoming, but they do incline the mind to view those possibilities favorably.

The second part of the sutta divides people into four sorts: (1) those who torment themselves, (2) those who torment others, (3) those who torment themselves and others, and (4) those who torment neither themselves nor others. The first and third alternatives describe styles of religious practice that were common in the Buddha's time: practices of self-torture and self-affliction, and the offering of sacrifices. The second alternative covers any and all bloody occupations. In opposition to these alternatives, the Buddha presents the fourth alternative as ideal: the practice of his teachings all the way to full liberation.

For other pragmatic arguments for accepting and practicing the Dhamma, see AN 3:61, AN 3:65, and SN 42:8. AN 3:65 also contains a variant on the wager argument given in this sutta.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion, when the Blessed One was on a wandering tour among the Kosalans with a large Saṅgha of monks, he arrived at the brahman village of the Kosalans called Sāla.

The brahman householders heard, "Master Gotama the contemplative—the son of the Sakyans, having gone forth from the Sakyan clan—on a wandering tour among the Kosalans with a large Saṅgha of monks—has arrived at Sāla. And of that master Gotama this fine reputation has spread: 'He is indeed a Blessed One, worthy & rightly self-awakened, consummate in clear-knowing & conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to the cosmos, unexcelled trainer of people fit to be tamed, teacher of devas & human beings, awakened, blessed. He makes known—having realized it through direct knowledge—this world with its devas, Māras, & Brahmās, this generation with its contemplatives & brahmans, its royalty & commonfolk; he explains the Dhamma admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end; he expounds the holy life both in its particulars & in its essence, entirely perfect, surpassingly pure. It is good to see such a worthy one.'"

So the brahman householders of Sāla went to the Blessed One. On arrival, some of them bowed down to the Blessed One and sat to one side. Some of them exchanged courteous greetings with him and, after an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, sat to one side. Some of them sat to one side having saluted him with their hands palm-to-palm over their hearts. Some of them sat to one side having announced their name & clan. Some of them sat to one side in silence.

As they were sitting there, the Blessed One asked them, "Householders, is there any teacher agreeable to you, in whom you have found grounded conviction?"

"No, lord, there is no teacher agreeable to us, in whom we have found grounded conviction."

"As you have not found an agreeable teacher, you should adopt and practice this safe-bet teaching, for this safe-bet teaching—when accepted and adopted—will be to your long-term welfare & happiness.

"And what is the safe-bet teaching?

Existence & Non-existence

A. "There are some contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view: 'There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed. There is no fruit or result of good or bad actions. There is no this world, no next world, no mother, no father, no spontaneously reborn beings; no contemplatives or brahmans who, faring rightly and practicing rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves.'1

B. “Some contemplatives & brahmans, speaking in direct opposition to those contemplatives & brahmans, say this: ‘There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives & brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.’

“What do you think, householders? Don’t these contemplatives & brahmans speak in direct opposition to each other?”

“Yes, lord.”

A1. “Now, householders, of those contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—‘There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed. There is no fruit or result of good or bad actions. There is no this world, no next world, no mother, no father, no spontaneously reborn beings; no contemplatives or brahmans who, faring rightly and practicing rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves’—it can be expected that, shunning these three skillful activities—good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, good mental conduct—they will adopt & practice these three unskillful activities: bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable contemplatives & brahmans do not see, in unskillful activities, the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; nor in skillful activities the rewards of renunciation, resembling cleansing.

A2. “Because there actually is the next world, the view of one who thinks, ‘There is no next world’ is his wrong view. Because there actually is the next world, when he is resolved that ‘There is no next world,’ that is his wrong resolve. Because there actually is the next world, when he speaks the statement, ‘There is no next world,’ that is his wrong speech. Because there actually is the next world, when he says that ‘There is no next world,’ he makes himself an opponent to those arahants who know the next world. Because there actually is the next world, when he persuades another that ‘There is no next world,’ that is persuasion in what is not true Dhamma. And in that persuasion in what is not true Dhamma, he exalts himself and disparages others. Whatever good habituation he previously had is abandoned, while bad habituation is manifested. And this wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, opposition to the arahants, persuasion in what is not true Dhamma, exaltation of self, & disparagement of others: These many evil, unskillful activities come into play, in dependence on wrong view.

A3. “With regard to this, an observant person considers thus: ‘If there is no next world, then—with the breakup of the body, after death—this venerable person has made himself safe. But if there is the next world, then this venerable person—on the breakup of the body, after death—will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Even if we didn’t speak of the next world, and there weren’t the true statement of those venerable contemplatives & brahmans, this venerable person is still criticized in the here & now by the observant as a person of bad habits & wrong view2: one who holds to a doctrine of non-existence.’ If there really is a next world, then this venerable person

has made a bad throw twice: in that he is criticized by the observant here & now, and in that—with the breakup of the body, after death—he will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Thus this safe-bet teaching, when poorly grasped & poorly adopted by him, covers (only) one side, and leaves behind the possibility of the skillful.

B1. "Now, householders, of those contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—'There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives & brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves'—it can be expected that, shunning these three unskillful activities—bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct—they will adopt & practice these three skillful activities: good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, good mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable contemplatives & brahmans see in unskillful activities the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; and in skillful activities the rewards of renunciation, resembling cleansing.

B2. "Because there actually is the next world, the view of one who thinks, 'There is a next world' is his right view. Because there actually is the next world, when he is resolved that 'There is a next world,' that is his right resolve. Because there actually is the next world, when he speaks the statement, 'There is a next world,' that is his right speech. Because there actually is the next world, when he says that 'There is a next world,' he doesn't make himself an opponent to those arahants who know the next world. Because there actually is the next world, when he persuades another that 'There is a next world,' that is persuasion in what is true Dhamma. And in that persuasion in what is true Dhamma, he doesn't exalt himself or disparage others. Whatever bad habituation he previously had is abandoned, while good habituation is manifested. And this right view, right resolve, right speech, non-opposition to the arahants, persuasion in what is true Dhamma, non-exaltation of self, & non-disparagement of others: These many skillful activities come into play, in dependence on right view.

B3. "With regard to this, an observant person considers thus: 'If there is the next world, then this venerable person—on the breakup of the body, after death—will reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world. Even if we didn't speak of the next world, and there weren't the true statement of those venerable contemplatives & brahmans, this venerable person is still praised in the here & now by the observant as a person of good habits & right view: one who holds to a doctrine of existence.' If there really is a next world, then this venerable person has made a good throw twice, in that he is praised by the observant here & now; and in that—with the breakup of the body, after death—he will reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world. Thus this safe-bet teaching, when well grasped & adopted by him, covers both sides, and leaves behind the possibility of the unskillful.

Action & Non-action

A. “There are some contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view: ‘In acting or getting others to act, in mutilating or getting others to mutilate, in torturing or getting others to torture, in inflicting sorrow or in getting others to inflict sorrow, in tormenting or getting others to torment, in intimidating or getting others to intimidate, in taking life, taking what is not given, breaking into houses, plundering wealth, committing burglary, ambushing highways, committing adultery, speaking falsehood—one does no evil. If with a razor-edged disk one were to turn all the living beings on this earth to a single heap of flesh, a single pile of flesh, there would be no evil from that cause, no coming of evil. Even if one were to go along the right bank of the Ganges, killing and getting others to kill, mutilating and getting others to mutilate, torturing and getting others to torture, there would be no evil from that cause, no coming of evil. Even if one were to go along the left bank of the Ganges, giving and getting others to give, making sacrifices and getting others to make sacrifices, there would be no merit from that cause, no coming of merit. Through generosity, self-control, restraint, and truthful speech there is no merit from that cause, no coming of merit.’3

B. “Some contemplatives & brahmans, speaking in direct opposition to those contemplatives & brahmans, say this: ‘In acting or getting others to act, in mutilating or getting others to mutilate, in torturing or getting others to torture, in inflicting sorrow or in getting others to inflict sorrow, in tormenting or getting others to torment, in intimidating or getting others to intimidate, in taking life, taking what is not given, breaking into houses, plundering wealth, committing burglary, ambushing highways, committing adultery, speaking falsehood—one does evil. If with a razor-edged disk one were to turn all the living beings on this earth to a single heap of flesh, a single pile of flesh, there would be evil from that cause, there would be a coming of evil. If one were to go along the right bank of the Ganges, killing and getting others to kill, mutilating and getting others to mutilate, torturing and getting others to torture, there would be evil from that cause, there would be a coming of evil. If one were to go along the left bank of the Ganges, giving and getting others to give, making sacrifices and getting others to make sacrifices, there would be merit from that cause, there would be a coming of merit. Through generosity, self-control, restraint, and truthful speech there is merit from that cause, there is a coming of merit.’

“What do you think, householders? Don’t these contemplatives & brahmans speak in direct opposition to each other?”

“Yes, lord.”

A1. “Now, householders, of those contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—’In acting or getting others to act, in mutilating or getting others to mutilate, in torturing or getting others to torture… one does no evil … Through generosity, self-control, restraint, and truthful speech there is no merit from that cause, no coming of merit’—it can be expected that, shunning these three skillful activities—good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, good mental conduct—they will adopt & practice these three unskillful activities: bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable contemplatives & brahmans do not see, in unskillful activities, the

drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; nor in skillful activities the rewards of renunciation, resembling cleansing.

A2. "Because there actually is action, the view of one who thinks, 'There is no action' is his wrong view. Because there actually is action, when he is resolved that 'There is no action,' that is his wrong resolve. Because there actually is action, when he speaks the statement, 'There is no action,' that is his wrong speech. Because there actually is action, when he says that 'There is no action,' he makes himself an opponent to those arahants who teach action. Because there actually is action, when he persuades another that 'There is no action,' that is persuasion in what is not true Dhamma. And in that persuasion in what is not true Dhamma, he exalts himself and disparages others. Whatever good habituation he previously had is abandoned, while bad habituation is manifested. And this wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, opposition to the arahants, persuasion in what is not true Dhamma, exaltation of self, & disparagement of others: These many evil, unskillful activities come into play, in dependence on wrong view.

A3. "With regard to this, an observant person considers thus: 'If there is no action, then—with the breakup of the body, after death—this venerable person has made himself safe. But if there is action, then this venerable person—on the breakup of the body, after death—will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Even if we didn't speak of action, and there weren't the true statement of those venerable contemplatives & brahmans, this venerable person is still criticized in the here & now by the observant as a person of bad habits & wrong view: one who holds to a doctrine of non-action.' If there really is action, then this venerable person has made a bad throw twice: in that he is criticized by the observant here & now; and in that—with the breakup of the body, after death—he will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Thus this safe-bet teaching, when poorly grasped & poorly adopted by him, covers (only) one side, and leaves behind the possibility of the skillful.

B1. "Now, householders, of those contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—'In acting or getting others to act, in mutilating or getting others to mutilate, in torturing or getting others to torture... one does evil.... Through generosity, self-control, restraint, and truthful speech there is merit from that cause, there is a coming of merit'—it can be expected that, shunning these three unskillful activities—bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct—they will adopt & practice these three skillful activities: good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, good mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable contemplatives & brahmans see in unskillful activities the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; and in skillful activities the rewards of renunciation, resembling cleansing.

B2. "Because there actually is action, the view of one who thinks, 'There is action' is his right view. Because there actually is action, when he is resolved that 'There is action,' that is his right resolve. Because there actually is action, when he speaks the statement, 'There is action,' that is his right speech. Because there actually is action, when he says that 'There is action,' he doesn't make himself an opponent to those arahants who teach action. Because there actually is action, when he persuades another that 'There is action,' that is persuasion

in what is true Dhamma. And in that persuasion in what is true Dhamma, he doesn't exalt himself or disparage others. Whatever bad habituation he previously had is abandoned, while good habituation is manifested. And this right view, right resolve, right speech, non-opposition to the arahants, persuasion in what is true Dhamma, non-exaltation of self, & non-disparagement of others: These many skillful activities come into play, in dependence on right view.

B3. "With regard to this, an observant person considers thus: 'If there is action, then this venerable person—on the breakup of the body, after death—will reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world. Even if we didn't speak of action, and there weren't the true statement of those venerable contemplatives & brahmans, this venerable person is still praised in the here & now by the observant as a person of good habits & right view: one who holds to a doctrine of action.' If there really is a next world, then this venerable person has made a good throw twice, in that he is praised by the observant here & now; and in that—with the breakup of the body, after death—he will reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world. Thus this safe-bet teaching, when well grasped & adopted by him, covers both sides, and leaves behind the possibility of the unskillful.

Causality & Non-causality

A. "There are some contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view: 'There is no causality, no requisite condition, for the defilement of beings. Beings are defiled without causality, without requisite condition. There is no causality, no requisite condition, for the purification of beings. Beings are purified without causality, without requisite condition. There is no strength, no effort, no human energy, no human endeavor. All living beings, all life, all beings, all souls are powerless, devoid of strength, devoid of effort. Subject to the changes of fate, serendipity, and nature, they experience pleasure and pain in the six great classes of birth.'4

B. "Some contemplatives & brahmans, speaking in direct opposition to those contemplatives & brahmans, say this: 'There is causality, there is requisite condition, for the defilement of beings. Beings are defiled with causality, with requisite condition. There is causality, there is requisite condition, for the purification of beings. Beings are purified with causality, with requisite condition. There is strength, there is effort, there is human energy, there is human endeavor. It's not the case that all living beings, all life, all beings, all souls are powerless, devoid of strength, devoid of effort; or that subject to the changes of fate, serendipity, and nature, they experience pleasure and pain in the six great classes of birth.'

"What do you think, householders? Don't these contemplatives & brahmans speak in direct opposition to each other?"

"Yes, lord."

A1. "Now, householders, of those contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—'There is no cause, no requisite condition, for the defilement of beings.... Subject

to the changes of fate, serendipity, and nature, they experience pleasure and pain in the six great classes of birth'—it can be expected that, shunning these three skillful activities—good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, good mental conduct—they will adopt & practice these three unskillful activities: bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable contemplatives & brahmans do not see, in unskillful activities, the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; nor in skillful activities the rewards of renunciation, resembling cleansing.

A2. "Because there actually is causality, the view of one who thinks, 'There is no causality' is his wrong view. Because there actually is causality, when he is resolved that 'There is no causality,' that is his wrong resolve. Because there actually is causality, when he speaks the statement, 'There is no causality,' that is his wrong speech. Because there actually is causality, when he says that 'There is no causality,' he makes himself an opponent to those arahants who teach causality. Because there actually is causality, when he persuades another that 'There is no causality,' that is persuasion in what is not true Dhamma. And in that persuasion in what is not true Dhamma, he exalts himself and disparages others. Whatever good habituation he previously had is abandoned, while bad habituation is manifested. And this wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, opposition to the arahants, persuasion in what is not true Dhamma, exaltation of self, & disparagement of others: These many evil, unskillful activities come into play, in dependence on wrong view.

A3. "With regard to this, an observant person considers thus: 'If there is no causality, then—with the breakup of the body, after death—this venerable person has made himself safe. But if there is causality, then this venerable person—on the breakup of the body, after death—will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Even if we didn't speak of causality, and there weren't the true statement of those venerable contemplatives & brahmans, this venerable person is still criticized in the here & now by the observant as a person of bad habits & wrong view: one who holds to a doctrine of non-causality.' If there really is a next world, then this venerable person has made a bad throw twice: in that he is criticized by the observant here & now, and in that—with the breakup of the body, after death—he will reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. Thus this safe-bet teaching, when poorly grasped & poorly adopted by him, covers (only) one side, and leaves behind the possibility of the skillful.

B1. "Now, householders, of those contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—'There is causality, there is requisite condition, for the defilement of beings.... It's not the case that all living beings, all life, all beings, all souls are powerless, devoid of strength, devoid of effort; or that subject to the changes of fate, serendipity, and nature, they experience pleasure and pain in the six great classes of birth'—it can be expected that, shunning these three unskillful activities—bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct—they will adopt & practice these three skillful activities: good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, good mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable contemplatives & brahmans see in unskillful activities the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; and in skillful activities the rewards of renunciation, resembling cleansing.

B2. "Because there actually is causality, the view of one who thinks, 'There is causality' is his right view. Because there actually is causality, when he is resolved that 'There is causality,' that is his right resolve. Because there actually is causality, when he speaks the statement, 'There is causality,' that is his right speech. Because there actually is causality, when he says that 'There is causality,' he doesn't make himself an opponent to those arahants who teach causality. Because there actually is causality, when he persuades another that 'There is causality,' that is persuasion in what is true Dhamma. And in that persuasion in what is true Dhamma, he doesn't exalt himself or disparage others. Whatever bad habituation he previously had is abandoned, while good habituation is manifested. And this right view, right resolve, right speech, non-opposition to the arahants, persuasion in what is true Dhamma, non-exaltation of self, & non-disparagement of others: These many skillful activities come into play, in dependence on right view.

B3. "With regard to this, an observant person considers thus: 'If there is causality, then this venerable person—on the breakup of the body, after death—will reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world. Even if we didn't speak of causality, and there weren't the true statement of those venerable contemplatives & brahmans, this venerable person is still praised in the here & now by the observant as a person of good habits & right view: one who holds to a doctrine of causality.' If there really is causality, then this venerable person has made a good throw twice, in that he is praised by the observant here & now; and in that—with the breakup of the body, after death—he will reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world. Thus this safe-bet teaching, when well grasped & adopted by him, covers both sides, and leaves behind the possibility of the unskillful.

Formlessness

"There are some contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view: 'There is no total formlessness.' Some contemplatives & brahmans, speaking in direct opposition to those contemplatives & brahmans, say this: 'There is total formlessness.' What do you think, householders? Don't these contemplatives & brahmans speak in direct opposition to each other?"

"Yes, lord."

"With regard to this, an observant person considers thus: 'As for those venerable contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—"There is no total formlessness"—I haven't seen that. As for those venerable contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—"There is total formlessness"—I haven't known that. If I, not knowing, not seeing, were to take one side and declare, "Only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless," that would not be fitting for me. As for those venerable contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—"There is no total formlessness": If their statement is true, there's the safe-bet possibility that I might reappear among the mind-made devas of form. As for those venerable contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—"There is total formlessness": If their statement is true, there's the safe-bet possibility that I might reappear among the

perception-made devas of no form. The taking up of rods & weapons, quarrels, contention, disputes, recrimination, divisiveness, & false speech are seen to arise from form, but not from total formlessness.' Reflecting thus, he practices for disenchantment toward forms, for dispassion toward forms, and for the cessation of forms.

Cessation of Becoming

"There are some contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view: 'There is no total cessation of becoming.' Some contemplatives & brahmans, speaking in direct opposition to those contemplatives & brahmans, say this: 'There is total cessation of becoming.' What do you think, householders? Don't these contemplatives & brahmans speak in direct opposition to each other?"

"Yes, lord."

"With regard to this, an observant person considers thus: 'As for those venerable contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—"There is no total cessation of becoming"—I haven't seen that. As for those venerable contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—"There is total cessation of becoming"—I haven't known that. If I, not knowing, not seeing, were to take one side and declare, "Only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless," that would not be fitting for me. As for those venerable contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—"There is no total cessation of becoming": If their statement is true, there's the safe-bet possibility that I might reappear among the perception-made devas of no form. As for those venerable contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—"There is total cessation of becoming": If their statement is true, it is possible that I will be totally unbound in the here & now. As for those venerable contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—"There is no total cessation of becoming": This view of theirs borders on passion, borders on fettering, borders on relishing, borders on grasping, borders on clinging. As for those venerable contemplatives & brahmans who hold this doctrine, hold this view—"There is total cessation of becoming": This view of theirs borders on non-passion, borders on non-fettering, borders on non-relishing, borders on non-grasping, borders on non-clinging.' Reflecting thus, he practices for disenchantment toward becomings, for dispassion toward becomings, and for the cessation of becomings.

Four Individuals

"Householders, there are these four types of individuals to be found existing in the world. Which four? There is the case where a certain individual torments himself and is devoted to the practice of torturing himself. There is the case where a certain individual torments others and is devoted to the practice of torturing others. There is the case where a certain individual torments himself and is devoted to the practice of torturing himself, and also torments others and is devoted to the practice of torturing others. There is the case where a certain individual neither torments himself nor is he devoted to the practice of torturing himself, neither torments others nor is he devoted to the practice of torturing others. Neither tormenting himself nor tormenting others, he dwells in the here & now free of

hunger, unbound, cooled, sensitive to happiness, with a Brahmā-like mind.

“And which is the individual who torments himself and is devoted to the practice of torturing himself? There is the case where a certain individual goes without cloth, rejecting conventions, licking his hands, not coming when called, not staying when asked. He does not accept food brought or specially made. He does not consent to an invitation (to a meal). He doesn’t receive anything from the mouth of a pot, from the mouth of a container, across a threshold, across a stick, across a pestle, from two eating together, from a pregnant woman, from a woman nursing a child, from a woman living with a man, from where it is announced that food is to be distributed, from where a dog is waiting, from where flies are buzzing. He accepts no meat, no distilled liquor, no wine, no fermented liquor. He limits himself to one house for one morsel, to two houses for two morsels… to seven houses for seven morsels. He lives on one saucerful a day, two saucerfuls a day… seven saucerfuls a day. He takes food once a day, once every two days… once every seven days, and so on up to once every half-month. He remains devoted to the practice of regulating his intake of food. He eats a diet of green vegetables or millet or wild rice or hide-parings or moss or rice bran or rice-water or sesame flour or grass or cow dung. He lives off forest roots & fruits. He eats fallen fruits. He clothes himself in hemp, in canvas, in shrouds, in thrown-away rags, in tree bark, in antelope hide, in wood-shavings fabric, in head-hair wool, in wild-animal wool, in owls’ 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 these many ways, he is devoted to the practice of tormenting & torturing the body. This is called an individual who torments himself and is devoted to the practice of torturing himself.

“And which is the individual who torments others and is devoted to the practice of torturing others? There is the case where a certain individual is a butcher of sheep, a butcher of pigs, a butcher of fowl, a trapper, a hunter, a fisherman, a thief, an executioner,5 a prison warden, or anyone who follows any other bloody occupation. This is called an individual who torments others and is devoted to the practice of torturing others.

“And which is the individual who torments himself and is devoted to the practice of torturing himself, and also torments others and is devoted to the practice of torturing others? There is the case where an individual is a head-anointed noble warrior king, or a brahman of great wealth. Having had a new temple built to the east of the city, having shaved off his hair & beard, having dressed himself in a rough hide, having smeared his body with ghee & oil, and scratching his back with a deer horn, he enters the new temple along with his chief queen & brahman high priest. There he makes his bed on the bare ground strewn with grass. The king lives off the milk from the first teat of a cow with an identical calf; the queen lives off the milk from the second teat; the brahman high priest, off the milk from the third teat. The milk from the fourth teat they pour6 into the fire. The calf lives on what is left.

“He says, ‘Let so many bulls be slaughtered for the sacrifice. Let so many bullocks… so many heifers… so many goats… so many sheep…. Let so many horses be slaughtered for the sacrifice.7 Let so many trees be cut down for the sacrificial posts; let so many plants be mowed down for the sacrificial grass.’ And his slaves, servants, & workers make preparations, weeping with tearful faces, spurred on by punishment, spurred on by fear. This is called an individual who torments himself and is devoted to the practice of torturing himself, and also torments others and is devoted to the practice of torturing others.

“And which is the individual who neither torments himself nor is devoted to the practice of torturing himself, neither torments others nor is devoted to the practice of torturing others; who—neither tormenting himself nor tormenting others—dwells in the here & now free of hunger, unbound, cooled, sensitive to happiness with a Brahmā-like mind?

“There is the case where a Tathāgata appears in the world, worthy & rightly self-awakened. He teaches the Dhamma admirable in its beginning, admirable in its middle, admirable in its end. He proclaims the holy life both in its particulars and in its essence, entirely perfect, surpassingly pure.

“A householder or householder’s son, hearing the Dhamma, gains conviction in the Tathāgata and reflects: ‘Household life is confining, a dusty path. Life gone forth is the open air. It isn’t easy, living at home, to practice the holy life totally perfect, totally pure, a polished shell. What if I, having shaved off my hair & beard and putting on the ochre robe, were to go forth from the household life into homelessness?’

“So after some time he abandons his mass of wealth, large or small; leaves his circle of relatives, large or small; shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the ochre robes, and goes forth from the household life into homelessness.

Virtue

“When he has thus gone forth, endowed with the monks’ training & livelihood, then—abandoning the taking of life—he abstains from the taking of life. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, sympathetic for the welfare of all living beings.

“Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given. He takes only what is given, accepts only what is given, lives not by stealth but by means of a self that has become pure.

“Abandoning uncelibacy, he lives a celibate life, aloof, refraining from the sexual act that is the villager’s way.

“Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech. He speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world.

“Abandoning divisive speech he abstains from divisive speech. What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord.

“Abandoning abusive speech, he abstains from abusive speech. He speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing and pleasing to people at large.

“Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter. He speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, and the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.

“He abstains from damaging seed and plant life.

“He eats only once a day, refraining from the evening meal and from food at the wrong time of day.

“He abstains from dancing, singing, instrumental music, and from watching shows.

“He abstains from wearing garlands and from beautifying himself with scents and cosmetics.

“He abstains from high and luxurious beds and seats.

“He abstains from accepting gold and money.

“He abstains from accepting uncooked grain… raw meat… women and girls… male and female slaves… goats and sheep… fowl and pigs… elephants, cattle, steeds, and mares… fields and property.

“He abstains from running messages… from buying and selling… from dealing with false scales, false metals, and false measures… from bribery, deception, and fraud.

“He abstains from mutilating, executing, imprisoning, highway robbery, plunder, and violence.

“He is content with a set of robes to provide for his body and alms food to provide for his hunger. Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden; so too is he content with a set of robes to provide for his body and alms food to provide for his hunger. Wherever he goes, he takes only his barest necessities along.

“Endowed with this noble aggregate of virtue, he is inwardly sensitive to the pleasure of being blameless.

Sense Restraint

“On seeing a form with the eye, he does not grasp at any theme or details by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. On hearing a sound with the ear…. On smelling an aroma with the nose…. On tasting a flavor with the tongue…. On touching a tactile sensation with the body…. On cognizing an idea with the intellect, he does not grasp at any theme or details by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the intellect—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. Endowed with this noble restraint over the sense faculties, he is inwardly sensitive to the pleasure of being blameless.

Mindfulness & Alertness

“When going forward and returning, he makes himself alert. When looking toward and looking away… when bending and extending his limbs… when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe, and his bowl… when eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting… when urinating and defecating… when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, he makes himself alert.

Abandoning the Hindrances

“Endowed with this noble aggregate of virtue, this noble restraint over the sense faculties, this noble mindfulness & alertness, he seeks out a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, 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.

The Four Jhānas

“Having abandoned these five hindrances—imperfections of awareness that weaken discernment—then, 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 & evaluation.

“Then, 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 & evaluation—internal assurance.

“Then, 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.’

“Then, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.

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. This, too, is how striving is fruitful, how exertion is fruitful.

“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 breakup 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 breakup 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.

“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 is called an individual who neither torments himself nor is devoted to the practice of torturing himself, who neither torments others nor is devoted to the practice of torturing others. Neither tormenting himself nor tormenting others, he dwells in the here & now free of hunger, unbound, cooled, sensitive to happiness, with a Brahmā-like mind."

When this was said, the brahman householders of Sāla said, "Magnificent, master Gotama! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has master Gotama—through many lines of reasoning—made the Dhamma clear. We go to master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Saṅgha of monks. May master Gotama remember us as lay followers who have gone to him for refuge, from this day forward, for life."

Notes

1. This was the view of Ajita Kesakambalin. See DN 2.

2. In this context—where that actual truth or falseness of the doctrine is not being addressed—"wrong view" would have to mean a view that leads a person to engage in bad conduct in body, speech, or mind.

3. This was the view of Pūraṇa Kassapa. See DN 2.

4. This was the view of Makkhali Gosāla. See DN 2.

5. The Burmese edition of the Canon here adds, "a slaughterer of cows."

6. This follows the Sinhalese, Burmese, and PTS editions of the Canon. The Thai edition reads, "he pours."

7. The PTS and Sinhalese editions omit the sentence, "Let so many horses be slaughtered for the sacrifice."

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 41; MN 95; AN 3:62; AN 3:66