MN 64 — MN 64 The Longer Exhortation to Māluṅkya | Mahā Māluṅkyovāda Sutta

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Text

The Longer Exhortation to Māluṅkya

Mahā Māluṅkyovāda Sutta (MN 64)

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, do you remember the five lower fetters as taught by me?”

When this was said, Ven. Māluṅkyaputta said to the Blessed One, "Lord, I remember the five lower fetters as taught by the Blessed One."

"And how, Māluṅkyaputta, do you remember the five lower fetters as taught by me?"

"Lord, I remember self-identification view as a lower fetter taught by the Blessed One. I remember uncertainty as a lower fetter taught by the Blessed One. I remember grasping at habits & practices as a lower fetter taught by the Blessed One. I remember sensual desire as a lower fetter taught by the Blessed One. I remember ill will as a lower fetter taught by the Blessed One. That's how I remember the five lower fetters as taught by the Blessed One."

"And to whom, Māluṅkyaputta, do you remember my having taught the five lower fetters in that way? Wouldn't the wanderers of other sects make a rebuttal with the simile of the youngster? For even the thought 'self-identification' doesn't occur to a stupid baby boy lying on its back, so from where would self-identification view arise in it, even though a latent tendency to self-identification view lies latent within it? Even the thought 'dhammas' doesn't occur to a stupid baby boy lying on its back, so from where would uncertainty about dhammas arise in it, even though a latent tendency to uncertainty lies latent within it? Even the thought 'habits' doesn't occur to a stupid baby boy lying on its back, so from where would grasping at habits & practices arise in it, even though a latent tendency to grasping at habits & practices lies latent within it? Even the thought 'sensuality' doesn't occur to a stupid baby boy lying on its back, so from where would sensual desire for sensuality arise in it, even though a latent tendency to sensual passion lies latent within it? Even the thought 'beings' doesn't occur to a stupid baby boy lying on its back, so from where would ill will for beings arise in it, even though a latent tendency to ill will lies latent within it?"

When this was said, Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One, "This is the time, O Blessed One. This is the time, O One Well-Gone, for the Blessed One to teach the five lower fetters. Having heard the Blessed One, the monks will remember it."

"In that case, Ānanda, listen and pay close attention. I will speak."

"As you say, lord," Ven. Ānanda responded to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said, "There is the case, Ānanda, 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—remains with his awareness possessed by self-identification view, overcome by self-identification view. He doesn't discern, as it has come to be, the escape from an arisen self-identification view. For him, that self-identification view—fixed & unsubdued in him—is a lower fetter.

"He remains with his awareness possessed by uncertainty…

“He remains with his awareness possessed by grasping at habits & practices…

“He remains with his awareness possessed by sensual passion…

“He remains with his awareness possessed by ill will, overcome by ill will. He doesn’t discern, as it has come to be, the escape from arisen ill will. For him, that ill will—fixed & unsubdued in him—is a lower fetter.

“But 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— remains with his awareness not possessed by self-identification view, not overcome by self-identification view. He discerns, as it has come to be, the escape from an arisen self-identification view. For him, that self-identification view—together with its latent tendency—is abandoned.

“He remains with his awareness not possessed by uncertainty…

“He remains with his awareness not possessed by grasping at habits & practices…

“He remains with his awareness not possessed by sensual passion…

“He remains with his awareness not possessed by ill will, not overcome by ill will. He discerns, as it has come to be, the escape from arisen ill will. For him, that ill will—together with its latent tendency—is abandoned.

“For one who has not followed the path, the practice, for the abandoning of the five lower fetters to know, to see, or to abandon the five lower fetters: That is impossible. It’s just as if there were a great tree standing, possessed of heartwood. For its heartwood to be cut without first cutting through the bark, without cutting through the sapwood: That is impossible. In the same way, for one who has not followed the path, the practice, for the abandoning of the five lower fetters to know, to see, or to abandon the five lower fetters: That is impossible.

“For one who has followed the path, the practice, for the abandoning of the five lower fetters to know, to see, or to abandon the five lower fetters: That is possible. It’s just as if there were a great tree standing, possessed of heartwood. For its heartwood to be cut after first cutting through the bark and cutting through the sapwood: That is possible. In the same way, for one who has followed the path, the practice, for the abandoning of the five lower fetters to know, to see, or to abandon the five lower fetters: That is possible.

“Suppose that the River Ganges were full of water up to the brim so that crows could drink out of it, and a weak man were to come along, (thinking,) ‘I will go across this River Ganges, cutting the current with my arms, safely to the further shore.’ He would not be able to go across the River Ganges, cutting the current with his arms, safely to the further shore. So it is with anyone whose mind, when the cessation of self-identification is being taught, doesn’t take to it, isn’t calmed by it, doesn’t resolve on it, and isn’t released in it:

That person is to be seen as like the weak man.

“But suppose that the River Ganges were full of water up to the brim so that crows could drink out of it, and a strong man were to come along, (thinking,) ‘I will go across this River Ganges, cutting the current with my arms, safely to the further shore.’ He would be able to go across the River Ganges, cutting the current with his arms, safely to the further shore. So it is with anyone whose mind, when the cessation of self-identification is being taught, takes to it, is calmed by it, resolves on it, and is released in it: That person is to be seen as like the strong man.

“And what, Ānanda, is the path, what is the practice, for the abandoning of the five lower fetters? There is the case where a monk—from being secluded from acquisitions, from the abandoning of unskillful qualities, from the entire calming of bodily discomfort, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena and, having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: ‘This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.’

“Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.

“This, Ānanda, is the path, this is the practice, for the abandoning of the five lower fetters.

[Similarly with the second, third, and fourth jhāna.]

“And further, Ānanda, the monk—with the complete transcending of perceptions of (physical) form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not attending to perceptions of multiplicity, (perceiving,) ‘Infinite space’—enters & remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena and, having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: ‘This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.’

“Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this very Dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.

“This, Ānanda, is the path, this is the practice, for the abandoning of the five lower fetters.”

[Similarly with the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness and the dimension of nothingness.]1

“But, lord, if this is the path, if this is the practice, for the abandoning of the five lower fetters, then why are some monks (said to be) ‘released through awareness,’ and some monks are (said to be) ‘released through discernment’?”2

“I tell you, Ānanda: That is the difference in their faculties.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Ven. Ānanda delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

Notes

1. The list of concentration attainments to be used as a basis for insight while one remains in the attainment stops here. MN 111 indicates that the next two attainments—the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception and the cessation of perception & feeling—can be used as a basis for liberating insight only after one has emerged from the attainment. AN 9:36 notes that the attainments from the first jhāna up through the dimension of nothingness are “perception-attainments.” Given that the work of insight requires perceptions, this suggests that the two higher attainments would be destroyed by trying to use the perceptions of insight while remaining in them. AN 9:36 adds, “As far as the perception-attainments go, that is as far as gnosis-penetration goes. As for these two dimensions—the attainment of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception & the attainment of the cessation of perception & feeling—I tell you that they are to be rightly explained by those monks who are meditators, skilled at attainment, skilled at attainment-emergence, who have attained & emerged in dependence on them.”

2. Given that arahants are described as being of two sorts—released through awareness and released through discernment—it might seem that there should be two different paths to arahantship. In this sutta, however, the Buddha is describing a single path. That’s why Ven. Ānanda asks for clarification. The Buddha’s response is in line with the explanation given in AN 9:43–45: “Released through discernment” does not mean that one has attained awakening without experiencing any of the jhānas. Instead, it means that one has experienced at least the first jhāna, but without any of the psychic powers that sometimes accompany the jhānas. Thus a person whose faculty of concentration was too weak to encompass any of those powers would be described as released through discernment, whereas one whose faculty of concentration was strong enough to encompass at least some of them would be described as released through awareness.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: MN 52; MN 78; SN 12:70; SN 22:89; AN 3:88; AN 10:13; Dhp 218; Sn 1:8