MN 99 — With Subha

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Text

Middle Discourses 99

With Subha

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery.

Now at that time the student Subha, Todeyya's son, was residing in Sāvatthī at a certain householder's home on some business. Then Subha said to that householder, "Householder, I have heard that Sāvatthī does not lack for perfected ones. What ascetic or brahmin might we pay homage to today?"

"Sir, the Buddha is staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. You can pay homage to him."

Acknowledging that householder, Subha went to the Buddha and exchanged greetings with him. When the greetings and polite conversation were over, he sat down to one side and said to the Buddha:

"Worthy Gotama, the brahmins say: 'Laypeople succeed in the system of the skillful teaching, not renunciates.' What do you say about this?"

"On this point, student, I speak after analyzing the question, not one-sidedly. I don't praise wrong practice for either laypeople or renunciates. Because of wrong practice, neither laypeople nor renunciates succeed in the system of the skillful teaching. I praise right practice for both laypeople and renunciates. Because of right practice, both laypeople and renunciates succeed in the system of the skillful teaching."

"Worthy Gotama, the brahmins say: 'Since the work of the lay life has many obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings it is very fruitful. But since the work of the renunciate has few obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings it is not very fruitful.' What do you say about this?"

"On this point, too, I speak after analyzing the question, not one-sidedly. Some work has many obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings, and when it fails it's not very fruitful. Some work has many obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings, and when it succeeds it is very fruitful. Some work has few obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings, and when it fails it's not very fruitful. Some work has few obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings, and when it succeeds it is very fruitful.

And what work has many obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings, and when it fails it's not very fruitful? Farming. And what work has many obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings, and when it succeeds it is very fruitful? Again, it is farming. And what work has few obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings, and when it fails it's not very fruitful? Trade. And what work has few obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings, and when it succeeds it is very fruitful? Again, it's trade.

The lay life is like farming in that it's work with many obligations and when it fails it's not very fruitful; but when it succeeds it is very fruitful. The renunciate life is like trade in that it's work with few obligations and when it fails it's not very fruitful; but when it succeeds it is very fruitful."

"Worthy Gotama, the brahmins prescribe five things for making merit and succeeding in the skillful."

"If you don't mind, please explain these in this assembly."

"It's no trouble when good fellows such as yourself are sitting here."

"Well, speak then, student."

"Worthy Gotama, truth is the first thing. Fervor is the second thing. Chastity is the third thing. Recitation is the fourth thing. Generosity is the fifth thing. These are the five things that the brahmins prescribe for making merit and succeeding in the skillful. What do you say about this?"

"Well, student, is there even a single one of the brahmins who says this: 'I declare the result of these five things after realizing it with my own insight'?"

"No, worthy Gotama."

"Well, is there even a single tutor of the brahmins, or a tutor's tutor, or anyone back to the seventh generation of tutors, who says this: 'I declare the result of these five things after realizing it with my own insight'?"

"No, worthy Gotama."

"Well, what of the ancient seers of the brahmins, namely Aṭṭhaka, Vāmaka, Vāmadeva, Vessāmitta, Yamadaggi, Aṅgīrasa, Bhāradvāja, Vāseṭṭha, Kassapa, and Bhagu? They were the authors and propagators of the hymns. Their hymnal was sung and propagated and compiled in ancient times; and these days, brahmins continue to sing and chant it, chanting what was chanted and teaching what was taught. Did even they say: 'We declare the result of these five things after realizing it with our own insight'?"

"No, worthy Gotama."

"So, student, it seems that there is not a single one of the brahmins, not even anyone back to the seventh generation of tutors, nor even the ancient seers of the brahmins who says: 'We declare the result of these five things after realizing it with our own insight.'

Suppose there was a queue of blind men, each holding the one in front: the first one does not see, the middle one does not see, and the last one does not see. In the same way, it

seems to me that the brahmins' statement turns out to be comparable to a queue of blind men: the first one does not see, the middle one does not see, and the last one does not see."

When he said this, Subha became angry and upset with the Buddha because of the simile of the queue of blind men. He even attacked and badmouthed the Buddha himself, saying, "The ascetic Gotama will be worsted!" He said to the Buddha:

"Worthy Gotama, the brahmin Pokkharasāti Upamañña of the Subhaga Forest says: 'This is exactly what happens with some ascetics and brahmins. They claim to have a superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. But their statement turns out to be a joke—mere words, vacuous and hollow. For how on earth can a human being know or see or realize a superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones? That is not possible.'"

"But student, does Pokkharasāti understand the minds of all these ascetics and brahmins, having encompassed them with his mind?"

"Worthy Gotama, Pokkharasāti doesn't even understand the mind of his own bonded maid Puṇṇikā, so how could he know all those ascetics and brahmins?"

"Suppose there was a person blind from birth. They couldn't see sights that are dark or bright, or blue, yellow, red, or magenta. They couldn't see even and uneven ground, or the stars, or the moon and sun. They'd say: 'There's no such thing as dark and bright sights, and no one who sees them. There's no such thing as blue, yellow, red, magenta, even and uneven ground, stars, moon and sun, and no one who sees these things. I don't know it or see it, therefore it doesn't exist.' Would they be speaking rightly?"

"No, worthy Gotama. There are such things as dark and bright sights, and one who sees them. There is blue, yellow, red, magenta, even and uneven ground, stars, moon and sun, and one who sees these things. So it's not right to say this: 'I don't know it or see it, therefore it doesn't exist.'"

"In the same way, Pokkharasāti is blind and sightless. It is quite impossible for him to know or see or realize a superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones.

What do you think, student? There are well-to-do brahmins of Kosala such as the brahmins Caṅkī, Tārukkha, Pokkharasāti, Jānussoṇi, and your father Todeyya. What's better for them: that their speech agrees or disagrees with the consensus of opinion?"

"That it agrees, worthy Gotama."

"What's better for them: that their speech is thoughtful or thoughtless?"

"That it is thoughtful."

"What's better for them: that their speech follows reflection or is unreflective?"

"That it follows reflection."

"What's better for them: that their speech is beneficial or worthless?"

“That it’s beneficial.”

“What do you think, student? If this is so, does Pokkharasāti’s speech agree or disagree with the consensus of opinion?”

“It disagrees, worthy Gotama.”

“Is it thoughtful or thoughtless?”

“Thoughtless.”

“Is it reflective or unreflective?”

“Unreflective.”

“Is it beneficial or worthless?”

“Worthless.”

“Student, there are these five hindrances. What five? The hindrances of sensual desire, ill will, dullness and drowsiness, restlessness and remorse, and doubt. These are the five hindrances. Pokkharasāti is obstructed, hindered, engulfed, and enveloped by these five hindrances. It is quite impossible for him to know or see or realize a superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones.

There are these five kinds of sensual stimulation. What five? There are sights known by the eye, which are likable, desirable, agreeable, pleasant, sensual, and arousing. There are sounds known by the ear … smells known by the nose … tastes known by the tongue … touches known by the body, which are likable, desirable, agreeable, pleasant, sensual, and arousing. These are the five kinds of sensual stimulation.

Pokkharasāti enjoys these five kinds of sensual stimulation, tied, infatuated, attached, blind to the drawbacks, and not understanding the escape. It is quite impossible for him to know or see or realize a superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones.

What do you think, student? Which would have better flames, color, and radiance: a fire that depends on grass and logs as fuel, or one that does not?”

“If it were possible for a fire to burn without depending on grass and logs as fuel, that would have better flames, color, and radiance.”

“But it isn’t possible, except by psychic power. Rapture that depends on the five kinds of sensual stimulation is like a fire that depends on grass and logs as fuel. Rapture that’s apart from sensual pleasures and unskillful qualities is like a fire that doesn’t depend on grass and logs as fuel.

And what is rapture that’s apart from sensual pleasures and unskillful qualities? It’s when a mendicant, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters and remains in the first absorption, which has the rapture and bliss born of seclusion, while placing the mind and keeping it connected. This is rapture that’s apart from sensual pleasures and unskillful qualities.

Furthermore, as the placing of the mind and keeping it connected are stilled, they enter and remain in the second absorption, which has the rapture and bliss born of immersion, with internal clarity and mind at one, without placing the mind and keeping it connected. This too is rapture that's apart from sensual pleasures and unskillful qualities.

Of the five things that the brahmins prescribe for making merit and succeeding in the skillful, which do they say is the most fruitful?"

"Generosity."

"What do you think, student? Suppose a brahmin was setting up a grand sacrifice. Then two brahmins came along, thinking, 'We shall participate in the grand sacrifice of the brahmin named so-and-so.' Then one of those brahmins thought: 'Oh, I hope that I alone get the best seat, the best drink, and the best almsfood in the refectory, not some other brahmin.' But it's possible that some other brahmin gets the best seat, the best drink, and the best almsfood in the refectory. Thinking, 'Some other brahmin has got the best seat, the best drink, the best almsfood,' they get angry and upset. What do the brahmins say is the result of this?"

"Worthy Gotama, brahmins don't give gifts so that others will get angry and upset. Rather, they only give gifts that are born from sympathy."

"In that case, isn't this a sixth ground for making merit, namely, being born from sympathy?"

"In that case, this is a sixth ground for making merit, namely, being born from sympathy."

"Of the five things that the brahmins prescribe for making merit and succeeding in the skillful, where do you usually find them: among laypeople or renunciates?"

"Mostly among renunciates, and less so among lay people. For a layperson has many obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings, and they can't always tell the truth, be fervent, be chaste, rehearse a lot, or be very generous. But a renunciate has few obligations, duties, issues, and undertakings, and they can always tell the truth, be fervent, be chaste, rehearse a lot, and be very generous. Of the five things that the brahmins prescribe for making merit and succeeding in the skillful, I usually find them among renunciates, and less so among laypeople."

"I say that the five things prescribed by the brahmins for making merit are prerequisites of the mind for developing a mind free of enmity and ill will.

Take a mendicant who speaks the truth. Thinking, 'I'm truthful,' they find inspiration in the meaning and the teaching, and find joy connected with the teaching. And I say that joy connected with the skillful is a prerequisite of the mind for developing a mind free of enmity and ill will.

Take a mendicant who is fervent … is chaste … rehearses a lot … and is very generous. Thinking, 'I'm very generous,' they find inspiration in the meaning and the teaching, and find joy connected with the teaching. And I say that joy connected with the skillful is a prerequisite of the mind for developing a mind free of enmity and ill will. I say that these five things prescribed by the brahmins for making merit are prerequisites of the mind for

developing a mind free of enmity and ill will."

When he had spoken, Subha said to him, "Worthy Gotama, I have heard that the ascetic Gotama knows a path to company with divinity."

"What do you think, student? Is the village of Naḷakāra nearby?"

"Yes it is, sir."

"What do you think, student? Suppose a person was born and raised in Naḷakāra. And as soon as they left the town some people asked them for the road to Naḷakāra. Would they be slow or hesitant to answer?"

"No, worthy Gotama. Why is that? Because they were born and raised in Naḷakāra. They're well acquainted with all the roads to the village."

"Still, it's possible they might be slow or hesitant to answer. But the Realized One is never slow or hesitant when questioned about the realm of divinity or the practice that leads to the realm of divinity. I understand the Divinity, the realm of divinity, and the practice that leads to the realm of divinity, practicing in accordance with which one is reborn in the realm of divinity."

"Worthy Gotama, I have heard that the ascetic Gotama teaches a path to company with divinity. Please teach me that path."

"Well then, student, listen and apply your mind well, I will speak."

"Yes, worthy sir," replied Subha. The Buddha said this:

"And what is a path to company with divinity? Firstly, a mendicant meditates spreading a heart full of love to one direction, and to the second, and to the third, and to the fourth. In the same way above, below, across, everywhere, all around, they spread a heart full of love to the whole world—abundant, expansive, limitless, free of enmity and ill will. When the heart's release by love has been developed like this, any limited deeds they've done don't remain or persist there. Suppose there was a powerful horn blower. They'd easily make themselves heard in the four quarters. In the same way, when the heart's release by love has been developed like this, any limited deeds they've done don't remain or persist there. This is a path to company with divinity.

Furthermore, a mendicant meditates spreading a heart full of compassion …

They meditate spreading a heart full of rejoicing …

They meditate spreading a heart full of equanimity to one direction, and to the second, and to the third, and to the fourth. In the same way above, below, across, everywhere, all around, they spread a heart full of equanimity to the whole world—abundant, expansive, limitless, free of enmity and ill will. When the heart's release by equanimity has been developed and cultivated like this, any limited deeds they've done don't remain or persist there. Suppose there was a powerful horn blower. They'd easily make themselves heard in the four quarters. In the same way, when the heart's release by equanimity has been developed and cultivated like this, any limited deeds they've done don't remain or persist

there. This too is a path to company with divinity."

When he had spoken, Subha said to him, "Excellent, worthy Gotama! Excellent! As if he were righting the overturned, or revealing the hidden, or pointing out the path to the lost, or lighting a lamp in the dark so people with clear eyes can see what's there, worthy Gotama has made the teaching clear in many ways. I go for refuge to the worthy Gotama, to the teaching, and to the mendicant Saṅgha. From this day forth, may the worthy Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge for life. Well, now, worthy Gotama, I must go. I have many duties, and much to do."

"Please, student, go at your convenience." And then Subha approved and agreed with what the Buddha said. He got up from his seat, bowed and respectfully circled the Buddha, keeping him on his right, before leaving.

Now at that time the brahmin Jānussoṇi drove out from Sāvatthī in the middle of the day in an all-white chariot drawn by mares. He saw the student Subha coming off in the distance, and said to him, "So, worthy Bhāradvāja, where are you coming from in the middle of the day?"

"Just now, good fellow, I've come from the presence of the ascetic Gotama."

"What do you think of the ascetic Gotama's lucidity of wisdom? Do you think he's astute?"

"Worthy sir, who am I to judge the ascetic Gotama's lucidity of wisdom? You'd really have to be on the same level to judge his lucidity of wisdom."

"Worthy Bhāradvāja praises the ascetic Gotama with high praise indeed."

"Who am I to praise the ascetic Gotama? He is praised by the praised as the best among gods and humans. The five things that the brahmins prescribe for making merit and succeeding in the skillful he says are prerequisites of the mind for developing a mind free of enmity and ill will."

When he had spoken, Jānussoṇi got down from his chariot, arranged his robe over one shoulder, raised his cupped palms toward the Buddha, and expressed this heartfelt sentiment three times, "King Pasenadi of Kosala is lucky, so very lucky that the Realized One, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha is living in his realm!"