SN 12.61 — Assutavā Sutta: The Spiritually-Unlearned (1)

English translation by K. Nizamis.

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Text

Thus it has been heard by me. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvatthi in the Jeta Forest in the private park owned by Anāthapiṇḍika. There the Blessed one addressed the monks thus: ‘Monks!’ Those monks responded thus: ‘Blessed One!’ The Blessed One said this:

“Monks, the ordinary person, [1] unlearned in spiritual knowledge, [2] might grow weary of, might become detached from, might become released from this physical body made up of the four great elements. What is the reason for this? Because, monks, apparent are the increase and the decrease, the taking up and the putting down, [3] of this physical body made up of the four great elements. For that reason, the ordinary person, in every way unlearned in spiritual knowledge, might grow weary, might become detached, might become released.

“But, indeed, that which, monks, is called ‘mind’, or ‘thought’, or ‘consciousness’, [4] the ordinary person, in every way unlearned in spiritual knowledge, not enough to turn away, not enough to become detached, not enough to be released. What is the reason for this?

Because for a long time, monks, that ‘mind’, or ‘thought’, or ‘consciousness’ of the ordinary person, in every way unlearned in spiritual knowledge, has been clung to, has been cherished, has been fondled: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’. Because of that, the ordinary person, in every way unlearned in spiritual knowledge, not enough to turn away, not enough to become detached, not enough to be released.

“Better, monks, to let the ordinary person, in all ways unlearned in spiritual knowledge, proceed from the assumption that the self is this physical body made up of the four great elements, rather than mind. [5] What is the reason for this? This physical body, Monks, comprising the four great elements, is seen standing for one rainy season, standing for two rainy seasons,… for three… four… five… ten… twenty… thirty… forty… fifty… standing for a hundred or more rainy seasons.

“But, indeed, that which, monks, is called ‘mind’, or ‘thought’, or ‘consciousness’, that, by night and by day, as other, indeed, arises, as other ceases. [6] Just as, monks, a monkey in the mountain-side forests, moving itself, [7] grasps a branch, then releasing that, grasps another, then releasing that, grasps another; even so, indeed, monks, that which is called ‘mind’, or ‘thought’, or ‘consciousness’: that, by night and by day, as other, indeed, arises, as other ceases.

“Therein, monks, the noble disciple, learned in spiritual knowledge, properly and legitimately cognizes [8] just dependent co-arising, thus: ‘In the event of the being of this, there is (also) this; from the arising of this, this (also) arises. In the event of the non-being of this, there is (also) not this. From the cessation of this, this (also) ceases.’

“Which is this: ‘From ignorance as condition, the formative mental functions; [9] from the formative mental functions as condition, sensory consciousness; from sensory consciousness as condition, name-and-form; from name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; from the six sense bases as condition, contact; from contact as condition, sensation; from sensation as condition, craving; from craving as condition, clinging; from clinging as condition, being; from being as condition, birth; from birth as condition, old age and death, grief, lamentation, suffering, distress and tribulation all together come to be. Thus there is the rise of this whole complex of suffering.

“‘But from the fading away and cessation, without any trace remaining, of ignorance, there is the cessation of the formative mental functions; from the cessation of the formative mental functions, the cessation of sensory consciousness; from the cessation of sensory consciousness, the cessation of name-and-form; from the cessation of name-and-form, the cessation of the six sense bases; from the cessation of the six sense bases, the cessation of contact; from the cessation of contact, the cessation of sensation; from the cessation of sensation, the cessation of craving; from the cessation of craving, the cessation of clinging; from the cessation of clinging, the cessation of being; from the cessation of being, the cessation of birth; from the cessation of birth, old age and death, grief, lamentation, suffering, distress and tribulation cease. Thus there is the cessation of this whole complex of suffering.’

“Seeing thus, monks, a noble disciple, learned in spiritual knowledge, grows weary and turns away [10] from material form; grows weary and turns away from feelings; grows weary and turns away from perceptions; grows weary and turns away from formative functions; grows weary and turns away from sensory consciousness. Having grown weary and having turned away, he detaches; from detachment, he is released; from being released, there is the knowledge: ‘Released.’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth; the holy life has been fulfilled; what had to be done has been done; no coming back again to being-here [11]’.”

Notes

1.

Puthujjana. The term puthujjana may well have originally derived from the Vedic pṛthak, “separate, different”, and jana, “generated creature, being”: hence, a creature or being that, while it is part of a species, lives its own individual, separate life. The much later commentaries to the suttas prefer to derive the term from pṛthu, “broad, wide, abundant, manifold”, thus suggesting a creature or being belonging to “the masses”, one of “the many”. Both terms share the same verbal root, pṛth, “to extend”, and overlap in sense, because “expansion” requires multiplication, and multiplication requires division, hence differentiation. What is “spaced apart” is “differentiated” (this is the sense of pṛthak). Thus, we could say, combining these two senses, that the puthujjana is a “mass individual”: someone who is “just like everyone else”, naïvely accepting and living the received opinions and values of his or her culture in his or her own individual life. See also SN 22.22, notes 6 and 7.

2.

Assutavā: literally, “one who has not heard; one who is ignorant”; that is to say, one who has not heard and intuited the meaning of genuine spiritual teachings from a genuine spiritual teacher, and who is therefore not learned in or not informed about spiritual truth.

3.

Ādānam-pi nikkhepanam-pi. Ādāna means 'taking up, grasping'; nikkhepana means 'putting or laying down, discarding'. The meaning of these terms here becomes much clearer if one sees how the same contrasting pair of terms is used in the very important and somewhat controversial sutta, SN 22.22 Bhāra Sutta (SN III.1.3.1; PTS SN III, 25), in which the Buddha defines the expressions bhāra-ādānaṃ, “taking up the burden”, and bhāra- nikkhepanaṃ, “putting down the burden”. In that sutta, the Buddha says that the bhāra, the “burden”, is the pañca-upādāna-khandhā, the “five clung-to aggregates”; and that the bhāra-hāra, the “burden-bearer”, is the puggala, the “person”. While the Buddha certainly denied the existence of any permanent, immutable entity such as a core “self” (attā), his teaching concerning the relationship between the continuity of consciousness and its various interrelated functions, modes and forms, was extremely subtle, sophisticated and complex. The process of consciousness continues from one

embodiment to another. While it is not a separable "self" or "soul" (attā), neither can it be reduced merely to the "stream" of its momentary "contents" or "components" (which is how, in essence, the later scholastic Abhidhamma re-interpreted the teaching of the suttas): in a certain sense, "something" makes the "movement" of "consciousness" possible. That is to say, in order to be "ignorant", to "crave", to "grasp", to "move", "consciousness" must always already possess the inherent capacity to be conscious or aware. To interpret the Buddha's teaching on "mind" or "consciousness" in a reductionist manner is to contradict its sense and thus to lose sight of its very deep and beautiful meaning. See also SN 22.22 notes 3, 5, and 7.

4.

"Yañca kho etaṃ, bhikkhave, vuccati cittaṃ itipi, mano itipi, viññāṇaṃ itipi…" The quotation marks placed around each term in the translation are justified by the fact that the Pali has "vuccati cittaṃ iti pi, mano iti pi, viññāṇaṃ iti pi", "It is called "citta" or "mano" or "viññāṇa"": the particle iti after each term functions as a "quotation marker", corresponding to the verb vuccati, "it is called…". These three terms demand a very detailed, comprehensive and lengthy analysis; which, of course, cannot possibly be provided in a footnote. If this sutta were presenting a more detailed technical and theoretical discussion, such as we do indeed find in many other suttas, then it would be more appropriate to translate these terms more precisely: for example, citta as "subjective mind", mano as "cognitive faculty", and viññāṇa as "sensory consciousness" (that is, consciousness when functioning in the mode of the six sense bases (saḷāyatana), although viññāṇa also has two further special technical senses and uses in the suttas). But the present sutta is very clearly not intended to be technically and theoretically precise about this particular subject. In fact, one of the points that the sutta seems to suggest is that for the ordinary, unlearned person these three terms are quite interchangeable: "six of one and half a dozen of the other", as the English idiom goes. For this reason, it is much more appropriate to translate these three terms more loosely and ambiguously; but this is somewhat difficult to do in English because, unlike Sanskrit and Pali, English does not have a very extensive vocabulary with which to indicate the subtleties of "consciousness" or "mind". We can see from the context in which these three terms are actually used in this sutta that what is in question here is the way in which the unlearned or uninformed person thinks of these terms: how he or she conflates them due to lack of analytical understanding, and how he or she relates to what he or she thinks of as his or her "own mind": namely, identifying it and cherishing as the private, personal "self" (attā).

This partial statement, "cittaṃ itipi, mano itipi, viññāṇaṃ itipi", is very frequently quoted — in isolation, out of context — by proponents and commentators of the Abhidhamma and of Abhidhamma-influenced schools, in support of the stereotypical Abhidhamma view that the terms citta, mano, and viññāṇa are somehow "synonymous". Only one other similar passage can be found in the Suttanta Piṭaka, in DN 1 (Brahmajāla Sutta; PTS DN i.1), at DN i.21, but this passage is rarely cited, for an obvious reason: "Yaṃ ca kho idaṃ vuccati cittanti vā mano'ti vā viññāṇanti vā…" "That which is called 'citta' or 'mano' or 'viññāṇa'…" There, in DN 1, it is put into the mouth of the kind of "reasoner" (takkī) who wrongly argues that "mind" is a permanent, eternal, unchanging "self" (attā). It is therefore

very interesting and very important to note that here, too, in SN 12.61, this same formula occurs in the context of a description of the way of thinking of the “tatrāssutavā puthujjano”, the “in every way spiritually-unlearned ordinary person”. This crucial matter is too detailed and complex to discuss here in a brief footnote, but it can hopefully be addressed in detail and in depth on a different occasion. Suffice it to say that I am not asserting that citta, mano, and viññāṇa are distinct and separate “things”, but that they refer to quite distinct and non-inter-reducible functions and properties of “mind” as such. To claim that they are “mere synonyms” is, very crudely speaking, rather like claiming that the words “steam”, “liquid”, and “ice” are all “mere synonyms”. To be sure, they may all refer to forms of “water”; but it would be plainly and simply wrong to claim that they are therefore merely “synonymous”.

5.

Here, the sutta uses the term citta.

6.

Aññadeva uppajjati aññaṃ nirujjhati.

7.

Caramāno: the reflective present participle of carati, “to move, to live and move, to behave”.

8.

This must serve as a provisional rendering of the phrase sādhukaṃ yoniso manasikaroti, which has to be discussed in much more detail elsewhere (forthcoming). The expression manasi-karoti is traditionally translated as “he or she attends”, while the noun form, manasi-kāra, is traditionally translated as “attention”. More literally, however, manasi-karoti means “to do or make in the mano (the cognitive faculty)”. It suggests not a merely passive turning of the attention toward some object, but a specific and fundamental kind of cognitive activity. Yoni means “womb, origin”; such that yoniso connotes something that is rightly or legitimately related to or derived from its source or origin. Unfortunately, it is just not possible to discuss these matters in any detail in a brief footnote.

9.

Saṅkhārā.

10.

Nibbindati.

11.

Itthatta: literally, “here-ness”.