

SN 12.63
Nidānavagga Saṃyutta
(Group of Connected Discourses On Causation)

Nidāna Saṃyutta
(Connected Discourses On Causation)

Mahā Vagga
(The Great Section)

Puttamaṃsa Sutta
“The Son’s Flesh”

Translated by Bhikkhu Candana

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While living in Sāvattihī, The Blessed One addressed the Bhikkhus by saying:

“Bhikkhus, there are these four types of nourishment that are necessary to maintain the health of sentient beings who are already alive, and for the assistance and support of those other beings, who are yet to be born. Now what are these four?

“The nourishment of edible food that is consumed, whether rough or fine, solid or liquid, coarse or refined; secondly, there is the nourishment of contact; thirdly, there is the nourishment of intentional thinking; and fourthly, there is the nourishment of consciousness or sense awareness.

“These are the four types of nourishment that are necessary to maintain the health of sentient beings who are already alive, and for the assistance and support of those other beings, who are yet to be born.

1. “Now, Bhikkhus, how should the consuming of the nourishment of edible food be understood?

“Just as a married couple, a husband and a wife, intending on crossing the desert, take their one and only, beloved, dear son with them, but they set off on their long journey without having taken sufficient amount of water, food, and supplies along with them.

“Later, after having already traveled a considerable distance, and having crossed halfway into the desert, their limited water, food, and supplies would be used up and completely exhausted. Furthermore, they realize how the rest of the desert still needs to be crossed for them to reach safety.

Then, the husband and wife reflect:

‘Our limited water, food and supplies have all been used up and completely exhausted, while the rest of this desert still needs to be crossed for us to reach safety. If we go on like this, all three of us will die and perish! The only option we have now is for us to kill our one and only, beloved, dear son, and by flavoring and drying up his flesh, we could carry it with us to feed and sustain us on the way! That way, by eating our beloved son’s flesh, we can then cross the rest of this desert!’

“Then, Bhikkhus, imagine that the husband and wife would go ahead and kill their one and only, beloved, dear son, flavoring and drying up his flesh which they then carry with them, as they cross the rest of the desert. But, while they are eating their son’s flesh, they would start beating their chests and cry out: *‘Where are you, our one and only son? Where are you, our one and only, beloved and dear son?’*

“Now, what do you think, Bhikkhus? Would they be eating that food for pleasure or to enjoy themselves, indulging themselves with it, or would they eat it so they become attractive or maintain physical beauty?”

“No, Venerable Sir, they would not.”

“Would they not be eating that food *only* for the sake of supporting themselves, as they cross the desert?”

“Yes, Venerable Sir, they would.”

“In just the same manner, Bhikkhus, I declare, you must relate to food, and in the way you consume the nourishment you get from edible food! For, when the nourishment of edible food is fully understood, the Noble Disciple then sees for certain the binding and fettering that result from lusting after the five branches of sensual pleasure.

And once lusting for the five branches of sensual pleasure is seen for certain and fully understood for what it is, then there are no more fetters for the Noble Disciple to become shackled to, which would have forced him to come back again to this world.

2. “And how, Bhikkhus, should the nourishment of contact be understood?”

“Just as, Bhikkhus, when a cow that has been severely injured and left with an open wound that exposes her flesh and soft tissues inside, if she were to stand or lean against a wall, the ants and other creeping animals dwelling in and on the wall would come eagerly biting and eating at her exposed and fleshy wound.

“And if she goes and stands against a tree, the animals dwelling in and on the tree would also come eagerly biting and eating at her exposed and fleshy wound.

“Or, if she goes and immerses herself in a body of water, the animals dwelling in the water would start biting and eating at her exposed and fleshy wound.

“And if she goes and stands in wide or open spaces, the creatures dwelling in the open air would start biting and eating at her exposed and fleshy wound.

“Thus, wherever that cow that has been severely injured and left with an open wound that exposes her flesh and soft tissues inside, were to go and stand, animals dwelling there would eagerly start biting and eating at her exposed and fleshy wound.

“In just the same manner, Bhikkhus, I declare, you must relate to the nourishment you get from contact!

For, when the nourishment of contact is fully understood, the Noble Disciple then sees for certain the three types of feeling.

And once the three types of feeling are seen for certain and fully understood for what they are, then, I declare that there is nothing further left for the Noble Disciple to do.

3. “And how, Bhikkhus, should the nourishment of intentional thinking be understood?

“Imagine, Bhikkhus, there being a pit that is filled up with burning hot coals, but without releasing any smoke nor having any flames come out of it, a pit that is deep enough for a full-grown man to be easily engulfed in, from head to toe.

Now, imagine there being a man who is desirous of living, wanting to experience happiness and not pain, terrified of death. Then, two strong men show up and rush towards him, and by grabbing him with both arms, they drag him towards the burning charcoal pit, wanting to throw him in it.

Now, that man’s intention is to escape the pit; his goal and aim would certainly be to simply escape the impending doom by running away from it, as far as possible! And why is that?

It is because that man would know for certain: *‘If I were to fall into the burning pit, I would most certainly burn and experience terrible pain and a most horrific death.’*

“In just the same manner, Bhikkhus, I declare, you must relate to the nourishment you get from intentional thinking!

For, when the nourishment of intentional thinking is fully understood for what it is, the Noble Disciple then sees for certain the three types of craving.

And once the three types of craving are seen for certain and fully understood for what they are, then, I declare that there is nothing further left for the Noble Disciple to do.

4. “And how, Bhikkhus, should the nourishment of consciousness or sense awareness be understood?

“Imagine, Bhikkhus, the king’s guards capture a bandit ‘red-handed’ while engaging in some criminal activity.

Now imagine, the arrested criminal is brought to the king, where the guards exclaim: ‘Lord, we caught this criminal ‘red-handed’ while engaging in criminal activity. Sir, you may now do with him whatever you like, by giving him whatever punishment you please.’

The king then would command them by saying: *‘Guards, take this man outside, in the morning, and throw hundred spears at him!’* And the guards do as they are told.

Later, when the king asks them what happened, the guards inform him that the man is still alive. The king then instructs them: *‘Guards, take that man outside, and again throw hundred spears at him, in the afternoon!’* And the guards do as they are told.

Afterwards, when the king asks them what happened, the guards inform him again that the man is still alive. The king then instructs them: *‘Guards, continue now, in the evening, throwing hundred spears at him!’* And the guards do as they are told.

“Now, what do you think, Bhikkhus? Would that man be experiencing much pain and suffering from being struck by three hundred spears thrown at him throughout that single day?”

“Yes, Venerable Sir, he certainly would experience much pain and suffering from being struck by a single spear thrown at him, let alone three hundred spears being thrown at him throughout that single day!”

“In just the same manner, Bhikkhus, I declare, you must relate to the nourishment you get from consciousness or sense awareness!

For, when the nourishment of consciousness or sense awareness is fully understood for what it is, the Noble Disciple then sees for certain mentality/materiality.

And once mentality/materiality are seen for certain and fully understood for what they are, then, I declare that there is nothing further left for the Noble Disciple to do.

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