SN 35.117 — SN 35:117 Strings of Sensuality | Kāmaguṇa Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: ABBREVIATED. Every source-unit character is preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure. Thanissaro's collection-level note explicitly states that repetitions were cut: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/about.html. This is evidence about the translation method, not an assertion that every individual unit contains an omission; no repetitions reconstructed.

Text

Strings of Sensuality

Kāmaguṇa Sutta (SN 35:117)

“Monks, before my awakening, when I was still just an unawakened bodhisatta, the thought occurred to me: ‘Those five strings of sensuality that previously made contact with my awareness—that are past, ceased, changed: My mind, having often gone there, might go to those that are present, or occasionally to those that are future.’1 Then the thought occurred to me: ‘Those five strings of sensuality that previously made contact with my awareness—that are past, ceased, changed: There, for my own sake, heedfulness, mindfulness, and a protection of my awareness should be practiced.

“Therefore, monks, those five strings of sensuality that previously made contact with your awareness, too—that are past, ceased, changed: Your mind, having often gone there, might go to those that are present, or occasionally to those that are future. Therefore, those five strings of sensuality that previously made contact with your awareness, too—that are past, ceased, changed: There, for your own sake, heedfulness, mindfulness, and a protection of your awareness should be practiced.

“Therefore, monks, that dimension should be experienced2 where the eye [vision] ceases and the perception [mental label] of form fades. That dimension should be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades. That dimension should be experienced where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades. That dimension should be experienced where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades. That dimension should be experienced where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades. That dimension should be experienced where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea fades. That dimension should be experienced.”

Having said this, the Blessed One got up from his seat and went into his dwelling.

Then, not long after the Blessed One had left, this thought occurred to the monks: “This brief statement the Blessed One made, after which he went into his dwelling without analyzing the detailed meaning—i.e., ‘Therefore, monks, that dimension should be experienced where the eye ceases and the perception of form fades. That dimension should be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades… where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades… where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades… where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades… where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea fades: That dimension should be experienced’: now who might analyze the unanalyzed detailed meaning of this brief statement?” Then the thought occurred to them, “Ven. Ānanda is praised by the Teacher and esteemed by his observant companions in the holy life. He is capable of analyzing the unanalyzed detailed meaning of this brief statement. Suppose we were to go to him and, on arrival, cross-question him about this matter.”

So the monks went to Ven. Ānanda and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, they sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they [told him what had happened, and added,] “Analyze the meaning, Ven. Ānanda!”

[He replied:] “Friends, it’s as if a man needing heartwood, looking for heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood—passing over the root & trunk of a standing tree possessing heartwood—were to imagine that heartwood should be sought among its branches & leaves. So it is with you, who—having bypassed the Blessed One when you were face to face with him, the Teacher—imagine that I should be asked about this matter. For knowing, the Blessed One knows; seeing, he sees. He is the Eye, he is Knowledge, he is Dhamma, he is Brahmā. He is the speaker, the proclaimer, the elucidator of meaning, the giver of the deathless, the lord of the Dhamma, the Tathāgata. That was the time when you should have cross-questioned him about this matter. However he answered, that was how

you should have remembered it."

"Yes, friend Ānanda: Knowing, the Blessed One knows; seeing, he sees. He is the Eye, he is Knowledge, he is Dhamma, he is Brahmā. He is the speaker, the proclaimer, the elucidator of meaning, the giver of the deathless, the lord of the Dhamma, the Tathāgata. That was the time when we should have cross-questioned him about this matter. However he answered, that was how we should have remembered it. But you are praised by the Teacher and esteemed by your observant companions in the holy life. You are capable of analyzing the unanalyzed detailed meaning of this brief statement. Analyze the meaning, Ven. Ānanda without making it difficult!"

"In that case, my friends, listen & pay close attention. I will speak."

"As you say, friend," the monks responded to him.

Ven. Ānanda said this: "Friends, concerning the brief statement the Blessed One made, after which he went into his dwelling without analyzing the detailed meaning—i.e., 'Therefore, monks, that dimension should be experienced where the eye ceases and the perception of form fades. That dimension should be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades… where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades… where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades… where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades… where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea fades. That dimension should be experienced'—I understand the detailed meaning to be this: This was stated by the Blessed One with regard to the cessation of the six sense media."3

"So, concerning the brief statement the Blessed One made, after which he entered his dwelling without analyzing the detailed meaning—i.e., 'Therefore, monks, that dimension should be experienced where the eye ceases and the perception of form fades. That dimension should be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades… where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades… where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades… where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades… where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea fades. That dimension should be experienced'—this is how I understand the detailed meaning. Now, friends, if you wish, having gone to the Blessed One, cross-question him about this matter. However he answers is how you should remember it."

Then the monks, delighting in & approving of Ven. Ānanda's words, got up from their seats and went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to him, they sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they (told him what had happened after he had gone into his dwelling, and ended by saying,) "Then Ven. Ānanda analyzed the meaning using these words, these statements, these phrases."

"Ānanda is wise, monks. Ānanda is a person of great discernment. If you had asked me about this matter, I too would have answered in the same way he did. That is its meaning, and that is how you should remember it."

Notes

1. More idiomatically, this sentence could be rendered as, "My mind—going often to those five strings of sensuality that previously made contact with my awareness and are past, ceased, changed—might go to those that are present, or occasionally to those that are future." This sentence is mistranslated both in KSB and CDB.

2. This phrase, se āyatane veditabbe, bears traces of the eastern dialect that is believed to have been the Buddha's native dialect. It was not regularized into the Pali form, apparently because this statement, with the rhapsodic quality of its repetitions, was so closely associated with the Buddha that there was a desire to preserve the way in which he said it. There are other examples in the Canon of phrases closely associated with the Buddha that maintained the form of his native dialect. The most common example is bhikkhave, instead of the standard Pali, bhikkhavo. The phrasing of the four noble truths is also not in standard Pali syntax, a fact that might possibly be attributed to a similar desire to preserve the Buddha's way of speaking in phrases that were particularly common to him.

In CDB, veditabbe in this passage is translated as "should be understood," but the term more usually means, "should be felt" or "should be experienced." Because the dimension described here falls under the third noble truth, the duty with regard to it is to realize it, rather than simply understanding it. Thus "should be experienced" appears to be the better translation here.

The Commentary explains the "therefore" at the beginning of this paragraph by saying that once the dimension described in this paragraph is experienced, there is no longer any need to exercise heedfulness and mindfulness to protect the mind. The mind in this dimension needs no protection.

3. The Commentary explains Ven. Ānanda's statement here as referring to nibbāna. It's hard to say that his explanation is more detailed than the Buddha's statement, as it actually is briefer. However, he is translating that statement into vocabulary that is apparently more familiar to his listeners.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 11; MN 49; SN 4:19; SN 35:23; AN 4:173; AN 6:61; Ud 1:10; Ud 8:1