SN 35.238 — The Simile of the Vipers

English translation by Bhikkhu Sujato.
Source: https://suttacentral.net/sn35.238/en/sujato
Source revision: 3bc8665e0e28e70518eba94304a2fafcab80f933
License: CC0-1.0 — https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/

Text

Linked Discourses 35.238

19. The Simile of the Vipers

The Simile of the Vipers

“Mendicants, suppose there were four venomous vipers of awesome might. Then a person would come along who wants to live and doesn’t want to die, who wants to be happy and recoils from pain.

They’d say to him, ‘My man, here are four venomous vipers of awesome might. They must be periodically picked up, washed, fed, and put to sleep. But when one or other of these four venomous vipers gets angry with you, you’ll meet with death or deadly pain. So then, my man, do what has to be done.’

Then that man, terrified of those four venomous vipers, would flee this way or that.

They’d say to him, ‘My man, there are five deadly enemies chasing you, thinking: “When we catch sight of him, we’ll murder him right there!” So then, my man, do what has to be done.’

Then that man, terrified of those four venomous vipers and those five deadly enemies, would flee this way or that.

They’d say to him, ‘My man, there’s a sixth hidden killer chasing you with a drawn sword, thinking: “When I catch sight of him, I’ll chop off his head right there!” So then, my man, do what has to be done.’

Then that man, terrified of those four venomous vipers and those five deadly enemies and the hidden killer, would flee this way or that.

He’d see an empty village. But whatever house he enters is vacant, deserted, and empty. And whatever vessel he touches is vacant, hollow, and empty.

They’d say to him, ‘My man, there are bandits who raid villages, and they’re striking now. So then, my man, do what has to be done.’

Then that man, terrified of those four venomous vipers and those five deadly enemies and the hidden killer and the bandits, would flee this way or that.

He’d see a large deluge, whose near shore is dubious and perilous, while the far shore is a sanctuary free of peril. But there’s no ferryboat or bridge for crossing over.

Then that man would think, ‘Why don’t I gather grass, sticks, branches, and leaves and make a raft? Riding on the raft, and paddling with my hands and feet, I can safely reach the far shore.’

And so that man did exactly that. Having crossed over and gone to the far shore, the brahmin stands on solid ground.

I’ve made up this simile to make a point. And this is the point.

‘Four venomous vipers of awesome might’ is a term for the four principal states: the elements of earth, water, fire, and air.

‘Five deadly enemies’ is a term for the five grasping aggregates, that is: form, feeling, perception, choices, and consciousness.

‘The sixth hidden killer with a drawn sword’ is a term for relishing and greed.

‘Empty village’ is a term for the six interior sense fields. If an astute, competent, intelligent person investigates that in relation to the eye, it appears vacant, hollow, and empty. If an astute, competent, intelligent person investigates that in relation to the ear … nose … tongue … body … mind, it appears vacant, hollow, and empty.

‘Bandits who raid villages’ is a term for the six exterior sense fields. The eye is struck by both agreeable and disagreeable sights. The ear … nose … tongue … body … mind is struck by both agreeable and disagreeable ideas.

‘Large deluge’ is a term for the four floods: the floods of sensual pleasures, desire to be reborn, views, and ignorance.

‘The near shore that’s dubious and perilous’ is a term for substantial reality.

‘The far shore, a sanctuary free of peril’ is a term for extinguishment.

‘The raft’ is a term for the noble eightfold path, that is: right view, right purpose, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right immersion.

‘Paddling with hands and feet’ is a term for rousing energy.

‘Crossed over, gone to the far shore, the brahmin stands on solid ground’ is a term for a perfected one.”