SN 47.10 — SN 47:10 At the Nuns’ Residence | Bhikkhun’upassaya Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

Source: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/SN/SN47_10.html

Source revision: sha256:06db98f11dbe5b66e3b290b0f8bcaa44ec5f2fe3d1e1b74062fcf0baea044036

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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

At the Nuns’ Residence

Bhikkhun’upassaya Sutta (SN 47:10)

The Blessed One was staying in Sāvatthī. Then Ven. Ānanda, early in the morning—having adjusted his lower robe and taking his bowl & outer robe—went to a certain nuns’ residence. On arrival, he sat down on a seat laid out. Then a large number of nuns went to Ven. Ānanda and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they said to him, “Here, Ven. Ānanda, a large number of nuns dwelling with their minds well-established in the four establishings of mindfulness are perceiving grand, successive distinctions.”

“That’s the way it is, sisters. That’s the way it is. Any monk or nun who dwells with mind well-established in the four establishings of mindfulness may be expected to perceive grand, successive distinctions.”

Then Ven. Ānanda, having gone for alms in Sāvatthī, after the meal, returning from his alms round, went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to him, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he (reported his conversation with the nuns.)

“That’s the way it is, Ānanda. That’s the way it is. Any monk or nun who dwells with mind well-established in the four establishings of mindfulness, he/she may be expected to perceive grand, successive distinctions.

“There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. As he remains thus focused on the body in & of itself, a fever based on the body arises within his body, or there is sluggishness in his awareness, or his mind becomes scattered externally. He should then direct his mind to any inspiring theme. As his mind is directed to any inspiring theme, gladness is born within him. In one who is gladdened, rapture is born. In one whose heart is enraptured, the body grows calm. His body calm, he feels pleasure. Feeling pleasure, his mind grows concentrated. He reflects, ‘I have attained the aim to which my mind was directed. Let me withdraw (my mind from the inspiring theme).’ He withdraws & engages neither in directed thought nor in evaluation. He discerns that ‘I am not thinking or evaluating. I am inwardly mindful & at ease.’

“And further, he remains focused on feelings… mind… mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. As he remains thus focused on mental qualities in & of themselves, a fever based on mental qualities arises within his body, or there is sluggishness in his awareness, or his mind becomes scattered externally. He should then direct his mind to any inspiring theme. As his mind is directed to any inspiring theme, gladness is born within him. In one who is gladdened, rapture is born. In one whose heart is enraptured, the body grows calm. His body calm, he feels pleasure. Feeling pleasure, his mind grows concentrated. He reflects, ‘I have attained the aim to which my mind was directed. Let me withdraw.’ He withdraws & engages neither in directed thought nor in evaluation. He discerns that ‘I am not thinking or evaluating. I am inwardly mindful & at ease.’

“This, Ānanda, is development based on directing. And what is development based on not directing? A monk, when not directing his mind to external things, discerns that ‘My mind is not directed to external things. It is unconstricted [asaṅkhitta] front & back—released & undirected. And then, I remain focused on the body in & of itself. I am ardent, alert, mindful, & at ease.’

“When not directing his mind to external things, he discerns, ‘My mind is not directed to external things. It is unconstricted front & back—released & undirected. And then, I remain focused on feelings… mind… mental qualities in & of themselves. I am ardent, alert, mindful, & at ease.’

“This, Ānanda, is development based on not directing.1

“Now, Ānanda, I have taught you development based on directing and development based on not directing. What a teacher should do out of compassion for his disciples, seeking their welfare, that have I done for you. Over there are (places to sit at) the roots of trees; over there, empty dwellings. Practice jhāna, Ānanda. Don’t be heedless. Don’t later fall into remorse. That is our message to you all.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Ven. Ānanda delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

Note

1. There is a controversy over how to understand the distinction drawn here between directing and not-directing the mind.

One interpretation, assuming that jhāna and the establishing of mindfulness are two radically different practices, argues that directing the mind refers to jhāna practice; and not-directing the mind, to mindfulness practice: the former inducing a narrow range of awareness; the latter, a broader, unconstricted one.

However, unconstricted doesn’t mean a broad range of awareness. According to SN 51:20, constricted simply means slothful or drowsy. So unconstricted means free of sloth and drowsiness. And the Buddha never drew a radical distinction between mindfulness and jhāna: The four establishings are the themes of jhāna (MN 44) and are themselves counted as a type of concentration (AN 8:70).

Thus it is more likely that this discourse is addressing a different issue entirely: how to deal with the mind both when it is amenable to settling down with any of the four frames of reference used in establishing mindfulness and when it is not.

When the mind is not amenable, the meditator can follow the instructions for directing it. Call to mind a subsidiary theme that will gladden it or chasten it and allow it to settle down. When it’s firmly settled, drop any thinking connected with the subsidiary theme, and this will bring the mind to a state of mindful ease equivalent to the second jhāna, free from directed thought and evaluation.

On other occasions, when the mind settles down easily—when it drops thoughts about external preoccupations and at the same time isn’t slothful or drowsy—the meditator can follow the instructions for non-directing the mind. Simply note that the mind is released from distraction and drowsiness, and it will naturally settle into the activities of any one of the establishings of mindfulness. This in turn will provide a theme for the practice of jhāna.

In this way, the instructions here parallel the observation in MN 101 that there are times when problems in the mind respond to simple on-looking equanimity, and other times when they require conscious fabrication.