SN 56.45 — SN 56:45 The Horsehair | Vāla 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

The Horsehair

Vāla Sutta (SN 56:45)

On one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Vesālī at the Gabled Hall in the Great Forest. Then in the early morning, Ven. Ānanda, having adjusted his lower robe and taking his bowl & outer robe, went into Vesālī for alms. He saw a large number of Licchavi boys practicing archery in the stadium building. From a distance they were shooting arrows through a tiny keyhole without missing, one right after the other. On seeing this, the thought occurred to him, “How trained these Licchavi boys are, how well-trained these Licchavi boys are, in that from a distance they can shoot arrows through a tiny keyhole without missing, one right after the other!”

Then, having gone for alms in Vesālī, after his meal, returning from his alms round, Ven. Ānanda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One: "Just now, lord, in the early morning, having adjusted my lower robe and taking my bowl & outer robe, I went into Vesālī for alms. I saw a large number of Licchavi boys practicing archery in the stadium building. From a distance they were shooting arrows through a tiny keyhole without missing, one right after the other. On seeing this, the thought occurred to me 'How trained these Licchavi boys are, how well-trained these Licchavi boys are, in that from a distance they can shoot arrows through a tiny keyhole without missing, one right after the other!'"

"What do you think, Ānanda? Which is harder to do, harder to master—to shoot arrows through a tiny keyhole without missing, one right after the other, or to take a horsehair split into seven strands and pierce tip with a tip?"1

"This, lord, is harder to do, harder to master—to take a horsehair split into seven strands and pierce tip with a tip."

"And they, Ānanda, pierce what is even harder to pierce, those who pierce, as it has come to be, that 'This is stress'; who pierce, as it has come to be, that 'This is the origination of stress' … 'This is the cessation of stress' … 'This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.'

"Therefore, Ānanda, your duty is the contemplation, 'This is stress … This is the origination of stress … This is the cessation of stress.' Your duty is the contemplation, 'This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.'"

Note

1. The Commentary tries to convert this feat into an archery trick, in which one fastens a strand of horsehair on an eggplant and another strand on the tip of an arrow, and then backs off to shoot the hair on the eggplant with the hair fastened on the arrow. This, however, sounds more like one of the impossible feats of marksmanship that Mark Twain once chided James Fennimore Cooper for including in his Deerslayer books. Even assuming that the hair on the arrow could withstand the force of the air pushing it back and actually stick straight ahead to pierce the other hair, the speed and force of the arrow would demolish any evidence that it had actually done so. Thus it seems more likely that the Buddha is describing a more delicate feat bearing more resemblance to the delicacy required in penetrating the four noble truths.