MN 122 — The Longer Discourse on Emptiness

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Text

Middle Discourses 122

The Longer Discourse on Emptiness

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying in the land of the Sakyans, near Kapilavatthu in the Banyan Tree Monastery.

Then the Buddha robed up in the morning and, taking his bowl and robe, entered Kapilavatthu for alms. He wandered for alms in Kapilavatthu. After the meal, on his return from almsround, he went to the lodge of the Sakyan Khemaka the Dark for the day's meditation.

Now at that time many resting places had been spread out at the lodge of Khemaka the Dark. The Buddha saw this, and wondered, "Many resting places have been spread out; are there many mendicants living here?"

Now at that time Venerable Ānanda, together with many other mendicants, was making robes at the lodge of the Sakyan Ghaṭā. Then in the late afternoon, the Buddha came out of retreat and went to Ghaṭā's lodge, where he sat down on the seat spread out and said to Venerable Ānanda, "Many resting places have been spread out at the lodge of Khemaka the Dark; are many mendicants living there?"

"Indeed there are, sir. It's currently the time for making robes."

"Ānanda, a mendicant doesn't shine who enjoys company and groups, who loves them and likes to enjoy them. It is quite impossible that such a mendicant will get the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of awakening when they want, without trouble or difficulty. But you should expect that a mendicant who lives alone, withdrawn from the group, will get the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of awakening when they want, without trouble or difficulty. That is possible.

Indeed, Ānanda, it is quite impossible that a mendicant who enjoys company will enter and remain in the freedom of heart—either that which is temporary and pleasant, or that which is irreversible and unshakable. But it is possible that a mendicant who lives alone, withdrawn from the group will enter and remain in the freedom of heart—either that which is temporary and pleasant, or that which is irreversible and unshakable.

Ānanda, I do not see even a single sight which, with its decay and perishing, would not give rise to sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress in someone who has desire and

lust for it.

But this meditation has been understood by the Realized One, namely to enter and remain in emptiness internally by not focusing on any signs. Now, suppose that while the Realized One is practicing this meditation, monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen, rulers and their chief ministers, monastics of other religions and their disciples go to visit him. In that case, with a mind slanting, sloping, and inclining to seclusion, withdrawn, and loving renunciation, having totally eliminated defiling influences, he invariably gives a talk concerned only with sending them away.

Therefore, if a mendicant should wish, 'May I enter and remain in emptiness internally!' then they should still, settle, unify, and immerse their mind in samādhi internally.

And how does a mendicant still, settle, unify, and immerse their mind in samādhi internally?

It's when a mendicant, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters and remains in the first absorption … second absorption … third absorption … fourth absorption. That's how a mendicant stills, settles, unifies, and immerses their mind in samādhi internally.

They focus on emptiness internally, but their mind does not leap forth, gain confidence, settle down, and become decided. In that case, they understand: 'I am focusing on emptiness internally, but my mind does not leap forth, gain confidence, settle down, and become decided.' In this way they are aware of the situation. They focus on emptiness externally … They focus on emptiness internally and externally … They focus on the imperturbable, but their mind does not leap forth, gain confidence, settle down, and become decided. In that case, they understand: 'I am focusing on the imperturbable internally, but my mind does not leap forth, gain confidence, settle down, and become decided.' In this way they are aware of the situation.

Then that mendicant should still, settle, unify, and immerse their mind in samādhi internally in the same meditation subject as a basis of immersion as before. They focus on emptiness internally, and their mind leaps forth, gains confidence, settles down, and becomes decided. In that case, they understand: 'I am focusing on emptiness internally, and my mind leaps forth, gains confidence, settles down, and becomes decided.' In this way they are aware of the situation. They focus on emptiness externally … They focus on emptiness internally and externally … They focus on the imperturbable, and their mind leaps forth, gains confidence, settles down, and becomes decided. In that case, they understand: 'I am focusing on the imperturbable, and my mind leaps forth, gains confidence, settles down, and becomes decided.' In this way they are aware of the situation.

While a mendicant is practicing such a meditation, if their mind inclines to walking, they walk, thinking: 'While I'm walking, bad, unskillful qualities of covetousness and displeasure will not overwhelm me.' In this way they are aware of the situation. While a mendicant is practicing such a meditation, if their mind inclines to standing, they stand, thinking: 'While I'm standing, bad, unskillful qualities of covetousness and displeasure will not overwhelm me.' In this way they are aware of the situation. While a mendicant is practicing such a

meditation, if their mind inclines to sitting, they sit, thinking: ‘While I’m sitting, bad, unskillful qualities of covetousness and displeasure will not overwhelm me.’ In this way they are aware of the situation. While a mendicant is practicing such a meditation, if their mind inclines to lying down, they lie down, thinking: ‘While I’m lying down, bad, unskillful qualities of covetousness and displeasure will not overwhelm me.’ In this way they are aware of the situation.

While a mendicant is practicing such a meditation, if their mind inclines to talking, they think: ‘I will not engage in the kind of speech that is low, crude, ordinary, ignoble, and pointless. Such speech doesn’t lead to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment. Namely: talk about kings, bandits, and chief ministers; talk about armies, threats, and wars; talk about food, drink, clothes, and beds; talk about garlands and fragrances; talk about family, vehicles, villages, towns, cities, and countries; talk about women and heroes; talk at the street market and the place for water pots; talk about the departed; motley talk; tales of land and sea; and talk about being reborn in this or that state of existence.’ In this way they are aware of the situation. ‘But I will take part in talk about self-effacement that helps open the heart and leads solely to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment. That is, talk about fewness of wishes, contentment, seclusion, aloofness, arousing energy, ethics, immersion, wisdom, freedom, and the knowledge and vision of freedom.’ In this way they are aware of the situation.

While a mendicant is practicing such a meditation, if their mind inclines to thinking, they think: ‘I will not think the kind of thought that is low, crude, ordinary, ignoble, and pointless. Such thoughts don’t lead to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment. That is, sensual, malicious, or cruel thoughts.’ In this way they are aware of the situation. ‘But I will think the kind of thought that is noble and emancipating, and brings one who practices it to the complete ending of suffering. That is, thoughts of renunciation, good will, and harmlessness.’ In this way they are aware of the situation.

There are these five kinds of sensual stimulation. What five? Sights known by the eye, which are likable, desirable, agreeable, pleasant, sensual, and arousing. Sounds known by the ear … Smells known by the nose … Tastes known by the tongue … Touches known by the body, which are likable, desirable, agreeable, pleasant, sensual, and arousing. These are the five kinds of sensual stimulation.

So a mendicant should regularly check their own mind: ‘Does my mind take an interest in any of these five kinds of sensual stimulation?’ Suppose that, upon checking, a mendicant knows this: ‘My mind does take an interest.’ In that case, they understand: ‘I have not given up desire and greed for the five kinds of sensual stimulation.’ In this way they are aware of the situation. But suppose that, upon checking, a mendicant knows this: ‘My mind does not take an interest.’ In that case, they understand: ‘I have given up desire and greed for the five kinds of sensual stimulation.’ In this way they are aware of the situation.

A mendicant should meditate observing rise and fall in these five grasping aggregates: ‘Such is form, such is the origin of form, such is the disappearance of form. Such is feeling … Such is perception … Such are choices … Such is consciousness, such is the origin of

consciousness, such is the disappearance of consciousness.'

As they do so, they give up the conceit 'I am' regarding the five grasping aggregates. In that case, they understand: 'I have given up the conceit "I am" regarding the five grasping aggregates.' In this way they are aware of the situation.

These principles are entirely skillful, with skillful outcomes; they are noble, transcendent, and inaccessible to the Wicked One.

What do you think, Ānanda? For what reason would a disciple deem it worthwhile to follow the Teacher, even if driven away?"

"Our teachings are rooted in the Buddha. He is our guide and our refuge. Sir, may the Buddha himself please clarify the meaning of this. The mendicants will listen and remember it."

"A disciple would not deem it worthwhile to follow the Teacher for the sake of this, namely statements, mixed prose & verse, or discussions. Why is that? Because for a long time you have learned the teachings, remembering them, rehearsing them, mentally scrutinizing them, and penetrating them theoretically. But a disciple would deem it worthwhile to follow the Teacher, even if driven away, for the sake of talk about self-effacement that helps open the heart and leads solely to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment. That is, talk about fewness of wishes, contentment, seclusion, aloofness, arousing energy, ethics, immersion, wisdom, freedom, and the knowledge and vision of freedom.

This being so, Ānanda, there is a peril for the tutor, a peril for the pupil, and a peril for a spiritual practitioner.

And how is there a peril for the tutor? It's when some teacher frequents a secluded lodging—a wilderness, the root of a tree, a hill, a ravine, a mountain cave, a charnel ground, a forest, the open air, a heap of straw. While meditating withdrawn, they're visited by a stream of brahmins and householders, and people of town and country. When this happens, they enjoy infatuation, fall into greed, and return to indulgence. This is said to be the tutor's peril. They're ruined by bad, unskillful qualities that are corrupting, leading to future lives, hurtful, resulting in suffering and future rebirth, old age, and death. That's how there is a peril for the tutor.

And how is there a peril for the pupil? It's when the disciple of a teacher, emulating their teacher's fostering of seclusion, frequents a secluded lodging—a wilderness, the root of a tree, a hill, a ravine, a mountain cave, a charnel ground, a forest, the open air, a heap of straw. While meditating withdrawn, they're visited by a stream of brahmins and householders, and people of town and country. When this happens, they enjoy infatuation, fall into greed, and return to indulgence. This is said to be the pupil's peril. They're ruined by bad, unskillful qualities that are corrupting, leading to future lives, hurtful, resulting in suffering and future rebirth, old age, and death. That's how there is a peril for the pupil.

And how is there a peril for a spiritual practitioner? It's when a Realized One arises in the world, perfected, a fully awakened Buddha, accomplished in knowledge and conduct, holy, knower of the world, supreme guide for those fit for training, teacher of gods and humans,

awakened, blessed. He frequents a secluded lodging—a wilderness, the root of a tree, a hill, a ravine, a mountain cave, a charnel ground, a forest, the open air, a heap of straw. While meditating withdrawn, he's visited by a stream of brahmins and householders, and people of town and country. When this happens, he doesn't enjoy infatuation, fall into greed, and return to indulgence. But a disciple of this teacher, emulating their teacher's fostering of seclusion, frequents a secluded lodging—a wilderness, the root of a tree, a hill, a ravine, a mountain cave, a charnel ground, a forest, the open air, a heap of straw. While meditating withdrawn, they're visited by a stream of brahmins and householders, and people of town and country. When this happens, they enjoy infatuation, fall into greed, and return to indulgence. This is said to be the spiritual practitioner's peril. They're ruined by bad, unskillful qualities that are corrupting, leading to future lives, hurtful, resulting in suffering and future rebirth, old age, and death. That's how there is a peril for the spiritual practitioner.

And in this context, Ānanda, as compared to the peril of the tutor or the pupil, the peril of the spiritual practitioner has more painful, bitter results, and even leads to the underworld.

So, Ānanda, treat me as a friend, not as an enemy. That will be for your lasting welfare and happiness.

And how do disciples treat their Teacher as an enemy, not a friend? It's when the Teacher teaches Dhamma to his disciples out of kindness and sympathy: 'This is for your welfare. This is for your happiness.' But their disciples don't want to listen. They don't actively listen or try to understand. They proceed having turned away from the Teacher's instruction. That's how the disciples treat their Teacher as an enemy, not a friend.

And how do disciples treat their Teacher as a friend, not an enemy? It's when the Teacher teaches Dhamma to his disciples out of kindness and sympathy: 'This is for your welfare. This is for your happiness.' And their disciples want to listen. They actively listen and try to understand. They don't proceed having turned away from the Teacher's instruction. That's how the disciples treat their Teacher as a friend, not an enemy.

So, Ānanda, treat me as a friend, not as an enemy. That will be for your lasting welfare and happiness. I shall not mollycoddle you like a potter with their damp, unfired pots. I shall speak, curbing you again and again, pressing you again and again. The core will stand the test."

That is what the Buddha said. Satisfied, Venerable Ānanda approved what the Buddha said.