MN 13 — The Longer Discourse on the Mass of Suffering

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Text

Middle Discourses 13

The Longer Discourse on the Mass of Suffering

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery.

Then several mendicants robed up in the morning and, taking their bowls and robes, entered Sāvatthī for alms. Then it occurred to them, "It's too early to wander for alms in Sāvatthī. Why don't we visit the monastery for the wanderers of other religions?" Then they went to the monastery for the wanderers of other religions and exchanged greetings with the wanderers there. When the greetings and polite conversation were over, they sat down to one side. The wanderers said to them:

"Reverends, the ascetic Gotama advocates the complete understanding of sensual pleasures, and so do we. The ascetic Gotama advocates the complete understanding of forms, and so do we. The ascetic Gotama advocates the complete understanding of feelings, and so do we. What, then, is the difference between the ascetic Gotama's teaching and instruction and ours?"

Those mendicants neither approved nor rejected that statement of the wanderers of other religions. They rose from their seats, thinking, "We will learn the meaning of this statement from the Buddha himself."

Then, after the meal, when they returned from almsround, they went up to the Buddha, bowed, sat down to one side, and told him what had happened. The Buddha said:

"Mendicants, when wanderers of other religions say this, you should say to them: 'But reverends, what's the gratification, the drawback, and the escape when it comes to sensual pleasures? What's the gratification, the drawback, and the escape when it comes to forms? What's the gratification, the drawback, and the escape when it comes to feelings?' Questioned like this, the wanderers of other religions would be stumped, and, in addition, would get frustrated. Why is that? Because they're out of their element. I don't see anyone in this world—with its gods, Māras, and divinities, this population with its ascetics and brahmins, its gods and humans—who could provide a satisfying answer to these questions except the Realized One or his disciple or someone who has heard it from them.

And what is the gratification of sensual pleasures? 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. The pleasure and happiness that arise from these five kinds of sensual stimulation: this is the gratification of sensual pleasures.

And what is the drawback of sensual pleasures? It's when a gentleman earns a living by means such as arithmetic, accounting, calculating, farming, trade, raising cattle, archery, government service, or one of the professions. But they must face cold and heat, being hurt by the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and reptiles, and risking death from hunger and thirst. This is a drawback of sensual pleasures apparent in the present life, a mass of suffering caused by sensual pleasures.

That gentleman might try hard, strive, and make an effort, but fail to accrue riches. If this happens, they sorrow and wail and lament, beating their breast and falling into confusion, saying: 'Oh, my hard work is wasted. My efforts are fruitless!' This too is a drawback of sensual pleasures apparent in the present life, a mass of suffering caused by sensual pleasures.

That gentleman might try hard, strive, and make an effort, and succeed in accruing riches. But they experience pain and sadness when they try to protect it, thinking: 'How can I prevent my wealth from being taken by rulers or bandits, consumed by fire, swept away by flood, or taken by unloved heirs?' And even though they protect it and ward it, rulers or bandits take it, or fire consumes it, or flood sweeps it away, or unloved heirs take it. They sorrow and wail and lament, beating their breast and falling into confusion: 'What once was mine is gone.' This too is a drawback of sensual pleasures apparent in the present life, a mass of suffering caused by sensual pleasures.

Furthermore, for the sake of sensual pleasures kings fight with kings, aristocrats fight with aristocrats, brahmins fight with brahmins, and householders fight with householders. A mother fights with her child, child with mother, father with child, and child with father. Brother fights with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, and friend fights with friend. Once they've started quarreling, arguing, and disputing, they attack each other with fists, stones, rods, and swords, resulting in death and deadly pain. This too is a drawback of sensual pleasures apparent in the present life, a mass of suffering caused by sensual pleasures.

Furthermore, for the sake of sensual pleasures they don their sword and shield, fasten their bow and arrows, and plunge into a battle massed on both sides, with arrows and spears flying and swords flashing. There they are struck with arrows and spears, and their heads are chopped off, resulting in death and deadly pain. This too is a drawback of sensual pleasures apparent in the present life, a mass of suffering caused by sensual pleasures.

Furthermore, for the sake of sensual pleasures they don their sword and shield, fasten their bow and arrows, and charge wetly plastered bastions, with arrows and spears flying and swords flashing. There they are struck with arrows and spears, splashed with dung, crushed by a superior force, and their heads are chopped off, resulting in death and deadly pain. This too is a drawback of sensual pleasures apparent in the present life, a mass of

suffering caused by sensual pleasures.

Furthermore, for the sake of sensual pleasures they break into houses, plunder wealth, steal from isolated buildings, commit highway robbery, and commit adultery. The rulers would arrest them and subject them to various punishments— whipping, caning, and clubbing; cutting off hands or feet, or both; cutting off ears or nose, or both; the 'porridge pot', the 'shell-shave', the 'Rāhu's mouth', the 'garland of fire', the 'burning hand', the 'bulrush twist', the 'bark dress', the 'antelope', the 'meat hook', the 'coins', the 'caustic pickle', the 'twisting bar', the 'straw mat'; being splashed with hot oil, being fed to the hounds, being impaled alive, and being beheaded. These result in death and deadly pain. This too is a drawback of sensual pleasures apparent in the present life, a mass of suffering caused by sensual pleasures.

Furthermore, for the sake of sensual pleasures, they conduct themselves badly by way of body, speech, and mind. When their body breaks up, after death, they're reborn in a place of loss, a bad place, the underworld, hell. This is a drawback of sensual pleasures to do with lives to come, a mass of suffering caused by sensual pleasures.

And what is the escape from sensual pleasures? Removing and giving up desire and greed for sensual pleasures: this is the escape from sensual pleasures.

There are ascetics and brahmins who don't truly understand sensual pleasures' gratification, drawback, and escape in this way for what they are. It's impossible for them to completely understand sensual pleasures themselves, or to instruct another so that, practicing accordingly, they will completely understand sensual pleasures. There are ascetics and brahmins who do truly understand sensual pleasures' gratification, drawback, and escape in this way for what they are. It is possible for them to completely understand sensual pleasures themselves, or to instruct another so that, practicing accordingly, they will completely understand sensual pleasures.

And what is the gratification of forms? Suppose there was a girl of the brahmins, aristocrats, or householders in her fifteenth or sixteenth year, neither too tall nor too short, neither too thin nor too fat, neither too dark nor too fair. Is she not at the height of her beauty and prettiness?"

"Yes, sir."

"The pleasure and happiness that arise from this beauty and prettiness is the gratification of forms.

And what is the drawback of forms? Suppose that some time later you were to see that same sister—eighty, ninety, or a hundred years old—bent double, crooked, leaning on a staff, trembling as they walk, ailing, past their prime, with teeth broken, hair grey and scanty or bald, skin wrinkled, and limbs blotchy.

What do you think, mendicants? Has not that former beauty vanished and the drawback become clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is the drawback of forms.

Furthermore, suppose that you were to see that same sister sick, suffering, gravely ill, collapsed in her own urine and feces, being picked up by some and put down by others.

What do you think, mendicants? Has not that former beauty vanished and the drawback become clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"This too is the drawback of forms.

Furthermore, suppose that you were to see that same sister as a corpse discarded in a charnel ground. And it had been dead for one, two, or three days, bloated, livid, and festering.

What do you think, mendicants? Has not that former beauty vanished and the drawback become clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"This too is the drawback of forms.

Furthermore, suppose that you were to see that same sister as a corpse discarded in a charnel ground. And it was being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, herons, hounds, tigers, leopards, jackals, and many kinds of little creatures …

Furthermore, suppose that you were to see that same sister as a corpse discarded in a charnel ground. And it had been reduced to a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together by sinews … A skeleton rid of flesh but smeared with blood, and held together by sinews … A skeleton rid of flesh and blood, held together by sinews … Bones rid of sinews scattered in every direction. Here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here an ankle bone, there a shin-bone, here a thigh-bone, there a hip-bone, here a rib-bone, there a back-bone, here an arm-bone, there a neck-bone, here a jaw-bone, there a tooth, here the skull. …

Furthermore, suppose that you were to see that same sister as a corpse discarded in a charnel ground. And it had been reduced to white bones, the color of shells … Decrepit bones, heaped in a pile … Bones rotted and crumbled to powder.

What do you think, mendicants? Has not that former beauty vanished and the drawback become clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"This too is the drawback of forms.

And what is the escape from forms? Removing and giving up desire and greed for forms: this is the escape from forms.

There are ascetics and brahmins who don't truly understand forms' gratification, drawback, and escape in this way for what they are. It's impossible for them to completely understand forms themselves, or to instruct another so that, practicing accordingly, they will completely understand forms. There are ascetics and brahmins who do truly understand forms' gratification, drawback, and escape in this way for what they are. It is

possible for them to completely understand forms themselves, or to instruct another so that, practicing accordingly, they will completely understand forms.

And what is the gratification of feelings? It's when a mendicant, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters and remains in the first absorption, which has the rapture and bliss born of seclusion, while placing the mind and keeping it connected. At that time a mendicant doesn't intend to hurt themselves, hurt others, or hurt both; they feel only feelings that are not hurtful. Freedom from being hurt is the ultimate gratification of feelings, I say.

Furthermore, a mendicant enters and remains in the second absorption … third absorption … fourth absorption. At that time a mendicant doesn't intend to hurt themselves, hurt others, or hurt both; they feel only feelings that are not hurtful. Freedom from being hurt is the ultimate gratification of feelings, I say.

And what is the drawback of feelings? That feelings are impermanent, suffering, and perishable: this is their drawback.

And what is the escape from feelings? Removing and giving up desire and greed for feelings: this is the escape from feelings.

There are ascetics and brahmins who don't truly understand feelings' gratification, drawback, and escape in this way for what they are. It's impossible for them to completely understand feelings themselves, or to instruct another so that, practicing accordingly, they will completely understand feelings. There are ascetics and brahmins who do truly understand feelings' gratification, drawback, and escape in this way for what they are. It is possible for them to completely understand feelings themselves, or to instruct another so that, practicing accordingly, they will completely understand feelings."

That is what the Buddha said. Satisfied, the mendicants approved what the Buddha said.