MN 138 — A Summary Recital and its Analysis

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Text

Middle Discourses 138

A Summary Recital and its Analysis

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. There the Buddha addressed the mendicants, "Mendicants!"

"Venerable sir," they replied. The Buddha said this:

"Mendicants, I shall teach you a summary recital and its analysis. Listen and apply your mind well, I will speak."

"Yes, sir," they replied. The Buddha said this:

"A mendicant should examine in whatever way such that, while examining, consciousness would neither be scattered nor diffused externally, nor stuck internally, and they would not be anxious because of grasping. When consciousness is neither scattered nor diffused externally, nor stuck internally, and they are not anxious because of grasping, there is no coming to be of the origin of suffering—of rebirth, old age, and death in the future."

That is what the Buddha said. When he had spoken, the Holy One rose from his seat and entered his dwelling.

Soon after the Buddha left, those mendicants considered, "The Buddha gave this brief summary recital, then entered his dwelling without explaining the meaning in detail. Who can explain in detail the meaning of this brief summary recital given by the Buddha?"

Then those mendicants thought, "This Venerable Mahākaccāna is praised by the Buddha and esteemed by his sensible spiritual companions. He is capable of explaining in detail the meaning of this brief summary recital given by the Buddha. Let's go to him, and ask him about this matter."

Then those mendicants went to Mahākaccāna, and exchanged greetings with him. When the greetings and polite conversation were over, they sat down to one side. They told him what had happened, and said, "May Venerable Mahākaccāna please explain this."

"Reverends, suppose there was a person in need of heartwood. And while wandering in search of heartwood he'd come across a large tree standing with heartwood. But he'd pass over the roots and trunk, imagining that the heartwood should be sought in the branches and leaves. Such is the consequence for the venerables. Though you were face to face with the Buddha, you bypassed him, imagining that you should ask me about this matter. For

he is the Buddha, the one who knows and sees. He is vision, he is knowledge, he is the manifestation of principle, he is the manifestation of divinity. He is the preacher, the proclaimer, the elucidator of meaning, the bestower of freedom from death, the lord of truth, the Realized One. That was the time to approach the Buddha and ask about this matter. You should have remembered it in line with the Buddha's answer."

"Certainly he is the Buddha, the one who knows and sees. He is vision, he is knowledge, he is the manifestation of principle, he is the manifestation of divinity. He is the preacher, the proclaimer, the elucidator of meaning, the bestower of freedom from death, the lord of truth, the Realized One. That was the time to approach the Buddha and ask about this matter. We should have remembered it in line with the Buddha's answer. Still, Venerable Mahākaccāna is praised by the Buddha and esteemed by his sensible spiritual companions. He is capable of explaining in detail the meaning of this brief summary recital given by the Buddha. Please explain this, if it's no trouble."

"Well then, reverends, listen and apply your mind well, I will speak."

"Yes, reverend," they replied. Venerable Mahākaccāna said this:

"Reverends, the Buddha gave this brief summary recital, then entered his dwelling without explaining the meaning in detail: 'A mendicant should examine in whatever way such that, while examining, consciousness would neither be scattered nor diffused externally, nor stuck internally, and they would not be anxious because of grasping. When consciousness is neither scattered nor diffused externally, nor stuck internally, and they are not anxious because of grasping, there is no coming to be of the origin of suffering—of rebirth, old age, and death in the future.' This is how I understand the detailed meaning of this summary recital.

How is consciousness said to be scattered and diffused externally? In this case, when a mendicant sees a sight with their eyes, and consciousness follows after the features of that sight—tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in its features—consciousness is said to be scattered and diffused externally. When they hear a sound with their ears … When they smell an odor with their nose … When they taste a flavor with their tongue … When they feel a touch with their body … When they know an idea with their mind, and consciousness follows after the features of that idea—tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in its features—consciousness is said to be scattered and diffused externally. That's how consciousness is said to be scattered and diffused externally.

And how is consciousness said to be not scattered and diffused externally? In this case, when a mendicant sees a sight with their eyes, but consciousness does not follow after the features of that sight—not tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in its features—consciousness is said to be not scattered and diffused externally. When they hear a sound with their ears … When they smell an odor with their nose … When they taste a flavor with their tongue … When they feel a touch with their body … When they know an idea with their mind, but consciousness does not follow after the features of that idea—not tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in its features—consciousness is said to be not scattered and diffused externally. That's how consciousness is said to be not scattered and diffused externally.

And how is it said to be stuck internally? Take a mendicant who, 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. When consciousness follows after that rapture and bliss born of seclusion—tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in that rapture and bliss born of seclusion—the mind is said to be stuck internally.

Furthermore, as the placing of the mind and keeping it connected are stilled, a mendicant enters and remains in the second absorption, which has the rapture and bliss born of immersion, with internal clarity and mind at one, without placing the mind and keeping it connected. When consciousness follows after that rapture and bliss born of immersion—tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in that rapture and bliss born of immersion—the mind is said to be stuck internally.

Furthermore, with the fading away of rapture, a mendicant enters and remains in the third absorption, where they meditate with equanimity, mindful and aware, experiencing for themselves the bliss of which the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous and mindful, one meditates in bliss.' When consciousness follows after that equanimity—tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in that bliss with equanimity—the mind is said to be stuck internally.

Furthermore, with the giving up of pleasure and pain and the disappearance of former happiness and sadness, a mendicant enters and remains in the fourth absorption, without pleasure or pain, with pure equanimity and mindfulness. When consciousness follows after that neutral feeling—tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in that neutral feeling—the mind is said to be stuck internally. That's how it is said to be stuck internally.

And how is it said to be not stuck internally? 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. When consciousness does not follow after that rapture and bliss born of seclusion—not tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in that rapture and bliss born of seclusion—the mind is said to be not stuck internally.

Furthermore, they enter the second absorption … When consciousness does not follow after that rapture and bliss born of immersion—not tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in that rapture and bliss born of immersion—the mind is said to be not stuck internally.

Furthermore, they enter and remain in the third absorption … When consciousness does not follow after that equanimity—not tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in that bliss with equanimity—the mind is said to be not stuck internally.

Furthermore, they enter and remain in the fourth absorption … When consciousness does not follow after that neutral feeling—not tied, attached, and fettered to gratification in that neutral feeling—the mind is said to be not stuck internally. That's how it is said to be not stuck internally.

And how is it anxious because of grasping? It's when an unlearned ordinary person has not seen the noble ones, and is neither skilled nor trained in the teaching of the noble ones. They've not seen true persons, and are neither skilled nor trained in the teaching of the true persons. They regard form as self, self as having form, form in self, or self in form. But that form decays and perishes, and consciousness latches on to the perishing of form. Anxieties occupy the mind, born of latching on to the perishing of form, and originating in accordance with natural principles. So it becomes frightened, worried, concerned, and anxious because of grasping. They regard feeling … perception … choices … consciousness as self, self as having consciousness, consciousness in self, or self in consciousness. But that consciousness decays and perishes, and consciousness latches on to the perishing of consciousness. Anxieties occupy the mind, born of latching on to the perishing of consciousness, and originating in accordance with natural principles. So it becomes frightened, worried, concerned, and anxious because of grasping. That's how it is anxious because of grasping.

And how is it not anxious because of grasping? It's when a learned noble disciple has seen the noble ones, and is skilled and trained in the teaching of the noble ones. They've seen true persons, and are skilled and trained in the teaching of the true persons. They don't regard form as self, self as having form, form in self, or self in form. When that form decays and perishes, consciousness doesn't latch on to the perishing of form. Anxieties—born of latching on to the perishing of form and originating in accordance with natural principles—don't occupy the mind. So it does not become frightened, worried, concerned, or anxious because of grasping. They don't regard feeling … perception … choices … consciousness as self, self as having consciousness, consciousness in self, or self in consciousness. When that consciousness decays and perishes, consciousness doesn't latch on to the perishing of consciousness. Anxieties—born of latching on to the perishing of consciousness and originating in accordance with natural principles—don't occupy the mind. So it does not become frightened, worried, concerned, or anxious because of grasping. That's how it is not anxious because of grasping.

The Buddha gave this brief summary recital, then entered his dwelling without explaining the meaning in detail: 'A mendicant should examine in whatever way such that, while examining, consciousness would neither be scattered nor diffused externally, nor stuck internally, and they would not be anxious because of grasping. When consciousness is neither scattered nor diffused externally, nor stuck internally, and they are not anxious because of grasping, there is no coming to be of the origin of suffering—of rebirth, old age, and death in the future.' And this is how I understand the detailed meaning of this summary recital. If you wish, you may go to the Buddha and ask him about this. You should remember it in line with the Buddha's answer."

Then those mendicants, approving and agreeing with what Mahākaccāna said, rose from their seats and went to the Buddha, bowed, sat down to one side, and told him what had happened, adding:

"Mahākaccāna clearly explained the meaning to us in this manner, with these words and phrases."

“Mahākaccāna is astute, mendicants, he has great wisdom. If you came to me and asked this question, I would answer it in exactly the same way as Mahākaccāna. That is what it means, and that’s how you should remember it.”

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