MN 24 — Chariots at the Ready

English translation by Bhikkhu Sujato.
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Text

Middle Discourses 24

Chariots at the Ready

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying near Rājagaha in the Bamboo Grove, the squirrels' feeding ground.

Then several mendicants who had completed the rainy season residence in their native land went to the Buddha, bowed, and sat down to one side. The Buddha said to them:

"In your native land, mendicants, which of the native mendicants is esteemed in this way: 'Personally having few wishes, they speak to the mendicants on having few wishes. Personally having contentment, seclusion, aloofness, energy, ethics, immersion, wisdom, freedom, and the knowledge and vision of freedom, they speak to the mendicants on all these things. They're an adviser and counselor, one who educates, encourages, fires up, and inspires their spiritual companions.'"

"Puṇṇa son of Mantāṇī, sir, is esteemed in this way in our native land."

Now at that time Venerable Sāriputta was sitting not far from the Buddha. Then he thought:

"Puṇṇa son of Mantāṇī is fortunate, so very fortunate, in that his sensible spiritual companions praise him point by point in the presence of the Teacher, and that the Teacher seconds that appreciation. Hopefully, some time or other I'll get to meet Venerable Puṇṇa, and we can have a discussion."

When the Buddha had stayed in Rājagaha as long as he pleased, he set out for Sāvatthī. Traveling stage by stage, he arrived at Sāvatthī, where he stayed in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. Puṇṇa heard that the Buddha had arrived at Sāvatthī.

Then he set his lodgings in order and, taking his bowl and robe, set out for Sāvatthī. Eventually he came to Sāvatthī and Jeta's Grove. He went up to the Buddha, bowed, and sat down to one side. The Buddha educated, encouraged, fired up, and inspired him with a Dhamma talk. Then, having approved and agreed with what the Buddha said, Puṇṇa rose from his seat, bowed, and respectfully circled the Buddha, keeping him on his right. Then he went to the Dark Forest for the day's meditation.

Then a certain mendicant went up to Venerable Sāriputta, and said to him, "Reverend Sāriputta, the mendicant named Puṇṇa, of whom you have often spoken so highly, after being inspired by a talk of the Buddha's, left for the Dark Forest for the day's meditation."

Sāriputta quickly grabbed his sitting cloth and followed behind Puṇṇa, keeping sight of his head. Puṇṇa plunged deep into the Dark Forest and sat at the root of a tree for the day's meditation. And Sāriputta did likewise.

Then in the late afternoon, Sāriputta came out of retreat, went to Puṇṇa, and exchanged greetings with him. When the greetings and polite conversation were over, he sat down to one side and said to Puṇṇa:

"Reverend, is our spiritual life lived under the Buddha?"

"Yes, reverend."

"Is the spiritual life lived under the Buddha for the sake of purification of ethics?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, is the spiritual life lived under the Buddha for the sake of purification of mind?"

"Certainly not."

"Is the spiritual life lived under the Buddha for the sake of purification of view?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, is the spiritual life lived under the Buddha for the sake of purification by traversing doubt?"

"Certainly not."

"Is the spiritual life lived under the Buddha for the sake of purification of knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, is the spiritual life lived under the Buddha for the sake of purification of knowledge and vision of the practice?"

"Certainly not."

"Is the spiritual life lived under the Buddha for the sake of purification of knowledge and vision?"

"Certainly not."

"When asked each of these questions, you answered, 'Certainly not.' Then what exactly is the goal of leading the spiritual life under the Buddha?"

"The goal of leading the spiritual life under the Buddha is complete extinguishment with no fuel for grasping."

"Reverend, is purification of ethics complete extinguishment with no fuel for grasping?"

"Certainly not, reverend."

"Is purification of mind ...

purification of view …

purification by traversing doubt …

purification of knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path …

purification of knowledge and vision of the practice …

Is purification of knowledge and vision complete extinguishment with no fuel for grasping?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then is complete extinguishment with no fuel for grasping something apart from these things?”

“Certainly not.”

“When asked each of these questions, you answered, ‘Certainly not.’ How then should we see the meaning of this statement?”

“If the Buddha had asserted purification of ethics to be complete extinguishment with no fuel for grasping, he would have asserted that which grasps fuel to be complete extinguishment without grasping fuel. If the Buddha had asserted purification of mind … purification of view … purification by traversing doubt … purification of knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path … purification of knowledge and vision of the practice … If the Buddha had asserted purification of knowledge and vision to be complete extinguishment with no fuel for grasping, he would have asserted that which grasps fuel to be complete extinguishment without grasping fuel. But if complete extinguishment with no fuel for grasping was something apart from these things, an ordinary person would become extinguished. For an ordinary person lacks these things.

Well then, reverend, I shall give you a simile. For by means of a simile some sensible people understand the meaning of what is said.

Suppose that, while staying in Sāvatthī, King Pasenadi of Kosala had some urgent business come up in Sāketa. Now, between Sāvatthī and Sāketa seven chariots were stationed at the ready for him. Then Pasenadi, exiting Sāvatthī, mounted the first chariot at the ready by the gate of the royal compound. The first chariot at the ready would bring him to the second, where he’d dismount and mount the second chariot. The second chariot at the ready would bring him to the third … The third chariot at the ready would bring him to the fourth … The fourth chariot at the ready would bring him to the fifth … The fifth chariot at the ready would bring him to the sixth … The sixth chariot at the ready would bring him to the seventh, where he’d dismount and mount the seventh chariot. The seventh chariot at the ready would bring him to the gate of the royal compound of Sāketa. And when he was at the gate, friends and colleagues, relatives and kin would ask him: ‘Great king, did you come to Sāketa from Sāvatthī by this chariot at the ready?’ If asked this, how should King Pasenadi rightly reply?”

“The king should reply: ‘Well, while staying in Sāvatthī, I had some urgent business come up in Sāketa. Now, between Sāvatthī and Sāketa seven chariots were stationed at the ready

for me. Then, exiting Sāvatthī, I mounted the first chariot at the ready by the gate of the royal compound. The first chariot at the ready brought me to the second, where I dismounted and mounted the second chariot. … The second chariot brought me to the third … the fourth … the fifth … the sixth … The sixth chariot at the ready brought me to the seventh, where I dismounted and mounted the seventh chariot. The seventh chariot at the ready brought me to the gate of the royal compound of Sāketa.' That's how King Pasenadi should rightly reply."

"In the same way, reverend, purification of ethics is only for the sake of purification of mind. Purification of mind is only for the sake of purification of view. Purification of view is only for the sake of purification by traversing doubt. Purification by traversing doubt is only for the sake of purification of knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path. Purification of knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path is only for the sake of purification of knowledge and vision of the practice. Purification of knowledge and vision of the practice is only for the sake of purification of knowledge and vision. Purification of knowledge and vision is only for the sake of extinguishment with no fuel for grasping. The spiritual life is lived under the Buddha for the sake of complete extinguishment with no fuel for grasping."

When he said this, Sāriputta said to Puṇṇa, "What is the venerable's name? And how are you known among your spiritual companions?"

"Reverend, my name is Puṇṇa. And I am known as 'son of Mantāṇī' among my spiritual companions."

"It's incredible, reverend, it's amazing! Venerable Puṇṇa son of Mantāṇī has answered each deep question point by point, as a learned disciple who rightly understands the Teacher's instructions. It is fortunate for his spiritual companions, so very fortunate, that they get to see Venerable Puṇṇa son of Mantāṇī and pay homage to him. Even if they only got to see him and pay respects to him by carrying him around on their heads on a roll of cloth, it would still be very fortunate for them! And it's fortunate for me, so very fortunate, that I get to see the venerable and pay homage to him."

When he said this, Puṇṇa said to Sāriputta, "What is the venerable's name? And how are you known among your spiritual companions?"

"Reverend, my name is Upatissa. And I am known as Sāriputta among my spiritual companions."

"Goodness! I had no idea I was consulting with the Venerable Sāriputta, the disciple who is fit to be compared with the Teacher himself! If I'd known, I would not have said so much. It's incredible, reverend, it's amazing! Venerable Sāriputta has asked each deep question point by point, as a learned disciple who rightly understands the Teacher's instructions. It is fortunate for his spiritual companions, so very fortunate, that they get to see Venerable Sāriputta and pay homage to him. Even if they only got to see him and pay respects to him by carrying him around on their heads on a roll of cloth, it would still be very fortunate for them! And it's fortunate for me, so very fortunate, that I get to see the venerable and pay homage to him."

And so these two spiritual giants agreed with each other’s fine words.