MN 26 — The Noble Quest

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Text

Middle Discourses 26

The Noble Quest

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

Then the Buddha robed up in the morning and, taking his bowl and robe, entered Sāvatthī for alms. Then several mendicants went up to Venerable Ānanda and said to him, "Reverend, it's been a long time since we've heard a Dhamma talk from the Buddha. It would be good if we got to hear a Dhamma talk from the Buddha."

"Well then, reverends, go to the brahmin Rammaka's hermitage. Hopefully you'll get to hear a Dhamma talk from the Buddha."

"Yes, reverend," they replied.

Then, after the meal, on his return from almsround, the Buddha addressed Ānanda, "Come, Ānanda, let's go to the stilt longhouse of Migāra's mother in the Eastern Monastery for the day's meditation."

"Yes, sir," Ānanda replied. So the Buddha went with Ānanda to the Eastern Monastery for the day's meditation. In the late afternoon the Buddha came out of retreat and addressed Ānanda, "Come, Ānanda, let's go to the eastern gate to bathe."

"Yes, sir," Ānanda replied.

So the Buddha went with Ānanda to the eastern gate to bathe. When he had bathed and emerged from the water he stood in one robe drying his limbs. Then Ānanda said to the Buddha, "Sir, the hermitage of the brahmin Rammaka is nearby. It's so delightful, so lovely. Please visit it out of sympathy." The Buddha consented with silence.

He went to the brahmin Rammaka's hermitage. Now at that time several mendicants were sitting together in the hermitage talking about the teaching. The Buddha stood outside the door waiting for the talk to end. When he knew the talk had ended he cleared his throat and knocked on the door-panel. The mendicants opened the door for the Buddha, and he entered the hermitage, where he sat down on the seat spread out and addressed the mendicants: "Mendicants, what were you sitting talking about just now? What conversation was left unfinished?"

“Sir, our unfinished discussion on the teaching was about the Buddha himself when the Buddha arrived.”

“Good, mendicants! It’s appropriate for gentlemen like you, who have gone forth out of faith from the lay life to homelessness, to sit together and talk about the teaching. When you’re sitting together you should do one of two things: discuss the teachings or keep noble silence.

Mendicants, there are these two quests: the noble quest and the ignoble quest.

And what is the ignoble quest? It’s when someone who is themselves liable to be reborn seeks what is also liable to be reborn. Themselves liable to grow old, fall sick, die, sorrow, and become corrupted, they seek what is also liable to these things.

And what should be described as liable to be reborn? Partners and children, male and female bondservants, goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, elephants and cattle, and gold and currency are liable to be reborn. These attachments are liable to be reborn. Someone who is tied, infatuated, and attached to such things, themselves liable to being reborn, seeks what is also liable to be reborn.

And what should be described as liable to grow old? Partners and children, male and female bondservants, goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, elephants and cattle, and gold and currency are liable to grow old. These attachments are liable to grow old. Someone who is tied, infatuated, and attached to such things, themselves liable to grow old, seeks what is also liable to grow old.

And what should be described as liable to fall sick? Partners and children, male and female bondservants, goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, and elephants and cattle are liable to fall sick. These attachments are liable to fall sick. Someone who is tied, infatuated, and attached to such things, themselves liable to falling sick, seeks what is also liable to fall sick.

And what should be described as liable to die? Partners and children, male and female bondservants, goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, and elephants and cattle are liable to die. These attachments are liable to die. Someone who is tied, infatuated, and attached to such things, themselves liable to die, seeks what is also liable to die.

And what should be described as liable to sorrow? Partners and children, male and female bondservants, goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, and elephants and cattle are liable to sorrow. These attachments are liable to sorrow. Someone who is tied, infatuated, and attached to such things, themselves liable to sorrow, seeks what is also liable to sorrow.

And what should be described as liable to corruption? Partners and children, male and female bondservants, goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, elephants and cattle, and gold and currency are liable to corruption. These attachments are liable to corruption. Someone who is tied, infatuated, and attached to such things, themselves liable to corruption, seeks what is also liable to corruption. This is the ignoble quest.

And what is the noble quest? It’s when someone who is themselves liable to be reborn, understanding the drawbacks in being liable to be reborn, seeks that which is free of

rebirth, the supreme sanctuary from the yoke, extinguishment. Themselves liable to grow old, fall sick, die, sorrow, and become corrupted, understanding the drawbacks in these things, they seek that which is free of old age, sickness, death, sorrow, and corruption, the supreme sanctuary from the yoke, extinguishment. This is the noble quest.

Mendicants, before my awakening—when I was still unawakened but intent on awakening—I too, being liable to be reborn, sought what is also liable to be reborn. Myself liable to grow old, fall sick, die, sorrow, and become corrupted, I sought what is also liable to these things. Then it occurred to me: 'Why do I, being liable to be reborn, grow old, fall sick, sorrow, die, and become corrupted, seek things that have the same nature? Why don't I seek that which is free of rebirth, old age, sickness, death, sorrow, and corruption, the supreme sanctuary from the yoke, extinguishment?'

Some time later, while still with pristine black hair, blessed with youth, in the prime of life—though my mother and father wished otherwise, weeping with tearful faces—I shaved off my hair and beard, dressed in ocher robes, and went forth from the lay life to homelessness.

Once I had gone forth I set out to discover what is skillful, seeking the supreme state of sublime peace. I approached Āḷāra Kālāma and said to him, 'Reverend Kālāma, I wish to lead the spiritual life in this teaching and training.'

Āḷāra Kālāma replied, 'Stay, venerable. This teaching is such that a sensible person can soon realize their own denomination with their own insight and live having achieved it.'

I quickly memorized that teaching. As far as lip-recital and verbal repetition went, I spoke the doctrine of knowledge, the elder doctrine. I claimed to know and see, and so did others.

Then it occurred to me, 'It is not solely by mere faith that Āḷāra Kālāma declares: "I realize this teaching with my own insight, and live having achieved it." Surely he meditates knowing and seeing this teaching.'

So I approached Āḷāra Kālāma and said to him, 'Reverend Kālāma, to what extent do you say you've realized this teaching with your own insight?' When I said this, he declared the dimension of nothingness.

Then it occurred to me, 'It's not just Āḷāra Kālāma who has faith, energy, mindfulness, immersion, and wisdom; I too have these things. Why don't I make an effort to realize the same teaching that Āḷāra Kālāma says he has realized with his own insight?' I quickly realized that teaching with my own insight, and lived having achieved it.

So I approached Āḷāra Kālāma and said to him, 'Reverend Kālāma, is it up to this point that you realized this teaching with your own insight, and declare having achieved it?'

'I have, reverend.'

'I too, reverend, have realized this teaching with my own insight up to this point, and live having achieved it.'

‘We are fortunate, reverend, so very fortunate to see a venerable such as yourself as one of our spiritual companions! So the teaching that I’ve realized with my own insight, and declare having achieved it, you’ve realized with your own insight, and dwell having achieved it. The teaching that you’ve realized with your own insight, and dwell having achieved it, I’ve realized with my own insight, and declare having achieved it. So the teaching that I know, you know, and the teaching that you know, I know. I am like you and you are like me. Come now, reverend! We should both lead this community together.’

And that is how my tutor Āḷāra Kālāma placed me, his pupil, on the same position as him, and honored me with high praise.

Then it occurred to me, ‘This teaching doesn’t lead to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment. It only leads as far as rebirth in the dimension of nothingness.’ Realizing that this teaching was inadequate, I left disappointed.

I set out to discover what is skillful, seeking the supreme state of sublime peace. I approached Uddaka son of Rāma and said to him, ‘Reverend, I wish to lead the spiritual life in this teaching and training.’

Uddaka replied, ‘Stay, venerable. This teaching is such that a sensible person can soon realize their own denomination with their own insight and live having achieved it.’

I quickly memorized that teaching. As far as lip-recital and verbal repetition went, I spoke the doctrine of knowledge, the elder doctrine. I claimed to know and see, and so did others.

Then it occurred to me, ‘It is not solely by mere faith that Rāma declared: “I realize this teaching with my own insight, and live having achieved it.” Surely he meditated knowing and seeing this teaching.’

So I approached Uddaka son of Rāma and said to him, ‘Reverend, to what extent did Rāma say he’d realized this teaching with his own insight?’

When I said this, Uddaka son of Rāma declared the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.

Then it occurred to me, ‘It’s not just Rāma who had faith, energy, mindfulness, immersion, and wisdom; I too have these things. Why don’t I make an effort to realize the same teaching that Rāma said he had realized with his own insight?’ I quickly realized that teaching with my own insight, and lived having achieved it.

So I approached Uddaka son of Rāma and said to him, ‘Reverend, had Rāma realized this teaching with his own insight up to this point, and declared having achieved it?’

‘He had, reverend.’

‘I too have realized this teaching with my own insight up to this point, and live having achieved it.’

‘We are fortunate, reverend, so very fortunate to see a venerable such as yourself as one of our spiritual companions! So the teaching that Rāma had realized with his own insight, and declared having achieved it, you’ve realized with your own insight, and dwell having achieved it. The teaching that you’ve realized with your own insight, and dwell having achieved it, Rāma had realized with his own insight, and declared having achieved it. So the teaching that Rāma directly knew, you know, and the teaching you know, Rāma directly knew. Rāma was like you and you are like Rāma. Come now, reverend! You should lead this community.’

And that is how my spiritual companion Uddaka son of Rāma placed me in the position of a tutor and honored me with high praise.

Then it occurred to me, ‘This teaching doesn’t lead to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment. It only leads as far as rebirth in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.’ Realizing that this teaching was inadequate, I left disappointed.

I set out to discover what is skillful, seeking the supreme state of sublime peace. Traveling stage by stage in the Magadhan lands, I arrived at the town of Senā in Uruvelā. There I saw a delightful park, a lovely grove with a flowing river that was clean and charming, with smooth banks. And nearby was a village to resort to for alms.

Then it occurred to me, ‘This park is truly delightful, a lovely grove with a flowing river that’s clean and charming, with smooth banks. And nearby there’s a village to resort to for alms. This is good enough for striving for a gentleman wanting to strive.’ So I sat down right there, thinking, ‘This is good enough for striving.’

And so, being myself liable to be reborn, understanding the drawbacks in being liable to be reborn, I sought that which is free of rebirth, the supreme sanctuary from the yoke, extinguishment—and I found it. Being myself liable to grow old, fall sick, die, sorrow, and become corrupted, understanding the drawbacks in these things, I sought that which is free of old age, sickness, death, sorrow, and corruption, the supreme sanctuary from the yoke, extinguishment—and I found it.

Knowledge and vision arose in me: ‘My freedom is unshakable; this is my last rebirth; now there’ll be no more future lives.’

Then it occurred to me, ‘This principle I have discovered is deep, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, sublime, beyond the scope of logic, subtle, comprehensible to the astute. But people like clinging, they love it and enjoy it. It’s hard for them to see this topic; that is, specific conditionality, dependent origination. It’s also hard for them to see this topic; that is, the stilling of all activities, the letting go of all attachments, the ending of craving, fading away, cessation, extinguishment. And if I were to teach this principle, others might not understand me, which would be wearying and troublesome for me.’

And then these verses, which were neither supernaturally inspired, nor learned before in the past, occurred to me:

‘I’ve struggled hard to realize this,

there’s no need to reveal it now!

Those mired in greed and hate

can’t really understand this teaching.

It goes against the stream, subtle,

deep, obscure, and very fine.

Those besotted by greed cannot see,

for they’re cloaked in a mass of darkness.’

So, as I reflected like this, my mind inclined to remaining passive, not to teaching the Dhamma.

Then the divinity Sahampati, knowing my train of thought, thought, ‘Oh lord! The world will be lost, the world will perish! For the mind of the Realized One, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha, inclines to remaining passive, not to teaching the Dhamma.’

Then, as easily as a strong person would extend or contract their arm, the divinity Sahampati vanished from the realm of divinity and reappeared in front of me. He arranged his robe over one shoulder, raised his cupped palms toward me, and said, ‘Sir, let the Blessed One teach the Dhamma! Let the Holy One teach the Dhamma! There are beings with little dust in their eyes. They’re in decline because they haven’t heard the teaching. There will be those who understand the teaching!’

That is what the divinity Sahampati said. Then he went on to say:

‘Among the Magadhans there appeared in the past

an impure teaching thought up by the stained.

Fling open the door to freedom from death!

Let them hear the teaching the immaculate one discovered.

Standing high on a rocky mountain,

you can see the people all around.

In just the same way, All-seer, so intelligent,

having ascended the Temple of Truth,

rid of sorrow, look upon the people

swamped with sorrow, overcome by rebirth and old age.

Rise, hero! Victor in battle, caravan leader,

wander the world free of debt.

Let the Blessed One teach the Dhamma!

There will be those who understand!'

Then, understanding the Divinity's invitation, I surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha, because of my compassion for sentient beings. And I saw sentient beings with little dust in their eyes, and some with much dust in their eyes; with keen faculties and with weak faculties, with good qualities and with bad qualities, easy to teach and hard to teach. And some of them lived seeing the danger in the fault to do with the next world, while others did not. It's like a pool with blue water lilies, or pink or white lotuses. Some of them sprout and grow in the water without rising above it, thriving underwater. Some of them sprout and grow in the water reaching the water's surface. And some of them sprout and grow in the water but rise up above the water and stand with no water clinging to them. In the same way, I saw sentient beings with little dust in their eyes, and some with much dust in their eyes.

Then I replied in verse to the divinity Sahampati:

'Flung open are the doors to freedom from death!

Let those with ears to hear commit to faith.

Thinking it would be troublesome, Divinity, I did not teach

the sophisticated, sublime Dhamma among mankind.'

Then the divinity Sahampati, knowing that his request for me to teach the Dhamma had been granted, bowed and respectfully circled me, keeping me on his right, before vanishing right there.

Then I thought, 'Who should I teach first of all? Who will quickly understand this teaching?'

Then it occurred to me, 'That Āḷāra Kālāma is astute, competent, intelligent, and has long had little dust in his eyes. Why don't I teach him first of all? He'll quickly understand the teaching.'

But a deity came to me and said, 'Sir, Āḷāra Kālāma passed away seven days ago.'

And knowledge and vision arose in me, 'Āḷāra Kālāma passed away seven days ago.'

I thought, 'This is a great loss for Āḷāra Kālāma. If he had heard the teaching, he would have understood it quickly.'

Then I thought, 'Who should I teach first of all? Who will quickly understand this teaching?'

Then it occurred to me, 'That Uddaka son of Rāma is astute, competent, intelligent, and has long had little dust in his eyes. Why don't I teach him first of all? He'll quickly understand the teaching.'

But a deity came to me and said, 'Sir, Uddaka son of Rāma passed away just last night.'

And knowledge and vision arose in me, 'Uddaka son of Rāma passed away just last night.'

I thought, 'This is a great loss for Uddaka. If he had heard the teaching, he would have understood it quickly.'

Then I thought, ‘Who should I teach first of all? Who will quickly understand this teaching?’

Then it occurred to me, ‘The group of five mendicants were very helpful to me. They looked after me during my time of resolute striving. Why don’t I teach them first of all?’

Then I thought, ‘Where are the group of five mendicants staying these days?’ With clairvoyance that is purified and superhuman I saw that the group of five mendicants were staying near Varanasi in the deer park at Isipatana. So, when I had stayed in Uruvelā as long as I pleased, I set out for Varanasi.

While I was traveling along the road between Gayā and Bodhgaya, the Ājīvaka ascetic Upaka saw me and said, ‘Reverend, your faculties are so very clear, and your complexion is pure and bright. In whose name have you gone forth, reverend? Who is your Teacher? Whose teaching do you believe in?’

I replied to Upaka in verse:

‘I am the vanquisher of all, the knower of all,

unsullied in the midst of all things.

I’ve given up all, freed through the ending of craving.

Since I know for myself, whose follower should I be?

I have no tutor.

There is no one like me.

In the world with its gods,

I have no rival.

For in this world, I am the perfected one;

I am the supreme Teacher.

I alone am fully awakened,

cooled, quenched.

I am going to the city of Kāsi

to roll forth the Wheel of Dhamma.

In this world that is so blind,

I’ll beat the drum of freedom from death!’

‘According to what you claim, reverend, you ought to be the Infinite Victor.’

‘The victors are those who, like me,

have reached the ending of defilements.

I have conquered bad qualities, Upaka—

that's why I'm a victor.'

When I had spoken, Upaka said: 'If you say so, reverend.' Shaking his head, he took a wrong turn and left.

Traveling stage by stage, I arrived at Varanasi, and went to see the group of five mendicants in the deer park at Isipatana. The group of five mendicants saw me coming off in the distance and stopped each other, saying, 'Here comes the ascetic Gotama. He's so indulgent; he strayed from the struggle and returned to indulgence. We shouldn't bow to him or rise for him or receive his bowl and robe. But we can set out a seat; he can sit if he likes.' Yet as I drew closer, the group of five mendicants were unable to stop themselves per their own agreement. Some came out to greet me and receive my bowl and robe, some spread out a seat, while others set out water for washing my feet. But they still addressed me by name and as 'reverend'.

So I said to them, 'Mendicants, don't address me by name and as "reverend". The Realized One is perfected, a fully awakened Buddha. Listen up, mendicants: I have achieved freedom from death! I shall instruct you, I will teach you the Dhamma. By practicing as instructed you will soon realize the supreme culmination of the spiritual path in this very life. You will live having achieved with your own insight the goal for which gentlemen rightly go forth from the lay life to homelessness.'

But they said to me, 'Reverend Gotama, even by that conduct, that practice, that grueling work you did not achieve any superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. How could you have achieved such a state now that you've become indulgent, strayed from the struggle and returned to indulgence?'

So I said to them, 'The Realized One has not become indulgent, strayed from the struggle and returned to indulgence. The Realized One is perfected, a fully awakened Buddha. Listen up, mendicants: I have achieved freedom from death! I shall instruct you, I will teach you the Dhamma. By practicing as instructed you will soon realize the supreme culmination of the spiritual path in this very life.'

But for a second time they said to me, 'Reverend Gotama … you've returned to indulgence.'

So for a second time I said to them, 'The Realized One has not become indulgent …'

But for a third time they said to me, 'Reverend Gotama, even by that conduct, that practice, that grueling work you did not achieve any superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. How could you have achieved such a state now that you've become indulgent, strayed from the struggle and returned to indulgence?'

So I said to them, 'Mendicants, have you ever known me to speak like this before?'

'No sir, we have not.'

'The Realized One is perfected, a fully awakened Buddha. Listen up, mendicants: I have achieved freedom from death! I shall instruct you, I will teach you the Dhamma. By practicing as instructed you will soon realize the supreme culmination of the spiritual path in this very life. You will live having achieved with your own insight the goal for which gentlemen rightly go forth from the lay life to homelessness.'

I was able to persuade the group of five mendicants. Then sometimes I advised two mendicants, while the other three went for alms. Then those three would feed all six of us with what they brought back. Sometimes I advised three mendicants, while the other two went for alms. Then those two would feed all six of us with what they brought back.

As the group of five mendicants were being advised and instructed by me like this, being themselves liable to be reborn, understanding the drawbacks in being liable to be reborn, they sought that which is free of rebirth, the supreme sanctuary from the yoke, extinguishment—and they found it. Being themselves liable to grow old, fall sick, die, sorrow, and become corrupted, understanding the drawbacks in these things, they sought that which is free of old age, sickness, death, sorrow, and corruption, the supreme sanctuary from the yoke, extinguishment—and they found it. Knowledge and vision arose in them: 'Our freedom is unshakable; this is our last rebirth; now there'll be no more future lives.'

Mendicants, 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.

There are ascetics and brahmins who enjoy these five kinds of sensual stimulation tied, infatuated, attached, blind to the drawbacks, and not understanding the escape. You should understand that they have met with calamity and disaster, and the Wicked One can do with them what he wants.

Suppose a deer in the wilderness was lying caught on a pile of snares. You'd know that it has met with calamity and disaster, and the hunter can do with them what he wants. And when the hunter comes, it cannot flee where it wants.

In the same way, there are ascetics and brahmins who enjoy these five kinds of sensual stimulation tied, infatuated, attached, blind to the drawbacks, and not understanding the escape. You should understand that they have met with calamity and disaster, and the Wicked One can do with them what he wants.

There are ascetics and brahmins who enjoy these five kinds of sensual stimulation without being tied, infatuated, or attached, seeing the drawbacks, and understanding the escape. You should understand that they haven't met with calamity and disaster, and the Wicked One cannot do what he wants with them.

Suppose a deer in the wilderness was lying on a pile of snares without being caught. You'd know that it hasn't met with calamity and disaster, and the hunter cannot do what he wants with them. And when the hunter comes, it can flee where it wants.

In the same way, there are ascetics and brahmins who enjoy these five kinds of sensual stimulation without being tied, infatuated, or attached, seeing the drawbacks, and understanding the escape. You should understand that they haven't met with calamity and disaster, and the Wicked One cannot do what he wants with them.

Suppose there was a wild deer wandering in the forest that walked, stood, sat, and laid down in confidence. Why is that? Because it's out of the hunter's range.

In the same way, 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. This is called a mendicant who has blinded Māra, put out his eyes without a trace, and gone where the Wicked One cannot see.

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. This is called a mendicant who has blinded Māra …

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.' This is called a mendicant who has blinded Māra …

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. This is called a mendicant who has blinded Māra …

Furthermore, a mendicant, going totally beyond perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of impingement, not focusing on perceptions of diversity, aware that 'space is infinite', enters and remains in the dimension of infinite space. This is called a mendicant who has blinded Māra …

Furthermore, a mendicant, going totally beyond the dimension of infinite space, aware that 'consciousness is infinite', enters and remains in the dimension of infinite consciousness. This is called a mendicant who has blinded Māra …

Furthermore, a mendicant, going totally beyond the dimension of infinite consciousness, aware that 'there is nothing at all', enters and remains in the dimension of nothingness. This is called a mendicant who has blinded Māra …

Furthermore, a mendicant, going totally beyond the dimension of nothingness, enters and remains in the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. This is called a mendicant who has blinded Māra …

Furthermore, a mendicant, going totally beyond the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, enters and remains in the cessation of perception and feeling. And, having seen with wisdom, their defilements come to an end. This is called a mendicant who has blinded Māra, put out his eyes without a trace, and gone where the Wicked One cannot see. They've crossed over clinging to the world. And they walk, stand, sit, and lie down in confidence. Why is that? Because they're out of the Wicked One's range."

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