MN 44 — The Shorter Elaboration

English translation by Bhikkhu Sujato.
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Text

Middle Discourses 44

The Shorter Elaboration

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

Then the layman Visākha went to see the nun Dhammadinnā, bowed, sat down to one side, and said to her:

"Ma'am, they speak of this thing called 'substantial reality'. What is this substantial reality that the Buddha spoke of?"

"Visākha, the Buddha said that these five grasping aggregates are substantial reality. That is, the grasping aggregates of form, feeling, perception, choices, and consciousness. The Buddha said that these five grasping aggregates are substantial reality."

Saying "Good, ma'am," Visākha approved and agreed with what Dhammadinnā said. Then he asked another question:

"Ma'am, they speak of this thing called 'the origin of substantial reality'. What is the origin of substantial reality that the Buddha spoke of?"

"It's the craving that leads to future lives, mixed up with relishing and greed, taking pleasure there wherever it alights. That is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for continued existence, and craving for nonexistence. The Buddha said that this is the origin of substantial reality."

"Ma'am, they speak of this thing called 'the cessation of substantial reality'. What is the cessation of substantial reality that the Buddha spoke of?"

"It's the fading away and cessation of that very same craving with no residue left behind; giving it away, letting it go, releasing it, and not clinging to it. The Buddha said that this is the cessation of substantial reality."

"Ma'am, they speak of the practice that leads to the cessation of substantial reality. What is the practice that leads to the cessation of substantial reality that the Buddha spoke of?"

"The practice that leads to the cessation of substantial reality that the Buddha spoke of is simply this noble eightfold path, that is: right view, right purpose, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right immersion."

“But ma’am, is that grasping the exact same thing as the five grasping aggregates? Or is grasping one thing and the five grasping aggregates another?”

“That grasping is not the exact same thing as the five grasping aggregates. Nor is grasping one thing and the five grasping aggregates another. The desire and greed for the five grasping aggregates is the grasping there.”

“But ma’am, how does substantialist view come about?”

“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. They regard feeling … perception … choices … consciousness as self, self as having consciousness, consciousness in self, or self in consciousness. That’s how substantialist view comes about.”

“But ma’am, how does substantialist view not come about?”

“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. They don’t regard feeling … perception … choices … consciousness as self, self as having consciousness, consciousness in self, or self in consciousness. That’s how substantialist view does not come about.”

“But ma’am, what is the noble eightfold path?”

“It is simply this noble eightfold path, that is: right view, right purpose, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right immersion.”

“But ma’am, is the noble eightfold path conditioned or unconditioned?”

“The noble eightfold path is conditioned.”

“Are the three spectrums of practice included in the noble eightfold path? Or is the noble eightfold path included in the three spectrums of practice?”

“The three spectrums of practice are not included in the noble eightfold path. Rather, the noble eightfold path is included in the three spectrums of practice. Right speech, right action, and right livelihood: these things are included in the spectrum of ethics. Right effort, right mindfulness, and right immersion: these things are included in the spectrum of immersion. Right view and right purpose: these things are included in the spectrum of wisdom.”

“But ma’am, what is immersion? What things are the bases of immersion? What things are the prerequisites for immersion? What is the development of immersion?”

“Unification of the mind is immersion. The four kinds of mindfulness meditation are the bases for immersion. The four right efforts are the prerequisites for immersion. The cultivation, development, and making much of these very same things is the development of immersion.”

“How many processes are there?”

“There are these three processes. The physical process, the verbal process, and the mental process.”

“But ma’am, what is the physical process? What’s the verbal process? What’s the mental process?”

“Breathing is a physical process. Placing the mind and keeping it connected are a verbal process. Perception and feeling are a mental process.”

“But ma’am, why is breathing a physical process? Why are placing the mind and keeping it connected a verbal process? Why are perception and feeling a mental process?”

“Breathing is physical. It’s tied up with the body, that’s why breathing is a physical process. First you place the mind and keep it connected, then you break into speech. That’s why placing the mind and keeping it connected are a verbal process. Perception and feeling are mental. They’re tied up with the mind, that’s why perception and feeling are a mental process.”

“But ma’am, how does someone attain the cessation of perception and feeling?”

“A mendicant who is entering such an attainment does not think: ‘I will enter the cessation of perception and feeling’ or ‘I am entering the cessation of perception and feeling’ or ‘I have entered the cessation of perception and feeling.’ Rather, their mind has been previously developed so as to lead to such a state.”

“But ma’am, which process ceases first for a mendicant who is entering the cessation of perception and feeling: physical, verbal, or mental?”

“The verbal process ceases first, then physical, then mental.”

“But ma’am, how does someone emerge from the cessation of perception and feeling?”

“A mendicant who is emerging from such an attainment does not think: ‘I will emerge from the cessation of perception and feeling’ or ‘I am emerging from the cessation of perception and feeling’ or ‘I have emerged from the cessation of perception and feeling.’ Rather, their mind has been previously developed so as to lead to such a state.”

“But ma’am, which process arises first for a mendicant who is emerging from the cessation of perception and feeling: physical, verbal, or mental?”

“The mental process arises first, then physical, then verbal.”

“But ma’am, when a mendicant has emerged from the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling, how many kinds of contact do they experience?”

“They experience three kinds of contact: emptiness, signless, and undirected contacts.”

“But ma’am, when a mendicant has emerged from the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling, what does their mind slant, slope, and incline to?”

“Their mind slants, slopes, and inclines to seclusion.”

“But ma’am, how many feelings are there?”

“There are three feelings: pleasant, painful, and neutral feeling.”

“What are these three feelings?”

“Anything felt physically or mentally as pleasant or enjoyable. This is pleasant feeling. Anything felt physically or mentally as painful or unpleasant. This is painful feeling. Anything felt physically or mentally as neither pleasurable nor painful. This is neutral feeling.”

“What is pleasant and what is painful regarding each of the three feelings?”

“Pleasant feeling is pleasant when it remains and painful when it perishes. Painful feeling is painful when it remains and pleasant when it perishes. Neutral feeling is pleasant in the presence of knowledge, and painful in the presence of ignorance.”

“What underlying tendencies underlie each of the three feelings?”

“The underlying tendency for greed underlies pleasant feeling. The underlying tendency for aversion underlies painful feeling. The underlying tendency for ignorance underlies neutral feeling.”

“Do these underlying tendencies always underlie these feelings?”

“No, they do not.”

“What should be given up in regard to each of these three feelings?”

“The underlying tendency to greed should be given up when it comes to pleasant feeling. The underlying tendency to aversion should be given up when it comes to painful feeling. The underlying tendency to ignorance should be given up when it comes to neutral feeling.”

“Should these underlying tendencies be given up regarding all instances of these feelings?”

“No, not in all instances. 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. With this they give up greed, and the underlying tendency to greed does not lie within that. And take a mendicant who reflects: ‘Oh, when will I enter and remain in the same dimension that the noble ones enter and remain in today?’ Nursing such a longing for the supreme liberations gives rise to sadness due to longing. With this they give up aversion, and the underlying tendency to aversion does not lie within that. Take a mendicant who, with the giving up of pleasure and pain and the disappearance of former happiness and sadness, enters and remains in the fourth absorption, without pleasure or pain, with pure equanimity and mindfulness. With this they give up ignorance, and the underlying tendency to ignorance does not lie within that.”

“But ma’am, what is the counterpart of pleasant feeling?”

“Painful feeling.”

“What is the counterpart of painful feeling?”

“Pleasant feeling.”

“What is the counterpart of neutral feeling?”

“Ignorance.”

“What is the counterpart of ignorance?”

“Knowledge.”

“What is the counterpart of knowledge?”

“Freedom.”

“What is the counterpart of freedom?”

“Extinguishment.”

“What is the counterpart of extinguishment?”

“Your question goes too far, Visākha. You weren’t able to grasp the limit of questioning. For extinguishment is the objective, destination, and culmination of the spiritual life. If you wish, go to the Buddha and ask him this question. You should remember it in line with his answer.”

And then the layman Visākha approved and agreed with what the nun Dhammadinnā said. He rose from his seat, bowed, and respectfully circled her, keeping her on his right. Then he went up to the Buddha, bowed, sat down to one side, and informed the Buddha of all they had discussed.

When he had spoken, the Buddha said to him, “The nun Dhammadinnā is astute, Visākha, she has great wisdom. If you came to me and asked this question, I would answer it in exactly the same way as the nun Dhammadinnā. That is what it means, and that’s how you should remember it.”

That is what the Buddha said. Satisfied, the layman Visākha approved what the Buddha said.