AN 3.102 — Nimitta Sutta (Hallmark)

English translation by Bhikkhu Candana.

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Text

101. Nimitta Sutta (Hallmark) Bhikkhus, while developing the Higher Mind, a Bhikkhu, from time to time, should attend to these three hallmarks. What three?

From time to time, and while attending carefully, the Bhikkhu should check to see whether the mind is truly collected and unshaken in its stability, thus bearing the hallmark of samādhi.

The Bhikkhu should, from time to time, check to see whether the mind is light and uplifted, while supporting and infusing it with persevering energy, thus bearing the hallmark of maintaining the right and proper exertion.

And from time to time, through his continuous application of careful attention, the Bhikkhu should check to see if the mind is indeed in equanimity, thus bearing the hallmark of upekkhā.

Now, Bhikkhus, while developing the Higher Mind, if the Bhikkhu tries to exclusively place his focus on keeping the mind collected, to thereby maintain it unshaken in its stability, then there is the possibility, that the mind may become idle and thus lean toward laziness.

Similarly, Bhikkhus, while developing the Higher Mind, if the Bhikkhu tries to exclusively place his focus on maintaining an uplifted mind while infusing and supporting it with persevering energy, then there is the possibility, that the mind may become restless and thus lean toward excited agitation.

And, Bhikkhus, while developing the Higher Mind, if the Bhikkhu tries to exclusively place his focus on maintaining the mind in a state of equanimity, then there is the possibility, that the mind will not become collected nor properly stable enough, in order to destroy the contaminants.

However, Bhikkhus, when developing the Higher Mind, if the Bhikkhu, from time to time, and while attending carefully, checks to see whether the mind is truly collected and unshaken in its stability; if from time to time, he checks to see whether the mind is light and uplifted while supporting and infusing it with persevering energy; and if, from time to

time, and through his continuous application of careful attention, the Bhikkhu checks to see if the mind is indeed in equanimity, then the mind truly becomes malleable, flexible, gentle, workable, bright, and not prone to agitation, as it organically and properly becomes collected in samādhi, which at this stage brings about the very destruction of the contaminants (āsavas).

This is similar, Bhikkhus, to the master goldsmith or his skilled apprentice who builds a furnace and fires up its mouth with the bellows, and by taking the gold with a pair of pincers, he places it in a smelting pot inside the crucible, while from time to time, blowing air on it and sprinkling it with water, as he carefully looks on, from time to time.

This because, if the master goldsmith or his skilled apprentice were to exclusively blow air on the gold within the crucible, then it is possible for it to simply spill out or burn up. And if he were to exclusively sprinkle water on it, then it is possible for it to cool down or cause the crucible to crack. If he were to exclusively keep looking at it without mixing or stirring it and doing what is necessary at specific intervals in the smelting process, then it is possible for the gold to not reach the right consistency, hence to become brittle and unworkable later, due to its rigidity.

On the other hand, if the master goldsmith or his skilled apprentice, from time to time, would go back and forth by blowing air on the gold in the furnace, sprinkling water on it as needed, and only from time to time, while carefully looking on, then the gold will become malleable, flexible, and pliant, no longer brittle, and fit to be worked with. And whatever the master goldsmith desires to fashion out of it, whether a girdle, earrings, or a chain for the neck, it would appropriately serve that purpose.

In just the same manner, Bhikkhus, while developing the Higher Mind, a Bhikkhu, from time to time, should attend to three hallmarks.

From time to time, and while attending carefully, the Bhikkhu should check to see whether the mind is truly collected and unshaken in its stability, thus bearing the hallmark of samādhi.

The Bhikkhu should, from time to time, check to see whether the mind is light and uplifted, while supporting and infusing it with persevering energy, thus bearing the hallmark of maintaining the right and proper exertion.

And from time to time, through his continuous application of careful attention, the Bhikkhu should check to see if the mind is indeed in equanimity, thus bearing the hallmark of upekkhā.

Now, Bhikkhus, while developing the Higher Mind, if the Bhikkhu tries to exclusively place his focus on keeping the mind collected, to thereby maintain it unshaken in its stability, then there is the possibility, that the mind may become idle and thus lean toward laziness.

Similarly, Bhikkhus, while developing the Higher Mind, if the Bhikkhu tries to exclusively place his focus on maintaining an uplifted mind while infusing and supporting it with persevering energy, then there is the possibility, that the mind may become restless and thus lean toward excited agitation.

And, Bhikkhus, while developing the Higher Mind, if the Bhikkhu tries to exclusively place his focus on maintaining the mind in a state of equanimity, then there is the possibility, that the mind will not become collected nor properly stable enough, in order to destroy the contaminants.

However, Bhikkhus, when developing the Higher Mind, if the Bhikkhu, from time to time, and while attending carefully, checks to see whether the mind is truly collected and unshaken in its stability; if from time to time, he checks to see whether the mind is light and uplifted while supporting and infusing it with persevering energy; and if, from time to time, and through his continuous application of careful attention, the Bhikkhu checks to see if the mind is indeed in equanimity, then the mind truly becomes malleable, flexible, gentle, workable, bright, and not prone to agitation, as it organically and properly becomes collected in samādhi, which at this stage brings about the very destruction of the contaminants (āsavas).

Thus, he directs the heart while enabling it to develop the capacity to fully understand and directly experience the inherent quality of things, and all that he desires to realize and know firsthand, whether here, there, or everywhere. That is because, at that point, the Bhikkhu would have already developed mastery over each of those specific mental spheres.

It is for this reason, Bhikkhus, that if the Bhikkhu wishes:

‘May I possess the various types of psychic powers, such as while being one, may I become many; by being many, may I become one again; may I appear and disappear as I please; may I move unobstructed through walls, embankments and rocks, as though passing through space; may I slip in and out of the earth beneath me as if submerging into water; may I walk on water without disturbing its surface as though its solid ground; may I sit comfortably and fly, while traveling through the skies like a bird; may I touch the Moon and the Sun with my hand; and may I wield these powers, while in this body, as far as the Brahma world.’

Then, he is able to experience and witness all these for himself, due to the mind’s mastery over that specific mental sphere.

If he so desires:

‘May I, with the Divine ear that is pure and goes beyond the capacity of mere human abilities, hear the sounds of both Divine and human origin, those that are far distant as well as near.’

Then, he is able to experience and witness all these for himself, due to the mind's mastery over that specific mental sphere.

And if he so desires:

'May I have the ability to penetratingly know the mental states of other beings, as well as of people; may I know and recognize a mind with lust, as a mind with lust, and a mind without lust, as a mind with without lust; may I know and recognize a mind with hatred, as a mind with hatred, and a mind without hatred, as a mind without hatred; may I know and recognize a mind with delusion, as a mind with delusion, and a mind without delusion, as a mind without delusion; may I know and recognize a torpid mind, as a torpid mind, and a scattered mind, as a scattered mind; may I know and recognize an expansive mind, as expansive, and a narrow-range mind, as narrow-ranged; may I know and recognize a mediocre mind as mediocre, and an excellent mind, as excellent; may I know and recognize a mind that is collected into stability, as collected into stability, and an uncollected mind as uncollected; may I know and recognize a released mind as a released mind, and an unreleased mind as unreleased.'

Thus, he is able to experience and witness all of these for himself, due to the mind's mastery over that specific mental sphere.

And if he so desires:

'May I recall my innumerable previous births, such as one birth, two births, three, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty births, one hundred, one thousand, one hundred thousand births, innumerable eons of world expansions, innumerable eons of world contractions, and innumerable eons of world expansions and contractions. Thus, he recalls: "Here, I was of such name, lineage, clan, with such a disposition, with such food as my nourishment, experiencing such pleasant and unpleasant feelings and with such a life span. Dying from that state, I was born there, of such name, lineage, clan, with such a disposition, with such food as my nourishment, experiencing such pleasant and unpleasant feelings and with such a life span. Dying from that state there, I was born here.'

Thus, he then begins recollecting his innumerable previous births with their specific characteristics and details, whereby he is able to experience and witness all these for himself, with direct knowledge and understanding, due to the mind's mastery over that specific mental sphere.

And if he so desires:

'May I, with the Divine eye that is pure and goes beyond the capacity of mere human abilities, see beings dying and being reborn, whether into inferior or superior births, beautiful or ugly, in good or evil states. May I know and recognize how they fare along on their respective states, according to their actions.'

Thus, he knows and recognizes:

‘These beings, due to their bodily, verbal, and mental misconduct, on account of abusing the noble ones, by adhering to their wrong views, and acting on those wrong views, after death, are reborn into terrible states of misery, in the lower worlds, in hell; whereas these good beings, due to their bodily, verbal, and mental good conduct, on account of not abusing and instead honoring the noble ones, by adhering to right view, and acting on right view, after death, are reborn into sublime states of happiness, in the heavenly realms.’

In this manner, with the Divine eye that is pure and goes beyond the capacity of mere human abilities, he sees beings dying and being reborn, whether into inferior or superior births, beautiful or ugly, in good or evil states, knowing and recognizing how they all fare along on their respective states, according to their actions.

Thus, he is able to experience and witness all these for himself, due to the mind’s mastery over that specific mental sphere.

And Bhikkhus, if he so desires:

‘May I realize for myself, here and now, the taintless liberation of the mind through wisdom, with the release of the mind from the contaminants (āsavā). Thus, by having entered into that state, may I abide in that state.’

Thus, he is able to experience and witness all this for himself, due to the mind’s mastery over that specific mental sphere.