

MN 43: Mahāvedalla Sutta

The Greater Series of Questions

Translated by Suddhāso Bhikkhu

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvatti, in Jeta's Grove, in Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. Then in the evening Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita emerged from seclusion, approached Venerable Sāriputta, and conversed with him. When the appropriate polite conversation was completed, he sat to one side. When he was seated to one side, Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita said to Venerable Sāriputta:

[*Wisdom, Consciousness, Feeling, and Recognition*]

“Venerable, it is said 'foolish, foolish.' Venerable, why is one called 'foolish'?”

“‘One does not understand, one does not understand’ - therefore, Venerable, one is called 'foolish.' And what does one not understand? One does not understand suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path of practice which leads to the cessation of suffering. 'One does not understand, one does not understand' - therefore, Venerable, one is called 'foolish.'”

“Excellent, Venerable,” Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita delighted and rejoiced in Venerable Sāriputta statements, then asked him a further question:

“Venerable, it is said 'wise, wise.' Venerable, why is one called 'wise'?”

“‘One understands, one understands’ - therefore, Venerable, one is called 'wise.' And what does one understand? One understands suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path of practice which leads to the cessation of suffering. 'One understands, one understands' - therefore, Venerable, one is called 'wise.'”

“Venerable, it is said 'consciousness, consciousness.' Venerable, why is it called 'consciousness'?”

“‘One cognizes, one cognizes’ - therefore, Venerable, it is called 'consciousness.' And what does one cognize? One cognizes 'pleasant,' 'unpleasant,' and 'neither pleasant nor unpleasant.' 'One cognizes, one cognizes' - therefore, Venerable, it is called 'consciousness.'”

“Venerable, regarding wisdom and consciousness: are these phenomena separate or conjoined? Is it possible to distinguish these phenomena in order to describe what makes them different?”

“Venerable, regarding wisdom and consciousness: these phenomena are conjoined, not separate. It is not possible to distinguish these phenomena in order to describe what makes them different. Venerable, what one understands, one cognizes; what one cognizes, one understands. Therefore these phenomena are conjoined, not separate. It is

not possible to distinguish these phenomena in order to describe what makes them different.”

“Venerable, regarding wisdom and consciousness: what is the difference between these phenomena which are conjoined and not separate?”

“Venerable, regarding wisdom and consciousness: the difference between these phenomena which are conjoined and not separate is that wisdom is to be developed, whereas consciousness is to be completely understood.”

“Venerable, it is said 'feeling, feeling.' Venerable, why is it called 'feeling'?”

“‘One feels, one feels’ – therefore, Venerable, it is called 'feeling.' And what does one feel? One feels 'pleasant,' 'unpleasant,' and 'neither pleasant nor unpleasant.' 'One feels, one feels' – therefore, Venerable, it is called 'feeling.'”

“Venerable, it is said 'recognition, recognition.' Venerable, why is it called 'recognition'?”

“‘One recognizes, one recognizes’ – therefore, Venerable, it is called 'recognition.' And what does one recognize? One recognizes blue, yellow, red, and white.¹ 'One recognizes, one recognizes' – therefore, Venerable, it is called 'recognition.'”

“Venerable, regarding feeling, recognition, and consciousness: are these phenomena separate or conjoined? Is it possible to distinguish these phenomena in order to describe what makes them different?”

“Venerable, regarding feeling, recognition, and consciousness: these phenomena are conjoined, not separate. It is not possible to distinguish these phenomena in order to describe what makes them different. Venerable, what one feels, one recognizes; what one recognizes, one cognizes. Therefore these phenomena are conjoined, not separate. It is not possible to distinguish these phenomena in order to describe what makes them different.”

[*The Domain of Completely Pure Mind-consciousness*]

“Venerable, what can be known by a completely pure mind-consciousness which has been released from the five faculties?”

“Venerable, a completely pure mind-consciousness which has been released from the five faculties can know the dimension of infinite space [with the thought] 'Space is infinite'; it can know the dimension of infinite consciousness [with the thought] 'Consciousness is infinite'; it can know the dimension of nothingness [with the thought] 'There is nothing.'”

“Venerable, using what does one understand a knowable phenomenon?”

1 These are presumably given merely as a few examples rather than a comprehensive list. The function of *saññā* (recognition) is to identify sensory experiences – for example, when seeing a blue object one identifies it as blue, when seeing a cat one recognizes it as a cat, etc.

“Venerable, one understands a knowable phenomenon using the eye of wisdom.”

“Venerable, what is the purpose of wisdom?”

“Venerable, the purpose of wisdom is higher knowledge, complete knowledge, and letting go.”

[*Right Perspective*]

“Venerable, how many conditions are there for the arising of right perspective?”

“Venerable, there are two conditions for the arising of right perspective: the voice of another, and wise attention. Venerable, there are the two conditions for the arising of right perspective.”

“Venerable, supported by how many factors does right perspective have mental liberation as its result and benefit and wisdom-liberation as its result and benefit?”

“Venerable, when supported by five factors, right perspective has mental liberation as its result and benefit and wisdom-liberation as its result and benefit. Here, Venerable, right perspective is supported by virtue, learning, conversation, tranquility, and insight². Venerable, when supported by these five factors, right perspective has mental liberation as its result and benefit and wisdom-liberation as its result and benefit.”

[*Existence*]

“Venerable, how many kinds of existence are there?”

“Venerable, there are three kinds of existence: sensual existence, material existence, and immaterial existence.”

“Venerable, how does there come to be the production of renewed existence?”

“Venerable, when beings who are obstructed by ignorance and bound by craving seek delight in various places, there is production of renewed existence.”

“Venerable, how does there come to be no production of renewed existence?”

“Venerable, with the fading away of ignorance, the arising of knowledge, and the cessation of craving, there is no production of renewed existence.”

[*The First Jhāna*]

2 *Sīla, suta, sākacchā, samatha, vipassanā.*

“Venerable, what is the first Jhāna?”

“Here, Venerable, a monk who is separated from sensuality and separated from unwholesome phenomena attains and remains in the first Jhāna, which is accompanied by thought and investigation, and has rapture and happiness produced by seclusion.”

“Venerable, how many factors does the first Jhāna have?”

“Venerable, the first Jhāna has five factors. Here, Venerable, a monk who has attained the first Jhāna engages in thought, investigation, rapture, happiness, and mental one-pointedness. Venerable, in this way the first Jhāna has five factors.”

“Venerable, in the first Jhāna, what factors have been abandoned and what factors are present?”

“Venerable, in the first Jhāna, five factors have been abandoned and five factors are present. Here, Venerable, a monk who has attained the first Jhāna has abandoned interest in sensuality, he has abandoned aversion, he has abandoned sloth and torpor, he has abandoned restlessness and remorse, and he has abandoned doubt. He engages in thought, investigation, rapture, happiness, and mental one-pointedness. Venerable, it is in this way that, in the first Jhāna, five factors have been abandoned and five factors are present.”

[The Five Sense-Faculties and the Nature of Vitality]

“Venerable, these five faculties have different territories and different domains, and they do not experience each other's territories and domains: namely, the eye-faculty, the ear-faculty, the nose-faculty, the tongue-faculty, and the body-faculty. Venerable, as regards these five faculties that have different territories and different domains, and that do not experience each other's territories and domains: what is their resort, and what experiences their territories and domains?”

“Venerable, these five faculties have different territories and different domains, and they do not experience each other's territories and domains: namely, the eye-faculty, the ear-faculty, the nose-faculty, the tongue-faculty, and the body-faculty. Venerable, as regards these five faculties that have different territories and different domains, and that do not experience each other's territories and domains: the mind is their resort, and the mind experiences their territories and domains.”

“Venerable, these are the five faculties: the eye-faculty, the ear-faculty, the nose-faculty, the tongue-faculty, and the body-faculty. Venerable, what is it that the existence of the five faculties depends on?”

“Venerable, these are the five faculties: the eye-faculty, the ear-faculty, the nose-faculty, the tongue-faculty, and the body-faculty. Venerable, the existence of the five faculties depends on vitality.”

“Venerable, what is it that the existence of vitality depends on?”

“The existence of vitality depends on warmth.”

“Venerable, what is it that the existence of warmth depends on?”

“The existence of warmth depends on vitality.”

“Venerable, we understand the Venerable Sāriputta's statement just now as 'The existence of vitality depends on warmth.' We also understand the Venerable Sāriputta's statement just now as 'The existence of warmth depends on vitality.' Venerable, how is the meaning of this speech to be seen?”

“Therefore, Venerable, I will make a simile; some discerning people understand the meaning of a statement by means of a simile. Venerable, just as the radiance of a burning oil-lamp is apparent because of the flame, and the flame is apparent because of the radiance; in the same way, Venerable, the existence of vitality depends on warmth, and the existence of warmth depends on vitality.”

“Venerable, are vitality-formations experienceable phenomena, or are vitality-formations one thing and experienceable phenomena something else?”

“Venerable, vitality-formations are not experienceable phenomena. Venerable, if vitality-formations were experienceable phenomena, then a monk who has attained the cessation of perception and feeling³ cannot be seen emerging from that attainment. Venerable, because vitality-formations are one thing and experienceable phenomena are something else, then a monk who has attained the cessation of perception and feeling can be seen emerging from that attainment.”

“Venerable, how many phenomena has this body abandoned when it lies forsaken and discarded like an insentient log?”

“Venerable, when this body has abandoned three phenomena - vitality, heat, and consciousness - then this body lies forsaken and discarded like an insentient log.”

“Venerable, what is the difference between one who is dead, and a monk who has attained the cessation of perception and feeling?”

“Venerable, when one is dead, the physical formations have ceased and subsided, the verbal formations have ceased and subsided, the mental formations have ceased and subsided, vitality is completely eliminated, warmth has faded, and the faculties have dissipated. When a monk has attained the cessation of perception and feeling, the physical formations have ceased and subsided, the verbal formations have ceased and subsided, the mental formations have ceased and subsided, vitality is not completely eliminated, warmth has not faded, and the faculties are very clear. Venerable, this is the

3 *Saññā-vedayita-nirodha*. “The cessation of perception and feeling” is a state of deep concentration attainable only by practitioners who have completely abandoned sensual desire and aversion - that is, they are either non-returners or fully enlightened.

difference between one who is dead, and a monk who has attained the cessation of perception and feeling.”

[*Mental Liberations*]⁴

“Venerable, how many conditions are there for attainment of the mental liberation that is neither painful nor pleasant?”

“Venerable, there are four conditions for the attainment of the mental liberation that is neither painful nor pleasant. Here, Venerable, a monk has abandoned pleasure, has abandoned pain, and with the prior disappearance of elation and dejection, he attains and remains in the fourth Jhāna, which is neither painful nor pleasant, and has purification due to equanimity and mindfulness. Venerable, these are the four conditions for the attainment of the mental liberation that is neither painful nor pleasant.”

“Venerable, how many conditions are there for attainment of the mental liberation that has no subject⁵?”

“Venerable, there are two conditions for attainment of the mental liberation that has no subject - non-attention to any subject, and attention to the element of subjectlessness. Venerable, these are the two conditions for attainment of the mental liberation that has no subject.”

“Venerable, how many conditions are there for continuation of the mental liberation that has no subject?”

“Venerable, there are three conditions for continuation of the mental liberation that has no subject - non-attention to any subject, attention to the element of subjectlessness, and prior preparation⁶. Venerable, these are the three conditions for continuation of the mental liberation that has no subject.”

“Venerable, how many conditions are there for emergence from the mental liberation that has no subject?”

“Venerable, there are two conditions for emergence from the mental liberation that has no subject - attention to any subject, and non-attention to the element of subjectlessness. Venerable, these are the two conditions for emergence from the mental liberation that has no subject.”

“Venerable, regarding limitless mental liberation, nothingness mental liberation, emptiness mental liberation, and subjectless mental liberation: are these phenomena

4 *Ceto-vimutti*. The “liberations” described in this section are states of deep concentration where the mind is temporarily liberated from harmful mental states. This is not to be confused with true liberation, which comes only from the development of insight and is irreversible.

5 *Nimitta*. In the Suttas this word means “object of awareness,” “image,” “characteristic,” etc. In this context it appears to refer to a meditation object. In apocryphal literature this term is used to refer to a bright light appearing at the onset of deep concentration, but this usage is not found in the Suttas.

6 *Abhisāṅkhāra*.

different in meaning and different in name, or are they one in meaning and different only in name?"

"Venerable, regarding limitless mental liberation, nothingness mental liberation, emptiness mental liberation, and subjectless mental liberation: Venerable, there is a description whereby these phenomena are different in meaning and different in name, and there is a description whereby these phenomena are one in meaning in different only in name."

"Venerable, what is the description whereby these phenomena are different in meaning and different in name?"

"Here, venerable, with a mind of loving-friendliness, a monk pervades the first direction, as well as the second, third, and fourth [direction]⁷. Thus, above, below, all around, impartially, and all-encompassing, he pervades the entire world with a mind of loving-friendliness that is abundant, vast, limitless, free of hostility, and free of enmity. With a mind of compassion... empathic joy⁸... equanimity, a monk pervades the first direction, as well as the second, third, and fourth [direction]. Thus, above, below, all around, impartially, and all-encompassing, he pervades the entire world with a mind of equanimity that is abundant, vast, limitless, free of hostility, and free of enmity. Venerable, this is called 'limitless mental liberation.'"

"Venerable, what is 'nothingness mental liberation'?"

"Here, Venerable, a monk completely transcends the dimension of consciousness, and, [perceiving] 'There is nothing,' he attains and remains in the dimension of nothingness. Venerable, this is called 'nothingness mental liberation.'"

"Venerable, what is 'emptiness mental liberation'?"

"Here, Venerable, a monk who has gone to a forest, to the base of a tree, or to an empty house, considers in this way: 'This is empty of a soul or of anything belonging to a soul.' Venerable, this is called 'emptiness mental liberation.'"

"Venerable, what is 'subjectless mental liberation'?"

"Here, Venerable, by not paying attention to any subject, a monk attains and remains in the subjectless mental liberation. Venerable, this is called 'subjectless mental liberation.'"

"Venerable, this is the description whereby these phenomena are different in meaning and different in name."

"Venerable, what is the description whereby these phenomena are one in meaning in different only in name?"

7 "In the four directions" is a way of saying "in all directions." Thus the meaning here is that one directs loving-friendliness everywhere and in every direction.

8 *Muditā*. Being happy because others are experiencing good fortune.

“Venerable, lust is a limit-maker, hatred is a limit-maker, delusion is a limit-maker. For a monk who has eliminated his defilements, these are abandoned, cut off at the root, made like a tree-trunk, obliterated, incapable of arising in the future. Venerable, of all the limitless mental liberations, the unshakable mental liberation is considered the best; and the unshakable mental liberation is empty of lust, empty of hatred, empty of delusion.

“Venerable, lust is something, hatred is something, delusion is something. For a monk who has eliminated his defilements, these are abandoned, cut off at the root, made like a tree-trunk, obliterated, incapable of arising in the future. Venerable, of all the nothingness mental liberations, the unshakable mental liberation is considered the best; and the unshakable mental liberation is empty of lust, empty of hatred, empty of delusion.

“Venerable, lust is a subject-maker, hatred is a subject-maker, delusion is a subject-maker. For a monk who has eliminated his defilements, these are abandoned, cut off at the root, made like a tree-trunk, obliterated, incapable of arising in the future. Venerable, of all the subjectless mental liberations, the unshakable mental liberation is considered the best; and the unshakable mental liberation is empty of lust, empty of hatred, empty of delusion.

“Venerable, this is the description whereby these phenomena are one in meaning in different only in name.”

This is what Venerable Sāriputta said. Satisfied, Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita delighted in Venerable Sāriputta's speech.