

MN 14: Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta

The Lesser Discourse on the Mass of Suffering

Translated by Bhante Suddhāso

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling among the Sakyans, at Kapilavatthu, in the Banyan Park. Then Mahānāma the Sakyan approached the Blessed One, paid respects to him, and sat to one side. When he was seated to one side, Mahānāma said to the Blessed One, “Bhante, for a long time I have understood the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One in this way: ‘Greed is a defilement of the mind, hate is a defilement of the mind, delusion is a defilement of the mind.’ Bhante, this is how I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One: ‘Greed is a defilement of the mind, hate is a defilement of the mind, delusion is a defilement of the mind.’ But sometimes my mind is overwhelmed by the nature of greed, the nature of hate, and the nature of delusion. Bhante, it occurs to me, ‘What phenomenon has not been internally abandoned by me, on account of which my mind is sometimes overwhelmed by the nature of greed, the nature of hate, and the nature of delusion?’

“Mahānāma, there is a phenomenon which has not been internally abandoned by you, on account of which your mind is sometimes overwhelmed by the nature of greed, the nature of hate, and the nature of delusion. Mahānāma, if that phenomenon was internally abandoned by you, you would not live a household life, and you would not indulge in sensuality. Mahānāma, because that phenomenon has not been internally abandoned by you, you still live a household life and you still indulge in sensuality.

“‘Sensuality has little gratification - it brings much suffering and much anguish; the drawback here is greater.’ Mahānāma, even if a disciple of the noble ones has truly seen this well with correct wisdom, if he does not attain rapture and happiness apart from sensuality and unwholesome phenomena¹ or something more peaceful than that², then he does not turn away from sensuality. Mahānāma, when a disciple of the noble ones has truly seen well with correct wisdom that ‘sensuality has little gratification - it brings much suffering and much anguish; the drawback here is greater,’ and he attains rapture and happiness apart from sensuality and unwholesome phenomena or something more peaceful than that, then he turns away from sensuality.

“Mahānāma, before my Awakening, when I was still an unawakened Bodhisatta³, I truly saw well with correct wisdom that ‘sensuality has little gratification - it brings much suffering and much anguish; the drawback here is greater.’ However, I did not attain rapture and happiness apart from sensuality and unwholesome phenomena or something more peaceful than that, so I did not turn away from sensuality. But, Mahānāma, when I truly saw well with correct wisdom that ‘sensuality has little gratification - it brings much suffering and much anguish; the drawback here is greater,’ and I attained rapture and happiness apart from sensuality and unwholesome phenomena or something more peaceful than that, then I turned away from sensuality.

1 This most likely refers to the rapture and happiness of first and second Jhāna.

2 Third Jhāna, fourth Jhāna, or an immaterial attainment.

3 This can mean either “one who is intent upon awakening” or “awakening-being.”

“Mahānāma, what is the gratification in relation to sensuality? [*The Buddha then states the gratification and the danger in relation to sensuality exactly as in MN13 Mahādūkkhakkhandha Sutta*] ...this is a future drawback in relation to sensuality: the mass of suffering which is caused by sensuality, originates in sensuality, is the consequence of sensuality – the cause of which is just sensuality.

“Mahānāma, on one occasion I was living at Rājagaha, at Vulture’s Peak Mountain. On that occasion many Nigaṇṭhas⁴ were at Isigili Slope, on Black Rock, practicing continuous standing and refusing to sit down; they were feeling acute pain that was piercing, harsh, and bitter. Then, Mahānāma, I emerged from retreat in the evening and approached those Nigaṇṭhas at Isigili Slope on Black Rock, and said to them, ‘Venerables, why are you Nigaṇṭhas practicing continuous standing and refusing to sit down, such that you are feeling acute pain that is piercing, harsh, and bitter?’ Mahānāma, when this was said, those Nigaṇṭhas said to me, ‘Venerable, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta knows all and sees all, and he claims to have absolute knowledge and vision: “Whether moving or standing, sleeping or awake, I have established continuous, constant knowledge and vision.” He says, “Nigaṇṭhas, you have performed harmful karma in the past; you can erode it with this bitter austerity. If you are now restrained by body, speech, and mind, then you will not make any harmful karma in the future; when your old karma has been destroyed by spiritual heat⁵ and you do not make any new karma, then there will be no further effect in the future; with no further effect in the future, there is the elimination of karma; with the elimination of karma, there is the elimination of suffering; with the elimination of suffering, there is the elimination of feelings; with the elimination of feelings, all suffering will be worn away.” That is what we approve of and accept, and we are satisfied with that.’

“Mahānāma, when this was said, I said to those Nigaṇṭhas, ‘Venerable Nigaṇṭhas, do you know what you have or have not done in the past?’ ‘No, Venerable.’ ‘Venerable Nigaṇṭhas, do you know whether or not you have previously made harmful karma?’ ‘No, Venerable.’ ‘Venerable Nigaṇṭhas, do you know what kind of harmful karma you have made?’ ‘No, Venerable.’ ‘Venerable Nigaṇṭhas, do you know how much suffering has been eroded, how much remains to be eroded, and when all of it will be eroded?’ ‘No, Venerable.’ ‘Venerable Nigaṇṭhas, do you know the immediate abandoning of unwholesome phenomena and the taking up of wholesome phenomena?’ ‘No, Venerable.’

“Venerable Nigaṇṭhas, it seems that you do not know what you have or have not done in the past; you do not know whether or not you have previously made harmful karma; you do not know what kind of harmful karma you have made; you do not know how much suffering has been eroded, how much remains to be eroded, and when all of it will be eroded; and you do not know the immediate abandoning of unwholesome phenomena and the taking up of wholesome phenomena. This being so, Venerable Nigaṇṭhas, when bloody-handed killers who have performed cruel deeds are reborn among humans, they go forth in the Nigaṇṭhas.’ ‘Venerable Gotama, happiness is not to be gained through pleasure, happiness is to be gained through pain. Gotama, if happiness could be gained through pleasure, then King Seniya Bimbisāra of Māgadha would gain happiness and live with more happiness than Venerable Gotama.’

4 Followers of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta. Their religion is believed to be identical with Jainism.

5 *Tapas*. It was believed at that time by some ascetic religions that experiencing pain produced “spiritual heat” which would then burn up one’s harmful karma.

“Surely the Nigaṇṭhas spoke hastily and without consideration when they said “Venerable Gotama, happiness is not to be gained through pleasure, happiness is to be gained through pain. Gotama, if happiness could be gained through pleasure, then King Seniya Bimbisāra of Māgadha would gain happiness and live with more happiness than Venerable Gotama.” But I will ask a counter-question: who lives with more happiness – King Seniya Bimbisāra of Māgadha, or Venerable Gotama?’ ‘Gotama, surely we spoke hastily and without consideration when we said “Venerable Gotama, happiness is not to be gained through pleasure, happiness is to be gained through pain. Gotama, if happiness could be gained through pleasure, then King Seniya Bimbisāra of Māgadha would gain happiness and live with more happiness than Venerable Gotama.” So let us set that aside, and now we will ask Venerable Gotama, “Who lives with more happiness – King Seniya Bimbisāra of Māgadha, or Venerable Gotama?””

“Therefore, Nigaṇṭhas, I will ask you a counter-question; answer as you see fit. What do you think, Nigaṇṭhas? Is King Seniya Bimbisāra of Māgadha able to, without moving his body or speaking a word, live for seven days experiencing pure happiness?’ ‘No, Venerable.’

“What do you think, Nigaṇṭhas? Is King Seniya Bimbisāra of Māgadha able to, without moving his body or speaking a word, live for six days... five days... four days... three days... two days... one day experiencing pure happiness?’ ‘No, Venerable.’

“Venerable Nigaṇṭhas, I am able to, without moving my body or speaking a word, live for one day... two days... three days... four days... five days... six days... seven days experiencing pure happiness. What do you think, Nigaṇṭhas? This being so, who lives with more happiness – King Seniya Bimbisāra of Māgadha, or me?’ ‘This being so, Venerable Gotama lives with more happiness than King Seniya Bimbisāra of Māgadha.”

This is what the Blessed One said. Satisfied, Mahānāma delighted in the Blessed One’s speech.