

Mahā-Assapura Sutta (MN39)

Great Discourse at Assapura

Translated by Bhante Suddhāso

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living among the Angans, at an Angan town named Assapura¹. There the Blessed One addressed the monks: “Monks!” “Auspicious sir,” the monks replied to the Blessed One. The Blessed One said this:

“Monks, people designate you as contemplatives. And when asked ‘What are you?’ you claim ‘We are contemplatives.’ Monks, as you have that designation and that claim, you should train in this way: ‘We will do what makes one a contemplative and a holy person, so that our identity will be accurate and our claim will be true. We will use robes, alms-food, dwellings, and medicine so that it will be of great fruit and great benefit for our benefactors. Our renunciate life will not be sterile; it will be fruitful and effective.’

“Monks, what makes one a contemplative and a holy person? Monks, you should train in this way: ‘We will have conscience and consideration.’ Monks, you may think, ‘We have conscience and consideration. That is enough, we are finished, we have reached the goal of the contemplative life, there is nothing more to do,’ and you may be content with just that much. Monks, I declare to you and proclaim to you, ‘Seekers of the goal of the contemplative life: Do not abandon the goal of the contemplative life. There is more to be done.’

“Monks, what more is to be done? Monks, you should train in this way: ‘Our physical conduct will be completely pure, open, unveiled, faultless, and restrained. However, we will not praise ourselves or condemn others on account of our pure physical conduct.’ Monks, you may think, ‘We have conscience and consideration, and our physical conduct is completely pure. That is enough, we are finished, we have reached the goal of the contemplative life, there is nothing more to do,’ and you may be content with just that much. Monks, I declare to you and proclaim to you, ‘Seekers of the goal of the contemplative life: Do not abandon the goal of the contemplative life. There is more to be done.’

“Monks, what more is to be done? Monks, you should train in this way: ‘Our verbal conduct will be completely pure, open, unveiled, faultless, and restrained. However, we will not praise ourselves or condemn others on account of our pure verbal conduct.’ Monks, you may think, ‘We have conscience and consideration, our physical conduct is completely pure, and our verbal conduct is completely pure. That is enough, we are finished, we have reached the goal of the contemplative life, there is nothing more to do,’ and you may be content with just that much. Monks, I declare to you and proclaim to you, ‘Seekers of the goal of the contemplative life: Do not abandon the goal of the contemplative life. There is more to be done.’

“Monks, what more is to be done? Monks, you should train in this way: ‘Our mental conduct will be completely pure, open, unveiled, faultless, and restrained. However, we will not praise ourselves or condemn others on account of our pure mental conduct.’

1 Lit. “Horse-city.”

Monks, you may think, 'We have conscience and consideration, our physical conduct is completely pure, our verbal conduct is completely pure, and our mental conduct is completely pure. That is enough, we are finished, we have reached the goal of the contemplative life, there is nothing more to do,' and you may be content with just that much. Monks, I declare to you and proclaim to you, 'Seekers of the goal of the contemplative life: Do not abandon the goal of the contemplative life. There is more to be done.'

"Monks, what more is to be done? Monks, you should train in this way: 'Our livelihood will be completely pure, open, unveiled, faultless, and restrained. However, we will not praise ourselves or condemn others on account of our pure livelihood.' Monks, you may think, 'We have conscience and consideration, our physical conduct is completely pure, our verbal conduct is completely pure, our mental conduct is completely pure, and our livelihood is completely pure. That is enough, we are finished, we have reached the goal of the contemplative life, there is nothing more to do,' and you may be content with just that much. Monks, I declare to you and proclaim to you, 'Seekers of the goal of the contemplative life: Do not abandon the goal of the contemplative life. There is more to be done.'

"Monks, what more is to be done? Monks, you should train in this way: 'We will guard our sense-faculties. When we see a sight with the eye, we will not cling to its features and characteristics. When we live with our eye-faculty unrestrained, covetousness, depression, and [other] harmful, unwholesome phenomena can invade; therefore we will practice restraint, we will guard the eye-faculty, we will practice restraint in relation to the eye-faculty. When we hear a sound with the ear... smell an odor with the nose... taste a flavor with the tongue... touch a tangible with the body... cognize a mind-object with the mind, we will not cling to its features and characteristics. When we live with our mind-faculty unrestrained, covetousness, depression, and [other] harmful, unwholesome phenomena can invade; therefore we will practice restraint, we will guard the mind-faculty, we will practice restraint in relation to the mind-faculty.' Monks, you may think, 'We have conscience and consideration, our physical conduct is completely pure, our verbal conduct is completely pure, our mental conduct is completely pure, our livelihood is completely pure, and we guard our sense-faculties. That is enough, we are finished, we have reached the goal of the contemplative life, there is nothing more to do,' and you may be content with just that much. Monks, I declare to you and proclaim to you, 'Seekers of the goal of the contemplative life: Do not abandon the goal of the contemplative life. There is more to be done.'

"Monks, what more is to be done? Monks, you should train in this way: 'We will know the right amount when eating. Wisely reflecting, we will eat food - not for fun, not for pleasure, not for adornment, not for beauty; only for the nourishment and health of this body and to support our spiritual practice, thinking "I will remove old unpleasant feelings² and I will not produce new unpleasant feelings³. In this way, I will be blameless and comfortable.'" Monks, you may think, 'We have conscience and consideration, our physical conduct is completely pure, our verbal conduct is completely pure, our mental conduct is completely pure, our livelihood is completely pure, we guard our sense-faculties, and we

2 Such as the sensations produced by hunger or malnutrition.

3 Such as the sensations produced by overeating or consuming unhealthy items.

know the right amount when eating. That is enough, we are finished, we have reached the goal of the contemplative life, there is nothing more to do,' and you may be content with just that much. Monks, I declare to you and proclaim to you, 'Seekers of the goal of the contemplative life: Do not abandon the goal of the contemplative life. There is more to be done.'

"Monks, what more is to be done? Monks, you should train in this way: 'We will be dedicated to wakefulness. During the day, we will cleanse the mind of obstructive phenomena while walking and sitting. During the first portion of the night, we will cleanse the mind of obstructive phenomena while walking and sitting. During the middle portion of the night, we will recline like a lion, on our right side with one foot on top of the other, mindful and completely aware, attentive to the perception of rising⁴. During the last portion of the night, we will cleanse the mind of obstructive phenomena while walking and sitting.' Monks, you may think, 'We have conscience and consideration, our physical conduct is completely pure, our verbal conduct is completely pure, our mental conduct is completely pure, our livelihood is completely pure, we guard our sense-faculties, we know the right amount when eating, and we are dedicated to wakefulness. That is enough, we are finished, we have reached the goal of the contemplative life, there is nothing more to do,' and you may be content with just that much. Monks, I declare to you and proclaim to you, 'Seekers of the goal of the contemplative life: Do not abandon the goal of the contemplative life. There is more to be done.'

"Monks, what more is to be done? Monks, you should train in this way: 'We will be mindful and completely aware. We will be completely aware while moving forward or backward. We will be completely aware while looking around or examining. We will be completely aware while contracting or extending our limbs. We will be completely aware while wearing our robes and carrying our bowls. We will be completely aware while eating, drinking, chewing, and swallowing. We will be completely aware while defecating and urinating. We will be completely aware while moving, standing, sitting, reclining, awake, speaking, and silent.' Monks, you may think, 'We have conscience and consideration, our physical conduct is completely pure, our verbal conduct is completely pure, our mental conduct is completely pure, our livelihood is completely pure, we guard our sense-faculties, we know the right amount when eating, we are dedicated to wakefulness, and we are mindful and completely aware. That is enough, we are finished, we have reached the goal of the contemplative life, there is nothing more to do,' and you may be content with just that much. Monks, I declare to you and proclaim to you, 'Seekers of the goal of the contemplative life: Do not abandon the goal of the contemplative life. There is more to be done.'

"Monks, what more is to be done? Monks, a monk lives in a secluded dwelling-place - a forest, the base of a tree, a mountain, a valley, a cave, a cemetery, a grove, in the open air, or on a heap of straw. After his meal, when he has returned from alms-round, he sits down, crosses his legs, and establishes mindfulness as foremost. He abandons covetousness about the world and abides with a mind free of covetousness; he purifies the mind of covetousness. He abandons aversion and hatred, he abides with a mind free of

4 *Uṭṭhāna-saññam manasikarivā*. Lit. "having paid attention to the perception of standing up." As *saññā* (perception) can also mean "memory," this may mean simply "remembering to get up." Or, as *uṭṭhāna* (lit. "standing up") can mean "energy," this may mean "paying attention to the perception of energy."

aversion, with compassion for the welfare of all living beings; he purifies the mind of aversion and hatred. He abandons dullness and sleepiness, he perceives light and is mindful and completely aware; he purifies the mind of dullness and sleepiness. He abandons restlessness and anxiety, he abides unagitated with an internally tranquil mind; he purifies the mind of restlessness and anxiety. He abandons doubt, he abides beyond doubt, free of perplexity about wholesome phenomena; he purifies the mind of doubt.

“Monks, it is just like a man who has a debt. He undertakes a job and succeeds at it. He pays off the debt and has enough remaining to support his wife. It occurs to him, ‘Previously I had a debt. I undertook a job and succeeded at it. I paid off the debt and have enough remaining to support my wife.’ On account of that he would become happy and elated.

“Monks, it is just like a man who is sick, suffering, severely ill, lacking appetite, with no strength in his body. Later on he is released from that illness, his appetite returns, and there is strength in his body. It occurs to him, ‘Previously I was sick, suffering, severely ill, lacking appetite, with no strength in my body. Now I am free of that illness, my appetite has returned, and there is strength in my body.’ On account of that he would become happy and elated.

“Monks, it is just like a man who is imprisoned. Later on he is released from prison, safe and unharmed, with no loss of wealth. It occurs to him, ‘Previously I was imprisoned. Now I am free from that imprisonment, safe and unharmed, with no loss of wealth.’ On account of that he would become happy and elated.

“Monks, it is just like a man who is enslaved, not self-governed, governed by others, constrained. Later on he is released from that slavery and is self-governed, not governed by others, free, unconstrained. It occurs to him, ‘Previously I was enslaved, not self-governed, governed by others, constrained. Now I am free of that slavery and am self-governed, not governed by others, free, unconstrained.’ On account of that he would become happy and elated.

“Monks, it is just like a man who sets out on a journey along a wilderness road, bringing wealth and property with him. Later on he completes his journey along that wilderness road, safe and unharmed, with no loss of wealth. It occurs to him, ‘Previously I set out on a journey along a wilderness road, bringing wealth and property with me. Now I have completed my journey along that wilderness road, safe and unharmed, with no loss of wealth.’ On account of that he would become happy and elated.

“Monks, when these five obstacles have not been abandoned by him, a monk regards it in exactly the same way that one regards debt, illness, prison, slavery, or a wilderness road. Monks, when these five obstacles have been abandoned by him, a monk regards it in exactly the same way that one regards debtlessness, health, freedom from imprisonment, freedom from slavery, and safe territory.

“After abandoning these five obstacles, which are defilements that weaken wisdom, he secludes himself from sensuality, secludes himself from unwholesome phenomena, and attains and remains in the first *Jhāna*, which has thought, evaluation, and the rapture and

happiness produced by seclusion. He saturates, permeates, fills, and suffuses this very body with the rapture and happiness produced by seclusion; there is nowhere in his entire body that is not suffused with the rapture and happiness produced by seclusion. Monks, just as a skilled bath-attendant or apprentice bath-attendant would place soap-powder in a metal bowl, sprinkle it with water, and knead it until the soap was completely moist inside and out, suffused with moisture but not dripping; monks, in the same way, a monk saturates, permeates, fills, and suffuses this very body with the rapture and happiness produced by seclusion; there is nowhere in his entire body that is not suffused with the rapture and happiness produced by seclusion.

“Monks, with the the abatement of thought and evaluation, a monk attains and remains in the second *Jhāna*, which has internal serenity, mental focus, no thought, no evaluation, and has the rapture and happiness produced by concentration. He saturates, permeates, fills, and suffuses this very body with the rapture and happiness produced by concentration; there is nowhere in his entire body that is not suffused with the rapture and happiness produced by seclusion. Monks, it is like a lake of water filled by a submerged spring, which has no inlet to the east or west or north or south, and is not filled by rainfall; cool water flows up from the spring into that lake, it saturates, permeates, fills, and suffuses that lake; there is nowhere in the entire lake that is not suffused by the cool water. Monks, in the same way, a monk saturates, permeates, fills, and suffuses this very body with the rapture and happiness produced by concentration; there is nowhere in his entire body that is not suffused with the rapture and happiness produced by concentration.

“Monks, with the fading of rapture, a monk attains and remains in the third *Jhāna*, and is equanimous, mindful, and completely aware, experiencing happiness through the body - what the noble ones call ‘one who is equanimous, mindful, and happy.’ He saturates, permeates, fills, and suffuses this very body with raptureless happiness; there is nowhere in his entire body that is not suffused with raptureless happiness. Monks, it is like a lotus pond with red, blue, or white lotus blossoms, some of which are born in the water, grow in the water, and thrive immersed in the water; they are saturated, permeated, filled, and suffused with cool water from their tips to their roots, and there is nothing in those entire lotus plants that are not suffused with cool water. Monks, in the same way, a monk saturates, permeates, fills, and suffuses this very body with raptureless happiness, and there is nowhere in his entire body that is not suffused with raptureless happiness.

“Monks, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the prior disappearance of elation and depression, a monk attains and remains in the fourth *Jhāna*, which is neither painful nor pleasant and has purity of mindfulness and equanimity. He sits suffusing this very body with a completely pure and clean mind; there is nowhere in his entire body that is not suffused with his completely pure and clean mind. Monks, it is like a man who sits with his entire body covered with a white cloth, including his head; there is nowhere on his body that is not covered by the white cloth. Monks, in the same way, a monk sits suffusing this very body with a completely pure and clean mind; there is nowhere in his entire body that is not suffused with his completely pure and clean mind.

“When the mind is concentrated in this way - completely pure, completely clean, flawless, without defilement, malleable, workable, stable, and imperturbable - one directs the mind

to the recollection of past lives. One recalls many past lives – one life, two lives, three lives, four lives, five lives, ten lives, twenty lives, thirty lives, forty lives, fifty lives, a hundred lives, a thousand lives, a hundred thousand lives, hundreds of lives, thousands of lives, hundreds of thousands of lives – [knowing] ‘There I had that name, that clan, that appearance, that food, that experience of pleasure and pain, and that death. After falling from that state of existence I appeared in that one, where I had that name, that clan, that appearance, that food, that experience of pleasure and pain, and that death. After falling from that state of existence I appeared here.’ In this way, one recalls many past lives in detail. Monks, it is just like a person who goes from his own village to another village, then goes from that village to another village, then goes from that village back to his own village. He would think, ‘I went from my own village to that village, where I stood in that way, sat in that way, spoke in that way, and was silent in that way. From that village I went to that other village, where I stood in that way, sat in that way, spoke in that way, and was silent in that way. From that village I returned to my own village.’ Monks, in the same way, a monk recalls many past lives... in detail.

“When the mind is concentrated in this way – completely pure, completely clean, flawless, without defilement, malleable, workable, stable, and imperturbable – one directs the mind to the knowledge of death and rebirth. With pure divine vision surpassing ordinary humans, one sees beings dieing and reappearing – inferior, superior, beautiful, ugly, fortunate, unfortunate. One understands how beings experience the results of their actions – ‘These beings engaged in physical misconduct, verbal misconduct, and mental misconduct, they spoke against noble beings, they held wrong view, they acted based on wrong view; when they were separated from their bodies, after death, they appeared in a state of deprivation, misfortune, downfall, hell. However, these beings engaged in good physical conduct, good verbal conduct, and good mental conduct, they did not speak against noble beings, they held right view, they acted based on right view; when they were separated from their bodies, after death, they appeared in a state of good fortune, a heavenly world.’ In this way, with pure divine vision surpassing ordinary humans, one sees beings dieing and reappearing – inferior, superior, beautiful, ugly, fortunate, unfortunate; and one understands how beings experience the results of their actions. Monks, it is like a house with two doors. A person with eyes who was standing in the middle could see people entering and leaving the house, walking around and wandering around. Monks, in the same way, with pure divine vision surpassing ordinary humans, one sees beings dieing and reappearing – inferior, superior, beautiful, ugly, fortunate, unfortunate; and one understands how beings experience the results of their actions...

“When the mind is concentrated in this way – completely pure, completely clean, flawless, without defilement, malleable, workable, stable, and imperturbable – one directs the mind to the knowledge of the elimination of [mental] taints⁵. One understands suffering as it is; one understands the cause of suffering as it is; one understands the cessation of suffering as it is; one understands the practice which leads to the end of suffering as it is. One understands the taints as they are; one understands the cause of the taints as it is; one understands the cessation of the taints as it is; one understands the practice which leads to the end of the taints as it is. One who knows and sees in this way liberates the mind from the taint of sensuality, the taint of existence, and the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated, there is the knowledge that it is liberated. One understands, ‘Birth is

5 *Āsava*. For more information, see MN2 Sabbāsava Sutta.

eliminated, the spiritual life has been completed, what was to be done has been done, there will not be another life here⁶.’

“Monks, it is like a lake in a mountain range – transparent, clear, and undisturbed. Standing on the shore, a person with eyes could see oysters, shells, stones, pebbles, and fish moving about and holding still. That person would think, ‘This is a transparent, clear, and undisturbed lake. Here there are oysters, shells, stones, pebbles, and fish moving about and holding still.’ Monks, in the same way, a monk understands suffering as it is... ‘Birth is eliminated, the spiritual life has been completed, what was to be done has been done, there will not be another life here.’

“Monks, this monk is called a ‘contemplative,’ a ‘spiritual person,’ a ‘cleansed one,’ a ‘knowledge-bearer,’ a ‘religious scholar,’ a ‘noble one,’ a ‘worthy one.’

“Monks, how is a monk a ‘contemplative’? He has tranquilized⁷ the harmful, unwholesome mindstates that are connected with defilements, produce further states of existence, are troublesome, result in suffering, and lead to future birth, decrepitude, and death. Monks, in this way a monk is a ‘contemplative.’

“Monks, how is a monk a ‘spiritual person’? He has expelled⁸ the harmful, unwholesome mindstates that are connected with defilements, produce further states of existence, are troublesome, result in suffering, and lead to future birth, decrepitude, and death. Monks, in this way a monk is a ‘spiritual person.’

“Monks, how is a monk a ‘cleansed one’? He has cleansed himself of the harmful, unwholesome mindstates that are connected with defilements, produce further states of existence, are troublesome, result in suffering, and lead to future birth, decrepitude, and death. Monks, in this way a monk is a ‘cleansed one.’

“Monks, how is a monk a ‘knowledge-bearer’? He has understood the harmful, unwholesome mindstates that are connected with defilements, produce further states of existence, are troublesome, result in suffering, and lead to future birth, decrepitude, and death. Monks, in this way a monk is a ‘knowledge-bearer.’

“Monks, how is a monk a ‘religious scholar’? He has cut off⁹ the flow of harmful, unwholesome mindstates that are connected with defilements, produce further states of existence, are troublesome, result in suffering, and lead to future birth, decrepitude, and death. Monks, in this way a monk is a ‘religious scholar.’

“Monks, how is a monk a ‘noble one’? He is far¹⁰ from the harmful, unwholesome mindstates that are connected with defilements, produce further states of existence, are troublesome, result in suffering, and lead to future birth, decrepitude, and death. Monks, in this way a monk is a ‘noble one.’

6 *Nāparam itthattāya*. This final phrase literally means “not another state of being here.”

7 *Samita*. This is a pun on the word for contemplative (*samaṇa*).

8 *Bāhita*. This is a pun on the word for ‘holy person’ (*brāhmaṇa*).

9 *Nissuta*. This is a pun on the word for ‘religious scholar’ (*sottiya*).

10 *Āraka*. This is a pun on the word for ‘noble one’ (*ariya*).

“Monks, how is a monk a ‘worthy one’? He is far¹¹ from the harmful, unwholesome mindstates that are connected with defilements, produce further states of existence, are troublesome, result in suffering, and lead to future birth, decrepitude, and death. Monks, in this way a monk is a ‘noble one.’”

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

11 *Āraka*. This is a pun on the word for ‘worthy one’ (*araham*).