

SN 22.95 *Phenapiṇḍūpama Sutta*

The Simile of the Lump of Foam

Translated by Bhante Suddhāso

On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Ayujjhā, on the bank of the Ganges river. There he addressed the monks:

“Monks, a large lump of foam could be carried along by the Ganges river. A person with eyesight could see it, consider it, and examine it. By seeing it, considering it, and examining it, that person could determine that it was insubstantial, hollow, and essenceless¹. Monks, what essence can there be in a lump of foam? Monks, in exactly the same way, a monk sees, considers, and examines any physical form – whether past, present, or future, internal or external, coarse or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near. By seeing it, considering it, and examining it, one determines that it is insubstantial, hollow, and essenceless. Monks, what essence can there be in physical forms?

“Monks, when it is raining in autumn and large raindrops are falling on the water, a water-bubble might arise and vanish. A person with eyesight could see it, consider it, and examine it. By seeing it, considering it, and examining it, that person could determine that it was insubstantial, hollow, and essenceless. Monks, what essence could there be in a water-bubble? Monks, in exactly the same way, a monk sees, considers, and examines any feeling – whether past, present, or future, internal or external, coarse or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near. By seeing it, considering it, and examining it, one determines that it is insubstantial, hollow, and essenceless. Monks, what essence can there be in feelings?

“Monks, in the last month of summer, a wavering mirage might appear at midday. A person with eyesight could see it, consider it, and examine it. By seeing it, considering it, and examining it, that person could determine that it was insubstantial, hollow, and essenceless. Monks, what essence could there be in a mirage? Monks, in exactly the same way, a monk sees, considers, and examines any perception – whether past, present, or future, internal or external, coarse or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near. By seeing it, considering it, and examining it, one determines that it is insubstantial, hollow, and essenceless. Monks, what essence can there be in perceptions?

“Monks, a person who needs heartwood², who is seeking heartwood, who is searching for heartwood might take a sharp axe and enter a forest. There he might see a large plantain tree – straight, fresh, and tall. He could cut it down at the base, cut off the crown, and peel off the leaves. While peeling off the leaves he would not even find sapwood, let alone heartwood. A person with eyesight could see it, consider it, and examine it. By seeing it, considering it, and examining it, that person could determine that it was insubstantial, hollow, and essenceless. Monks, what essence could there be in a plantain tree? Monks, in exactly the same way, a monk sees, considers, and examines any [mental] formation – whether past, present, or future, internal or external, coarse or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near. By seeing it, considering it, and examining it, one determines that it

1 *Asāraka*. Lit. “having no essence (*sāra*).”

2 *Sāra*. This particular simile is a pun on the double meaning of the word.

is insubstantial, hollow, and essenceless. Monks, what essence can there be in [mental] formations?

“Monks, an illusionist or an apprentice illusionist could display an illusion at a crossroads. A person with eyesight could see it, consider it, and examine it. By seeing it, considering it, and examining it, that person could determine that it was insubstantial, hollow, and essenceless. Monks, what essence could there be in an illusion? Monks, in exactly the same way, a monk sees, considers, and examines any [form of] consciousness - whether past, present, or future, internal or external, coarse or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near. By seeing it, considering it, and examining it, one determines that it is insubstantial, hollow, and essenceless. Monks, what essence can there be in consciousness?”

“Monks, when a learned disciple of the noble ones sees in this way, he becomes disenchanted with physical form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with [mental] formations, disenchanted with consciousness. Being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate; dispassion liberates. When there is liberation, one knows, ‘Liberated.’ One understands, ‘Birth has been eliminated, the spiritual life has been completed, what was to be done has been done, there will be no further existence here.’”

This is what the Blessed One said. When this was said, the Sublime One, the Teacher, further said this:

“Form is like a lump of foam, feelings are like water-bubbles,
Perception is like a mirage, mental formations are like plantain-trees,
Consciousness is like an illusion - this is what was said by the Kinsman of the Sun.

“One who considers in this way and wisely examines,
Sees that it is insubstantial and hollow.

“Referring to this body, it was taught by the One of Abundant Wisdom,
That when three things are lost, one sees the body abandoned:

“Vitality, heat, and consciousness: When the body has lost these things,
Then it lies discarded and insentient, food for other beings.

“This is the continuity - this illusion, which deceives the foolish,
It is called a murderer, and here no essence can be found.

“Regarding these components in this way, an energetic monk
Is clearly aware and mindful, whether it is day or night.

“One should abandon all the fetters, and make a refuge for oneself,
Live as though your head is on fire - intent upon the path to the Deathless.”