

MN 22: Alagaddūpama Sutta

The Simile of the Viper

Translated by Bhante Suddhāso

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvatti, at Jeta's Grove, in Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. On that occasion there was a monk named Ariṭṭha, who had previously been a vulture-trapper, and in whom a harmful opinion had arisen to this effect: "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things which are spoken of by the Blessed One as obstructive are not obstructive for one who indulges in them." Many monks heard, "Apparently there is a monk named Ariṭṭha, who was previously a vulture-trapper, and in whom a harmful opinion has arisen to this effect: 'As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things which are spoken of by the Blessed One as obstructive are not obstructive for one who indulges in them.'"

Then those monks approached Venerable Ariṭṭha and said to him, "Venerable Ariṭṭha, is it true that a harmful opinion that arisen in you to this effect: 'As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things which are spoken of by the Blessed One as obstructive are not obstructive for one who indulges in them'?"

"Yes, Venerables. As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things which are spoken of by the Blessed One as obstructive are not obstructive for one who indulges in them."

Then those monks, wishing to separate the monk Ariṭṭha from that harmful opinion, enjoined, pressured, and entreated him: "Venerable Ariṭṭha, do not speak in that way, do not slander the Blessed One; it is not good to slander the Blessed One, it is not good to speak about the Blessed One in that way. Venerable Ariṭṭha, in many ways obstructive things have been spoken about by the Blessed One as obstructive. They are obstructive for one who indulges in them. Sensuality has been spoken about by the Blessed One as bringing little gratification, much suffering, and much anguish; the drawback here is greater [than the gratification]. Sensuality has been spoken about by the Blessed One using the simile of the skeleton... the simile of the piece of meat... the simile of the charcoal pit... the simile of the dream... the simile of the borrower... the simile of the tree-fruit... the simile of the chopping-block... the simile of the spear... the simile of the serpent's head. It brings much suffering and much anguish; the drawback here is greater [than the gratification]." But although the monk Ariṭṭha was enjoined, pressured, and entreated in this way by those monks, he still stubbornly held on to and professed that harmful opinion: "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things which are spoken of by the Blessed One as obstructive are not obstructive for one who indulges in them."

When those monks were not able to separate the monk Ariṭṭha from that harmful opinion, they approached the Blessed One, paid respects to him, and sat to one side. While they were seated to one side, those monks said to the Blessed One, "Bhante, a harmful opinion has arisen in the monk named Ariṭṭha to this effect: 'As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things which are spoken of by the Blessed One as obstructive are not obstructive for one who indulges in them.' Bhante, we heard that 'A harmful

opinion has arisen in the monk named Ariṭṭha...' Then, Bhante, we went to the monk Ariṭṭha and said to him, 'Venerable Ariṭṭha, is it true...?' Then, Bhante, we enjoined, pressured, and entreated him in this way... Bhante, when we were not able to separate the monk Ariṭṭha from that harmful opinion, we reported this matter to the Blessed One."

Then the Blessed One said to a certain monk, "Go, monk, and summon the monk Ariṭṭha using my words: 'Venerable Ariṭṭha, the Teacher summons you.'"

"Yes, Bhante," that monk replied to the Blessed One. He went to the monk Ariṭṭha and said to him, "Venerable Ariṭṭha, the Teacher summons you."

"Yes, Venerable," the monk Ariṭṭha replied to that monk. He approached the Blessed One, paid respects, and sat to one side.

When the monk Ariṭṭha was seated to one side, the Blessed One said to him, "Ariṭṭha, is it true that a harmful opinion has arisen in you to this effect: 'As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things which are spoken of by the Blessed One as obstructive are not obstructive for one who indulges in them?'"

"Yes, Bhante. As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things which are spoken of by the Blessed One as obstructive are not obstructive for one who indulges in them."

"You foolish man, how could you understand in that way the Dhamma taught by me? Foolish man, isn't it true that in many ways obstructive things have been spoken about by me as obstructive? They are obstructive for one who indulges in them. Sensuality has been spoken about by me as bringing little gratification, much suffering, and much anguish; the drawback here is greater [than the gratification]. Sensuality has been spoken about by the Blessed One using the simile of the skeleton... the simile of the piece of meat... the simile of the charcoal pit... the simile of the dream... the simile of the borrower... the simile of the tree-fruit... the simile of the chopping-block... the simile of the spear... the simile of the serpent's head. It brings much suffering and much anguish; the drawback here is greater [than the gratification]. Then you, foolish man, slander me with your bad grasp [of the teaching]. You ruin yourself and accumulate much demerit. Foolish man, this will be for your long-term detriment and suffering."

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, "What do you think, monks? Has this monk Ariṭṭha produced even a spark [of wisdom] in this Dhamma-Vinaya?"

"How could that be, Bhante? Certainly not, Bhante."

When this was said, the monk Ariṭṭha became silent and ashamed, and he sat with shoulders slumped and face downcast, sulky and unresponsive. Knowing that the monk Ariṭṭha was silent and ashamed, sitting with his shoulders slumped and face downcast, sulky and unresponsive, the Blessed One said to him, "Foolish man, you will be known by your own harmful opinion. I will question the monks about this."

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks: “Monks, do you understand the Dhamma taught by me in the same way that the monk Ariṭṭha does, when he slanders me with his bad grasp [of the teaching], ruining himself and accumulate much demerit?”

“Certainly not, Bhante. Bhante, in many ways obstructive things have been spoken about by the Blessed One as obstructive... the drawback here is greater [than the gratification].”

“Good, good, monks. Monks, it is good that you understand in this way the Dhamma taught by me. Monks, in many ways obstructive things have been spoken about by me as obstructive... the drawback here is greater [than the gratification]. Then this monk Ariṭṭha slanders me with his bad grasp [of the teaching], ruining himself and accumulating much demerit. That will be for this foolish man’s long-term detriment and suffering. Monks, it is not possible for one to indulge in sensuality without sensual [desires], sensual perceptions, and sensual thoughts.

[The Simile of the Viper]

“Monks, here some foolish person learns¹ the Dhamma - discourses, poems, explanations, verses, exclamations, reports, birth-stories, wonders, and discussions². Having learned the Dhamma, he does not wisely examine its meaning. Since the meaning of those teachings has not been wisely examined by him, they are not accepted³ by him. He just learns the Dhamma so he can argue, so he can refute other people’s statements. He learns the Dhamma, but he does not manifest its benefit. His bad grasp of the teachings leads to his long-term detriment and suffering. For what reason? Monks, because of the bad grasp of the teachings.

“Monks, imagine that a man needed a viper, was seeking a viper, was going about searching for a viper. He might see a large viper, and grab it by its body or tail. Then that viper would curl around and bite his hand or arm or one of his other limbs. Because of that he would die, or experience death-like pain. For what reason? Monks, because of the bad grasp of the viper. In the same way, monks, here some foolish man learns the Dhamma... His bad grasp of the teachings leads to his long-term detriment and suffering. For what reason? Monks, because of the bad grasp of the teachings.

“Monks, here some gentleman learns the Dhamma - discourses, poems, explanations, verses, exclamations, reports, birth-stories, wonders, and discussions. Having learned the Dhamma, he wisely examines its meaning. Since the meaning of those teachings has been wisely examined by him, they are accepted by him. He does not learn the Dhamma just so he can argue, nor just so he can refute other people’s statements. He learns the Dhamma and manifests its benefit. His good grasp of the teachings leads to his long-term benefit and happiness. For what reason? Monks, because of the good grasp of the teachings.

1 *Pariyāpuṇati*. In this context, this verb may mean “memorize.”

2 *Sutta, geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gāthā, udāna, itivuttaka, jātaka, abbhutadhamma, vedalla*. This list is found in several places in the Canon, and appears to have been the system by which the teachings were categorized in the time of the Buddha. Some time after the Buddha’s passing, his successors rearranged the teachings into the categorization system we have today.

3 *Nijjhānam khamati*. This indicates a deep acceptance arising from deep understanding.

“Monks, imagine that a man needed a viper, was seeking a viper, was going about searching for a viper. He might see a large viper, and pin it down well using a forked stick. Having pinned it down well using a forked stick, he would grasp it well by the neck. Monks, even though that snake might wrap its body around his hand or arm or one of his other limbs, he would not die or experience death-like pain because of that. For what reason? Monks, because of the good grasp of the viper. In the same way, monks, here some gentleman learns the Dhamma... His good grasp of the teachings leads to his long-term benefit and happiness. For what reason? Monks, because of the good grasp of the teachings.

“Therefore, monks, understand the meaning of what I have said and remember it accordingly. And if you do not understand the meaning of what I have said, you should discuss it with me or with one of the other competent monks.

[The Simile of the Raft]

“Monks, I will teach you how the Dhamma is like a raft; it is to be used for the sake of escaping⁴, not for the sake of grasping. Listen to this and carefully pay attention; I will speak.”

“Yes, Bhante,” those monks replied to the Blessed One. The Blessed One said this:

“Monks, imagine that a person was traveling on a road. He might see a large river, the near shore of which is risky and dangerous, and the far shore of which is safe and harmless; but there is no ferry-boat or bridge or any other way to cross. He would think, ‘The near shore of this large river is risky and dangerous, and the far shore is safe and harmless; but there is no ferry-boat or bridge or any other way to cross. Perhaps I will gather grass and wood and branches and leaves, bind them together into a raft, and then, relying on that raft, I will make an effort with my arms and legs to cross safely to the other side.’

“Then, monks, that person gathered grass and wood and branches and leaves, bound them together into a raft, and then, relying on that raft, he made an effort with his arms and legs to cross safely to the other side. When he reached the other side, he would think, ‘This raft has done much for me; relying on this raft and making an effort with my arms and legs, I crossed safely to the other side. Perhaps I will put this raft on my head or carry it on my shoulders as I go about doing what I wish to do.’ What do you think, monks – is this person doing what should be done with that raft?”

“Certainly not, Bhante.”

“Monks, how could this person do what should be done with that raft? Here, monks, when he reached the other side, he would think, ‘This raft has done much for me; relying on this raft and making an effort with my arms and legs, I crossed safely to the other side. Perhaps I will leave it on the ground or floating in the water as I go about doing what I wish to do.’ Monks, this person is doing what should be done with that raft.

4 *Nittharaṇa*. Lit. “crossing over” or “leaving behind.”

“In the same way, monks, I have taught you how the Dhamma is like a raft; it is for the purpose of escaping, not for the the purpose of grasping. Monks, I have taught you how the Dhamma is like a raft; those who understand this are to let go even of Dhamma, let alone non-Dhamma.

[Six Standpoints of Wrong View]

“Monks, there are six standpoints of [wrong] view. What six?”

“Here, monks, an uneducated commoner - one who does not see the noble ones, has not mastered the teachings of the noble ones, is undisciplined in the teachings of the noble ones, does not see good people, has not mastered the teachings of good people, and is undisciplined in the teachings of good people - he sees the body as ‘This is me, I am this, this is my self’; he sees identification as ‘This is me, I am this, this is my self’; he sees mental objects as ‘This is me, I am this, this is my self’; he sees whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, or explored with the mind as ‘This is me, I am this, this is my self’; or based on this view - ‘The world is the self, and after death I will be permanent, stable, eternal, unchanging, and will remain that way forever’ - he sees that as ‘This is me, I am this, this is my self.’

“Monks, an educated disciple of the noble ones - one who sees the noble ones, has mastered the teachings of the noble ones, is well-disciplined in the teachings of the noble ones, sees good people, has mastered the teachings of good people, and is well-disciplined in the teachings of good people - does not see the body as ‘This is me, I am this, this is my self’; does not see identification as ‘This is me, I am this, this is my self’; does not see mental objects as ‘This is me, I am this, this is my self’; does not see whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, or explored with the mind as ‘This is me, I am this, this is my self’; and regarding this view - ‘The world is the self, and after death I will be permanent, stable, eternal, unchanging, and will remain that way forever’ - he does not see that as ‘This is me, I am this, this is my self.’ Seeing in this way, he is not agitated about what does not exist.”

[Bases of Agitation]

When this was said, a certain monk asked the Blessed One, “Bhante, can there be agitation about something external that does not exist?”

“There can be, monk,” said the Blessed One. “Here a monk thinks about something, ‘Oh, it was mine, but now it is not! Oh, it could be mine, but I will not get it!’ He sorrows, frets, and laments, beating his chest and wailing, and becomes confused. Monk, in this way there is agitation about something external that does not exist.”

“Bhante, can there be no agitation about something external that does not exist?”

“There can be, monk,” said the Blessed One. “Here a monk does not think about something, ‘Oh, it was mine, but now it is not! Oh, it could be mine, but I will not get it!’ He does not sorrow, fret, lament, beat his chest, wail, or become confused. Monk, in this way there is no agitation about something external that does not exist.”

“Bhante, can there be agitation about something internal that does not exist?”

“There can be, monk,” said the Blessed One. “Here a monk has this opinion: ‘The world is the self, and after death I will be permanent, stable, eternal, unchanging, and will remain that way forever.’ He hears the Dhamma being taught by the Tathāgata or one of the Tathagata's disciples, for the complete uprooting of the tendency of settling on, obsessing with, and sticking to any viewpoint, for the pacification of all formations, for the relinquishing of all acquisitions, for the elimination of craving, for dispassion, for cessation, for enlightenment. It occurs to him, ‘It seems I will be cut off! It seems I will be destroyed! It seems I will be lost!’ He sorrows, frets, and laments, beating his chest and wailing, and becomes confused. Monk, in this way there is agitation about something internal that does not exist.”

“Bhante, can there be no agitation about something internal that does not exist?”

“There can be, monk,” said the Blessed One. “Here a monk does not have this opinion: ‘The world is the self... It seems I will be lost!’ He does not sorrow, fret, lament, beat his chest, wail, or become confused. Monk, in this way there is no agitation about something internal that does not exist.”

“Monks, you could possess something which is permanent, stable, eternal, unchanging, and which will remain that way forever. Monks, do you see anything which is permanent, stable, eternal, unchanging, and which will remain that way forever?”

“Certainly not, Bhante.”

“Good, monks. Monks, I also do not see anything which is permanent, stable, eternal, unchanging, and which will remain that way forever.

“Monks, you could cling to a belief in self-existence which, when clung to, does not produce sorrow, lamentation, pain, depression, and anguish. Monks, do you see any belief in self-existence which, when clung to, does not produce sorrow, lamentation, pain, depression, and anguish?”

“Certainly not, Bhante.”

“Good, monks. Monks, I also do not see any belief in self-existence which, when clung to, does not produce sorrow, lamentation, pain, depression, and anguish.”

“Monks, you could rely on an opinion which, when relied upon, does not produce sorrow, lamentation, pain, depression, and anguish. Monks, do you see any opinion which, when relied upon, does not produce sorrow, lamentation, pain, depression, and anguish?”

“Certainly not, Bhante.”

“Good, monks. Monks, I also do not see any opinion which, when relied upon, does not produce sorrow, lamentation, pain, depression, and anguish.”

[Belief in Self-Existence]

“Monks, if a self existed, would there be the concept ‘belongs to my self’?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“Monks, if ‘belongs to my self’ existed, would there be the concept ‘my self’?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“Monks, since one cannot arrive at ‘self’ or ‘belongs to self’ as true and reliable, then isn’t the viewpoint ‘The world is the self, and after death I will be permanent, stable, eternal, unchanging, and will remain that way forever’ utterly and completely foolish?”

“How could it not be, Bhante? Bhante, it is utterly and completely foolish.”

“What do you think, monks? Is the body permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, Bhante.”

“Is that which is impermanent unsatisfying or satisfying?”

“Unsatisfying, Bhante.”

“Is it proper to regard that which is impermanent, unsatisfying, and changeable as ‘this is mine, I am this, this is my self’?”

“Certainly not, Bhante.”

“What do you think, monks? Is feeling... recognition... mental formations... consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, Bhante.”

“Is that which is impermanent unsatisfying or satisfying?”

“Unsatisfying, Bhante.”

“Is it proper to regard that which is impermanent, unsatisfying, and changeable as ‘this is mine, I am this, this is my self’?”

“Certainly not, Bhante.”

“Therefore, monks, any body – past, future, or present, internal or external, obvious or subtle, inferior or excellent, far or near – all should be accurately seen with correct wisdom in this way: ‘This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.’ Any feeling... recognition... mental formations... consciousness – past, future, or present, internal or

external, obvious or subtle, inferior or excellent, far or near – all should be accurately seen with correct wisdom in this way: ‘This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.’

“Seeing in this way, monks, an educated disciple of the noble ones becomes disenchanted with the body, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with recognition, disenchanted with mental formations, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchantment produces dispassion. Dispassion liberates. When there is liberation, there is knowing: ‘Liberated.’ One understands, ‘Birth is eliminated, the spiritual life has been completed, what was to be done has been done, there will not be another existence like this.’

“Monks, this is called a monk who has ‘removed the barrier’. who has ‘filled in the moat’, who has ‘demolished the pillar⁵’, who has ‘opened the lock’, who is ‘a noble being who has lowered the banner, put down the burden, and is unbound’.

“Monks, how is he a monk who has ‘removed the barrier’? Monks, ignorance has been abandoned by that monk, its root has been cut up, it has been made like a palm stump, rendered non-existent, not subject to future arising. Monks, in this way he is a monk who has ‘removed the barrier’.

“Monks, how is he a monk who has ‘filled in the moat’? Monks, wandering through birth from one state of existence to another has been abandoned by that monk, its root has been cut up, it has been made like a palm stump, rendered non-existent, not subject to future arising. Monks, in this way he is a monk who has ‘filled in the moat’.

“Monks, how is he a monk who has ‘demolished the pillar’? Monks, craving has been abandoned by that monk, its root has been cut up, it has been made like a palm stump, rendered non-existent, not subject to future arising. Monks, in this way he is a monk who has ‘demolished the pillar’.

“Monks, how is he a monk who has ‘opened the lock’? Monks, the five lower fetters have been abandoned by that monk, their roots have been cut up, they have been made like a palm stump, rendered non-existent, not subject to future arising. Monks, in this way he is a monk who has ‘opened the lock’.

“Monks, how is he a monk who is ‘a noble being who has lowered the banner, put down the burden, and is unbound’? Monks, the conceit ‘I am’ has been abandoned by that monk, its root has been cut up, it has been made like a palm stump, rendered non-existent, not subject to future arising. Monks, in this way he is a monk who is ‘a noble being who has lowered the banner, put down the burden, and is unbound’.

“Monks, when a monk’s mind has been liberated in this way, then even an investigation by all the angels including Indra, Brahma, and Pajāpati would not be able to ascertain, ‘The consciousness of a Tathāgata⁶ is dependent on that.’ For what reason? Monks, I say that even here and now a Tathāgata cannot be found. But since I say this, some contemplatives and brahmins slander me – inaccurately, vainly, falsely, untruthfully – by saying, ‘The

5 *Abbūlhesika*. This could also mean “one who has ended the search.”

6 Although the term “Tathāgata” usually only refers to a Sammā-sambuddha, this discourse appears to be using it to refer to an ordinary Arahant as well.

contemplative Gotama leads people astray; he declares the destruction, removal, and annihilation of an existing being.’ Monks, since I am not that way and I do not speak that way, then it is inaccurate, vain, false, and untruthful when those contemplatives and brahmins slander me by saying, ‘The contemplative Gotama leads people astray; he declares the destruction, removal, and annihilation of an existing being.’ Monks, previously and currently I declare only suffering and the cessation of suffering.

“Monks, even when others condemn, criticize, revile, and insult the Tathāgata, the Tathāgata is not irritated, bothered, or dissatisfied. Monks, even when others praise, honor, and revere the Tathāgata, the Tathāgata is not delighted, elated, or overjoyed. Monks, when others praise, honor, and revere the Tathāgata, the Tathāgata thinks, ‘This is how I act towards what has been understood.’

“Therefore, monks, if others condemn, criticize, revile, and insult you, you should not be irritated, bothered, or dissatisfied. If others praise, honor, and revere you, you should not be delighted, elated, or overjoyed. Monks, when others praise, honor, and revere you, you should think, ‘This is how I act towards what has been understood.’

[Abandoning What Is Not Yours]

“Therefore, monks, abandon what is not yours; abandoning it will be for your long-term benefit and happiness. Monks, what is not yours?

“Monks, the body is not yours; abandon it. Abandoning it will be for your long-term benefit and happiness.

“Monks, feeling is not yours; abandon it. Abandoning it will be for your long-term benefit and happiness.

“Monks, recognition is not yours; abandon it. Abandoning it will be for your long-term benefit and happiness.

“Monks, mental formations are not yours; abandon them. Abandoning them will be for your long-term benefit and happiness.

“Monks, consciousness is not yours; abandon it. Abandoning it will be for your long-term benefit and happiness.

“What do you think, monks? If people were to take or burn or do whatever they wished with all the grass and sticks and leaves and branches in Jeta’s grove, would you think ‘The people are taking us, burning us, doing whatever they wish to us?’”

“Certainly not, Bhante.”

“For what reason?”

“Bhante, because it is not our self or belonging to our self.”

“In exactly the same way, monks, abandon what is not yours; abandoning it will be for your long-term benefit and happiness. Monks, what is not yours? Monks, the body... feeling... recognition... mental formations... consciousness is not yours; abandon it. Abandoning it will be for your long-term benefit and happiness.

[Purity of the Dhamma]

“Monks, the Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way is evident, apparent, manifest, flawless.

“Monks, in this Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way and which is evident, apparent, manifest, and flawless, there are monks who are Arahants, who have eliminated their corruptions, who have lived completely, who have done what was to be done, who have put down the burden, who have reached the true goal, who have completely eliminated the fetter of existence, who are liberated through right knowledge; for them, there is no cycle of rebirth to be found. Monks, the Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way is evident, apparent, manifest, flawless.

“Monks, in this Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way and which is evident, apparent, manifest, and flawless, there are monks who have abandoned the five lower fetters; all of them will be reborn as angels and will attain full enlightenment in that state, without returning from that world. Monks, the Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way is evident, apparent, manifest, flawless.

“Monks, in this Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way and which is evident, apparent, manifest, and flawless, there are monks who have abandoned three fetters and attenuated lust and hate; all of them are once-returners, who will come to this world once more and put an end to their suffering. Monks, the Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way is evident, apparent, manifest, flawless.

“Monks, in this Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way and which is evident, apparent, manifest, and flawless, there are monks who have abandoned three fetters; all of them are stream-enterers, exempt from the lower realms, certain to reach full awakening. Monks, the Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way is evident, apparent, manifest, flawless.

“Monks, in this Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way and which is evident, apparent, manifest, and flawless, there are monks who are Dhamma-followers, faith-followers; all of them are certain to reach full awakening. Monks, the Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way is evident, apparent, manifest, flawless.

“Monks, in this Dhamma which has been well-explained by me in this way and which is evident, apparent, manifest, and flawless, there are those who have faith in me and affection in me; all of them will reach heaven.”

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