

MN 28: Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta

The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint

Translated by Bhante Suddhāso

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Prosperous One¹ was dwelling at Sāvatti, at Jeta's Grove, in Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. There Venerable Sāriputta addressed the monks: "Venerable monks!" "Venerable," those monks replied to Venerable Sāriputta. Venerable Sāriputta said this:

"Venerables, just as the footprint of any jungle animal can fit inside an elephant's footprint, and the elephant's footprint is considered the best of them on account of its large size, in the same way, Venerables, all wholesome teachings are included in the four noble truths. What four? The noble truth of unsatisfactoriness, the noble truth of the origin of unsatisfactoriness, the noble truth of the cessation of unsatisfactoriness, and the noble truth of the practice which leads to the cessation of unsatisfactoriness.

"Venerables, what is the noble truth of unsatisfactoriness? Birth is unsatisfactory, decay is unsatisfactory, death is unsatisfactory; sorrow, grief, pain, depression, and anguish are unsatisfactory; not getting what one wants is unsatisfactory; briefly, the five components subject to grasping are unsatisfactory.

"Venerables, what are the five components subject to grasping? The body component subject to grasping, the feeling component subject to grasping, the identification component subject to grasping, the mental activity component subject to grasping, and the consciousness component subject to grasping.

"Venerables, what is the body component subject to grasping? The four great elements, and the body which is composed of the four great elements.

[Contemplation of the Four Physical Elements]

"Venerables, what are the four great elements? The earth element, the water element, the heat element, the wind element.

"Venerables, what is the earth element? The earth element may be internal or external. Venerables, what is the internal earth element? Whatever internal personal component that is experienced as hard or solid – such as head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin, muscle, tendons, bone, bone-marrow, kidney, heart, liver, membranes, spleen, lungs, colon, intestines, stomach, feces, or any other internal personal component that is experienced as hard or solid – venerables, this is called the 'internal earth element.' Whether earth element is internal or external, it is the same earth element. It should be accurately seen with right wisdom in this way: 'This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.' When one has accurately seen it with right wisdom in this way, one becomes disenchanted with the earth element, and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the earth element.

1 *Bhagavā*. Lit. "one who possesses something valuable." Commonly translated "The Blessed One."

“Venerables, there is a time when the external earth element is disturbed. At that time, the external earth element disappears. Venerables, even the vastness of the external earth element will be seen as impermanent, as subject to elimination, subject to disappearance, subject to alteration. How then could one say of this ephemeral craving-born body, ‘This is me’ or ‘This is mine’ or ‘I am this’? Those concepts do not apply here.

“Venerables, if they disparage, demean, deprecate, or deride a monk, he understands it in this way: ‘What has arisen for me is an unpleasant feeling produced by ear-contact. It is has a basis, it is not without a basis. What is its basis? Sense-contact is its basis.’ He sees, ‘Sense-contact is impermanent.’ He sees, ‘Feeling is impermanent.’ He sees, ‘Identification is impermanent.’ He sees, ‘Mental activities are impermanent.’ He sees, ‘Consciousness is impermanent.’ He places, settles, stabilizes, and resolves his mind on that elemental foundation.

“Venerables, if others assail that monk in an unwanted, undesirable, unpleasing way – such as hitting him with fists, stones, sticks, or knives – he understands it in this way: ‘This body is such that it can be hit by fists, stones, sticks, and knives. However, the Prosperous One said in the Simile of the Saw: “Monks, even if criminals cut off your limbs with a two-handled saw, if you produce hostility in your mind, you are not following my instructions.” Unrelenting energy will be initiated in me, unwavering mindfulness will be established, the body will be tranquil and undisturbed, the mind will be collected and unified. Now let them hit this body with fists, stones, sticks, and knives, for the Buddha’s instructions are being followed.’

“Venerables, when that monk recollects the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha in this way, if equanimity based on wholesomeness does not become established in him, then he rouses himself in this way: ‘Ah, it is misfortune for me, it is unfortunate for me, it is bad fortune for me, it is not good fortune for me, that when I recollect the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on wholesomeness does not become established in me!’ Venerables, just as when a daughter-in-law sees her father-in-law she becomes roused, in the same way, venerables, when that monk recollects the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha in this way, if equanimity based on wholesomeness does not become established in him, then he rouses himself in this way: ‘Ah, it is misfortune for me, it is unfortunate for me, it is bad fortune for me, it is not good fortune for me, that when I recollect the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha in this way, equanimity based on wholesomeness does not become established in me!’ Venerables, when that monk recollects the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha in this way, if equanimity based on wholesomeness does become established in him, then because of that he is satisfied. Venerables, by that point, much has been accomplished by that monk.

“Venerables, what is the water element? The water element may be internal or external. Venerables, what is the internal water element? Whatever internal personal component that is experienced as water or watery – such as bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, oil, saliva, mucus, synovial fluid, urine, or any other internal personal component that is experienced as water or watery – Venerables, this is called the ‘internal water element.’ Whether water element is internal or external, it is the same water element. It should be accurately seen with right wisdom in this way: ‘This is not mine, I am not this, this is not

my self.' When one has accurately seen it with right wisdom in this way, one becomes disenchanted with the water element, and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the water element.

"Venerables, there is a time when the external water element is disturbed. It demolishes villages, towns, cities, countries, and regions. Venerables, there is a time when the depth of the great ocean decreases by a hundred fathoms, two hundred fathoms, three hundred fathoms, four hundred fathoms, five hundred fathoms, six hundred fathoms, seven hundred fathoms. Venerables, there is a time when the great ocean is only as deep as the height of seven trees, six trees, five trees, four trees, three trees, two trees, one tree. Venerables, there is a time when the great ocean is only as deep as the height of seven people, six people, five people, four people, three people, two people, one person. Venerables, there is a time when the great ocean is only as deep as half the height of one person, to the waist of one person, to the knees of one person, to the ankles of one person. Venerables, there is a time when the great ocean is so shallow it doesn't even reach the top of one's toes. Venerables, even the vastness of the external water element will be seen as impermanent, as subject to elimination, subject to disappearance, subject to alteration. How then could one say of this ephemeral craving-born body, 'This is me' or 'This is mine' or 'I am this'? Those concepts do not apply here.

"Venerables, if they disparage, demean, deprecate, or deride a monk... Venerables, by that point, much has been accomplished by that monk.

"Venerables, what is the heat element? The heat element may be internal or external. Venerables, what is the internal heat element? Whatever internal personal component that is experienced as heat or heating - such as what brings warmth, or causes decay, or burns, or causes what one has eaten, drunk, consumed, or swallowed to be completely digested; or any other internal personal component that is experienced as heat or heating - Venerables, this is called the 'internal heat element.' Whether heat element is internal or external, it is the same heat element. It should be accurately seen with right wisdom in this way: 'This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.' When one has accurately seen it with right wisdom in this way, one becomes disenchanted with the heat element, and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the heat element.

"Venerables, there is a time when the external heat element is disturbed. It burns villages, towns, cities, countries, and regions. Only when it reaches greenery, a roadside, a cliffside, a shore, or a decent extent of open land does it go out from a lack of fuel. Venerables, there is a time when they try to kindle fire using chicken feathers, sinews, or scraps of leather. Venerables, even the vastness of the external heat element will be seen as impermanent, as subject to elimination, subject to disappearance, subject to alteration. How then could one say of this ephemeral craving-born body, 'This is me' or 'This is mine' or 'I am this'? Those concepts do not apply here.

"Venerables, if they disparage, demean, deprecate, or deride a monk... Venerables, by that point, much has been accomplished by that monk.

"Venerables, what is the wind element? The wind element may be internal or external. Venerables, what is the internal wind element? Whatever internal personal component

that is experienced as wind or windy – such as up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the belly, winds in the abdomen, winds moving along the limbs, inhalation, exhalation, or any other internal personal component that is experienced as wind or windy – venerables, this is called the ‘internal wind element.’ Whether wind element is internal or external, it is the same wind element. It should be accurately seen with right wisdom in this way: ‘This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.’ When one has accurately seen it with right wisdom in this way, one becomes disenchanted with the wind element, and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the wind element.

“Venerables, there is a time when the external wind element is disturbed. It demolishes villages, towns, cities, countries, and regions. Venerables, there is a time, in the last month of summer, when they try to generate wind using a palm leaf or a fan, and even the roof-thatch does not quiver. Venerables, even the vastness of the external wind element will be seen as impermanent, as subject to elimination, subject to disappearance, subject to alteration. How then could one say of this ephemeral craving-born body, ‘This is me’ or ‘This is mine’ or ‘I am this’? Those concepts do not apply here.

“Venerables, if they disparage, demean, deprecate, or deride a monk... Venerables, by that point, much has been accomplished by that monk.

[Analysis of Sensory Consciousness]

“Venerables, just as when space is encompassed by wood, rope, thatch, and clay it is called a ‘house,’ in the same way, when space is encompassed by bones, sinews, muscle, and skin it is called a ‘body.’

“Venerables, when the eye is not internally damaged but an external sight does not enter the sensory field, then no connection happens and there is no manifestation of consciousness based on that.

“Venerables, when the eye is internally damaged and an external sight enters the sensory field, then no connection happens and there is no manifestation of consciousness based on that.

“Venerables, when the eye is not internally damaged and an external sight enters the sensory field, then a connection happens and there is a manifestation of consciousness based on that.

“The body that has come into existence in this way is included in the body component subject to grasping. The feeling that has come into existence in this way is included in the feeling component subject to grasping. The identification that has come into existence in this way is included in the identification component subject to grasping. The mental activity that has come into existence in this way is included in the mental activity component subject to grasping. The consciousness that has come into existence in this way is included in the consciousness component subject to grasping.

“One understands in this way: ‘It seems there is this collection and combination of these five components subject to grasping. This was said by the Prosperous One: “One who sees Dependent Co-Arising sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees Dependent Co-Arising.” These five components subject to grasping are dependently co-arisen. Interest, attachment, affection, and adherence in relation to these five components subject to grasping is the arising of dissatisfaction. The elimination of discarding of interest and passion in relation to these five components subject to grasping is the cessation of dissatisfaction.’ Venerables, by that point, much has been accomplished by that monk.

“Venerables, when the ear is not internally damaged but an external sound does not enter the sensory field...

“Venerables, when the nose is not internally damaged but an external fragrance does not enter the sensory field...

“Venerables, when the tongue is not internally damaged but an external flavor does not enter the sensory field...

“Venerables, when the body is not internally damaged but an external touch does not enter the sensory field...

“Venerables, when the mind is not internally damaged but an external mind-object does not enter the sensory field... Venerables, by that point, much has been accomplished by that monk.”

This is what Venerable Sāriputta said. Satisfied, those monks delighted in Venerable Sāriputta’s speech.