

# MN 16: Cetokhila Sutta (Annotated)

## *Mental Desolation*

Translated and Annotated by Suddhāso Bhikkhu

**Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvatti, in Jeta's Grove, at Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. There the Blessed One addressed the monks: "Monks!" "Auspicious sir," those monks replied to the Blessed One. The Blessed One said this:**

*This is a standard opening sequence for a Sutta - the location is identified, and the Buddha addresses his audience. As the Buddha spent most of his time with other monks, most of his discourses are addressed to monks (as in this case). This does not mean that the teachings within this discourse are only for monks, however; they are equally applicable to all dedicated Buddhist practitioners of any gender, whether or not they are ordained.*

**"Monks, when there is a monk for whom five kinds of mental desolation have not been abandoned and five kinds of mental imprisonment have not been destroyed, it is not possible for him to attain growth, development, and fulfillment in this Dhamma-Vinaya.**

*This powerful statement by the Buddha provides a basic outline of the discourse. It also emphasizes the importance of the information he is about to convey; as he states that the ten things he is about to describe are things that render it impossible to make progress in one's spiritual practice, then we would do well to pay careful attention to his instructions and to follow them as well as we can.*

*The two categories he uses are "mental desolation" (Pāli: ceto-khila) and "mental imprisonment" (cetaso vinibandhā). The Pāli word for "desolation" more literally means "wasteland," which gives an indication of how serious the Buddha considers these five conditions: to harbor one of the five kinds of "mental desolation" makes one's mind like a wasteland - barren, sterile, incapable of supporting positive growth and development. Describing the second set of five as forms of "imprisonment" is similarly evocative, particularly in a spiritual system which describes its highest goal as liberation (vimutti).*

**"What are the five kinds of mental desolation that have not been abandoned by him? Here, monks, a monk is uncertain and doubtful about the Teacher, and has not resolved his mind and become confident [in the Teacher]. Monks, when a monk is uncertain and doubtful about the Teacher and has not resolved his mind and become confident [in the Teacher], his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the first kind of mental desolation that has not been abandoned by him.**

*The Teacher (satthā) is one of the epithets of the Buddha. This first item, therefore, is about confidence in the Buddha – particularly confidence that the methods the Buddha taught lead to one's own benefit and spiritual development. So how do we develop confidence in the Buddha? Confidence comes from personal experience: One can practice the Buddha's techniques, and observe the results one achieves; as one notices that following the Buddha's instructions produces the results that the Buddha described, then naturally one's trust in the Buddha as a teacher grows.*

**“Monks, this is another one: There is a monk who is uncertain and doubtful about the Dhamma... about the Saṅgha... about the training, and has not resolved his mind and become confident [in the training]. Monks, when a monk is uncertain and doubtful about the training and has not resolved his mind and become confident [in the training], his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the fourth kind of mental desolation that has not been abandoned by him.**

*The second kind of mental desolation is a lack of confidence in the Dhamma. This is a more direct form of the first kind; here one doubts the validity of the Dhamma – and when one lacks confidence in the Dhamma then one naturally will not live according to Dhamma. The remedy for this kind of mental desolation is the same as the remedy for the first kind, and in fact these two kinds are intertwined – two sides of the same coin.*

*The third kind of mental desolation is a lack of confidence in the Saṅgha. The word “saṅgha” in the Suttas almost always has one of two meanings: the monastic community, or the assembly of enlightened beings. In this case, if the second meaning is the intended one, then “lack of confidence in the Saṅgha” most likely refers to a lack of confidence that it is possible to attain enlightenment.*

*The fourth kind of mental desolation is a lack of confidence in the training (sikkhā). This probably refers particularly to the precepts (sikkhā-pada); either the five precepts of a lay devotee, or the extensive monastic precepts of monks and nuns. It may also refer to all of the practices recommended by the Buddha, as they may all be viewed as methods of training one's mind to be free of unwholesome tendencies. Either way, if one lacks confidence in the effectiveness of the training principles laid down by the Buddha, then one is not likely to place much importance on following them.*

*There are a variety of possible reasons why one might lack confidence in these four pillars of practice. Sometimes the issue is doubt in the Buddha himself – doubt that he was, in fact, fully enlightened; or perhaps doubt that he taught a complete Dhamma – suspicion that he might have left something out. Such doubts are often based on a lack of sufficient knowledge about the Buddha's teachings, often combined with a surplus of misinformation (which, unfortunately, is all too common). In that case, one powerful remedy is to read the Suttas, consider their*

*meanings and implications deeply, and discuss them with other dedicated practitioners. This also addresses doubt in the Dhamma; as we develop a more complete and accurate understanding of the Dhamma, we naturally tend to develop stronger confidence in its validity.*

*Doubt in the Sangha can come from various sources. One way it can arise is from seeing other practitioners engage in what appears to be inappropriate behavior. This can be particularly disheartening when we observe apparent misconduct in monastics and teachers, as we expect a higher standard of conduct from such individuals. In that case it's worth remembering that we are all human beings, subject to human flaws and failings. If we were perfect, we would have no need to practice; thus it follows that all the people on the Path are imperfect. So rather than focusing on their misconduct, we focus on their commitment to self-development, and on any positive qualities we can find in them. We give them the space to work through their issues, just as we are trying to work through ours. And we draw our attention to any progress we've made in our practice (however small or large that progress may be), as well as any progress we've observed in others; from that we can extrapolate the potential results of a lifetime of practice. So even if we do not personally know any enlightened individuals, and even if the other practitioners we know are less than inspiring, we can still foster a sense of faith in the possibility of enlightenment.*

*Doubt in the training often comes from a lack of experience. It takes time to see the results of our practice; when we have only been practicing for a short period of time (such as ten or twenty years), it is natural that we might not see dramatic effects right away. If we're expecting overnight enlightenment, then we are bound to be disappointed; patience is an invaluable asset to the spiritual path. There's also more to it than just how much time we've been practicing: there are many aspects of the Buddha's techniques. If we only practice a limited segment of his methods, and only to a limited extent, then we will only achieve limited benefit - which can cause us to doubt the value of the training. Thus it is important to study the extent of the Buddha's methods of self-development and to make a genuine effort to live accordingly. In this way, we can see for ourselves the benefits that come from training ourselves, and our confidence in the Buddha's system grows.*

**“Monks, this is another one: There is a monk who is angry and dissatisfied with his co-practitioners, who has an afflicted mind and a callous nature. Monks, when a monk is angry and dissatisfied with his co-practitioners, when he has an afflicted mind and a callous nature, his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the fifth kind of mental desolation that has not been abandoned by him.**

*The fifth kind of mental desolation has to do with one's attitudes towards one's fellow practitioners. This one is especially relevant to those who live in monastic*

*communities. When people live together there is almost always a certain amount of incompatibility: there will be aspects of each other's behavior that one dislikes or disapproves of. This is normal. However, in order for communities to function, it is critical that there be a high degree of mutual tolerance and forgiveness; a willingness to overlook each other's foibles and forgive each other's mistakes. This creates an atmosphere of mutual support that is extremely beneficial for spiritual practice.*

*However, even if one is living with hostile and intolerant companions, if one is careful to protect one's own mind from the arising of unwholesome mindstates, then one may still be able to practice reasonably well (though it can be inadvisable to live with such companions as they may disrupt or obstruct one's practice; as the Buddha says in KN 5.3.46, although it is best to live with wise companions, if one cannot find a wise companion then it could be better to live alone). What makes practice very difficult is when one allows oneself to indulge in anger and resentment towards one's fellow practitioners; this inner hostility is a constant obstacle to the development of wholesome mindstates, and directly prevents concentration and wisdom. If we hope to make true progress on the path, then we must endeavor to overcome our tendencies towards anger, resentment, and hostility, and strive to live peacefully with our fellow practitioners.*

**“These are the five kinds of mental desolation that have not been abandoned by him.**

**“What are the five kinds of mental imprisonment that have not been destroyed by him? Here, monks, in regards to sensuality, a monk is not free of passion, interest, affection, thirst, fever<sup>1</sup>, and craving. Monks, when a monk is not free of passion, interest, affection, thirst, fever, and craving about sensuality, his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the first kind of mental imprisonment that has not been destroyed by him.**

*In many discourses the Buddha describes two different kinds of pleasure: the pleasure of sensuality (kāma-sukha) and the pleasure of renunciation (nekkhamma-sukha). Sensual pleasure is any kind of pleasure that depends upon sensory experiences: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or thought. The pleasure of renunciation, on the other hand, comes from detachment: the willingness to let go of all experiences – not clinging to them when they arise, and not mourning them when they cease. The pleasure of renunciation is also sometimes described as the euphoric joy that often arises during deep concentration (jhāna), which is easiest to obtain when one is not caught up in sensuality and attachment.*

*As long as one is caught up in sensual pleasure, then one tends to place little or no value on renunciation. Sensuality is easy; renunciation is difficult. The rewards of*

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1 *Pariḷāha*. Lit. “completely burning.” This calls to mind the phrase “burning desire.”

*sensuality are readily apparent; the rewards of renunciation are hard to see. However, when the pleasure of renunciation is developed, it far exceeds the limited and paltry domain of sensual pleasure; and thus it is worth the effort it takes. It also has the great benefit of not being dependent upon conditions; sensual pleasure relies on external conditions lining up just the way we want them to, whereas renunciation is completely independent of external conditions.*

*So we make an effort to reduce our dependence on sensual pleasure and to develop an appreciation for renunciation and its benefits. We focus on spiritual self-development as that frees us from reliance on the unreliable world of sensory contact.*

**“Monks, this is another one: In regards to the body.. to a [visible] object, a monk is not free of passion, interest, affection, thirst, fever, and craving. Monks, when a monk is not free of passion, interest, affection, thirst, fever, and craving about a [visible] object, his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the third kind of mental imprisonment that has not been destroyed by him.**

*The second and third kinds of mental imprisonment are similar; namely, passion, interest, affection, burning desire, and craving related to the physical body (either one's own, or the bodies of other people), and passion etc. related to visible objects. These are both just further examples of sensual obsession, and thus are not significantly different from the first kind of mental imprisonment. They may have been listed separately in order to clarify particularly notable forms of sensual obsession; infatuation with physical bodies is a very clear example and is often related to lust, and thus is worthy of special mention. Similarly, as most people place more importance on their vision than on any other physical sense, it is reasonable to single out visual objects as a notable focal point for obsessiveness.*

*So once again we make an effort to reduce our infatuation with sensory objects and to develop our practice of independence from and non-reliance on external phenomena. We develop an inner refuge; a sense of self-reliant stability that we maintain regardless of what we experience.*

**“Monks, this is another one: There is a monk who eats as much as he wishes to fill his stomach<sup>2</sup>, and dwells devoted to the pleasure of sleep, the pleasure of reclining, and the pleasure of lethargy. Monks, when a monk eats as much as he wishes to fill his stomach and dwells devoted to the pleasure of sleep, the pleasure of reclining, and the pleasure of lethargy, his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the fourth kind of mental imprisonment that has not been destroyed by him.**

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2 *Udarāvadehaka*. The implication here is overeating.

*The fourth kind of mental imprisonment is about our relationship with food and sleep. In order to survive we need to eat; this is unavoidable. However, we also need to be careful to pay attention to how our choices about eating affect our mind. If we eat too much, the mind tends to become sluggish, dull, unfocused, and sleepy, which makes it difficult to focus the mind on developing and maintaining wholesome mindstates. Similarly, if we eat too little then we may find we lack the physical energy necessary to practice. So we attempt to find the proper amount; the amount that sustains our physical health without reducing our mental clarity.*

*We also consider our relationship with sleep. Just as the amount of food that is necessary varies from person to person, the amount of sleep that is necessary varies as well. A small percentage of people do just fine with only four hours of sleep. Most people need significantly more; they may need to sleep for six, seven, eight hours, or even longer. So it's worth experimenting with how much we sleep and watching the results; we may find that if we sleep a bit less or a bit more, the mind is noticeably sharper and stronger.*

**“Monks, this is another one: There is a monk who lives the Holy Life intent upon a particular group of devas<sup>3</sup>, [thinking] 'By means of this virtue<sup>4</sup>, practice, austerity, or holy life, I will become a deva or a particular kind of deva.' Monks, when a monk live the Holy Life intent upon a particular group of devas, [thinking] 'By means of this virtue, practice, austerity, or holy life, I will become a deva or a particular kind of deva,' his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind does not tend towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the fifth kind of mental imprisonment that has not been destroyed by him.**

*The fifth kind of mental imprisonment relates to our motivation for practicing. The primary purpose of Buddha's instructions is to help us attain complete freedom from suffering – that is, enlightenment. He recommends this because “Nibbāna is the highest form of happiness” (Dhp 203), and also the only completely reliable form of happiness – once attained it can never be lost.*

*However, this stage of self-development takes a lot of time and effort. It's easy to lose sight of the goal and to instead set our sights on something easier to imagine and easier to achieve. So instead of practicing for the sake of enlightenment, we wind up focusing on getting better conditions within Saṃsāra – either in this life or in a future life. We get sidetracked by the pursuit of a goal that leads only to temporary relief and conditional happiness, and stop making progress towards permanent relief and unconditional happiness.*

*There is nothing wrong with seeking better conditions in our lives; however, it is important to do so with a sense of non-attachment and equanimity: the recognition that we cannot completely control our conditions, and thus there is no reason to get*

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3 *Deva.* A deva is a celestial being, such as an angel or demigod, who lives an extremely pleasant life.

4 *Sīla.* This can also mean “habit.”

*upset when we don't get the conditions we want. More importantly, though, it is vital to remember that all these conditions are temporary, and thus are only temporary sources of happiness, which take second place to the true goal: complete freedom from suffering, unshakable peace and happiness - Nibbāna. With that in mind, we do not allow our lesser desires to supplant our primary quest, and the true purpose of Buddhist practice.*

**“These are the five kinds of mental imprisonment that have not been destroyed by him.**

**“Monks, when there is a monk for whom these five kinds of mental desolation have not been abandoned and these five kinds of mental imprisonment have not been destroyed, it is not possible for him to attain growth, development, and fulfillment in this Dhamma-Vinaya.**

**“Monks, when there is a monk for whom five kinds of mental desolation have been abandoned and five kinds of mental imprisonment have been well-destroyed, it is possible for him to attain growth, development, and fulfillment in this Dhamma-Vinaya.**

*Now we see the positive side: when one has abandoned these ten unwholesome tendencies, then it is possible to make progress on the path. Over the next few paragraphs we see one of the common features of the discourses: repetition. Often in the Suttas a particular statement will be repeated with slight variation, sometimes numerous times with numerous variations. Some people find this tiresome and boring. If so, then the best thing to do is to skim through the repetition and note how it differs from the initial statement, then move on to the next section of the discourse.*

**“What are the five kinds of mental desolation that have been abandoned by him? Here, monks, a monk is not uncertain or doubtful about the Teacher... about the Dhamma... about the Saṅgha... about the training, and has resolved his mind and become confident [in the training]. Monks, when a monk is not uncertain or doubtful about the training and has resolved his mind and become confident [in the training], his mind tends towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind tends towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the fourth kind of mental desolation that has been abandoned by him.**

**“Monks, this is another one: There is a monk who is not angry or dissatisfied with his co-practitioners, who does not have an afflicted mind or a callous nature. Monks, when a monk is not angry or dissatisfied with his co-practitioners, when he does not have an afflicted mind or a callous nature, his mind tends towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind tends towards**

**ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the fifth kind of mental desolation that has been abandoned by him.**

**“These are the five kinds of mental desolation that have been abandoned by him.**

*First the five kinds of mental desolation are reiterated from the positive perspective: namely, when these five things are abandoned, then one tends to be committed to the practice, and thus is likely to make progress.*

**“What are the five kinds of mental imprisonment that have been well-destroyed by him? Here, monks, in regards to sensuality.. to the body.. to a [visible] object, a monk is free of passion, interest, affection, thirst, fever, and craving. Monks, when a monk is free of passion, interest, affection, thirst, fever, and craving about a [visible] object, his mind tends towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind tends towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the third kind of mental imprisonment that has been well-destroyed by him.**

**“Monks, this is another one: There is a monk who does not eat as much as he wishes to fill his stomach, and does not dwell devoted to the pleasure of sleep, the pleasure of reclining, or the pleasure of lethargy. Monks, when a monk does not eat as much as he wishes to fill his stomach and does not dwell devoted to the pleasure of sleep, the pleasure of reclining, or the pleasure of lethargy, his mind tends towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind tends towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the fourth kind of mental imprisonment that has been well-destroyed by him.**

**“Monks, this is another one: There is a monk who does not live the Holy Life intent upon a particular group of devas, [thinking] 'By means of this virtue, practice, austerity, or holy life, I will become a deva or a particular kind of deva.' Monks, when a monk does not live the Holy Life intent upon a particular group of devas, [thinking] 'By means of this virtue, practice, austerity, or holy life, I will become a deva or a particular kind of deva,' his mind tends towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving. As his mind tends towards ardency, commitment, perseverance, and striving, this is the fifth kind of mental imprisonment that has been well-destroyed by him.**

**“These are the five kinds of mental imprisonment that have been well-destroyed by him.**

*Then the five kinds of mental imprisonment are reiterated from the positive perspective. Again, when one is free of these five kinds of mental imprisonment, then one is much more likely to be successful in Dhamma practice.*

**“Monks, when there is a monk for whom these five kinds of mental desolation have been abandoned and these five kinds of mental imprisonment have been**



**well-destroyed, it is possible for him to attain growth, development, and fulfillment in this Dhamma-Vinaya.**

**“He develops the basis of success which is endowed with the formation of concentration and striving based on interest... on energy... on mentality... on investigation, with exertion as the fifth. Monks, a monk who is endowed in this way with fifteen factors including exertion, it is possible for [him to attain] breakthrough<sup>5</sup>, it is possible for [him to attain] awakening, it is possible for [him to attain] arrival at unsurpassable security from bondage.**

*Here the Buddha introduces another set of five: the four Paths to Success (iddhipāda), with exertion (ussolhi) as the fifth element of the set. These five factors are worth looking at a bit more closely:*

1. Interest (chanda) - In order to do anything, one must have an interest in doing it. This can also be translated “enthusiasm” or “zeal.”
2. Energy (vīriya) - Interest alone is not enough; one must also put forth effort towards achieving one's goal.
3. Mentality (citta) - It is useful to think about and consider what it is that one wishes to achieve and how one can achieve it.
4. Investigation (vīmaṃsa) - Then one reflects on what one has done and considers the effects of the choices one has made. By identifying what is working and what is not working, one can adjust one's efforts accordingly.
5. Exertion (ussolhi) - This indicates the degree of determined striving necessary to accomplish anything that is particularly difficult.

*Thus we have fifteen factors: the abandoning of the five kinds of mental desolation, the removal of the five kinds of mental imprisonment, the development of the four Paths to Success, and self-exertion. With these fifteen factors, the Buddha says that it is possible to attain breakthrough (a term for the first stage of enlightenment), awakening to the truth of the way things are, and finally to achieve complete liberation (full enlightenment; freedom from suffering).*

*These fifteen factors all work together and mutually support each other. In particular, the final set of five - the Paths to Success - gives us a blueprint for how we can develop the first ten. For example, to overcome our doubt in the training, first we cultivate an interest in overcoming our doubt (chanda); then we develop motivation for it (vīriya); then we consider how to go about doing it (citta); then we investigate the effects of what we're doing (vīmaṃsa); and finally we make a determined effort to achieve our goal (ussolhi). The same methodology can be applied to any variety of mental desolation or mental imprisonment; and, in fact, we can use that fivefold methodology as a framework for achieving any aspect of the path.*

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<sup>5</sup> Although the text reads *abhinibbidā* (strong disenchantment), based on the simile given below, it seems likely that this is a textual error for *abhinibbidhā* (breakthrough).

**“Monks, it is like when there is a hen who has eight or ten or twelve eggs. She correctly sits on, incubates, and fully develops those eggs. Even if the hen does not produce the wish, 'May the chicks pierce the eggshells with their claws or beaks and break through safely,' it is still possible that those chicks will pierce the eggshells with their claws and beaks and break through safely. Monks, in the same way, a monk who is endowed with these fifteen factors including exertion, it is possible for [him to attain] breakthrough, it is possible for [him to attain] awakening, it is possible for [him to attain] arrival at unsurpassable security from bondage.”**

*This simile indicates another important thing to remember: if we do not develop these fifteen factors, then no matter how much we might desire enlightenment it will not happen; conversely, if we do develop these fifteen factors, then even if we do not consciously wish for enlightenment we are still capable of attaining it. So although having an aspiration for enlightenment is beneficial in helping to keep us on the path, it is ultimately the work we do on ourselves that leads us to freedom from suffering.*

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