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Appendix [14]

Mahā Assa,pura Sutta

Commentarial explanations of the parables of the mental hindrances

MA 2:318-321 on M 39,14/1:276,12

[The text of the Sutta says:] “...when these five hindrances are not abandoned [in himself, the monk regards it as a debt, a sickness, a prison, slavery, a journey on a road through the wilderness]” (M 39,14).

Here the Blessed One compares the unabandoned hindrance of lustful desire to a debt; and compares the other hindrances to an illness, and so on. These [parables] here should be understood thus:

1. Lustful desire (*kāma-c, chanda*)¹

When a man has fallen into debt, he is ruined. When his creditors, pressing him to settle the debt, speak roughly to him, or harass and beat him, he is unable to retaliate but has to bear it all. This endurance is simply because of his debt.

In the same way, if a man is filled with lustful desire for someone, filled with craving for that object of his desire, he would be attached to it.

Even if he is roughly spoken to by that person, or harassed, or beaten, he will bear it all. This endurance is simply because of his lustful desire—he is like a house-lord² being beaten up by his wife. In this way, lustful desire is like a debt.

2. Ill will (*vyāpāda*)

If a man suffering from a bile disorder³ were to receive even honey and sugar, he will not enjoy its taste because of his bile disorder. He would simply vomit it, complaining, “It is bitter! It is bitter!” In the same way, when one with an angry mind is admonished even slightly by his teacher or preceptor for his benefit, he does not accept their advice. Saying words like “You are harassing me too much!” he would leave the Order, or go away and roam about.⁴

Just as the person with bile disorder does not enjoy the taste of honey and sugar, even so one who has the disease of anger will not enjoy the taste of the Buddha’s Teaching consisting in the joy of meditative absorptions, etc. In this way, ill will is like an illness.

3. Sloth and torpor (*thīna, middha*)

A person who is imprisoned during a festival day is unable to see the beginning or the middle or the end of the festivities. When released on the following day, he hears people saying, “Oh, how delightful yesterday’s festival was! Oh, those dances and songs!” he will not reply.

And why not? Because he did not enjoy the festival himself.

In the same way, even if a very eloquent Dharma discourse is being given, one overcome by sloth and torpor would not know its beginning, middle or end. If after the discourse, he hears it being praised:

¹ The term “covetousness” (*abhijjhā*) is used instead in the Sutta.

² “House-lord,” *ghara,sāmika*, lit “house owner”.

³ “Bile disorder” (*pitta,roga*), ie a liver disorder. On traditional Indian medicine, see **Sivaka S** (S 36.21/4:230 f), SD 5.6.

⁴ In **Khaluṅka S** (A 8.14), it is stated, “Again, monks, here the monks accuse a monk of an offence. That monk, being thus accused [195] of an offence by the monks, strongly objecting to the accusation, says thus, ‘Why do you venerable sirs fuss so much over me? Let me now give up the training and return to the low life!’ Having given up the training and return to the lowlife, he says thus, ‘Now, venerable sirs, are you satisfied?’” (A 8.14,17/4:194 f)

“How pleasant it was to listen to the Dharma! How interesting the subject was and how good the parables!” he will not reply.

And why not? Because of his sloth and torpor, he did not enjoy the discourse. In this way, sloth and torpor are like imprisonment.

4. Restlessness and worry (*uddhacca,kukkucca*)

A slave who wants to enjoy himself at a festival is told by his master, “Go quickly to such and such a place! There is urgent work to be done. If you do not go, I shall have your hands and feet cut off, or your ears and nose cut off!” Hearing that, the slave will quickly go as ordered, and will not be able to enjoy any part of the festival. This is because of his dependence on others.

In the same way it is with a monk not well versed in the Vinaya, who has gone to the forest for the sake of solitude. If in any matter, down to the question of permissible meat [such as pork], thinking that it is not permissible [taking it for bear’s flesh],⁵ he has to disrupt his solitude to seek a Vinaya master to purify his moral conduct.

Thus he will not be able to experience the joy of solitude due to his being overcome by restlessness and worry. In this way, restlessness and worry are like slavery.

5. Doubt (*vicikicchā*)

A man journeying on a road through the wilderness where travellers have been plundered or killed by robbers would, at the mere sound of a twig or of a bird, become anxious and fearful, thinking, “The robbers have come!” would say, “Go! Stop! Turn back!”

Thus he would be more frequently stopping than going ahead. Only with toil and trouble would he reach a safe place, or he might not even reach it.

In the same way, there would be the eight reasons⁶ for doubt to arise in him, such as whether the Buddha is awakened or not. He is unable to accept such matters out of faith. Being unable to do so, he does not attain to the paths and fruits.

Thus, like the traveller on a road through the wilderness who is uncertain whether there are robbers or not, there arise in him persistent doubt and distrust, wavering, mental agitation.

Thus he creates an obstacle for himself from reaching the safe ground of the noble ones. In this way, doubt is like travelling on a road through the wilderness.

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⁵ These two examples from MA Țīkā.

⁶ He has doubts regarding the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, the threefold training (moral virtue, mental cultivation, wisdom), the past, the future, both past and future, and states arising through specific conditionality and dependent arising (Vbh 914/365).