

Excerpt from

The Middle Length  
Discourses of the Buddha  
(Majjhima Nikaya) translated  
by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and  
Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## 7 *Vatthūpama Sutta* The Simile of the Cloth

1. **THUS HAVE I HEARD.**<sup>84</sup> On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvatti in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. There he addressed the bhikkhus thus: "Bhikkhus."—"Venerable sir," they replied. The Blessed One said this:

2. "Bhikkhus, suppose a cloth were defiled and stained, and a dyer dipped it in some dye or other, whether blue or yellow or red or pink; it would look poorly dyed and impure in colour. Why is that? Because of the impurity of the cloth. So too, when the mind is defiled, an unhappy destination may be expected.<sup>85</sup> Bhikkhus, suppose a cloth were pure and bright, and a dyer dipped it in some dye or other, whether blue or yellow or red or pink; it would look well dyed and pure in colour. Why is that? Because of the purity of the cloth. So too, when the mind is undefiled, a happy destination may be expected.

3. "What, bhikkhus, are the imperfections that defile the mind?<sup>86</sup> Covetousness and unrighteous greed is an imperfection that defiles the mind. Ill will...anger...resentment...contempt...insolence...envy...avarice...deceit...fraud...obstinacy...rivalry...conceit...arrogance...vanity...[37]...negligence is an imperfection that defiles the mind.<sup>87</sup>

4. "Knowing that covetousness and unrighteous greed is an imperfection that defiles the mind, a bhikkhu abandons it.<sup>88</sup> Knowing that ill will...negligence is an imperfection that defiles the mind, a bhikkhu abandons it.

5. "When a bhikkhu has known that covetousness and unrighteous greed is an imperfection that defiles the mind and has abandoned it; when a bhikkhu has known that ill will...negligence is an imperfection that defiles the mind and has abandoned it, he acquires perfect confidence in the Buddha thus:<sup>89</sup> 'The Blessed One is accomplished, fully enlightened, perfect in

true knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of worlds, incomparable leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of gods and humans, enlightened, blessed.'

6. "He acquires perfect confidence in the Dhamma thus: 'The Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One, visible here and now, immediately effective, inviting inspection, onward leading, to be experienced by the wise for themselves.'

7. "He acquires perfect confidence in the Sangha thus: 'The Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples is practising the good way, practising the straight way, practising the true way, practising the proper way, that is, the four pairs of persons, the eight types of individuals; this Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, the unsurpassed field of merit for the world.'

8. "When he has given up, expelled, released, abandoned, and relinquished [the imperfections of the mind] in part,<sup>90</sup> he considers thus: 'I am possessed of perfect confidence in the Buddha,' and he gains inspiration in the meaning, gains inspiration in the Dhamma,<sup>91</sup> gains gladness connected with the Dhamma. When he is glad, rapture is born in him; in one who is rapturous, the body becomes tranquil; one whose body is tranquil feels pleasure; in one who feels pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated.<sup>92</sup>

9. "He considers thus: 'I am possessed of perfect confidence in the Dhamma,' and he gains inspiration in the meaning, gains inspiration in the Dhamma, gains gladness connected with the Dhamma. When he is glad...the mind becomes concentrated. [38]

10. "He considers thus: 'I am possessed of perfect confidence in the Sangha,' and he gains inspiration in the meaning, gains inspiration in the Dhamma, gains gladness connected with the Dhamma. When he is glad...the mind becomes concentrated.

11. "He considers thus: '[The imperfections of the mind] have in part been given up, expelled, released, abandoned, and relinquished by me,' and he gains inspiration in the meaning, gains inspiration in the Dhamma, gains gladness connected with the Dhamma. When he is glad, rapture is born in him; in one who is rapturous, the body becomes tranquil; one whose body is tranquil feels pleasure; in one who feels pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated.

12. "Bhikkhus, if a bhikkhu of such virtue, such a state [of concentration], and such wisdom<sup>93</sup> eats almsfood consisting of choice hill rice along with various sauces and curries, even that will be no obstacle for him.<sup>94</sup> Just as a cloth that is defiled and stained becomes pure and bright with the help of clear water, or just as gold becomes pure and bright with the help of a furnace, so too, if a bhikkhu of such virtue...eats almsfood...that will be no obstacle for him.

13. "He abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness,<sup>95</sup> likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; so above, below, around, and everywhere, and to all as to himself, he abides pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.

14–16. "He abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with compassion...with a mind imbued with altruistic joy...with a mind imbued with equanimity, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; so above, below, around, and everywhere, and to all as to himself, he abides pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with equanimity, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.

17. "He understands thus: 'There is this, there is the inferior, there is the superior, and beyond there is an escape from this whole field of perception.'<sup>96</sup>

18. "When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It is liberated.' He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.'  
[39] Bhikkhus, this bhikkhu is called one bathed with the inner bathing."<sup>97</sup>

19. Now on that occasion the brahmin Sundarika Bhāradvāja was sitting not far from the Blessed One. Then he said to the Blessed One: "But does Master Gotama go to the Bāhukā River to bathe?"

"Why, brahmin, go to the Bāhukā River? What can the Bāhukā River do?"

"Master Gotama, the Bāhukā River is held by many to give liberation, it is held by many to give merit, and many wash away their evil actions in the Bāhukā River."

20. Then the Blessed One addressed the brahmin Sundarika Bhāradvāja in stanzas:

"Bāhukā and Adhikakkā,  
Gayā and Sundarikā too,  
Payāga and Sarassatī,  
And the stream Bahumatī—<sup>98</sup>  
A fool may there forever bathe  
Yet will not purify dark deeds.

What can the Sundarikā bring to pass?  
What the Payāga? What the Bāhukā?  
They cannot purify an evil-doer,  
A man who has done cruel and brutal deeds.

One pure in heart has evermore  
The Feast of Spring, the Holy Day,<sup>99</sup>  
One fair in act, one pure in heart  
Brings his virtue to perfection.

It is here, brahmin, that you should bathe,  
To make yourself a refuge for all beings.  
And if you speak no falsehood  
Nor work harm for living beings,  
Nor take what is offered not,  
With faith and free from avarice,  
What need for you to go to Gayā?  
For any well will be your Gayā."

21. When this was said, the brahmin Sundarika Bhāradvāja said: "Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent, Master Gotama! Master Gotama has made the Dhamma clear in many ways, as though he were turning upright what had been overturned, revealing what was hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, or holding up a lamp in the dark for those with eyesight to see forms. I go to Master Gotama for refuge and to the Dhamma and to the Sangha of bhikkhus. I would receive the

going forth under Master Gotama, I would receive the full admission.”<sup>100</sup>

22. And the brahmin Sundarika Bhāradvāja received the going forth under the Blessed One, and he received the full admission. [40] And soon, not long after his full admission, dwelling alone, withdrawn, diligent, ardent, and resolute, the venerable Bhāradvāja, by realising for himself with direct knowledge, here and now entered upon and abided in that supreme goal of the holy life for the sake of which clansmen rightly go forth from the home life into homelessness. He directly knew: “Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.” And the venerable Bhāradvāja became one of the arahants.

- higher wisdom (*adhipaññāsikkhā*). The phrase “dwell in empty huts” combines the latter two trainings, since one resorts to an empty hut to develop serenity and insight.
- 78 That is, if the relatives who have been reborn in the realm of ghosts or in some lower deva realm recollect virtuous bhikkhus with confidence, that confidence will become a source of merit for them, protecting them from bad rebirths and becoming a positive condition for the attainment of Nibbāna.
- 79 These are the four immaterial attainments for which the full formulas are to be found below at MN 8.8–11, MN 25.16–19, etc. MA glosses “body” as “mental body” (*nāmakāya*).
- 80 The three fetters destroyed by the stream-enterer are identity view, doubt, and adherence to rules and observances, as mentioned at MN 2.11.
- 81 In addition to the first three fetters, the non-returner destroys the other two “lower fetters” of sensual desire and ill will. The non-returner is reborn in a special region of the Brahma-world called the Pure Abodes, and there makes an end of suffering.
- 82 §§14–19 present the six kinds of direct knowledge (*abhiññā*). See Introduction, p. 37; for details, see Vsm XII and XIII.
- 83 MA: In this passage “mind” and “wisdom” signify, respectively, the concentration and wisdom associated with the fruit of arahantship. Concentration is called “deliverance of mind” (*cetovimutti*) because it is liberated from lust; wisdom is called “deliverance by wisdom” (*paññāvimutti*) because it is liberated from ignorance. The former is normally the result of serenity, the latter the result of insight. But when they are coupled and described as taintless (*anāsava*), they jointly result from the destruction of the taints by the supramundane path of arahantship.

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- 84 For a more thorough treatment of this sutta and the following one, with helpful introductions and lengthy

- explanatory notes, see Nyanaponika Thera, *The Simile of the Cloth and The Discourse on Effacement*.
- 85 An unhappy destination (*duggati*) is rebirth in the three states of deprivation—hell, the animal kingdom, and the realm of ghosts. A happy destination (*sugati*), mentioned just below, is rebirth in a superior state among humans and in the heavenly worlds.
- 86 *Cittassa upakkilesā*. The word *upakkilesā* is sometimes used in the sense of blemishes or imperfections of meditative concentration, as at MN 128.27, 30; sometimes in the sense of blemishes or imperfections of insight, as at Vsm XX, 105; and sometimes to signify the minor defilements that arise from the three unwholesome roots—greed, hate, and delusion—either as their modes or their offshoots. Here it is used in this third sense, but to maintain the connection with its first two usages, it has been translated by the phrase “imperfections that defile the mind.”
- 87 MA offers several tentative distinctions between covetousness (*abhijjhā*) and unrighteous greed (*visamalobha*), but then it points out that since, from the standpoint of the higher training, all greed is unrighteous, the two terms can be understood as merely different names for the same mental factor, greed or lust. Here I paraphrase MA’s explanations of some of the other mental corruptions: Resentment (*upanāha*) sets in after anger has repeatedly enveloped the mind. *Contempt* (*makkha*) is the devaluation of benefits conferred on one by others. *Insolence* (*paḷāsa*) is presumption (*yugaggāha*) arising when one puts oneself at the same level as others who have superior qualities. *Envy* (*issā*) is resentment over the honours, etc., shown to others; *avarice* (*macchariya*) is unwillingness to share one’s own possessions with others. *Obstinacy* (*thambha*) is inflexibility, stiffness, rigidity, like a bellows full of air. *Rivalry* (*sārambha*) is attempting to outdo others, the drive to surpass their achievements. Several of these corruptions are also defined at Vbh §§845–46, 891–94.
- 88 MA says that the abandoning spoken of here should be understood as “abandonment by eradication” (*samucchadappahāna*), that is, complete uprooting by the supramundane

path. The sixteen defilements are abandoned by the noble paths in the following order:

1. The *path of stream-entry* abandons: contempt, insolence, envy, avarice, deceit, fraud.
2. The *path of non-returning* abandons: ill will, anger, resentment, negligence.
3. The *path of arahantship* abandons: covetousness and unrighteous greed, obstinacy, rivalry, conceit, arrogance, vanity.

MA maintains, by reference to an ancient exegetical source, that in this passage the path of the non-returned is being described. Therefore we must understand that those defilements to be fully abandoned by the path of arahantship have at this point only been abandoned in part, by way of their coarser manifestations.

- 89 Perfect confidence (*aveccappasāda*) in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha is an attribute of a noble disciple at the minimal level of a stream-enterer, whose confidence is perfect because he has seen the truth of the Dhamma for himself. The formulas for recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha given here are explained at length in Vsm VII.
- 90 This translation follows the reading *yatodhi* and MA's explanation of this as the partial abandoning of defilements by the first three paths, contrasted with the total (*anodhi*) abandoning of defilements by the fourth and final path. *Ñm*, following the reading *yathodhi*, translates: "And whatever [from among those imperfections] has, according to the limitation [set by whichever of the first three paths he has attained], been given up, has been [forever] dropped, let go, abandoned, relinquished." The two variations seem to be ancient as they are both recognized by MA.
- 91 *Labhati atthavedaṃ labhati dhammavedaṃ*. Ven. Nyānaponika renders: "He gains enthusiasm for the goal, gains enthusiasm for the Dhamma." MA explains *veda* as meaning joy and the knowledge connected with that joy, and says: "*Atthaveda* is the inspiration arisen in one who reviews his perfect confidence; *dhammaveda* is the inspiration arisen in one who reviews the abandonment of the defilements in part, the cause of that perfect confidence."

- 92 The Pali equivalents, in noun form, for the terms in this series are: *pāmojja*, gladness; *pīti*, rapture; *passaddhi*, tranquillity; *sukha*, pleasure; *samādhi*, concentration. Tranquillity, by removing the subtle bodily and mental disturbances connected with gladness and rapture, brings the serene pleasure that prepares the mind for deepened concentration.
- 93 The Pali terms are: *evaṃsilo evaṃdhammo evaṃpaṇṇo*. The middle term, in this context, obviously must refer to the second stage of the threefold training, concentration, though it is puzzling why *samādhi* itself is not used. The commentary to MN 123.2 glosses a parallel expression by *samādhi-pakkha-dhammā*, "states belonging to concentration."
- 94 This statement underscores his attainment of the stage of non-returned. Since the non-returned has eradicated sensual desire, delicious food cannot impede him in his quest for the final path and fruit.
- 95 §§13–16 present the standard sutta formulas for the four "divine abodes" (*brahmavihāra*). Briefly, loving-kindness (*mettā*) is the wish for the welfare and happiness of others; compassion (*karuṇā*), the empathy with them in their suffering; altruistic joy (*muditā*), rejoicing in their virtues and success; and equanimity (*upekkhā*), the attitude of detached impartiality towards beings (*not* apathy or indifference). For a fuller treatment, see Vsm IX.
- 96 MA: The present section shows the non-returned's practice of insight meditation aimed at arahantship and the following section his attainment of arahantship. The phrase "there is this" signifies the truth of suffering; "there is the inferior," the origin of suffering; "the superior," the truth of the path; and "the escape from this whole field of perception" is Nibbāna, the cessation of suffering.
- 97 MA: The Buddha used this phrase to arouse the attention of the brahmin Sundarika Bhāradvāja, who was in the assembly and believed in purification by ritual bathing. The Buddha foresaw that the brahmin would be inspired to take ordination under him and would attain arahantship.

- 98 These are rivers and fords that were popularly believed to give purification.
- 99 The Pali has *phaggu*, a day of brahmanical purification in the month of *Phagguna* (February–March), and *uposatha*, the religious observance days regulated by the lunar calendar. See n.59.
- 100 The going forth (*pabbajjā*) is the formal ordination of entering the homeless life as a novice (*sāmaṇera*); the full admission (*upasampadā*) confers the status of a bhikkhu, a full member of the Sangha.