

MN-13  
The Greater Discourse on the Mass of Suffering  
*Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta*  
Dhamma Talk by  
Bhante Vimalaramsi  
12-Oct-05

1. THUS HAVE I HEARD. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvatti in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.

2. Then, when it was morning, a number of bhikkhus dressed, and taking their bowls and outer robes, went into Sāvatti for alms. Then they thought: "It is still too early to wander for alms in Sāvatti. Suppose we went to the park of the wanderers of other sects." So they went to the park of the wanderers of other sects and exchanged greetings with the wanderers. When this courteous and amiable talk was finished, they sat down at one side. The wanderers said to them:

3. "Friends, the recluse Gotama describes the full understanding of sensual pleasures, and we do so too; the recluse Gotama describes the full understanding of material form, and we do so too; the recluse Gotama describes the full understanding of feelings, and we do so too. What then is the distinction here, friends, what is the variance, what is the difference between the recluse Gotama's teaching of the Dhamma and ours, between his instructions and ours?"

4. Then those bhikkhus neither approved nor disapproved of the wanderers' words. Without doing either they rose from their seats and went away, thinking: "We shall come to understand the meaning of these words in the Blessed One's presence."

5. When they had wandered for alms in Savatti and had returned from their almsround, after the meal they went to the Blessed One, and after paying homage to him, they sat down at one side and told him what had taken place.

[The Blessed One said:]

6. "Bhikkhus, wanderers of other sects who speak thus should be questioned thus: 'But, friends, what is the gratification, what is the danger, and what is the escape in the case of sensual pleasures? What is the gratification, what is the danger, and what is the escape in the case of material form? What is the gratification, what is the danger, and what is the escape in the case of feelings?' Being questioned thus, wanderers of other sects will fail to account for the matter, and what is more, they will get into difficulties. Why is that? Because it is not their province. Bhikkhus, I see no one in the world with its gods, its Māras, and its Brahmas, in this generation with its recluses and brahmins, with its princes and its people, who could satisfy the mind with a reply to these questions, except for the Tathāgata or his disciple or one who has learned it from them.

7. (i) "And what, bhikkhus, is the gratification in the case of sensual pleasures? Bhikkhus, there are these five cords of sensual pleasure. What are the five? Forms cognizable by the eye that are wished for, desired, agreeable and likeable, connected with sensual desire, and provocative of lust. Sounds cognizable by the ear that are wished for, desired, agreeable and likeable, connected with sensual desire, and provocative of lust. Odours cognizable by the nose that are wished for, desired, agreeable and likeable, connected with sensual desire, and provocative of lust. Flavours cognizable by the tongue that are wished for, desired, agreeable and likeable, connected with sensual desire, and provocative of lust. Tangibles cognizable by the body that are wished for, desired, agreeable and likeable, connected with sensual desire, and provocative of lust. These are the five cords of sensual pleasure. Now the pleasure and joy that arise dependent on these five cords of sensual pleasure are the gratification in the case of sensual pleasures.

8. (ii) "And what, bhikkhus, is the danger in the case of sensual pleasures? Here, bhikkhus, on account of the craft by which a clansman makes a living—whether checking or accounting or calculating or farming or trading or husbandry or archery or the royal service, or whatever craft it may be—he has to face cold, he has to

face heat, he is injured by contact with gadflies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and creeping things; he risks death by hunger and thirst. Now this is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering visible here and now, having sensual pleasures as its cause, sensual pleasures as its source, sensual pleasures as its basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures.

S: I don't really understand the part about...

BV: You have to face all different kinds of things because of the sensual pleasures.

S: OK. If you want the sensual pleasures, you also have to face cold... That's part of the package.

BV: Yeah, mosquitoes and all of that stuff. That's part of the package because of the sensual pleasures, and that's the danger of the sensual pleasures.

MN: 9. "If no property comes to the clansman while he works and strives and makes an effort thus, he sorrows, grieves, and laments, he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught, crying: 'My work is in vain, my effort is fruitless!' Now this too is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering visible here and now, having sensual pleasures as its cause, sensual pleasures as its source, sensual pleasures as its basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures.

10. "If property comes to the clansman while he works and strives and makes an effort thus, he experiences pain and grief in protecting it: 'How shall neither kings nor thieves make off with my property, nor fire burn it, nor water sweep it away, nor hateful heirs make off with it?' And as he guards and protects his property, kings or thieves make off with it, or fire burns it, or water sweeps it away, or hateful heirs make off with it. And he sorrows, grieves, and laments, he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught, crying: 'What I had I have no longer!' Now this too is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering visible here and now...{....}

11. "Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause, sensual pleasures as the source, sensual pleasures as the basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures, kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmins with brahmins, householders with householders; mother quarrels with son, son with mother, father with son, son with father; brother quarrels with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend. And here in their quarrels, brawls, and disputes they attack each other with fists, clods, sticks, or knives,

BV: I suppose we could throw in guns, too, these days.

MN: whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. Now this too is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering here and now...{...}

12. "Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause...men take swords and shields and buckle on bows and quivers, and they charge into battle massed in double array with arrows and spears flying and swords flashing; and there they are wounded by arrows and spears, and their heads are cut off by swords, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. Now this too is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering here and now...{...}

13. "Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause...men take swords and shields and buckle on bows and quivers, and they charge slippery bastions, with arrows and spears flying and swords flashing; and there they are wounded by arrows and spears and splashed with boiling liquids and crushed under heavy weights, and their heads are cut off by swords, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. Now this too is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering here and now...the cause being simply sensual pleasures.

14. "Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause...men break into houses, plunder wealth, commit burglary, ambush highways, seduce others' wives, and when they are caught, kings have many kinds of torture inflicted on them. The kings have them flogged with whips,

BV: It has always amazed me that if you want to find the best way to torture somebody, you go to spiritual books (laughs).

MN: beaten with canes, beaten with clubs; they have their hands cut off, their feet cut off, their hands and feet cut off; their ears cut off, their noses cut off, their ears and noses cut off; they have them subjected to the 'porridge pot.'

BV: Boiled in oil.

MN: to the 'polished-shell shave.' to the 'Rahu's mouth.'

BV: What is Rahu's mouth? (asking Bhante Jatikabhivamsa) It sounds like getting beaten with boards that have nails in them or something like that.

BJ: I don't remember.

BV: OK, that's no problem.

MN: to the 'fiery wreath.' to the 'flaming hand.' to the 'blades of grass.'

BV: They have grass that is called kusa grass that is very, very painful when you get cut by it.

BJ: I get it. 'Rahu's mouth' means ~

BV: Oh, red hot iron, pushed through. Oh, that's nasty, they burn your mouth when they stick them with swords and stuff, through their mouth... Anyway, getting cut with these blades of kusa grass is very, very painful and it's very sharp. You have to be extremely careful handling this grass, because it will cut a hole into the bone.

Ok –

S: ~ my kuti ~ (laughs)

BV: You think you want to stay down here tonight?

MN: to the 'bark dress.'

BV: They put them in bark and they get splinters.

MN: to the 'antelope.'

BV: I have no idea what that means.

MN: to the 'meat hooks.' to the 'coins.'

BV: That means red hot coins.

MN: to the 'lye pickling.' to the 'pivoting pin.'

BV: That's being on a stake, and they rotate you around a little bit to make sure it gets stuck in good and tight.

MN: to the 'rolled-up palliasse';

BV: I guess that's like a big ball that you get rolled up on.

MN: and they have them splashed with boiling oil, and they have them thrown to be devoured by dogs, and they have them impaled alive on stakes, and they have their heads cut off with swords—whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. Now this too is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, {...}

15. "Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause, sensual pleasures as the source, sensual pleasures as the basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures, people indulge in misconduct of body, speech, and mind. Having done so, on the dissolution of the body, after death, they reappear in states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell. Now this is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering in the life to come, having sensual pleasures as its cause, sensual pleasures as its source, sensual pleasures as its basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures.

S: Could you ~ for the difference between cause and basis, and the third word was...

BV: The cause is the karma – the action. The basis is the actual sense desire – the sense door. The cause simply being sensual pleasures – running after sensual pleasures.

S: So, cause was the cause, and the basis is the sense doors, and...

BV: Yeah, and there is another one here – sensual pleasures as its source. You understand that?

KK: So, cause is karma, and then you have sensual pleasures as the source, and then the basis is the sense doors.

S: One more time, the cause is...

BV: Is the action. That's seeing something and going for it. Let's put it this way: the cause is the thought of the action, and the source is the action itself.

S: The cause is the thought...

BV: That's the thought of "I want", and then the source is the actual going and going for it, and the basis is the sense doors.

S: We perceive it through the sense doors... The sensual pleasures.

BV: OK?

MN: 16. (iii) "And what, bhikkhus, is the escape in the case of sensual pleasures? It is the removal of desire and lust, the abandonment of desire and lust for sensual pleasures. This is the escape in the case of sensual pleasures.

BV: When you are practicing your meditation, you close your eyes, you don't have the sensual pleasure of seeing. A sound comes, you

let it be and come back to your object of mediation. A taste comes, you let it be and come back to your object of mediation. A smell comes, you let it be and come back to your object of mediation. A touch comes, and you let it be and come back to your object of mediation. You don't pursue it – and that's what it's talking about here.

MN: 17. "That those recluses and brahmins who do not understand as it actually is the gratification as gratification, the danger as danger, and the escape as escape in the case of sensual pleasures, can either themselves fully understand sensual pleasures or instruct another so that he can fully understand sensual pleasures—that is impossible. That those recluses and brahmins who understand as it actually is the gratification as gratification, the danger as danger, and the escape as escape in the case of sensual pleasures, can either themselves fully understand sensual pleasures or instruct another so that he can fully understand sensual pleasures—that is possible.

18. (i) "And what, bhikkhus, is the gratification in the case of material form? Suppose there were a girl of the noble class or the brahmin class or of householder stock, in her fifteenth or sixteenth year, neither too tall nor too short, neither too thin nor too fat, neither too dark nor too fair. Is her beauty and loveliness then at its height?"—"Yes, venerable sir."—"Now the pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on that beauty and loveliness are the gratification in the case of material form.

19. (ii) "And what, bhikkhus, is the danger in the case of material form? Later on one might see that same woman here at eighty, ninety, or a hundred years, aged, as crooked as a roof bracket, doubled up, supported by a walking stick, tottering, frail, her youth gone, her teeth broken, grey-haired, scanty-haired, bald, wrinkled, with limbs all blotchy. What do you think, bhikkhus? Has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger become evident?"—

BV: I think so.



MN: "Yes, venerable sir."— "Bhikkhus, this is a danger in the case of material form.

20. "Again, one might see that same woman afflicted, suffering, and gravely ill, lying fouled in her own urine and excrement, lifted up by some and set down by others. What do you think, bhikkhus? Has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger become evident?"—"Yes, venerable sir."— "Bhikkhus, this too is a danger in the case of material form.

21. "Again, one might see that same woman as a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter. What do you think, bhikkhus? Has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger become evident?"—

BV: Yeah, I think so.

MN: "Yes, venerable sir."—"Bhikkhus, this too is a danger in the case of material form

22-29. "Again, one might see that same woman as a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms...a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews...a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews...a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together with sinews...disconnected bones scattered in all directions— here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here a thigh-bone, there a rib-bone, here a hip-bone, there a back-bone, here the skull...bones bleached white, the colour of shells...bones heaped up, more than a year old...bones rotted and crumbled to dust. What do you think, bhikkhus? Has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger become evident?"—"Yes, venerable sir."—"Bhikkhus, this too is a danger in the case of material form.

30. (iii) "And what, bhikkhus, is the escape in the case of material form? It is the removal of desire and lust, the abandonment of desire

and lust for material form. This is the escape in the case of material form.

31. "That those recluses and brahmins who do not understand as it actually is the gratification as gratification, the danger as danger, and the escape as escape in the case of material form, can either themselves fully understand material form or instruct another so that he can fully understand material form—that is impossible. That those recluses and brahmins who understand as it actually is the gratification as gratification, the danger as danger, and the escape as escape in the case of material form, can either themselves fully understand material form or instruct another so that he can fully understand material form—that is possible.

(FEELINGS)

32. (i) "And what, bhikkhus, is the gratification in the case of feelings? Here, bhikkhus, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states,

BV: What are unwholesome states?

S: Um, unwholesome states...Greed, hatred and delusion.

BV: Those are part of the unwholesome states.

S: Unwholesome states...Sloth, restlessness and doubt.

BV: Restlessness, sloth and torpor, and doubt. Delusion is always the taking of the greed and the hatred personally. It's always the belief that "this is me, this is mine, this is who I am". Now, the importance of the hindrances can't be overstated, because that's where all of our attachments are. That's where all of our concepts come from. It's from the hindrances. Our likes, our dislikes, our ideas about the world come from having the hindrances arise. And what you do in the present moment with the hindrance dictates what happens in the future. Now, you said, you were sitting for three hours today, and the last half hour was tough. Why? Because a hindrance arose.

S: Absolutely.

BV: (Laughs) No doubt about it.

S: And equanimity wasn't arising. Wasn't strong enough (laughs).

BV: Well, the thing is, we have to learn to have the perspective with the hindrances when they arise. The perspective is: "it's OK for that to be there, it's not mine." Relax and let it be there. Relax and come back to your object of meditation. Even though you don't feel the equanimity, you still come back to it. Or, if you can't have equanimity arise at all, start back at the Metta.

S: ~

BV: Yeah

S: ~

BV: Whatever is easiest. Use your object of meditation wisely. And, the thing that makes the hindrance such a devastating thing is because we identify so strongly with it. We don't see it as being impersonal at all. We see it as being "this is me, this is mine, Oh man, I wish it would stop bothering me."

S: Do you think that pain is the strongest one of them all? The feeling of pain?

BV: No, it's the restlessness.

S: The restlessness?

BV: Definitely. But the thing is, it doesn't just come up one hindrance at the time. They like to gang up. So, you have pain, and you have restlessness, and you have dislike of the restlessness, and dislike of the pain. And you are identifying with all of them. So what to do? The fastest way to change your perspective is to laugh at how caught up you become. It sounds odd and I know that there is an awful lot

of quote , “Buddhist” teachers that don’t really like that idea. But the faster you can change your perspective and see it for what it really is – “it’s only this feeling and it’s OK, it has to be”, that’s how you get your balance back. Because when it comes in, it really knocks you for a loop, it pulls you away, it stops you from meditating and it makes your mind and body both suffer a lot. But, as you learn to lovingly accept, as you keep on relaxing into, and seeing it for what it is: “It is a feeling – that’s true. It is an unpleasant feeling, it’s painful – that’s true. OK, it’s a painful feeling. It’s going to change. It’s not my feeling – I didn’t ask it to come up, I can’t make it go away.” The only thing we can do is allow it to be. That’s where you develop your equanimity even stronger, even when the unacceptable, arises.

S: So we have this illusion that we can control it.

BV: That’s right, yeah, and that’s our old habitual tendency. And we have the tendency to want to think our feeling away. And feelings are one thing and thoughts are something else completely. They are different. Feeling, then there’s craving and then there’s thoughts – clinging, they’re not the same. Learning how to lovingly accept whatever arises, even when it is painful, even when it is completely unsatisfactory. I was having a conversation the other day with KK, and I said: “Remember there are many definitions of dukkha. And one definition of dukkha that I kind of like: ‘du’ means ‘a lack of’, ‘kha’ is the, what do you call it? The root word for patience – ‘khanti’. So, lack of patience – that is dukkha. And that’s what happens when we have especially physical sensation of pain arise. We lose patience with it immediately and then try to fight it, and try to control it, and try to make it be the way we want it to be, and it doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with physical sensation, it’s just our take on it. And it’s the same that happens with, mental sensations, emotions, sadness, anger, dissatisfaction, whatever it happens to be. We like to think that we can control whatever arises and take care of it. But we can’t, it doesn’t work. We only set ourselves up for more and more suffering, and more and more pain. And more and more lack of patience. So, the hindrances are your teacher, because they are showing you exactly what you are doing. They are showing you exactly, in the present moment, exactly what you do whenever this

kind of thing arises, or that kind of thing arises. Need to learn how to change your perspective, and the fastest way is to have joy arise. Start laughing at yourself for being so serious, because this is here. It changes the hindrance from "I am that" to "It's only that". And with that change of perspective, you are following the 8-fold path, right in that very moment. You've changed your thoughts about it, you've changed your communication with it, you've changed your movements, mind movements, you've changed your practice and your effort and your energy, you've changed the way that you observe, and you changed the emergency in your mind into calmness. That's the 8-fold path. And you do that all by laughing – having joy come up that puts everything in balance. "It's only this, no big deal." OK.

MN : Repeats (Here, bhikkhus, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states,) a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by [thinking and examining]thought, with [joy] and pleasure born of seclusion. On such an occasion he does not choose for his own affliction, or for another's affliction, or for the affliction of both. On that occasion he feels only feeling that is free from affliction. The highest gratification in the case of feelings is freedom from affliction,

BV: Why is joy so important?

MN: I say.

33-35. "Again, with the stilling of [thinking and examining] thought, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the second jhāna...With the fading away as well of [joy]...he enters upon and abides in the third jhāna...With the abandoning of pleasure and pain he enters upon and abides in the fourth jhāna...On such an occasion he does not choose for his own affliction, or for another's affliction, or for the affliction of both. On that occasion he feels only feeling that is free from affliction."

S: ~

BV: Well, you remember that chart that I made, that had the five aggregates, and the four foundations of mindfulness, and the hindrances right underneath that?<sup>1</sup> And I told you that this was an amazing healing... an amazing awareness chart, because the five aggregates and the four foundations of mindfulness are basically the same thing, and it says that in the Samyutta Nikaya. When your mindfulness begins to waver, becomes weak, your attention for one reason or another starts to slip. As soon as it does that, you are no longer in the jhana and you are caught by a hindrance, whatever the catch of the day happens to be.

S: So, why do you choose the affliction?

BV: Well, the word 'affliction' means causing pain, causing dissatisfaction, causing a lot of mind movement. You are afflicted with something, you are not solid, you are not stable, you are not at ease.

S: And so, the words were...

BV: [Repeats MN] "On that occasion he feels only feeling that is free from affliction."

S: Right, but before that.

BV: OK, let me go back. [Repeats MN] "On that occasion he does not choose for his own affliction." You are not causing problems for yourself, you are not causing problems for someone else, and you are not causing problems for both, that means yourself or anyone else.

KK: This is volition, right?

BV: No, you don't ask that feeling to come up, there's nothing to do with volition about it. That feeling you don't choose...

KK: He did not choose for his own affliction...

BV: No, no, no, no, no. The feeling arises when you are in the jhana. You don't choose for that feeling to arise, but the truth is it arises by itself, because the conditions are right. Because you've used your volition to a point that you keep on letting go and relaxing and then finally everything takes off by itself. There's no more volition there, it's just on automatic.

S: But then when a feeling comes up...

BV: Well they are talking about the feeling that comes up while you are in the jhana.

S: Right. And then... So, starting with the second jhana...

BV: Ha?

S: The words are?

BV: Well they go through the second, third and the fourth. [Repeats MN] "On such an occasion he does not choose for his own affliction."

S: Right, but then the sentence right before that?

BV: [Repeats MN] " With the abandoning of pleasure and pain he enters upon and abides in the fourth jhāna...On such an occasion he does not choose for his own affliction, or for another's affliction, or for the affliction of both. On that occasion he feels only feeling that is free from affliction." Bhante, what is the Pali word for 'affliction'? Let's go to section number 32, page 184.

S: But, to say that...

BV: But, it's 'choose to afflict'. 'To cause other people pain'?

BJ: ~

BV: It says here 'affect, bother distress, weaken, enfeeble, debilitate'. Affliction is 'hardship, misery, misfortune'.

KK: ~

BV: I think 'cause hardship' would be better than 'affliction'.

KK: The word 'suffering' would be ~.

BV: So, we can say it this way – while you are in the jhana, you do not choose to cause hardship to yourself, or hardship to someone else, or hardship to either you or someone else.

S: So, the meaning of that passage is while you are in that fourth jhana...

BV: While you are in any of the jhanas, you do not cause any hardship to anyone.

S: Right. That's the meaning of...

BV: That's it.

S: It wasn't so clear ~ to me (laughs).

BV: Well, I'm glad we did this.

MN: [Repeats] On that occasion he feels only feeling that is free from [hardship]. The highest gratification in the case of feelings is freedom from [hardship], I say.

S: If you are in a jhana, you certainly don't have hardship.

BV: Right, but hardship is a better word in this instance.

S: 'Affliction' is kind of a strange word.

BV: Yeah it is.



MN: 36. (ii) "And what, bhikkhus, is the danger in the case of feelings? Feelings are impermanent, suffering, and subject to change. This is the danger in the case of feelings.

37. (iii) "And what, bhikkhus, is the escape in the case of feelings? It is the removal of desire and lust, the abandonment of desire and lust for feelings. This is the escape in the case of feelings.

38. "That those recluses and brahmins who do not understand as it actually is the gratification as gratification, the danger as danger, and the escape as escape in the case of feelings, can either themselves fully understand feelings or instruct another so that he can fully understand feelings—that is impossible. That those recluses and brahmins who understand as it actually is the gratification as gratification, the danger as danger, and the escape as escape in the case of feelings, can either themselves fully understand feelings or instruct another so that he can fully understand feelings—that is possible."

That is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words.

BJ: ~ 'Affliction' is dukkha.

BV: Yeah, affliction is dukkha. But for this particular thing, it really feels a lot better that it says 'hardship'. It kind of pulls everything together a little bit better. So, the word 'hardship' is part of dukkha, but it's better than saying 'affliction'. OK, here you go: "Monks, one shall here and now make an end of suffering by abandoning the underlying tendency for lust, for pleasant feeling, by abolishing the underlying tendency to aversion, towards painful feeling, by extirpating the underlying tendency to ignorance."

S: (Laugh)

BV: OK, then let's share some merit.

May suffering ones, be suffering free  
And the fear struck, fearless be  
May the grieving shed all grief  
And may all beings find relief.

May all beings share this merit that we have thus acquired  
For the acquisition of all kinds of happiness.

May beings inhabiting space and earth  
Devas and nagas of mighty power  
Share this merit of ours.

May they long protect the Buddha's dispensation.

Sadhu . . . Sadhu . . . Sadhu . . .

Footnote:

1. Chart: <http://library.dhammasukha.org/5-aggregates-chart.html>

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