

THE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

The
Middle Length
Discourses
of the
Buddha



A Translation of the
Majjhima Nikāya



Translated from the Pāli

ORIGINAL TRANSLATION
by

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Third Edition



WISDOM PUBLICATIONS • BOSTON

in association with the

Barre Center for Buddhist Studies

22 *Alagaddūpama Sutta* The Simile of the Snake

(SETTING)

[130] 1. THUS HAVE I HEARD.²⁴⁸ On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvathī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.

2. Now on that occasion a pernicious view had arisen in a bhikkhu named Ariṭṭha, formerly of the vulture killers, thus: "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things called obstructions by the Blessed One are not able to obstruct one who engages in them."²⁴⁹

3. Several bhikkhus, having heard about this, went to the bhikkhu Ariṭṭha and asked him: "Friend Ariṭṭha, is it true that such a pernicious view has arisen in you?"

"Exactly so, friends. As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things called obstructions by the Blessed One are not able to obstruct one who engages in them."

Then these bhikkhus, desiring to detach him from that pernicious view, pressed and questioned and cross-questioned him thus: "Friend Ariṭṭha, do not say so. Do not misrepresent the Blessed One; it is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One. The Blessed One would not speak thus. For in many ways the Blessed One has stated how obstructive things are obstructions, and how they are able to obstruct one who engages in them. The Blessed One has stated that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more. With the simile of the skeleton...with the simile of the piece of meat...with the simile of the grass torch...with the simile of the pit of coals...with the simile of the dream...with the simile of the borrowed goods...with the simile of fruits on a tree...with the simile of the butcher's knife and block...with the simile of the sword stake...with the simile of

the snake's head, the Blessed One has stated that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more."²⁵⁰

Yet although pressed and questioned and cross-questioned by those bhikkhus in this way, the bhikkhu Ariṭṭha, formerly of the vulture killers, still obstinately adhered to that pernicious view and continued to insist upon it.

4. Since the bhikkhus were unable to detach him [131] from that pernicious view, they went to the Blessed One, and after paying homage to him, they sat down at one side and told him all that had occurred, adding: "Venerable sir, since we could not detach the bhikkhu Ariṭṭha, formerly of the vulture killers, from this pernicious view, we have reported this matter to the Blessed One."

5. Then the Blessed One addressed a certain bhikkhu thus: "Come, bhikkhu, tell the bhikkhu Ariṭṭha, formerly of the vulture killers, in my name that the Teacher calls him."—[132] "Yes, venerable sir," he replied, and he went to the bhikkhu Ariṭṭha and told him: "The Teacher calls you, friend Ariṭṭha."

"Yes, friend," he replied, and he went to the Blessed One, and after paying homage to him, sat down at one side. The Blessed One then asked him: "Ariṭṭha, is it true that the following pernicious view has arisen in you: 'As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things called obstructions by the Blessed One are not able to obstruct one who engages in them?'"

"Exactly so, venerable sir. As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those things called obstructions by the Blessed One are not able to obstruct one who engages in them."

6. "Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in that way? Misguided man, have I not stated in many ways how obstructive things are obstructions, and how they are able to obstruct one who engages in them? I have stated that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more. With the simile of the skeleton...with the simile of the piece of meat...with the simile of the grass torch...with the simile of the pit of coals...with the simile of the dream...with the simile of the borrowed goods...with the simile of fruits on a tree...with the simile of the butcher's knife and block...with the simile of the sword stake...with the simile of the snake's head, I have stated that sensual pleasures provide little gratification,

much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more. But you, misguided man, by your wrong grasp have misrepresented us, injured yourself, and stored up much demerit; for this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time.”²⁵¹

7. Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: “Bhikkhus, what do you think? Has this bhikkhu Ariṭṭha, formerly of the vulture killers, kindled even a spark of wisdom in this Dhamma and Discipline?”

“How could he, venerable sir? No, venerable sir.”

When this was said, the bhikkhu Ariṭṭha, formerly of the vulture killers, sat silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, and without response. Then, knowing this, the Blessed One told him: “Misguided man, you will be recognised by your own pernicious view. I shall question the bhikkhus on this matter.”

8. Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: “Bhikkhus, [133] do you understand the Dhamma taught by me as this bhikkhu Ariṭṭha, formerly of the vulture killers, does when by his wrong grasp he misrepresents us, injures himself and stores up much demerit?”

“No, venerable sir. For in many ways the Blessed One has stated how obstructive things are obstructions, and how they are able to obstruct one who engages in them. The Blessed One has stated that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more. With the simile of the skeleton...with the simile of the snake’s head, the Blessed One has stated...that the danger in them is still more.”

“Good, bhikkhus. It is good that you understand the Dhamma taught by me thus. For in many ways I have stated how obstructive things are obstructions, and how they are able to obstruct one who engages in them. I have stated that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more. With the simile of the skeleton...with the simile of the snake’s head, I have stated...that the danger in them is still more. But this bhikkhu Ariṭṭha, formerly of the vulture killers, by his wrong grasp misrepresents us, injures himself, and stores up much demerit; for this will lead to this misguided man’s harm and suffering for a long time.

9. “Bhikkhus, that one can engage in sensual pleasures without sensual desires, without perceptions of sensual desire, without thoughts of sensual desire—that is impossible.²⁵²

(THE SIMILE OF THE SNAKE)

10. “Here, bhikkhus, some misguided men learn the Dhamma—discourses, stanzas, expositions, verses, exclamations, sayings, birth stories, marvels, and answers to questions—but having learned the Dhamma, they do not examine the meaning of those teachings with wisdom. Not examining the meaning of those teachings with wisdom, they do not gain a reflective acceptance of them. Instead they learn the Dhamma only for the sake of criticising others and for winning in debates, and they do not experience the good for the sake of which they learned the Dhamma. Those teachings, being wrongly grasped by them, conduce to their harm and suffering for a long time.²⁵³ Why is that? Because of the wrong grasp of those teachings.

“Suppose a man needing a snake, seeking a snake, wandering in search of a snake, saw a large snake and grasped its coils or its tail. It would turn back on him and bite his hand or his arm or one of his limbs, [134] and because of that he would come to death or deadly suffering. Why is that? Because of his wrong grasp of the snake. So too, here some misguided men learn the Dhamma...Why is that? Because of the wrong grasp of those teachings.

11. “Here, bhikkhus, some clansmen learn the Dhamma—discourses...answers to questions—and having learned the Dhamma, they examine the meaning of those teachings with wisdom. Examining the meaning of those teachings with wisdom, they gain a reflective acceptance of them. They do not learn the Dhamma for the sake of criticising others and for winning in debates, and they experience the good for the sake of which they learned the Dhamma. Those teachings, being rightly grasped by them, conduce to their welfare and happiness for a long time. Why is that? Because of the right grasp of those teachings.

“Suppose a man needing a snake, seeking a snake, wandering in search of a snake, saw a large snake and caught it rightly with a cleft stick, and having done so, grasped it rightly by the neck. Then although the snake might wrap its coils round his hand or

his arm or his limbs, still he would not come to death or deadly suffering because of that. Why is that? Because of his right grasp of the snake. So too, here some clansmen learn the Dhamma... Why is that? Because of the right grasp of those teachings.

12. "Therefore, bhikkhus, when you understand the meaning of my statements, remember it accordingly; and when you do not understand the meaning of my statements, then ask either me about it or those bhikkhus who are wise.

(THE SIMILE OF THE RAFT)

13. "Bhikkhus, I shall show you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.²⁵⁴ Listen and attend closely to what I shall say."—"Yes, venerable sir," the bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said this:

"Bhikkhus, suppose a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water, whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferryboat or bridge for going to the far shore. [135] Then he thought: 'There is this great expanse of water, whose near shore is dangerous and fearful and whose further shore is safe and free from fear, but there is no ferryboat or bridge for going to the far shore. Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore.' And then the man collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with his hands and feet, he got safely across to the far shore. Then, when he had got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder, and then go wherever I want.' Now, bhikkhus, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done with that raft?"

"No, venerable sir."

"By doing what would that man be doing what should be done with that raft? Here, bhikkhus, when that man got across

and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water, and then go wherever I want.' Now, bhikkhus, it is by so doing that that man would be doing what should be done with that raft. So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.

14. "Bhikkhus, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the teachings."²⁵⁵

(STANDPOINTS FOR VIEWS)

15. "Bhikkhus, there are these six standpoints for views."²⁵⁶ What are the six? Here, bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person, who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who has no regard for true men and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, regards material form thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self.'²⁵⁷ He regards feeling thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self.' He regards perception thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self.' He regards formations thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self.' He regards what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, encountered, sought, mentally pondered thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self.'²⁵⁸ And this standpoint for views, namely, 'That which is the self is the world; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change; [136] I shall endure as long as eternity'—this too he regards thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self.'²⁵⁹

16. "Bhikkhus, a well-taught noble disciple who has regard for noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, who has regard for true men and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, regards material form thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' He regards feeling thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' He regards perception thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' He regards formations thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' He regards what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, encountered, sought, mentally pondered thus: 'This is not mine,

this I am not, this is not my self.’ And this standpoint for views, namely, ‘That which is the self is the world; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change; I shall endure as long as eternity’—this too he regards thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

17. “Since he regards them thus, he is not agitated about what is non-existent.”²⁶⁰

(AGITATION)

18. When this was said, a certain bhikkhu asked the Blessed One: “Venerable sir, can there be agitation about what is non-existent externally?”

“There can be, bhikkhu,” the Blessed One said. “Here, bhikkhu, someone thinks thus: ‘Alas, I had it! Alas, I have it no longer! Alas, may I have it! Alas, I do not get it!’ Then he sorrows, grieves, and laments, he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught. That is how there is agitation about what is non-existent externally.”

19. “Venerable sir, can there be no agitation about what is non-existent externally?”

“There can be, bhikkhu,” the Blessed One said. “Here, bhikkhu, someone does not think thus: ‘Alas I had it! Alas, I have it no longer! Alas, may I have it! Alas, I do not get it!’ Then he does not sorrow, grieve, and lament, he does not weep beating his breast and become distraught. That is how there is no agitation about what is non-existent externally.”

20. “Venerable sir, can there be agitation about what is non-existent internally?”

“There can be, bhikkhu,” the Blessed One said. “Here, bhikkhu, someone has the view: ‘That which is the self is the world; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change; I shall endure as long as eternity.’ He hears the Tathāgata or a disciple of the Tathāgata teaching the Dhamma for the elimination of all standpoints, decisions, obsessions, adherences, and underlying tendencies, for the stilling of all formations, for the relinquishing of all attachments, for the destruction of craving, for dispassion, for cessation, for Nibbāna. He [137] thinks thus: ‘So I shall be annihilated! So I shall perish! So I shall be no more!’ Then he sorrows, grieves, and laments, he

weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught. That is how there is agitation about what is non-existent internally."

21. "Venerable sir, can there be no agitation about what is non-existent internally?"

"There can be, bhikkhu," the Blessed One said. "Here, bhikkhu, someone does not have the view: 'That which is the self is the world...I shall endure as long as eternity.' He hears the Tathāgata or a disciple of the Tathāgata teaching the Dhamma for the elimination of all standpoints, decisions, obsessions, adherences, and underlying tendencies, for the stilling of all formations, for the relinquishing of all attachments, for the destruction of craving, for dispassion, for cessation, for Nibbāna. He does not think thus: 'So I shall be annihilated! So I shall perish! So I shall be no more!' Then he does not sorrow, grieve, and lament, he does not weep beating his breast and become distraught. That is how there is no agitation about what is non-existent internally.

(IMPERMANENCE AND NOT SELF)

22. "Bhikkhus, you may well acquire that possession that is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and that might endure as long as eternity.²⁶¹ But do you see any such possession, bhikkhus?"—"No, venerable sir."—"Good, bhikkhus. I too do not see any possession that is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and that might endure as long as eternity.

23. "Bhikkhus, you may well cling to that doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it.²⁶² But do you see any such doctrine of self, bhikkhus?"—"No, venerable sir."—"Good, bhikkhus. I too do not see any doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it.

24. "Bhikkhus, you may well take as a support that view that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who takes it as a support.²⁶³ But do you see any such support of views, bhikkhus?"—"No, venerable sir."—"Good, bhikkhus. I too do not see any support of views [138] that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who takes it as a support.

25. "Bhikkhus, there being a self, would there be for me what belongs to a self?"²⁶⁴—"Yes, venerable sir."—"Or, there being what belongs to a self, would there be for me a self?"—"Yes, venerable sir."—"Bhikkhus, since a self and what belongs to a self are not apprehended as true and established, then this standpoint for views, namely, 'That which is the self is the world; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change; I shall endure as long as eternity'—would it not be an utterly and completely foolish teaching?"

"What else could it be, venerable sir, but an utterly and completely foolish teaching?"

26. "Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?"—"Impermanent, venerable sir."—"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"—"Suffering, venerable sir."—"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?"—"No, venerable sir."

"Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is feeling...Is perception... Are formations...Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?"—"Impermanent, venerable sir."—"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"—"Suffering, venerable sir."—"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?"—"No, venerable sir."

27. "Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, [139] gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all material form should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' Any kind of feeling whatever...Any kind of perception whatever...Any kind of formations whatever...Any kind of consciousness whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all consciousness should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'

28. "Seeing thus, bhikkhus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with material form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with formations, disenchanted with consciousness.

29. "Being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through

dispassion [his mind] is liberated.²⁶⁵ 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.'

(THE ARAHANT)

30. "Bhikkhus, this bhikkhu is called one whose cross-bar has been lifted, whose trench has been filled in, whose pillar has been uprooted, one who has no bolt, a noble one whose banner is lowered, whose burden is lowered, who is unfettered.

31. "And how is the bhikkhu one whose cross-bar has been lifted? Here the bhikkhu has abandoned ignorance, has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it, so that it is no longer subject to future arising. That is how the bhikkhu is one whose cross-bar has been lifted.

32. "And how is the bhikkhu one whose trench has been filled in? Here the bhikkhu has abandoned the round of births that brings renewed being, has cut it off at the root...so that it is no longer subject to future arising. That is how the bhikkhu is one whose trench has been filled in.

33. "And how is the bhikkhu one whose pillar has been uprooted? Here the bhikkhu has abandoned craving, has cut it off at the root...so that it is no longer subject to future arising. That is how the bhikkhu is one whose pillar has been uprooted.

34. "And how is the bhikkhu one who has no bolt? Here the bhikkhu has abandoned the five lower fetters, has cut them off at the root...so that they are no longer subject to future arising. That is how the bhikkhu is one who has no bolt.

35. "And how is the bhikkhu a noble one whose banner is lowered, whose burden is lowered, who is unfettered? Here a bhikkhu has abandoned the conceit 'I am,' has cut it off at the root [140]...so that it is no longer subject to future arising. That is how the bhikkhu is a noble one whose banner is lowered, whose burden is lowered, who is unfettered.

36. "Bhikkhus, when the gods with Indra, with Brahmā and with Pajāpati seek a bhikkhu who is thus liberated in mind, they do not find [anything of which they could say]: 'The consciousness of one thus gone is supported by this.' Why is that? One thus gone, I say, is untraceable here and now.²⁶⁶

(MISREPRESENTATION OF THE TATHĀGATA)

37. "So saying, bhikkhus, so proclaiming, I have been baselessly, vainly, falsely, and wrongly misrepresented by some recluses and brahmins thus: 'The recluse Gotama is one who leads astray; he teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existing being.'²⁶⁷ As I am not, as I do not proclaim, so have I been baselessly, vainly, falsely, and wrongly misrepresented by some recluses and brahmins thus: 'The recluse Gotama is one who leads astray; he teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existing being.'

38. "Bhikkhus, both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering.²⁶⁸ If others abuse, revile, scold, and harass the Tathāgata for that, the Tathāgata on that account feels no annoyance, bitterness, or dejection of the heart. And if others honour, respect, revere, and venerate the Tathāgata for that, the Tathāgata on that account feels no delight, joy, or elation of the heart. If others honour, respect, revere, and venerate the Tathāgata for that, the Tathāgata on that account thinks thus: 'They perform such services as these for me in regard to this which earlier was fully understood.'²⁶⁹

39. "Therefore, bhikkhus, if others abuse, revile, scold, and harass you, on that account you should not entertain any annoyance, bitterness, or dejection of the heart. And if others honour, respect, revere, and venerate you, on that account you should not entertain any delight, joy, or elation of the heart. If others honour, respect, revere, and venerate you, on that account you should think thus: 'They perform such services as these for us in regard to this which earlier was fully understood.'

(NOT YOURS)

40. "Therefore, bhikkhus, whatever is not yours, abandon it; when you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. What is it that is not yours? Material form is not yours. Abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. Feeling is not yours. [141] Abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. Perception is not yours. Abandon it. When you have

abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. Formations are not yours. Abandon them. When you have abandoned them, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. Consciousness is not yours. Abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time.²⁷⁰

41. “Bhikkhus, what do you think? If people carried off the grass, sticks, branches, and leaves in this Jeta Grove, or burned them, or did what they liked with them, would you think: ‘People are carrying us off or burning us or doing what they like with us?’”—“No, venerable sir. Why not? Because that is neither our self nor what belongs to our self.”—“So too, bhikkhus, whatever is not yours, abandon it; when you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time. What is it that is not yours? Material form is not yours...Feeling is not yours...Perception is not yours...Formations are not yours...Consciousness is not yours. Abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time.

(IN THIS DHAMMA)

42. “Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear, open, evident, and free of patchwork.²⁷¹ In the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus, which is clear, open, evident, and free of patchwork, there is no [future] round for manifestation in the case of those bhikkhus who are arahants with taints destroyed, who have lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached their own goal, destroyed the fetters of being, and are completely liberated through final knowledge.²⁷²

43. “Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear...free of patchwork. In the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus, which is clear...free of patchwork, those bhikkhus who have abandoned the five lower fetters are all due to reappear spontaneously [in the Pure Abodes] and there attain final Nibbāna, without ever returning from that world.

44. “Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear...free of patchwork. In the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus, which is clear...free of patchwork, those bhikkhus who

have abandoned three fetters and attenuated lust, hate, and delusion are all once-returners, returning once to this world to make an end of suffering.

45. “Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear...free of patchwork. In the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus, which is clear...free of patchwork, those bhikkhus who have abandoned three fetters are all stream-enterers, no longer subject to perdition, [142] bound [for deliverance] and headed for enlightenment.

46. “Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear...free of patchwork. In the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus, which is clear...free of patchwork, those bhikkhus who are Dhamma-followers or faith-followers are all headed for enlightenment.²⁷³

47. “Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear, open, evident, and free of patchwork. In the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus, which is clear, open, evident, and free of patchwork, those who have sufficient faith in me, sufficient love for me, are all headed for heaven.”²⁷⁴

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