

Wheel Publication No. 101

**The Greater Discourse on the
Elephant-Footprint Simile**

With Introduction and Notes

Nyanaponika Thera



The Greater Discourse on the Elephant-Footprint Simile

From the Majjhima Nikāya

With Introduction and Notes

edited by

Nyanaponika Thera

**Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka**

The Wheel Publication No. 101

First Edition: 1966

Reprint: 1981

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

Introduction

The Greater Discourse on the Elephant-footprint Simile (*Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta*) [1] is the 28th sutta of the Majjhima-Nikāya (Middle Collection). [2] This discourse was spoken by the great chief disciple of the Buddha, the Venerable Sāriputta, whose wisdom, it is said, was surpassed only by that of the Buddha himself.

It may well have been intended as a formal recognition of that fact when the Master chose the Venerable Sāriputta to repeat to the monks the gist of his first discourse, the Sermon of Benares, in which the Four Noble Truths were for the first time proclaimed to humanity. Sāriputta's version of it is recorded in the Discourse on the Analysis of the Truths (*Saccavibhaṅga Sutta*, MN 141).

How profoundly the Great Elder had understood the vast range of these Four Noble Truths [3] is illustrated by the discourse translated in the following pages. To impress upon his hearers the all-comprehensive scope of the Four Noble Truths, the Venerable Sāriputta begins by comparing these Truths with the great footprint of the elephant, which can encompass the foot mark of any smaller being. Similarly, the Four Noble Truths comprise as the Elder says, all that is beneficial; i.e., all that is truly worth knowing and following after. This he illustrates by making explicit some of the insights contained in the Truths and the practical

conduct deriving from those insights.

The way in which the two great strands of the Teaching, knowledge (*viññā*) and conduct (*caranā*), are subtly interwoven in the development of the theme is characteristic of this discourse, and of the Great Elder's mastery of exposition. It is shown how, from a detailed meditative analysis of the four elements of matter can issue the challenge and the strength to stand firm in personal afflictions, and how such afflictions can be made the starting-point of liberating insight (*vipassanā*).

In a wide sweep, the impermanence of the physical elements is shown in this tiny body of ours as well as in the cataclysmic destruction of our planet caused by these very elements. If the significance of that universal impermanence is fully comprehended, any concern with anger, fear or self-assertion will be seen as quite incongruous. It will vanish, and the mind, thus become unperturbed, will be able to view all factors of any given situation in their true light as conditioned and transient phenomena (§ 11).

Situations of adversity are then taken as a reminder of the Three Gems, the Buddha, his Teaching (Dhamma) and the Community (Sangha); and the recollection of them serves to arouse a sense of urgency to maintain or to recover the equanimity of mind required for the development of Insight (§ 13).

All that sequence of thought and practice is repeated with each of the four elements.

The Truth of the Origin of Suffering is derived from the sixfold perception (§ 37) and the five aggregates (§ 38) involved in it and forming the First Truth (see § 4). It is the desire for these which constitutes craving (*taṇhā*), and this, according to the Second Truth, is the originator of suffering.

The removal of that desire for the six fields of perception (internal and external) is the Cessation of Suffering, the Third Noble Truth. And with that the discourse ends.

This development of the Second and Third Truth out of the sixfold sense activity was also stated, in a different way, by the Master himself in the Mahā-Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, in the section on the Truths:

But where does this craving arise and take root? Wherever in the world there are delightful and pleasurable things, there this craving arises and takes root. Eye, ear ... visual forms, sounds ... eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness ... these are delightful and pleasurable, there this craving arises and takes root. This, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering.

But where may this craving be abandoned, where may it be extinguished? Wherever there are in the world delightful and pleasurable things, there this craving may be abandoned, there it may be extinguished. Eye, ear ... are delightful and pleasurable; There this craving may be abandoned, there it may be extinguished. This, monks, is the

Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering.

In both texts—the above utterance of the Master and the Venerable Sāriputta’s discourse—the intention is to show how the Four Noble Truths may be applied to our constant encounter with the world of bodily and mental experience. And such, or similar, application may be made by the earnest disciple whenever he feels that the Four Noble Truths are in danger of becoming for him an all too familiar and lifeless formula. [4]

To those who wish to explore the wide reaches of the Four Truths or to contemplate their depth dimension, this discourse of the Great Disciple is recommended for close and repeated study.

For the present version of the discourse, the late Venerable Ñāṇamoli Thera’s translation of the Majjhima Nikāya (in unpublished manuscript) has been used in parts. For some sections and terms, however, the editor’s own rendering has been used, and the notes are also supplied by him. The Venerable Ñāṇamoli’s translation, as he left it, was obviously in an experimental stage, as indicated by pencilled alternatives in the ink-written manuscript. He had, for instance, experimented with newly-coined renderings of doctrinal terms to be used consistently, which in the progress of translation, however, did not seem to be applicable throughout. Hence, it was not feasible to use his version in full.

—Nyanaponika Thera

The Greater Discourse on the Elephant-footprint Simile

1. Thus I heard.

On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvathī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s Park. There the Venerable Sāriputta addressed the bhikkhus thus, “Friends, bhikkhus,”—“Friend,” they replied. The Venerable Sāriputta now said this:

2.* [5] “Friends, just as the footprint of any breathing thing that walks can be placed within an elephant’s footprint, and so the elephant’s footprint is declared the chief of them because of its great size, so too, whatever beneficial ideas there are can all be included in the four Noble Truths. What four?”

3. In the Noble Truth of suffering, in the Noble Truth of the origin of suffering, in the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering, and in the Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

4.* And what is the Noble Truth of suffering? Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, death is suffering,

sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in short the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

5.* And what are the five aggregates affected by clinging? They are the form aggregate affected by clinging, the feeling aggregate affected by clinging, the perception aggregate affected by clinging, the mental-formations aggregate affected by clinging, and the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging.

6.* And what is the form aggregate affected by clinging? It is the four great primaries and any form derived from the four primaries.

7. What are the four great primaries? They are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element.

Earth

8.* And what is the earth element? The earth element is both in oneself and external.

What is the earth element in oneself? Whatever in oneself, belonging to oneself, is solid, solidified and clung-to, that is to say, head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow,

kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, bowels, entrails, gorge, excrements, or whatever else in oneself, belonging to oneself, is solid, solidified and clung-to: this is called earth element in oneself.

Now earth element in oneself and external earth element are simply earth element. That should be seen as it actually is with right understanding thus: 'This is not mine, this is not I this is not myself.'

When a man sees it thus with right understanding as it actually is, he becomes dispassionate towards the earth element, he makes lust for the earth element fade out of his mind.

9.* There is a time when the external water element is disturbed and then the external earth element vanishes.

10.* For even this external earth element, great as it is, can be seen as impermanent, can be seen as liable to destruction, liable to fall, liable to change; so what of this body, which is clung-to by craving and lasts but a while? There can be no (considering) that as 'I' or 'mine' or 'I am.'

11.* So then, (thus having seen this element as it actually is) if others abuse and scold and curse and threaten a bhikkhu, he understands thus: 'This painful feeling born of ear-contact has arisen in me. That is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact.' Then he sees that

contact is impermanent, that feeling is impermanent, that perception is impermanent, that mental formations are impermanent, and that consciousness is impermanent. And his mind enters into that very object (taking it just as an impersonal) element, and acquires confidence, steadiness and decision (herein).

12.* Now, if others attack that bhikkhu with the undesirable, unpleasant and disagreeable contact of fists, clods, sticks or knives, he understands thus: 'This body is of such a nature that contact of fists, clods, sticks or knives can occur to it. But this has been said by the Blessed One in his admonition on the simile of the saw: "Even if bandits brutally severed limb from limb with a two-handed saw, he who entertained hate in his heart on that account, would not be one who carried out my teaching." So tireless energy shall be aroused in me, unremitting mindfulness established, my body shall be tranquil and unexcited, my mind shall be concentrated and unified. And now let contact with fists, clods, sticks or knives occur to this body; for this, indeed, (is an occasion when) the Enlightened One's teaching must be put into effect!'

13.* If, when he thus recollects the Enlightened One, the Teaching (Dhamma), and the Community (Sangha), equanimity with the beneficial as its support does not persist in him, then he arouses a sense of urgency thus, 'It is a loss for me, it is no gain

for me, it is bad for me, it is no good for me, that when I recollect the Enlightened One, the Teaching and the Community thus, equanimity with the beneficial as its support does not persist in me.' Just as when a daughter-in-law sees her father-in-law, she has a sense of urgency (to please him), so, too, if a bhikkhu recollects the Enlightened One ... and equanimity does not persist in him, then he arouses a sense of urgency ...

14.* But if, when a bhikkhu recollects the Enlightened One, the Teaching and the Community, equanimity with the beneficial as its support becomes established in him, then he is satisfied. And at that point, friends, much has been done by that bhikkhu.

Water

15. What is the water element? The water element is both in oneself and external.

What is the water element in oneself? Whatever in oneself, belonging to oneself, is water, watery, and clung-to, that is to say, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil-of-the-joints, urine, or whatever else in oneself, belonging to oneself, is water, watery and clung-to: this is called water element in oneself.

Now water element in oneself and external water element are simply water element. That should be seen as it actually is with right understanding thus, 'This is not mine, this is not I this is not myself'.

When a man sees it thus with right understanding as it actually is, he becomes dispassionate towards the water element, he makes lust for the water element fade out of his mind.

16. There is a time when the external water element is disturbed. It carries away village, town, city, district, and country. There is a time when the waters in the great ocean sink down a hundred leagues, two hundred leagues ..., five hundred leagues, six hundred leagues, seven hundred leagues. There is a time when the waters in the great ocean stand seven palm trees deep, six palm trees deep, five ... , four ... , three ... , two palm trees deep, only a palm tree deep. There is a time when the waters in the great ocean stand seven fathoms deep, six fathoms deep, five ... , four ..., three ..., two fathoms deep, only a fathom deep. There is a time when the waters in the great ocean stand half a fathom deep, only waist deep, only knee deep, only ankle deep. There is a time when the waters in the great ocean are not enough to wet even the joint of a finger.

17. For even this external water element, great as it is, can be seen as impermanent, can be seen as liable to destruction, liable to fall, liable to change; so what of

this body, which is clung-to by craving and lasts but a while? There can be no (considering) that as 'I' or 'mine' or 'I am.'

18–21. So then (thus having seen this element as it actually is), if others abuse ... (*repeat* §§ 11–14) ... much has been done by that bhikkhu.

Fire

22. What is the fire element? The fire element is both in oneself and external.

What is the fire element in oneself? Whatever in oneself, belonging to oneself, is fire, fiery, and clung-to: that is to say, that whereby one is warmed, ages, and is consumed, and whereby what is eaten, drunk, chewed and tasted gets completely digested, or whatever else in oneself, belonging to oneself, is fire, fiery, and clung-to: this is called fire element in oneself.

Now fire element in oneself and external fire element are simply fire element. That should be seen as it actually is with right understanding thus, 'This is not mine, this is not I this is not myself.' When a man sees it thus with right understanding as it actually is, he becomes dispassionate towards the fire element,

he makes lust for the fire element fade out of his mind.

23. There is a time when the external fire element is disturbed. It burns up village, town, city, district, and country. It only goes out when it comes to green grass, or to a road or to a rock or to water or to a fair open space, for want of fuel. (But) there are also times when people have to try making a fire even with fowls' claws or hide-parings.

24. For even this external fire element, great as it is, can be seen as impermanent, can be seen as liable to destruction, liable to fall, liable to change; so what of this body, which is clung-to by craving and lasts but a while? There can be no (considering) that as 'I' or 'mine' or 'I am.'

25–28. So then (thus having seen this element as it actually is), if others abuse ... (*repeat* §§ 11–14) ... much has been done by that bhikkhu.

Air

29.* What is the air element? The air element is both in oneself and external.

What is the air element in oneself? Whatever in oneself, belonging to oneself, is air, airy, and clung-

to, that is to say, up-going air, down-going air, air in the belly, air in the bowels, air that pervades all the limbs, in-breath and out-breath, or whatever else in oneself, belonging to oneself, is air, airy, and clung-to: this is called air element in oneself.

Now air element in oneself and external air element are simply air element. That should be seen as it actually is with right understanding thus, 'This is not mine, this is not I this is not myself. When a man sees it thus with right understanding as it actually is, he becomes dispassionate towards the air element, he makes lust for the air element fade out of his mind.

30. There is a time when the external air element is disturbed. It sweeps away village, town, city, district and country. (But) there are also times when in the last month of the hot season people seek to produce wind by means of a fan or bellows, and even straws in the drip-fringe of the thatch do not stir.

31. For even this external air element, great as it is, can be seen as impermanent, can be seen as liable to destruction, liable to fall, liable to change; so what of this body, which is clung-to by craving and lasts but a while? There can be no (considering) that as 'I' or 'mine' or 'I am.'

32. So then, (thus having seen this element as it actually is), if others abuse and scold and curse and threaten a bhikkhu, he understands thus, 'This

painful feeling born of ear-contact has arisen in me. That is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact.' Then he sees that contact is impermanent, that feeling is impermanent, that perception is impermanent, that mental formations are impermanent, and that consciousness is impermanent. And his mind enters into that very object (taking it just as an impersonal) element, and acquires confidence, steadiness and decision (herein).

33. Now if others attack that bhikkhu with the undesirable, unpleasant and disagreeable contact of fists, clods, sticks or knives, he understands thus, 'This body is of such a nature that contact of fists, clods, sticks and knives can occur to it. But this has been said by the Blessed One in the admonition on the simile of the saw: "Even if bandits brutally severed limb from limb with a two-handled saw, he who entertained hate in his heart on that account, would not be one who carried out my teaching." So tireless energy shall be aroused in me, unremitting mindfulness established, my body shall be tranquil and unexcited, my mind shall be concentrated and unified. And now let contact with fists, clods, sticks or knives occur to this body; for this, indeed, (is an occasion when) the Enlightened One's teaching must be put into effect!'

34. If when he thus recollects the Enlightened One, the Teaching and the Community, equanimity with

the beneficial as its support does not persist in him, then he arouses a sense of urgency thus, 'It is a loss for me, it is no gain for me, it is bad for me, it is no good for me, that when I recollect the Enlightened One, the Teaching, and the Community thus, equanimity with the beneficial as its support does not persist in me.' Just as when a daughter-in-law sees her father-in-law, she has a sense of urgency (to please him), so, too, if a bhikkhu recollects the Enlightened One ... and equanimity does not persist in him, then he arouses a sense of urgency ...

35. But if, when a bhikkhu recollects the Enlightened One, the Teaching, and the Community, equanimity with the beneficial as its support becomes established in him, then he is satisfied. And at this point, friends, much has been done by the bhikkhu.

36.* Just as when a space is equipped with timber and creepers and straw and clay, there comes to be the term 'house,' so too, when a space is equipped with bones and sinews and flesh and skin, there comes to be the term '(bodily) form.'

37.* If the eye in oneself were intact, but no external forms came within its range and there were no appropriate (conscious) engagement, then there would be no appearance of the appropriate class of consciousness. If the eye in oneself were intact and external forms came within its range, but there were

no appropriate (conscious) engagement, there would (still) be no appearance of the appropriate class of consciousness. But it is owing to the fact that the eye in oneself is intact and that external forms come within its range, and that there is the appropriate (conscious) engagement, that there is appearance of the appropriate class of consciousness.

38.* Any form in what has thus come to be, is included, in the form aggregate affected by clinging. Any feeling in what has thus come to be, is included in the feeling aggregate affected by clinging. Any perception in what has thus come to be, is included in the perception aggregate affected by clinging. Any mental formations in what has thus come to be, are included in the mental-formations aggregate affected by clinging. Any consciousness in what has thus come to be, is included in the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging.

He understands thus, 'In such a way, so it is said, there is an including, a gathering and classifying (of phenomena) into these five aggregates affected by clinging. Now this has been said by the Blessed One, "He who sees dependent origination sees the Teaching; he who sees the Teaching sees dependent origination." And these five aggregates affected by clinging are dependently arisen. The desire for, attachment to, approval or acceptance of these five aggregates affected by clinging is the origin of

suffering. The removal of desire and lust for them is the cessation of suffering.’ And at this point too, friends, much has been done by the bhikkhu.

39–40. If the ear in oneself were intact but no external sounds came within its range ... (as in §§ 37–38) ... much has been done by the bhikkhu.

41–42. If the nose in oneself were intact but no external odours came within its range ... (as in §§ 37–38) ... much has been done by the bhikkhu.

43–44. If the tongue in oneself were intact but no external tastes came within its range ... (as in §§ 37–38) ... much has been done by the bhikkhu.

45–46. If the body in oneself were intact but no external tangibles came within its range ... (as in §§ 37–38) ... much has been done by the bhikkhu.

47.* If the mind in oneself were intact but no external idea came within its range and there were no appropriate (conscious) engagement, then there would be no appearance of the appropriate class of consciousness. If the mind in oneself were intact and external ideas came within its range, but there were no appropriate (conscious) engagement, there would (still) be no appearance of the appropriate class of consciousness. But it is owing to the fact that the mind in oneself is intact and external ideas come within its range, and that there is the appropriate (conscious) engagement, that there is appearance of

the appropriate class of consciousness.

48. Any form in what has thus come to be, is included in the form aggregate affected by clinging. Any feeling in what has thus come to be, is included in the feeling aggregate affected by clinging. Any perception in what has thus come to be, is included in the perception aggregate affected by clinging. Any mental formations in what has thus come to be, are included in the mental-formations aggregate affected by clinging. Any consciousness in what has thus come to be, is included in the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging.

He understands thus, 'In such a way, so it is said, there is an including, a gathering and classifying (of phenomena) into these five aggregates affected by clinging. Now, this has been said by the Blessed One: "He who sees dependent origination sees the Teaching; he who sees the Teaching sees dependent origination." And these five aggregates affected by clinging are dependently arisen. The desire for, attachment to, approval and acceptance of, these five aggregates affected by clinging is the origin of suffering. The removal of desire and lust for them is the cessation of suffering.' And at this point too, friends, much has been done by the bhikkhu."

That is what the venerable Sāriputta said. The bhikkhus were satisfied and they delighted in his

words.

Commentarial Notes

Abbreviations:

Cy.: Buddhaghosa's Commentary (*Papañcasūdanī*).

Subcy.: Sub-Commentary (*Majjhima-ṭīkā*).

Figures refer to the paragraph numbers of the discourse.

2. **Beneficial ideas** (*kusala dhamma*); or wholesome, salutary things.

4. **The five aggregates affected by clinging** (*pañcupadānakkhandhā*). Alternative renderings used by Ñāṇamoli Thera: "aggregates (as objects) of clinging" (in *Path of Purification*), "categories of clinging's objects" (in *The Wheel No. 17*); by Nyanatiloka Thera: "groups of existence forming the objects of attachment."

5. **Mental formations aggregate** (*saṅkhārakkhandha*). On *saṅkhāra* see *Buddhist Dictionary*, by Nyanatiloka (2nd ed., Colombo 1956), p. 148.

6. **Form aggregate** (*rūpakkhandha*); the aggregate, or group of corporeality.

7. **The four great primaries** (*mahā-bhūtā*), also called *dhātu*, the primary elements of matter.—The *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of*

Purification, p. 381) says that the meditation subject of “Defining of the Elements” (*dhātuvaṅkathāna*) is given in brief in the Mahā-Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN 22), and is explained in detail in the Greater Discourse on the Elephant-footprint Simile and in the Mahā Rāhulovāda Sutta (MN 62; translated in The **Wheel No. 33**).

8. **Clung-to** (*upādiṇṇa*), **Cy**: Strictly spoken, only that corporeal form which is produced by kamma (*kammasamuṭṭhāna*) is called ‘clung-to’ (or ‘karmically acquired.’ Ven. Nyanatiloka’s rendering). But, in a general sense, as here, it is a designation for the entire bodily frame. The bodily frame, namely, may be either ‘clung-to’ (‘karmically acquired,’ *upādiṇṇa*) or ‘not clung-to’ (‘not karmically acquired,’ *anupādiṇṇa*; see Dhammasaṅgaṇī §§653–4). But because the whole body is clung-to [tenaciously], grasped at [‘as mine’], and misapprehended as an [Ego] [6] [namely by way of conceit, craving and wrong views; *māna, diṭṭhi*, the bodily frame in its entirety is here said to be ‘clung-to’ (by craving) [7]

For the **external** (*bāhira*) earth element, the *Dhātuviḅhaṅga* of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka gives as examples various metals, precious stones, rock, wood and soil.

Cy: While the ‘earth element in oneself’ has been explained in detail by giving twenty modes of it, the external earth element is treated very briefly in the discourse. Why is that so? Because it is to the solid element in one’s own body that beings have a strong attachment; therefore, the Buddhas

and their disciples speak of it in detail, for removing that attachment to it.

Cy: are simply earth element (*paṭhavidhātur-ev'esa*). Though the earth element is of two kinds, one's own and external, the Elder shows it to have the common characteristic of being stiff, hard and coarse. In the case of the external earth element, its inanimate nature is clear, but not so with the 'earth element in oneself.' But if one takes the latter together with the external earth element, one can easily understand that both are equally inanimate. It is as if an untamed oxen is yoked together with a tame one, the untamed animal may wriggle and struggle for a few days, but before long it will become tame. Similarly, if one takes the internal earth element together with the external, their common inanimate nature may not be apparent for a few days, but before long it will become quite clear.

9. According to ancient Indian cosmological conceptions, the earth may have its cyclical destruction either by water, by fire or by wind.

10. **Clung to by craving** (*taṇhūpādiṇṇa*). **Cy:** Clung-to, grasped at and misconceived by craving (see Note to §6).— The words in the discourse, 'I, 'mine,' I am.' represent again the threefold clinging to personality, belief, due to conceit (*mana*), craving (*taṇhā*) and wrong views (*diṭṭhi*).

11. **So then, if others ... abuse ... that bhikkhu.** **Cy:** This refers to a bhikkhu who, as shown before, practises the meditation on the elements (*dhātu-kammaṭṭhāniko*). The

paragraph under consideration shows the strength of his mind in applying his meditative comprehension of reality to occurrences at the sense-door of hearing (i.e. when he hears words of abuse).—The SubCy adds that this also illustrates the powerful influence which a subject of meditation may have (on one's attitude to everyday happenings; *kammaṭṭhānassa anubhāvaṃ dasseti*). The bhikkhu's strength is that of imperturbability achieved by seeing that the 'earth element in oneself' is as inanimate as the external one, and this makes him as imperturbable as a tree that is being abused or struck.

acquire ... decision (*adhimuccati*). **Cy:** that is, as to its true nature, by seeing it as an impersonal element, and hence the bhikkhu has neither attachment nor aversion concerning it.

And his mind enters into that very object (taking it just as an impersonal) element (*tassa dhātārammaṇaṃ eva cittaṃ pakkhandati*); lit.: enters into that very element-object.—The

rendering chosen here is based on an explanation in the Commentary which is reproduced here in the following when commenting on the words "acquires decision."

According to that explanation the above textual passage refers to the "auditory object," that is the words of abuse; and the word "element," (*dhātu*) is to be taken in the sense of an impersonal element in general, not as primary element of matter. The SubCy, however, says that the term "object-element" (*dhātārammaṇa*) refers to the earth-element which the bhikkhu had contemplated earlier. In the present context this would mean that the bhikkhu is supposed to return to

his original subject of meditation, the earth-element. This explanation, though likewise feasible, is perhaps less likely than the earlier interpretation which relates the term to the “auditory object.”

acquires ... decision (*adhimuccati*). **Cy:** That is, he comes to a decision (as to its true nature), by seeing it as an (impersonal) element (*dhātu-vasena*) and hence the bhikkhu has neither attachment nor aversion concerning it. This monk, that is to say, applies here to the auditory object, his comprehension (*pariggaha*) by way of the accurate knowledge of the root, (*mūla-pariññā*) and by way (of contemplating the casual (*āgantuka*) and temporary (*tāvakālika*) state of the object, as described in detail in the Commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. [8] There, however, it is explained with regard to the sense-door of the eye, but here with regard to the sense-door of the ear.

When in such a way correct comprehension has been applied by one who practices the element-meditation, even if (**SubCy:** due to long habituation in the beginningless saṃsāra) unwise ‘adverting’ (or ‘attention’; *ayoniso avajjaṃ*) [9] occurs with a visual or other perception, then there will be three alternative reactions:

(1) In the case of one with strong insight (*balavā vipassanā*), the cognitive series will reach the stage of determining (*voṭṭhapana*), occurring once or twice, and after that the consciousness will just fall into *bhavaṅga*, and there will be arising of greed, etc. So it is with one

of keen insight who has reached its culmination (*koṭippatto tikkha-vipassako*).

(2) In the case of another meditator, impulsion (*javana*) impels the mind (only) once, by way of greed, etc. But because at the end of that (single moment of) impulsion, he becomes aware, [10] ‘impulsion has impelled me by way of greed, etc.,’ the object is (then) correctly comprehended (*pariggahitaṃ eva*), and impulsion does not arise again in that way. [11]

(3) Again, in the case of another whose mind has adverted once, yet impulsion arises for a second time by way of greed, etc. But because at the end of that second impulsion, he becomes aware as stated above, the object is then correctly comprehended and impulsion does not arise for a third time in that way.

The Insight of the first person is very keen; that of the third person is very slow; as to the second, his nature should be understood as explained in the Discourse on the Simile of the Quail (*Lokuṭakopama Sutta*, MN 66) [12] and as in the Discourse on the Cultivation of the Sense-faculties (*Indriyabhāvanā Sutta*, MN 151).

Enters into ... acquires confidence, steadiness and decision (*pakkhandati pasidati santiṭṭhati adhimuccati*).—This sequence of terms occurs so frequently in the discourses that the following illuminating explanations given in the SubCy may be found helpful to students of the Pali scriptures. The SubCy, however, reads the last of the above terms as

vimuccati (“is freed”) instead of *adhimuccati* (“acquires decision”). This reading is also found in other text editions (e.g., the Siamese) of the present discourse and in parallel passages of other suttas.

SubCy: Enters into (*pakkhandati*): The mind engaged in Insight meditation penetrates (its object) by way of comprehending it as impermanent, also as suffering, and also as not-self (*vipassanā-cittaṃ aniccan’ ti pi dukkhan’ ti pi anattan’ ti pi sammasanavasena anupavisati*). Hereby the absence of distractions from outside is stated.

Acquires confidence (*pasīdati*). Hereby is indicated that the meditation is progressing smoothly on its road (*kammaṭṭhānassa vīthi-paṭipannataṃ*):

Is freed (*vimuccati*), by loosing the grip of craving, conceit and wrong views.

12. Now if others attack that bhikkhu with fists... Cy: In the preceding section the inner strength of a meditating bhikkhu was shown on the occasion when there were undesirable objects at the sense-door of hearing; now the same is illustrated with occurrences at the sense-door of the body. For, when one is confronted with an undesirable experience, there may be failure (in mind control) in two ways, at the sense-door of hearing and that of the body.

The Great Elder proceeds here like a farmer who makes the round of his field, and whenever he notices that he has not put sufficient earth (at the side of the irrigation channel), he cuts the ground with his mammoty-spade and, at the weak

spots only, he puts some lumps of earth together with grass. Similarly, the Great Elder introduces this section of his discourse for the purpose of strengthening the monks' mind-control (*saṃvara*) at those two sense-doors only. He did so with the wish: 'May those noble sons of the future, who are desirous of training themselves, and engage in meditative effort, make speedily an end of birth, decay and death, after establishing firm control at those sense-doors!'

13. If, when he thus recollects the Enlightened One, the Teaching and the Community ... **Cy:** There is Recollection of the Buddha (*Buddhānussati*) not only by way of (reciting the traditional text): "Thus indeed is the Blessed One..." (*Iti pi so Bhagavā*), but also if (as here) a saying of His is remembered, there is Recollection of the Dhamma not only by way of (reciting) "Well proclaimed is the Teaching...", but also when the admonition called the simile of the saw is remembered (as done here). And there is Recollection of the Sangha not only by way of reciting, "Of good conduct is the Order of the Blessed One, ...," but also when remembering the virtue of a monk who patiently endures even when assaulted with a saw.

Equanimity, with the beneficial as its support, does not persist in him (*upekkhā kusalanissitā na saṅṭhāti*,—**Cy:** Here the equanimity of (still mundane) insight (*vipassanupekkhā*) is meant,—**SubCy:** He has not yet obtained equanimity of outlook (*ajjhupekkhatā*) with regard to everything conditional.

14. Equanimity, with the beneficial as its support, becomes established in him.—Cy: This refers to the sixfold equanimity (*chalaṅgupekkhā*). Though this type of equanimity arises (strictly speaking, only) in the canker-free saint who has neither attachment nor aversion with regard to the six sense-objects, be they desirable or undesirable; yet in the case of the monk spoken of here, through the strength of his energy (*virīya-bala*) and the potency of his meditation (*bhāvanā-siddhi*), his insight approximates to the six-fold equanimity of a canker-free saint.

29. Here and in the following the Pali term is wind, lit. 'winds.'

36. Just as when a space is equipped with timber ..., there comes to be the term 'house,' so too, when a space is equipped with bones ..., there comes to be the term '(bodily) form.'

Cy: Hereby the impersonal nature of the great placements spoken of before, is shown.—**House** is a mere concept (*paññatti-matta*). If timber, etc., is placed separately in heaps, it is called just as a "heap of timber," etc. Just as a house that is so termed on account of timber etc., may be called a 'nobleman's house' or a 'brahmin's house,' similarly one speaks of the body of a nobleman or a brahmin, but no abiding being (*satta*) or soul (*jīva*) is found here.

37. If the eye in oneself were intact.—Cy: Why has this subject matter been introduced here? In the preceding part of this discourse, materiality derived (from the four

elements; *upādā-rūpa*), the four mental aggregates, and (the last) three of the four Noble Truths have not been dealt with as yet; for speaking of them now, this present exposition is being introduced here.

Appropriate (conscious) engagement (*tajjo samannāhāro*), — *Appropriate*, i.e. suitable (*anurūpa*) for the arising of visual consciousness (SubCy).—(*Conscious*) *engagement*.—**Cy**: This refers to (initial) attention (*manasikāra*), which, dependent on eye and visual objects, arises after having deflected the life-continuum (*bhavaṅgaṃ āvaṭṭetvā*). It belongs to the class of consciousness called ‘functional Mind-element’ (*kiriya-manodhātu-citta*), which is capable of deflecting the (subconscious) Life-continuum. When no visual objects enter the range of perception, it does not arise with objects of another type. (This last statement is made for emphasizing again the term ‘appropriate.’ —Ed.)

38. Any form in what has thus come to be (*yaṃ tathābhūtaṃ rūpaṃ*). **Cy**: In this section and in the following, the Four Truths are explained by way of the sense-doors.

In what has thus come to be: **Cy**: (The entire complex of bodily and mental processes) that have arisen together with visual consciousness as its adjuncts (*samaṅgino*).

Any form (*yaṃ rūpaṃ*). **Cy**: Because visual consciousness is not a producer of form (material processes), form (materiality) with (only) three (of the four) producers (*ti-samuṭṭhāna-rūpa*) applies here at the moment of visual consciousness (that is, without the fourth producer, mind;

the other three being temperature, kamma and nutriment). But in the subsequent moment of consciousness, all four producers of materiality obtain. [13]

Any feeling ... perception ... mental formations; these are those conjoined with visual consciousness; and **consciousness** is that very visual consciousness. *Mental formations:* this refers in particular to volition (*cetanā*); (though also contact, attention, vitality and mental stability belong here to the aggregate of formations: SubCy).

“He who sees Dependent Origination, sees the Teaching (Dhamma); he who sees the Teaching, sees dependent origination.”

Cy: He who sees conditions, sees also the things dependently arisen; and he who sees the things conditionally arisen, sees also the conditioning things.

Here, in the canonical text, three Truths are mentioned, while the fourth, the Path Truth, has to be taken by implication. It is the penetration by meditation and cultivation (*bhāvanā paṭivedha*) [14] applied to those three items (the first three Truths) which constitute the (Eightfold) Path, namely by way of (right) understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration.

47. Cy: As to the mind-door, the **mind in oneself** is the life-continuum consciousness (*bhavaṅga-citta*). If it has ceased (to function) and thus is incapable of being a condition of the advertent consciousness (*āvajjana-citta*); and also if it

proceeds in an enfeebled state (as in deep sleep: SubCy), it is called **not intact** (or damaged, *paribhinna*). When capable of being a condition of 'adverting,' it is called **intact** (or undamaged, *aparibhinna*).

There would still be no appearance of the appropriate class of consciousness. Cy: This applies only to the phase of the life-continūm (*bhavaṅga*).—As to the second instance (given in the discourse), this refers to a case when (the mind is preoccupied) by something else, e.g. with reviewing a familiar jhāna, or with attention to a familiar subject of meditation or with the recitation of a familiar Buddha-word ... (In such a case, though the sense organs are intact and sense-objects are present, the mind will not be 'engaged' by them, being fully absorbed by the afore-mentioned activities.—Ed.)

Here, (*bodily*) *form* has all four producers, as mind consciousness can produce bodily processes. *Feeling*, *perception*, and, *formations*, are those conjoined with mind consciousness. *Consciousness* is that very mind-consciousness. But the *formations* included here are contact and volition. (**SubCy:** These are mentioned because they are the most prominent; not because the others are absent.)

After the Great Elder had first considered only one part (of the Four Truths and of the five aggregates as stated at the beginning), and having reached now this point of his discourse, he now deals with everything he had omitted above, namely in the context of the respective sense-door,

and thus concludes the sutanta in accordance with the sequence of meaning (outlined before).

The Structure of the Discourse as explained in the Commentary

Suppose there is a skilled craftsman who fashions bamboo goods. First he selects a well-grown bamboo and cuts it into four. Putting aside three sections, he takes the fourth and divides it into five parts. Of these, again, he lays aside four, takes the fifth and splits it into five pieces. Again he puts away four pieces, takes the fifth and splits it into a lower and a top portion. Laying aside the top portion, he takes the lower one (being softer) and fashions of it various kinds of bamboo goods. But this does not mean that he will not utilize for his work the remaining portions of the bamboo, that is, the top portion, the other four small pieces, the larger four parts and the original three sections. He cannot make use of them all at once, but he utilizes them gradually.

Likewise the Venerable Sāriputta, too, when starting his great discourse takes up as the main subject (*mātika*) the **Four Truths**, corresponding to the bamboo worker's first four sections. Then, as the man puts aside three of them, takes the fourth and divides it into five parts, similarly the great elder lays aside three of the Truths, takes one, the **Truth of Suffering**, and gives it a fivefold division, by way of the *five aggregates* (*khandha*). Then, again similar to the

bamboo worker, he puts aside four of them, the four mental aggregates, and takes one, **the aggregate of form** (*rūpakkhandha*) and gives it a fivefold classification, namely as the **four great elements and form derived from the four great elements** (*cattāro ca mahābhūtāni catunnañca mahābhūtānaṃ upādāya rūpaṃ*). Again, as the bamboo worker puts aside four pieces, takes the fifth and splits it into a top and lower portion, so the Elder lays aside derived form and three of the elements and divides the remaining one, the earth-element into two, as being **in oneself** (*ajjhatta*) and **external** (*bāhira*) As the craftsman puts aside the top portion and makes various bamboo articles from the lower portion, so the Great Elder, laying aside the external earth-element, divides the **earth-element in oneself** into twenty modes, namely in the discourse passage beginning **What is earth-element in oneself?** And finally, just as the man utilizes gradually the remaining sections, parts, pieces and portions for his work, as he could not use them all at once, so the Venerable Sāriputta, too, gradually explains also the remaining parts of his subject matter namely: the external earth-element, the other three elements, derived form **[15]** , the four mental aggregates and the other three Noble Truths, **[16]** as he could not do so all at once.

Notes

1. The 'Lesser Discourse' was spoken by the Buddha. A translation of it has been published in the series *Bodhi Leaves* No. B 5 (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy).
2. On this discourse see also *The Life of Sāriputta* by Nyanaponika Thera (The **Wheel No. 90/92#T28**), p. 40f.
3. See *The Four Noble Truths* by Francis Story (The **Wheel No. 34/35**).
4. In the commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the four Noble Truths are applied to all meditation exercises given in the Sutta. See *The Way of Mindfulness*, by Soma Thera, pp. 52, 57 etc.
5. An asterisk (*) after the paragraph number refers to the Commentarial Notes at the end of the Discourse.
6. *Ādinna-gāhita-parāmatṭha*.
7. Additions in square brackets are taken from the **SubCy**.
8. See *The Way of Mindfulness* by Soma Thera, p. 79ff
9. Here and in the following, reference is made to the Abhidhamma teaching of the cognitive series, or process of cognition (*citta-vīthi*), on which see The **Wheel No. 63–64 Aids to Abhidhamma Philosophy**, p. 21ff. and Chart II.
10. *Āvajjato*: lit.: because his mind adverts.

- 11. SubCy:** By his establishing thus that impulsion and its object have vanished after having existed, it has become a legitimate subject of meditation (*sārammaṇassa javanassa "hutvā-abhāva"-vavatthā panassa kammaṭṭhānabhāvato*).
- 12.** In the "Simile of the Quail," it is said: "While he is practising for the abandoning of clinging, towards the discarding of clinging, memories and thoughts connected with clinging beset him from time to time, due to confusion. Slow, Udāyi, is the arising of mindfulness, but quickly he abandons that (clinging), dispels it, makes an end of it, brings it to destruction."
- 13.** See *Visuddhi-Magga*, ch. 14 §75.
- 14.** The word *bhāvanā* has here both these meanings, meditation *and* cultivation.
- 15.** Derivatory form (*upādāya rūpa*) is mentioned in the discourse by way of a prominent part of it, i.e. the six sense organs and their objects (§ 37–46).
- 16.** The Fourth Truth of the Path is not stated explicitly in the discourse. But the sections concerned with conduct and meditation extend to all three divisions of the Noble Eightfold Path, i.e. virtue, concentration and wisdom. The moral restraint of the bhikkhu when insulted or assaulted, shows his virtue (*sīla*). The sections referring to his firmness of mind and to various meditations (on the four elements, of the Triple Gem), indicate the practice of concentration (*samādhi*). The wisdom-group (*paññā*) of the Path is represented in the meditator's insight-practice

(*vipassanā*) when seeing the elements as void of self (§ 10) and the five aggregates as conditioned and impermanent (§ 11). (Ed.)

THE BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or write an e-mail or a letter to the:

Administrative Secretary
Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61

54 Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy • Sri Lanka
E-mail: bps@bps.lk

web site: <http://www.bps.lk>
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283 • Fax: 0094 81 222 3679

Table of Contents

Title page	2
Introduction	4
The Greater Discourse on the Elephant-footprint Simile	9
Earth	10
Water	13
Fire	15
Air	16
Commentarial Notes	24
The Structure of the Discourse as explained in the Commentary	37
Notes	39