

Study Guide for MN 28

The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint

(Thanissaro Bhikkhu has a good translation in volume 5 of "Handful of Leaves")

Both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering.
MN 22.38

Why have I declared [the four noble truths]? Because it is beneficial, it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life, it leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. That is why I have declared it.

MN 63.10

Nyanaponika, the great German scholar-monk, described MN 28 as a "masterpiece." He praised the discourse as "like an intricate and beautifully constructed piece of music ending on a solemn and majestic chord."¹ The sutta begins and ends with the Four Noble Truths. After emphasizing how all skillful states are included in the Four Noble Truths, the sutta narrows its focus to the first truth. In defining the first truth as the five aggregates of clinging, it then narrows its focus on the first aggregate of form. This then is further analyzed into the four elements. After this "telescoping in," the sutta telescopes back out to the Four Noble Truths. This is done by explaining how insight into the dependently arisen nature of experiencing the elements leads to understanding the five clinging-aggregates which in turn leads to understanding the origin of suffering and the cessation of suffering, in other words, the second and third Noble Truth. Though the fourth truth is not mentioned, it is perhaps implied.

Dependent Origination:

A good place to begin understanding this sutta is by starting near the end. In paragraph 28, Sariputta quotes the Buddha as having said, "**One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination.**"²

Insight into 'dependent origination' reveals not only that all things arise and cease, but also how all things arise and cease exclusively in dependence on something else. An example is the pleasure of listening to music. It is relatively easy to see how that pleasure arises and passes dependent on hearing the music. Without hearing the music, the pleasure would not exist.

¹ Nyanaponika Thera, *Great Disciples of the Buddha: Their lives, Their works, Their Legacy*; (Boston: Wisdom Publications. 1997) pp 40-41

² This is an extremely important quote and is often referred to in contemporary discussions of the Buddha's teachings. That this is the only discourse in all the Pali suttas where this sentence is found adds to the importance of MN 28.

Suffering and the Five Clinging-Aggregates

It follows then that if suffering is like all other things, it exists dependent on a supporting condition. Therefore, without the supporting condition the suffering would not exist. **The teaching of dependent origination implies that it is possible to become free of suffering by removing the causal conditions for it. According to the first noble truth it is clinging to the aggregates that is suffering.**

In the Buddha's standard definition of the first noble truth, all forms of suffering can be subsumed under the five clinging-aggregates, *i.e.*, form, feelings, perceptions, mental constructions, and consciousness (MN 28.3). In a sense, suffering is synonymous with the five clinging-aggregates. However, the clinging-aggregates are not the same as the aggregates. It is important to understand that the clinging associated with the aggregates is what causes the suffering. The aggregates can occur without being clung to, for example, when they are seen with wisdom.

In section 28 Sariputta explains that the five clinging-aggregates are dependently arisen; that is, they arise and pass, and this arising and passing occurs contingent on something else occurring and passing away. Sariputta goes on to explain that suffering originates dependent on "desire, indulgence, inclination, and holding based on these five clinging-aggregates" and that the cessation of suffering is dependent on the removal of this "desire, indulgence, inclination, and holding based on these five clinging-aggregates."

The Five Aggregates

A good part of the sutta is devoted to explaining the psycho-physical processes that give rise to the five aggregates. The aggregates are not explained as existing separate from our consciousness of them. In other words, the aggregates are not described as real objects independent of our awareness of them.

Section 27 states that in order to have the conscious experience of seeing, there must be the "engagement" of the eye and a sight object. When this engagement occurs, 'seeing consciousness' arises. Section 28 then suggests that this 'seeing consciousness' has five different features, *i.e.*, the five aggregates. The five aggregates do not exist distinct from or independently of each other. This can be described by analogy: It is possible to distinguish various properties of ocean water, *e.g.* its temperature, color, turbulence, salinity, and water pressure, but these properties do not exist independent of each other – they are joined in the water. In MN 43.9 Sariputta explicitly states that feeling (the second aggregate), perception (the third) and consciousness (the fifth) are conjoined and impossible to separate. Because of the interconnectedness of the five aggregates, when one perceives the dependently arisen nature of every act of conscious seeing, one will also perceive that the sensations, feelings, perceptions, and mental formations occurring with each act of seeing are also dependently originated.

Sections 29-38 make the same analysis for the other sense doors, *i.e.*, the ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. This is significant because our experience of the world occurs only through these six sense doors as mediated by the five aggregates. (In fact, in a number suttas the Buddha equates the world with the six sense experiences; see SN 35.23 and 82) If one does not cling to the aggregates, one will not cling to anything in the world that the senses perceive.

MN 43, another discourse by Sariputta, reinforces the idea that the aggregates are not entities or objects. Rather, they are activities or processes that have particular functions. In MN 43.4-8, the aggregate of feeling is defined as the process of ‘feeling’, the aggregate of perception as ‘perceiving’, and the aggregate of consciousness as ‘cognizing’. The importance of these seemingly redundant “definitions” is to emphasize that the aggregates are to be understood by their function.

The Aggregate of Form and the Four Elements:

The first aggregate is what gets the most detailed discussion in MN 28. This aggregate is defined by the four elements of earth, water, fire and air. Sariputta then teaches how a practitioner should, with wisdom, relate to these elements. This is not meant to be an abstract exercise but rather something that can be used for developing equanimity during difficult times (MN 28.8). Another example of using elements for developing equanimity is found in MN 62.

Notes:

MN 28 is one of the ten Middle Length Discourses in which Sariputta is the major teacher. Sariputta is closely associated with the *Abhidhamma*, the canonical texts providing detailed analysis of our psycho-physical processes. Sometimes *abhidhamma* is called Buddhist psychology. MN 28 can be seen as representing those suttas that began the analytical process leading to the creation of the books of *Abhidhamma*.

An interesting study would be to read these ten suttas attributed to Sariputta to understand better his perspective on the Dharma. The ten suttas are MN 3, 5, 9, 28, 31, 43, 69, 97, 114, and 143. (DN 28 and 33 are also taught by Sariputta).

Reflections:

MN 28.6 indicates that the insight into the impersonal aspect of the elements leads to disenchantment. How would you apply the insight into not-self so that it might bring you a healthy disenchantment?

MN 28.7 suggests that understanding how, on a cosmic scale, the elements are impermanent will lead to dropping the concepts of “I, mine and I am.” How can you contemplate the arising and passing of the elements in order to free yourself from concepts of self?

Reflecting on MN 28.10, how can you contemplate the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha to bring about a meaningful degree of equanimity?

This dependent origination is deep and deep in implications. It is because of not understanding and not penetrating this Dhamma that this generation of people has become like a knotted ball of thread and does not pass beyond samsara.

SN II.12.60