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Attached to Nothing

Sutta Nipāta 1112-1115

icc-āyasmā Posālo:

yo afitam ādisati
anejo chinnaśamsayo
pāraguṃ sabbadhamānaṃ
atthi pañhena āgamaṃ:

vibhūtarūpasaññissa
sabbakāyapahāyino
ajjhatañ ca bahiddhā ca
'n' atthi kiñci' ti passato

ñānaṃ Sakkānupucchāmi,
kathaṃ neyyo tathāvidho.

Posālo ti Bhagavā:

viññāṇatthitīyo sabbā
abhijānaṃ Tathāgato
tīṭhantaṃ enaṃ jānāti
vimuttaṃ tapparāyanaṃ

ākiñcaññāsambhavaṃ ñatvā
'nandi saṃyojanaṃ' iti
evam evaṃ abhiññāyo
tato tattha vipassati,

etam ñānaṃ tathaṃ tassa
brāhmaṇassa vusīmato ti

Venerable Posāla:

To the one who reveals the past,
Is unperturbed, with doubts cut off,
To he who's gone beyond all things
—It's with a question that I come.

For one whose perception of form
Has dissolved, who's let go all form,
Who inwardly and outwardly
Sees that "Nothing at all exists,"

I ask, Sākya, to understand:
How would one guide someone like this?

Buddha to Posāla:

All the stations of consciousness
Are known to the Tathāgata.
He knows how one established there
Goes beyond that to become free.

Knowing "delight is a fetter,"
Even where nothingness occurs,
He thereby fully understands
And gains insight into that state.

This is the knowledge that truly
Fulfills the life of a brahman.

This is an archaic poem in the *Sutta Nipāta*, and the language is thus rather compressed. Existing translations vary widely, and this is my best attempt to make sense of the verses while matching the traditional meter's eight syllables per line.

I think Posāla is a yogi of the old school, skilled in attaining formless states of consciousness through intensive concentration practice, including the seventh of the eight stations of consciousness known as "the sphere of nothingness." This is a mode of consciousness accessible to the advanced

meditator in which the conceptual workings of perception become so subtle that no mental construction of form appears to be taking place at all. Some practitioners of the time construed this to be the highest attainment possible, and equated the experience of nothingness with final nirvāna.

Posāla approaches the Buddha respectfully, and seems to be asking about one who attains this state of attenuated consciousness. There is an apparent paradox: An advanced stage of knowing is



achieved through yogic meditation, but the content of that state is by definition empty of all discernable forms of knowing. Is this wisdom? He may also be fishing for confirmation that he is in no further need of guidance.

If so he would have been disappointed. The Buddha seems to answer that true knowledge consists of understanding the second noble truth, that desire is the source of suffering, rather than of reaching altered states of consciousness. If the mind has any attachment at all, including a subtle delight in the pleasure of a mind without the clutter of mental objects, it is bound to renewed existence and to the construction of suffering. One needs to go beyond this state to get truly free.

This poem neatly captures the point of diversion between the view of the older yoga meditation practices and the Buddha's innovative discovery that only insight into the nature of experience results in liberation of the mind from clinging.

—A. Olendzki