

Study Guide for MN 26 *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*

Discourse on the Noble Search

Discourses 26, 4, 19, and 36 are the primary sources within the Middle Length Discourses for biographical information about the Buddha. The other major source among the suttas is the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* in the Long Discourses which reports the last months of the Buddha's life, his death and the distribution of his relics. The *Mahavagga* of the *Vinaya* also has important material describing the Buddha's activities from the time of his Awakening through the conversion of his main disciples, Sariputta and Mahā Moggallāna.

Etiquette

The opening of MN 26 (sections 1-4) is interesting because it provides a glimpse of the etiquette associated with the Buddha. He belonged to a society that was highly cultured with prescribed or formal behavior for social interaction. This was especially so with people of unequal social and spiritual status. In this sutta, Ananda does not directly ask the Buddha to teach to the monks wishing to receive teachings. Rather he waits for an opportune moment and then makes the request somewhat indirectly. The request is not actually a request, it is a leading statement. In stating that it would be good if he went to the hermitage "out of compassion," Ananda is suggesting the Buddha teach since the primary compassionate activity of the Buddha is teaching. When the Buddha consents to Ananda's suggestion, the consent is conveyed through silence – a form of communication understood at the time.

As you read the sutta you might reflect on the other passages where etiquette plays a role. For example, the Buddhist practice of teaching only when requested is perhaps conveyed in the story of Brahma asking the Buddha to teach. What is the significance that it is the supreme god of the Hindu pantheon who is making this request? A central part of ancient Indian etiquette had to do with social hierarchy. Do you think the Buddha is asserting his place in the social-spiritual hierarchy when he tells Upaka that he has no peer (counterpart) and when he tells the group of five monks not to address "the Tathagata by name and as 'friend'?" For what other reasons might the Buddha be making this claim?

What are the implications of the Buddha not wanting to be called by his name or as a friend? Many modern people have wanted to select out of the Pali suttas the historical person who was the Buddha. But if this sutta is presenting an historical event, then we see that from the time of his enlightenment the Buddha was not presenting himself in conventional human or personal terms.

Two Kinds of Search

In sections 5 to 12 the Buddha presents a sharp distinction between two kinds of search: noble and ignoble. Making such distinctions has sometimes been criticized as being too simplistic or too dualistic. However we find that throughout the suttas the Buddha often relies on making dichotomous distinctions to make his points. Given how

central it is to his way of thinking it is well worth considering the value of such discriminations. I would suggest that it has a lot to do with the pragmatic focus of the Buddha; what matters is whether something does or does not work, is or is not helpful in the spiritual quest.

Enlightenment

Many people would like to know what the Buddha's experienced when he was Awakened. The suttas provide a variety of accounts that are interesting to compare and contrast. MN 4 provides one of the most standard descriptions. The description in section 18 of MN 26 is quite sparse, mostly stating that it involves variations of "the supreme security from bondage." The adjectives given for describing this security are unborn, unageing, unailing, and deathless. These are important in the Buddha's teaching which we will study more at the end of our course.

In the last sections of the sutta there is a description of practice leading to awakening that is different from both the one in section 18 and as found in MN 4. What do you make of this difference?

Notes

The section of the sutta describing the Buddha's hesitation to teach and Brahma's request that he teach (sections 19-21) is missing in the Chinese version of this sutta. Without this section, the sutta has no supernatural material. Perhaps the story of Brahma is a later interpolation into the Pali version we have in the *Majjhima*. Or maybe the Chinese translators choose to omit this material from their translation.

The Chinese translation also lacks the entire discussion of the eight *jhanas* that appears at the end of MN 26. In other words it does not present a path to awakening through the eight absorptions. While the absence of this section is subject to many interpretations, it is a reminder that there has been a long history of inter-Buddhist controversy about the role of the *jhanas*.

In section 13 the Buddha refers to himself as a "*bodhisatta*." This term is absent in the Chinese version. Scholars have attempted to find the origin of the bodhisattva ideal. So far they have found no solid dateable evidence that the term was used in Indian Buddhism prior the first century of the Common Era. Extrapolating from the known evidence, scholars have suggested that the term came into use sometime between 250 and 100 BCE. While the term does appear in the Pali suttas, it is very likely that these are later interpolations since the Chinese translations lack the word in the corresponding passages.

The Pali word for noble is *ariya*. Because this word was adopted by the Nazis, the Pali word is seldom used in English. It originally referred to the Indo-European warrior people who swept into Northern Indian many hundreds of years before the Buddha. The dictionary defines it as being of high caste or eminent. 'Noble' has been the standard English translation for over a century. It is the source for the name 'Iran'.

Reflections

In what ways might it be useful and not useful for you to distinguish between the noble and the ignoble search when looking at your own life?

What do you think of the Buddha's hesitation to teach? Do you agree that the Dhamma is hard to see and hard to understand? If so, how do you understand this to be so?

Do you think that attaining 'supreme security from bondage' is a possible goal for you? What do you think about this description of the goal of Buddhist practice?

If you were to meet the Buddha, how would you address him? Would you be likely to offer him forms of respect? What kinds?