

## Study Guide for MN 27

### *Culahatthipadoma Sutta*

#### The Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint

In MN 27 the Buddha gently directs a brahmin's devotion to go beyond veneration of the Buddha by practicing himself. The brahmin's faith in the Buddha was inspired by the praise the Buddha received from clever people. We might say that his faith was externally based. In contrast, the Buddha pointed him to a verified faith based on inner realization.

The sutta contains an account of a conversation the Buddha had with the Brahmin Janussoni, the same interlocutor in MN 4 (The Discourse on Fear and Dread). In MN 4 the Buddha teaches the Brahmin through a brief autobiographical description of his own course of practice. In MN 27 the Buddha provides an idealized version of the path of liberation that goes through 14 steps. This path is taught while making the point that in order to know the extent of the Buddha's realization one must personally walk the path to its culmination. Inference is not accepted as a valid way of fully knowing the Buddha's attainment. Anything short of completing this path provides a person with only traces or hints of the Buddha's spiritual accomplishment.

The teaching in the sutta builds on an analogy of searching for a bull elephant. Just as seeing an elephant's footprints does not give certainty that they are the footprints of a bull elephant, so fulfilling the earlier steps in practice does not provide direct knowledge and certainty about someone who has completed the fourteenth step. In using this analogy the Buddha compares himself and the attainment of awakening to the bull elephant, the king of beasts.

The path of practice the Buddha describes in MN 27 begins with the appearance of the Tathagata. The Buddha describes himself with a stock formula often used in the suttas as well as in Theravada liturgical chanting. The passage explains that the Tathagata is:

Accomplished, fully enlightened, perfect in true knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of worlds, incomparable leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of gods and humans, enlightened, blessed. (MN 27.11).

Next, a person who listens to the Tathagata teach and who has *faith* reflects on how "the household life is crowded and dusty; life gone forth is wide open." This is a common expression for describing someone's decision to become a monastic. The phrase emphasizes what is gained with taking up the monastic life; i.e., one goes from a confined situation to an unconfined one. The Pali *nekkhama*, usually translated as renunciation, is sometimes explained as coming from a verbal root meaning "to go forth." The English word 'renunciation' stresses what is let go of. The Pali word has a more positive connotation when understood as leaving a restricted life to one lived in the wide open.

### Notes

Both MN 4 and MN 27 end with Janussoni stating the same expression of faith. It seems a little odd that he should on two different occasions say “let the Master Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge for life.’ This may have been a standard formula of faith or it may indicate Janussoni’s enthusiasm. It is also possible that the addition of this stock passage is an artifact of how the suttas were composed and edited.

### Reflections

Please note that the Buddha first begins referring to the elephant footprint analogy when he describes the first jhana. In other words, the ethical practices described before this do not by themselves qualify as providing a trace of the enlightened life. Why do you think the traces of the enlightened life begins with the jhanas?

The path of practice is described as progressive, one stage following the preceding one. Please consider how the practices and attainments build on each other. What do the preceding stages provide the subsequent ones?

Please read paragraphs 12 and 13 several times. Find some contemplative way of reading them; perhaps at the end of your meditation sessions. You might read them out loud or with a friend. Notice what happens as you allow these passages to work within you.

Just as the footprint of any living being  
That walks can be placed within an elephant’s footprint, ...  
So to, all wholesome states can be included in the Four Noble Truths.

MN 28.2