

Study Guide for MN 85 *Bodhirajakumara Sutta*

The Discourse to Prince Bodhi

Virtually all the suttas in the Middle Length Discourses are presented as some form of direct and personal communication. The teachings are thus given in consideration of the particular circumstances of the person or people being addressed. This is most obvious when the teachings are a response to someone's questions or when the examples used to illustrate the teachings come from the life of the questioner (as is the case in MN 85). The personal aspect of the communication is also seen when the Buddha's presence and teachings have an effect on those who meet him and listen to him.

In this regard, it is useful to keep in mind that the Middle Length Discourses not only preserve teachings of the Buddha, they also record how people responded to him and his teachings. Most of the suttas end with a statement of how the audience reacted. For example, the first Middle Length Discourse ends by stating that the monks were not pleased with what they heard. This ending is unusual. More commonly, if the audience were monks, the suttas often end saying that the monks were satisfied and delighted. In the case of lay audiences, a range of responses is recorded. Mahasaccaka is impressed by the Buddha's composure under insult but otherwise goes on his way seemingly without being effected by his encounter with the Buddha (MN 36). More commonly lay people are affected much more positively. Some express confidence in the Buddha, many go for refuge to him, a number of them declare themselves as lay disciples (*upasakas* and *upasikas*) and some ask to be ordained as monks.

MN 85 presents the Buddha's conversation with a prince. It also describes the reverence with which the prince acted toward the Buddha. He sends a representative to see the Buddha with the instruction to, in the name of the prince, bow his head to the Buddha's feet. This is an extreme form of honoring for it dramatically illustrates that one is willing to lower the most valued part of one's body (the head) to the least valuable part of the other's (the feet). When the prince meets the Buddha, the prince does not take that occasion to bow himself. Perhaps it was unbecoming for a prince to actually lower himself that far – it was enough that the student had done it for him. Even so, the surrogate prostration indicates that the prince held the Buddha in high regard.

At the end of the discourse the prince declares that he goes for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for life. In a way that resembles Christian baptism more than any similar behavior recorded elsewhere in the suttas, the prince explains that his mother declared he was taking refuge when he was *in utero* and that his nurse did the same when he was a still a baby.

We read then that the prince had a deep faith that motivated him to revere the Buddha and take refuge in the triple treasure. This stands as a backdrop to the Buddha's teaching on the importance of faith in "striving" for realization (MN85.56-58). The strength of the prince's faith suggests something of how motivating faith can be for practice.

Notes:

The Pali word that Bhikkhu Bodhi translates as ‘striving’ is *padhāna*. Other translators have chosen ‘exertion’ and ‘endeavor’ for this word. It is the same term that is used for the ‘four right efforts’ (*sammā-padhāna*). In the suttas, the Buddha uses many near synonyms to emphasize the role of exertion in practice. In the description of the four right efforts a person is instructed to ‘generate desire, arouse strength, uphold the mind, and endeavor for the sake of these four right efforts. In practicing mindfulness the Buddha emphasizes ardency. Elsewhere he encourages vigilance. The word translated as the energy or effort in the list of the five faculties is *virīya*, a word that is cognate with *vira* or hero (Buddhaghosa defines *virīya* as being the state of a hero). Buddhist practice is thus not for the lazy.

Paragraphs 15-4 of MN 85 contain the most complete account of the Buddha’s own practice found in the Pali suttas. This is not so obvious from Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation because these paragraphs are condensed, with notes referring the reader to the nearly identical passages in MN 26 and 36. MN 36, 85 and 100 add the story of the Buddha’s ascetic practice to the description of the Buddha’s practice given in MN 26 (The Discourse on the Noble Search). In MN 26 the Buddha is teaching his monks; in MN 36, 85, and 100 he is countering wrong views held by laypeople that came to question him. A description of the Buddha’s ascetic practice would not be needed for monks already engaged in the Buddha’s practice. For the lay people in MN 36, 85, and 100 the Buddha used the authority of his own experience rather than reasoning or argument to correct their views. In MN 85.10 the Buddha gives what seems to be a rationale for why he practiced asceticism: “I too thought thus: ‘Pleasure is not to be gained through pleasure; pleasure is to be gained through pain.’”

Reflections:

Please memorize the five factors of striving. Then consider which of the five are strongest in you and which are weakest. How might you strengthen all five?

What outer expressions of faith or confidence do you perform? What happens to you when you express your faith? How does expressing your faith in words and actions support you in your practice? How might it interfere?

What function does going for refuge have for you?