

Study Guide to MN 32

Mahagosinga Sutta

Personal Expressions of the Dhamma

This sutta describes a conversation between some of the most senior enlightened disciples of the Buddha. The conversation takes place in a woodland park filled with the majestic Sala trees – Indian trees having some of the same majesty as large California Redwoods. Sariputta describes the night setting as “delightful, moonlit, the Sala trees in full bloom with heavenly scents wafting in the air.” If, in reading the sutta, you can visualize such a wonderful forest scene, the conversation will probably be more poignant.

In the conversation each monk gives a different answer to the same question. When the Buddha is told of this, he approves each answer as appropriate to the abilities and dispositions of each monk. The Buddha then gives his own, very different answer to the question. From a literary point of view the sutta uses a strategy occasionally used elsewhere in the discourses, namely to give special emphasis to the Buddha’s teachings by contrasting them to other teachings that appear quite lofty.

The sutta can also be seen as showing the unique way different people express the Dhamma. Whenever we consider how the Dhamma might affect or transform us, we can remember that the practice may manifest differently in different people. As we practice, live, and speak of the Dhamma, we hopefully respect the uniqueness of each practitioner.

Note:

Starting in section 5, Sariputta says that each monk speaks according to “his own inspiration.” The Pali word Bhikkhu Bodhi translates as inspiration is *patibhana*, which the Pali-English Dictionary defines as ‘understanding, illumination, intelligence, confidence in speech.’ *Patibhana* is a very important word in the early Buddhist tradition because it refers to talk on the Dhamma that arises out of the understanding, inspiration, and authority of someone other than the Buddha – the implication being that others besides the Buddha can access and speak about the truth. While this may be an obvious possibility, it does suggest that others besides the Buddha can be the source of Buddhist teachings.

Reflections:

- 1) How would you answer the question posed in the sutta? Please write this down and bring it to our first class.
- 2) Do you know people who are likely to answer the question quite differently from yourself?