

Study Guide for MN 58

Abhayarajakumara Sutta

On the Buddha's Use of Right Speech

This discourse is representative of the inter-religious strife and rivalry that existed in the time of the Buddha. Nigantha Nataputta is thought to be Mahavira, the founder of the Jain religion who was a contemporary of the Buddha. A number of the Buddhist suttas present debates and conflict with the Jains, but we have no record of the Jain side of the story so we cannot be sure how accurate the Buddhist versions are.

This discourse was chosen for the beginning of our sutta study program because the Buddha describes criteria he uses for teaching or instructing others. In MN 58.8 we read, that for the Buddha, it is not enough that something is true; what he speaks about also has to be beneficial and timely. That the Buddha's teachings are to be true, beneficial and timely has two important implications. First, as we read a sutta we should remember that the teachings were originally given to someone on a particular occasion and were meant to be beneficial and timely for that occasion. It is easy to pull the teachings out of the context in which they were given and then treat them as abstract philosophy. In reading a sutta we can try to understand not only how a particular teaching might be true, we can also try to understand how it might have been useful for those listening.

The second implication has to do with how you understand the teachings for yourself. In addition to trying to understand the truth of what the Buddha is teaching, it is quite useful if you also consider the times and occasions when these teachings could be true and beneficial for you. Similarly, if there is a teaching you don't agree with, rather than rejecting it, you might consider whether there are circumstances when these teachings would be beneficial for you.

You are encouraged, for each of the suttas we read in the sutta study program, to spend less time focusing on whether you agree or disagree with the Buddha's teachings and more time reflecting on how and when the teachings might be beneficial. After all, as is stated in MN 58, the Buddha was quite capable of saying things that are unwelcome and disagreeable.

Note:

Devadatta who is mentioned in the beginning of the sutta is the Buddha's cousin who in various ways was a rival to the Buddha. At various times he tried to usurp the Buddha's position as head of the Buddha's monastic order. It is also written that he tried to kill the Buddha.

Reflection:

How do you usually relate to teachings that you find unwelcome and disagreeable? How would you go about exploring how disagreeable teachings might be beneficial? Might some teachings be unsuitable for you because they are not 'timely'?