

Study Guide to MN 100

Sangarava Sutta

The Basis for the Buddha's Knowing

This sutta is an account of questions an extremely learned brahmin priest poses to the Buddha. From the detailed description of the brahmin's expertise, we get a glimpse of how well-developed and sophisticated the brahminical religion was at the time. And from the first question the brahmin asks we also get a sense that there were perhaps many people who claimed to have reached the highest level of spiritual knowledge. When the brahmin asks the Buddha how he fits into this collection of "realized" people, the Buddha first classifies them into three categories depending on what they rely on for their "knowledge."

This is a key issue in religions, i.e., from where does religious understanding come? What makes it authoritative? Down through the centuries Indian religious traditions have given much thought to this. The Buddha was no exception.

For the Buddha, the three kinds of 'recluses and Brahmins' who have attained final knowledge are those who rely on traditional teachings and texts, those who rely on reasoning and inquiry, and those who rely on a heightened form of direct knowing call *abhiñña*.

The Buddha does not pass any judgment or evaluation of these three categories. Instead he simply claims he belongs to the third, i.e., those who rely on direct knowing. That is, the Buddha does not rely on tradition, what he has heard from others, or from scriptures. He also does not rely on his reasoning to come to final knowledge. Rather he uses his own ability to know directly.

In this discourse the Buddha does not define what he means by direct knowing. It is well worth considering what it is that we can reliably know for ourselves. As you read through the Middle Length Discourses this year, please see if you can discover what the Buddha means by direct knowing. What can be known in this way? What form of direct knowing is the Buddha most concerned with?

After describing himself as having direct knowledge, the Buddha then gives his own practice history right up to his awakening (sections 9 to 41). These sections of the sutta are abbreviated. I suggest you skip over them and not try to reconstruct the passages – we will be studying this material next month. For now it is enough to understand that in describing his own

practice up to the point of his awakening, the Buddha was describing an impressive degree of spiritual accomplishment.

This seems to be under-appreciated by the Brahmin, for he then changes the subject asking, ‘Do gods exist?’ Or possibly because the Buddha claimed he relies on direct knowing, the brahmin asked his questions to find out how far the Buddha’s knowledge extended. Or, since the brahmanical religion is centered on gods, the brahmin was asking something that was personally important.

This passage is partially significant because it is one of perhaps only two places in the suttas where the Buddha is asked point blank if there are gods, i.e., *devas* (the other is in MN 90). The answer the Buddha gives in this sutta is hard to understand in the original Pali. This may be because the Buddha was being evasive in how he answered. He was being intentionally ambiguous. Or perhaps he was using an idiom that was perfectly clear to his listener but that would not be clear to non-native speakers of the language (i.e., all modern translators and scholars).

It is helpful to compare the translations of two different sentences as provided by Bhikkhu Bodhi and by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Their differences are partially because of differences in these passages as found in the Sri Lankan and Thai editions of the Pali canon.

Bhikkhu Bodhi:

“It is known to me to be the case, Bharadvaja, that there are gods,”

Thanissaro Bhikkhu:

“It is immediately known to me, Bharadvaja, that there are devas.”

And,

Bhikkhu Bodhi :

“It is widely accepted in the world, Bharadvaja, that there are gods.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu:

“It’s assumed as something high in the world that there are devas.”

The main Theravada commentary seems to support Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s translation of the second sentence. The commentary states that *devas* can clearly be known to exist because the Buddha said that it can be known that gods (*devas*) exist because there are living people who are given the name or title of *deva*. It is possible the Buddha perceived the brahmin’s question about gods to be a trick question or perhaps an inappropriate question and so gave a flippant answer. While the Buddha’s answer may not impress a

modern reader, we read in MN 100.43 that it greatly impressed the brahmin. Why might the sophisticated brahmin have appreciated the Buddha's answer?

Notes:

The Buddha's three categories of Brahmins and recluses who claim perfect knowledge are quite similar to the three ways of knowing listed in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (albeit with different words; *agama*, *anumana*, and *pratyksa*). Although the words are different, the parallel in underlying thought is suggestive of how much sharing there was between Indian religious traditions. In fact, a good number of the teachings that we now associate with Buddhism existed before the Buddha; some teachings associated with other Indian religions originally came from Buddhism.

Reflections:

Please begin making an inventory of your spiritual and religious beliefs. On what basis do you take them to be true? Are some based on received tradition or the teachings of others? Are some based on your own power of reasoning? Which come from what you might know directly?

How can you be sure that you know something directly versus knowing it through an overlay of interpretation, reasoning, logic, or social/linguistic conditioning?

What do you think you can most reliably or usefully know directly?