

Study Guide to MN 4 ***Bhayabherava Sutta***

The Discourse on Fear and Dread

This discourse provides one of the most common descriptions of the Buddha's awakening found in the Middle Length Discourses (repeated in MN 6, 12, 19, 39). It reports the Buddha going through a threefold process of meditation and insight. The first part of this process he describes in section 22: "Tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was tranquil and untroubled, my mind concentrated and unified." The second part involves going through the four 'form' *jhanas* (absorptions). The last phase involves attaining the Three Knowledges.

In the Middle Length Discourses, the Three Knowledges are closely connected to the Buddha's Awakening. This raises the question of their function. Why was seeing his past lives important? Why was it necessary to have the divine eye enabling him to see how beings pass away and are reborn? The third knowledge clearly places the Four Noble Truths at the heart of this Awakening. Does the third knowledge build on the first and second? By seeing the conditional relationship between suffering and its origin, cessation and the way to cessation he could be freed from the taints. His Awakening thus involves both insight and transformation.

The Buddha as exemplar

In the opening of the sutta, the Buddha says that people "follow my example." At the end of the discourse he explains that he resorts to the forest out of "compassion for future generations." The usual interpretation of this statement is that he resorts to forests in order to set an example for later practitioners.

It is well worth considering how the Buddha functions as an example. What aspects of his life are later generations to emulate? To what degree were the suttas and other early texts composed in order to encourage people to live or practice in certain ways?

Notes

Many readers are confused by section 21; why would some recluses and Brahmins "perceive day when it is night and night when it is day." And why does the Buddha feel it is necessary to claim he sees day as day and night as night? After all, this is what most ordinary people do as well.

One explanation is that some recluses and Brahmins believed reversing perceptions of day and night was an important attainment. The Buddha, in contrast, was saying that it was an irrelevant attainment.

The Pali commentary to this sutta explains that if someone attaining *jhana* with a white *kasina* (i.e., focusing on a white disk until the whiteness fills the mind) emerges

from the *jhana* unexpectedly at night then he or she might mistakenly think it is daytime. This explanation seems forced.

Another explanation is that a mistake was made during the transmission of this part of this sutta. In other words, perhaps the text originally had something that did make better sense. This theory is supported by the fact that the Chinese version of this sutta has alternative wording for this passage that is quite reasonable. The Chinese version simply says, “Both day and night, some recluses do not understand the path of the Dharma.”

The Chinese version of this sutta also has a different description of the third knowledge (section 31). It contains no mention of the Four Noble Truths or the fourfold formula for the taints. The Chinese sutta (EA 31.1) simply has:

When my mind became composed, purified, clarified, without blemish, without defilement, grown soft and workable, fixed, and immovable, I called to mind knowledge to eliminate the taints. Then I truly knew suffering. (T125 p666c15)

There is no definite interpretation for the difference between the two suttas. However, given the centrality of the Four Noble Truths and the importance of the Buddha’s enlightenment, it seems unlikely that this would have been dropped during the transmission of the sutta. It is more likely that it was added to the Pali sutta sometime after the original composition of the text. Some support for this idea is found in MN 6 (section 19), MN12 (section 19) where the third knowledge is described closer to the Chinese version than in MN 4. Though this is all conjecture, the differences between the Pali and the Chinese versions of the sutta at least suggest that we should be cautious in assuming the Pali sutta represents the original version of the sutta.

Reflections on MN 4

An understanding of rebirth is inherent in the first two Knowledges. It is also an important foundation to the Buddha’s liberation. Why do you think this is? What do you think about this emphasis on rebirth? Does rebirth have a role in your practice?

Have you ever practiced alone in the forest or in a place where you were afraid? What value do such locations have for your practice? The Buddha gave a long list of reasons why someone might be afraid while in remote forests. Do any of these reasons play a role in any fear that you have? Do you think you would be less afraid if you were purified in bodily, verbal or mental conduct? What if you were free of covetousness, hate, sloth and torpor, etc.? The sutta suggests that one can deal with fear of the wilderness by inwardly changing oneself. What do you think of this?

Please consider the differences between the description of the Buddha’s awakening in MN 4 and in MN 26 (section 18). If you have access to Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of the Samyutta Nikaya (The Connected Discourses) you can also compare these with a third description of the Buddha’s Awakening (SN 35.13 and 14; pp1136-7).

Further reading

One explanation of the function of the Three Knowledges can be read in Thanissaro Bhikkhu's *Wings of Awakening* (pp1-12; especially p 10)

The best scholarly survey and analysis of the sources for understanding the Buddha's life is Hajime Nakamura's *Gotama Buddha: A Biography Based on the Most Reliable Texts* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 2000)