

## Study Guide for MN 12

### *Mahasihanda Sutta*

#### The Greater Discourse on the Lion's Roar

The Buddha is a source of tremendous faith, devotion and inspiration within the Buddhist world. However, it is not easy to understand who the Buddha was: MN 72 claims he cannot be “reckoned” or defined. He is said to be human though in some descriptions he appears superhuman. Historians of Buddhism point out that over time the Buddha tended to be increasingly mythologized. This tendency developed furthest within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, where he was apotheosized to the point of being more god than human. For example, the Lotus Sutra (an important Mahayana work sometimes called the bible of East Asian Buddhism) states that Sakyamuni Buddha was not real; he was actually a mental image projected from an eternal, celestial Buddha to provide provisional teachings. Within much of Mahayana Buddhism the idea of an historical, human Buddha faded into obscurity. It was a surprise – some say a shock – for late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese Buddhists to discover the Pali suttas and the idea that Buddhism had its origin in an historical person.

While not as elaborate as the Mahayana, Theravada Buddhism also developed myths about the Buddha. Included are mythic lineages that connect the Buddha to past Buddhas, to a family tree going back to a mythical first king, and to a long sequence of past lives. Innumerable legends arose about miracles he performed. Theravada commentaries attribute superhuman omniscience to him.

The Buddha must have been an extraordinary person. But how extraordinary was he? At what point did accounts of him switch from extraordinary but humanly possible to mythological and far beyond human capacity?

Sutta 12 is one of those discourses that enumerates many of the ways that he was extraordinary. Are the descriptions in this sutta real or the elements of myth? How do we decide? On what basis do we evaluate the truth of how the Buddha describes himself in this sutta? According to MN 12 this is an important question because there are serious consequences to denying that the Buddha had attained “superhuman states.”

Stories of Sunakkhatta, the man who disparages the Buddha in MN 12, also occur in the Long Discourses (DN 24). Still a monk, Sunakkhatta threatens to leave the monastic life because the Buddha had not performed any miracles. Calling him a fool for thinking this way, the Buddha emphasizes that the purpose of the Dhamma “is to lead whoever practices it to the total destruction of suffering.” However, the Buddha goes on to perform a series of miracles. The first is to foresee someone’s death and rebirth. The most dramatic miracle was when the Buddha entered “the fire-element, and rose into the air to the height of seven palm-tress, and projecting a beam for the height of another seven so that it blazed and shed fragrance” (DN 24.2.13). Are these miracle stories myth or not? If they are myth, did they begin in the lifetime of the Buddha or were they composed afterwards? What kind of records are the suttas?

Notes

In Connected Discourses (SN 52.12-24), Venerable Anuruddha explains that each of the abilities that the Buddha claims from section 6 to section 19 in MN 12 is attained by practicing the four foundations of mindfulness. The connection to the four foundations of mindfulness is most obvious in section 8 of MN 12. The description the Buddha gives of knowing “a mind affected by lust as affected by lust, etc...” is the exact wording of the third foundation of mindfulness in the *Satipatthana Sutta* (MN 10.34).

In section 5, the Buddha infers that it is appropriate to understand that the Blessed One “is accomplished, fully enlightened, perfect in true knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of worlds, incomparable leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of gods and humans, enlightened, blessed.” This quote is often used liturgically at the beginning of most Theravada Buddhist chanting sessions.

At the end of MN 12 the Buddha names the sutta ‘The Hair-raising Discourse.’ The word translated here as “discourse” is *pariyaya*. We know neither when the sutta received its present title nor when the discourses started to be called ‘suttas’.

Reflections:

How might the ten powers of the Tathagata (sections 9-19) be relevant in the practice of mindfulness and insight?

What role does respect, gratitude, and reverence have in your Buddhist practice? How might you want to express these toward the Buddha? How might these attitudes support your practice?

At the beginning of MN 12 the Buddha says that one praises the Buddha by saying he teaches a practice leading to “the complete destruction of suffering.” Why might this praise not suffice? Why should the Buddha go to great lengths to describe his “superhuman states” and his “distinctions in knowledge and vision”? What value might it be for you and your practice to consider the lofty states and knowledges that the Buddha attained? Which of these attainments is most meaningful for you?