

Study Guide for MN 36 *Mahasaccaka Sutta*

The Greater Discourse to Saccaka

The Buddha lived during an effervescent period of religious diversity and cross fertilization. It was also a time of vigorous debate and competition among different spiritual groups. Of the different sects of the time, the Jains were perhaps the closest to the Buddhists. Nigantha, the historical founder of the Jains, was a contemporary of the Buddha. It is quite likely they even met. Coming out of the same religious environment and interacting with each other for centuries, Jainism and Buddhism share a remarkable amount of teachings and practices.

The early suttas suggest that there was considerable amount of rivalry between the Jain and Buddhist groups. The only “records” of this conflict are found in the Buddhist texts. For some reason the Jain scriptures do not mention the Buddhists by name. Middle Length Discourse 36 provides an example of the interface of Jainism and Buddhism.

This discourse is organized around questions Saccaka, a Jain follower, uses to challenge the Buddha. Implying that developing both the body and the mind is best, Saccaka assumes that the Buddha teaches only the “development of the body.” After the Buddha gives an example of how physical and mental development together allow one to be unaffected by pleasant and painful feelings, Saccaka asks if the Buddha ever had strong pain or pleasure. Buddha responds with a long autobiographical description of his own practice. The function of the autobiographical narrative seems to be to contrast the Buddha’s practice with that of the Jains and to teach that such austerities as practiced by the Jains do not lead to liberation.

At the end of the discourse, Saccaka asks whether the Buddha ever slept during the day. This question seems out of place following the Buddha’s description of his Awakening. However, it is in keeping with Saccaka’s attempt to contrast the Buddha’s practice with that of the Jains: the Jains had a practice of not sleeping during the day.

The Three Similes (sections 17-19)

These three similes indicate that people cannot attain Awakening if they have not abandoned sensual craving. No matter how much painful asceticism a person undergoes, if latent sensual craving has not been abandoned freedom cannot occur. We will explore teachings on sensuality later in the year. For now I would like to highlight this issue so you begin noticing its appearance in the sutta readings.

Ascetic Practice (sections 20-30)

The two spiritual sects that had the most emphasis on asceticism were the Jains and the Ajivakas. The ascetic practices the Buddha says he underwent are practices associated with these two sects. As a means to liberation, these ascetic practices had two

functions: 1) to use up one's store of karma, and 2) to cease all activities, including mental activities, so that liberation through non-activity could occur. The practice of breathless meditation and fasting could be seen as attempts at reaching non-activity.

One function of describing the Buddha's ascetic practice is to show that the Buddha had practiced austerities as well as any Jain or Ajivaka before he decided to look for another path.

Childhood Memory (sections 31-32)

Another function of the description of ascetic practice is to set up a sharp contrast with the relaxed and pleasant description of Buddha's childhood memory of sitting under the rose-apple tree. This memory helped the Buddha to distinguish between sensual pleasure and non-sensual pleasure. Like the ascetic tradition of his time, the Buddha saw danger in sensual pleasure. But when he realized that there are non-sensual pleasures arising from meditative absorption, he turned toward such absorption as a potential path to liberation. In contrast to those who sought liberation through suffering and inactivity, the Buddha sought it through a path of a particular form of pleasure.

The story of Buddha's childhood memory also functions to show how the Buddha discovered concentration practice as the key that led to his awakening.

Notes

In section 26 some of the gods think that the Buddha is an "*arahant*." The word literally means "worthy one" and is used in Buddhism to refer to someone who is fully awakened. In Buddhism it has come to mean someone who is fully awakened but who is not a Buddha. In the earliest suttas, however, *arahant* was a term also used for the Buddha (and the word *buddha* was sometimes used to refer to the "arahant" disciples of the Buddha). The term *arahant* was used prior to Buddhism by some religious traditions of India, including the Jains. The appearance of this word in this paragraph suggests its pre-Buddhist usage.

In sections 21-24 the Buddha refers to practicing "breathless meditation." It is possible that the word *jhānam*, here translated as meditation, should more appropriately be translated 'trance' or 'absorption' in a quite broad sense of these words. In time, Buddhists narrowed the meaning of this term to the four or eight absorption concentration states. Here the term does not refer to these Buddhist absorption states. At times, the word *jhānam* seems to simply mean meditation in general.

Reflection

In the way that the Buddha discusses, how developed are you in body and mind? How much equanimity do you have in regard to painful or pleasant feelings? How could you train yourself so that pain doesn't lead to sorrow and pleasure doesn't lead to attachment?

The Buddha's memory of sitting under the rose-apple tree is a very important teaching in Buddhism. Have you had experiences of joy that was not caused by sensual

pleasure or by external conditions in the world? What role could non-sensual pleasure have in your practice?

In reference to the simile of the fire sticks, in what ways does sensual desire make you not able to get a good 'fire' going with your practice?

Please read and reflect carefully on section 47.