

**Thanissaro Bhikkhu's introduction to
Brahmanimantaknika Sutta
MN 49**

The Discourse of the Invitation of a Brahma

*Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation of this sutta is found at [accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org)
(<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.049.than.html>)*

In this sutta, the Buddha faces two antagonists: Baka, a brahma who believes that his brahma-attainment is the highest attainment there is; and Mara, who wants (1) to keep Baka under his power by allowing Baka to maintain his deluded opinion, and (2) to prevent the Buddha from sharing his awakened knowledge with others. Of the two, Mara is the more insidious, a point illustrated by the fact that Mara always speaks through someone else and never directly shows his face. (Another interesting point is illustrated by the fact that Mara is the source of the demand that one obey a creator god.)

In overcoming his antagonists, the Buddha asserts the superiority of his knowledge in two major fashions: through a description of his awakened knowledge and through a display of psychic powers.

The Buddha describes his awakened knowledge in a variety of ways:

- by identifying Mara whenever he possesses an attendant of Baka's assembly,
- by describing the full extent of Baka's power,
- by identifying levels of being that Baka does not know,
- by describing an awakened consciousness that is not known by means of any of the six senses at all,
- by asserting an awareness that avoids delight in both becoming and the quest for non-becoming, and
- by asserting that he has abandoned all possible conditions that would lead to further rebirth.

Some of these assertions — in particular, the assertion of a consciousness not mediated by any of the six senses — are extremely important dhamma lessons, which are further explained in the notes. But as the sutta shows, even the Buddha's description of these teachings was not enough to win over Baka or the members of his following. They were convinced only when the Buddha then performed a feat of psychic power that (1) even Baka could not fathom and (2) illustrated the Buddha's major point. Up to then, in identifying Mara and the range of Baka's power, the Buddha was in effect saying, "I see you, but you don't see me." With his display of psychic power, in which brahma and his following could not see him but could hear his voice, he demonstrated his point in such graphic terms that Baka and his following were immediately won over.

In this way, the protagonists of this sutta react in a way very different from that of a typical modern reader. We at present, when reading this sutta, may be more impressed with the Buddha's explanation of his awakened knowledge than we are with the account of his display of psychic power, for after all, both aspects of the sutta — the description of the Buddha's knowledge and the description of his psychic power — are, for us, just that: descriptions. But, for those who witnessed it, his display of power was an undeniable fact that went beyond words. They saw him go beyond their range. Prior to that display, they regarded his claims of knowledge simply as that: mere claims. When he showed, however, that he could perform a miracle that even Baka could not perform, they were forced to concede his superiority. Thus this sutta imparts a lesson often forgotten at present, that the Buddha taught not only by word but also by example, and that some of his examples required a dimension of power that even the gods could not match.

Strictly speaking, of course, the Buddha's display of power did not prove that he had gone beyond becoming. After all, in becoming invisible to Baka, he may simply have gone to another level of becoming of which Baka was unaware. However, the Buddha correctly surmised that a display of power would subdue the pride of his listeners, awaken a sense of conviction in his attainment, and thus enable them to enter the path of practice. As he states in [MN 27](#), only when one sees the four noble truths — usually a synonym for stream-entry — is one's conviction in the Buddha's Awakening confirmed. Only when one puts an end to one's mental fermentations does one have firm proof of the Buddha's Awakening. The Buddha notes in [DN 11](#) that a display of psychic powers can sometimes backfire, in that one's audience might assume that one is engaging in cheap magic tricks. Thus, instead of inspiring conviction, the display simply increases doubt. Nevertheless, there are other instances in the Canon — most notably in the story of the Kassapa brothers (Mv.I.15-22) and that of Angulimala ([MN 86](#)) — where the Buddha was able to display his powers to good effect. Still, because he could not trust even his arahant disciples to possess his same sense of when such powers would work and when they would backfire, he forbade his disciples from displaying psychic powers to lay people. (See Cv.V.8; [Buddhist Monastic Code, vol. 2, chapter 10.](#))

The conclusion of the sutta states that the sutta's name comes from two facets of the story: the fact that it contains an invitation from a brahma — when Baka welcomes the Buddha to his realm — and from the silencing of Mara. The first point is clear enough, but the second requires explanation. It is a play on the word brahma, which is not only a noun denoting the highest levels of devas, but also an adjective meaning "of great or high power." The Buddha's last statement, in which he declares his freedom from rebirth, is something of an invitation to Mara: Mara is welcome to refute it if he can. Up to that point, Mara has phrased his threats to the Buddha in terms of the fortunate rebirths the Buddha will experience if he obeys Mara's advice, and the unfortunate ones he will experience if he doesn't. Now that the Buddha declares, in a way that Mara cannot refute, that he has abandoned all possible conditions for rebirth, Mara has nothing more on which to base his threats. Thus he is left speechless. In this way, the Buddha's last statement is a brahma-invitation: a statement that anyone is welcome to refute, but of such great power that no one can refute it at all.