DN 11 — DN 11 To Kevaṭṭa | Kevaṭṭa Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

To Kevaṭṭa

Kevaṭṭa Sutta (DN 11)

Introduction

This discourse (also known as the Kevaddha Sutta) discusses the role of miracles and conversations with heavenly beings as a possible basis for faith and belief. While not denying the reality of such experiences, the Buddha points out that—of all possible miracles—only the miracle of instruction in the proper training of the mind is reliable. As for heavenly beings, they are subject to greed, anger, and delusion, and so the information they give—especially with regard to the miracle of instruction—is not necessarily trustworthy. Thus the only valid basis for faith is the instruction that, when followed, brings

about the end of one's own mental defilements.

The tale concluding the discourse is one of the finest examples of the early Buddhist sense of humor.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Nālandā in Pāvārika's mango grove. Then Kevaṭṭa the householder approached the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "Lord, this Nālandā is powerful, both prosperous and populous, filled with people who have faith in the Blessed One. It would be good if the Blessed One were to direct a monk to display a miracle of psychic power from his superior human state so that Nālandā would to an even greater extent have faith in the Blessed One."

When this was said, the Blessed One said to Kevaṭṭa the householder, "Kevaṭṭa, I don't teach the monks in this way: 'Come, monks, display a miracle of psychic power to the lay people clad in white.'"

A second time.... A third time, Kevaṭṭa the householder said to the Blessed One: "I won't argue with the Blessed One, but I tell you: Lord, this Nālandā is powerful, both prosperous and populous, filled with people who have faith in the Blessed One. It would be good if the Blessed One were to direct a monk to display a miracle of psychic power from his superior human state so that Nālandā would to an even greater extent have faith in the Blessed One."

A third time, the Blessed One said to Kevaṭṭa the householder, "Kevaṭṭa, I don't teach the monks in this way: 'Come, monks, display a miracle of psychic power to the lay people clad in white.'

"Kevaṭṭa, there are these three miracles that I have declared, having directly known and realized them for myself. Which three? The miracle of psychic power, the miracle of telepathy, and the miracle of instruction.1

The Miracle of Psychic Power

"And what is the miracle of psychic power? There is the case where a monk wields manifold psychic powers. Having been one he becomes many; having been many he becomes one. He appears. He vanishes. He goes unimpeded through walls, ramparts, and mountains as if through space. He dives in and out of the earth as if it were water. He walks on water without sinking as if it were dry land. Sitting cross-legged he flies through the air like a winged bird. With his hand he touches and strokes even the sun and moon, so mighty and powerful. He exercises influence with his body even as far as the Brahmā worlds.

"Then someone who has faith and conviction in him sees him wielding manifold psychic powers... exercising influence with his body even as far as the Brahmā worlds. He reports

this to someone who has no faith and no conviction, telling him, 'Isn't it awesome. Isn't it astounding, how great the power, how great the prowess of this contemplative. Just now I saw him wielding manifold psychic powers… exercising influence with his body even as far as the Brahmā worlds.'

Then the person without faith, without conviction, would say to the person with faith and with conviction: 'Sir, there is a charm called the Gandhāri charm by which the monk wielded manifold psychic powers… exercising influence with his body even as far as the Brahmā worlds.' What do you think, Kevaṭṭa? Isn't that what the man without faith, without conviction, would say to the man with faith and with conviction?"

"Yes, lord, that's just what he would say."

"Seeing this drawback to the miracle of psychic power, Kevaṭṭa, I feel ashamed, repelled, and disgusted with the miracle of psychic power.

The Miracle of Telepathy

"And what is the miracle of telepathy? There is the case where a monk reads the minds, the mental events, the thoughts, the ponderings of other beings, other individuals, (saying,) 'Such is your thinking, here is where your thinking is, thus is your mind.'

"Then someone who has faith and conviction in him sees him reading the minds… of other beings…. He reports this to someone who has no faith and no conviction, telling him, 'Isn't it awesome. Isn't it astounding, how great the power, how great the prowess of this contemplative. Just now I saw him reading the minds… of other beings….'

Then the person without faith, without conviction, would say to the person with faith and with conviction: 'Sir, there is a charm called the Maṇikā charm by which the monk read the minds… of other beings….' What do you think, Kevaṭṭa? Isn't that what the man without faith, without conviction, would say to the man with faith and with conviction?"

"Yes, lord, that's just what he would say."

"Seeing this drawback to the miracle of telepathy, Kevaṭṭa, I feel horrified, humiliated, and disgusted with the miracle of telepathy.

The Miracle of Instruction

"And what is the miracle of instruction? There is the case where a monk gives instruction in this way: 'Direct your thought in this way, don't direct it in that. Attend to things in this way, don't attend to them in that. Let go of this, enter and remain in that.' This, Kevaṭṭa, is called the miracle of instruction.

"Then there is the case where a Tathāgata appears in the world, worthy and rightly self-awakened. He teaches the Dhamma admirable in its beginning, admirable in its

middle, admirable in its end. He proclaims the holy life both in its particulars and in its essence, entirely perfect, surpassingly pure.

“A householder or householder’s son, hearing the Dhamma, gains conviction in the Tathāgata and reflects: ‘Household life is confining, a dusty path. The life gone forth is like the open air. It is not easy living at home to practice the holy life totally perfect, totally pure, like a polished shell. What if I were to shave off my hair and beard, put on the ochre robes, and go forth from the household life into homelessness?’

“So after some time he abandons his mass of wealth, large or small; leaves his circle of relatives, large or small; shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the ochre robes, and goes forth from the household life into homelessness.

“When he has thus gone forth, he lives restrained by the rules of the monastic code, seeing danger in the slightest faults. Consummate in his virtue, he guards the doors of his senses, is possessed of mindfulness & alertness, and is content [for details, see DN 2]....

Abandoning the Hindrances

“Endowed with this noble aggregate of virtue, this noble restraint over the sense faculties, this noble mindfulness and alertness, and this noble contentment, he seeks out a secluded dwelling: a forest, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw. After his meal, returning from his alms round, he sits down, crosses his legs, holds his body erect, and brings mindfulness to the fore.

“Abandoning covetousness with regard to the world, he dwells with an awareness devoid of covetousness. He cleanses his mind of covetousness. Abandoning ill will & anger, he dwells with an awareness devoid of ill will, sympathetic with the welfare of all living beings. He cleanses his mind of ill will & anger. Abandoning sloth & torpor, he dwells with an awareness devoid of sloth and torpor, mindful, alert, percipient of light. He cleanses his mind of sloth & torpor. Abandoning restlessness & anxiety, he dwells undisturbed, his mind inwardly stilled. He cleanses his mind of restlessness & anxiety. Abandoning uncertainty, he dwells having crossed over uncertainty, with no perplexity with regard to skillful mental qualities. He cleanses his mind of uncertainty.

“Suppose that a man, taking a loan, invests it in his business affairs. His business affairs succeed. He repays his old debts and there is extra left over for maintaining his wife. The thought would occur to him, ‘Before, taking a loan, I invested it in my business affairs. Now my business affairs have succeeded. I have repaid my old debts and there is extra left over for maintaining my wife.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

“Now suppose that a man falls sick—in pain and seriously ill. He does not enjoy his meals, and there is no strength in his body. As time passes, he eventually recovers from that sickness. He enjoys his meals and there is strength in his body. The thought would occur to him, ‘Before, I was sick....Now I am recovered from that sickness. I enjoy my meals and there is strength in my body.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

“Now suppose that a man is bound in prison. As time passes, he eventually is released from that bondage, safe and sound, with no loss of property. The thought would occur to him, ‘Before, I was bound in prison. Now I am released from that bondage, safe and sound, with no loss of my property.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

“Now suppose that a man is a slave, subject to others, not subject to himself, unable to go where he likes. As time passes, he eventually is released from that slavery, subject to himself, not subject to others, freed, able to go where he likes. The thought would occur to him, ‘Before, I was a slave….Now I am released from that slavery, subject to myself, not subject to others, freed, able to go where I like.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

“Now suppose that a man, carrying money and goods, is traveling by a road through desolate country. As time passes, he eventually emerges from that desolate country, safe and sound, with no loss of property. The thought would occur to him, ‘Before, carrying money and goods, I was traveling by a road through desolate country. Now I have emerged from that desolate country, safe and sound, with no loss of my property.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

“In the same way, when these five hindrances are not abandoned in himself, the monk regards it as a debt, a sickness, a prison, slavery, a road through desolate country. But when these five hindrances are abandoned in himself, he regards it as unindebtedness, good health, release from prison, freedom, a place of security. When he sees that they have been abandoned within him, gladness is born. In one who is gladdened, rapture is born. Enraptured at heart, his body grows calm. His body calm, he is sensitive to pleasure. Feeling pleasure, his mind becomes concentrated.

The Four Jhānas

“Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, he enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. Just as if a dexterous bathman or bathman’s apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again and again with water, so that his ball of bath powder—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within and without—would nevertheless not drip; even so, the monk permeates…this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of seclusion.

“This, too, is called the miracle of instruction.

“Then, with the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters and remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. Just like

a lake with spring-water welling up from within, having no inflow from the east, west, north, or south, and with the skies supplying abundant showers time & again, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate and pervade, suffuse and fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; even so, the monk permeates… this very body with the rapture and pleasure born of concentration. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture and pleasure born of concentration.

"This, too, is called the miracle of instruction.

"And then, with the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters and remains in the third jhāna, and of him the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.' He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. Just as in a lotus pond, some of the lotuses, born and growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated and pervaded, suffused and filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water; even so, the monk permeates…this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure divested of rapture.

"This, too, is called the miracle of instruction.

"And then, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. He sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; even so, the monk sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness.

"This, too, is called the miracle of instruction.

Insight Knowledge, etc.

"With his mind thus concentrated, purified, & bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, he directs and inclines it to knowledge & vision… to creating a mind-made body… to the modes of supranormal powers… to the divine ear-element… to knowledge of the awareness of other beings… to knowledge of the recollection of past lives… to knowledge of the passing away & re-appearance of beings… to the knowledge of the ending of effluents. He discerns, as it has come to be, that 'This is stress… This is the origination of stress… This is the cessation of stress… This is the way leading to the cessation of stress… These are effluents… This is the origination of effluents… This is the cessation of effluents… This is the way leading to the cessation of effluents.' His heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, is released from the effluent of sensuality, the effluent of becoming, the effluent of ignorance. With release,

there is the knowledge, 'Released.' He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.' Just as if there were a pool of water in a mountain glen—clear, limpid, and unsullied—where a man with good eyesight standing on the bank could see shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also shoals of fish swimming about and resting, and it would occur to him, 'This pool of water is clear, limpid, and unsullied. Here are these shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also these shoals of fish swimming about and resting.' In the same way—with his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability—the monk directs and inclines it to the knowledge of the ending of effluents. He discerns, as it has come to be, that 'This is stress… This is the origination of stress… This is the cessation of stress… This is the way leading to the cessation of stress… These are effluents… This is the origination of effluents… This is the cessation of effluents… This is the way leading to the cessation of effluents.' His heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, is released from the effluent of sensuality, the effluent of becoming, the effluent of ignorance. With release, there is the knowledge, 'Released.' He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'

This, too, is called the miracle of instruction.

"These are the three miracles that I declare, Kevaṭṭa, having directly known and realized them for myself.

Conversations with the devas

"Once, Kevaṭṭa, this train of thought arose in the awareness of a certain monk in this very Saṅgha of monks: 'Where do these four great elements—the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, and the wind property—cease without trace?' Then he attained to such a state of concentration that the way leading to the devas appeared in his concentrated mind. So he approached the Devas of the Retinue of the Four Great Kings and, on arrival, asked them, 'Friends, where do these four great elements—the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, and the wind property—cease without trace?'

"When this was said, the Devas of the Retinue of the Four Great Kings said to the monk, 'We also don't know where the four great elements… cease without trace. But there are the Four Great Kings who are higher and more sublime than we. They should know where the four great elements… cease without trace.'

"So the monk approached the Four Great Kings and, on arrival, asked them, 'Friends, where do these four great elements… cease without trace?'

"When this was said, the Four Great Kings said to the monk, 'We also don't know where the four great elements… cease without trace. But there are the Devas of the Thirty-three who are higher and more sublime than we. They should know….'

“So the monk approached the Devas of the Thirty-three and, on arrival, asked them, ‘Friends, where do these four great elements… cease without trace?’

“When this was said, the Devas of the Thirty-three said to the monk, ‘We also don’t know where the four great elements… cease without trace. But there is Sakka, the ruler of the devas, who is higher and more sublime than we. He should know….’

“So the monk approached Sakka, the ruler of the devas, and, on arrival, asked him, ‘Friend, where do these four great elements… cease without trace?’

“When this was said, Sakka, the ruler of the devas, said to the monk, ‘I also don’t know where the four great elements… cease without trace. But there are the Yāma devas [Devas of the Hours] who are higher and more sublime than I. They should know….’….

“The Yāma devas said, ‘We also don’t know…. But there is the deva named Suyāma…. He should know…. ’ ….

“Suyāma said, ‘I also don’t know…. But there are the Tusita devas…. They should know…. ’….

“The Tusita devas said, ‘We also don’t know…. But there is the deva named Santusita…. He should know…. ’….

“Santusita said, ‘I also don’t know…. But there are the Nimmānaratī devas…. They should know…. ’ ….

“The Nimmānaratī devas [devas who delight in creation] said, ‘We also don’t know…. But there is the deva named Sunimmita…. He should know…. ’ ….

“Sunimmita said, ‘I also don’t know…. But there are the Paranimmitavasavattī devas [Devas Wielding control over the creations of others]…. They should know…. ’ ….

“The Paranimmitavasavattī devas said, ‘We also don’t know…. But there is the deva named Vasavatti…. He should know…. ’ ….

“So the monk approached the deva Vassavatti and, on arrival, asked him, ‘Friend, where do these four great elements… cease without trace?’

“When this was said, the deva Vassavatti said to the monk, ‘I also don’t know where the four great elements… cease without trace. But there are the Devas of Brahmā’s Retinue who are higher and more sublime than I. They should know where the four great elements… cease without trace’….

“Then the monk attained to such a state of concentration that the way leading to the Devas of Brahmā’s Retinue appeared in his concentrated mind. So he approached the Devas of Brahmā’s Retinue and, on arrival, asked them, ‘Friends, where do these four great

elements—the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, and the wind property—cease without trace?'

"When this was said, the Devas of Brahmā's Retinue said to the monk, 'We also don't know where the four great elements… cease without trace. But there is Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Sovereign Lord, the Maker, Creator, Chief, Appointer, and Ruler, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. He is higher and more sublime than we. He should know where the four great elements… cease without trace.'

"'But where, friends, is the Great Brahmā now?'

"'Monk, we also don't know where Brahmā is or in what way Brahmā is. But when signs appear, light shines forth, and a radiance appears, Brahmā will appear. For these are the portents of Brahmā's appearance: Light shines forth and a radiance appears.'

"Then it was not long before Brahmā appeared.

"So the monk approached the Great Brahmā and, on arrival, said, 'Friend, where do these four great elements—the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, and the wind property—cease without trace?'

"When this was said, the Great Brahmā said to the monk, 'I, monk, am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Sovereign Lord, the Maker, Creator, Chief, Appointer, and Ruler, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be.'

A second time, the monk said to the Great Brahmā, 'Friend, I didn't ask you if you were Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Sovereign Lord, the Maker, Creator, Chief, Appointer, and Ruler, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. I asked you where these four great elements—the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, and the wind property—cease without trace.'

"A second time, the Great Brahmā said to the monk, 'I, monk, am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Sovereign Lord, the Maker, Creator, Chief, Appointer, and Ruler, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be.'

"A third time, the monk said to the Great Brahmā, 'Friend, I didn't ask you if you were Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Sovereign Lord, the Maker, Creator, Chief, Appointer, and Ruler, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. I asked you where these four great elements—the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, and the wind property—cease without trace.'

"Then the Great Brahmā, taking the monk by the arm and leading him off to one side, said to him, 'These Devas of the Retinue of Brahmā believe, "There is nothing that the Great

Brahmā does not know. There is nothing that the Great Brahmā does not see. There is nothing of which the Great Brahmā is unaware. There is nothing that the Great Brahmā has not realized." That is why I did not say in their presence that I, too, don't know where the four great elements… cease without trace. So it's your own wrongdoing, your own mistake, in that—bypassing the Blessed One—you searched outside for an answer to this question. Go right back to the Blessed One and, on arrival, ask him this question. However he answers you, that's how you should remember it.'

"Then—just as a strong man might extend his flexed arm or flex his extended arm—the monk disappeared from the Brahmā world and immediately appeared in front of me. Having bowed down to me, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to me, 'Lord, where do these four great elements—the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, and the wind property—cease without trace?'

"When this was said, I said to him, 'Once, monk, some sea-faring merchants, taking a shore-sighting bird, set out across the ocean in their ship. When they could not see the shore from their ship, they released the shore-sighting bird. It flew to the east; it flew to the south; it flew to the west; it flew to the north; it flew to straight up; it flew to the intermediate directions. If it saw the shore in any direction, it flew there and was gone. If it did not see the shore in any direction, it returned right back to the ship. In the same way, monk, having searched as far as the Brahmā world and not receiving an answer to this question, you have come right back to my presence.

"'This question should not be asked in this way: Where do these four great elements—the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, and the wind property—cease without trace? Instead, the question should be asked like this:

"'Where do water, earth, fire, & wind

have no footing?

Where are long & short,

coarse & fine,

fair & foul,

name & form

brought to a stop without trace?

"'And the answer to that is:

"'Consciousness without surface,2

without end,

luminous all around:

Here water, earth, fire, & wind

have no footing.

Here long & short,

coarse & fine,

fair & foul,

here name & form

are all brought to a stop without trace.

With the cessation of (the aggregate of) consciousness

each is here brought to a stop.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Kevaṭṭa the householder delighted in the Blessed One's words.

Notes

1. See AN 3:61.

2. Viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ. This term is nowhere explained in the Canon. Anidassanaṁ is listed in SN 43 as an epithet for unbinding. This is apparently related to the image in SN 12:64 of a beam of light that doesn't land (or: "become established") on any surface anywhere, corresponding to consciousness that takes no food anywhere. MN 49 mentions that viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ "is not experienced through the allness of the All"—the "All" meaning the six internal and six external sense media (see SN 35:23). In this it differs from the consciousness factor in dependent co-arising, which is defined in terms of the six sense media. Because name and form are brought to an end, this consciousness also lies beyond the consciousness of the jhānas and the formless attainments, inasmuch as the four jhānas are composed of both name and form, and the formless attainments are composed of various aspects of name: feeling, perception, and fabrication. The formless jhānas are also experienced through the sixth sense medium, the intellect.

Lying outside of time and space, consciousness without surface would also not come under the consciousness-aggregate, which covers all consciousness near and far; past, present, and future. However, the fact that it is outside of time and space—in a dimension where there is no here, there, or in between (Ud 1:10), no coming, no going, or staying (Ud 8:1)—means that it cannot be described as eternal or omnipresent, terms that have meaning only within space and time.

The standard description of nibbāna after death is, "All that is sensed, not being relished, will grow cold right here." (See MN 140 and Iti 44.) Again, as "all" is defined as the sense media, this raises the question as to whether consciousness without feature is not covered by this "all." However, AN 4:173 warns that any speculation as to whether anything does or doesn't remain after the remainderless stopping of the six sense media is to "objectify the non-objectified," which gets in the way of attaining the non-objectified. Thus this is a

question that is best put aside.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 16; MN 86; SN 41:4; AN 4:45; AN 9:38