Snp 4.9 — Sn 4:9 To Māgandiya

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: ABBREVIATED. Every source-unit character is preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure. Thanissaro's collection-level note explicitly states that repetitions were cut: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/about.html. This is evidence about the translation method, not an assertion that every individual unit contains an omission; no repetitions reconstructed.

Text

4:9 To Māgandiya

[Māgandiya, a brahman, offers his daughter to the Buddha, who replies:]1

“On seeing [the daughters of Māra]

—Discontent, Craving, & Passion—

there wasn’t even the desire for sex.

So what would I want with this,

filled with urine & excrement?

I wouldn’t want to touch it

even with my foot.”2

Māgandiya:

“If you don’t want
this gem of a woman, coveted
by many kings,
then for what sort of viewpoint,
habit, practice, life,
attainment of [further] becoming
do you argue?”

The Buddha:

“‘I argue for this’
doesn’t occur to one
when considering what’s grasped
among doctrines.
Looking for what is ungrasped
with regard to views,3
and detecting inner peace,
I saw.”

Māgandiya:

“Sage, you speak
of not grasping
at any theorized judgments.
This ‘inner peace’:
What does it mean?
How is it,
by the enlightened,
proclaimed?”

The Buddha:

“He doesn’t speak of purity
in connection with view,
learning,
knowledge,
habit or practice.
Nor is it found by a person
through lack of view,
of learning,
of knowledge,
of habit or practice.4
Letting these go, without grasping,
at peace,
independent,
one wouldn’t long for becoming.”

Māgandiya:
“Well, if he doesn’t speak of purity
in connection with view,
learning,
knowledge,
habit or practice.
and it isn’t found by a person
through lack of view,
of learning,
of knowledge,
of habit or practice,5
it seems to me that this teaching’s
simply confused,
for some assume a purity
in terms of

—by means of6—

a view.”

The Buddha:

“Asking questions

dependent on view,

you’re confused

by the things you have grasped.

And so you don’t glimpse

even

the slightest

notion

[of what I am saying].

That’s why you think

it’s confused.

Whoever supposes

‘equal,’

‘superior,’ or

‘inferior,’

by that he’d dispute;

whereas to one unaffected

by these three,

‘equal,’

‘superior,’

do not occur.

Of what would the brahman say ‘true’

or ‘false,’

with whom would he dispute?

With whom would he join in dispute,

he in whom ‘equal,’ ‘unequal’ are not?

Having abandoned home,
living free from society,
the sage
in villages
creates no intimacies.
Remote from sensuality, not
preferring,
he wouldn’t engage with people
in quarrelsome debate.7

Those things
aloof from which
he should go about in the world:
The Nāga
wouldn’t take them up
& argue for them.

As the prickly lotus
is unsmeared by water & mud,
so the sage,
an exponent of peace,
without greed,
is unsmeared by sensuality &
the world.

An attainer-of-knowledge isn’t measured
made proud8
by views or what’s thought,
for he isn’t fashioned9 of them.
He wouldn’t be led
by action,10 learning;

doesn't reach a conclusion

in any entrenchments.

For one dispassionate toward perception

there are no snares;

for one released by discernment,

no

delusions.

Those who grasp at perceptions & views

go about clashing in the world."

vv. 835–847

Notes

1. This information is taken from SnA. The Sanskrit version of this sutta found in the Divyāvadāna provides the same basic information in a narrative much more elaborate than that in SnA. The Sanskrit translation of this sutta found in East Turkestan includes a short prose introduction that agrees in some details with the Divyāvadāna narrative, and in others with the SnA narrative.

2. Unfortunately, the sutta does not say what Māgandiya's daughter had done or thought to deserve such a sharp rebuke. See MN 58.

3. See AN 10:93.

4. Putting the first two sentences of this verse together and making sense of them is the major challenge for anyone trying to translate this poem. The reading given here is based on considerations of both grammar and context.

a) First, grammar: The Pali of the first sentence puts the words for "view, learning, knowledge, habit, & practice" in the instrumental case. This case stands for the relationship "by means of" or "because of" but it also has an idiomatic meaning: "in terms of." (To keep the translation neutral on this point, I have translated with the idiom, "in connection with," which can carry both possibilities.) The second sentence puts the words for lack of view, etc., in the ablative case, which carries the meaning "because of" or "from."

If we assume that the instrumental case in the first sentence is meant in the sense of "by means of," then we are dealing—as Māgandiya asserts—with plain nonsense: The first sentence would say that a person cannot achieve purity by means of views, etc., while the second sentence would be saying that he cannot achieve purity by means of no view, etc.

The fact that the two sentences place the relevant terms in different grammatical cases, though, suggests that they are talking about two different kinds of relationships. If we take the instrumental in the first sentence idiomatically in the sense of "in terms of," then the verse not only makes sense but also fits in with teachings of the rest of the Pali suttas: A person cannot be said to be pure simply because he/she holds to a particular view, body of learning, etc. Purity is not defined in those terms. The second sentence goes on to say that a person doesn't arrive at purity from a lack of view, etc. Putting the two sentences together with the third, the message is this: One uses right views, learning, knowledge, habits, & practices as a path, a means for arriving at purity. Once one arrives, one lets go of the path, because the purity of inner peace, in its ultimate sense, is something transcending the means by which it is reached.

b) The immediate context of this verse supports this interpretation. The Buddha's initial statement here is an answer, not to the question of how the goal is attained, but to Māgandiya's question of how an enlightened person would describe the goal. The Buddha responds by contradicting the general views current in his time as to how such a state would be defined, and so in this context the meaning of "in terms of" makes the most immediate sense. Then, having shown that description isn't helpful, the Buddha goes on to discuss the most useful thing that can be said about such a state: how to get there.

However, in the verse immediately following this one, it's obvious that Māgandiya has not caught this distinction and so misses the Buddha's point.

For further illustrations of the role of right view in taking one to a dimension beyond all views, see AN 10:93, AN 10:96, MN 22 (in particular, the simile of the raft), and MN 24. (The analogy of the relay coaches in MN 24 actually seems more tailored to the issues raised by the Buddha's remarks in this sutta than it does to the question it addresses in that one.) See also sections III/H and III/H/i in The Wings to Awakening.

Nd I, without explaining the grammatical word play at work in this verse, offers an interpretation in line with the one offered in this note: On the one hand, it says, one doesn't describe purity or release in terms of view, etc. On the other, one cannot attain inner peace without using a measure of right view, learning, knowledge, habit (virtue), and practice. It defines right view in terms of mundane right view, described in MN 117; learning in terms of the voice of another (AN 2:124) and the nine traditional divisions of Dhamma in the Canon: dialogues, narratives of mixed prose and verse, explanations, verses, spontaneous exclamations, quotations, birth stories, amazing events, question & answer sessions (AN 7:64); knowledge in terms of knowledge of what has been done by action, knowledge in line with the four noble truths, the knowledge of the six forms of direct knowing (AN 5:28), and knowledge of the nine concentration attainments (AN 9:33); habit (virtue) in terms of restraint in the Pāṭimokkha (AN 10:17); and practice in terms of eight of the dhutaṅga practices: living in the wilderness, going for alms, wearing cast-off cloth, wearing only one triple set of robes, bypassing no donors on one's alms round, refusing food brought afterwards, not lying down, and accepting whatever lodging one is assigned (see Thag 16:7 and SN 16:5). It is important to note that Nd I does not insist that all these practices and forms of knowledge, etc., must be completely mastered to attain

inner peace. Instead, it insists that a "measure" (matta) be mastered, without defining how large that measure must be.

5. The lines of this verse up to this point are clearly missing in the text of the Sanskrit version found in East Turkestan. Hoernle, the scholar who first studied the text, concluded that the lines in the Pali here must have been a later interpolation, but it's also possible that the Sanskrit was either a faulty translation or an accurate translation based on a faulty transmission of the text.

6. "In terms of—by means of": Two ways of interpreting the instrumental case in this sentence.

7. A long explanation of this verse, attributed to Ven. Mahā Kaccāna, is contained in SN 22:3. The main points are these:

"The property of form, householder, is the home of consciousness. When consciousness is in bondage through passion to the property of form, it is said to be living at home. The property of feeling... perception... fabrication is the home of consciousness. When consciousness is in bondage through passion to the property of fabrication, it is said to be dwelling at home.

"And how does one not live at home? Any desire, passion, delight, craving, any attachments, clingings, fixations of awareness, biases, or obsessions with regard to the property of form: These the Tathāgata has abandoned, their root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Therefore the Tathāgata is said to be not dwelling at home.

[Similarly with the remaining aggregates.] ...

"And how does one live free from society? The Tathāgata has abandoned bondage to the distraction of the society of form-impressions, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Therefore the Tathāgata is said to be living free from society.

[Similarly with the society of sound-impressions, aroma-impressions, flavor-impressions, tactile-sensation-impressions, and idea-impressions.]

"And how is one not intimate in villages? There is the case where a monk lives unentangled with householders. Not delighting together with them, not sorrowing together with them, not happy when they are happy, not pained when they are pained, he does not take on any of their arisen business affairs as his own duty. This is how one is not intimate in villages....

"And how is one remote from sensuality? There is the case where a certain person is free of passion for sensuality, free of desire, free of love, free of thirst, free of fever, free of craving for sensuality. This is how one is remote from sensuality....

“And how is one free from preferences? There is the case where a certain person does not think, ‘May form be like this in the future. May feeling…. May perception…. May fabrication…. May consciousness be like this in the future.’ This is how one is free from preferences….

“And how does one not engage with people in quarrelsome debate? There is the case where a certain person is not a fomenter of this kind of debate: ‘You understand this doctrine & discipline? I’m the one who understands this doctrine & discipline. How could you understand this doctrine & discipline? You’re practicing wrongly. I’m practicing rightly. What should be said first you said last. What should be said last you said first. I’m being consistent. You’re not. What you took so long to think out has been refuted. Your doctrine has been overthrown. You’re defeated. Go and try to salvage your doctrine, or extricate yourself if you can!’ This is how one does not engage with people in quarrelsome debate.”

8. “Measured … made proud”—two meanings of the Pali word mānameti.

9. To be fashioned by something is to define oneself around it. See MN 78, note 2; and MN 113. For discussions of the role of non-fashioning in the practice, see The Wings to Awakening, II/B and III/G, and The Paradox of Becoming, chapter 6.

10. “Action” here can mean either kamma in a restricted sense, as ritual action, or in its general sense, meaning that the attainer-of-knowledge has gone beyond creating seeds of kamma that will lead to further becoming (see AN 3:34). According to Nd I, “action” here denotes the three types of fabrication (abhisaṅkhāra): meritorious (ripening in pleasure), demeritorious (ripening in pain), and imperturbable (the formless attainments)—see DN 33.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 9; MN 63; MN 72; AN 4:194