MN 35 — MN 35 The Shorter Discourse to Saccaka | Cūḷa Saccaka Sutta

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Source: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN35.html

Source revision: sha256:06db98f11dbe5b66e3b290b0f8bcaa44ec5f2fe3d1e1b74062fcf0baea044036

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Text

The Shorter Discourse to Saccaka

Cūḷa Saccaka Sutta (MN 35)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Vesālī, at the Gabled Hall in the Great Forest. And on that occasion Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son was dwelling in Vesālī—a debater, a sophist,1 well-regarded by people at large. He made this statement before the assembly in Vesālī: “I see no contemplative or brahman, the head of an order, the head of a group, or even one who claims to be an arahant, rightly self-awakened, who—engaged in debate with me—would not shiver, quiver, shake, & break out in sweat under the armpits. Even if I were to engage a senseless stump in debate, it—engaged with me in debate—would shiver, quiver, & shake, to say nothing of a human being.”

Then early in the morning Ven. Assaji2 adjusted his lower robe and—taking his bowl & outer robe—went into Vesālī for alms. Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son, walking & wandering around Vesālī to exercise his legs, saw Ven. Assaji coming from afar. On seeing him, he went up to him and exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he stood to one side. As he was standing there, he said to him, "Master Assaji, how does Gotama the contemplative discipline his disciples? Or what part of his instruction is generally presented to his disciples?"

"Aggivessana,3 the Blessed One disciplines his disciples in this way; this part of the Blessed One's instruction is generally presented to his disciples: 'Form is inconstant. Feeling is inconstant. Perception is inconstant. Fabrications are inconstant. Consciousness is inconstant. Form is not-self. Feeling is not-self. Perception is not-self. Fabrications are not-self. Consciousness is not-self. All fabrications are inconstant. All phenomena are not-self.' This, Aggivessana, is the way in which the Blessed One disciplines his disciples; this part of the Blessed One's instruction is generally presented to his disciples."

"What a bad thing to hear we have heard, Master Assaji, when we have heard that Gotama the contemplative teaches this sort of thing. Perhaps sooner or later we might go to meet with Gotama the contemplative. Perhaps there might be some discussion. Perhaps we might pry him away from that evil viewpoint."

Now on that occasion, five hundred Licchavis had gathered at a meeting hall on some business or other. So Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son went to those Licchavis and, on arrival, said to them, "Come out, good Licchavis! Come out, good Licchavis! Today will be my discussion with Gotama the contemplative! If he takes the position with me that was taken with me by his famous disciple, the monk named Assaji, then just as a strong man, seizing a long-haired ram by the hair, would drag him to and drag him fro and drag him all around, in the same way I, statement by statement, will drag Gotama the contemplative to and drag him fro and drag him all around. Just as a strong distillery worker, throwing a large distiller's strainer into a deep water tank and grabbing it by the corners, would drag it to and drag it fro and drag it all around, in the same way I, statement by statement, will drag Gotama the contemplative to and drag him fro and drag him all around. Just as a strong distillery ruffian, grabbing a horse-hair strainer by the corners, would shake it down and shake it out and thump it, in the same way I, statement by statement, will shake Gotama the contemplative down and shake him out and thump him. Just as a sixty-year old elephant, plunging into a deep pond, would amuse itself playing the game of hemp-washing, in the same way I will amuse myself playing the game of hemp-washing Gotama the contemplative, as it were. Come on out, good Licchavis! Come on out, good Licchavis! Today will be my discussion with Gotama the contemplative!"

Then some of the Licchavis said, "Who is Gotama the contemplative that he will refute the statement of Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son? It's Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son who will refute the statement of Gotama the contemplative." Some of the Licchavis said, "Who is Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son that he will refute the statement of Gotama the contemplative? It's Gotama the contemplative who will refute the statement of Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son."

So Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son, surrounded by five hundred Licchavis, went to the Gabled Hall in the Great Forest.

Now on that occasion a large number of monks were doing walking meditation in the open air. So Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son went up to the monks and said, "Where, masters, is Master Gotama now? We want to see Master Gotama."

"The Blessed One, Aggivessana, having plunged into the Great Forest, is sitting under a certain tree for the day's abiding."

Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son together with a large group of Licchavis plunged into the Great Forest and went to the Blessed One. On arrival, he exchanged courteous greetings with the Blessed One. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. Some of the Licchavis, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. Some of the Licchavis exchanged courteous greetings with the Blessed One and, after an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, sat to one side. Some of the Licchavis, having raised their hands palm-to-palm in front of the chest, sat to one side. Some of the Licchavis, after announcing their name and clan, sat to one side. Some of the Licchavis, staying silent, sat to one side.

As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, "I would like to question Master Gotama on a certain point, if Master Gotama would grant me the favor of an answer to the question."

"Ask, Aggivessana, as you see fit."

"How does Master Gotama discipline his disciples? Or what part of his instruction is generally presented to his disciples?"

"Aggivessana, I discipline my disciples in this way; this part of my instruction is generally presented to my disciples: 'Form is inconstant. Feeling is inconstant. Perception is inconstant. Fabrications are inconstant. Consciousness is inconstant. Form is not-self. Feeling is not-self. Perception is not-self. Fabrications are not-self. Consciousness is not-self. All fabrications are inconstant. All phenomena are not-self.' This, Aggivessana, is the way in which I discipline my disciples; this part of my instruction is generally presented to my disciples."

"A simile occurs to me, Master Gotama."

"Let it occur to you, Aggivessana."

"Just as any seeds that exhibit growth, increase, & proliferation, all do so in dependence on the earth; or just as any activities requiring strength that are done, all are done in dependence on the earth; in the same way, Master Gotama, an individual with form as self, taking a stance on form, produces merit or demerit. An individual with feeling as self… with perception as self… with fabrications as self… with consciousness as self, taking a stance

on consciousness, produces merit or demerit."

"Then, Aggivessana, are you saying, 'Form is my self, feeling is my self, perception is my self, fabrications are my self, consciousness is my self'?"

"Yes, Master Gotama, I'm saying that 'Form is my self, feeling is my self, perception is my self, fabrications are my self, consciousness is my self.' As does this great multitude."4

"What does this great multitude have to do with you? Please focus just on your own assertion."

"Yes, Master Gotama, I'm saying that 'Form is my self, feeling is my self, perception is my self, fabrications are my self, consciousness is my self.'"

"Very well then, Aggivessana, I will cross-question you on this matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think? Would a consecrated, noble-warrior king—such as King Pasenadi of Kosala or King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha—wield the power in his own domain to execute those (he has) sentenced to be executed, to fine those (he has) sentenced to be fined, or to banish those (he has) sentenced to be banished?"

"Yes, Master Gotama, he would wield the power in his own domain to execute those (he has) sentenced to be executed, to fine those (he has) sentenced to be fined, or to banish those (he has) sentenced to be banished. Even these oligarchic groups, such as the Vajjians & Mallans, wield the power in their own domains to execute those (they've) sentenced to be executed, to fine those (they've) sentenced to be fined, or to banish those (they've) sentenced to be banished,5 to say nothing of a consecrated, noble-warrior king such as King Pasenadi of Kosala, or King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha. He would wield it, and he would deserve to wield it."

"What do you think, Aggivessana? When you say, 'Form is my self,' do you wield power over that form: 'May my form be thus, may my form not be thus'?"

When this was said, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son was silent.

A second time, the Blessed One said to Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son: "What do you think, Aggivessana? When you say, 'Form is my self,' do you wield power over that form: 'May my form be thus, may my form not be thus'?"

When this was said, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son was silent a second time.

Then the Blessed One said to him, "Answer now, Aggivessana. This is not the time to be silent. When anyone doesn't answer when asked a legitimate question by the Tathāgata up to three times, his head splits into seven pieces right here."

Now on that occasion the spirit [yakkha] Vajirapāṇin [Thunderbolt-in-Hand], carrying an iron thunderbolt, was poised in the air above Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son, (thinking,) "If

Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son doesn't answer when asked a legitimate question by the Blessed One up to three times, I will split his head into seven pieces right here."

The Blessed One saw the spirit Vajirapāṇin, as did Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son. So Saccaka—afraid, terrified, his hair standing on end—seeking shelter in the Blessed One, seeking asylum in the Blessed One, seeking refuge in the Blessed One—said to the Blessed One, "Let Master Gotama ask me. I will answer."

"What do you think, Aggivessana? When you say, 'Form is my self,' do you wield power over that form: 'May my form be thus, may my form not be thus'?"

"No, Master Gotama."

"Pay attention, Aggivessana, and answer (only) after having paid attention! What you said after isn't consistent with what you said before, nor is what you said before consistent with what you said after.

"What do you think, Aggivessana? When you say, 'Feeling is my self… Perception is my self… Fabrications are my self… Consciousness is my self,' do you wield power over that consciousness: 'May my consciousness be thus, may my consciousness not be thus'?"

"No, Master Gotama."

"Pay attention, Aggivessana, and answer (only) after having paid attention! What you said after isn't consistent with what you said before, nor is what you said before consistent with what you said after.

"What do you think, Aggivessana? Is form constant or inconstant?"

"Inconstant, Master Gotama."

"And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?"

"Stressful, Master Gotama."

"And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'?"

"No, Master Gotama."

"…Is feeling constant or inconstant?"

"Inconstant, Master Gotama."…

"…Is perception constant or inconstant?"

"Inconstant, Master Gotama."…

“…Are fabrications constant or inconstant?”

“Inconstant, Master Gotama.”…

“What do you think, Aggivessana? Is consciousness constant or inconstant?”

“Inconstant, Master Gotama.”

“And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?”

“Stressful, Master Gotama.”

“And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am’?”

“No, Master Gotama.”

“What do you think, Aggivessana? When one adheres to stress, holds to stress, is attached to stress, and envisions of stress that ‘This is mine; this is my self; this is what I am,’ would he comprehend stress or dwell having totally destroyed stress?”

“How could that be, Master Gotama? No, Master Gotama.”

“That being the case, Aggivessana, don’t you adhere to stress, hold to stress, aren’t you attached to stress, and don’t you envision of stress that ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am’?”

“How could that not be the case, Master Gotama? Yes, Master Gotama.”

“Suppose a man—in need of heartwood, seeking heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood—were to enter a forest taking a sharp ax. There he would see a large plantain trunk: straight, young, immature. He would cut it at the root and, having cut it at the root, cut off the crown. Having cut off the crown, he would unfurl the leaf sheaths. Unfurling the leaf sheaths, he wouldn’t even find sapwood there, to say nothing of heartwood. In the same way, Aggivessana, when you are interrogated, rebuked, & pressed by me with regard to your own statement, you are empty, void, mistaken. But it was you who made this statement before the assembly in Vesālī: ‘I see no contemplative or brahman, the head of an order, the head of a group, or even one who claims to be an arahant, rightly self-awakened, who—engaged in debate with me—would not shiver, quiver, shake, & break out in sweat under the armpits. Even if I were to engage a senseless stump in debate, it—engaged with me in debate—would shiver, quiver, & shake, to say nothing of a human being.’ But now some drops of sweat coming out of your forehead, drenching your upper robe, are landing on the ground, whereas now I have no sweat on my body.” And the Blessed One uncovered his golden-colored body to the assembly.

When this was said, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son fell silent, abashed, sitting with his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding, at a loss for words.

Then Dummukha [BadMouth] the Licchavi-son—sensing that Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son was silent, abashed, sitting with his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding, at a loss for words—said to the Blessed One, "Lord, a simile has occurred to me."

"Let it occur to you, Dummukha," the Blessed One said.

"Suppose, lord, that not far from a village or town was a pond. There in it was a crab. Then a number of boys & girls, leaving the village or town, would go to the pond and, on arrival, would go down to bathe in it. Taking the crab out of the water, they would place it on the ground. And whenever the crab extended a leg, the boys or girls would cut it off, break it, and smash it with sticks or stones right there, so that the crab—with all its legs cut off, broken, & smashed—would be unable to get back in the water as before. In the same way, whatever Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son's writhings, capers, & contortions, the Blessed One has cut them off, broken them, and smashed them all, so that Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son is now unable to approach the Blessed One again for the purpose of debate."

When this was said, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son said to Dummukha the Licchavi-son, "Just you wait, Dummukha. Just you wait, Dummukha. You're a big-mouth, Dummukha.6 We're not taking counsel with you. We're here taking counsel with Master Gotama." [Then, turning to the Buddha,] "Let that be, Master Gotama, our words & those of other ordinary contemplatives & brahmans—prattled prattling, as it were.

"Now, Master Gotama, to what extent is a disciple of Master Gotama one who carries out his message, carries out his instruction, one who has crossed over & beyond doubt, one with no more questioning, one who has gained fearlessness and dwells independent of others with regard to the Teacher's message?"

"There is the case, Aggivessana, where a disciple of mine sees with right discernment any form whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every form as it has come to be—as 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

"He sees with right discernment any feeling… any perception… any fabrications… any consciousness whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every consciousness as it has come to be—as 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

"It's to this extent, Aggivessana, that a disciple of mine is one who carries out my message, carries out my instruction, one who has crossed over & beyond doubt, one with no more questioning, one who has gained fearlessness and dwells independent of others with regard to the Teacher's message."

“And to what extent, Master Gotama, is a monk an arahant, one whose mental effluents are ended, who has reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and is released through right gnosis?”

“There is the case, Aggivessana, where a monk—having seen with right discernment any form whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every form as it has come to be—as ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am’ is, through lack of clinging/sustenance, released.

“Having seen with right discernment any feeling… any perception… any fabrications… any consciousness whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every consciousness as it has come to be—as ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am,’ he is, through lack of clinging/sustenance, released.

“It’s to this extent, Aggivessana, that a monk is an arahant, one whose mental effluents are ended, who has reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and is released through right gnosis.

“One thus released is endowed with three unsurpassables: unsurpassable vision, unsurpassable practice, unsurpassable release. And a monk whose mind is thus released still honors, respects, reveres, & worships the Tathāgata (in this way): “Awakened, the Blessed One teaches the Dhamma for awakening. Tamed, the Blessed One teaches the Dhamma for taming. Tranquil, the Blessed One teaches the Dhamma for tranquility. Having crossed over, the Blessed One teaches the Dhamma for crossing over. Totally unbound, the Blessed One teaches the Dhamma for total unbinding.”

When this was said, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son said to the Blessed One, “It is we, Master Gotama, who were insolent, we who were reckless, in that we supposed that Master Gotama could be attacked statement by statement. For there might be safety for a person who has attacked a rutting elephant, but there is no safety for a person who has attacked Master Gotama. There might be safety for a person who has attacked a mass of fire, but there is no safety for a person who has attacked Master Gotama. There might be safety for a person who has attacked a fanged snake, a poisonous snake, but there is no safety for a person who has attacked Master Gotama. It is we, Master Gotama, who were insolent, we who were reckless, in that we supposed that Master Gotama could be attacked statement by statement.

“May Master Gotama, together with the Saṅgha of monks, acquiesce to my offer of tomorrow’s meal.”

The Blessed One acquiesced with silence.

Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son, sensing the Blessed One’s acquiescence, addressed the Licchavis, “Listen, Master Licchavis. Gotama the contemplative is invited for tomorrow together with the Saṅgha of monks. Offer to me what you think would be proper for him.”

Then, after the night had passed, the Licchavis offered to Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son a food offering of approximately five hundred oblation-dishes. Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son, after having exquisite staple & non-staple food prepared in his own monastery, announced the time to the Blessed One: "It's time, Master Gotama. The meal is ready."

So the Blessed One early in the morning adjusted his lower robe and—taking his bowl & outer robe—went together with the Saṅgha of monks to Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son's monastery. On arrival, he sat down on a seat laid out. Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son, with his own hand, served & satisfied the Saṅgha of monks headed by the Blessed One with exquisite staple & non-staple food. Then, when the Blessed One had eaten and had rinsed his bowl & hands, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha-son, taking a lower seat, sat down to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, "Master Gotama, may the merit and accoutrements of the merit of this gift be exclusively for the happiness of the donors."

"Aggivessana, whatever has come from (giving to) a recipient such as you—not without passion, not without aversion, not without delusion—that will be for the donors. Whatever has come from (giving to) a recipient such as me—without passion, without aversion, without delusion—that will be for you."

Notes

1. In Pali, paṇḍita-vādo, "one who teaches the teaching of the wise." Like the sophists ("wisdom-ists") of Greece who were near contemporaries of the Buddha, Saccaka claimed to be wise, but his wisdom was largely a matter of debater's tricks. Thus it seems appropriate to adopt the Greek label for him.

2. One of the five brethren to whom the Buddha delivered his first sermon (SN 56:11). Ven. Assaji was also the person who taught Sāriputta the wanderer the brief gist of the Buddha's teaching that immediately inspired Sāriputta to attain the Dhamma eye. See Mv 1.23.1-10.

3. Aggivessana is Saccaka's clan name.

4. Saccaka is here attempting to appeal to the prejudices of his audience, a cheap debater's trick.

5. Again, Saccaka is trying to appeal to the vanity of his audience. He doesn't realize, however, that he is setting himself up for a trap. By tying his audience's vanity to the Buddha's analogy, he cannot later deny that the analogy is valid.

6. Following the Thai edition here, which reads, "Āgamehi tvaṁ Dummukha. Āgamehi tvaṁ Dummukha. Mukharo'si tvaṁ Dummukha." The Burmese edition here reads, "Just you wait, Dummukha. Just you wait, Dummukha." The Sri Lankan edition reads, "Just you wait, Dummukha. You're a big-mouth, Dummukha."

For more on the Buddha’s approach to argument and debate, see Skill in Questions, chapters one and five.