MN 49 — MN 49 The Brahmā Invitation | Brahma-nimantanika Sutta

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Text

The Brahmā Invitation

Brahma-nimantanika Sutta (MN 49)

Introduction

In this sutta, the Buddha faces two antagonists: Baka, a Brahmā who believes that his Brahmā-attainment is the highest attainment there is; and Māra, 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, Māra is the more insidious, a point illustrated by the fact that Māra always speaks through someone else and never directly shows his face. (Another interesting point is illustrated by the fact

that Māra 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 Māra 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 Māra 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 Brahmā 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 effluents 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 Aṅgulimāla (MN 86)—where the Buddha was able to display his powers to good effect. But 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 Brahmā—when Baka welcomes the Buddha to his realm—and from the silencing of Māra. The first point is clear enough, but the second requires explanation. It is a play on the word Brahmā, 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 Māra: Māra is welcome to refute it if he can. Up to that point, Māra has phrased his threats to the Buddha in terms of the fortunate rebirths the Buddha will experience if he obeys Māra's advice, and the unfortunate ones he will experience if he doesn't. Now that the Buddha declares, in a way that Māra cannot refute, that he has abandoned all possible conditions for rebirth, Māra 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.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. There he addressed the monks, "Monks!"

"Yes, lord," the monks responded to him.

The Blessed One said: "On one occasion recently I was staying in Ukkaṭṭha in the Subhaga forest at the root of a royal Sal tree. Now on that occasion an evil viewpoint had arisen to Baka Brahmā: 'This is constant. This is permanent. This is eternal. This is total. This is not subject to falling away—for this does not take birth, does not age, does not die, does not fall away, does not reappear.1 And there is no other, higher escape.'

“So I—having known with my awareness the line of thinking in Baka Brahmā’s awareness—as a strong man would extend his flexed arm or flex his extended arm, vanished into the root of the royal Sal tree in the Subhaga forest in Ukkaṭṭha and appeared in that Brahmā world. Baka Brahmā saw me coming in the distance and, on seeing me, said, ‘Come, good sir. You are well-come, good sir. It has been long, good sir, since you arranged to come here—for this, good sir, is constant. This is permanent. This is eternal. This is total. This is not subject to falling away—for here one does not take birth, does not age, does not die, does not fall away, does not reappear. And there is no other, higher escape.’

“When this was said, I told Baka Brahmā, ‘How immersed in ignorance is Baka Brahmā! How immersed in ignorance is Baka Brahmā! — in that what is actually inconstant he calls “constant.” What is actually impermanent he calls “permanent.” What is actually non-eternal he calls “eternal.” What is actually partial he calls “total.” What is actually subject to falling away he calls “not subject to falling away.” Where one takes birth, ages, dies, falls away, and reappears, he says, “For here one does not take birth, does not age, does not die, does not fall away, does not reappear.” And there being another, higher escape, he says, “There is no other, higher escape.”’

“Then Māra, the Evil One, taking possession of an attendant of the Brahmā assembly, said to me, ‘Monk! Monk! Don’t attack him! Don’t attack him! For this Brahmā, monk, is 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. There were, monk, before your time, contemplatives & brahmans in the world

who found fault with earth and were disgusted with earth,

who found fault with liquid and were disgusted with liquid,

who found fault with fire and were disgusted with fire,

who found fault with wind and were disgusted with wind,

who found fault with beings and were disgusted with beings,

who found fault with devas and were disgusted with devas,

who found fault with Pajāpati and were disgusted with Pajāpati,2

who found fault with Brahmā and were disgusted with Brahmā.

“‘They, with the break-up of the body, with the cutting off of life, were established in a coarse body.3 There were, monk, before your time, contemplatives & brahmans in the world

who praised earth and were delighted with earth,

who praised liquid and were delighted with liquid,

who praised fire and were delighted with fire,

who praised wind and were delighted with wind,

who praised beings and were delighted with beings,

who praised devas and were delighted with devas,

who praised Pajāpati and were delighted with Pajāpati,

who praised Brahmā and were delighted with Brahmā.

"'They, with the break-up of the body, with the cutting off of life, were established in a refined body. So I tell you, monk, "Please, good sir, do only as Brahmā says. Don't defy the word of Brahmā. If you defy the word of Brahmā, then—as a man, when the goddess of fortune approaches, chases her away with a stick, or as a man, falling into hell, loses hold of the earth with his hands and feet—that will be what you have accomplished. Please, good sir, do only as Brahmā says. Don't defy the word of Brahmā. Don't you see that Brahmā's assembly has gathered?'" And so Māra the Evil One directed my attention to Brahmā's assembly.

"When this was said, I told Māra the Evil One, 'I know you, Evil One. Don't assume, "He doesn't know me." You are Māra, Evil One. And Brahmā, and Brahmā's assembly, and the attendants of Brahmā's assembly have all come into your hands. They have all come under your sway. And you think, "This one, too, has come into my hands, has come under my sway." But, Evil One, I have neither come into your hands nor have I come under your sway.'

"When this was said, Baka Brahmā told me, 'But, good sir, what is actually constant I call "constant." What is actually permanent I call "permanent." What is actually eternal I call "eternal." What is actually total I call "total." What is actually not subject to falling away I call "not subject to falling away." Where one does not take birth, age, die, fall away, or reappear, I say, "For this does not take birth, does not age, does not die, does not fall away, does not reappear." And there being no other, higher escape, I say, "There is no other, higher escape."

"'There were, monk, before your time, contemplatives & brahmans in the world whose ascetic practice lasted as long as your entire life span. They knew, when there was another, higher escape, that there was another, higher escape; or, when there was no other, higher escape, that there was no other, higher escape. So I tell you, monk, both that you will not find another, higher escape, and that, to that extent, you will reap your share of trouble & weariness. Monk, if you relish earth, you will lie close to me, lie within my domain, for me

to banish and to do with as I like. If you relish liquid… fire… wind… beings… devas… Pajāpati… Brahmā, you will lie close to me, lie within my domain, for me to banish and to do with as I like.'

"'I, too, know that, Brahmā. If I relish earth, I will lie close to you, lie within your domain, for you to banish and to do with as you like. If I relish liquid… fire… wind… beings… devas… Pajāpati… Brahmā, I will lie close to you, lie within your domain, for you to banish and to do with as you like. Moreover, I discern your sphere, I discern your splendor: "Baka Brahmā has this much great power. Baka Brahmā has this much great might. Baka Brahmā has this much great influence."'

"'Well, monk, how do you discern my sphere, how do you discern my splendor: "Baka Brahmā has this much great power. Baka Brahmā has this much great might. Baka Brahmā has this much great influence"?'

"'As far as suns & moons revolve,

shining, illuminating the directions,

over a thousand-fold world

your control holds sway.

There you know those above & below,

those with lust & those without,

the state of what is as it is,

the state of what becomes otherwise,

the coming & going of beings.

"'That, Brahmā, is how I discern your sphere, that is how I discern your splendor: "Baka Brahmā has this much great power. Baka Brahmā has this much great might. Baka Brahmā has this much great influence." There are, Brahmā, bodies other than yours that you don't know, don't see, but that I know, I see. There is, Brahmā, the body named Ābhassarā [Radiant] from which you fell away & reappeared here.4 From your having lived here so long, your memory of that has become muddled. That is why you don't know it, don't see it, but I know it, I see it. Thus I am not your mere equal in terms of direct knowing, so how could I be inferior? I am actually superior to you.

"'There is, Brahmā, the body named Subhakiṇhā [Beautiful Black]… the body named Vehapphalā [Sky-fruit], {the body named Abhibhū [Conqueror]}5 which you don't know, don't see, but that I know, I see. Thus I am not your mere equal in terms of direct knowing, so how could I be your inferior? I am actually superior to you.

"'Having directly known earth as earth, and having directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the earthness of earth,6 I wasn't earth, I wasn't in earth, I wasn't coming from earth, I wasn't "Earth is mine." I didn't affirm earth.7 Thus I am not

your mere equal in terms of direct knowing, so how could I be inferior? I am actually superior to you.

“‘Having directly known liquid as liquid… fire as fire… wind as wind… beings as beings… devas as devas… Pajāpati as Pajāpati… Brahmā as Brahmā… the radiant as radiant… the beautiful black as the beautiful black… the sky-fruit as the sky-fruit… the conqueror as the conqueror…

“‘Having directly known the all as the all,8 and having directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the allness of the all, I wasn’t the all, I wasn’t in the all, I wasn’t coming forth from the all, I wasn’t “The all is mine.” I didn’t affirm the all. Thus I am not your mere equal in terms of direct knowing, so how could I be inferior? I am actually superior to you.’

“‘If, good sir, you have directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the allness of the all, may it not turn out to be actually vain and void for you.’

“‘Consciousness without surface,

endless, radiant all around,

has not been experienced through the earthness of earth… the liquidity of liquid… the fieriness of fire… the windiness of wind… the allness of the all.’9

“‘Well then, good sir, I will disappear from you.’

“‘Well then, Brahmā, disappear from me if you can.’

“Then Baka Brahmā, (thinking,) ‘I will disappear from Gotama the contemplative. I will disappear from Gotama the contemplative,’ was not able to disappear from me. When this was said, I said to Baka Brahmā, ‘Well then, Brahmā, I will disappear from you.’

“‘Well then, good sir, disappear from me if you can.’

“So then, monks, I fabricated a fabrication of psychic power to the extent that Brahmā, the Brahmā assembly, and the attendants of the Brahmā assembly heard my voice but did not see me. Having disappeared, I recited this verse:

‘Having seen

danger

right in becoming,

and becoming

in searching for non-becoming,10

I didn’t affirm

any kind of becoming,

or cling to any delight.'

"Then in Brahmā, the Brahmā assembly, and the attendants of the Brahmā assembly there arose a sense of amazement & astonishment: 'How amazing! How astounding! — The great power, the great might of Gotama the contemplative! Never before have we seen or heard of any other contemplative or brahman of such great power, such great might as that of this Gotama the contemplative, who went forth from a Sakyan clan! Living in a generation that so delights in becoming, so rejoices in becoming, is so fond of becoming, he has pulled out becoming by the root!'

"Then Māra, the Evil One, taking possession of an attendant of the Brahmā assembly, said to me, 'If, good sir, this is what you discern, if this is what you have awakened to, do not lead (lay) disciples or those gone forth. Do not teach the Dhamma to (lay) disciples or those gone forth. Do not yearn for (lay) disciples or those gone forth. There were, good sir, before your time, contemplatives & brahmans in the world who claimed to be worthy & rightly self-awakened. They led (lay) disciples & those gone forth. They taught the Dhamma to (lay) disciples & those gone forth. They yearned for (lay) disciples & those gone forth. Having led (lay) disciples & those gone forth, having taught the Dhamma to (lay) disciples & those gone forth, having yearned for (lay) disciples & those gone forth, they—on the break-up of the body, with the cutting off of life—were established in a coarse body.

"'There were, good sir, before your time, contemplatives & brahmans in the world who claimed to be worthy & rightly self-awakened. They did not lead (lay) disciples or those gone forth. They did not teach the Dhamma to (lay) disciples or those gone forth. They did not yearn for (lay) disciples or those gone forth. Having not led (lay) disciples or those gone forth, having not taught the Dhamma to (lay) disciples or those gone forth, having not yearned for (lay) disciples or those gone forth, they—on the break-up of the body, with the cutting off of life—were established in a refined body.

"'So, monk, I tell you this: Please, good sir, be effortless. Abide committed to a pleasant abiding in the here & now—for it's skillful, good sir, that this not be taught. Don't instruct others.'

"When this was said, I told Māra the Evil One, 'I know you, Evil One. Don't assume, "He doesn't know me." You are Māra, Evil One. And it's not sympathetic to welfare that you speak thus to me. It's sympathetic to what is not welfare that you speak thus to me. You think this, Evil One: "Those to whom Gotama the contemplative will teach the Dhamma will defy my sovereignty". Without being rightly self-awakened, Evil One, your contemplatives & brahmans claimed to be rightly self-awakened. I, however, being rightly self-awakened, claim to be rightly self-awakened. For when the Tathāgata is teaching the Dhamma to his disciples, he is Such. When he is not teaching the Dhamma to his disciples, he is Such. When leading his disciples he is Such. When not leading his disciples he is Such. Why is that? The effluents that defile, that lead to further becoming, that disturb, that ripen in stress, that tend to future birth, aging, & death: Those the Tathāgata has abandoned, their

root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Just as a palmyra tree with its crown cut off is incapable of growing again; so, too, the effluents that defile, that lead to further becoming, that disturb, that ripen in stress, that tend to future birth, aging, & death: Those the Tathāgata has abandoned, their root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising.'"

Thus, because of the silencing of Māra, and because of the Brahmā's invitation, this discourse is entitled, "The Brahmā Invitation."

Notes

1. Baka Brahmā here appears to be referring both to his Brahmā world and to the state of mind that enables one to inhabit his Brahmā world.

2. Pajāpati has different meanings in different contexts. In some contexts, it refers to a creator deva dwelling in a Brahmā world of form. In other contexts, it refers to the chief wife of a major deva.

3. The word body in this discourse refers to three things: an individual body, a group of beings on a particular level of being, and the level of being as a whole. The Commentary says that coarse body here refers to the four levels of deprivation, and refined body, further on, to the Brahmā worlds.

4. The Ābhassarā Brahmā-body is attained through mastering and relishing the second jhāna. The next two Brahmā-bodies are attained through mastering and relishing the third and fourth. See AN 4:123 & 125, and in particular note 2 under the latter sutta.

5. The phrase in braces is from the Burmese edition of the Canon.

6. What is not experienced through the earthness of earth (and so on through the list of categories up through the allness of the all) is nibbāna, or unbinding. It is described in these terms because it is directly known, without intermediary of any sort.

7. These statements can be read in two ways. The first way is to regard them in light of the standard definition of self-identification view (see, for instance, MN 44, MN 109, and SN 22:1) in which one defines self either as identical with an aggregate, as possessing an aggregate, as being contained in an aggregate, or as containing an aggregate within it. The second way is to regard the statements in light of the parallel passage from MN 1, in which one engages in metaphysical speculation as to whether one's being is identical with something, lies within something, or comes from something. For more on this topic, see the introduction to MN 1.

8. "What is the All? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & aromas, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, intellect & ideas. This is termed the All. Anyone who would say, 'Repudiating this All, I will describe another,' if questioned on what exactly

might be the grounds for his assertion, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why is that? Because it lies beyond range." —SN 35:23

For more on this topic, see The Mind Like Fire Unbound, Chapter 1.

9. Consciousness without surface (viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ): This term appears to be related to the following image from SN 12:64:

"Just as if there were a roofed house or a roofed hall having windows on the north, the south, or the east. When the sun rises, and a ray has entered by way of the window, where does it land?"

"On the western wall, lord."

"And if there is no western wall, where does it land?"

"On the ground, lord."

"And if there is no ground, where does it land?"

"On the water, lord."

"And if there is no water, where does it land?"

"It doesn't land, lord."

"In the same way, where there is no passion for the nutriment of physical food… contact… intellectual intention… consciousness, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or grow. Where consciousness does not land or grow, name-&-form does not alight. Where name-&-form does not alight, there is no growth of fabrications. Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair."

In other words, normal sensory consciousness is experienced because it has a "surface" against which it lands: the sense organs and their objects, which constitute the "all." For instance, we experience visual consciousness because of the eye and forms of which we are conscious. Consciousness without surface, however, is directly known, without intermediary, free from any dependence on conditions at all.

This consciousness thus differs from the consciousness factor in dependent co-arising, which is defined in terms of the six sense media. Lying outside of time and space, it would also not come under the consciousness-aggregate, which covers all consciousness near and far; past, present, and future. And, as SN 35:23 notes, the word "all" in the Buddha's teaching covers only the six sense media, which is another reason for not including this

consciousness under the aggregates. 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 permanent or omnipresent, terms that have meaning only within space and time.

Some have objected to the equation of this consciousness with nibbāna, on the grounds that nibbāna is nowhere else in the Canon described as a form of consciousness. Thus they have proposed that consciousness without surface be regarded as an arahant's consciousness of nibbāna in meditative experience, and not nibbāna itself. This argument, however, contains a flaw: If nibbāna is an object of mental consciousness (as a dhamma), it would come under the all, as an object of the intellect. There are passages in the Canon (such as AN 9:36) that describe meditators experiencing nibbāna as a dhamma, but these passages seem to indicate that this description applies up through the level of non-returning. Other passages, however, describe nibbāna as the ending of all dhammas. For instance, Sn 5:6 quotes the Buddha as calling the attainment of the goal the transcending of all dhammas. Sn 4:6 and Sn 4:10 state that the arahant has transcended dispassion, said to be the highest dhamma. Thus, for the arahant, nibbāna is not an object of consciousness. Instead it is directly known without mediation. Because consciousness without feature is directly known without mediation, there seems good reason to equate the two.

Also, given that this consciousness is independent of the six senses, and that at the death of the arahant the six senses simply grow cold (Iti 44), then such an event should have no effect on it.

10. In other words, the act of searching for non-becoming—or annihilation—is also a type of becoming. Although the Buddhist path aims at the cessation of becoming (bhava), it does not attempt this cessation by trying to annihilate the process of becoming. Instead, it does so by focusing on what has already come to be (bhūta), developing dispassion for what has come to be and for the nutriment—the causes—of what has come to be. With no more passion, there is no clinging to or taking sustenance from the causes of what has come to be. And through this lack of clinging or sustenance comes release. On this point see SN 12:31 and Iti 49.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 11; MN 1; MN 72; MN 86