MN 57 — The Ascetic Who Behaved Like a Dog

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Text

Middle Discourses 57

The Ascetic Who Behaved Like a Dog

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying in the land of the Koliyans, where they have a town named Haliddavasana.

Then Puṇṇa the Koliyan, a cow votary, and the naked ascetic Seniya, a dog votary, went to the Buddha. Puṇṇa bowed to the Buddha and sat down to one side, while Seniya exchanged greetings and polite conversation with him before sitting down to one side curled up like a dog.

Puṇṇa said to the Buddha, "Sir, this naked ascetic Seniya the dog votary does a hard thing: he eats food placed on the ground. For a long time he has undertaken that observance to behave like a dog. Where will he be reborn in his next life?"

"Enough, Puṇṇa, let it be. Don't ask me that."

For a second time … and a third time, Puṇṇa said to the Buddha, "Sir, this naked ascetic Seniya does a hard thing: he eats food placed on the ground. For a long time he has undertaken that observance to behave like a dog. Where will he be reborn in his next life?"

"Clearly, Puṇṇa, I'm not getting through to you when I say: 'Enough, Puṇṇa, let it be. Don't ask me that.' Nevertheless, I will answer you.

Take someone who develops the dog observance fully and uninterruptedly. They develop a dog's ethics, a dog's mentality, and a dog's behavior fully and uninterruptedly. When their body breaks up, after death, they're reborn in the company of dogs. But if they have such a view: 'By this precept or observance or fervent austerity or spiritual practice, may I become one of the gods!' This is their wrong view. An individual with wrong view is reborn in one of two places, I say: hell or the animal realm. So if the dog observance succeeds it leads to rebirth in the company of dogs, but if it fails it leads to hell."

When he said this, Seniya cried and burst out in tears.

The Buddha said to Puṇṇa, "This is what I didn't get through to you when I said: 'Enough, Puṇṇa, let it be. Don't ask me that.'"

Seniya said, "Sir, I'm not crying because of what the Buddha said. But, sir, for a long time I have undertaken this observance to behave like a dog. Sir, this Puṇṇa is a cow votary. For a long time he has undertaken that observance to behave like a cow. Where will he be

reborn in his next life?"

"Enough, Seniya, let it be. Don't ask me that."

For a second time … and a third time Seniya said to the Buddha, "Sir, this Puṇṇa is a cow votary. For a long time he has undertaken that observance to behave like a cow. Where will he be reborn in his next life?"

"Clearly, Seniya, I'm not getting through to you when I say: 'Enough, Seniya, let it be. Don't ask me that.' Nevertheless, I will answer you.

Take someone who develops the cow observance fully and uninterruptedly. They develop a cow's ethics, a cow's mentality, and a cow's behavior fully and uninterruptedly. When their body breaks up, after death, they're reborn in the company of cows. But if they have such a view: 'By this precept or observance or fervent austerity or spiritual practice, may I become one of the gods!' This is their wrong view. An individual with wrong view is reborn in one of two places, I say: hell or the animal realm. So if the cow observance succeeds it leads to rebirth in the company of cows, but if it fails it leads to hell."

When he said this, Puṇṇa cried and burst out in tears.

The Buddha said to Seniya, "This is what I didn't get through to you when I said: 'Enough, Seniya, let it be. Don't ask me that.'"

Puṇṇa said, "Sir, I'm not crying because of what the Buddha said. But, sir, for a long time I have undertaken this observance to behave like a cow. I am quite confident that the Buddha is capable of teaching me so that I can give up this cow observance, and the naked ascetic Seniya can give up that dog observance."

"Well then, Puṇṇa, listen and apply your mind well, I will speak."

"Yes, sir," he replied. The Buddha said this:

"Puṇṇa, I declare these four kinds of deeds, having realized them with my own insight. What four?

There are dark deeds with dark results;

bright deeds with bright results;

dark and bright deeds with dark and bright results; and

neither dark nor bright deeds with neither dark nor bright results, which lead to the ending of deeds.

And what are dark deeds with dark results? It's when someone makes hurtful choices by way of body, speech, and mind. Having made these choices, they're reborn in a hurtful world, where hurtful contacts strike them. Touched by hurtful contacts, they experience hurtful feelings that are absolutely painful—like the beings in hell. This is how a being is born from a being. For your deeds determine your rebirth, and when you're reborn contacts strike you. This is why I say that sentient beings are heirs to their deeds. These are called dark deeds with dark results.

And what are bright deeds with bright results? It's when someone makes pleasing choices by way of body, speech, and mind. Having made these choices, they are reborn in a pleasing world, where pleasing contacts strike them. Touched by pleasing contacts, they experience pleasing feelings of absolute happiness—like the gods of universal beauty. This is how a being is born from a being. For your deeds determine your rebirth, and when you're reborn contacts strike you. This is why I say that sentient beings are heirs to their deeds. These are called bright deeds with bright results.

And what are dark and bright deeds with dark and bright results? It's when someone makes both hurtful and pleasing choices by way of body, speech, and mind. Having made these choices, they are reborn in a world that is both hurtful and pleasing, where hurtful and pleasing contacts strike them. Touched by both hurtful and pleasing contacts, they experience both hurtful and pleasing feelings that are a mixture of pleasure and pain—like humans, some gods, and some beings in the underworld. This is how a being is born from a being. For what you do brings about your rebirth, and when you're reborn contacts strike you. This is why I say that sentient beings are heirs to their deeds. These are called dark and bright deeds with dark and bright results.

And what are neither dark nor bright deeds with neither dark nor bright results, which lead to the ending of deeds? It's the intention to give up dark deeds with dark results, bright deeds with bright results, and both dark and bright deeds with both dark and bright results. These are called neither dark nor bright deeds with neither dark nor bright results, which lead to the ending of deeds.

These are the four kinds of deeds that I declare, having realized them with my own insight."

When he had spoken, Puṇṇa the Koliyan said to the Buddha, "Excellent, sir! Excellent! … From this day forth, may the Buddha remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge for life."

And Seniya the naked ascetic said to the Buddha, "Excellent, sir! Excellent! … I go for refuge to the Buddha, to the teaching, and to the mendicant Saṅgha. Sir, may I receive the going forth, the ordination in the Buddha's presence?"

"Seniya, if someone formerly ordained in another sect wishes to take the going forth, the ordination in this teaching and training, they must spend four months on probation. When four months have passed, if the mendicants are satisfied, they'll give the going forth, the ordination into monkhood. However, I recognize individual differences in this matter."

"Sir, if four months probation are required in such a case, I'll spend four years on probation. When four years have passed, if the mendicants are satisfied, let them give me the going forth, the ordination into monkhood."

And the naked ascetic Seniya received the going forth, the ordination in the Buddha's presence. Not long after his ordination, Venerable Seniya, living alone, withdrawn, diligent, keen, and resolute, soon realized the supreme culmination of the spiritual path in this very life. He lived having achieved with his own insight the goal for which gentlemen rightly go forth from the lay life to homelessness.

He understood: “Rebirth is ended; the spiritual journey has been completed; what had to be done has been done; there is nothing further for this place.” And Venerable Seniya became one of the perfected.