MN 72 — MN 72 To Vacchagotta on Fire | Aggi-vacchagotta Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

To Vacchagotta on Fire

Aggi-vacchagotta Sutta (MN 72)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. Then Vacchagotta the wanderer went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he asked the Blessed One: "How is it, Master Gotama—does Master Gotama hold the view: 'The cosmos is eternal: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

" … no…"

“Then does Master Gotama hold the view: ‘The cosmos is not eternal: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless’?”

“ … no…”

“Then does Master Gotama hold the view: ‘The cosmos is finite: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless’?”

“ … no…”

“Then does Master Gotama hold the view: ‘The cosmos is infinite: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless’?”

“ … no…”

“Then does Master Gotama hold the view: ‘The soul & the body are the same: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless’?”

“ … no…”

“Then does Master Gotama hold the view: ‘The soul is one thing and the body another: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless’?”

“ … no…”

“Then does Master Gotama hold the view: ‘After death a Tathāgata exists: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless’?”

“ … no…”

“Then does Master Gotama hold the view: ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless’?”

“ … no …”

“Then does Master Gotama hold the view: ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists & does not exist: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless’?”

“ … no…”

“Then does Master Gotama hold the view: ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless’?”

“ … no…”

“How is it, Master Gotama, when Master Gotama is asked if he holds the view ‘the cosmos is eternal…’ … ‘after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless,’ he says ‘ … no…’ in each case. Seeing what drawback, then, is Master Gotama thus entirely dissociated from each of these ten positions?”

“Vaccha, the position that ‘the cosmos is eternal’ is a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is accompanied by suffering, distress, despair, & fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation; to calm, direct knowledge, self-awakening, unbinding.

“The position that ‘the cosmos is not eternal’…

“…‘the cosmos is finite’…

“…‘the cosmos is infinite’…

“…‘the soul & the body are the same’…

“…‘the soul is one thing and the body another’…

“…‘after death a Tathāgata exists’…

“…‘after death a Tathāgata does not exist’…

“…‘after death a Tathāgata both exists & does not exist’…

“…‘after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist’… does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation; to calm, direct knowledge, self-awakening, unbinding.”

“Does Master Gotama have any position at all?”

“A ‘position,’ Vaccha, is something that a Tathāgata has done away with. What a Tathāgata sees is this: ‘Such is form, such its origination, such its disappearance; such is feeling, such its origination, such its disappearance; such is perception… such are fabrications… such is consciousness, such its origination, such its disappearance.’ Because of this, I say, a Tathāgata—with the ending, fading away, cessation, renunciation, & relinquishment of all suppositions, all excogitations, all I-making & mine-making & obsessions with conceit—is, through lack of clinging/sustenance, released.”

“But, Master Gotama, the monk whose mind is thus released: Where does he reappear?”

“‘Reappear,’ Vaccha, doesn’t apply.”

“In that case, Master Gotama, he does not reappear.”

“‘Does not reappear,’ Vaccha, doesn’t apply.”

"...both does & does not reappear."

"...doesn't apply."

"...neither does nor does not reappear."

"...doesn't apply."

"How is it, Master Gotama, when Master Gotama is asked if the monk reappears... does not reappear... both does & does not reappear... neither does nor does not reappear, he says, '... doesn't apply' in each case. At this point, Master Gotama, I am befuddled; at this point, confused. The modicum of clarity coming to me from your earlier conversation is now obscured."

"Of course you're befuddled, Vaccha. Of course you're confused. Deep, Vaccha, is this phenomenon, hard to see, hard to realize, tranquil, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise. For those with other views, other practices, other satisfactions, other aims, other teachers, it is difficult to know. That being the case, I will counter-question you on this matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think, Vaccha? If a fire were burning in front of you, would you know that 'This fire is burning in front of me'?"

"...yes..."

"And if someone were to ask you, Vaccha, 'This fire burning in front of you, dependent on what is it burning?': Thus asked, how would you reply?"

"...I would reply, 'This fire burning in front of me is burning dependent on grass & timber as its sustenance.'"

"If the fire burning in front of you were to go out, would you know that, 'This fire burning in front of me has gone out'?"

"...yes..."

"And if someone were to ask you, 'This fire that has gone out in front of you, in which direction from here has it gone? East? West? North? Or south?': Thus asked, how would you reply?"

"That doesn't apply, Master Gotama. Any fire burning dependent on a sustenance of grass & timber, being unnourished—from having consumed that sustenance and not being offered any other—is classified simply as 'out' [unbound]."

"In the same way, Vaccha, any form by which one describing the Tathāgata would describe him: That the Tathāgata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the

classification of form, Vaccha, the Tathāgata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the sea. 'Reappears' doesn't apply. 'Does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Both does & does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Neither reappears nor does not reappear' doesn't apply.

"Any feeling.... Any perception.... Any fabrication....

"Any consciousness by which one describing the Tathāgata would describe him: That the Tathāgata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of consciousness, Vaccha, the Tathāgata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the sea. 'Reappears' doesn't apply. 'Does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Both does & does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Neither reappears nor does not reappear' doesn't apply."

When this was said, Vacchagotta the wanderer said to the Blessed One: "Master Gotama, it's as if there were a great Sal tree not far from a village or town: From inconstancy, its branches and leaves would wear away, its bark would wear away, its sapwood would wear away, so that on a later occasion—divested of branches, leaves, bark, & sapwood—it would stand as pure heartwood. In the same way, Master Gotama's words are divested of branches, leaves, bark, & sapwood and stand as pure heartwood.

"Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has Master Gotama—through many lines of reasoning—made the Dhamma clear. I go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Saṅgha of monks. May Master Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge, from this day forward, for life."

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 15; MN 29–30; SN 6:15; SN 22:36; SN 22:85–86; SN 23:2; SN 44:1; SN 44:9; AN 4:24; AN 10:81; AN 10:93; Ud 8:9–10; Iti 63; Iti 112; Sn 5:6; Thig 5:10