

MN 36: Mahāsaccakasutta: The Greater Discourse to Saccaka

Bhikkhu Bodhi

[*Dhamma](#)

The Greater Discourse to Saccaka

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Vesālī in the Great Wood in the Hall with the Peaked Roof.

Now on that occasion, when it was morning, the Blessed One had finished dressing and had taken his bowl and outer robe, desiring to go into Vesālī for alms.

Then, as Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha's son was walking and wandering for exercise, he came to the Hall with the Peaked Roof in the Great Wood. The venerable Ānanda saw him coming in the distance and said to the Blessed One: "Venerable sir, here comes Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha's son, a debater and a clever speaker regarded by many as a saint. He wants to discredit the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It would be good if the Blessed One would sit down for a while out of compassion." The Blessed One sat down on the seat made ready. Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha's son went up to the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and amiable talk was finished, he sat down at one side and said to the Blessed One:

"Master Gotama, there are some recluses and brahmins who abide pursuing development of body, but not development of mind. They are touched by bodily painful feeling. In the past, when one was touched by bodily painful feeling, one's thighs would become rigid, one's heart would burst, hot blood would gush from one's mouth, and one would go mad, go out of one's mind. So then the mind was subservient to the body, the body wielded mastery over it. Why is that? Because the mind was not developed. But there are some recluses and

brahmins who abide pursuing development of mind, but not development of body. They are touched by mental painful feeling. In the past, when one was touched by mental painful feeling, one's thighs would become rigid, one's heart would burst, hot blood would gush from one's mouth, and one would go mad, go out of one's mind. So then the body was subservient to the mind, the mind wielded mastery over it. Why is that? Because the body was not developed. Master Gotama, it has occurred to me: 'Surely Master Gotama's disciples abide pursuing development of mind, but not development of body.'

"But, Aggivessana, what have you learned about development of body?"

"Well, there are, for example, Nanda Vaccha, Kisa Sankicca, Makkhali Gosāla. They go naked, rejecting conventions, licking their hands, not coming when asked, not stopping when asked; they do not accept food brought or food specially made or an invitation to a meal; they receive nothing from a pot, from a bowl, across a threshold, across a stick, across a pestle, from two eating together, from a pregnant woman, from a woman giving suck, from a woman in the midst of men, from where food is advertised to be distributed, from where a dog is waiting, from where flies are buzzing; they accept no fish or meat, they drink no liquor, wine, or fermented brew. They keep to one house, to one morsel; they keep to two houses, to two morsels... they keep to seven houses, to seven morsels. They live on one saucerful a day, on two saucerfuls a day...on seven saucerfuls a day. They take food once a day, once every two days...once every seven days; thus even up to once every fortnight, they dwell pursuing the practice of taking food at stated intervals."

"But do they subsist on so little, Aggivessana?"

"No, Master Gotama, sometimes they consume excellent hard food, eat excellent soft food, taste excellent delicacies, drink excellent drinks. Thereby they again regain their strength, fortify themselves, and become fat."

"What they earlier abandoned, Aggivessana, they later gather together again. That is how there is increase and decrease of this body. But what have you learned about development of mind?"

When Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha's son was asked by the Blessed One about development of mind, he was unable to answer.

Then the Blessed One told him: "What you have just spoken of as development of body, Aggivessana, is not development of body according to the Dhamma in the Noble One's Discipline. Since you do not know what development of body is, how could you know what development of mind is? Nevertheless, Aggivessana, as to how one is undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind, and developed in body and developed in mind, listen and attend closely to what I shall say."—"Yes, sir," Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha's son replied. The Blessed One said this:

"How, Aggivessana, is one undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind? Here, Aggivessana, pleasant feeling arises in an untaught ordinary person. Touched by that pleasant feeling, he lusts after pleasure and continues to lust after pleasure. That pleasant feeling of his ceases. With the cessation of the pleasant feeling, painful feeling arises. Touched by that painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, and laments, he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught. When that pleasant feeling has arisen in him, it invades his mind and remains because body is not developed. And when that painful feeling has arisen in him, it invades his mind and remains because mind is not developed. Anyone in whom, in this double manner, arisen pleasant feeling invades his mind and remains because body is not developed, and arisen painful feeling invades his mind and remains because mind is not developed, is thus undeveloped in body because mind is not developed, is thus undeveloped in body and undeveloped in mind.

"And how, Aggivessana, is one developed in body and developed in mind? Here, Aggivessana, pleasant feeling arises in a well-taught noble disciple. Touched by that pleasant feeling, he does not lust after pleasure or continue to lust after pleasure. That pleasant feeling of his ceases. With the cessation of the pleasant feeling, painful feeling arises. Touched by that painful feeling, he does not sorrow, grieve, and lament, he does not weep beating his breast and become distraught. When that pleasant feeling has arisen in him, it does not invade his mind and remain because body is developed. And when

that painful feeling has arisen in him, it does not invade his mind and remain because mind is developed. Anyone in whom, in this double manner, arisen pleasant feeling does not invade his mind and remain because body is developed, and arisen painful feeling does not invade his mind and remain because mind is developed, is thus developed in body and developed in mind.”

“Have confidence in Master Gotama thus: ‘Master Gotama is developed in body and developed in mind.’”

“Surely, Aggivessana, your words are offensive and discourteous, but still I will answer you. Since I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and went forth from the home life into homelessness, it has not been possible for arisen pleasant feeling to invade my mind and remain or for arisen painful feeling to invade my mind and remain.”

“Has there never arisen in Master Gotama a feeling so pleasant that it could invade his mind and remain? Has there never arisen in Master Gotama a feeling so painful that it could invade his mind and remain?”

“Why not, Aggivessana? Here, Aggivessana, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, I thought: ‘Household life is crowded and dusty; life gone forth is wide open. It is not easy, while living in a home, to lead the holy life utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell. Suppose I shave off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and go forth from the home life into homelessness.’

“Later, while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life...as Sutta 26, §§14-17...And I sat down there thinking: ‘This will serve for striving.’

“Now these three similes occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before. Suppose there were a wet sappy piece of wood lying in water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: ‘I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.’ What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by taking the upper fire-stick and rubbing it against the wet sappy piece of wood lying in the water?”

“No, Master Gotama. Why not? Because it is a wet sappy piece of wood, and it is lying in water. Eventually the man would reap only weariness and disappointment.”

“So too, Aggivessana, as to those recluses and brahmins who still do not live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has not been fully abandoned and suppressed internally, even if those good recluses and brahmins feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good recluses and brahmins do not feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment. This was the first simile that occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before.

“Again, Aggivessana, a second simile occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before. Suppose there were a wet sappy piece of wood lying on dry land far from water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: ‘I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.’ What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by taking the upper fire-stick and rubbing it against the wet sappy piece of wood lying on dry land far from water?”

“No, Master Gotama. Why not? Because it is a wet sappy piece of wood, even though it is lying on dry land far from water. Eventually the man would reap only weariness and disappointment.”

“So too, Aggivessana, as to those recluses and brahmins who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, but whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has not been fully abandoned and suppressed internally, even if those good recluses and brahmins feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good recluses and brahmins do not feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment. This was the second simile that occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before.

“Again, Aggivessana, a third simile occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before. Suppose there were a dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far from water, and a man came with an upper fire-stick, thinking: ‘I shall light a fire, I shall produce heat.’ What do you think, Aggivessana? Could the man light a fire and produce heat by rubbing it against the dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far from water?”

“Yes, Master Gotama. Why so? Because it is a dry sapless piece of wood, and it is lying on dry land far from water.”

“So too, Aggivessana, as to those recluses and brahmins who live bodily withdrawn from sensual pleasures, and whose sensual desire, affection, infatuation, thirst, and fever for sensual pleasures has been fully abandoned and suppressed internally, even if those good recluses and brahmins feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment; and even if those good recluses and brahmins do not feel painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, they are capable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment. This was the third simile that occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before. These are the three similes that occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before.

“I thought: ‘Suppose, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind.’ So, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained, and crushed mind with mind. While I did so, sweat ran from my armpits. Just as a strong man might seize a weaker man by the head or shoulders and beat him down, constrain him, and crush him, so too, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained, and crushed mind with mind, and sweat ran from my armpits. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“I thought: ‘Suppose I practise the breathingless meditation.’ So I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth and nose.

While I did so, there was a loud sound of winds coming out from my earholes. Just as there is a loud sound when a smith's bellows are blown, so too, while I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my nose and ears, there was a loud sound of winds coming out from my earholes. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

"I thought: 'Suppose I practise further the breathingless meditation.' So I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose, and ears. While I did so, violent winds cut through my head. Just as if a strong man were to crush my head with the tip of a sharp sword, so too, while I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose, and ears, violent winds cut through my head. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

"I thought: 'Suppose I practise further the breathingless meditation.' So I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose, and ears. While I did so, there were violent pains in my head. Just as if a strong man were tightening a tough leather strap around my head as a headband, so too, while I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose, and ears, there were violent pains in my head. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

"I thought: 'Suppose I practise further the breathingless meditation.' So I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose, and ears. While I did so, violent winds carved up my belly. Just as if a skilled butcher or his apprentice were to carve up an ox's belly with a sharp butcher's knife, so too, while I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose, and ears, violent winds carved up my belly. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and

uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“I thought: ‘Suppose I practise further the breathingless meditation.’ So I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose, and ears. While I did so, there was a violent burning in my body. Just as if two strong men were to seize a weaker man by both arms and roast him over a pit of hot coals, so too, while I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose, and ears, there was a violent burning in my body. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“Now when deities saw me, some said: ‘The recluse Gotama is dead.’ Other deities said: ‘The recluse Gotama is not dead, he is dying.’ And other deities said: ‘The recluse Gotama is not dead nor dying; he is an arahant, for such is the way arahants abide.’

“I thought: ‘Suppose I practise entirely cutting off food.’ Then deities came to me and said: ‘Good sir, do not practise entirely cutting off food. If you do so, we shall infuse heavenly food into the pores of your skin and you will live on that.’ I considered: ‘If I claim to be completely fasting while these deities infuse heavenly food into the pores of my skin and I live on that, then I shall be lying.’ So I dismissed those deities, saying: ‘There is no need.’

“I thought: ‘Suppose I take very little food, a handful each time, whether of bean soup or lentil soup or vetch soup or pea soup.’ So I took very little food, a handful each time, whether of bean soup or lentil soup or vetch soup or pea soup. While I did so, my body reached a state of extreme emaciation. Because of eating so little my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems. Because of eating so little my backside became like a camel’s hoof. Because of eating so little the projections on my spine stood forth like corded beads. Because of eating so little my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn. Because of eating so little the gleam of my eyes sank far down in their sockets, looking like the gleam of water that has sunk far down in a deep well. Because of eat-

ing so little my scalp shrivelled and withered as a green bitter gourd shrivels and withers in the wind and sun. Because of eating so little my belly skin adhered to my backbone; thus if I touched my belly skin I encountered my backbone and if I touched my backbone I encountered my belly skin. Because of eating so little, if I defecated or urinated, I fell over on my face there. Because of eating so little, if I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair, rotted at its roots, fell from my body as I rubbed.

“Now when people saw me, some said: ‘The recluse Gotama is black.’ Other people said: ‘The recluse Gotama is not black, he is brown.’ Other people said: ‘The recluse Gotama is neither black nor brown, he is golden-skinned.’ So much had the clear, bright colour of my skin deteriorated through eating so little.

“I thought: ‘Whatever recluses or brahmins in the past have experienced painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. And whatever recluses and brahmins in the future will experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. And whatever recluses and brahmins at present experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to enlightenment?’

“I considered: ‘I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Could that be the path to enlightenment?’ Then, following on that memory, came the realisation: ‘That is indeed the path to enlightenment.’

“I thought: ‘Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?’ I thought: ‘I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states.’

“I considered: ‘It is not easy to attain that pleasure with a body so excessively emaciated. Suppose I ate some solid food—some boiled rice and porridge.’ And I ate some solid food—some boiled rice and porridge. Now at that time five bhikkhus were waiting upon me, thinking: ‘If our recluse Gotama achieves some higher state, he will inform us.’ But when I ate the boiled rice and porridge, the five bhikkhus were disgusted and left me, thinking: ‘The recluse Gotama now lives luxuriously; he has given up his striving and reverted to luxury.’

“Now when I had eaten solid food and regained my strength, then quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, I entered upon and abided in the second jhāna...With the fading away as well of rapture...I entered upon and abided in the third jhāna...With the abandoning of pleasure and pain...I entered upon and abided in the fourth jhāna...But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births...as Sutta 4, §27...Thus with their aspects and particulars I recollected my manifold past lives.

“This was the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings...as Sutta 4, §29... Thus with the divine eye, which

is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, and I understood how beings pass on according to their actions.

“This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the middle watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is suffering’;...‘This is the origin of suffering’;...‘This is the cessation of suffering’;...‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering’;...‘These are the taints’;...‘This is the origin of the taints’;...‘This is the cessation of the taints’;...‘This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints.’

“When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.’

“This was the third true knowledge attained by me in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“Aggivessana, I recall teaching the Dhamma to an assembly of many hundreds, and even then each person thinks of me: ‘The recluse Gotama is teaching the Dhamma especially for me.’ But it should not be so regarded; the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma to others only to give them knowledge. When the talk is finished, Aggivessana, then I steady my mind internally, quieten it, bring it to singleness, and con-

centrate it on that same sign of concentration as before, in which I constantly abide.”

“This is a matter about which Master Gotama can be trusted, as an accomplished and fully enlightened one should be. But does Master Gotama recall sleeping during the day?”

“I recall, Aggivessana, in the last month of the hot season, on returning from my almsround, after my meal I lay out my outer robe folded in four, and lying down on my right side, I fall asleep mindful and fully aware.”

“Some recluses and brahmins call that abiding in delusion, Master Gotama.”

“It is not in such a way that one is deluded or undeluded, Aggivessana. As to how one is deluded or undeluded, listen and attend closely to what I shall say.”—“Yes, sir,” Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son replied. The Blessed One said this:

“Him I call deluded, Aggivessana, who has not abandoned the taints that defile, bring renewal of being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, ageing, and death; for it is with the non-abandoning of the taints that one is deluded. Him I call undeluded who has abandoned the taints that defile, bring renewal of being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, ageing, and death; for it is with the abandoning of the taints that one is undeluded. The Tathāgata, Aggivessana, has abandoned the taints that defile, bring renewal of being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, ageing, and death; he has cut them off at the root, made them like a palm stump, done away with them so that they are no longer subject to future arising. Just as a palm tree whose crown is cut off is incapable of further growth, so too, the Tathāgata has abandoned the taints that defile...done away with them so that they are no longer subject to future arising.”

When this was said, Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son said: “It is wonderful, Master Gotama, it is marvellous how when Master Gotama is spoken to offensively again and again, assailed by discourteous courses of speech, the colour of his skin brightens and the colour of his face

clears, as is to be expected of one who is accomplished and fully enlightened. I recall, Master Gotama, engaging Pūraṇa Kassapa in debate, and then he prevaricated, led the talk aside, and showed anger, hate, and bitterness. But when Master Gotama is spoken to offensively again and again, assaulted by discourteous courses of speech, the colour of his skin brightens and the colour of his face clears, as is to be expected of one who is accomplished and fully enlightened. I recall, Master Gotama, engaging Makkhali Gosāla... Ajita Kesakambalin... Pakudha Kaccāyana... Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta... the Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta in debate, and then he prevaricated, led the talk aside, and showed anger, hate, and bitterness. But when Master Gotama is spoken to offensively again and again, assailed by discourteous courses of speech, the colour of his skin brightens and the colour of his face clears, as is to be expected of one who is accomplished and fully enlightened. And now, Master Gotama, we depart. We are busy and have much to do.” “Now is the time, Aggivessana, to do as you think fit.”

Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha’s son, having delighted and rejoiced in the Blessed One’s words, got up from his seat and departed.

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