

MN 35: Cūlasaccaka Sutta

The Lesser Discourse to Saccaka

Translated by Suddhāso Bhikkhu

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Vesāli, in the Great Grove, at the Peaked-Roof Hall. Now on that occasion Saccaka Nigaṇṭhaputta¹ was living at Vesāli; he was a debater, a clever orator considered a saint by much of the populace. He spoke this statement all around Vesāli: “I do not see any contemplative² or holy man³, a leader of a community, a teacher of a group, even one claiming to be a fully enlightened Arahant, who would not tremble, quiver, shake, and emit sweat from their armpits when engaged in debate with me. Even if I were to engage a senseless post in debate, it would tremble, quiver, and shake when engaged in debate with me. What can be said of a human being?”

Then Venerable Assaji, after dressing in the morning and taking his bowl and robe, entered Vesāli for alms. While walking in Vesāli for exercise, Saccaka saw Venerable Assaji coming from afar. After seeing this, he approached Venerable Assaji and conversed with him. After engaging in the appropriate polite conversation, he stood to one side. While he was standing to one side, Saccaka said to Venerable Assaji, “Sir Assaji, how does the contemplative Gotama guide his disciples? What is the usual instruction given amidst the contemplative Gotama's disciples?”

“Aggivessana⁴, it is in this way that the Blessed One guides his disciples, and this is the usual instruction given amidst the Blessed One's disciples: 'Monks, the body is impermanent, feelings are impermanent, recognition is impermanent, thoughts are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent. Monks, the body is not self, feelings are not self, recognition is not self, thoughts are not self, consciousness is not self. All conditions are impermanent, all phenomena are not self.' Aggivessana, it is in this way that the Blessed One guides his disciples, and this is the usual instruction given amidst the Blessed One's disciples.”

“Oh, Sir Assaji, that is unpleasant to hear, what we have heard of the contemplative Gotama's doctrine. Perhaps at some point we will meet with Sir Gotama and there might be some conversation, and perhaps we can separate him from that harmful⁵ perspective.”

Now on that occasion [about] five hundred Licchavis were gathered together in the assembly-hall on account of something to be done. Then Saccaka approached those Licchavis and said to them, “May the Licchavi gentlemen come forth, may the Licchavi gentlemen come forth! Today I will have a conversation with the contemplative Gotama. If the contemplative Gotama maintains the same position that a certain famous disciple [of his], the monk Assaji, has maintained, then just as a strong man might seize a long-haired

1 Lit. “Nigaṇṭha-son.” That is, a member of the Nigaṇṭhas, a religion popular in India at the Buddha's time, identified with the religion now known as Jainism. While the descriptor “Nigaṇṭhaputta” is added to his name throughout the text, it is omitted in the rest of this translation for the sake of brevity.

2 *Samāna*.

3 *Brahmaṇa*.

4 This was probably the name of Saccaka's clan or extended family.

5 *Pāpaka*. From *pāpa*. This is often translated “evil” or “bad.”

goat by its hair and pull it around⁶, in the same way I will pull the contemplative Gotama around using words. Just as a strong pool-worker might toss a pool-mat in a lake, grasp one corner, and shake it up and down and beat it down, in the same way I will shake the contemplative Gotama up and down and beat him down using words. Just as a sixty-year-old elephant might plunge into a deep pond and play the hemp-washing game, in the same way I will play the hemp-washing game with the contemplative Gotama. May the Licchavi gentlemen come forth, may the Licchavi gentlemen come forth! Today I will have a conversation with the contemplative Gotama.”

Some of the Licchavis there thought, “How could the contemplative Gotama refute Saccaka's doctrine? Saccaka will refute the contemplative Gotama's doctrine.” Some of the [other] Licchavis thought, “How could Sir Saccaka refute the Blessed One's doctrine? The Blessed One will refute Saccaka's doctrine.” Then Saccaka approached the Peaked-Roof Hall in the Great Forest, surrounded by [about] five hundred Licchavis.

On this occasion several monks were walking in the open air. Then Saccaka approached those monks and said to them, “Sir, where does Sit Gotama currently reside? We want to see Sir Gotama.” “Aggivessana, the Blessed One has entered this Great Forest and is seated at the root of a certain tree for the day's abiding.” Then Saccaka entered the Great Forest with a large company of Licchavis⁷, approached the Blessed One, and conversed with him. After engaging in the appropriate polite conversation, he sat to one side. Some of Licchavis paid respects to the Blessed One and sat to one side. Some conversed with the Blessed One, and, after engaging in the appropriate polite conversation, sat to one side. Some extended their hands in *añjali* towards the Blessed One and sat to one side. Some announced their name and clan in the Blessed One's presence and sat to one side. Some remained silent and sat to one side.

While he was seated to one side, Saccaka said to the Blessed One, “I might ask Sir Gotama about a particular issue, if Sir Gotama will make an opportunity for answering my question.” “Aggivessana, ask what you wish.” “How does Sir Gotama guide his disciples? What is the usual instruction given amidst Sir Gotama's disciples?” “Aggivessana, I guide my disciples in this way, and this is the usual instruction given amidst my disciples: 'Monks, the body is impermanent, feelings are impermanent, recognition is impermanent, thoughts are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent. Monks, the body is not self, feelings are not self, recognition is not self, thoughts are not self, consciousness is not self. All conditions are impermanent, all phenomena are not self.' Aggivessana, it is in this way that I guide my disciples, and this is the usual instruction given amidst my disciples.”

“A simile occurs to me, Sir Gotama.”

“Then let it occur, Aggivessana,” the Blessed One said.

“It is like this, Sir Gotama: These seeds and plants attain increase, growth, and abundance. All of them are dependent on earth; all are established on earth. In this way

⁶ *Ākaḍḍheyya parikaḍḍheyya samparikaḍḍheyya*. Lit. “pull, pull around, pull completely around.”

⁷ The sudden change in the text from “five hundred Licchavis” to “a large company of Licchavis” may imply that many of the Licchavis who originally came with Saccaka did not proceed with him into the Great Forest.

these seeds and plants attain increase, growth, and abundance. It is like this, Sir Gotama, there are those who do work that requires strength. All of them are dependent on earth, all are established on earth.⁸ In this way they do work that requires strength. In the same way, Sir Gotama, a person has the body as self, and established on the body he accrues merit or demerit. A person has feeling as self... recognition as self... thoughts as self... consciousness as self, and established on consciousness he accrues merit or demerit.”

“Aggivessana, do you not therefore say, 'The body is my self, feelings are my self, recognition is my self, thoughts are my self, consciousness is my self'?”

“Sir Gotama, I say 'The body is my self, feelings are my self, recognition is my self, thoughts are my self, consciousness is my self,' and so does the majority of the populace.”

“Aggivessana, what can the majority of the populace do for you? Aggivessana, surely you can explain your own assertion.”

“Sir Gotama, I say 'The body is my self, feelings are my self, recognition is my self, thoughts are my self, consciousness is my self.'”

“Therefore, Aggivessana, I will ask you a counter-question about exactly that. Answer as you consider appropriate. What do you think, Aggivessana? Can a consecrated royal king exercise control in his own realm, to execute, fine, or exile those who are to be executed, fined, or exiled? For example, King Pasenadi of Kosala, or King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha?” “Sir Gotama, a consecrated royal king can exercise control in his own realm, to execute, fine, or exile those who are to be executed, fined, or exiled; such as King Pasenadi of Kosala, or King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha. Sir Gotama, even those who are [ruled by] a group – such as the Vajjīs or the Mallans – exercise control in their own realm, to execute, fine, or exile those who are to be executed, fined, or exiled. But what of consecrated royal kings, such as King Pasenadi of Kosala, or King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha? Sir Gotama, they exercise control, and they are worthy to exercise control.”

“What do you think, Aggivessana? You say 'The body is my self.' Do you exercise control in that body, [determining] 'May my body be like this, may my body not be like that'?” When this was said, Saccaka was silent. A second time the Blessed One said to Saccaka, “What do you think, Aggivessana? You say 'The body is my self.' Do you exercise control in that body, [determining] 'May my body be like this, may my body not be like that'?” For a second time Saccaka was silent. Then the Blessed One said to Saccaka, “Answer now, Saccaka. This is not the time for you to be silent. Aggivessana, if someone does not answer when he has been asked a question that accords with the Dhamma by a Tathāgata for the third time, his head will immediately split into seven pieces.”

⁸ *Paṭhavī*. This is probably referring to solidity as a property of physicality, rather than to earth in the more usual sense of dirt and stone. In other words, Saccaka appears to be saying that one is able to do work that requires strength because one has a solid physical body.

On this occasion the spirit⁹ Vajirapāṇi¹⁰ was standing in the sky above Saccaka, holding a lightning-bolt that was on fire, blazing, and radiant, [thinking] “If this Saccaka does not answer when asked a question that accords with the Dhamma by the Blessed One for the third time, then I will immediately split his head into seven pieces.” Both the Blessed One and Saccaka saw the spirit Vajirapāṇi. Then Saccaka was frightened, terrified, with his hair standing on end. Seeking protection in the Blessed One, seeking safety in the Blessed One, seeking refuge in the Blessed One, he said to the Blessed One, “Let Sir Gotama ask me; I will answer.”

“What do you think, Aggivessana? You say 'The body is my self.' Do you exercise control in that body, [determining] 'May my body be like this, may my body not be like that'?”
“Certainly not, Sir Gotama.”

“Pay attention, Aggivessana; answer after paying attention, Aggivessana. [What you said] before does not connect with [what you said] afterwards, nor [what you said] afterwards with [what you said] before.

“What do you think, Aggivessana? You say 'Feelings are my self... recognition is my self... thoughts are my self... consciousness is my self.' Do you exercise control in that consciousness, [determining] 'May my consciousness be like this, may my consciousness not be like that'?” “Certainly not, Sir Gotama.”

“Pay attention, Aggivessana; answer after paying attention, Aggivessana. [What you said] before does not connect with [what you said] afterwards, nor [what you said] afterwards with [what you said] before.

“What do you think, Aggivessana? Is the body permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, Sir Gotama.”

“Is that which is impermanent [a source of] suffering or [a source of] happiness?”

“[A source of] suffering, Sir Gotama.”

“Is it appropriate to regard that which is impermanent, [a source of] suffering, and subject to alteration¹¹ as 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self'?”

“Certainly not, Sir Gotama.”

“What do you think, Aggivessana? Are feelings... recognition... thoughts... consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, Sir Gotama.”

9 *Yakkha*. In post-canonical this term came to be used to refer only to hostile spirits; however, in the Pāli canon it is used to refer to all manner of spirits, devas, and deities.

10 Lit. “lightning-hand.”

11 *Vipariṇāma*. This often has the meaning of catastrophic alteration, and is frequently used as a euphemism for serious illness and/or death.

“Is that which is impermanent [a source of] suffering or [a source of] happiness?”

“[A source of] suffering, Sir Gotama.”

“Is it appropriate to regard that which is impermanent, [a source of] suffering, and subject to alteration¹² as 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self'?”

“Certainly not, Sir Gotama.”

“What do you think, Aggivessana? If someone adheres to [a source of] suffering, stays close to [a source of] suffering, clings to [a source of] suffering, and regards [a source of] suffering as 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self,' could he personally understand suffering, or abide having completely discarded suffering?”

“How could it be so, Sir Gotama? Certainly not, Sir Gotama.”

“What do you think, Aggivessana? Are you not the same – one who adheres to [a source of] suffering, stays close to [a source of] suffering, clings to [a source of] suffering, and regards [a source of] suffering as 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self'?”

“How could it not be so, Sir Gotama? It is just like that, Sir Gotama.”

“Aggivessana, it is just as if a man who needs heartwood, who seeks heartwood, who travels in search of heartwood, were to take a sharp axe and enter a forest. There he might see a large banana-tree, straight, young, and healthy¹³. He might cut it down at the base, chop off the top, and separate the leaf-rolls. While separating the leaf-rolls, he would not even find sapwood, let alone heartwood. In the same way, Aggivessana, while being examined, investigated, and interrogated about my own doctrine, you are [found to be] empty and hollow – a failure. However, Aggivessana, at the assembly in Vesāli you said 'I do not see any contemplative or holy man, a leader of a community, a teacher of a group, even one claiming to be a fully enlightened Arahant, who would not tremble, quiver, shake, and emit sweat from their armpits when engaged in debate with me. Even if I were to engage a senseless post in debate, it would tremble, quiver, and shake when engaged in debate with me. What can be said of a human being?' But, Aggivessana, it is on your forehead that there is sweat, and it has soaked through your upper robe and landed on the ground. But, Aggivessana, there is no sweat on my body at this time.” And the Blessed One revealed his golden-colored body in that assembly. When this was said, Saccaka sat silent, ashamed, with shoulders slumped, with face downcast, sulking and unresponsive.

Then Dummukha¹⁴ the Licchavi, after recognizing that Saccaka was silent, ashamed, with shoulders slumped, with face downcast, sulking and unresponsive, said to the Blessed

12 *Vipariṇāma*. This often has the meaning of catastrophic alteration, and is frequently used as a euphemism for serious illness and/or death.

13 *Akukkukajāta*. This term appears only in this simile, and different scholars have widely varying opinions as to its meaning.

14 His name means “bad face” or “bad mouth.”

One, "Blessed One, a similar occurs to me." "Then let it occur, Dummukha," the Blessed One said. "Bhante, it is just as if there was a pond not far from a village or town, where there was a crab. Then, Bhante, several young boys or girls went out from that village or town and approached the pond; after approaching and plunging into the pond, they took the crab out of the water and placed it on dry land. Bhante, wherever that crab extended a limb, the boys or girls would use a stick or stone to cut it off, break it, crush it. Bhante, when all the crab's limbs had been cut off, broken, and crushed in this way, it is not possible for it to enter the pond again, as [it did] before. In the same way, Bhante, all of Saccaka's distortions, writhings, and vacillations have been cut off, broken, and crushed by the Blessed One. Bhante, now it is impossible for Saccaka to approach the Blessed One again with the intention of debate." When this was said, Saccaka said to Dummukha the Licchavi, "Wait, Dummukha, wait, Dummukha. We do not speak with you, we speak with Sir Gotama.

"Sir Gotama, let us set aside those statements of ours and of other, ordinary contemplatives and holy men. I think it was just idle talk. How does one abide as one who implements the Blessed One's teachings, one who acts in accordance with his exhortations, one who has overcome doubt, one who is free of perplexity, one who has attained intrepidity, one who is not dependent on another in the Teacher's dispensation?"

"Here, Aggivessana, whatever body there is - past, future, present, internal or external, coarse or subtle, inferior or superior, whether far or near - my disciple sees the entire body¹⁵ as it is with correct wisdom in this way: 'This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.' Whatever feelings... recognition... thoughts... consciousness there is - past, future, present, internal or external, coarse or subtle, inferior or superior, whether far or near - my disciple sees all consciousness as it is with correct wisdom in this way: 'This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.' Aggivessana, it is in this way that one abides as one who implements the Blessed One's teachings, one who acts in accordance with his exhortations, one who has overcome doubt, one who is free of perplexity, one who has attained intrepidity, one who is not dependent on another in the Teacher's dispensation.

"Sir Gotama, how is a monk an Arahant - one who has destroyed the taints, lived [perfectly], done what was to be done, laid down the burden, reached the true goal¹⁶, completely destroyed the fetter of existence, and has been liberated by right knowledge?"

"Here, Aggivessana, whatever body... feelings... recognition... thoughts... consciousness there is - past, future, present, internal or external, coarse or subtle, inferior or superior, whether far or near - a monk sees all consciousness as it is with correct wisdom in this way: 'This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self,' and is liberated by non-clinging. Aggivessana, it is in this way that a monk is an Arahant - one who has destroyed the taints, lived [perfectly], done what was to be done, laid down the burden, reached the true goal, completely destroyed the fetter of existence, and has been liberated by right knowledge. Aggivessana, it is in this way that a monk is an Arahant - one who has destroyed the taints, lived [perfectly], done what was to be done, laid down the burden, reached the true goal, completely destroyed the fetter of existence, and has been liberated by right knowledge. Aggivessana, a monk whose mind is liberated in this way is

¹⁵ *Sabbam rūpaṃ*. This could also be translated "all bodies" or "all physical form."

¹⁶ *Sadattha*. This could also be rendered "true benefit."

endowed with three unsurpassables - unsurpassable vision, unsurpassable practice, and unsurpassable liberation. Aggivessana, a monk whose mind is liberated in this way esteems, respects, honors, and reveres only the Tathāgata, [thinking] 'Himself awakened, the Blessed One teaches Dhamma for the sake of awakening; himself trained, the Blessed One teaches the Dhamma for the sake of training; himself tranquil¹⁷, the Blessed One teaches Dhamma for the sake of tranquility; himself crossed over¹⁸, the Blessed One teaches Dhamma for the sake of crossing over; himself completely cooled¹⁹, the Blessed One teaches Dhamma for the sake of complete cooling.'

When this was said, Saccaka said to the Blessed One, "Sir Gotama, we were offensive, we were impudent, in that we thought to assault Sir Gotama with words. Sir Gotama, a man might be safe after assaulting a furious elephant, but a man is not safe after assaulting Sir Gotama. Sir Gotama, a man might be safe after assaulting a blazing bonfire, but a man is not safe after assaulting Sir Gotama. Sir Gotama, a man might be safe after assaulting a poisonous snake of terrible venom, but a man is not safe after assaulting Sir Gotama. Sir Gotama, we were offensive, we were impudent, in that we thought to assault Sir Gotama with words. May Sir Gotama consent to a meal from me tomorrow, together with the community of monks." The Blessed One consented in silence.

Then, after understanding the Blessed One's consent, Saccaka addressed the Licchavis: "May the Licchavi gentlemen hear me! The contemplative Gotama has been invited by me for tomorrow[*'s meal*], together with the community of monks. Therefore, you may bring to me whatever you think is appropriate." Then, at the end of the night, those Licchavis brought [about] five hundred pots of food to Saccaka. Then Saccaka had many kinds of excellent food prepared in his own monastery, and had the time announced to the Blessed One: "Sir Gotama, it is time; the meal is prepared." Then the Blessed One, after dressing in the morning and taking his bowl and robe, approached Saccaka's monastery; after approaching, he sat on the designated seat, together with the community of monks. Then Saccaka served and satisfied the community of monks headed by the Blessed One with many kinds of excellent food, using his own hands. Then, when the Blessed One had finished his meal and washed his bowl and hand, Saccaka took a low seat and sat to one side. When he was seated to one side, Saccaka said to the Blessed One, "Sir Gotama, may the merit of this giving lead to the happiness of the donors." "Aggivessana, what [merit] comes from [giving to] one like you, who is not free of passion, aversion, and delusion - that [merit] will be for the donors. Aggivessana, what [merit] comes from [giving to] one like me, who is free of passion, aversion and delusion - that [merit] will be for you."

17 *Santa*. This can also mean "peaceful" or "calmed."

18 *Tiṇṇa*. That is, one who has "crossed over" the river of suffering.

19 *Parinibbuta*. That is, one who has "cooled" the fires of desire, aversion, and delusion.