

Mahā Saccaka Sutta

The Greater Discourse to Saccaka

[The Bodhisattva's self-mortification]
(M 36.17-44/1:242-249)¹

The similes of the fire-sticks²

17 “Then, Aggi,vessana, three similes, unheard before, spontaneously occurred to me.

Suppose, Aggi,vessana, there were a wet, sappy piece of wood lying in water. Then, a man were to come along, carrying an upper piece of fire-stick, thinking:

‘I will make fire. I will produce heat.’”

What do you think, Aggi,vessana? Could that man make fire and produce heat by rubbing the fire-stick on this wet, sappy piece of wood lying in water?”

“No, master Gotama.”

“What is the cause of this? “

“Because, master Gotama, the wood is wet, sappy and lying in water. That man would only become weary and vexed.

Even so, Aggi,vessana, there are some recluses and brahmins who still do not live without bodily and mentally withdrawn from sense pleasures, and whose

desire for sense-pleasure	<i>(kāma-c, chanda)</i> ,	
affection for sense-pleasure	<i>(kāma, sneha)</i> ,	
infatuation with sense-pleasure	<i>(kāma, mucchā)</i> ,	
thirst for sense-pleasure	<i>(kāmapipāsā)</i> ,	and
fever for sense-pleasure	<i>(kāma, parilāha)</i> .	

have not been fully abandoned nor suppressed internally.

Even so, if those recluses and brahmins experienced painful, severe, acute and sharp pains due to striving they would not be able to gain knowledge, vision, and supreme awakening.

And even if those recluses and brahmins did not experience painful, severe, acute and sharp pains due to striving, they would not be able to gain knowledge, vision, and supreme awakening. “

This, Aggi,vessana, was the first simile that occurred to me spontaneously, unheard before.

18 Then, Aggi,vessana, a second simile, unheard before, spontaneously occurred to me.

Suppose, Aggi,vessana, a wet, sappy piece of wood were placed on dry ground, far away from water. Then, a man were to come along, holding an upper piece of fire-stick, thinking,

‘I will make fire. I will produce heat.’

What do you think about his, Aggi,vessana? Could that man, holding an upper piece of fire-stick, and rubbing on that wet, sappy stick placed on the dry ground, far away from water, light a fire? Could he produce heat?”

“No, master Gotama.”

“What is the reason for this?”

“Because, master Gotama, the wood is wet and sappy although it had been placed on dry ground, far away from water. That man would only become weary and vexed.

¹ For a complete tr, see SD 49.4.

² On the location of the account of the similes of the fire-sticks, see M:ÑB 1229 n387. According to Bronkhorst, this episode of the three similes (M 36.17-19) and the episode where Saccaka contrasts the composed behaviour of the Buddha with the evasive reactions of the six heterodox teachers (M 36.48): “If we remove these portions... we are left with what may be called the ‘Original Mahāsaccaka Sūtra’. From the beginning this Original Mahāsaccaka Sūtra must have contained the episode on meditation without breath and reduced intake of food. This episode itself may or may not have existed before the composition of the Original Mahāsaccaka Sūtra.” (1993:18). For a negative application of this simile, see Kāya,gata,sati S (M 119.22/ 3:94 = SD 12.21).

Even so, Aggi,vessana, there are some recluses and brahmins who still do not live without being bodily and mentally withdrawn from sense-pleasure, and whose desire for sense-pleasure, affection for sense-pleasure, infatuation with sense-pleasure, thirst for sense-pleasure and fever for sense-pleasure have not been fully abandoned or suppressed internally.

Even if those recluses and brahmins experienced painful, severe, acute and sharp pains due to striving, they would not be able to gain knowledge, vision and supreme awakening.

And even if those recluses and brahmins did not experience painful, severe, acute and sharp pains due to striving, they would not be able to gain knowledge, vision and supreme awakening. “

This, Aggi,vessana, was the second simile that occurred to me spontaneously, unheard before.

19 Then, Aggi,vessana, a third simile, unheard before, spontaneously occurred to me.

Suppose, Aggi,vessana, a dry, sapless stick were placed on the dry ground, far away from water. Then a man were to come along holding an upper piece of fire-stick, thinking,

‘I will make fire. I will produce heat.’

What do you think, Aggi,vessana? Could that man, holding an upper piece of fire-stick, and rubbing on that dry sapless stick placed on dry ground, far away from water, light a fire? Could he produce heat?

“Yes, master Gotama”

“What is the reason for this?”

“Because, master Gotama, that piece of wood was dry, sapless and was placed on dry ground far away from water.

“Even so, Aggi,vessana, there are some recluses and brahmins who live *bodily and mentally withdrawn from sense pleasures*, and whose desire for sense-pleasure, affection for sense-pleasure, infatuation with sense-pleasure, thirst for sense-pleasure and fever for sense-pleasure *have been fully abandoned and suppressed internally*.

If those recluses and brahmins experienced painful, severe, acute and sharp pains due to striving, they would be able to gain knowledge, vision and supreme awakening.

And even if those recluses and brahmins did not experience painful, severe, acute and sharp pains due to striving, they would be able to gain knowledge, vision and supreme awakening.

This, Aggi,vessana, was the third simile that occurred to me spontaneously, unheard before.

These, Aggi,vessana, were the three similes that occurred to me spontaneously, unheard before.

The Bodhisattva’s self-mortification³

20 I thought thus, Aggi,vessana,

‘Suppose, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against my palate, I beat down the mind with mind.’

So, Aggi,vessana, I with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against my palate, I beat down the mind with mind.

While I, Aggi,vessana, was subduing, restraining and beating down my mind, with teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against my palate, *sweat poured from my armpits*.

Just like as a strong man, Aggi,vessana holding a weaker man by the head or by the shoulders, were to restrain, subdue, attack him,

even so, when I, Aggi,vessana, with my teeth clenched, and my tongue pressed against my palate, sweat poured from my armpits.

But although tireless energy was aroused in me, and undistracted mindfulness was established, my body was overstrained [243] and ill at ease because I was exhausted by the painful striving. But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.⁴

21 I thought thus, Aggi,vessana,

³ The best known image of the mortifying Buddha is that from Sikri (2nd cent CE), now in the Lahore Museum, Pakistan: see http://www.azibaza.com/lecture/lectures_emaciated.htm.

⁴ This is apparently the earliest canonical example of the two kinds of pain (bodily and mental), noted in Sall’-atthana S (S 36.6/4:207-210 = SD 5.5), wherein the saint experiences only bodily pain but not mental pain.

‘Suppose I practise the breathingless meditation.’⁵ So I stopped my 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 ear-holes*, just like a loud sound of winds from a smith’s bellows.

Even so, Aggi,vessana, when I stopped my in-breaths and out-breaths, there was a loud sound of winds coming out from my ear-holes.

But although tireless energy was aroused in me, and undistracted mindfulness was established, my body was overstrained and ill at ease because I was exhausted by the painful striving.

But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

22 I thought thus, Aggi,vessana,

‘Suppose I practise *further* the breathingless meditation.’

So I stopped my 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 splitting my head open with a sharp sword.

Even so, Aggi,vessana, when I stopped my in-breaths and out-breaths, there was a loud sound of winds coming out from my ear-holes.

But although tireless energy was aroused in me, and undistracted mindfulness was established, my body was overstrained and ill at ease because I was exhausted by the painful striving.

But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

23 I thought thus, Aggi,vessana,

‘Suppose I practise *further* the breathingless meditation.’

So I stopped my 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 [244] were tightening a tough leather strap around my head as a headband.

Even so, Aggi,vessana, when I stopped my in-breaths and out-breaths, there were violent pains in my head.

But although tireless energy was aroused in me, and undistracted mindfulness was established, my body was overstrained and ill at ease because I was exhausted by the painful striving.

But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

24 I thought thus, Aggi,vessana, ‘Suppose I practise *further* the breathingless meditation.’ So I stopped my in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose and ears.

While I did so, *violent winds carved up my belly*,⁶ just as if a skilled butcher or his apprentice were to carve up an ox’s belly with a sharp butcher’s knife.

Even so, Aggi,vessana, when I stopped my in-breaths and out-breaths, violent winds carved up my belly.

But although tireless energy was aroused in me, and undistracted mindfulness was established, my body was overstrained and ill at ease because I was exhausted by the painful striving.

But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

25 I thought thus, Aggi,vessana,

‘Suppose I practise *further* the breathingless meditation.’

So I stopped my 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 men were to seize a weaker man by both arms, might set him on fire and roast him over a pit of burning coal.

Even so, Aggi,vessana, when I stopped my in-breaths and out-breaths through my mouth, nose and ears, there was a violent burning in my body.

⁵ “Breathingless meditation,” *appānaka jhāna*.

⁶ According to Agniveśa’s *Caraka Saṁhitā*, Sūtra,sthāna 20.11 (p113), headache (*śīroruc*) [§§21-23] and belly (*udarāveṣṭaḥ* [§24]: the Ayurvedic commentator Cakrapāṇidatta explains: *udarasyāveṣṭanam ivodarāveṣṭaḥ*) are caused by wind (*vāta*). Heat (*dāha*), on the other hand, is caused by bile (*pitta*): see Sūtra,sthāna 20.14 (p114). See Bronkhorst 1993:20 f & n29.

But although tireless energy was aroused in me, and undistracted mindfulness was established, my body was overstrained and ill at ease because I was exhausted by the painful striving.

But such painful feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

26 Now, Aggi,vessana, when [245] the devas saw me, some said: ‘The recluse Gotama is dead!’

Other devas said: ‘The recluse Gotama is not dead but dying!’

Still others said: ‘The recluse Gotama is neither dead nor dying; he is an arhat, for such is how arhats live!’⁷

27 I thought thus, Aggi,vessana,

‘Suppose I practise cutting off food entirely.’ Then, Aggi,vessana, devas came to me and said,

‘Good sir, do not do so. If you do so, we shall infuse divine essence⁸ through the pores of your skin and you will live on like that.’

I thought thus, Aggi,vessana,

‘Suppose I practise cutting off food entirely, and these devas were to infuse divine essence through the pores of my skin, and I live on that, then I shall be lying.’ So, Aggi,vessana, I dismissed the devas, saying, ‘There is no need!’

28 I thought thus,

‘Suppose I take very little food, a handful each time, perhaps of bean soup or lentil soup or vetch⁹ soup or pea soup.’

So, Aggi,vessana, I *took food little by little, drop by drop*, such as bean soup or lentil soup or vetch soup or pea soup. When I did so, my body reached a state of extreme emaciation. Because of eating so little,

my limbs became like the joints of vine stems or bamboo stems;

my backside became like a buffalo’s [camel’s] hoof;¹⁰

the projections of my spine stood out like corded beads;

my ribs jutted out like the crazy¹¹ rafters of an old broken shed;

the gleam of my eyes sank deep down into their sockets, looking like the gleam of water gone far down in a deep well;

my scalp shrivelled and withered like [246] green bitter gourd shrivels and withers in the wind and sun;

When, Aggi,vessana, I thought: ‘I will touch the skin of my belly,’ it was my backbone that I took hold of.

When I thought: ‘I will touch my backbone,’ it was the skin of my belly that I took hold of.

Because I ate so little, the skin of my belly, Aggi,vessana, came to be cleaving to my backbone.

When, Aggi,vessana, I defaecated or urinated, I fell over on my face right there;

When, Aggi,vessana, I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair, rotted at their roots, fell off from my body as I rubbed—all because of eating so little.¹²

⁷ IB Horner is puzzled by this statement and speculates that either these devas are mistaken or they are using the word *arhat* in a pre-Buddhist sense (M:H 1:299 n1). John Strong, in *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta*, adds, “It is nonetheless interesting to take their statements at face value: an arhat, think the deities, is someone who paradoxically looks both dead and alive at the same time.” (1992:88)

⁸ “Divine essence,” *oja*, ambrosia.

⁹ A beanlike climbing plant.

¹⁰ *Oṭṭha, padam*, often tr as “camel’s hoof,” but as noted by LS Cousins, it is prob “buffalo” in Vedic rather than “camel” in Classical Skt (1997: 268 f); see CPD: ²*oṭṭha*.

¹¹ *Jarā, sālāya gopanasīyo olugga, viluggā bhavanti*. Here, *olugga, vilugga* means “collapsing and fallen down, broken-down, dilapidated” (not “crazy” as in M:H & M:ÑB): see CPD: & DP: *olujjati*. See LS Cousins 1997: 269.

¹² The Bodhisattva’s self-mortification. There are at least three well known statues of the Buddha looking very emaciated. In his paper “The Emaciated Gandhāran Buddha Images: Asceticism, Health and the Body,” Robert L. Brown argues that although most people think that these images depict the Bodhisattva at the height of his self-mortification, on closer examination of the details on these images, they actually represent the Buddha fasting during the 49 days following the Great Awakening (Brown 1997:106, 112). Brown, however, fails to note perhaps the clearest evidence that it is the Buddha, not the Bodhisattva, who is represented in the Sikri and the Jamalgarhi

29 Indeed, Aggi,vessana, when people saw me, some said, ‘The recluse Gotama is black.’

Others said, ‘The recluse Gotama is not black, he is brown.’

Others said, ‘The recluse Gotama is neither; he is golden-skinned.’

So much had the clear, bright colour of my skin deteriorated through eating so little.’

30 I thought thus, Aggi,vessana,

‘In *the past*, whatever recluses and brahmins have experienced painful, racking, piercing pains due to striving, this is the utmost extreme, there is none beyond this.

In the future, whatever recluses and brahmins will experience painful, racking, piercing pains due to striving, this is the utmost extreme, there is none beyond this.

At present, whatever recluses and brahmins are experiencing painful, racking, piercing pains due to striving, this is the utmost extreme, there is none beyond this.

But by these painful austerities, I did not attain any superhuman state, nor any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to awakening?’

The Middle Way

31 Then, Aggi,vessana, I thought thus, ‘I recall¹³ that when my father the Sakya 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 dhyana that is accompanied by initial application and sustained application, zest and joy born of seclusion.

Could that be the path to awakening?’

Then following on that memory, Aggi,vessana, I realized, ‘That *is* the path to awakening!’

32 I thought thus, ‘Why [247] do I fear the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?’

I thought thus, ‘I do not fear the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states!’¹⁴

33 I thought thus, Aggi,vessana,

‘It is not easy to attain that pleasure with a body so excessively emaciated. Suppose I ate some solid food—some boiled rice and gruel.’¹⁵

And so, Aggi,vessana, I ate some solid food, boiled rice and gruel.

Now at that time, Aggi,vessana, the five monks were waiting upon me, thinking, ‘If our recluse Gotama achieve some higher state, he will inform us.’

But when I ate the boiled rice and gruel, the five monks were disgusted and left me, thinking, ‘The recluse Gotama now lives luxuriously. He has given up the quest and reverted to luxury!’

images (and very likely in the Takht-i-Bahi image, too)—namely, the presence of the halo or aureole behind the image’s head—which Brown acknowledges in a personal communication in 2002.

¹³ Ploughing festival, ie, the ritual sowing (*vappa,maṅgala*), when he turned to the mindfulness of the breath (MA 2:290 f; J 1:57). On this First Dhyana episode (M 26.31 f/1:246 f) cf Chinese version, T1428.781a4-11.

¹⁴ On the 2 kinds of pleasures—sensual pleasure and the pleasure of awakening—see Araṇa,vibhaṅga S (M 139.9/3:233) = SD 7.8. On pleasure experience by the awakened mind, see (Kosambī) Uṇṇābha S (S 51.15) = SD 10.10.

¹⁵ “Boiled rice and gruel,” *odāna,kummāsa* (as *dvandva*), or “rice gruel” (as *tatpuruṣa*). Senānigama. This is the original name as found in the Canon (eg V 1:21; M 1:166. 240; A 1:106). (Māra) Pāsa S 2 (4.5) says that this is at Senānī,gāma (M 4.5/1:105 f; V 1:21; Mvst 3:315 f). The Comys give it as Senānī,nigama, the market town of Senānī, on the Nerañjarā bank near Uruvelā (MA 2:173), and where Sujātā gives milk-rice (*pāyāsa*) to the Bodhi-sattva, which is his last meal before the awakening (J 1:68; SA 1:172; AA 1:401; BA 7; ApA 72; DhsA 34). The Lalita,vistāra calls it Senāpati,grāma (Lalv 311.248). The Sutta here only mentions the humble *odāna,kummāsa*. However, it is possible that Sujātā’s offering was made after this event, as noted by the Comys.

The attainment of dhyana

34 Now when I had eaten solid food and regained my strength, then quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered and remained in the first dhyana, accompanied by initial application and sustained application, accompanied by zest and joy born of seclusion.

But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

35 With the stilling of initial application and sustained application, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, he enters and remains in the second dhyana, free of initial application and sustained application,¹⁶ accompanied by zest and happiness born of concentration. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with zest and happiness born of concentration.

But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

36 And with the fading away of zest, I remained equanimous, mindful and fully aware, and experienced happiness with the body. I entered and remained in the third dhyana, of which the Noble Ones declare, ‘Happily he dwells in equanimity and mindfulness.’ He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the happiness (of body), free of zest (of mind).

But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

37 And with the abandoning of pleasure and pain—and with the earlier disappearance of joy and grief—I entered and remained in the fourth dhyana, that is neither pleasant nor painful and contains mindfulness fully purified by equanimity. I sat, pervading the body with a pure, bright mind, so that there is no part of my entire body that is not pervaded by a pure, bright mind.

But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.¹⁷

The Great Awakening

38 (1) When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady and attained to unshakable steadiness, [248] I directed it to the knowledge of the recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births, three births, four births, five [as in M 4.27]... Thus in their forms and details I recollected my manifold past lives.

39 This, Aggi,vessana, was the first true knowledge won 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.

40 (2) When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady and attained to unshakable steadiness, I directed it to the knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings... [as in M 4.29]... Thus with divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing; I comprehend that beings are inferior and superior, fair and ugly, gone to a happy state, gone to a suffering state, faring according to their karma; thus I understood how beings fared on according to their karma...

41 This, Aggi,vessana, was the second true knowledge won by me in the middle watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, [249] darkness was banished and light arose, as hap-

¹⁶ The 2nd dhyana is known as “the noble silence” (*ariya,tuṅhī,bhāva*) because within it initial application and sustained application (thought and discursion, *vitakka,vicāra*) cease, and with their cessation, speech cannot occur. (S 2:273); cf. S 4:293 where *vitakka* and *vicāra* are called verbal formation (*vacī,saiikhāra*), the mental factors responsible for speech. In Ariya,pariyesanā S (M 1:161), the Buddha exhorts the monks when assembled to “either speak on the Dharma or observe the noble silence” (ie either talk Dharma or meditate).

¹⁷ Norman: “It is debatable whether the Buddha actually went through the four states of meditation as set out in the texts. It seems more likely that there was a single developing state of meditation, which (when he came to describe it to his followers) could conveniently be broken down into four states. ...the Buddha was trying to put into words something ineffable which had happened to him, and his words are really a later rationalization (perhaps of his followers) of the irrational. All his views are simple ways of describing different aspects of the same experience, and are complementary, not contradictory. These various rationalizations are not necessarily of different dates, since they may be products of different environments and (preaching) needs.” (1990:128 n5).

pens in one who abides diligent, ardent and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

42 (3) When my concentrated mind was thus purified...attained to unshakable steadiness, I directed it to the knowledge of the destruction of the influxes.¹⁸ I directly knew as it really is:

‘This is suffering;
This is the arising of suffering;
This is the ending of suffering;
This is the path to the ending of suffering.’¹⁹

These are the influxes;
This is the arising of the influxes;
This is the ending of the influxes;
This is the path to the ending of the influxes.’²⁰

43 When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated
from the influx of sensual desire,
from the influx of existence, and
from the influx of ignorance.

When it was liberated, there arose the knowledge: ‘It is liberated!’ I directly knew: ‘Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. What needs to be done has been done. There is (for me) no more of arising in any state of being.’

44 This, Aggī, vessaṇa, was the third true knowledge won by me in the third 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.

— evaṃ —

Bibliography on the Life of the Buddha

[See Frank E. Reynolds, *Guide to the Buddhist Religion*, 1981 ch 8]

(A) Canonical biography of the Buddha

Bronkhorst, Johannes

¹⁸ *Āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*. The term *āsava* (lit “in-and-out-flow”) has been variously translated as taints, corruptions, cankers, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists four *āsava*: the influx of (1) sense-desire (*kāma’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) wrong views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijjā’āsava*) (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhs §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (*ogha*) and “yokes” (*yoga*). *The influx of existence* is the attachment and desire for the realm of form and of formlessness, and as such, is the craving for the dhyanas, on account of *the false views* of eternalism and annihilationism. As such, *the influx of view* is subsumed under the influx of existence (MA 1:67). The list of 3 influxes (omitting the influx of views) is probably older and is found more freq in the suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). See BDict under *āsava*.

¹⁹ These 4 statements on suffering pose an interesting problem: they are not called noble truths here (and in *Sāmañña, phala S*, 2.97). Norman remarks that “since they appear to be subordinate to the four statements about the *āsavas*, it is possible that the statements about misery are a later addition, which led to a parallel, but inappropriate, set of four statements being evolved about the *āsavas*, to provide a symmetry. See Schmithausen 1981:205 & Norman 1982: 377-91, 1990:130.

²⁰ As in *Sāmaññaphala S* (D 2.97/1:83 f) = SD 8.10. On the application of the four noble truth template to both *dukkha* and to *āsava* here, see Analayo 2003:224 n28 & SD 17.4(8.4).

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(B) General biography of the Buddha

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