Introduction

The sutta opens with Sāriputta telling the Buddha that Sunakkhatta, who had recently left the Order, has been going around claiming that the Buddha “does not have any superhuman state, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones”[2]. Sunakkhatta as such claims that the Buddha teaches a doctrine that he has merely thought out rather than one that he has realized through transcendental wisdom. Apparently, for him the acquisition of miraculous powers is superior to the knowledge and experience of the uprooting of suffering. As a direct rebuttal, the Buddha expounds on the following in this sutta:

- the 10 powers of the Tathāgata (tathāgatassa dasa, bala) [§§9-21],
- his 4 kinds of intrepidity (cattāro vesārajja) [§§22-28],
- his knowledge of the 8 assemblies (aṭṭha parisa) [§§29-30],
- the 4 kinds of birth (catasso yoni) [§§32-34],
- the 5 destinies and nirvana (pañca gati) [§§35-43] and
- the Bodhisattva’s austerities (atta,kilamath’ānyoga) [§§44-64],

all of which entitle him to “roar his lion’s roar in the assemblies.”

The sutta excerpts [17-19, 32-43] here however are meant for study in connection with the Pāṭāla Sutta (S 36.4), and the (Pañca) Gati Sutta (A 9.68), both of which deal with types and levels of existence.
Thus have I heard.

The threefold knowledge

At one time the Blessed One was staying in the dense forest outside the city of Vesālī to its west…

(8) “Again, Sāriputta, the Tathāgata recollects his manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births, three births, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, one hundred, one thousand, one hundred thousand, many aeons of cosmic contraction, many aeons of cosmic expansion, many aeons of cosmic contraction and expansion, [recollecting],

‘There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of joy and pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of joy and pain, such my life-span. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.’ Thus he recollects his manifold past lives in their modes and details.

That too, Sāriputta, is a Tathāgata’s power that a Tathāgata has by virtue of which he claims to be a lordly bull [leading the spiritual herd], roars his lion-roar in the assemblies, and sets rolling the Divine Wheel (brahma,cakka).

(9) Again, Sāriputta, by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the human, the Tathāgata sees beings passing away and reappearing, and he knows how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, faring according to their karma:

‘These beings—who were endowed with evil conduct of body, speech, and mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views— with the body’s breaking up, after death, [71] have reappeared in a state of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.

But these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech, and mind, who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views— with the body’s breaking up, after death, have reappeared in a happy destination, in heaven.’

Thus, by means of the divine eye, he sees beings passing away and reappearing, and how they fare according to their karma.

That too is a Tathāgata’s power...

(10) Again, Sāriputta, the Tathāgata right here and now, having realized for himself through direct knowledge, after attaining, dwells in the liberation of mind and the liberation by wisdom that are influx-free with the destruction of the mental influxes.

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5 Brahma,cakka. Comy explains that the Divine Wheel is the supreme, best, most excellent wheel, the Wheel of Truth (dhamma,cakka) in its twofold meanings: the knowledge that penetrates the truth (paññavedha ṃū) and the knowledge of how to expound the teaching (desanā ṃū) and the latter mundane (lokiya). Both knowledges together however are unique to the Buddha.

6 dibba,cakkhu, clairvoyance, not to be confused with the Dharma-eye (dhamma,cakkhu), which is a term for “entering the stream” (Stream-winning).

7 “Liberation of mind (ceto,vimutti)...liberation by wisdom (paññā,vimutti).” Liberation of mind is so called because the mind is liberated, by way of concentration, from lust. Liberation by wisdom is so called because the mind is liberated, normally through insight, from ignorance. When they are coupled and described as influx-free (anāsava), they jointly result from the destruction of the mental influxes by the supramundane path of arhathood.

8 The term āsava (lit “inflow, outflow”) comes from ā-savati “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as taints (“deadly taints,” RD), canker, corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists four āsava: the influx of (1) sense-desire (kāmāsava), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (bhavāsava), (3) wrong views (diṭṭhāsava), (4) ignorance (avijjāsava) (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 list of 3 influxes (omitting the influx of views) [43] is probably older and is found
That too, Sāriputta, is a Tathāgata’s power that a Tathāgata has by virtue of which he claims to be the lordly bull [leading the spiritual herd], roars his lion-roar in the assemblies, and sets rolling the Divine Wheel.

[M 12.32-43/1:73-77]

Four kinds of birth

[73] 32 Sāriputta, there are these four kinds of birth (yoni). What are the four?

(1) The egg-born [oviparous] birth (āṇḍa,jā yoni),
(2) The womb-born [viviparous] birth (jaḷābu,jā yoni),
(3) The moisture-born birth (saṁśeda,jā yoni),
(4) The Spontaneous birth (opāpāti,kā yoni).

33 What, Sāriputta, is the egg-born birth?
There are, Sāriputta, these beings born by breaking out of the egg-shell—this is called the egg-born birth.

What, Sāriputta, is the womb-born birth?
There are, Sāriputta, these beings born by breaking out from the caul—this is called the womb-born birth.

What, Sāriputta, is moisture-born birth?
There are, Sāriputta, these beings born in a rotting fish, in a decomposing corpse, in decaying broth, in a cesspool, or in a sewer—this is called moisture-born birth.

What, Sāriputta, is spontaneous birth?
There are gods, hell-beings, certain human beings and some beings in the lower worlds—this, Sāriputta, is called spontaneous birth.

These, Sāriputta, are the four kinds of birth.

The Buddha’s direct knowledge

34a Sāriputta, when I know and see thus, should anyone say of me: ‘The recluse Gotama does not have any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones; the recluse Gotama teaches a Dharma that he has put together through reasoning, through his own insight following his own investigations’—unless, Sāriputta, he gives up this talk, gives up this state of mind, renounces this view, it would be for him as if he were cast into hell.

34b Sāriputta, just as a monk possessed of moral virtue, concentration and wisdom would here and now attain [enjoy] final knowledge, so, too, Sāriputta, I speak of this accomplishment.

Unless he gives up this talk, gives up this state of mind, renounces this view, it would be for him as if he were cast into hell.

more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these āsāvas is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict under āsāva.

9 The gods of the Pure Abodes (suddh’āvāsa), the five highest heavens of the Form World (rūpa,loka) are all non-returners, living out their last birth to become arhats and attain nirvana. These worlds are Āvīha (“non-declining”), Aṭappa (“Unworried”), Sudassā (“Clearly Visible”), Sudassī (“Clear-visioned”) and Akaṇṭhā (“Highest”) (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46).

10 “Through his own insight, following his own investigation,” vīmaṁsā’nucaritaṁ sayaṁ paṭibhānaṁ; cf “following his own line of inquiry as it occurs to him” (M:NB 167). Recurs at §43.

11 The phrase yathā,bhatam nikkhitto evam niraye is difficult sentence (M 1:71; S 4:325; A 1:8, 105, 292, 297, 2:71, 83; It 12, 14, 26), and here is rendered following the Comy gloss: “He will be cast into hell as if carried off and put there by the wardens of hell.” (MA 2:32). Alt tr “according to his deserts he will be, as it were, dropped off in hell” (S:B 1346::S 42.9/4:325). “Although such a fate may sound excessively severe merely for verbal denigration, it should be remembered that he is maligning a Fully Awakened Buddha with a mind of hatred, with the intention of discouraging others from entering upon the path that could lead them to complete liberation from suffering.” (Ñānomoli The Lion’s Roar: Two Discourses of the Buddha (WH 390/391), rev ed Bhikkhu Bodhi. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993 n17)
The five destinies and nirvana (in brief)

35 Sāriputta, there are these five destinies (gati). What are the five?
Hell, the animal womb, the realm of the departed, humans and gods.

36 (1) Sāriputta, I understand hell, and the path and way leading to hell, too. And I also understand how one who has entered this path will, with the body’s breaking up, after death, reappear in a state of misery, an evil destination, a suffering state, in hell.
(2) Sāriputta, I understand the animal womb, and the path and way leading to the animal womb, too. And I also understand how one who has entered this path will, with the body’s breaking up, after death, reappear in the animal womb.
(3) Sāriputta, I understand the realm of the departed (the pretas), and the path and way leading to the realm of the departed. And I also understand how one who has entered this path will, with the body’s breaking up, after death, reappear in a state of joy, a happy destination, in heaven.
(4) Sāriputta, I understand human beings, and the path and way leading to the human world. And I also understand how one who has entered this path will, with the body’s breaking up, after death, reappear among human beings.
(5) Sāriputta, I understand the gods, and the path and way leading to the world of the gods. And I also understand how one who has entered this path will, with the body’s breaking up, after death, reappear in a state of joy, a happy destination, in heaven.
(6) Sāriputta, I understand nirvana, and the path and way leading to nirvana. [74] And I also understand how one who has entered this path will, by realizing it for himself with direct knowledge, here and now enter upon and abide, influx-free, in the liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom, with the destruction of the mental influxes.

The five destinies and nirvana (in detail)

37 (1) THE HELLS. Sāriputta, by fully grasping (another’s) mind with (my own) mind, I understand that person thus: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, with the body’s breaking up, after death, would reappear in a state of misery, an evil destination, a suffering state, in hell.’
And then later, with the divine eye, that is purified and surpasses the human, I saw that with the body’s breaking up, after death, he had reappeared in a state of misery, an evil destination, a suffering state, in hell, experiencing extremely painful, racking, piercing feelings.

PARABLE OF THE FIERY COAL PIT. Suppose, Sāriputta, there were a fiery coal pit deeper than a man’s height, full of glowing coals with neither flame nor smoke; and then a man scorched and exhausted by hot weather, weary, parched and thirsty, came by a one-way path leading directly to that same fiery coal pit.
Then a man with good sight on seeing him would say: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, will come to this same fiery coal pit’; and then later on he sees that he has fallen into that fiery coal pit, experiencing extremely painful, racking, piercing feelings.
So too, Sāriputta, by fully grasping (another’s) mind with (my own) mind, I understand that person thus: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, after death, when the body has broken up, would reappear in a state of misery, an evil destination, a suffering state, in hell.’
And then later, with the divine eye, that is purified and surpasses the human, I saw that with the body’s breaking up, after death, he had reappeared in a state of misery, an evil destination, a suffering state, in hell, experiencing extremely painful, racking, piercing feelings.

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12 “That,” ekacce, lit “a certain (person).” In view of the amplified tr here, “that” gives better sense here.
14 “By a one-way path leading directly,” ekāyanena maggena. See SD 13(3.2).
15 “That,” ekacce, lit “a certain (person).” In view of the amplified tr here, “that” gives better sense here.
38 (2) THE ANIMAL WOMB. Sāriputta, by fully grasping (another’s) mind with (my own) mind, I understand that person thus: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, with the body’s breaking up, after death, would reappear in the animal womb.’

And then later on, with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw that with the body’s breaking up, after death, he had reappeared in the animal womb, experiencing painful, racking, piercing feelings. 16

PARABLE OF THE CESSPOOL. Suppose, Sāriputta, there were a cesspool deeper than a man’s height full of filth; and then a man scorched and exhausted by hot weather, weary, parched and thirsty, came by a one-way path leading directly to that same cesspool.

Then a man with good sight on seeing him would say: ‘This person behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, will come to this same cesspool’; and then later on he sees that he has fallen into that cesspool, experiencing painful, racking, piercing feelings.

So too, Sāriputta, by fully grasping mind with mind, I understand that person thus: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, after death, when the body had broken up, would reappear in the animal womb.

And then later, with the divine eye, that is purified and surpasses the human, I saw that with the body’s breaking up, after death, he had reappeared in a state of animal womb, experiencing extremely painful, racking, piercing feelings.

39 (3) THE REALM OF THE DEPARTED. Sāriputta, by fully grasping (another’s) mind with (my own) mind, I understand that person thus: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, after death, when the body had broken up, would reappear in the realm of the departed [the pretas].’

And then later on, with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw that after death, when the body had broken up, he had reappeared in the realm of the departed, experiencing much painful feeling. 17

PARABLE OF THE TREE ON UNEVEN GROUND. Suppose, Sāriputta, there were a tree growing on uneven ground with scanty foliage casting a dappled shade; and then a man scorched and exhausted by hot weather, weary, parched and thirsty, came by a one-way path leading directly to that same tree.

Then a man with good sight on seeing him would say: ‘This person behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, will come to this same tree’; and then later on he sees that he is sitting or lying in the shade of that tree, experiencing much painful feeling.

So too, Sāriputta, by fully grasping mind with mind, I understand that person thus: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, after death, when the body had broken up, would reappear in the realm of the departed [the pretas].

And then later, with the divine eye, that is purified and surpasses the human, I saw that with the body’s breaking up, after death, he had reappeared in the realm of the departed, experiencing much painful feeling.

40 (4) HUMANS. Sāriputta, by fully grasping (another’s) mind with (my own) mind, I understand that person thus: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, after death, when the body has broken up, would reappear among human beings.’

And then later on, with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw that after death, when the body has broken up, he had reappeared in he had reappeared among human beings, experiencing much pleasant feeling.

PARABLE OF THE TREE ON EVEN GROUND. Suppose, Sāriputta, there were a tree growing on even ground with thick foliage casting a deep shade; and then a man scorched and exhausted by hot weather, weary, parched and thirsty, came by a one-way path leading directly to that same tree.

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Then a man with good sight on seeing him would say: ‘This person behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, will come to this same tree’; and then later on he sees that he is sitting or lying in the shade of that tree, experiencing much pleasant feeling.

So too, Sāriputta, by fully grasping mind with mind, I understand that person thus: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, after death, when the body had broken up, he had reappeared among human beings, experiencing much pleasant feeling.

[76] 41 (5) THE HEAVENLY WORLD. Sāriputta, by fully grasping (another’s) mind with (my own) mind, I understand that person thus: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, after death, when the body has broken up, would reappear in a happy destination, in the heavenly world.’

And then, later on, with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw that after death, when the body has broken up, he had reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world, experiencing extremely pleasant feelings.

PARABLE OF THE MANSION’S UPPER CHAMBER. Suppose, Sāriputta, there were a mansion’s upper chamber, plastered within and without, protected from the wind, secured with bars, with windows shuttered, and in it are a couch spread with long-furred rugs, embroidered white woollen sheets, choice rugs of Kadalī deer hide, spreads with red canopies, and crimson double rests [crimson pillows and bolsters] for the head and feet; and then a man scorched and exhausted by hot weather, weary, parched and thirsty, comes by a one-way path leading directly to that same mansion.

Then a man with good sight on seeing him would say: ‘This person behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, will come to this same mansion’; and later on he sees that he is sitting or lying in that upper chamber in that mansion, experiencing extremely pleasant feelings.

So too, by fully grasping mind with mind I understand, I understand that person thus: ‘This person, behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, after death, when the body had broken up, had reappeared in a happy destination, in the heavenly world, experiencing extremely pleasant feelings.

42 (6) DESTRUCTION OF THE MENTAL INFLUXES. Sāriputta, by fully grasping (another’s) mind with (my own) mind, I understand that person thus: ‘This person behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, by realizing it for himself with direct knowledge, here and now would enter upon and dwell in the liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom that are influx-free with the destruction of the mental influxes.’

And then later on I saw that by realizing it for himself with direct knowledge, he here and now had entered upon and dwelt in the liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom that are influx-free with the destruction of the mental influxes, experiencing extremely pleasant feelings.

PARABLE OF THE CLEAR POOL. Suppose, Sāriputta, there were a pond with clean, agreeable, cool water, transparent, with smooth banks, delightful, and nearby a dense wood; and then a man scorched and exhausted by hot weather, weary, parched and thirsty, came by a one-way path leading directly to that same pond.

Then a man with good sight on seeing him would say: ‘This person behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, will come to this same pond’; and then later on he sees that he has plunged into the pond, bathed, drunk and relieved of all his distress, tiredness and fever, and has come out again and is sitting or lying in the dense forest, experiencing extremely pleasant feelings.

So too, Sāriputta, by fully grasping mind with mind I understand, I understand that person thus: ‘This person behaving thus, conducting himself thus, having taken such a path, by realizing it for himself with

18 ubhato,lohitakûpadhâno, alt tr “crimson rests at both ends (of the couch).” See Brahmajâla S (D 1.15/1:7) & Venâga S (A 3.63.3b/1:181) = SD 21.1, for a more detailed list.

19 Comy: Even though the description here is the same as that of the heavenly happiness, the meaning is different. For the happiness of heaven is not really extremely pleasant because the fevers of lust, etc are still present there. But the bliss of nirvana is extremely pleasant in every way through the subsiding of all fevers. (MA 2:40)
direct knowledge, here and now would enter upon and dwell in the liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom that are influx-free with the destruction of the mental influxes.’

And then later on I saw that by realizing it for himself with direct knowledge, he here and now had entered upon and dwelt in the liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom that are influx-free with the destruction of the mental influxes, experiencing extremely pleasant feelings.

These, Sāriputta, are the five destinies.

The teaching’s significance

43 Sāriputta, when I know and see thus, should anyone say of me: ‘The recluse Gotama does not have any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones; the recluse Gotama teaches a Dharma that he has put together through reasoning, through his own insight, following his own investigations’—unless, Sāriputta, he gives up this talk, gives up this state of mind, renounces this view, it would be for him as if he were cast into hell.

Sāriputta, just as a monk possessed of moral virtue, concentration and wisdom would here and now enjoy final knowledge, so it would be in this case, I say, Sāriputta, that unless he gives up this talk, gives up this state of mind, renounces this view, it would be for him as if he were cast into hell.

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20 “Through his own insight, following his own investigation,” vīmaṁśā’nucaṁ sayāṁ,paṭibhānaṁ. Recurs at §34 (qv).