

# Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta

## The Fire Discourse to Vaccha,gotta

[Nirvana and the problem of language]

(Majjhima Nikāya 72/1:483-489)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003

### Introduction

#### 1 The wanderer Vaccha,gotta

The Thera,gāthā Commentary (ThaA 1:235 f) says that Vaccha,gotta, whose personal name is unknown, comes from a rich brahmin family of the Vaccha (Skt *vatsa*) clan (*vaccha,gotta*). After becoming an expert in brahmanical learning, he fails to find the answer he was seeking, and becomes a wanderer (*paribbājaka*), and later turns to the Buddha's Teaching. One of his earliest, perhaps his first, meeting with the Buddha is recorded in **the (Dāna) Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (A 3.57), when he politely asks the Buddha to clarify on matter of giving.<sup>1</sup>

The Majjhima Nikāya contains three Vaccha,gotta Suttas arranged in a chronological order recounting the spiritual development of Vaccha,gotta:

- (1) **Tevijja Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 71/1:481-483), the Discourse on the Three Knowledges to Vaccha,gotta, also called the Cūḷa Vaccha,gotta Sutta (the Lesser Discourse to Vaccha,gotta), where the Buddha denies that he is omniscient (that is, knowing everything all the time) and defines the threefold knowledge he possesses.
- (2) **Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72/1:483-489), the Fire Discourse to Vaccha,gotta, where the Buddha explains that he has no speculative views and employs the famous "extinguished fire" simile to illustrate that it is possible to go beyond the four logical alternatives (*koṭi*); Vaccha,gotta himself, on taking refuge, gives his own version of the tree similes.
- (3) **Mahā Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 73/1:489-497), the Greater Discourse to Vaccha,gotta, recounts his final conversion, going forth and attainment of arhathood.

The Saṃyutta Nikāya contains a whole section—**the Vaccha,gotta Saṃyutta** (S 33)—comprising of 55 short discussions or sutta-cycles of teaching of the Buddha to Vaccha,gotta,<sup>2</sup> all dealing with various reasons for one's subscribing to any of the 10 points.

**The Abyākata Saṃyutta** (S 44) contains five suttas (S 44.7-11) where he is the interlocutor. In **the (Vaccha,gotta) Moggallāna Sutta** (S 44.7/4:391-395), Vaccha,gotta questions Moggallāna about the 10 points [2-12] and who answers in terms of the selflessness of the five aggregates. In the following (**Avyākata**) **Vaccha,gotta Sutta**, he again asks the Buddha the same question (evidently before the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta) (S 44.8/4:395-398). This first half of this sutta is evidently identical with the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta. In the second half of the Sutta, Vaccha,gotta approaches Moggallāna with the same question and receives an identical answer. Vaccha,gotta is amazed:

It is wonderful, Master Moggallāna! It is marvellous, Master Moggallāna! How both teacher and disciple agree meaning for meaning, phrase for phrase; they do not diverge, that is, concerning the highest state.<sup>3</sup>

(S 44.8.30/4:397)

Apparently, this sutta records the events immediately following and connected to those recorded in the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta. In terms of narrative sequence, there are two possibilities: (1) Vaccha,gotta, after questioning Moggallāna and rejoicing in his answer, returns to the Buddha and takes refuge [9-10]

<sup>1</sup> A 3.57/1:160-162 = SD 22.12.

<sup>2</sup> S 33/3:257-262.

<sup>3</sup> *Acchariyam bho Moggallāna abbhutaṃ bho Moggallāna, yatrahi nāma satthu ca sāvakassa ca atthena attho vyañjanehi vyañjanam samsandissati samessati na vibhāyissati yad idaṃ agga,padasmīn ti.*

(in other words, the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta omits this episode); or (2) after taking refuge in the Buddha [9-10], Vaccha,gotta meets Moggallāna and questions him.

In the **Kutūhala,sāla Sutta** (S 44.9),<sup>4</sup> he asks the Buddha regarding rebirth, and in his answer, the Buddha makes the famous statement on the intermediate state:<sup>5</sup> “Vaccha, when a being has laid down this body, but is not yet reborn into another body, it is fuelled by craving, I say.” In the **Atth’attā Sutta**, also known as the (Vaccha,gotta) Ānanda Sutta (S 44.10/4:401 f), when Vaccha,gotta asks the Buddha the 10 questions, the Buddha remains silent. After Vaccha,gotta leaves, Ānanda asks the Buddha’s the reason for his silence. This famous sutta probably recounts Vaccha,gotta’s first meeting with the Buddha. **The Sabhiya Kaccāna Sutta** recounts Vaccha,gotta’s question of Sabhiya Kaccāna (whom he addresses as Mahā Kaccāna) regarding the 10 points.

## 2 The ten points

The ten undeclared points or theses (*avyākata*)<sup>6</sup> represent the views of various teachers and teachings known during the Buddha’s times, although their specific authors or origins cannot all be traced.<sup>7</sup> These 10 questions are called “undeclared” or indeterminate because they do not have any definite or categorical answer. The undeclared question

is either (a) misleading in form, violating the logic of meaningful syntax and thus rendered meaningless, or (b) it is conceptually impossible for us within a given conceptual framework to assign truth values, true or false, to any answer given to it. (Bharadwaja 1984:305)

These 10 questions are “set aside” (*thapanīya*), ie left unanswered “on pragmatic grounds since belief in any of the possible answers was considered irrelevant and otiose for our purpose” (Jayatilleke 1963:288, 474). In the **Param,marāṇa Sutta** (S 16.12), Mahā Kassapa declares the reason to Sāriputta for the Buddha’s not entertaining the 10 points as follows:

Because it is unbeneficial, irrelevant to the fundamental of holy life, and does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation [o suffering], to inner peace, to superknowledge, to awakening, to nirvana. Therefore the Blessed One has not declared it. (S 16.12/2:223)

The parable of the poisoned dart of the **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta Sutta** (M 63), for example, shows that for a wounded person the questions asked should be relevant to the healing of the person (M 1:429), that is to say, we should seek what is relevant and conducive to spiritual development and liberation.<sup>8</sup> The parable of the handful of leaves of the **Siṃsapā Sutta** (S 56.31/5:437 f), on the other hand, shows that what the Buddha knows but does not teach is comparable to the leaves on the trees of the *siṃsapā* forest, while what he teaches (compared to the leaves in his hand) is sufficiently relevant for our spiritual purposes.<sup>9</sup>

Jayatilleke closes his remarkable study of the *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (1963) by quoting the great ocean simile and then says:

‘Whereof one can speak of him—that he does not have’ (*yena naṃ vajju taṃ tassa n’atthi*, Sn 1076) and hence one has to be silent. In this respect alone it resembles the Positivist’s outlook:

<sup>4</sup> S 44.9/4:398-400 = SD 23.15.

<sup>5</sup> See **Is rebirth immediate?** = SD 2.17.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of the 10 points, see **Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63) = SD 5.8 Intro (2).

<sup>7</sup> For an attempt to identify the schools that put forward these ideas, see Jayatilleke 1963:243-276. See also pp 470-476.

<sup>8</sup> See Jayatilleke, 1963:357 f.

<sup>9</sup> See Jayatilleke, 1963:469.

‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.’<sup>10</sup> This attitude has, however, to be distinguished from Agnosticism. It was not that there was something that the Buddha did not know, but that what he ‘knew’ in the transcendent sense could not be conveyed in words because of the limitation of language and of empiricism. (Jayatilleke 1963:476; footnote omitted)

The Buddha’s refusal to answer Vaccha,gotta categorically must be understood in the same light as his refusal to give unequivocal answers to the ten undeclared points, that is, the questions are wrongly put and as such unacceptable.

Furthermore, we should note that, while the Buddha may refuse to give a categorical answer when asked whether or not the self exists, he is nevertheless recorded as stating that all those ascetics and brahmins who contemplate the self in various ways in fact contemplate the five aggregates or one of them, and on the basis of this comes to the conclusion, “I exist” [S 3:46 f]. (Gethin 1998:161)

Of the suttas dealing with the 10 undeclared points, the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta is “the most highly structured, intricate, and complete” (Robinson 1972b:316). Apparently, there is only one group of suttas that share a common topic in their origin stories (*nidāna*), that is, those concerning Vaccha,gotta.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese Āgamas place **the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72)<sup>12</sup> and **the Mahā Vaccha,gotta** (M 73)<sup>13</sup> in the Saṃyukta Āgama, together with the other Vatsa,gotra Sūtras, constituting the Vatsa,gotra cycle.<sup>14</sup>

The undeclared points are, however, most exhaustively dealt with—by way of the 62 wrong views—in **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1.1.29-3.31/1:12-39). The 10 points are **the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9), **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta** (M 63 *passim*/1:426-437),<sup>15</sup> **Vaccha,gotta Saṃyutta** (S 33/3:257-263), and **the Abyākata Saṃyutta** (S 10/4:374-403). One of the most famous similes in connection with the 10 points is that of the blind men and the elephant, found in **the Āhu Sutta** of the Udāna (U 6.4/66-69). The subsequent Udāna text, **the Tittḥā Sutta** (U 6.5/69 f), too, deals with the 10 points. The ten points are listed in part in a number of other places in the Pāli Canon, such as:

<b>Mahāli Sutta</b>	(D 6.16-19/157 f) [only on the self ( <i>jīva</i> )], <sup>16</sup>
<b>Poṭṭhapāda Sutta</b>	(D 9.25-30/1:187 -190) = SD 7.14, and
<b>Pāsādikā Sutta</b>	(D 29.30-33/135-138) [only on the Tathāgata’s state].

A different list of speculative views are given in the **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38).<sup>17</sup>

### 3 The four alternatives

When Vaccha,gotta asks the Buddha, by way of a tetralemma or the four logical alternatives (*catu,koṭi*, Skt *catuṣ,koṭi*) [16], he is certain that one of them would apply, that is, to say:<sup>18</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1913, 7:189.

<sup>11</sup> His Skt name is probably **Vatsa** or **Vaṃśa**, rarely Vatsa,gotra (Mvst 3.364.16); Chin 婆蹉種.

<sup>12</sup> **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72), SA 962 = T 2.245, SA2 196 = T2.444. See SD 6.15 Intro (2-3) (2004).

<sup>13</sup> **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 73), SA 964 = T 2.246, SA2 198 = T2.446.

<sup>14</sup> This cycle is examined by Richard H Robinson, “Some methodological approaches to the unexplained points,” 1972b:313-317.

<sup>15</sup> See SD 5.8 (2004).

<sup>16</sup> Where see T W Rhys Davids’ Intro to his tr (D:RD 1:186 -188).

<sup>17</sup> M 38.23/1:264 f = SD 7.10.

<sup>18</sup> This tetralemma is found in many other places in the Canon. In **Param,marāṇa S** (S 16.12/2:222 f) the Buddha mentions it to Mahā Kassapa; in **Anurādha S** (S 22.86/3:116-119). The tetralemma are mention by lemma in 4 suttas in Saṃyutta (S 24.15-18/3:215 f). The **Abyākata Saṃyutta** contains some suttas dealing with it (S 44.2-8/-4:381-397): see S:B 1080 n165. For a philosophical discussion, see Kügler 2003:100 f. For a detailed analysis of the tetralemma of the 10 points, see **Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63) = SD 5.8 Intro (2).

<i>Affirmation:</i>	x exists.
<i>Negation:</i>	x does not exist.
<i>Meta-affirmation:</i>	x both exists and does not exist.
<i>Meta-negation:</i>	x neither exists nor does not exist.

However, Vaccha,gotta is confused when the Buddha rejects all four alternatives, and declares his loss of confidence derived from their earlier discussion [§17]. The Buddha then reassures him by switching to a different level of language—that of imageries—by employing the similes of the extinguished fire [§§18 f] and of the great ocean [§20].<sup>19</sup>

The simile of the extinguished fire is interesting from a philosophical viewpoint. **KN Jayatilleke**, his *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, makes the following helpful observation:

The question is grammatically correct in its form and appears to have meaning owing to the logic of “go out.” A categorical and meaningful answer specifying the direction is possible to this question. Now our symbolism or linguistic usage permits us to extend the use of “go out” for such processes as fires or lights, but in such situations we would be committing a category mistake<sup>20</sup> if we assume that the going out takes place in a specific direction. It therefore makes no sense to ask “in which direction has the [extinguished] fire gone?” and thereby asking a nonsensical question, to which no meaningful answer is possible. (Jayatilleke 1963:290)

#### 4 On fire

The Agga Vaccha,gotta Sutta contains this famous fire simile that the Buddha uses to help Vaccha,gotta understand the reality of nirvana despite its ineffability:

**19a** Now, what do you think, Vaccha: suppose there were a **fire** burning before you, would you know it?”

“Master Gotama, if there were a fire burning before me, I would know it.”

“Suppose, Vaccha, someone were to ask you: ‘This fire that is burning before you, depending on what does it burn?’ What, Vaccha, would be your answer?”

“Master Gotama, on being asked thus, I would answer: ‘This fire burning before me burns depending on grass and wood.’”

**19b** “Suppose, Vaccha, this fire before you were to go out, would you know it?”

“Master Gotama, if this fire before me were to go out, I would know it.”

**19c** “Now suppose, Vaccha, you were asked, ‘When that fire before you went out in which direction had it gone—to the east, or to the west, or to the north, or to the south?’ How would you answer it?”

“It does not apply, master Gotama! The fire had burned depending on grass and wood. When that fuel is used up and it does not get any more, being without fuel, it would be regarded as quenched.” (M 72.19/1:487)

This is a classic example of the Buddha’s Socratic method of teaching where the inquirer is led from the known (the inquirer’s knowledge) to the unknown (what the inquirer has not yet realized). **§19a** deals with *conditionality*: fire burns dependent of fuel; even so, life proceeds on consciousness (the 6 senses reacting with the external world) fed by craving.<sup>21</sup> **§19b** is a statement of *pragmatism*: if you do not know it, you have not attained it. Just as the ignorant person ultimately has to know the truth for himself, even

<sup>19</sup> See Jayatilleke 1963:289-291 for further discussion.

<sup>20</sup> See Gilbert Ryle. “Categories” in *Logic and Language*, ed AGN Flew, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser 1953:75.

<sup>21</sup> See **Saññojana S 1** (S 2:86): “Suppose, monks, an oil lamp were burning in dependence of oil and a wick, and the man were not to pour oil into it, or were not to adjust the wick from time to time. Thus, when the former supply of fuel is exhausted, that oil lamp, not being fed with any more fuel, lacking sustenance, would go out. So, too, when one lives contemplating danger in things that can fetter, craving ceases” (S 12.53/2:86).

so nirvana has to be personally realized. §19c shows that *nirvana*, although a non-state that is indescribable, can be experienced.

The fire simile here has at least two important significances. Firstly, the word *nibbuta* (“cooled”) that describes one who has attained nirvana also refers to the putting out of a fire.<sup>22</sup> In his article, “On the problem of Nirvāṇa,” F Otto Shrader notes the common ancient Indian belief that “an expiring flame does not really go out, but returns into the primitive, pure, invisible state of fire it had before its appearance as visible fire” (1905-05:167).<sup>23</sup>

Where does the extinguished fire go?<sup>24</sup> The answer depends on what one thinks that fire is. Neither the Buddha nor Vaccha thinks that it is a kind of oxidizing agent. For them it is one of the four primary elements (*mahā,bhūta*).<sup>25</sup> For many of their contemporaries, it is the god **Agni** (*P aggi*), dwelling in fuel, latent in fire-sticks, sometimes unmanifested, sometimes manifested. This popular notion is clearly expressed in **the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad** (almost certainly a post-Buddha work):

- 13 Just as fire lying latent in its source is not seen, and yet its seed is not destroyed,  
It may be lit ever again in its source by a drill, so is the atman, in both states, can grasped by *auṃ*.
- 14 By making one’s body the lower fire-stick, and *auṃ* the upper fire-stick,  
By working on the friction of meditation, one may see the divine that is hidden.
- 15 Just as oil in sesame seeds, as butter in cream, as water in springs, and as fire in wood,  
So is atman [the soul] found in one’s self—if one looks for it with truth and austerity.  
(Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 1.13-15)<sup>26</sup>

In other words, when Agni goes out, he “goes home” (*astam gacchati*),<sup>27</sup> returns to his abode in the unmanifested state. When the Tathāgata dies, he casts off his space-time limitations and “goes” where there is neither earth, water, fire nor wind, and neither space time nor space.<sup>28</sup> In his paper on “Death and the Tathāgata,” Norman concludes:

So it is with an individual who has gained *nibbāna*. His state cannot be described any more than the state of a fire that has gone out can be described,<sup>29</sup> and the question about his future arising is

<sup>22</sup> “Just as the extinguished flame of a lamp goes into an indefinable state” (*vijjhāta,dīpa,sikhā viya apaṇṇattika,bhāvaṃ yāti*, DA 394).

<sup>23</sup> Shrader’s fn: *Vahner yathā yoni-gatasya mūrtir na drśyate n’aiva ca liṅga-nāsaḥ*... = As a form of fire...is not seen nor its seed destroyed [Norman] (Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 1.13); cf Miln 327 f (where is nirvana stored?). See also Norman 1991:262 f.

<sup>24</sup> This para is based on RH Robinson 1972b:322.

<sup>25</sup> On the *mahā,bhūta*, see **Kevalāḍḍha S** (D 3) = SD 1.7 Intro (2).

<sup>26</sup> Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 1.13-15:

- 13 *Vahner yathā yoni,gatasya mūrtir | na drśyate n’aiva ca liṅga,nāsaḥ |  
sa bhūya evendhana,yoni,gr̥hyas | tadvobhayaṃ vai praṇavena dehe ||*
- 14 *sva,deham araṇim kṛtvā | praṇavaṃ cottarāraṇim |  
dhyāna,nirmathanābhāsād | devaṃ paśyen nigūdhavat ||*
- 15 *tileṣu tailaṃ dadhanīva sarpir | āpaḥ srotaḥsu araṇiṣu cāgniḥ |  
evam ātmā ātmani gr̥hyate’sma | satyenainam tapasa yo’nupśyati ||*

<sup>27</sup> This verb form does not occur in the Pāli, which however has such forms as: *attha,gata* (disappeared, destroyed, A 4:157 = 160 = Sn 472 = 475); *attha,gama* (disappearance, cessation, annihilation, D 1:37 = M 1:22 = 2:16 = 226; M 1:486, 3:114; S 2:28, 72-74, 175, 4:327); *attha,gamana* (going down, setting (of the sun, etc), J 1:101, 209, 4:61); *atthaṃ,gata* (gone down, set (of the sun), V 1:62, 4:55; J 1:296, 3:36, 6:62; disappeared, ceased, destroyed, Sn 1075; It 58, Dhs 1038; Vbh 195).

<sup>28</sup> See eg **Kevalāḍḍha S** (D 13.67b-85/1:216-223), and RH Robinson 1972b:322.

<sup>29</sup> **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72): *Sace pana taṃ Vaccha evaṃ puccheyya: yo te ayaṃ purato aggo nibbuto co aggi ito katamaṃ disaṃ gato, puratthimaṃ vā pacchimaṃ vā uttaraṃ vā dakkhiṇaṃ vā, evaṃ puṭṭho tvaṃ Vaccha kinti vyākareyyāsi ti. Na upeti bho Gotamo* (M 1:487).

met with the statement that it is not appropriate to speak of him as arising or not arising, or as both, or as neither.<sup>30</sup> Nothing can be said about a tathāgata after death, because if whatever reason or basis there might be for a description of him as embodied, disembodied, etc, should cease completely, how could he be described?<sup>31</sup> The Buddha was right to insist that the religious life does not depend on answers for such questions. (Norman 1991:8 =1993:262 f)

### 5 Did the Buddha “borrow” ideas from the Upaniṣads?

Modern scholars have three general views regarding early Buddhism and the Upaniṣads: the first is that the Buddha “borrowed” many ideas from the Upaniṣads (and other early traditions) (a notion held mostly by native—understandably Hindu—Indian scholars); the second is that the Buddha was aware of those ideas and simply responded to them; and the third is that the Buddha was simply “ignorant” of the Upaniṣads or ignored them. We shall briefly look at the main points in answer to this problem here.

The Bṛhad Āraṇyaka, one of the oldest Upaniṣads, the “highest Āraṇyaka,” like the other “forest texts” (*āraṇyaka*), “contains little of the exalted mysticism of the Upaniṣads, being mainly concerned with the same theme as the Brāhmaṇas (commentaries on the Vedas), the cosmic symbolism of the sacrificial ritual.”<sup>32</sup> The earliest Upaniṣads probably formed part of the Brāhmaṇas, but are distinguished from both by increased philosophical and mystical questioning and by their diminished concern with Vedic deities and sacrificial rites.

The Upaniṣads are especially concerned with the nature of reality, the most fundamental notion of which is the Brahman (ultimate reality) and the *ātman* (self), a spark of that reality found in every being and whose aim should let it return to or reunify with the Brahman. Such an idea is clearly alien to early Buddhism even though the earliest Upaniṣads were completed before the rise of Buddhism. Early Buddhism rejects the notion of the atman or abiding self or permanent soul.

It should be noted that the Upaniṣads started as “closed up sessions” between teacher and pupil. It was a very private and privileged tradition. The famous dialogue from the **Bṛhad Āraṇyaka** is a good case in point:<sup>33</sup>

“Yajñavalkya,” said he, “when this dead person’s the speech [voice] goes into fire, the breath into air [wind], the eye into the sun, the mind into the moon, hearing into the quarters, the self into space [ether], the body hairs into the plants, the head hairs into the trees, and the blood and the semen into the water—what then becomes of this person?”

“Ārtabhāga, my friend, take my hand. Only we two shall know of this: neither of us shall make public of this.”

The two went away and discussed. What they said was karma and what they praised what karma, namely, that by good works one becomes good (*puṇya*), by evil works one becomes evil (*pāpa*). Then, Ārtabhāga of the line of Jāratkaru kept silent. (Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.2.13)

We have here a good example of the Upaniṣadic tradition of transmitting teachings in “secret” (*rahasyam*).<sup>34</sup> The Buddha’s declaration that “the Tathāgata has no ‘teacher’s fist’ in respect of teachings” (D 16.2.25a/2:100), is apparently in connection with such secret transmissions.

<sup>30</sup> **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72): *Evam,vimutta,citto pana bho Gotamo bhikkhu kuhim upapajjati ti kho Vaccha na upeti...na upapajjati ti kho Vaccha na upeti...upapajjati ca na ca upapajjati ti kho Vaccha na upeti...n'eva upapajjati na na upapajjati ti kho Vaccha na upeti* (M 1:486).

<sup>31</sup> **Sabhiya Kaccāna S** (S 44.11): *Yo ca Vaccha hetu yo ca paccayo paññāpanāya rūpī ti vā arūpī ti vā saññī ti vā asaññī ti vā n'eva saññī nāsaññī ti vā, so ca hetu so paccayo sabbena sabbam sabbathā sabbam aparisesam nirujjhetvā, kena nam paññāpayamāno paññāpeyya rūpī vā ti...nāsaññī ti vā* (S 4:402).

<sup>32</sup> Basham, *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*, 1989:38. The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa is probably the latest of the important Brāhmaṇas, the last of the long series, and must have been composed in the 7<sup>th</sup> cent BCE.

<sup>33</sup> See **Loṇa,phala S** (A 3.99) = SD 3.5 Intro (1) (2003).

<sup>34</sup> The Tibetan tradition of “secret teachings” is probably directly rooted in this ancient Indian tradition but given a Buddhist garb.

Scholars like Wendy O’Flaherty<sup>35</sup> have suggested that “**karma**” here refers to religious works, especially the Vedic sacrifice. “But,” disagrees Basham,

if this were Yājñavalkya’s intention there would be no point in secrecy, for it was common knowledge that performing sacrifices provided beneficial spiritual results. The idea that every deed bears results in the future, however, must have been a very new one. (Basham 1989:128 n11)

Despite such academic contentions, the point here is that the mechanics of rituals was public knowledge (since the idea was to attract generous devotees), but their dynamics was privileged knowledge of the priests who monopolized such teaching dissemination of such knowledge and the performance of such rituals.

In the brahminical religions during Buddha’s time, *karman* generally referred to proper sacrificial rituals performed by the brahmins for their devotees. The Buddha, like many other sramanas or ascetics, secularized the notion of “karma” and applied to personal accountability in one’s conscious actions. It is also interesting to note that the Pāli Canon, although it often mentions *atta* (Skt *ātman*), does not make any mention of the neuter *Brahman*, the most important concept in the Upaniṣads. The masculine *Brahmā* is found in Pāli, referring to a high heavenly class of being, and *brahma-* as a prefix often appears in the Pāli Canon, for example, *brahma,jāla* (the perfect net, D 1), *brahma,cariya* (the holy life, celibacy),<sup>36</sup> and *brahma,bhūta* (Brahmā-become, perfect being).<sup>37</sup> None of these usages, however, even hint at any Upaniṣadic idiom.

A few interesting points should be noted regarding **the Tevijja Sutta** (D 13), where two young brahmins discuss how to have *sahavyatā* (fellowship, companionship, communion) with *Brahmā*, but here the term means *rebirth amongst the host of Brahmā*, not some kind of mystical union. The two brahmin youths are unable to come to an agreement and decide to consult the Buddha, who declares that neither the brahmins nor their ancestors have ever met *Brahmā*. Without such a personal knowledge of *Brahmā*, none of them are qualified to speak about him.<sup>38</sup> The notion of *Brahman* here is glaringly conspicuous by its absence.

Furthermore, the *Tevijja Sutta* mentions the names of the ancient brahminical “paths” (*patha*, traditions), such as *Adhvaryu*, *Taittirīya*, *Chāndogya* and *Bahvṛcā* (D 13.10),<sup>39</sup> and of ancient seers such as *Aṣṭaka*, *Vāmaka*, *Vāmadeva*, *Viśvāmitra*, *Jamadagni*, *Āṅgīrasa*, *Bhāradvāja*, *Vāsiṣṭha*, and *Kaśyapa*, *Bhagu* (D 13.13),<sup>40</sup> from whom the brahmins received their mantras. The early Buddhist texts also mention *Udraka Rāmaputra* and *Araḍa Kālāma* with great reverence,<sup>41</sup> and less reverently, the six heterodox teachers,<sup>42</sup> but not once do we see here the names of well known Upaniṣadic seers and sages.

<sup>35</sup> Wendy O’Flaherty, “Karma and rebirth in the Vedas and Purāṇas,” 1980:xiii, 3-37.

<sup>36</sup> V 1:12, 19; D 1:84; M 1:77; S 1:38; A 1:50; Sn 267, 274; Tha 1027; It 28; Dh 155.

<sup>37</sup> D 3:84; M 1:111, 3:195, 224; S 4:94; A 5:226; It 57; said of arhats: A 2:206; S 3:83.

<sup>38</sup> D 13.12-23/1:238-244.

<sup>39</sup> *Adhvaryu*, *Taittirīya*, *Chāndogya* and *Bahvṛcā* [vl *Brahmacariyā*]. These are the original Skt forms of the Pali: *Addhariyā*, *Tittiriya*, *Chandokā*, *Chandāvā*, *Brahmacariyā*. According to Rhys Davids, the first three were skilled in liturgy generally and probably referred to those adept in the Yajur, Sāma and Ṛg Vedas respectively, and notes that “If we adopt the other reading [ie *brahma,cariyā*] for the last in the list, then those priests who relied on liturgy, sacrifice or chant would be contrasted with those who had ‘gone forth’ as *religieux*, either as *Tāpasas* or as *Bhikshus*.” (D:RD 1:303 n2)

<sup>40</sup> In Pali, *Aṭṭhaka*, *Vāmaka*, *Vāmadeva*, *Vessāmitta*, *Yamataggi*, *Āṅgīrasa*, *Bhāradvāja*, *Vāseṭṭha*, *Kassapa*, *Bhagu*. These names are stock: V 1:245; D 1:104/3.2.8; A 3:224, 229, 4:61; M 2:169/95.13, 2:200/99.9. For identification of these names, see *Vinaya Texts* (tr Rhys Davids & Oldenberg) 2:130 n3 & V:H 4:337 nn5-9.

<sup>41</sup> The story of the Bodhisattva’s first two teachers is found in **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26.15/1:163-168), **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36/1:240; **Saṅgarāva S** (M 100/2:212); **Madhyam’āgama** of the Sarvāstivāda (T26.776b5-777a4; **Vinaya** of the Dharmaguptakas (T1428.780bt-c19); cf J 1:66; DhA 1:85; ApA 71; BA 6; DhsA 34; Mahvṛṭ 66. See Ariyapariyesanā S = SD 1.11(15) (2003).

<sup>42</sup> The 6 heterodox teachers were: (1) *Pūraṇa Kāśyapa* (P *Pūraṇa Kassapa*, died ca 503 BCE), an amoralist who was an Ājīvika or naked ascetic; (2) *Maskarin Gośāla* or *Gośālīputra* (P *Makkhali Gosāla*), a determinist (fatalist),

The Upaniṣads are sacred texts of the brahmins, the priestly class, but they were merely one amongst many religious groups in the Buddha's days. Most significant is that the Buddha is strongly opposed to the monistic and theistic ideas and sacrificial system of the brahmins. This being the case, it is highly unlikely that the Buddha would take over brahminical notions and practices *as they are*. In many instances, the Buddha gives new meanings to the brahminical terms and practices.<sup>43</sup>

A successful teacher is a good communicator. To communicate his teachings, the Buddha has not only introduced new terms (such as *pratisamvid/paṭisambhidā*) but more often used numerous old terms (Buddha, arhat, dharma, karma, nirvana), giving them new senses. In his article, "Theravāda Buddhism and Brahmanical Hinduism: Brahmanical terms in a Buddhist guise" (1991), KR Norman investigates into the terminology used by the Buddha to show how he coped with this new vocabulary.<sup>44</sup> The Buddha, for example, accepts the *devas* as being merely superhuman and does not allow any causal role in the universe.<sup>45</sup> Various brahminical **myths and fables** are retold, for example, in **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1), where the Buddha employs a humorous device relating how Brahmā thinks that he has created other beings, and he (the Buddha) makes references to an ancient creation myth found in the Brhad Āraṇyaka. In his comments in **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27) on the way in which brahmins are born, the Buddha satirizes the Puruṣa,sūkta of the Rigveda.<sup>46</sup> Norman explains the reason for this skillful means thus:

Besides the convenience of taking over terms which were already known to this audience, albeit in a different sense, the Buddha possibly had other reasons for acting in this way. In part it may have been due to his desire to show that Brahmanical Hinduism was wrong in its [basic] tenets: a Brahmanical *brāhmaṇa* was *suddhi*, etc. If a teacher takes over his rivals' terms and repeats them often enough in his own meaning, he gives the impression that he is using them in the correct sense, and the original owners are wrong in their usage.

It must be made clear that we cannot prove that the Buddha (or the Buddhists) was the first to make use of these Brahmanical terms in a new sense, since there is a possibility that such a use of some of these terms was also common to other contemporary religions. Some of the terminology of Buddhism is [sic] held in common with **Jainism**, e.g. Buddha, *pratyeka,Buddha, jina, nirvāṇa, tathāgata, bhāvanā, dhuta, yoga, kevalin, āsrava, karman, gati, mokṣa, śramaṇa, pravrajyā, pravrajita, tapas, ṛṣi, tā(din), phāsu(ya)*, and also certain epithets of the Buddha and the Jina. It is possible therefore that the use of Brahmanical terms in a non-Brahmanical sense was taken from the general fund of vocabulary of *śramaṇical* [ie non-brahmanical] religions.

(KR Norman, 1991:199f; emphasis mine)

In other words, as Pratap Chandra (1971) points out, there was a commonwealth of ideas and beliefs from which both early Buddhism and the Upaniṣads drew.

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leader of the Ājīvikas; (3) Ajita Keśa,kambala, of the hair-blanket (P Ajita Kesakambala), a materialist; (4) Kakudha Kātyāyana, or Pakudhaka Kātyāyana (P Kakudha Kaccāyana), an atomist; (5) Nirgrantha Jñāti,putra (P Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta, the Pāli name for Vardhamāna Mahāvīra, ca. 540-568 BCE?, in the Pāli Canon), the leader of the Jains; (6) Saṃjayin Vairatī,putra or Belaṭṭha,putta. (P Sañjaya Belaṭṭha,putta), a skeptic and agnostic. See **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.16-39/1:52-59).

<sup>43</sup> See eg (Uggata,sarīra) Aggi S (A 4.44) = SD 3:16 (2003), esp A 4.44.4/4:42.

<sup>44</sup> Norman deals with the Buddha's usage of brahminical terms in three categories: (1) terms and structures taken over by the Buddha, such as *deva*, and the brahminical myths and fables (see above); (2) terms taken over by the Buddha but used with new senses, such as *aggi. amata, jhāna*, etc; (3) terms referred to but rejected, such as *atta* (Skt *ātman*). For a summary, see Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, ch 4 "The secret of the Buddha's success," 2004.

<sup>45</sup> On the 3 types of devas (Nc 307; KhA 123) see KR Norman, "Devas and Adhidevas in Buddhism", JPTS 9 1981: 154.

<sup>46</sup> R. Gombrich, "Recovering the Buddha's Message" in T Skorupski (ed), *The Buddhist Forum* 1, 1990:13 ff and 14 n25.

In an age quite unaware of copyright laws, the term “borrowing” is not a suitable choice. Every age has its own commonwealth of ideas. These are the ideas which are held by all irrespective of other differences. Such ideas are accepted and inherited in the same manner as linguistic usages are accepted and inherited. Individual freedom is one such idea in Western culture. No one needs feel obliged to express indebtedness for it to some earlier thinker, simply because it is a common property now. In a similar way, the doctrine of moral retribution was a common property in the day of the Buddha. In any case, it is not held by anyone that the Upaniṣadic seers originated it, though it was first mentioned by them. According to the well known *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* passage, this doctrine was not even known to the Brahmans.

(Pratap Chandra, “Was Buddhism influenced by the Upaniṣads?” 1971:322 f)

Finally, early Buddhism is not only empirical in its approach (placing emphasis on personal experience), but is profoundly *psychological* in its method and vocabulary, that is to say, its teachings are based on social harmony through moral virtue (*sīla*), which is the basis for healthy mental development (*samā-dhi*), both of which are essential environments conducive for the realizing of liberating insight (*paññā*). The Upaniṣads, on the other hand, seldom care about personal experiences, and are essentially *eschatological*, aiming “to discover a suprasensuous, supraphenomenal reality, entirely free of change and the laws of the world, which could be the basis as well as the goal of all becoming and with which we could identify ourselves in some way and thus win liberation from this existence” (Pratap Chandra, 1971: 323).<sup>47</sup>

## 6 Balancing similes

This Agga Vaccha,gotta Sutta contains two important similes that balance each other up. Just as **an extinguished fire** [18 f] cannot be said to have gone anywhere (in any of the four quarters), so too the Buddha’s awakening cannot be described in terms of the four alternatives [16]. This simile reflects the problem of intellectual language: not everything can be logically explained, especially personal and spiritual experiences.

On the other hand, the Buddha is said to be “profound, immeasurable, unfathomable as **the great ocean**” [20]. This simile deals with the non-conceptual side of language. **Bhikkhu Bodhi** succinctly puts it thus:

It seems that at this point in the dialogue, the Buddha resorts to imagery to suggest what concepts cannot convey. The two images—of the extinguished fire and the deep ocean—establish between themselves a dialectical tension, and thus both must be taken into account to avoid falling into one-sided views. The image of the extinguished fire, taken alone, veers in the direction of total extinction, and thus must be balanced by the image of the ocean; the image of the ocean, taken alone, suggests some eternal mode of being, and thus must be balanced by the image of the extinguished fire. Again the truth lies in the middle that transcends untenable extremes.

(M:ÑB 1278 n723)

## 7 Kaccāna,gotta Sutta

The reason for the problem of the 10 points is that the unawakened mind tends to think in dualistic terms, especially in terms of “existing” (*atthi*) and “not existing” (*n’atthi*), living by a computer-like almost mechanical “on-off” existential computation.

### The Kaccāna,gotta Sutta (S 12.15)

At Sāvatti. Then the Venerable Kaccāna,gotta asked the Buddha: “Venerable sir, it is said, ‘Right view, right view’. **In what way, venerable sir, is there right view?**”

“This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends upon a duality—upon the notion of existence and the notion of non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of nonexistence. And for one who sees the

<sup>47</sup> See also **Tevijja S** (D 13) = SD 1.8 (2003) Intro (2) “Did the Buddha know the Vedas?”

cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world.”

“‘All exists’: Kaccāna, this is one extreme. ‘All does not exist’: this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dharma by the middle: [the interdependent origination is then declared].

(S 12.15/2:16 f = 22.90/3:134, abridged)

In chapter 15 of his **Mūla Madhyamika Kārikā**, Nāgārjuna, the master of the “middle way,” alludes to the Kaccāna,gotta Sutta:

*kātyāyanāvavāde c'āstī ti nāstī ti cōbhyaṃ |*  
*pratisiddhaṃ bhagavatā bhāvābhāva,vibhāvinā ||* MK 15,7

In the Admonition to Katyāyana, the Blessed One,  
Free from existence and non-existence, refuted both “it is” and “it is not”.

— — —

## The Fire Discourse to Vaccha,gotta

(M 72/1:483-489)

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying at Anātha,piṇḍika's Park in Jeta's Forest near Sāvathī.

### The 10 points

2 Then the wanderer Vaccha,gotta approached the Blessed One, [484] exchanged greetings with the Blessed One, and then sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, the wanderer Vaccha,gotta said this to the Blessed One:<sup>48</sup>

#### THE WORLD

3 (1) "How is it, master Gotama, does the master Gotama hold this view, that 'the world is eternal (*sassato loko*)—only this is true, all else is false'?"

"Vaccha, I do not hold this view, that 'the world is eternal—only this is true, all else is false'."

4 (2) "How is it then, master Gotama, does the master Gotama hold this view, that 'the world is not eternal (*asassato loko*)—only this is true, all else is false'?"

"Vaccha, I do not hold this view, that 'the world is not eternal—only this is true, all else is false'."

5 (3) "How is it then, master Gotama, does the master Gotama hold this view, that 'the world is finite (*antavā loko*)—only this is true, all else is false'?"

"Vaccha, I do not hold this view, that 'the world is finite—only this is true, all else is false'."

6 (4) "How is it then, master Gotama, does the master Gotama hold this view, that 'the world is infinite (*anantavā loko*)—only this is true, all else is false'?"

"Vaccha, I do not hold this view, that 'the world is infinite—only this is true, all else is false'."

#### THE SOUL

7 (5) "How is it then, master Gotama, does the master Gotama hold this view, that 'the soul and the body are the same (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*)<sup>49</sup>—only this is true, all else is false'?"

"Vaccha, I do not hold this view, that 'the soul and the body are the same—only this is true, all else is false'."

8 (6) "How is it then, master Gotama, does the master Gotama hold this view, that 'the soul and the body are different (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*)<sup>50</sup>—only this is true, all else is false'?"

"Vaccha, I do not hold this view, that 'the soul and the body are different—only this is true, all else is false'."

#### THE TATHĀGATA

9 (7) "How is it then, master Gotama, does the master Gotama hold this view, that 'the Tathāgata [the Buddha Thus Come] exists after death (*hoti tathāgato param maraṇā*)—only this is true, all else is false'?"

"Vaccha, I do not hold this view, that 'the Tathāgata exists after death—only this is true, all else is false'."

10 (8) "How is it then, master Gotama, does the master Gotama hold this view, that 'the Tathāgata does not exist after death (*hoti tathāgato param maraṇā*)<sup>51</sup>—only this is true, all else is false'?"

<sup>48</sup> In **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63) Māluṅkya,putta asks the Buddha these 10 questions. In reply, the Buddha explains to him the true purpose of the spiritual life and employs the well known parable of the man wounded with a poisoned dart (M 63.4-5/1:428 f).

<sup>49</sup> The ancient Indian Materialists believe that the soul and the body are identical, meaning that when the body dies, the soul is destroyed, too. As such, there is no hereafter, and in such a system there is practically no place for moral accountability.

<sup>50</sup> This is the eternalist view, incl the Sāṃkhya system, that the soul is an enduring entity independent of the body.

“Vaccha, I do not hold this view, that ‘the Tathāgata does not exist after death—only this is true, all else is false’.”

**11** (9) “How is it then, master Gotama, does the master Gotama hold this view, that ‘the Tathāgata both exists and not exist after death (*hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato param maraṇā*)—only this is true, all else is false?’” [485]

“Vaccha, I do not hold this view, that ‘the Tathāgata both exists and not exist after death—only this is true, all else is false’.”

**12** (10) “How is it then, master Gotama, does the master Gotama hold this view, that ‘the Tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death (*n’eva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param maraṇā*)<sup>52</sup>—only this is true, all else is false?’”

“Vaccha, I do not hold this view, that ‘the Tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death—only this is true, all else is false’.”

### The Buddha’s silence on speculations

**13** “How is it, master Gotama, that when master Gotama is asked: ‘Does the master Gotama hold this view,<sup>53</sup>

that ‘the world is eternal—only this is true, all else is false?’...

that ‘the world is not eternal—only this is true, all else is false?’...

that ‘the world is finite—only this is true, all else is false?’...

that ‘the world is infinite—only this is true, all else is false?’...

that ‘the soul and the body are the same—only this is true, all else is false?’...

that ‘the soul and the body are different—only this is true, all else is false?’...

that ‘the Tathāgata exists after death—only this is true, all else is false?’...

that ‘the Tathāgata does not exist after death—only this is true, all else is false?’...

that ‘the Tathāgata both exists and not exist after death—only this is true, all else is false?’...

that ‘the Tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death—only this is true, all else is false?’...

—[each time] the master Gotama answers, ‘Vaccha, I do not hold such a view.’

What danger does the master Gotama see that he does not embrace any of these speculations?’<sup>54</sup>

### Dangers of speculations

**14** “Vaccha, this holding on to the speculation that the world is eternal is a wilderness of views, a twisting of views, a wriggling of views, a fetter of views; attended by pain, by conflict, by misery, by fever; not conducive to disenchantment, nor to fading away [of lust],<sup>55</sup> nor to cessation [of suffering],<sup>56</sup> nor to inner peace, nor to superknowledge, nor to self-awakening, nor to nirvana.<sup>57</sup>

Vaccha, this holding on to the speculation

that ‘the world is not eternal’ ...

...that ‘the world is finite’ ...

...that ‘the world is infinite’ ...

...that ‘the soul and the body are the same’ ...

...that ‘the soul and the body are different’ ...

...that ‘the Tathāgata exists after death’ ... [486]

...that ‘the Tathāgata does not exist after death’ ...

...that ‘the Tathāgata both exists and not exist after death’ ...

<sup>51</sup> This effectively means that the self is annihilated after death, which amounts to annihilationism or nihilism.

<sup>52</sup> This is a kind of skeptical or agnostic view, one that avoids any standpoint, mainly due to ignorance.

<sup>53</sup> See **Levels of Learning** = SD 40a.10.

<sup>54</sup> “Speculations,” *ditṭhi,gatāni*, lit “gone to views,” “views that one goes by.”

<sup>55</sup> “Fading away,” *virāga* also “dispassion”.

<sup>56</sup> “Cessation,” *nirodha*, that is, “cessation of suffering”.

<sup>57</sup> An almost identical statement is found in **Sabb’āsava S** (M 2.8/1:8) = SD 30.3.

...that ‘the Tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death’  
—[they are] a wilderness of views, a twisting of views, a wriggling of views, a fetter of views; attended by pain, by conflict, by misery, by fever; not conducive to disenchantment, nor to fading away [of lust], nor to cessation [of suffering], nor to inner peace, nor to superknowledge, nor to self-awakening, nor to nirvana.

Seeing this danger, Vaccha, the Tathāgata does not embrace any of these speculations.

### The Buddha has seen the true nature of things

15 “That being the case, does the master Gotama have any speculation (at all)?”

“Speculations, Vaccha—they have been dispelled by the Tathāgata.

Vaccha, the Tathāgata has seen<sup>58</sup> thus:

‘This is form, this is the arising of form, this is the ending of form;

this is feeling, this is the arising of feeling, this is the ending of feeling;

this is perception, this is the arising of perception, this is the ending of perception;

these are formations, this is the arising of formations, this is the ending of formations;

this is consciousness, this is the arising of consciousness, this is the ending of consciousness.’

Therefore, Vaccha, the Tathāgata, with the destruction, the fading away, the cessation, the letting go, getting rid of all conceivings,<sup>59</sup> all supposings,<sup>60</sup> all I-making, all mine-making and all the latent tendency of conceit,<sup>61</sup> the Tathāgata is liberated through not clinging, I say!<sup>62</sup>

### The 4 alternatives

16 (1) “And where, master Gotama, does a monk with such a liberated mind arise (after death)?”

“‘Arises,’ Vaccha, does not apply.”

(2) “Then, master Gotama, it does not arise?”

“‘Does not arise,’ Vaccha, does not apply.”

(3) “Then, master Gotama, it both arises and does not arise?”

“‘Both arises and does not arise,’ Vaccha, does not apply.”

(4) “Then, master Gotama, it neither arises nor does not arise?”

“‘Neither arises nor does not arise,’ Vaccha, does not apply.”

17 “How is it, master Gotama, that when master Gotama is asked, ‘And where, master Gotama, does a monk with such a liberated mind arise?’ he answers that ‘arises’ does not apply?

When asked, ‘Then, master Gotama, it does not arise?’ he answers that ‘does not arise’ does not apply?

When asked, ‘Then, master Gotama, it both arises and does not arise?’ he answers that ‘both arises and does not arise’ does not apply?”

When asked, ‘Then, master Gotama, it neither arises nor does not arise?’ he answers that ‘neither arises [487] nor does not arise’ does not apply?”

Master Gotama, I have fallen into not knowing here, I am confused here, and even that measure of satisfaction [and confidence]<sup>63</sup> I had from our previous conversation, that too is lost to me!”

<sup>58</sup> “Has seen,” *diṭṭham*, when contrasted with *diṭṭhi, gatam* (speculative view) is clearly a word play. Here *diṭṭha* refers to what has been “seen” by the Buddha through direct experience, ie the rise and fall of the 5 aggregates.

<sup>59</sup> Through craving, views, and conceit (MA 3:198; SA 2:363). The Vibhaṅga gives 9 kinds of conceit, ie the superiority, equality and inferiority conceits as found in one superior, in one equal and in one inferior as they view others (Vbh 390). Cf (Maññita Samuggaha) Sārappa S (S 35.30/21-23), Maññita Samuggaha) Sappāya S I (S 35.31/4:23 f) and II (S 35.32/ 4:24-26) all of which deal with the uprooting of conceivings.

<sup>60</sup> “(Of) all supposings,” *sabba, mathitānam*. Comy says this is a syn of *sabba, maññitānam* (“of all conceivings”), the preceding term in the phrase (MA 3:198). *Mathita* has the senses of “churning, agitation”.

<sup>61</sup> On latent tendencies, see SD 6.14 Intro (5).

<sup>62</sup> *Tasmā Tathāgato sabba, maññitānam sabba, mathitānam sabba, ahimkāra, mamiṅkāra, mānānusayānam khayā virāga nirodhā cāgā paṇinissaggā anupādā vimutto ti vadāmi ti.*

### The fire simile

**18** “You should be not knowing, Vaccha, you ought to be confused. Deep indeed, Vaccha, is this Dharma, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, sublime, not won by (mere) reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise—it is hard for you to know, being one holding a different view, keeping different priorities, having different likes, following a different practice, following a different teaching.<sup>64</sup>

As such, Vaccha, I shall question you in return about this: answer as you please.

**19a** Now, what do you think, Vaccha: suppose there were a fire burning before you, would you know it?”

“Master Gotama, if there were a fire burning before me, I would know it.”

“Suppose, Vaccha, someone were to ask you: ‘This fire that is burning before you, depending on what does it burn?’ What, Vaccha, would be your answer?”

“Master Gotama, on being asked thus, I would answer: ‘This fire burning before me burns depending on grass and wood.’”

**19b** “Suppose, Vaccha, this fire before you were to go out, would you know it?”

“Master Gotama, if this fire before me were to go out, I would know it.”

**19c** “Now suppose, Vaccha, you were asked, ‘When that fire before you went out in which direction has it gone—to the east, or to the west, or to the north, or to the south?’ How would you answer it?”

“It does not apply, master Gotama! The fire had burned depending on grass and wood. When that fuel is used up and it does not receive any more fuel, being without fuel, it would be regarded as quenched.”<sup>65</sup>

### The great ocean simile

**20** “In the same way, Vaccha, the Tathāgata has abandoned the form by which one describing him would use. It is cut off at the root, made like a palm-tree stump, done away with so that it is not subject to further growth.

The Tathāgata, Vaccha, is liberated from reckoning in terms of form: he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable as **the great ocean** so that

‘arises’ does not apply,

‘does not arise’ does not apply, **[488]**

‘both arises and does not arise’ does not apply,

‘neither arises nor not arise’ does not apply.

The Tathāgata has abandoned the feeling by which one describing him would use. It is cut off at the root, . . . not subject to further growth.

The Tathāgata, Vaccha, is liberated from reckoning in terms of feeling: he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable as the great ocean so that *the four alternatives do not apply*.

The Tathāgata has abandoned the perception by which one describing him would use. It is cut off at the root, . . . not subject to further growth.

The Tathāgata, Vaccha, is liberated from reckoning in terms of perception: he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable as the great ocean so that *the four alternatives do not apply*.

<sup>63</sup> “Measure of satisfaction [and confidence],” *pasāda, matta*. The term *pasāda* has the senses of faith, confidence, devotion, trust, joy”.

<sup>64</sup> “Holding a differing view . . . following different teachings”, *añña, diṭṭhikena añña, khantikena añña, rucikena aññatr’āyogena aññatr’ācariyakena*. M:ÑB has “when you hold another view, accept another teaching, approve of another teaching, pursue a different training, and follow a different teacher”. These same words are spoken by the Buddha to the wanderer Nigrodha in **Udumbarika Sihanāda S** (D 25.7/3:40) & to the wanderer (Kaccāna) Vekhanassa in **Vekhanassa S** (M 80.14/2:43).

<sup>65</sup> *Tassa ca pariyādānā aññassa ca anupahārā anāhāro nibbuta t’eva saṅkham gacchatī ti*. A modern version of the fire simile could be this: A student asks his teacher, “Where does this fire come from?” The wise teacher puts out the fire, and replies, “Tell me where the fire has gone, and I will tell you where it came from!” The fire simile here is balanced by the following great ocean simile. See Intro (5).

The Tathāgata has abandoned the formations by which one describing him would use. It is cut off at the root, . . .not subject to further growth.

The Tathāgata, Vaccha, is liberated from reckoning in terms of formations: he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable as the great ocean so that *the four alternatives do not apply*.

The Tathāgata has abandoned the consciousness by which one describing him would use. It is cut off at the root, made like a palm-tree stump, done away with so that it is not subject to further growth.

The Tathāgata, Vaccha, is liberated from reckoning in terms of consciousness: he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable as the great ocean so that ‘arises’ does not apply, ‘does not arise’ does not apply, ‘both arises and does not arise’ does not apply, ‘neither arises nor not arise’ does not apply.”<sup>66</sup>

### Vaccha,gotta takes refuge

**21** When this was said the wanderer Vaccha,gotta said this:

“Master Gotama, suppose there were **a great sal tree** not far from a village or market town, and whose branches and leaves<sup>67</sup> were dissolved by impermanence, which would then dissolve the bark and loose crust, then dissolve the sapwood, so that in due course, it was bereft of branches and leaves, bereft of bark and loose outer bark, bereft of sapwood, and would be clear of them, standing only as the pith;<sup>68</sup> even so this discourse of the master Gotama’s is bereft of branches and leaves, bereft of bark and loose crust, bereft of sapwood, standing only as the pith.

**22** Excellent, master Gotama! Excellent, Master Gotama! Venerable sir, just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were to reveal what was hidden, or were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark [489] so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way the Blessed One has, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been made clear by the Blessed Gotama.

I go to the Blessed Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May the Blessed Gotama remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth for life.”

— evaṃ —

<sup>66</sup> The great ocean simile here is balanced by the previous fire simile. See Intro (6).

<sup>67</sup> On refs to the sal tree, see D 2:134; M:488; A 1:202, 3:43, 214; Dh 162. On the tree similes, see **Udumbārika Siha.nāda S** (D 25.15-19/4:48-52) & Intro to its tr in the Sutta Discovery vol 1, 2003.

<sup>68</sup> “Would be clear of them, standing only as the pith” *suddho assa sāre patit̥hito*, where *suddho assa* lit “would be pure.” As at **Anaṅgaṇa S** (M 5.31/1:31 f).

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