

3

Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta Sutta

The Vaccha,gotta Discourse on the Those with the 3 Knowledges or, The Discourse to Vaccha,gotta on the 3 Knowledges | **M 71**
 Se **Cūḷa Vaccha,gotta Sutta** The Lesser Vaccha,gotta Discourse¹
 Theme: On the Buddha's knowledge and salvation
 Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2014, 2018

1 Summary and highlights

1.1 SUMMARY AND SIGNIFICANCE

1.1.1 The Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta Sutta, “the discourse to Vaccha,gotta² on the 3 knowledges,”³ is the 71st sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya. The Sutta is especially significant because it records how the Buddha, in reply to a question by the wanderer Vaccha,gotta, unequivocally denies to have ever made any claim to being omniscient in the sense that “knowledge and vision are continuously and constantly established before him.”⁴ [2.7.2.3]

This significantly differs from later traditions which attribute omniscience to the Buddha. According to the Sutta, such a claim “misrepresents him, and is untrue and contrary to reality” (*abbhācikkhanti ... asatā abhūtena*) [§5].

1.1.2 The Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta Sutta (M 71) probably records the wanderer's first or second meeting with the Buddha. There are at least 10 major suttas recording his meetings with the Buddha and other monks where he learns the Buddha's teachings. **The Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72) records his going for refuge and **the Mahā Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 73) recounts his renunciation and attainment of arhat-hood.⁵

1.2 THE PURPOSE OF THE TE,VIJJA VACCHA,GOTTA SUTTA

1.2.1 Awakening and omniscience

1.1.2.1 First, let us look at what the Buddha does not teach in the Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta Sutta: he neither ascertains nor rejects that he has continuous omniscience. If he had intended to refute that he has continuous omniscience, we would have expected him to tell Vaccha,gotta in what other ways he is omniscient. We clearly cannot assume that by declaring his possession of the 3 knowledges, he has omniscience, too. These knowledges (*abhiññā*) are definitely different from omniscience (*sabbaññūtā,-ñāṇa*).

1.1.2.2 Instead, in the Sutta, the Buddha only declares that he has the 3 knowledges [§§6.2-9]. This reply shows that instead of making a claim to omniscience, he only states that he has these knowledges. It should also be noted that he does *not* make any claim to have a “discontinuous” type of omniscience, whatever that may be. The crux of the Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta Sutta is that it is an explicit state-

¹ However, other Pali eds of M 73, **Mahā Vaccha,gotta S**, is without any Cūḷa counterpart.

² He is **Vaccha,gotta 1**—there are at least 4 persons of this name. On the wanderer Vaccha,gotta: SD 27.4 (1).

³ The adj **te,vijja** means “the one with the 3 knowledges,” while the n **te,vijjā** means “the 3 knowledges.”

⁴ *Satataṃ samitaṃ ñāṇa,dassanaṃ paccupaṭṭhitaṃ.*

⁵ M 72/1:483-489 (SD 6.15) & M 73/1:489-497 (SD 27.4). For Vaccha,gotta's 10 suttas, see SD 27.4 (2.1).

ment that the Buddha has the 3 knowledges—that he is fully awakened like any arhat [§9]—as affirmed by the **Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58).⁶

1.2.2 Omniscience as statement

We may, however, deduce from the Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta Sutta that implicitly the Buddha makes no claim to any kind of omniscience. Neither the Buddha nor his disciples have made any **statement** of the Buddha’s omniscience. Neither a pious *statement* nor a theological *definition* makes omniscience any more real or true. Religion is often notoriously imaginative and dissembling—they have the unhealthy habit of repeating a belief innumerable times so that they convince themselves that it is true, and impose or seduce their followers into doing the same.

The Buddha unequivocally rejects and disclaims that which is imaginative, no matter how convincing. This disclaimer of the Buddha finds support in various related key doctrines in the suttas. Omniscience and related abilities are *conspicuously absent* from the best known sets of qualities of the Buddha, especially the 10 powers and the 4 intrepidities, mention of which follows.

1.2.2.1 THE BUDDHA’S 10 POWERS (*dasa,bala*): Mahā Sīha,nāda Sutta (M 12,9-21) + SD 49.1 (3.5)

The Buddha understands, (according to true reality):

- (1) what is possible to be possible, and what is impossible to be impossible;
- (2) results of karma undertaken, past, present and future, according to their causes and possibilities;
- (3) the ways leading to all destinies [goals];
- (4) the numerous and different elements and worlds;
- (5) the various dispositions of beings;
- (6) the faculties, here and beyond, of other beings, other individuals;
- (7) the defilement, the cleansing, and the emergence regarding the attainments, the liberations, the samadhis and the dhyanas;
- (8) he recollects his manifold past lives;
- (9) by means of the divine eye, he sees the karmic dispositions of beings;
- (10) influx-free liberation (awakening) with the destruction of the mental influxes.

1.2.2.2 THE BUDDHA’S 4 INTREPIDITIES (*catu versārajja*): (Catukka) Vesārajja Sutta (A 4.8) + SD 51.19

There are these 4 intrepidities⁷ of the Tathagata, accomplished in which he claims the place of the herd-leader [a bull], roars the lion-roar before assemblies, turns the perfect wheel. No one can justly accuse of the Buddha that (paraphrased):

- (1) despite his claim, he is not fully awakened (not the Buddha);
- (2) despite his claim, he has not destroyed the mental influxes (he is still defiled);
- (3) what the Buddha regard as obstructions to spiritual progress are not so;
- (4) when we practise the Dharma as taught by the Buddha, it would not lead to the ending of suffering.

⁶ S 22.56 (SD 49.10).

⁷ “Intrepidities” (*vesārajjāni*), 4 kinds of “moral or spiritual courage or confidence”: see **Sarabha S** (A 3.64/-1:186) & **Vesārajja S** (A 4.8/2:8); also **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3,2.22/1:110); **Upāli S** (M 56,18/1:380); **Cara S** (A 4.11/2:13 = It 110/115-118); **Nakula S** (A 6.16/3:297 f), **Arakheyye S** (A 7.58/4:83), **(Vesālika) Ugga S** (A 8.21/4:210), **(Hatthi,-gāmaka) Ugga S** (A 8.22/4:213); Pm 2:194; Nc 466; DA 1:278; KhpA 104; VvA 213; J 2:27; DhA 1:86. **Sārajja S** (A 5.101) mentions these 5 conditions for moral courage, viz, faith, moral virtue, deep learning, industry, and wisdom, SD 28.9a (3); also **Piṇḍolya S** (S 22.80/3:91-94), SD 28.9a.

1.2.2.3 These are two very well known and important sets of characteristics of the Buddha. If omniscience of any form is a vital quality of his, surely it would have been included in either of these set, especially the list of the Buddha’s 10 powers.

Indeed, “omniscience” is not included even in the 100 virtues of the Buddha in the Upāli Gāthā recorded in **the Upāli (Gaha,pati) Sutta** (M 56).⁸ Upāli, an erstwhile Jain, one of Nāta,putta’s chief donors, would have been familiar with the Jain leader’s claim to omniscience [2.7.2.3], but there is no mention of it at all in his lion-roar verses.

In **the Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta** (M 71), instead of claiming any kind of omniscience, the Buddha, instead, declares that he is “one of the 3 knowledges” (*te,vijja*), encompassing (8-10) of the “10 powers” (*dasa,bala*). This is *not* a mere statement, but a **declaration** of reality and truth—that he has actually attained them, that they have liberated him, and which will liberate us, too. [1.2.2; 2]

1.2.2.4 The Buddha’s 3 knowledges [§§6.2-9] are described in **the Kandaraka Sutta** (M 51) in a very interesting way. Unlike in the Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta, these 3 knowledges (*te,vijjā*) are not so called in the Kandaraka Sutta, and where they are not linked to omniscience. Although the 3 knowledges are not treated in the Kandaraka Sutta as any kind of omniscience, it is remarkable in presenting them as liberating knowledge.

It should be noted that the 3 knowledges in the Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta and those in the Kandaraka Sutta are identical—they are the same **liberating knowledge** as that of the Buddha and of the arhats, too [1.1.2.2]. We should note here that there are other knowledges of the Buddha which greatly surpasses that of the arhats—as exemplified in the parable of the simsapa leaves [3.1]. Those super-extra Buddha knowledges, however, are not liberating knowledge, which are identical for both the Buddha and the arhats, and for us, too, when we awaken on the path. [1.2.2.6]

1.2.2.5 The Kandaraka Sutta [1.2.2.4] describes the actual function of the 3 knowledges as the progress or stages of the path to freedom from samsara. The 1st knowledge—that of retrocognition—lays out “**the knowledge of the recollection of past lives**” (*pubbe,nivāsānusatti,ñāṇa*) pericope, describing how the Buddha or the arhat recalls his numerous past lives in all their variations and details. This is the direct knowledge of rebirth.

The 2nd knowledge—that of the divine eye (*dibba,cakkhu*)—is “**the knowledge of the passing away and re-arising of beings**” (*cutūpapāta ñāṇa*)⁹ pericope, describing how beings fare well or badly according to their karma. This is the direct knowledge of karma.

The 3rd and “final knowledge” is laid out in its full “4-noble-truth” pericope as the destruction of the 4 mental influxes, that is, the direct knowledge of their nature, how they arise, how they end, and the path to their ending [3.1].¹⁰

1.2.2.6 Although many of the great awakened saints—known as **the “3-knowledge” arhats** (*te,vijja arahata*)¹¹—have the same 3 knowledges as the Buddha, there are many more arhats who are just as awakened but with only the 3rd knowledge—that of *the destruction of the influxes*.¹² Indeed, the first 2 knowledges are special, like graduating from a university magna cum laude. However, even without

⁸ M 56,29/1:386 (SD 27.1).

⁹ Or “knowledge of rebirth according to karma” (*yathā,kammūpaga ñāṇa*).

¹⁰ M 51,24-28/1:347 f (SD 32.9).

¹¹ On the 3-knowledge arhat, see SD 10.16 (14.4).

¹² There are the 4 influxes (*āsava*), ie, those of: (1) sensual desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), and (4) ignorance (*avijjā’sava*). The set of 3 influxes (omitting “view”) is prob older. See D 16,-10.4 n (SD 9).

them, we are still liberated from samsara. It's just that we are not able to recall our past lives or those of others. Our awakening is still identical to that of the Buddha or of any other arhat.¹³

2 Omniscience: Statement or state?

2.1 CONTINUOUS OMNISCIENCE IS IMPOSSIBLE

2.1.1 Total knowledge

2.1.1.1 The Commentary tries to reconcile the Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta Sutta teaching with the view that the Buddha *was* omniscient—had total knowledge of things—by explaining that his disavowal referred only to being endowed with omniscience in a continuous manner, in the sense that the Buddha would have total knowledge only when he turned his mind to exercise such a knowledge (MA 3:195).¹⁴

Technically, we are looking at omniscience in 2 ways: the episodic and the dispositional. **Episodic omniscience** is where our consciousness is simultaneously aware of each and every fact and moment. In **dispositional omniscience**, we freely choose to direct our awareness when and where we wish. In **the Milinda,pañha**, for example, when king Milinda asks whether the Buddha was omniscient, the monk Nāgasena answers: “The Blessed One’s omniscience was bound with his mental advertence [wherever he directs his mind]. When he adverted it, he knew whatever he wished.”¹⁵ (Miln 102). This is a case of “dispositional” omniscience.

2.1.1.2 When referring to the Buddha’s knowledge, the suttas noticeably never pronounces any “fiat”—such as the statement, “the holy texts say so.” As a rule, the suttas, even the Commentaries, make an effort to explain *what is possible and what not*, and in what way is the Buddha “omniscient.” The suttas are not merely making a *statement*, but impress upon us that the Buddha’s “total knowledge” arises from his own attainment, especially the first 2 of the 3 knowledges—those of retrocognition and of the divine eye [§6.2-10; 1.2.2].

2.1.2 Omniscience that is possible

This commentarial explanation [1.2.1] may perhaps refer to the Buddha’s statement in **the Kaṇṇaka-t,thala Sutta** (M 90) that a certain kind of omniscience is impossible. According to the Buddha, it is impossible to know “at once”—in the sense of *knowing everything and all at once*, that is, “simultaneous omniscience,” such as of all the bugs, beings, rock and planets and universes in all times and places.¹⁶

This omniscience that Vaccha,gotta refers to in **M 71** is different. It is a full knowledge that is “continuously present” [§4.8]—this is a “continuous omniscience.” This means that *I know right now what is happening everywhere in the universe, and right here around me and to me*. This implies that I will also know what *will* be happening—but whether I will be able to act on that knowledge is another matter. The Buddha rejects such claims.

¹³ On other kinds of arhats, see SD 10.16 (14).

¹⁴ For an overview, see McClintock 2010:28-32.

¹⁵ *Āvajjana,paṭibaddhaṃ bhagavato sabba-ññuta,ññāṇaṃ, āvajjitvā yad icchakaṃ jānātīti.*

¹⁶ M 90/2:127 (SD 10.8).

2.1.3 Commentaries: The Buddha is omniscient

The Commentary to the Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta tries to reconcile the Sutta’s teaching with the view that the Buddha is omniscient but rejecting the idea that he continuously knows everything—both the continuity and totality are rejected due to natural and logical impossibility. The Buddha can, however, can have omniscience by way of turning his mind to exercise such knowledge (MA 3:195). [1.2.2]

In other words, the Buddha can, at any time he wishes, know whatever he wants to know that is knowable or worth knowing. He cannot know, for example, what has not happened—for the simple reason that it happens not [2.7]. He would not find it worthwhile to know how many black ants there are in the world right now. He would also neither know the total number of living beings there would be in this universe during this aeon, nor see this as worthy of knowing.¹⁷

2.2 THE DIVINE EYE

2.2.1 Usage. The divine eye (*dibba,cakkhu*) is a figurative name for **clairvoyance**, the 2nd of the 4 knowledges [§8], and as mentioned in **the Pacalā Sutta** (A 7.58), where it is described as being “purified and surpassing the human” (*visuddhena atikkanta,mānusakena*).¹⁸

It should not be confused with **the “Dharma-eye”** (*dhamma-cakkhu*), which refers to streamwinning. As in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2,95/1:82), SD 8.10.¹⁹

2.2.2 The eye

2.2.2.1 The physical eye (*maṁsa,cakkhu*) is, metaphorically, the basis for the second of the 3 knowledges: the “divine eye” (*dibba,cakkhu*). The eye (*akkhi*) itself is merely unseeing flesh. The eye as a faculty, called *cakkhu*, functions, in tandem with an eye-object and eye-consciousness (attention), is the instrument of sight. In a sense, the eye only sees: it does not elaborate on what it sees.²⁰

The eye sees, the mind processes what is seen. The mind here functions as eye-consciousness or visual *cognition*. It measures and evaluates what it sees. The visual measuring or *recognition* is technically called perception, while the visual evaluation is called formations—when what is seen feeds our karmic potential depending on the moral tone of the seeing.

2.2.2.2 From the short but dynamic **Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), we learn that the eye feeds us with visual information, which, when processed by the mind in connection with other sense-experiences, gives us a holistic view of the world, the “all” of the Sabba Sutta²¹ [2.4]. The way the eye feeds us information is exemplified in a well-known parable of the city with the man at the city-centre. A person with good eyes, sitting on the roof-terrace of his house at a crossroads, observes people walking about on the streets below. He sees them leaving a house, walking down the street, sitting on the kerb, entering a house.²²

This shows that the field of vision processed by the eye-consciousness is limited to present events, as they occur, and does not extend to the past or the future. Although the divine eye or clairvoyance parallels this visual process in providing us with similar information, the divine eye has nothing to do

¹⁷ Further see Miln 102-107.

¹⁸ A 7.58,1.2/4:85 (SD 4.11). For details, see SD 49.8b (7.5).

¹⁹ See also SD 49.8b (7.5).

²⁰ SD 17.21 (9.5).

²¹ S 35.23 (SD 7.1).

²² See eg **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,96/1:83), SD 8.10.

with the physical eye. It is *mental faculty*, a psychic ability or super-power (*abhiññā*).²³ Even when the physical eye-faculty does not function very well or has limited ability, the *divine eye*, being “purified and surpassing the human” [2.2.1] is able to see very well, and visually capture much more the best physical eye can.

2.3 THE KĀLAK’ĀRĀMA SUTTA (A 4.24)

The **Kālak’ārāma Sutta** (A 4.24) records the Buddha declaring that he knows what is “seen, heard, sensed and known” (*diṭṭha, suta, muta, viññāta*)²⁴ by humans and gods. The Sutta’s commentary takes this as referring to omniscience (AA 3:38). However, upon closer examination, the Sutta statement does not refer to factual knowledge, but to penetrative insight, that is, into what is seen, heard, sensed and known, highlighting the fact that the Buddha takes no stand on any of it.²⁵

2.4 THE ALL (*sabba*)

2.4.1 Suttas on the “all”

2.4.1.1 This is an example of a sutta where the Buddha declares that “all” (*sabba*) must be fully understood, if we are to end suffering. **The Sabba Vagga**, the “chapter on the all” (S 35) has 10 suttas all of which deals with the “all.” See, for example, **the Sabba Pahāna Sutta 1** (S 35.24).²⁶ **The Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23) defines what is meant by the “all” (*sabba*).²⁷

SD 53.3(2.4)

Sabba Pariññā Sutta

The Discourse on Fully Knowing All • It 7/1.1.7/3 f

Traditional: It 1.1.7 (Khuddaka Nikāya 4) 1, Eka Nipāta 1, Paṭhama Vagga 7

This was spoken by the Blessed One, spoken by the Arhat as heard by me:

1 “One who has *not* fully understood, not fully comprehended the “all” (*sabba*), bhikshus, who has not detached his mind from it, who has not abandoned it, will not be able to destroy suffering.²⁸

2 But, bhikshus, one who *has* fully understood, [**4**] fully comprehended the “all,” who has detached his mind from it, who has abandoned it, *will* be able to destroy suffering.

3 Of this matter, then, bhikshus, this occurred to me:

*Yo sabbaṃ sabbato ñātvā
sabbatthesu na rajjati
sa ve sabbaṃ pariññā so
sabba, dukkhaṃ upaccagā’ti*

The one who having known the all in every way,
lust not after all things.
He, indeed, is one who understood the all—
he has passed beyond all suffering.

²³ Pace Analayo, Ency Bsm 2008 8:303 col A.

²⁴ On these terms, see **Diṭṭha suta muta viññāta**, SD 53.5.

²⁵ A 4.24/2:25 (SD 85.1).

²⁶ S 35.24 (SD 105.12).

²⁷ S 35.23 (SD 7.1).

²⁸ *Sabbaṃ bhikkhave anabhijānaṃ aparijānaṃ tattha cittaṃ avirajayaṃ appajahaṃ abhabbo dukkha-k, khāyāya.*

5 ²⁹The Blessed One spoke on this matter. Then he said this:

This, too, is a matter spoken by the Blessed One. Thus it was heard by me.

— evaṃ —

2.4.2 If we take **the Sabba Pariññā Sutta** literally, we might conclude that we must attain omniscience in order to awaken and be free from suffering. This is clearly not the case in early Buddhism. If we understand and follow the teaching of **the Kāḷak'ārāma Sutta** (A 4.24) [2.3], we will then know that it refers to insight—that is, seeing impermanence in them, and from there to deepen out understanding of how they are also unsatisfactory and non-self. What is this “all” that we must see with insight? **The Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23) defines them as the 12 sense-bases: the 6 internal sense-faculties (the 5 physical senses and the mind) and their respective 6 external sense-objects.³⁰ [2.4.1.1]

2.5 THE SANDAKA SUTTA (M 76)

2.5.1 Another instructive sutta for a proper understanding of the Buddha’s “omniscience” is **the Sandaka Sutta** (M 76). The Sutta records Ānanda criticizing a religious teacher’s claim to omniscience. Ānanda charges that a teacher making such a claim will nevertheless receive no food when he goes on almsround, or when he meets with some misfortune. When asked how this has happened, the teacher will have to evasively reply that he *had* to get no almsfood, and that he *had* to meet with a misfortune.³¹

2.5.2 Hence, if we attribute omniscience to the Buddha, the same kind of evasiveness would be needed to explain why on one occasion the Buddha, on his almsround, does not get any food—such as one occasion when Māra takes possession of the villagers’ minds, so that none of them offered any alms, as recorded in **the Piṇḍa Sutta** (S 4.18).³²

Another dilemma concerns the mass suicide of a group of newly ordained monks, after the Buddha advises them to be detached towards the body by cultivating the foul (*asubha, bhāvanā*)—as recorded in **the (Ānāpāna, sati) Vesālī Sutta** (S 54.9).³³ Clearly, in this case the Buddha does not foresee how the new monks would react to the cultivation of the foul. On the other hand, if we were to attribute omniscience, we will need to resort to the kind of argument criticized in the Sandaka Sutta [2.5.1].

2.7 PROBLEMS WITH THE FUTURE

2.7.1 Can we know the future?

2.7.1.1 According to the teaching of **the Sandaka Sutta** (M 76) [2.5.1], omniscience includes knowledge of the future. This aspect of omniscience is confirmed by a late canonical Abhidhamma work, **the Paṭisambhidā, magga** (Pm 1:131). [2.7.2.4]

²⁹ From here on the whole passage is found in the closing half of **Puñña, kiriya, vatthu S 2** (It 60), SD 22.17(2.1).

³⁰ For a study on *sabba*, see Endo 1997:61-64.

³¹ M 76/1:519 (SD 35.7).

³² S 4.18/1:114 (SD 61.13).

³³ S 54.9/5:320 (SD 62.21). A similar account is given as the background story to Pār 3 (V 3:73,20-16). See also SD 48.2 (6.2.2.1).

2.7.1.2 Foresight into the future, however, is possible only if the future has already happened, that is, it is fixed or predetermined [2.7.2]. Even when certain events may be foretold with certainty (such as an alarm clock we have set will go off at the set time), the future is still undetermined and depends on a set of changing and evolving causes and conditions.

2.7.2 Predicting the future and determinism

2.7.2.1 If we assume that the future can be foreseen—that certain things will happen as a certain fixed time—or even in its entirety, such a world-view can only be deterministic. In such a situation, no matter what would not change anything. Hence, it does not matter at all whether we do bad or good. There is no reason or purpose for living a moral life. Such a world would not be good to live in since we can make no choices whatsoever in our lives.

2.7.2.2 A deterministic world-view is clearly against the early Buddhist teaching of dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*), which teaches that things arise based on a number of interacting conditions. These conditions bring about certain effects (plural), which, in turn, become causal conditions for more effects, and so on.³⁴

2.7.2.3 In summary, then, the Buddha denies that he or anyone can have full knowledge of everything in a single moment of cognition. The Buddha’s statement in **the Kaṇṇaka-t,thala Sutta** (M 90) is most definitive: **“There is neither recluse nor brahmin who knows all, who sees all, at the same time [simultaneously]—this is not possible.”**³⁵

Further, in **the Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 71), the Buddha vigorously rejects the view that “The recluse Gotama claims to be all-knowing, all-seeing, to have all-embracing knowledge and vision. Whether I am walking or standing, sleeping or awake, knowledge and vision are continuously and constantly established before me”³⁶—which is in fact the claim of Nātaputta, the Jain leader.³⁷

Instead, the Buddha declares that he has **the 3 knowledges**—retrocognition, the divine eye, and that he has attained mental freedom and the freedom by wisdom through having destroyed all his defilements. This last knowledge defines his own full knowledge and awakening [1.2.2.3]. Significant, too, is that these 3 knowledges do not differ from of his awakened disciples, the arhats [1.1.2.2].

2.7.2.4 According to **the Pāsādika Sutta** (D 29), the Buddha explains that to expect him to predict the future is a sign of confusing a possible type of knowledge, such as knowledge about the past, with quite a different type of knowledge. The Buddha’s knowledge of the past goes as far back as he wishes; his knowledge of the future, however, is based on his awakening thus: “This is the last birth! There is no more rebirth now (for me)!”³⁸

The Buddha then declares that whether it is knowledge about **the past, the present or the future**, he will not reveal it if it were *untrue* or *unconnected with the spiritual goal*; he will only reveal it when

³⁴ See SD 10.8 (2.1).

³⁵ *N’atthi so samaṇo vā brāhmaṇo vā yo sakid eva sabbaññassati sabbañ dakkhīti—n’etañ ñhānañ vijjatī ti* (M 90,8.2/2:127), SD 10.8. The phrase *sakid eva* or *sakim eva* = “at once, at the same time; once only.” Comy says that no one can know all and see all—past, future and present—with one act of mental adverting, with one act of consciousness. As such, this problem is discussed in terms of a single conscious act (*eka,citta*) (MA 3:357). See “Omniscience,” see SD 10.8 (2).

³⁶ M 71,5.3/1:482 (SD 53.3).

³⁷ On Nātaputta’s claim of omniscience, see **Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha S** (M 14,17/1:92 f), SD 32.4; **Deva,daha S** (M 101,10/2:217 f), SD 18.4. See also SD 27.1 (2.1).

³⁸ D 29,27/3:134 (SD 40a.6).

it is “true, real and connected with the goal”—even then, *at the right time*. Hence, as regards such knowledge, the Tathagata is one who “speaks at the right time, speaks the truth, speaks on the goal (or meaning), speaks the Dharma, speaks the Vinaya—therefore, he is called Tathāgata.”³⁹

3 What the Buddha knows

3.1 THE SIMSAPĀ SUTTA (S 56.31) records the Buddha’s parable of the simsapa leaves. While walking through a forest of simsapa trees, the Buddha stops and holds up a few leaves in his hand. He asks the monks which are numerous: the leaves in his hand or those in the forest. The monks reply that the leaves in the forest are much more numerous.

“Even so, bhikkhus,” declares the Buddha, “Much more have I directly known that has not been taught.”⁴⁰ He has not taught them, he explains, because they *not* connected with the spiritual life. And what has the Buddha taught?

He has taught **the 4 noble truths**—suffering, its rising, its ending and the path. He has taught them because “they are connected with the goal, connected with the fundamentals of the holy life, and lead to revulsion, to letting go, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana.”⁴¹

3.2 THE 91 AEONS

3.2.1 The 7 buddhas

3.2.1.1 When Vaccha,gotta asks the Buddha if any ajivaka has, after death, gone to heaven [S14], he replies that, even after recollecting for “91 aeons or world-cycles” (*eka,navuto kappo*) of the re-births and redeaths of beings, he is unable to see any ajivaka arising in the heavens. There is a familiarity to this astronomical figure.

The (Asi,bandhaka,putta) Kulā Sutta (S 42.9), the Buddha tells the headman Asi,bandhaka,putta that he is able to recollect as far back as 91 aeons to see that no family had ever been destroyed by giving alms of cooked food.⁴² The very same duration is also mentioned in **the Mahā,padāna Sutta** (M 14) [3.2.1.2], **the Buddha,varṃsa**, and most frequently in the poems of **the Apadāna**, the canonical hagiography of the great saints.⁴³

3.2.1.2 Significantly, **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14) states that the Buddha **Vipassī** arose in our world 91 aeons (kappa) or world-cycles ago.⁴⁴ The same Sutta mentions Vipassī as the 1st of 6 other buddhas—who, together with Gotama—form the most ancient lineage of **the 7 buddhas**, that is, Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Koṇāgmana, Kassapa and our own Blessed One, Gotama.⁴⁵ This is the most ancient list of buddhas we know, preceding even that of the 28 buddhas, which is clearly a late list.⁴⁶

³⁹ *Iti kho cunda atī’ānāgata,paccuppannesu dhammesu tathāgato kāla,vādī bhūta,vādī attha,vādī dhamma,-vādī vinaya,vādī, tasmā tathāgato’ti vuccati* (D 29,28.10), SD 40a.6.

⁴⁰ *Evam eva kho bhikkhave etad eva bahu,taraṃ yaṃ vo mayā abhiññāya anakkhātaraṃ.*

⁴¹ S 56.31,6/5:438 (SD 21.7). For their context, see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana** (S 56.11), SD 1.1.

⁴² S 42.9/4:324 (SD 7.11)

⁴³ Mention of “91 aeons”: V 2:2; **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14/2:2); **Buddha,varṃsa** (B 52, 67); **Apadāna** (Ap 1:79, 80, 81, 89, 98 + over 120 other refs).

⁴⁴ D 14,1.4/2:2 (SD 49.8a)

⁴⁵ For the timings of the other buddhas, see V 2:2. On these 7 buddhas, see SD 49.8b (1.0.4.5).

⁴⁶ See Thomas 1949:27 & M:H 2:xvii. On the 28 buddhas, see SD 36.2 (3.4.3).

3.2.1.3 The duration of “**91 aeons**,” then, is clearly an ancient one, probably preceding even the tradition of the lineage of the 7 buddhas. Understandably, the actual mathematical exactness of such a large number does not matter in Buddhist mythology (as in any religious mythology), except to signify “a very long time ago,” sufficiently long enough to prove a point—that no ajivaka (on account of their rejection of karma) ever finds his way to heaven, much less to awakening. [3.2.2.2]

3.2.2 The Buddha’s retrocognition

3.2.2.1 The Buddha is probably impressing on Vaccha,gotta that he (the Buddha) has profound knowledge of the past, so that he is able to “**recollect 91 aeons**” [§14].The Buddha is not merely stat-
ing [2.1.1.2] that he fully knows something. He actually explains *how* he knows it, and, as a rule, the meaning (*dhamma*) and purpose (*attha*) of such knowledge is elaborated or at least mentioned in the sutta or some related text.

Hence, in stating this immensely long time-span of his recall of past lives [§14], the Buddha is impressing on Vaccha,gotta that it is not “Because I say so,” but he is **verifying** *how* he knows it to be so—by his own power of retrocognition. The problem is that we, lacking that capability of not only retrocognition, but of all the 3 powers, can only surmise that the Buddha is merely, after all, making a *statement*.

3.2.2.2 Apparently, “**91 aeons**”—spelt as *ekānavuta kappa* or *ekānavuti kappa*—is a shorthand (synecdoche) for “an immeasurably long time.” In fact, there appears to be no duration larger than this mentioned in the suttas, especially in connection with any kind of measurement of past time. The closest large numbers in the context of recalling past lives is found in **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1), where it is stated the best meditators who were prone to eternalist views were able to recall only 10, or 20, or 30, or 40 “world contractions and expansions,” that is, world periods or aeons (*kappa*).⁴⁷

The Buddha can, of course, recall past lives and events well beyond 40 aeons, or 91 aeons, or as far as he wishes (*so yāvatakaṃ ākaṅkhati tāvatakaṃ anussarati*), as declared by the Buddha to the novice Cunda in **the Pāsādika Sutta** (D 29).⁴⁸ Moreover, understandably, the Buddha is only telling us what is within our mental capacity to comprehend or imagine.

3.2.2.3 It is for this reason, we are exhorted to attain the path for ourself, to awaken ourself, so that, if we are inclined to, we will, upon attaining **the 3 knowledges** ourself be able to verify this fact—of the Buddha’s own 3 knowledges—since we ourself have them.

For the moment, we need not be troubled even if we see this merely as a “statement.” For, unlike a theological *statement* of the God-believers or those who believe the Buddha as a Godly being—we need not blindly accept this; we are freely allowed to question and investigate such a statement to the best of our wisdom, to gauge its mythical value—and we should—that is, until we attain the 3 knowledges, or just the 3rd knowledge itself. Then, we will surely see the very same truth, liberation and awakening as the Buddha himself.

⁴⁷ D 1,33/1:16 (SD 25.2).

⁴⁸ D 29,27.3/3:134 (SD 40a.6).

4 Reflection on the Tevijja Vacchagotta Sutta

[Posted on the Early Buddhism Facebook Page, fb 180511]

4.1 The wanderer Vaccha,gotta asks the Buddha if he is omniscient, whether he knows all. The Buddha at once replies that he has **the 3 knowledges**, that is,

- (1) the recollection of past lives;
- (2) the divine eye, which sees how beings fare according to their karma; and
- (3) the knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes.

4.2 With the 1st knowledge, the Buddha is able to see back into the past of the lives of beings, as far back as he wants. This superknowledge shows him how beings continue to live their lives over and again, dying and being reborn. This knowledge proves the truth of REBIRTH, that this is not our only life, that we have many lives.

4.3 With the 2nd knowledge, the Buddha is able to see into the past lives of beings, understanding how they fare according to their karma, how the bad surely fall into suffering, and the good fare in happiness. The bad that we do now may not harm us now, but it will eventually -- in the next life, or in some future lives.

The good that we do, too, may not benefit us now, but will fruit in the next life or in future lives. Karma is like a lightning high rod, attracting the thunder whenever there is a storm. It is not merely a one-time thing. This knowledge proves the reality of **karma**, how we are responsible for our own actions, and how we become the karma that we do.

4.4 While the first two knowledges *inform* the Buddha, it is this 3rd knowledge that frees him from sensual desire, existence, views and ignorance. This means that he will not be reborn again when this life ends. Meantime, he will never fall into wrong view or do bad deeds or create any new karma. In short, he is an arhat, one fully awakened.

4.5 All arhats—who awaken after the Buddha—attain the same 3rd superknowledge: the destruction of the influxes. As arhats, we all taste the same freedom as the Buddha does: the only difference is that the Buddha is the first to arise, discover the path, and declare the path to us. This is clearly stated in **the Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

4.6 Another difference—nothing to do with freedom or awakening—is that the Buddha has greater wisdom than anyone else. Many other arhats have the same 3 knowledges as the Buddha, too. But the depth of the first 2 knowledges of the Buddha excels them all. He is like the head professor of the department in a university, but much more.

4.7 The Buddha's knowledge is unlimited as far as knowledge goes. It is impossible, however, for anyone, earthly or divine, to know all at one time or at all times. One reason for this is that whatever we know will be already gone, or will change even as we know it.

4.8 Furthermore, we cannot really know the future simply because it has not happened. However, the Buddha, because of his awakening, knows that he will not be reborn, that there is no more of his present state once he dies. Then he is fully free in nirvana, so to speak.

4.9 If, supposedly, we can know the future, then that event has already happened. If we can know all of the future, then all such future events are fixed. This is called **determinism**. Then, there is no point for us to make any effort, especially to do good, since whatever happens is already fixed and unchanging. Early Buddhism rejects such a notion because then it is meaningless and impossible to do good and awaken to true freedom.

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Te,vijja Vaccha,gotta Sutta

The Vaccha,gotta Discourse on Those with the Three Knowledges

M 71

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time, the Blessed One was staying in the Pinnacled Hall in the Mahā,vana (the Great Wood) outside Vesālī.

2 At that time, the wanderer Vaccha,gotta was staying in the Eka,puṇḍarīka⁴⁹ wanderers' park.

Is the Buddha omniscient?

3 Then, when it was dawn, the Blessed One, having dressed,⁵⁰ taking bowl and robe,⁵¹ entered⁵² Vesālī for alms.⁵³

4 Then, it occurred to the Blessed One:

“It’s still too early to walk for alms in Vesālī. Why don’t I go to the Eka,puṇḍarīka wanderers’ park and meet the wanderer Vaccha,gotta.

4.2 Then, the Blessed One went to the Eka,puṇḍarīka wanderers’ park and meet the wanderer Vaccha,gotta.

4.3 The wanderer Vaccha,gotta saw the Blessed One coming from afar. Seeing the Blessed One, he said:

⁴⁹ Comys say that *puṇḍarīka* is a white mango tree (*set’amba,rukkha*) (MA 3:195 = DA 2:416). This park should not be confused with Sakra’s “one-lotus garden” (*eka,puṇḍarīka uyyāna*) in Tāvatiṃsa heaven, mentioned in **Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 1:252).

⁵⁰ “Having dressed,” *nivāsetvā*, lit, “having worn the *nīvasana*.” A *nīvasana*, “inner garment,” is prob a broad term that incl the *antara,vāsaka*, “undergarment ‘worn in between.’” The two words are often synonymous (V 4:185,18), but *nivāsana* (“that which is worn below”) specifically may refer to “underpants.” For details, see **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62,2) n, SD 3.11.

⁵¹ *Patta,cīvaram ādāya*. **Cīvara** here refers to any of the “**3 robes**” (*ti,cīvara*). For details, see **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62,2) n, SD 3.11.

⁵² Note that “entered” (*pāvīsi*) has a broad sense of going towards as well as into a town, etc; or, we may take it to mean entering the “city limits,” etc (ie not strictly into the actual town or city itself). The wanderers’ park is located outside the city.

⁵³ *Atha kho bhagavā pubb’anha,samayam nivāsetvā patta,cīvaram ādāya vesāliyam piṇḍāya pāvīsi*.

4.4 “Please come, venerable Blessed One! Welcome, venerable Blessed One!⁵⁴ It’s been a long time since the venerable Blessed One has found the occasion to come here.⁵⁵ Let the venerable Blessed One take a seat. Here’s one prepared.”⁵⁶

4.6 The Blessed One sat down on the prepared seat.

Vaccha,gotta questions the Buddha

4.7 The wanderer Vaccha,gotta, [482] taking a lower seat, sat down at one side.

Sitting at one said, the wanderer Vaccha,gotta said to the Blessed One:

5 “Bhante,⁵⁷ I have heard this: ‘The recluse Gotama claims to be all-knowing, all-seeing, to have all-embracing knowledge and vision.⁵⁸ Whether I am walking or standing, sleeping or awake, knowledge and vision are continuously and constantly established [present] before me.’⁵⁹

5.2 Bhante, I hope, that when I answered thus, I have stated what has actually been spoken by the Blessed One; that I have not misrepresented him with what is untrue; that I have explained the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma; and that neither reasonable rebuke nor ground for criticism would come up?”⁶⁰

5.3 “Vaccha, when you have answered thus—

‘The recluse Gotama claims to be all-knowing, all-seeing, to have all-embracing knowledge and vision. Whether I am walking or standing, sleeping or awake, knowledge and vision are continuously and constantly established before me.’—

you have *not* stated what has actually been spoken by me; that you *have* misrepresented me with what is untrue.”⁶¹

6 “How then, bhante, should I answer, so that I would be stating what has actually been spoken by the Blessed One; that I would not be misrepresenting him with what is untrue; that I would be explaining the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma; and that neither reasonable rebuke nor ground for criticism would come up?

⁵⁴ On wanderers addressing the Buddha as “venerable Blessed One,” see SD 49.5 (2.1.1).

⁵⁵ “Please come, ... to come here,” *etu kho bhante bhagavā svagatam bhante bhagavato, cirassam kho marisā imam pariyaṃyam akāsi yad idam idh’āgamanāya*, using the 3rd imp sg *etu* (“Let...come!”) as a polite formality (D 25.7a/3:39). The passage is stock. See foll n.

⁵⁶ For details, see **Udumbarikā Sīha,nāda S** (D 25,7) n, SD 1.4.

⁵⁷ Note that at the start Vaccha,gotta is not only very polite, but addresses the Buddha as *bhante* [§§5-6], but at the end, addresses him formally as “master Gotama” (*bho gotama*) [§§11-15]. It is possible that he is disappointed that, in his estimation, the Buddha does not have “omniscience,” and further the Buddha tells him that none outside the teaching attains the path nor goes to heaven. Moreover, he does not go for refuge at the end of the teaching. See Vaccha,gotta’s reaction at §15.

⁵⁸ *Sutam me’tam bhante, samaṇo gotamo sabbaññū sabba,dassāvī aparisesam ñāṇa,dassanam paṭijānāti.*

⁵⁹ *Carato ca me tiṭṭhato ca suttassa ca jāgarassa ca satatam samitam ñāṇa,dassanam paccupaṭṭhitanti.* This is actually claimed by Nigaṇṭha Nāra,putta, the Jain leader [2.7.2.3]

⁶⁰ “That no reasonable consequence ... ground for criticism” (*na ca koci sahadhammiko vādānuvādo [vl vādānu-pāto] gārayham ihānam āgacchati*). This is stock: see **Sampasādaniya S** (D 28,19.18), SD 14.14. My rendition is guided by similar passages where *vādānuvāda* is contrasted with *pāsamsā* in **Sikkha S** (A 5.5/3:4). This is stock: V 1:145, 2:297; D 1:161, 3:115; M 1:368, 482; A 1:161, 2:31, 3:4; S 2:26, 33, 36, 117, 3:6, 4:51, 340, 382, 5:6 f; the Buddha himself utters these words at S 2:39. On its difficulty, see S:B 747 n72, where Bodhi says that *saha,dhammika* is an adj meaning “legitimate, reasonable” (S 41.8/4:299). Its more common meaning is “a follower of the same teaching” (M 1:64).

⁶¹ Comy explains that even though only part of the statement is valid (that the Buddha is omniscient and all-seeing), the Buddha rejects the whole statement on account of the invalid portion (that knowledge and vision are continuously present to the Buddha). (MA 3:195,23-25)

The Buddha has the 3 knowledges

6.2 “Vaccha, when you answer thus:

‘The recluse Gotama is **one with the 3 knowledges** (*te, vijjo samaṇo gotamo’ti*),’
you would be stating what has actually been spoken by me; that you would not be misrepresenting me with what is untrue; that you would be explaining the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma; and that neither reasonable rebuke nor ground for criticism would come up.’

(1) THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE RECOLLECTION OF PAST LIVES⁶²

7 For, Vaccha, whenever I wish **I recollect the manifold past existences**, that is to say,⁶³
 one birth, two births, three births, four births, five births,
 ten births, twenty births, thirty births, forty births, fifty births,
 one hundred births, one thousand births, one hundred thousand births,
 many aeons of cosmic contractions, many aeons of cosmic expansions,
 many aeons of cosmic contractions and expansions, thus:
 ‘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.⁶⁴

(2) THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE KARMIC PROGRESS OF BEINGS (THE DIVINE EYE)⁶⁵

8 For, Vaccha, whenever I wish,⁶⁶
 I see—by means of the divine eye [clairvoyance],⁶⁷ purified, surpassing the human—
 I understand how they are inferior and superior,
 beautiful and ugly,
 fortunate and unfortunate,
 in the heavens, in the suffering states,
 faring in accordance with their karma:
 ‘These beings, sir—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, and mind,
 who reviled the noble ones,
 held wrong views and
 undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—

⁶² This is the 1st of “the 3 knowledges” (*te, vijjā*) of the Buddha and the arhats (D 3:220, 275; A 5:211), and is a shorthand for “the 6 knowledges” (*cha-l-ābhiññā*), ie, those of: (1) psychic powers; (2) clairaudience (the divine ear); (3) mind-reading; (4) the recollection of past lives; (5) the karmic progress of beings (the divine eye); (6) the destruction of the mental influxes. See **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,89-100), SD 8.10.

⁶³ *Ahaṃ hi vaccha yāvad eva ākañkhāmi aneka, vihitam pubbe, nivāsam anussarāmi.*

⁶⁴ This knowledge is detailed at Vism 13.13-71/411-423.

⁶⁵ *Cutūpapāta ñāṇa*, “the knowledge of the falling away and rebirth (of beings),” or “knowledge of rebirth according to karma” (*yathā, kammūpaga ñāṇa*), or “the divine eye” (*dibba, cakkhu*): see foll n.

⁶⁶ Here, the formula in the 6 knowledges adds: “I direct and incline it to the knowledge of the passing away and re-arising of beings”: **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,97), SD 8.10.

⁶⁷ *Dibba, cakkhu*, clairvoyance, not to be confused with the Dharma-eye (*dhamma, cakkhu*) (see n in §104). On the relationship of this knowledge to the 62 grounds for wrong views, see **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1), SD 25.3(76.3). See prec n.

after death, with the body's breaking up,

have re-arisen in a plane of misery, a bad destination, a lower realm, in hell.

8.2 These beings, sirs—

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—

after death, with the body's breaking up, have reappeared in a happy destination, in heaven.'

(6) THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INFLUXES

9 For, I, Vaccha, by realizing for myself through **direct knowledge**, right here and now, with the destruction of the mental influxes,⁶⁸

attain and dwell in **the influx-free⁶⁹ freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.**⁷⁰

10 Vaccha, when you answer thus:

'The recluse Gotama is **one with the 3 knowledges** (*te,vijjo samaṇo gotamo'ti*),' **[483]**

you would be stating what has actually been spoken by me; that you would not be misrepresenting me with what is untrue; that you would be explaining the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma; and that neither reasonable rebuke nor ground for criticism would come up.'

Renunciation is the only way to the path

11 When this was spoken, the wanderer Vaccha,gotta said to the Blessed One:

"Master Gotama, has any householder, without giving up the householder fetters,⁷¹ when the body breaks up, made an end of suffering?"⁷²

"No, Vaccha, no householder, without giving up the householder fetter, when the body breaks up, has ever made an end of suffering."

12 "Master Gotama, any householder who, without giving up the householder fetter, when the body breaks up, gone to heaven?"

⁶⁸ On the 4 influxes, see (1.2.2.6).

⁶⁹ "Influx-free" (*anasava*), ie, free from being conditioned by the mental influxes (*āsavānaṃ apaccaya,bhūtaṃ*, SA 2:174).

⁷⁰ *Ahaṃ hi vaccha āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ ceto,vimuttiṃ paññā,vimuttiṃ diṭṭh'eva dhamme sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharāmi*, this statement, in 1st person, recurs in the set of 6 knowledges: **Jhānābhīñña S** (S 16.9,29/2:214), SD 50.7; **Upassaya S** (S 16.10/2:217), SD 92.7. This statement in the 3rd person is much more common. For full def in the set of 6 knowledges, see **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,99), SD 8.10; **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,42-44), SD 49.4.

⁷¹ Clearly this refers to one's worldly conditions, associations and possessions. Comy explains the "householder fetter" (*gihī,saññojana*) as attachment to the requisites of a householder (MA 3:196,4). Tīkā elaborate that these are "clothing (*vattha*) [land, *vatthu*], ornaments, wealth, grain, etc" (*vatth'ābharan'ādi,dhana,dhaññ'ādi,gihī,parikhāresu*, MAṬ:Be 2:91). Comy adds that even though the texts mention some laymen arhats (such as the chief minister Santati, the seth's son Ugga,sena, the boy Vitasoka), by the arhat path, they destroyed all attachment to the world, and thus either went forth as monastics or passed away immediately after their attainment (MA 3:196,-6-13). For a discussion, see Miln 264. On lay arhats, see **Naḷakapāna S** (M 68), SD 37.4 (4); SD 8.6 (15); SD 37.4 (4); SD 4.9 (5.3.5).

⁷² *Atthi nu kho bho gotama koci gihī gihī,saññojanam appahāya kāyassa bheda dukkhass'antakaroti*. Technically, "Is there, master Gotama, any householder who, without giving up the householder fetter, when the body breaks up, has made an end of suffering?"

“Indeed, Vaccha, not only one, nor 100, nor 200, nor 300, nor 400, nor 500, but much more than that are the householders who, without giving up the householder fetter, when the body breaks up, have gone to heaven.”

13 “Master Gotama, has any ajivaka [naked ascetic]⁷³ who, when the body breaks up, gone to heaven?”

“No, Vaccha, no ajivaka, when the body breaks up, has ever gone to heaven.”⁷⁴

14 “Master Gotama, has any ajivaka [naked ascetic] who, when the body breaks up, gone to heaven?”

“Although, Vaccha, I recollect 91 aeons,⁷⁵ I do not know of any ajivika who has gone to heaven—except for one⁷⁶—and he upholds the teaching of karma, the teaching of action.”⁷⁷

15 “That being so, master Gotama, even the whole community of sectarians is empty of any who go to heaven!”⁷⁸

“That is so, Vaccha, even the whole community of sectarians⁷⁹ is empty of any who go to heaven.”

16 The Blessed One said this.

17 The wanderer, satisfied, rejoiced in the Blessed One’s word.⁸⁰

— evaṃ —

Bibliography: See end of SD 53.
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⁷³ On *ājīvaka* (naked ascetics), see SD 23.5 (1.1) n.

⁷⁴ The predominant doctrine of the Ājīvaka is that of determinism and fatalism, which rejected karma and personal accountability in the destiny of beings. The ajivakas looked to Makkhali Gosāla (one of the well known 6 heterodox sectarian teachers of the time) as their leader: see **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,3), SD 8.10; SD 35.5 (2.2.3); also SD 35.2 (3).

⁷⁵ On the significance of this duration, see (3.2).

⁷⁶ Comy identifies this Ājīvaka as the Bodhisattva in a previous birth (MA 3:196,22-197,2). Interestingly, comy on **Loma, haṃsa J** (J 94), at its conclusion, records the Buddha as identifying himself as “the ajivaka at that time” (*ahaṃ tena samayena so ājīvako ahoṣin’ti*, J 1:391).

⁷⁷ *Ito kho so vaccha eka, navuto kappo yam ahaṃ anussarāmi, nābhijjānāmi kañci ājīvakaṃ saggūpagaṃ añña-tra ekena, sopāsi kamma, vādī kiriya, vādīti*. The Buddha declares this sect, amongst all the heterodox sects, to be the “worst of all”: see eg **Kesa, kambala S** (A 3.135/1:287), SD 77.19. **Vinaya** records that matted hair ascetics who upheld karma and accountability (*kamma, vādino ete ... kiriya, vādino*) need not undergo the prescribed 4 months’ probation for ordination candidates who are erstwhile members of other sects (Mahv 1.38.11 @ V 1:71,27).

⁷⁸ *Evaṃ sante bho gotama suññaṃ aduṃ titth’āyatanaṃ antamaso saggūpaganāpīti*. We must imagine that Vaccha, gotta saying this with some annoyance, even disbelief, as he must be disappointed, despite the jubilant stock closing [§17].

⁷⁹ **Titth’āyatana** has 2 senses: (1) “sectarian state or nature; sectarian or heterodox doctrines; sectarianism” and (2) “community of sectarians or heterodox sect”: (*tittha, bhūtāni āyatanaṇi, titthiyānaṃ vā āyatanaṇi*, AA 2:272,15; DhsA 497). For (1): **Titth’āyatana S** (A 3.61/1:173,13), SD 6.8; for (2) “community of sectarians” as here [§15]. Monks who go back to their erstwhile sect should not be reordained (V 1:60, 69); nuns, too (V 2:279, 4:217). See V:H 3:167 n2.

⁸⁰ We must imagine that Vaccha, gotta is being polite to “rejoice” in being told by the Buddha that he (Vaccha, -votta) would not go to heaven. However, a total of at least 10 major suttas record his meeting with the Buddha and other monks from whom he learns the Dharma [1.1.2].