

Respecting the body, freeing the mind

Source: **Nivāpa Sutta** (M 25, SD 61.2), Is there others who can teach like the Buddha? © Piya Tan, 2024.¹

3.3.1 Kassapa Sīhanāda Sutta (D 8)

3.3.1.1 The Kassapa Sīhanāda Sutta (D 8)² is a dialogue between the Buddha and the naked ascetic (*acela*) Kassapa; hence, Acela Kassapa. The Sutta records a criticism of extreme asceticism similar to the one in **the Udumbarikā Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 25) [3.2]. In D 8, the Buddha rejects the view that these ascetic practices constituted true asceticism (*sāmañña* or *brāhmañña*).³ Instead, the Buddha declares that only a person who has destroyed the influxes (*āsava*)⁴ is considered a true recluse (*samaṇa*) or brahmin (*brāhmaṇa*),⁵ that is, one who will awaken or is awakened as an arhat. [3.2.2.3]

D 25 and D 8 each presents a contrasting study in *interfaith dialogue*. **D 25** is a lengthy teaching given by the Buddha to the worldly wanderer **Nigrodha and his followers**, who despite understanding the limitations of their own practice and the opportunity for spiritual freedom ignored the Buddha's invitation to cultivate the path. In **D 8** the Buddha gives a similarly lengthy teaching to the naked ascetic (*acela*) Kassapa, engaging in deep discussion on asceticism at every stage of the dialogue.

Unlike Nigrodha, the lone ascetic **Kassapa** understood and accepted the Buddha's rejection of asceticism—which focuses on mortifying the body and external ritual behaviour—and promotion of an “internal asceticism,” that of morally disciplining the body and speech, and of cultivating the mind to free itself through calm and clarity, that is, freedom of the mind and freedom by wisdom. At the end of the dialogue, Kassapa is convinced to work for the path and renounces under the Buddha. He goes into solitary meditation and, in due course, becomes an arhat.

3.3.1.2 In D 8, the Buddha explains to the naked ascetic Kassapa that the moral virtue, mental cultivation, wisdom and self-liberation of **the arhat** are more difficult to attain than the merely physical acts of the ascetic, which only seems evident to the vulgar and appealing only to the ingenuous observer. The Buddha knows well from his own experience that self-mortification weakens one's body and distracts the mind from what is spiritually essential and efficacious.⁶

The early Buddhist texts often highlight the fact that moral restraint and mental cultivation lead to the insight wisdom that brings about “**the destruction of the influxes**” (*āsava-k,khaya*) [3.2.2.1], that is, awakening and nirvana. These are harder to practise since they actually transform us into selfless beings who are free of ignorance and craving. Asceticism, on the other hand, is mostly a matter of accomplishment and often seen as attaining some kind of religious or social status.

¹ <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/61.2-Nivapa-S-m25-piya.pdf>

² Also known as **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (D 8/1:161-177), SD 73.12.

³ Here *brahmañña* is used by the Buddha to refer to “true brahminhood,” a synonym for *sāmañña*.

⁴ The influxes (*āsava*)—an ancient triad of influxes of (1) sensual lust (*kām'āsava*), (2) existence (*bhav'āsava*), and (3) ignorance (*avijj'āsava*)—are defilements that hold us back in samsara. With their destruction one becomes an arhat: **D 2**,99.1 n (SD 8.10); **M 11**,9 n (SD 7.13). The later suttas and Comys insert “the influx of views” (*diṭṭh'āsava*) as no 3, giving a tetrad of influxes, also called “the floods” (*ogha*) [**Ogha Pañha S** (S 38.11), SD 30.3(1.4) + (1.4.2)] or the yokes (*yoga*) [SD 30.3 (1.4.2 n)].

⁵ **D 8**,15/1:167,14-168,12 (SD 73.12).

⁶ See SD 61a (2.1.2.4 + 16).

Moreover, the practice of **inner asceticism** of the eightfold path is a personal quest that demands devotion and diligence in solitary meditation. Asceticism, on the other hand, is an external act often done in public to attract followers and supporters.

Indeed, the hardness of asceticism does not lie in its *rituality* or *severity*. The Buddha insightfully points out that if the hardness of asceticism depended on its practices, “then it would not be fitting to say that the life of the recluse, of the brahmin, was hard to lead. It would be quite possible for a householder, or for the householder’s offspring, or for anyone, even a slave woman with a water-jar, to say: “Let me now go naked, let me become of low habits, ... ” and so on. Rather, the hardness of the ascetic life is that it is truly a difficult task to destroy the influxes.⁷ The Buddha thus devalues, even rejects, ascetic practices, and promotes the accomplishment of moral ethics and meditation as *a harder but more efficient way* to attain liberation.

3.3.2 The mind over the body

3.3.2.1 The Nivāpa Sutta (M 25,9.3/1:156,21-27) lists a brief set of ascetic practices that proves not to lead one towards liberation but only to backslide into craving (in a parable of the herd of deer that is captured by the deer-hunter, that is, Māra the evil one). We find the same view in **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 1:238,12-35) [3.2.1.6], where the Jain Saccaka states that 3 Ajīvaka recluses practised a number of severe self-mortifying rituals (a short version of the list) but has to admit that they had a copious meal from time to time.

Extreme asceticism is a Catch-22 situation. Those sincere and diligent ascetics who take up extreme practices do not live long on account of wrecking their physical body. Only those who make a successful *performance* of their ascetic act live well to market to their religious believers who are Guru-dependent. Religious tenets, stories and faith set the ascetic stage with bright lights, blinding smoke and glaring mirrors.

3.3.2.2 This significant point is often missed by both teachers and scholars of religion, that is, **the ascetic act** is an exclusivist practice. The impression one is supposed to get is that an ascetic act is difficult for the ordinary person to do; it is only for the religious elite, the Guru, to *perform* (and “perform” is the right word here). The Guru claims to have some kind of religious abilities which are exclusive to him; this “ascetic” performance is hidden away in the hazy past, out of the follower’s reach or ken.

Since the follower is unable to attain that level of the Guru, it is the Guru who is thus empowered to dispense blessings or “empowerment” to give the follower some kind of benefit, worldly and temporary. The follower depends on the Guru and has to keep returning to him for that “empowerment.” In this sense, asceticism (as defined by the Guru) must always exclude the followers, or at least place them only at the receiving end of the glory of the Guru’s performance and pontifications.

3.3.2.3 The noble eightfold path, the middle way, is first and foremost **a way** (*magga*)—this way is neither a physical path nor an external act, but an internal journey we must make by and for ourself. We must first cultivate the body so that it is *morally cultivated*; then we are said to be “**bodily cultivated**” (*bhāvita,kāya*). Alongside this, we need to cultivate the mind to be calm and clear; then we are said to be “**mentally cultivated**” (*bhāvita,citta*). Cultivated in body and mind, we go on to gain the wisdom that liberates us from ignorance and craving.

⁷ D 8,16/1:168,13-169,38 (SD 73.12).

The suttas we have examined here reveal **a skillful means** often used by the Buddha. That skillful means not only presents the advantage of the middle way but that it is really the “one and only way” (*ekâyaṇa maggo*) (Dh 274). If religious asceticism is mostly rhetoric (especially with sectarian gurus), then the middle way is **the truth** we need to cultivate for ourself to gain self-knowledge and personal freedom.

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