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Mahā Sīha,nāda Sutta

The Greater Discourse on the Lion-roar | M 12,44-63/1:77-83¹

Theme: The Bodhisattva's self-mortification

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003,2010, See SD 49.1 for the full Sutta

Introduction

The sutta opens with Sāriputta telling the Buddha that Sunakkhatta,² who had recently left the Order, has been going around claiming that the Buddha “does not have any superhuman state,³ any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones”⁴ [2]. Sunakkhatta as such claims that the Buddha teaches a doctrine that he has merely thought out rather than one that he has realized through transcendental wisdom. Apparently, for him the acquisition of miraculous powers is superior to the knowledge and experience of the uprooting of suffering. As a direct rebuttal, the Buddha expounds on the following in this sutta:

- §§9-21 the ten powers of the Tathāgata,
- §§22-28 his four kinds of intrepidity,
- §§29-30 his knowledge of the eight assemblies,
- §§32-34 the four kinds of generation,
- §§35-43 the five destinations and nirvana,] and
- §§44-64 the Bodhisattva's austerities,

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

The sutta excerpts [44-63] here however are meant for study in connection with the Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta (M 26), the Mahā Saccaka Sutta (M 36.17-44/1:240-249), and the Bhaya,bherava Sutta (M 4), all of which deal with the asceticism and quest of the Bodhisattva and the Buddha's awakening.

The Majjhima Commentary explains that the Buddha gives this account of his past ascetic practices because Sunakkhatta was a great admirer of extreme asceticism (as is clear from Pāṭika S, D 24.1.7/3:6 f) and the Buddha wants to show he has no equal in the practice of austerities. §§44-56 apparently describe the Bodhisattva's practices during the six years of austerities in his last existence, while §§57-61 recount his previous existences as a seeker of awakening.

A sutta of the same title is found in the Dīgha Nikāya (D 8) which contains the long stock passage on the Moralities,⁵ which also has a similar list of ascetic practices of the Bodhisattva mentioned here. However, the interlocutor there is the naked ascetic (*acelaka*) Kassapa, not Sāriputta. As such, the sutta there is also called the Kassapa Sīhanāda Sutta to distinguish it from the sutta here.

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¹ For a complete tr, see SD 49.1.

² The teachings of **Sunakkhatta S** (M 105) were expounded to Sunakkhatta, a man of wrath and folly, apparently before he joined the Order. **Pāṭika S** (D 24) gives an account of his dissatisfaction and subsequent forsaking the order because the Buddha would not perform any miracles for him or explain to him the beginning of things.

³ The superhuman states (*uttari manussa,dhamma*) are qualities and attainments beyond those of an ordinary human, comprising the 10 wholesome course of action (M 9.6/1:47; elaborated at M 41.12-14/1:287 f). They include the 4 dhyanas (*jhāna*), the 3 direct knowledges (*abhiññā*), and the paths and fruitions (*maggā,phala*).

⁴ “Any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones” (*alam ariya,ñāṇa,dassana,visesa*) is stock signifying all higher degrees of meditative knowledge characteristic of the noble saint. MA says that here it specifically refers to the supramundane path (*lok'uttara magga*) that Sunakkhatta claims the Buddha lacks.

⁵ See for example Sāmañña,phala S (D 2.39-63/1:62-70).

[Appendix to **Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta**: Insert between M 26.17 and 18.]

The Greater Discourse on the Lion-roar

M 12.44-63/1:77-83; see SD 49.1 for the full Sutta

1 Thus have I heard.

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

The Bodhisattva's austerities

44 "Sāriputta, I recall having lived a holy life comprising four factors.

I have been an ascetic (*tapassī*), a supreme ascetic;

I have been coarse (*lūkha*), supremely coarse;

I have been scrupulous (*jegucchī*),⁶ supremely scrupulous;

I have been secluded (*pavivitta*), supremely secluded.⁷

45 (1) Sāriputta, such was my **asceticism**.⁸

I was a naked ascetic, of loose habits [flouting conventions],⁹
not coming when invited, not stopping when invited.

I did not accept food brought (to me) nor food specially prepared nor a meal invitation.

I accepted nothing from a pot, from a bowl, across a threshold, among the firewood, among the rice-pounders, from two eating together, from a pregnant woman, from a woman giving suck, from a woman in the midst of men,¹⁰ from a food-distribution centre, from where a dog is waiting, from where flies are swarming.

I accepted neither fish nor meat; drank no liquor, nor wine, nor cereal brew.

I kept myself to one house, to one morsel [when collecting alms]. I kept myself to two houses, [78] to two morsels...I kept to seven houses, to seven morsels.

I lived on one small serving (of food) a day; on two small servings a day...on seven small servings a day.¹¹

I took food once a day; once every two days...once every seven days. Thus even up to a fortnight, I dwelt pursuing the practice of taking of food at such regular intervals.

⁶ *Jegucchī*, lit "detester (of evil)" (MA 2:43).

⁷ Comy explains that the Buddha gives this account of his past ascetic practices because Sunakkhatta was a great admirer of extreme asceticism (as is clear from Pāṭika S, D 24.1.7/3:6 f) and the Buddha wants to show he has no equal in the practice of austerities. §§44-56 apparently describe the Bodhisattva's practices during the 6 years of austerities in his last existence, while §§57-61 recount his previous existences as a seeker of awakening.

⁸ This whole section is, mutatis mutandis, at **Kassapa Sīha,nāda S** (D 8.14/1:165-167 = SD 77.1) = **Udumbarikā Sīha,nāda S** (D 25.8b/3:41 = SD 1.4) = **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12.45/1:77 f = SD 49.1) = **Kandaraka S** (M 51.8/1:342 f = SD 32.9) = **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60.36/1:412 = SD 35.5) = **Ghoṭa,mukha S** (M 94.10/2:161 = SD 77.2) = **Acelaka Paṭipadā S** (A 3.141/1:295) = **Atta,danḍa Sutta N** (Nm 15/416 f). The Dīgha pericope here has 6 additional self-mortifying observances.

⁹ *Mutt'ācāro*.

¹⁰ *Puris'antara'gatā*. This phrase is used to define *gihi,gata*, "gone gone to a layperson" (V 4:322); defines *itthi*, "woman" at MA 2:209, DA 78. Comys say that this is a danger to their pleasure (as such putting the ascetic at a disadvantage).

¹¹ "Small serving," *datti*. Comy says that a *datti* is a small bowlful from which they leave out the main food (MA 2:45).

I was an eater of greens or millet or wild rice or hide-parings or moss or rice-bran or rice-scum or sesamum flour or grass or cow-dung,

I lived on forest roots and fruits; on fallen fruits.

I clothed myself in hemp; in hemp-mixed cloth; in shrouds;¹² in refuse rags; in tree bark; in antelope hide; in strips of antelope hide; in kusa-grass fabric; in bark fabric; in wood-shaving fabric; in head-hair wool; in animal wool; in owl's wings.

I pulled out (my) hair and beard, and was devoted to this practice.

I stood continuously, rejecting seats.

I squatted continuously, and was devoted to such a posture.

I used a bed of spikes, making it my bed.

I engaged in (the ritual of) bathing in water three times a day, including the evening.¹³

Thus in these various ways I dwelt keeping to the practice of tormenting myself and mortifying the body. Such was my asceticism.¹⁴

46 (2) Sāriputta, such was my **coarseness**: just as dust and dirt accumulate on the trunk of a *tindukā* tree,¹⁵ over the years, so that they fell in flakes, so too, dust and dirt, accumulated over the years, fell off my body in flakes.

It never occurred to me, 'Now, let me rub this dust and dirt off with my hand, or let another rub this dust and dirt off with his hand'—it never occurred to me thus.

Such was my coarseness.

47 (3) Sāriputta, such was my **scrupulousness**: I was always mindful in stepping forwards and stepping backwards. I was full of pity (*dayā*) even for (the beings in) a drop of water thus: 'Let me not, by a false step,¹⁶ bring harm to the tiny creatures!'¹⁷

Such was my scrupulousness.

48 (4) Sāriputta, such was my **seclusion**: **[79]** I would plunge into some forest dwelling, and when I saw a cowherd or a shepherd or someone gathering grass or someone gathering sticks or someone gathering forest products as food,¹⁸ I would flee from grove to grove, from thicket to thicket, from valley to valley, from hill to hill.

Why was that? I thought: 'Let them not see me and let me not see them!' Just as a wild deer, on seeing human beings, flees from grove to grove, from thicket to thicket, from valley to valley, from hill to hill, so too, I *on seeing a cowherd or a shepherd ...* would flee ...

Such was my seclusion.

¹² Shrouds collected from corpses in a charnel ground.

¹³ Apparently to wash away his sins as related in **Saṅgārava S** (S 7.2.11).

¹⁴ This passage [§45] is at **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60.36) = D 35.5, where this last sentence is replaced by "This is called the person who torments himself and is intent on tormenting himself." (M 60.36/1:412)

¹⁵ Skt *tinduka*, *Diospyros embryopteris*, a tree of the ebony family.

¹⁶ "by any false step" (*visama, gate*). I do not follow Comy which explains it as "May I not bring harm to the drops of water wherein tiny living beings live (*gate*) in low and high places, at the tip of grass-blades, tree-branches and so on" (MA 2:46). I think here the ascetic is very careful in his bodily actions so as not to cause any harm to tiny living creatures by not using water with living beings in them, not stepping on them, not breathing them in, etc. The particle *pi*, here rendered "even" is a key to the sense of the whole sentence.

¹⁷ Bodhi: "The idea seems to be that his pity was directed, not towards microbes in a drop of water... but towards the creatures that might be hurt or killed by carelessly discarded water." (M:ÑB 1199 n193) This practice is clearly that of a Jain; cf **Kassapa Sihanāda S** (D 8) and **Udumbārika Sihanāda S** (D 25) where "not drinking cold water" is regarded as an ascetic practice (D 8.14/1:167, 25.8/3:42); see also D:W n200.

¹⁸ *Vana, kammika*. M:ÑB renders it as "woodsman." Here I follow Comy: "one who wanders in the forest seeking (edible) tubers, roots etc." (MA 2:46)

49 Sāriputta, I would go on all fours into the cow-pens¹⁹ when the cattle had gone out and the cowherd had left them, and I would feed on the dung of the young suckling calves. As long as my own excrement and urine lasted, I fed on even my own excrement and urine.²⁰

Such, Sāriputta, was my great (act of) **feeding on filth** (*mahā,vikaṭa,bhojana*).

50 Sāriputta, I would plunge into some fearful dense forest and dwell there—a dense forest so fearful that it would make most people’s hair stand up if he were not free from lust.²¹

Sāriputta, during those cold wintry nights between the eighth days [of Māgha and Phagguna],²² I would dwell by night in the open and by day in the dense forest. In the last month of the hot season I would dwell by day in the open and by night in the dense forest.²³ And there came to me spontaneously this stanza never heard before:

Now chilled, now scorched,	Alone in a fearful forest,
Naked, without a fire to sit by,	The sage is (yet) intent upon his quest. ²⁴

51 Sāriputta, I would make a charnel ground my bed, resting on the bones of the dead.²⁵ And cowherd boys²⁶ came up and spat on me, urinated on me, threw dirt at me, and poked sticks into my ears. Yet, Sāriputta, I do not recall that I ever aroused an evil mind (of hate) against them. Such was my abiding in **equanimity**. [80]

52 Sāriputta, there are certain recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: ‘Purification arises through food.’ They said: ‘Let us live on jujube fruits,’²⁷ and they ate jujube fruits, they ate jujube fruit powder, they drank jujube fruit water, and they made many kinds of jujube fruit concoctions.²⁸

Now I, Sāriputta, recall having eaten a single jujube fruit a day.

Sāriputta, you may think that the jujube fruit was bigger then, but you should not think so: the jujube fruit was then just the same size as it is now. Sāriputta, through feeding on a single jujube fruit a day, my body became extremely emaciated.

Because of eating so little, my limbs became like the joints of vine stems or bamboo stems ... [*as in the Mahā Saccaka Sutta, M 26.28/1:245 f*]...

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

53 Sāriputta, there are certain recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: ‘Purification arises through food.’ They said: ‘Let us live on beans,’...

Now I recall having eaten a single bean a day.

¹⁹ On ox-asceticism, see **Kukkura,vatika S** (M57.2-6).

²⁰ *Yāva kivañ ca me Sāriputta sakaṃ mutta,karisaṃ aperiyaṇṇaṃ hoti, sakaṃ yeva sudam mutta,karisaṃ āhāremi*. The practice of the “filth eater” (*vekaṭika*) is also mentioned in **Kassapa Sīha,nāda S** (D 8.14/1:167). The Vinaya mentions 4 of these “great filth” (*mahā,vikaṭā*), namely, (cow) dung (*gūtha*), (cow) urine (*mutta*), ash (*chārikā*) and clay (*mattikā*), applied against snakebite (V 1:206). Since they do not count as “nutriment,” a monk could use them directly (without being made “allowable,” *kappiya*) if there were no lay people around (V 4:90).

²¹ See **Bhaya,bherava S** (M 4.19/1:20).

²² “Between the eighth days” (*antar’atṭhaka*) (V 1:31, 288; A 1:36; U 1:9; Miln 396) is a regular cold spell which occurs in South Asia between Māgha and Phagguna (AA 2:225), ie late February and early March (or late December and early January, according to M:ÑB 1199 n194). See V:H 4:41 n3.

²³ Qu at Miln 396; cf J 1:390.

²⁴ As at J 1:390 with more detailed Comy than at MA 2:48.

²⁵ See C 3.15.1; J 1:47; BA 61; ApA 51. CA 269 “making a bone my pillow.” This verse illustrates the highest perfection of equanimity of the Bodhisattva. See also I B Horner, *Ten Jataka Stories*, 1957: xxi.

²⁶ *Go,maṇḍala*. Comy: “cowherd’s boys” (*gopāla,dārakā*) (MA 2:48 f).

²⁷ Jujube, *kola* (M 1:80; A 3:49).

²⁸ As salads, cakes, balls (MA 2:49).

54 ... 'Let us live on sesamum,' ...

Now I recall having eaten a single sesamum seed a day.

55 Sāriputta, there are certain recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: 'Purification arises through food.' They said, 'Let us live on rice,' and they ate rice, they ate rice powder, **[81]** they drank rice water, and they made various kinds of rice concoctions.

Now I recall having eaten a single rice grain a day.

Sāriputta, you may think that the rice grain was bigger then, but you should not think so: the rice grain was then just the same size as it is now. Through feeding on a single rice grain a day, my body became extremely emaciated.

56 Yet, Sāriputta, by such conduct, by such practice, by such austerities, I did not gain any super-human state, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones.

Why was that? Because I did not gain that noble wisdom which, when gained, is noble and emancipating and leads the one who lives in accordance with it to the complete destruction of suffering.

57 Sāriputta, there are certain recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: 'Purification comes about through the cycle of rebirths (*samsāra*).'

But, Sāriputta, it is impossible to find a realm in the cycle in which I have not already **[82]** arisen in this long journey, except for the gods of the Pure Abodes.²⁹

For, had I passed through the cycle as a god in the Pure Abodes, I would never have returned to this world.³⁰

58 Sāriputta, there are certain recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: 'Purification comes about through (a particular) rebirth (*upapatti*).'

But it is impossible to find any particular kind of rebirth into which I have not already been reborn in this long journey, except for the gods of the Pure Abodes.

For, had I passed through the cycle as a god in the Pure Abodes, I would never have returned to this world.

59 Sāriputta, there are certain recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: 'Purification comes about through (some particular) abode (*āvāsa*).'

But it is impossible to find any kind of abode in which I have not already dwelt in this long journey, except for the gods of the Pure Abodes.

For, had I passed through the cycle as a god in the Pure Abodes, I would never have returned to this world.

60 Sāriputta, there are certain recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: 'Purification comes about through sacrifice (*yañña*).'

But it is impossible to find any kind of sacrifice which has not already been offered up by me in this long journey, when I was either a head-anointed noble king or a wealthy brahmin.

61 Sāriputta, there are certain recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: 'Purification comes about through fire-worship (*aggi, paricariyā*).'

But it is impossible to find any kind of fire that has not already been worshipped by me in this long journey, when I was either a head-anointed noble king or a wealthy brahmin.

62 Sāriputta, there are certain recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: 'As long as this good man is still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, so long is he possessed of the most lucid wisdom. But when this good man is old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, and come to the last stage, being eighty, ninety or a hundred years old,³¹ then he loses that lucidity of his wisdom.'

²⁹ Qu at DA 2:511.

³⁰ Rebirth into the Pure Abodes (*suddh'āvāsa*) is possible only for non-returners.

³¹ Stock phrase, as at V 2:88, 3:2.

But, Sāriputta, you should not think so. I am now old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, and come to the last stage—my years have turned eighty.³² Now suppose that I had four disciples, each with a hundred years' lifespan, perfect in mindfulness, in assimilative memory, in retentive memory and in lucidity of wisdom.³³

Just as, Sāriputta, a skilled archer, trained, tried and tested, could easily shoot a light arrow through³⁴ the shadow of a palm tree,³⁵ and suppose to that extent they are perfect in mindfulness, assimilative memory, **[83]** retentive memory and lucidity of wisdom.

Suppose that they continuously asked me about the 4 focuses of mindfulness, and that I kept answering them when asked, and that they remembered each answer of mine, and neither asked a secondary question nor paused except to eat, drink, chew and taste,³⁶ to urinate and defaecate, and to rest in order to dispel sleepiness and tiredness.

Still, Sāriputta, the Tathagata's exposition of the Dharma, his explanations of words and phrase of the Dharma,³⁷ and his replies to questions would not yet come to an end, before those four disciples of mine, each with a hundred years' lifespan, living out a hundred years, would have died at the end of those hundred years.

Sāriputta, even if you have to carry me about on a litter,³⁸ still there will be no change in the Tathagata's clarity of wisdom.³⁹

63 If, Sāriputta, it were to be rightly said of anyone: 'A being not subject to delusion has appeared in the world for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare and happiness of gods and humans,' it is of me indeed it would be rightly spoken *thus*."

— evaṃ —

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³² It is said that the Buddha spoke this discourse during the year of his Parinirvana (MA 2:51).

³³ The Pali for the four terms respectively are *sati*, *gati*, *dhiti*, *pañña*, *veyyattiya*. Comy explains *sati* as the ability to grasp in mind a hundred or a thousand phrases as they are being spoken; *gati*, the ability to bind them and retain them in the mind; *dhiti*, the ability to recite back what has been grasped and retained; and *pañña*, *veyyattiya*, the ability to discern the meaning and logic of those phrases. Ānanda is declared to be the foremost amongst monks with *sati*, *gati* and *dhiti* (A 1:24 f). The last quality—*pañña*, *veyyattiya*—is perhaps synonymous with *mahā*, *pañña*, in which Sāriputta is declared foremost (A 1:23).

³⁴ *tiriyam*, usually translated as "across" (M:ÑB 177; A:H 4:288), but Bodhi has "shoot past" (S:B 157).

³⁵ As at S 1:62, 2:265 f; A 2:48, 4:429; J 4:211. AA says that the "shadow" is a span and 4 fingers (about 8 ins or 20 cm) wide and so would be passed quickly. See A:H 4:288 n3.

³⁶ *asita*, *pīta*, *khāyita*, *sāyitā*. These are the 4 modes of consuming food, namely: *eat* food; *drink* liquids; *chew* solid food, a toothstick, betel-nut, chewing gum; *taste* (or lick) sweets, ice-cream.

³⁷ "Words and phrases of the Dharma," *dhamma*, *pada*, *vyañjana*.

³⁸ "Litter," *mañcaka*, lit "small bed" (from *mañca*, "bed").

³⁹ "Clarity of wisdom," *pañña*, *veyyatīyam*, alt tr "lucidity of wisdom"; as at **Cūḷa Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 27), where the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi questions the wanderer Pilotikā (who has great faith in the Buddha) what he thinks of the Buddha's "clarity of wisdom" (M 27.2.3/1:175) = SD 40a.5.