

Crusher of Māra's host

Excerpt from *SD 61a Māra: a Buddhist mythology of evil and reality of badness*, Piya Tan © 2023.

2.5.7 Sela Sutta (Sn 3.7) Sn 558-571 (SD 45.7a)

2.5.7.1 Amongst the suttas of the Sutta, nipāta, **the Sela Sutta** (Sn 3.7 = M 92)¹ is probably one of the latest entries. This is evident from the presentation of the Buddha as the “great man” (*mahā, purisa*) with the 32 marks [2.5.7.2], and also the Buddha actually inviting the brahmins to *have faith in him* (which is a rare gesture by the Buddha). However, the appearance of this Sutta in 3 canonical collections —the Majjhima Nikāya, the Sutta, nipāta and the Thera, gāthā—attests to its popularity.

The Commentaries tell us that **Keṇiya** was a very wealthy brahmin (*mahā, sāla brāhmaṇa*) of Āpaṇa² who became a part-time matted-hair recluse (*jaṭila*) with the purpose of protecting his wealth. Having bought some land from the king, he built his hermitage there and became protector (*nissaya*) of 1,000 families. He donned the yellow robe by day and enjoyed sense-pleasures as a layman by night.³

Interestingly, Keṇiya had great faith in the Buddha and tried to make an alms-offering to him, but the Buddha twice refused to accept them. On the 3rd offering, however, the Buddha accepted Keṇiya's offering. Now, Keṇiya had a good friend and devotee named **Sela**, another brahmin of Aṅguttarapa. Upon inquiring Keṇiya about the meal preparation, Sela was told that it was for the Buddha.

Upon hearing the word “Buddha” from Keṇiya, Sela was deeply thrilled with joy and faith. With his 300 pupils, he went to see the Buddha in the forest outside Āpaṇa. Meeting the Buddha, he joyfully affirmed that the Buddha possessed the 32 marks. **The Sela Sutta** records Sela praising the Buddha in a series of verses and asking questions of the Buddha. At the end of the Buddha's instruction, Sela and his pupils renounced, and went into solitary meditation. At the end of a week, he attained arhathood.⁴

We shall look at only 6 of the Sela verses in connection with “the Buddha of faith” and Māra theme.

2.5.7.2 Having faith in the Buddha

*Vinayassu mayi kaṅkhaṃ
adhimuccassu⁵ brāhmaṇa
dullabhaṃ dassanaṃ hoti
sambuddhānaṃ abhiṅhaso*

Dispel (your) doubt in me,
brahmin, be firm in your faith:
ever difficult it is to see
the self-awakened ones.

Sn 559 = Tha 829

This verse is spoken by the Buddha to the brahmin Sela, who is familiar with the lore of **the “great man”** (*mahā, purisa*), one with the 32 bodily marks. According to an ancient lore of the 2 destinies, if such a one remains in the home life he will become a world monarch (*cakka, vatti*), but if he renounces the world, he will become a world teacher, the Buddha.⁶ This is a worldly view of secular power and spiritual power; whereas the Buddha is more concerned with the attaining of full awakening so that we, too, will be able to learn and practise the path for awakening for ourselves.

¹ Sn 3.7/548*-573*/p102-112 = M 92/2:146 (SD 45.7a). Verses at **Sela Thera, gāthā** (Tha 818-841/78-80).

² A town in Aṅguttarāpa, a country north of the river Mahī. Its prefix Aṅga suggests that it was part of Aṅga which lay across the river. (SnA 2:437,4-8).

³ MA 3:399; SnA 440; Ap 389/26/318.

⁴ MA 3:406; SnA 456; Ap 389/26/318.

⁵ Comy: resolve firmly, have faith that he is the fully self-awakened (*adhimuccasū ti adhimokkhaṃ kara, sammā, sambuddho ti saddaha*, ThaA 3:49,30).

⁶ Sn 3.7,10 (SD 45.7a); SD 52.1 (2.6.1).

For this reason, the Buddha says, “**Dispel your doubt in me**, etc,” that is, not to merely believe in some worldly prediction, but rather have faith in self-effort through the Buddha-Dharma that leads us to self-awakening. The Buddha is difficult to meet in the world; but when we truly see the Dharma, we will surely see the Buddha here and now, that is, by realizing the Dharma that the Buddha personifies. “He who sees the Dharma, sees me” (*yo dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati*).⁷

2.5.7.3 “That buddha am I”

<i>Yesaṃ ve dullabho loka</i>	That buddha [self-awakened one] am I,	c
<i>pātubhāvo abhiṅhaso</i>	whose appearance in the world,	a
<i>so'haṃ brāhmaṇa sambuddho</i>	brahmin, is difficult to find repeatedly—	b
<i>salla,katto anuttaro</i>	a peerless dart-remover. ⁸	Sn 560 = Tha 830

In this and the next verse, the Buddha affirms himself as the awakened one before Sela and his 300 followers (*māṇava*, “brahmin youths”).⁹ This is not a declaration of a status (a position that demands the adoration and fear of others) but rather the state of **dart-remover**—one who has himself removed the dart of suffering—who has thus attained nirvana. This is a testimony to self-effort and self-liberation: the painful wound is identified, it arises from the dart (something external that has invaded our being); the dart is removed, and the wound healed—these are the 4 noble truths.

Awakening makes the Buddha *brahmā*, like the High God himself, filled with love, ruth, joy and peace; but awakening ends rebirth, making the Buddha “god beyond the gods” (*devâtideva*),¹⁰ brahma “beyond Brahmā” (*atibrahmā*),¹¹ that is, “**perfect**” in the sense of being self-liberated from samsara.

Such an awakening is thus “unequaled” (*atitula*), that is, incomparable (*tulam atīto, upamaṃ atīto, nirupamo*)¹² since it cannot be attained by priestly blessing or godly fiat, but only by self-effort. In other words, it can be taught to others, and those who have heard it can be liberated by self-effort.

2.5.7.4 “Crusher of Māra's host”

<i>Brahma,bhūto atitulo</i>	Having become Brahma [perfect] ¹³ unequalled	
<i>māra,sena-p,pamaddano</i>	crusher of Māra's armies, ¹⁴	
<i>sabbâmitte vasī katvā</i>	having overcome all enemies,	
<i>modāmi akuto,bhayo</i>	I rejoice, everywhere free from fear.	Sn 561 = Tha 831

⁷ **Vakkali S** (S 22.87,13/3:120), SD 8.8; Miln 71; SA 2:252; AA 1:250; DhA 4:118; UA 311; ItA 2:116; ThaA 2:147; ApA 492. See SD 10.4 (2.2.5); SD 51.25 (2.2.2.6); SD 55.8 (1.2.2.2).

⁸ ie, removing the “barbs” (*salla*) of suffering: see eg **Salla S** (Sn 3.8 esp 593*). Comy: “‘surgeon’ means one who cuts off the barbs of lust and so on” (*salla,katto ti rāg’ādi,salla,kattano*, ThaA 3:49,33), showing the etym from *kart-tṛ*; cf Skt *śalya,kartṛ*, “surgeon” (SED), in **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta** (M 63), ~ is used literally meaning “dart-remover,” but here metaphorically; cf “the Buddha is like a dart-remover because he removes all darts of views” (*sabba,diṭṭhi,sall’uddharaṇato salla,katto viya buddho*, KhpA 21). **Niddesa** lists the darts (*salla*) as those of lust, hate, delusion, conceit, view, sorrow, and doubt: *rāga~ dosa~ moha~ māna~ diṭṭhi~ soka~ kathaṅkathā~* [read *salla* for ~] (Nm 59). See Tha:N 243 ad 830.

⁹ On Sela and his 300 brahmin youths, see Sn 3.7,5.2 (SD 45.7a).

¹⁰ On *devâtideva*: Vv 74.27; J 4:158,23*; Ap 253,12; Miln 217,2; ThaA 3:171,5.

¹¹ On *atibrahmā*: MA 1:51,15 = AA 1:111,14 = UA 132,3; DhA 2,26; Vism 2,8; Miln 277,11.

¹² SnA 2:455,7 f; MA 3:405,11.

¹³ Comy: *brahma,bhūta* means “become the best” (*seṭṭha,bhūto*, SnA 455,7).

¹⁴ Comy says Māra's host here, ie, “all the enemies” (*sabbâmitte*) (next line), refers to the “5 kinds of Māra” (*pañca,māra*): (1) as the 5 aggregates (*khandha,māra*), (2) as defilements (*kilesa,māra*), (3) as the 4 karmic doors of body, speech and mind (*abhisaṅkhāra,māra*), (4) as death (*maccu,māra*), and (5) as a devaputra or deity (*deva.putta,māra*) (*khandha,kilesâbhisaṅkhāra,maccu,deva.putta,mār’ādike*, SnA 455,11).

In metaphorical and mythical language—by way of imagery and symbolism—the Buddha’s self-awakening makes him “**crusher of Māra’s armies**”—he has overcome *sensual pleasure, discontent, hunger-and-thirst, craving, sloth-and-torpor, fear, doubt, hypocrisy-and-obstinacy, reputation and gains, and self-exaltation* [2.1.2.8]—our real “enemies” that lurk within ourselves, enslaving us with a false sense of power and control on account of our birth, social position, religious status, titles or pure self-centredness, especially narcissism.

Māra’s armies turn us into **Narcissus**, fallen prone in the dirt beside the pool of self-view, gazing with animal fancy at our own image in the water. This shimmering pool of self-view is filled with the murky waters of *birth, social position, religious status, titles and self-centredness*. It’s a matter of time before we die of thirst beside this watery grave.

The Buddha’s teachings shines like the light of dawn, rousing us from the narcissistic nightmare. We learn to see how Māra tricks us into being self-deceived. We begin to truly see how we are reflected in everyone else. We all alike love life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom: these are **the fivefold love** that makes life meaningful and purposeful, and a good society possible.

2.5.7.5 Sela’s decision to go forth

<i>Brahma, bhūtaṃ atitulaṃ, māra, sena-p, pamaddanaṃ. ko disvā na-p, pasīdeyya, api kaṇḥābhijātiko</i> ¹⁶	The one become Brahmā ¹⁵ unequalled crusher of Māra’s armies— having seen him, who wouldn’t have faith. even those born into a dark lowly birth? Sn 563 = Tha 833
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

<i>Yo maṃ icchati anvetu yo vā nicchati gacchatu idhāham pabbajissāmi vara, paññassa santike</i>	Let him who wishes follow me, or, who wishes not, let him go. Here will I go forth in the presence of the wisely noble one. Sn 564 = Tha 834
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Having seen and heard the Buddha for himself, **Sela** knows he has reached the right path to his liberation: “**having seen him, who wouldn’t have faith?**” This is the kind of seeing that liberates us from the weight of dogma and priestcraft, giving us the wings of calm and insight to be able to fly well above and away from Māra’s armies.

We see here a play on the word “**dark**” (*kaṇhā*) in *kaṇḥābhijātika*, not in reference to Māra, but alluding to those marginalized or downtrodden dark-skinned members of a society dominated by the fair-skinned elite, especially the brahmins (who preach such a colour- and race-based ideology). Thus “**even those born into a dark lowly birth**” means that such “outcastes” who view the “elites” with fear or scorn, feel a sense of profound respect, connectedness and liberation with the Buddha.

This is a kind of “contra-Narcissus” effect: despite their self-view, they see themselves in the Buddha, their greater potential to be buddha-like. Hence, **faith** here means a confidence that we can ourselves *do it, be it, free it*: act morally, be mindful and gain awakening.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Brahma*, as in *brahma, cariya*, the “holy life,” ie, the Buddha is perfect in terms of the holy life.

¹⁶ Lit “dark lowly birth.” Comys: “those born into families of the outcaste, and so on” (*caṇḍāl’ādini, ca, kule jāto*, DA 3:405 = SnA 455,17); “one low-born, stuck in the state of falling from darkness into darkness” (*kaṇḥābhijātiko ‘ti nīca, jātiko tamo tama, parāyana, bhāve ṭhito*, ThaA 3:50); “those dark-skinned by nature” (*kālakajātiko*, AA 3:394; *kāḷaka, sabhāvo*, J 5:87); “the dark-skinned, of low birth” (*kaṇhe nīce kule jāto*, NettA:Be 248); cf D 33, 1.11(49)/3:233; (**Saṅkhitta**) **Puggala S** (A 4.85/2:85), SD 18.6. Cousins: “All [translators of this Sutta] follow Buddhaghosa here, but the editors of Ps III 405 [MA 3:405] and Pj II 455 [SnA 455] rightly refer to Sv I 162 [DA 1:162]. If such a doctrine of 6 *abhijāti* was current and adopted by Sela, then we should translate: ‘even one of the lowest kind of behaviour,’” but see next n. See **Cha-ḷ-abhijāti S** (A 6.57) esp Ṣ(1) From dark to dark (SD 23.5). Cf Sn 573 below.

¹⁷ It is also possible to interpret *kaṇḥābhijāti* as the 1st of the “6 kinds of birth” (*cha-ḷ-abhijāti*), a view held by Pūraṇa Kassapa (one of the 6 sectarian teachers): **Cha-ḷ-abhijāti S** (A 6.57,2), SD 23.5. See prec n.

2.5.7.6 Going forth of Sela and his followers

<i>Svākkhātaṃ brahma, cariyāṃ (selāti bhagavā) sandīṭṭhikam akālikāṃ yattha amoghā pabbajjā appamattassa sikkhato ti</i>	Well taught is the holy life, ¹⁸ (O Sela, said the Blessed One ,) ¹⁹ seen here and now, nothing to do with time, where the going-forth isn't empty for one who trains heedfully.	Sn 567 = Tha 837
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------

As a whole, the verse seems to allude to a “**come, O monk!**” going-forth (*ehi bhikkhu pabbajjā*) formula like where the Buddha pronounces, “Well taught is the Dharma, live the holy life for the utter ending of suffering!” (*svākkhāto dhammo, cara brahma, cariyāṃ, sammā dukkhassa anta, kiri-yāya*). This formula is for those who have attained streamwinning who wish to go forth. A famous example is that of Koṇḍañña, who, having attained streamwinning after hearing the Dhamma, cakkā Pavattana Sutta (S 59.11), goes on to request to go forth.²⁰

The Sela Sutta, despite including the section of the marks of the great man (probably a later addition), as a story goes back to a time (probably the 1st period, perhaps within the 1st 10 years of the ministry)²¹ when the Buddha himself admits renunciants into the sangha.²² We may thus read this verse (Sn 567 = Tha 837) as the *ehi, bhikkhu* admission of Sela, and also the *etha, bhikkhave* (come, O monks) admission of his 300 followers. However, there is no mention that Sela or any of his pupils attaining the path at the time of their going forth. However, after their 7-day solitary retreat, they returned to see the Buddha on the 8th day to report themselves as “nagas” (*nāga*), a term for arhats (Sn 573 = Tha 841).²³

R875 Inspiration 524

Piya Tan ©2024

¹⁸ Comys say that this phrase means that Sela and the 300 brahmin youths have gone forth by the “Come, bhikkhu” (*ehi, bhikkhu*) formula (SnA 456; MA 3:406, also 399). See SD 45.7a (4.1).

¹⁹ This line was inserted by the council elders.

²⁰ S 56.11, 20/5:424 (SD 1.1); also Mv 1.6.31 (V 1:12, 23). See SD 45.16 (1.2.1 f).

²¹ On the periods of the Buddha's ministry, see SD 1.1 (2.2); SD 40a.1 (1.3).

²² SD 45.7a (4.1).

²³ It is possible that the Sela story occurred at the end of the 1st period, or even later, but the reciters hinted the ordination as being done by the Buddha himself.