

The conversion of Āḷavaka the yaksha (1 of 2)

Excerpt from **SD 61.8: Āḷavaka Sutta, a ferocious cannibal awakens to the teaching of the buddhas** © Piya Tan 2024.

The Sutta teachings and details are here explained along with commentarial notes (with references) and my own comments [within square brackets] or their own numbered sections.

2.1 ĀḷAVAKA AND KASSAPA BUDDHA'S 8 QUESTIONS

2.1.1 The first 4 questions (nos. 1-4) and their answers [§§9 f]

(1) “What here is a person’s best wealth?” [§9a: Sn 182a = S 847a]

2.1.1.1 These 8 questions were taught by **Kassapa Buddha** to Āḷavaka’s parents, who were attending on that Buddha. They in turn taught them to Āḷavaka as a boy. As time passed, Āḷavaka forgot the answers. To ensure he did not forget the questions, too, he inscribed them in vermilion on a golden scroll, which he kept in his mansion (*vimāna*). They were said to be “the Buddha’s questions that are the Buddha’s domain” (*buddha,pañhā buddha,visaya*). (SnA 1:228,22-27; SA 1:4-10)

After Āḷavaka’s parents died, he grew into a ferocious and powerful yaksha who devoured humans. He lost touch with the Dharma, that is, until he met another buddha, our Blessed One Gotama. The Buddha knows these questions, and that Āḷavaka is ready for conversion to the path. Āḷavaka asks the Buddha these questions, and the Buddha answers them just as they have been answered by Kassapa Buddha.

These “Buddha-domain questions” not only show that all buddhas teach the same Dharma, but they serve as a sort of wholesome karmic ground on which even an evil yaksha can stand and, in the presence of the Buddha, reconnect Āḷavaka with the Dharma—he becomes a streamwinner. The questions are here listed with the Buddha’s answers. (SnA 1:228,22-229,1)

2.1.1.2 The Commentaries say that **faith** (*saddhā*) [§10a] is here a person’s best wealth. Such wealth as money and gold brings the happiness of use and enjoyment, dispels such suffering as hunger and thirst, alleviates poverty, is the means for obtaining such precious gems as pearls, and gains respect of the world.¹ In similar ways, mundane and supramundane faith brings mundane and supramundane happiness; ends the suffering of birth, decay, and so forth for those practising with faith as their vehicle; alleviates the lack of excellent qualities; and serves as the cause for obtaining the gems that are the awakening factors (*bojjhaṅga*).² And according to the following statement, one gains the respect of the world: A person of faith and moral virtue, possessing fame and wealth, is honored wherever he lives. (Dh 303)³

2.1.1.3 Thus, faith is called “**wealth**” (*vitta*) [§10a]. This wealth that is faith follows one; it is unmatched by anything else; it is a cause for all excellence; and it is also a source of mundane wealth

¹ **SnA**:Ee *loka,sannatim̃*. Variants: Ce *loka,santatim̃*, Be Se *loka,santhutim̃*; **SA**:Be Ce Ee Se *loka,santatim̃*. Sinhala Pali MSS sometimes confuse the letters *ṣ ta* and *ṣ na*, due to their similarity. The reading *sannati* is supported by SED: *saṃnati*, “subjection or submission to, humility toward,” and vb *saṃnamati*, “to bend down, to bow before or to.” Further, **Dh 303** qu by the text, says that a faithful morally virtuous person, famous and wealthy, “is honored everywhere” (*tattha tatth’eva pūjito*) seems to confirm *loka,sannati* as the right or preferred reading.

² These are the 7 awakening factors (*satta bojjhaṅga*): (1) mindfulness, (2) investigation of states, (3) effort, (4) zest, (5) tranquillity, (6) concentration and (7) equanimity. See (**Bojjhaṅga**) **Sīla S** (S 46.3), SD 10.1.

³ SnA 1:231,12-232,2; SA 1:328,6-25.

such as money and means.⁴ For it is a person of faith who does meritorious deeds and acquires wealth, while one without faith wastes wealth for harmful purposes; hence, it is said to be best (*seṭṭha*) (that is, used by the best of people for the best of things in a spiritual sense).

In a rare diversion, the Commentary seems to be apologetic. It says that the word *purisassa*, literally, “a man’s or that of a man” [§9a] is based on a teaching about what is categorically the “best” (for everyone) (*ukkaṭṭha, pariccheda, desanā*). Hence, it should be known that not all (of the benefactors of the best wealth) are men. For, the wealth that is faith is best for even women and others (*tasmā na kevalam purisassa, itthi, ādīnam pi saddhā, vittam eva seṭṭhan ti veditabbarā, SA 1:328, 23-25*).

(2) “What well practised brings happiness?” [§92b: Sn 182b = S 847b]

2.1.1.4 The Dharma (*dhamma*) [§10b] here is the 10 courses of wholesome karma (*kusala kamma, patha*),⁵ summarized as charity (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*) and mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*), the 3 bases for merits.⁶ This brings human happiness, divine happiness, and in the end the happiness that is nirvana.

The Commentaries simply glosses **well practised** (*suciṇṇo*) [§10b] as “well done, well conducted” (*suciṇṇo ti sukato sucarito, SA 1:328, 27*). [This refers to disciplining one’s body and speech by moral training, cultivating the mind to be calm and clear, and developing insight into true reality (beginning with seeing impermanence).]

2.1.1.5 The phrase, **brings happiness** (*sukham āvahati*) [§10b] means that one gains worldly wellbeing, such as that of Soṇa the treasurer’s son, Raṭṭhapāla, and others; celestial happiness, such as that of Sakra and others; and in the end the happiness that is nirvana, such as in the case of Mahāpaduma and others.⁷ It should be noted that all happiness, worldly or celestial, are temporary and uncertain. Only when one has attained at least streamwinning will that happiness be lasting and steady.]

(3) “What is truly the sweetest of tastes?” [§9c: Sn 182c = S 847c]

2.1.1.6 By **truth** (*sacca*) [§10c] here is meant truthful speech, with nirvana as the ultimate truth (*paramattha, sacca*), which comprises truth as abstinence (from falsehood, *virati, sacca*). Of the various kinds of **tastes** (*rasa*) [§9c], truth is really the sweetest, truth *alone* is the sweetest (*sādutarm*). Or it is the best (*sadhutaram*), the supreme, the highest. This is because such tastes as that of roots, etc, nourish only the body and bring a defiled happiness, but the taste of truth

⁴ SnA 2:231, 25-29 = SA 1:328, 7-11. Subcomy explains the 4 reasons for the faith being the best wealth: *Para, lokam gatam anugacchatī ti anugāmikam. Aññehi na sādharmaṇan ti anañña, sādharmaṇam. Sabba, - sampatti, hetū ti sabbāsam sīla, sampad’ādīnam lokiya, lokuttarānam sampattīnam hetu. Anattāya hoti anupāya, paṭipattito. Tasmā anugāmi, kattā anañña, sādharmaṇattā sabba, sampatti, hetu, bhāvato hiraññādi, vitta, - nidānattā ca saddhā, vittam eva seṭṭham*. (SAṬ:Be 1:321)

⁵ The 10 wholesome courses of karma are the abstention from (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) sexual misconduct; (4) falsehood, (5) malicious words, (6) harsh words, (7) frivolous words, (8) covetousness, (9) ill will and (10) wrong views. See **Mahā Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 136, 11) SD 4.16.

⁶ “Bases for merits,” *puñña, kiriya, vatthu*, ie, grounds for merit-making based on giving, moral virtue and mental cultivation: **Puñña, kiriya, vatthu S** (A 8.36/4:241-243), SD 22.17; D 3:218; It 51. They are often expanded into a set of 10 bases, ie, those based on (1) giving, (2) moral virtue, (3) mental cultivation, (4) reverence (humility), (5) service, (6) dedicating merit, (7) rejoicing in other’s merits, (8) listening to the Dharma, (9) teaching the Dharma, (10) straightening of view (DA 3:999; Abhs 5.24/146).

⁷ On **Soṇa**, see V 1:179 f, A 6.55/3:374 f; on **Raṭṭhapāla**, see M 82/2:54 f. Comys say that **Mahā, paduma** was a king who was the son of the queen Padumavatī. He first enjoyed the happiness of kingship and later, having become a pratyeka-buddha, enjoyed the happiness that is nirvana (MA 4:127 f; SA 2:160, 188-191, 353 f; AA 1:173-175; SAṬ:Be 1:321; ThaA 3:128) [DPPN: Mahāpaduma (1)].

nourishes the mind with calm and insight and brings an undefiled happiness. (SA 1:328,31-333,7 highlights)

This word “**truth**” (*sacca*) is found with many meanings, such as in the following statements:

- “one should speak the truth, one should not become angry” (Dh 224), it is truthful speech;
- “recluses and brahmins standing in truth” (J 5:491), it means abstinence;
- “why do they assert diverse truths, those proponents who claim to be skilled?” (Sn 885ab), it means views;
- “there are, bhikkhus, these 4 brahmin truths” (A 2:176,26), it means brahminical truths;
- “truth indeed is one—there is no second” (S 884a), it means the supreme truth;
- “of the 4 truths, how many are wholesome” (Pm 2:108,34; Vbh §212/128), it means noble truths.

But here, **truthful speech** (*sacca, vācā*) is intended—including nirvana as *supreme truth* and truth as *abstinence*—through the spiritual might of which one exercises control over water and other things, and crosses beyond birth, old age, and death. Thus, it is said:

By the word of truth, one runs [stands firm] on water;⁸ | by truth, the wise even destroy poison;
by truth,⁹ the sky thunders and rains; | firm in truth, they aspire for nirvana.

[untraced]

Whatever tastes there are on earth, | truth is the sweetest of those tastes.

Firm in truth, recluses and brahmins | cross over beyond birth and death.

(J 5:491,6-9)

(SnA 1:232 f)

2.1.1.7 The sweetest of tastes (*sādutaram rasānam*) [§10c]. The things called tastes (*rasa*) refer to a variety of experiences, as expressed in the following statements:

- “Taste of roots, taste of stems” (Dhs 180, §628), [and so forth, it is that which can be tasted];
- “I allow you, bhikkhus, the taste of all fruit juices” (V 1:246,17); [that which can be consumed];
- “Master Gotama is tasteless (*arasa, rūpa*)” (V 3:2,14 = A 4:173,16-26); [unsociable; a wallflower];
- “The recluse Gotama is tasteless (*arasa, rūpa*)” (V 3:2,16-18); [“not bent” on forms, etc; see following];
- “The taste of forms, the taste of sounds” (V 3:2,16); [enjoyment of the 6 sense-pleasures];
- “Any curry apart from bean curry (*rasa, rase*)” (VA 4:892); [Vinaya technical term];
- “This Dharma and Vinaya has a single taste, the taste of freedom” (A 4:203,7); [benefit, purpose, goal];
- “The Blessed One partakes of the taste of the meaning, the taste of the Dharma,” (Nm 104); [nuances, essence]; and so forth.¹⁰

Of these tastes, truth is the sweetest or the most excellent, the best, supreme. For such tastes as those of roots nourish only the body and bring defiled pleasure; but the taste of truth—truth as abstinence and truthful speech—nourishes the mind with calm and insight, and brings undefiled pleasure. The taste of freedom is sweet because it is suffused with the taste of supreme truth; and the taste of the meaning and taste of the teaching are sweet because they occur in dependence on the

⁸ The verse is not found in the suttas. Line a, SnA: Ee *sacca, vācena udakam hi gādhati*; Ce *saccena vācen’udakam hi gādhati*; Be *saccena vācen’udakam pi dhāvati*; Se *saccena vācen’udakam hi dhāvati*. Also in SA, where SAṬ explains, “One runs on the water-surface without dividing it, as if it were earth” (*udaka, piṭṭhiyaṃ abhijjamānāyaṃ paṭhaviyā viya dhāvati gacchati*) (SAṬ 1:282). VI “one stands firm (*gādhati*) on water.”

⁹ In modern terms, this is “scientific truth.”

¹⁰ For encyclopedic defs of *rasa*, see Nm 240, Nc §540; Dhs 629.

meaning (*attha*) and the Dharma (*dhamma*) that are the means for attaining that (taste of freedom). (SA 1:232 f)

(4) “How lives the one whose life they say is best?” [§9d: Sn 182d = S 847d]

2.1.1.8 (One) living by wisdom (*paññā, jīvim jīvatam*) [§10d]: A householder lives by wisdom when he keeps an honourable occupation, goes for refuge (in the 3 jewels), gives alms, observes the precepts, fulfils the uposatha duties, and so on. One gone forth (as a monk or a nun) lives by wisdom when they undertake pure virtue and the superior practices beginning with purification of mind. (SA 1:330,8-16)

Living by wisdom, they say, is *the best life*. But here, among those who are *blind, one-eyed, and two-eyed*,¹¹ this is **the two-eyed householder** who lives by wisely undertaking the householder’s practice—pursuing a (wholesome) occupation, going for refuge, giving and sharing, undertaking the precepts, observing the uposatha, and so forth; and it is **the monastic** who wisely takes up the practice of a monastic—good conduct that brings freedom from remorse and the higher practices such as purification of mind and so forth. They say that the life of this one living by wisdom—or, among those who live, the one living by wisdom¹²—is best. This is the way that the meaning should be understood. (SnA 1:233)

2.1.1.9 Living by wisdom is to live wisely, to keep happily in touch with true reality. One wisely sees the body as the embodiment of *life, happiness* and *freedom* (valued by the first 3 precepts),¹³ and speech as the wholesome communication with others (with *truth, pleasant, useful, unifying* and *timely*).¹⁴ Thus one is “cultivated in body” (*bhāvita, kāya*),¹⁵ which is the basis for mental training in calm and clarity for seeing into the true reality of impermanence. Thus, one is “mentally cultivated” (*bhāvita, citta*). This is the basis for overcoming defilement of *self-identity view, doubt* and *attachment to rituals and vows* that, in turn, leads one to the path of streamwinning. This is the beginning of *the living by wisdom*.

For the “one gone forth” or renunciant, it means keeping to the Vinaya in every way, practising meditation for calm and insight, with which to see the true nature of *impermanence* and *suffering*, and with growing wisdom, to better understand *nonsel*f. The purpose of this is to overcome the defilements that are the floods of views, existence, sensual desire and ignorance [2.1.2], and attain the path of nirvana in this life itself.¹⁶

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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¹¹ An allusion to **A 3.29**:1:128-130, where the “one with two eyes” is a householder who looks after both his temporal and spiritual welfare.

¹² *Paññā, jīvino jīvatam, tam vā paññā, jīvim jīvatam*. The alternative glosses refer back to the two alternative readings of the line.

¹³ On the 5 values underlying the precepts, see SD 1.5 (2.7+2.8); SD 51.11 (2.2.3.4); SD 54.2e (2.3.2.5).

¹⁴ See **Kakacūpama S** (M 21,11.1), SD 38.1.

¹⁵ On *bhāvita, kāya* and *bhāvita, citta*, see **Piṇḍola Bhāra, dvāja S** (S 35.127,7), SD 27.6a.

¹⁶ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.