

The five questions for ascertaining the goal

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.

2.1.3 The 5 questions for ascertaining the goal (*attha,yutti pucchā*) [§§13-16]

(9) “How does one gain wisdom?” [§13a: Sn 185a = S 850a]

2.1.3.1 Now, having picked up the word “wisdom” (*paññā*) mentioned in the line “By wisdom one is fully purified,” asking a question that combines the mundane and the supramundane, Āḷavaka spoke this 6-line verse through his own acumen (*paṭibhāna*): “How does one gain wisdom?”

Here, all these questions begin with “how” (*katham su*), that is, they are about the means for gaining a benefit.¹ For having known *wisdom* and so forth to be the benefit, he asks about the means to attain it: **How**—by what means, through what cause—**does one gain wisdom?**

(SnA 1:234,32-235,5)

2.1.3.2 Then, the Blessed One, showing how **wisdom** is gained through 4 causes, answered:

“**Keeping faith ...**” (*saddahāno*). [§14a]

This is the meaning: **Keeping faith** in the Dharma of the arhats for the attainment of nirvana one gains both mundane and supramundane wisdom. This is the Dharma through which arhats—buddhas, pratyeka-buddhas and disciples—have attained nirvana. The preliminary portion of this practice consists in bodily good conduct and so forth [2.1.1.8], and in the subsequent components of the 37 limbs of awakening (*bodhi,pakkhiya dhamma*).²

However, this is not attained merely by faith. For since³ “one who has given rise to faith (in the Dharma) visits a teacher; when he visits him, he serves him; when he serves him, he lends an ear; one who lends an ear hears the Dhamma”⁴—therefore, from the moment of visiting until one hears the Dharma, one gains **a desire to learn** [§14c]. What is meant here?

Having placed faith in that Dharma, one visits teachers and preceptors, whom one serves by doing their duties towards them. When they are satisfied with one’s service and wish to say something, because one has not lost one’s desire to learn, one lends an ear, and by listening, one gains wisdom.

Even when there is just a desire to learn, only one who is **heedful** [§14d], by constant presence of mindfulness, and **astute** [§14d], by being able to distinguish between what has been well said and what has been badly said, gains the well said, not the other. Hence, it is said: **One who’s heedful and astute** [§14d].

(SnA 1:235,6-23)

¹ *Attha,yutti,pucchā*, which Subcomy glosses as “Questions connected with the means and method for the attaining of the goal that is wisdom and so forth” (*paññādi,atthasamādhigamassa yuttiiyā kāraṇassa pucchā*, SAT:Be 1:325,8 f).

² The 37 limbs of awakening (*bodhi,pakkhiya dhamma*) comprise the 7 sets, viz: 4 focuses of mindfulness, 4 right efforts, 4 bases of success, 5 spiritual faculties, 5 spiritual powers, 7 awakening factors [2.1.1.2], and the noble eightfold path: **Bodhi.pakkhiya,dhamma** (SD 10.1); SD 56.13a(2) (2.1).

³ Reading Be Se *yasmā pana*; Ce Ee *kiṃ pana*.

⁴ These are the early stages of the 12-stage discipleship: **Caṅkī S** (M 95,20/2:173), SD 21.15; **Kīṭā,giri S** (M 70,23-24/1:480), SD 11.1. For the connection between “lending an ear” (*sotāvadhāna*) and “proximate means” (*upanisā*), see **Kathā,vatthu S** (A 3.67/1:198.27-30), SD 45.11.

2.1.3.3 Thus, it is through **faith** (*saddhā*) that one practises the way leading to wisdom; through **having a desire to learn** (*sussūsa*) that one carefully listens to the means for attaining wisdom; through being **heedful** (*appamatta*) that one does not forget what one has grasped; and through **being astute** (*vicakkhaṇa*) that one grasps it neither too little nor in excess, without distortion, and then expands upon it.

Or through a desire to learn one lends an ear and hears the Dharma that is the cause for gaining wisdom; having heard it through heedfulness, one keeps the Dharma in mind; through astuteness, one *examines* the meaning of the teachings one has kept in mind and then gradually realizes the supreme truth.

Therefore, when asked by Āḷavaka, “**How does one gain wisdom?**” [§13a] the Blessed One spoke this verse, “Keeping faith ... astute” [§14], showing the 4 causes. (SnA 1:235,23-236,5)

(10) “How does one find wealth?” [§13b: Sn 185b = S 850b]

2.1.3.4 Now, answering the other 3 questions, the Blessed One spoke this verse that begins with “Doing what is proper.”

Here, **doing what is proper** (*paṭirūpa, kāri*) [§15a] means: Without overlooking place, time, and other circumstances, one employs the proper means for gaining mundane or supramundane wealth.

Dutiful (*dhuravā*) [§15a]: By means of mental effort one does not neglect one’s duties.

One with initiative (*uṭṭhātā*) [§15b]: One possessing initiative by way of bodily effort, not relaxing one’s exertion, in the way stated thus: one “regards cold and heat no more than one does a blade of grass.”⁵

Finds wealth (*vindate dhanam*) [§15b]: One obtains mundane wealth like the Little Apprentice⁶ who, with one mouse, soon earned 200,000 pieces of money; and one obtains supramundane wealth like the elder Mahallaka Mahātissa,⁷ who made the vow: “I will dwell in 3 postures.” When dullness and drowsiness came upon him, he expelled them by wetting a coil of straw and putting it on his head and by entering water up to his throat. After 12 years, he attained arhathood. (SnA 1:236,6-19)

(11) “How does one win fame?” [§13c: Sn 185c = S 850c]

2.1.3.5 By **truthfulness** [*saccena*]—by truthful speech as “one who speaks truth, who speaks fact,” and also by supreme truth—one wins **fame** (*kitti*) as “a buddha, a pratyeka-buddha, a noble disciple.” (SnA 1:236,19-21)

[Note that the word for “fame,” *kitti*, refers to a supramundane state of attaining the path of awakening. It is just the opposite of the worldly states of “gains, honours and praises” (*lābha, sakkāra, siloka*) that the Buddha often and strongly warns us (especially the renunciants) to avoid. The reason for this is clear and simple: gains, honours and praises arise from and feed **the self-identity view**.

With self-identity view, we identify with anything that gives us a (false) sense of permanence, certainty and plenty (that is, a self, craving and clinging)—in a word, *power*. For this reason, the Buddha warns us of the dangers in any desire for power by way of “**gain, honour, praise**” (*lābha, sakkāra, siloka*), as recorded in such teachings as **the Bhindi Sutta** (S 17.33): “Bhikshus, dreadful are gain, honour and praise, bitter, vile, an obstruction to attaining the unsurpassed security from the yoke.”⁸

⁵ **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31,14.9/3:185,15 f), SD 4.1; Tha 232.

⁶ The Little Apprentice (*cūl’antevāsī*) is the protagonist of **Cullaka Setṭhi J** (J 4/1:120-122).

⁷ Mahalakka Mahā Tissa is mentioned in SnA:Be Se, which agrees with SA:Be Ce Se. A certain Milakkhā Mahā Tissa is mentioned in SnA:Ce Ee; see DPPN sv. The 3 postures are sitting, walking, and standing. He did not lie down to sleep but rested or slept in the sitting posture.

⁸ **Bhindi S** (S 17.33), SD 46.24. This whole para is stock, recurring in all the 43 suttas of **Lābha, sakkāra Saṁyutta** (S 17/2:225-243). See also **(Opamma) Nāga S** (S 20.9/2:268-270), SD 69.12; SD 60.1d (7.6.2.3).

(12) “How does one bind friends?” [§13d: Sn 185d = S 850d]

2.1.3.6 By **giving** (*dadam*) means by giving whatever wholesome they wish for and desire, one binds friends. Or one binds them by giving what is hard to give, or, under the heading of giving, the 4 means of attracting and sustaining a retinue are included.⁹ What is meant is that one makes friends in these ways. (SnA 1:236,21-25)

Giving, generosity or charity is the 1st of the 4 bases of welfare (*saṅgaha, vatthu*), which are: giving (*dāna*), pleasant speech (*peyya, vājja*), beneficial conduct (*attha, variya*) and impartiality (*samān’attatā*). These are the qualities that attract friends and bind good friendship; that is, the qualities of a good and true leader.¹⁰

2.1.3.7 Once when the Buddha asks Hatthaka—fully, **Hatthaka Ālavaka**—how he is able to command the allegiance of such a large following of 500, he answers, “By the 4 bases of welfare: by giving, by pleasant speech, by beneficent conduct, and by impartiality.”¹¹ The Buddha thus declares Hatthaka as the foremost amongst his lay disciples who draw and keep friends with the 4 bases of welfare (A 1.251/1:26). Hatthaka also has the virtue of fewness of wishes (*app’icchā*) and other qualities. In **the (Aṭṭhaka) Hatthaka Sutta 1** (A 8.23), the Buddha praises for having 8 remarkable qualities: faith, moral virtue, moral shame, moral fear, great learning, charity, wisdom, and fewness of wishes (A 8.24).¹²

Hatthaka is one of 7 laymen¹³ who is always accompanied by 500 lay followers (A 4:218) who are all noble disciples of the path (*ariya, sāvaka upāsakā*) (AA 1:392). The Buddha praises his virtues in **the Hatthaka Sutta 1** (A 8.23), and in **the Eka,puttaka Sutta** (S 17.23), the Buddha holds up Hatthaka, along with Citta the householder (*gaha, pati*) as models for male lay followers to emulate.¹⁴ **The Buddha, vaṃsa** states that Citta and Hatthaka are the chief lay patrons (*agg’upaṭṭhākā*) of Gotama Buddha (B 26,19/98).

(13) “When passing from this world to the next, how does one not sorrow?” [§13d: Sn 185d = S 850d]

2.1.3.8 (§16). Thus, having answered 4 questions in a way that is common to householders and monastics and combines mundane and supramundane aspects, answering this 5th question, “When passing from this world to the next, how does one not sorrow?” the Blessed One spoke of these 4 qualities: “**The household life of one who’s a faithful seeker ... has these 4 qualities**” [truth, Dharma, steadfastness, generosity] [§16abc]. This is the meaning:

Faithful, because he possesses the faith that gives rise to all good qualities, as stated as follows:

“**Keeping faith in the Dharma of the arhats**”; seeker of the household life because he is a householder enjoying sensual pleasures who seeks a home or seeks the 5 strands of sensual pleasure.

(1) An aspect of truth was stated here: “**By truthfulness one wins fame**” (*saccena kittim opappoti*) [§15c].

⁹ Giving [generosity] is the 1st of the 4 conditions for welfare (*saṅgaha, vatthu*): giving (*dāna*), pleasant speech (*peyya, vājja*), beneficial conduct (*attha, variya*) and impartiality (*samān’attatā*): (**Tika**) **Ālavaka S** (A 3.34), SD 4.8; **Saṅgaha Bala S** (A 9.5.6), SD 2.21; **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30,1.16), SD 33.9.

¹⁰ (**Tika**) **Ālavaka S** (A 3.34), SD 4.8; **Saṅgaha Bala S** (A 9.5.6), SD 2.21; **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30,1.16), SD 33.9.

¹¹ A 1.251/1:26,7-9. See **Spiritual friendship: A textual study**, SD 34.1 (6.2.1).

¹² **A 8.23/4:216-220; A 8.24/4:220.**

¹³ The 7 laymen are Dhamma, dinna, Visākha, Ugga, Citta, Hatthaka Ālavaka, Cūḷa Anātha, piṇḍika, Mahā Anātha, piṇḍika (AA 3:291).

¹⁴ S 17.23/2:235 f.

(2) In the line “**One gains wisdom from a desire to learn**” (*sussūsā labhate paññam*)¹⁵ [§14c], **Dharma**¹⁶ [§16c] was stated by the expression “**wisdom ... desiring to learn**”¹⁷ [§14c].

(3) In the line, “dutiful, one with initiative,” **steadfastness** (*dhiti*) [§16c] was stated by the expressions “**doing what is proper, dutiful**” [§15a] and “**one with initiative**” [§15b].

(4) An aspect of generosity was stated here: “**by giving, one binds friends**” [§15d]. Thus, one in whom these 4 qualities exist does not sorrow when he dies: does not sorrow when he moves on from the present world to the next world. [SnA 1:236,26-237,9]

R891 Revisioning Buddhism 353

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

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¹⁵ §14c [Sn 186c = S 851c]: Sn:Ce Ee S:Ce Ee *sussūsā labhate paññam*; Sn:Be Se S:Be Se *sussūsam labhate paññam*. The former is found in the sutta in Sinhalese and PTS editions, the latter in Burmese, Siamese and all 4 SnA editions. Comy treats *sussūsā* as a truncated instrumental of *sussūsāya*, but Jayawickrama disagrees: it “is to be taken as a shorter inst sg (Vedic) and not as a contraction of the Pāli *sussūsāya*” (UCR 8,1 1950:41 = PBR 2,3 1977: 146 §57). *Sussūsam* in the 2nd phrase is nominative with *paññam* as accusative: “The desire to learn [listen] begets wisdom.” Or, *sussūsam* functions as the first component with *paññam* in a split compound meaning “the wisdom consisting in a desire to learn.” SnA, in fact, uses the cpds *sussūsā,paññā* and *sussūsana,paññā*, which supports this interpretation. Bodhi sees a gloss in SnA employing an explicit instr, *sussūsāya sakkaccam paññā’dhigamūpāyam suṇāti*, “through a desire to learn, one carefully listens to the method for achieving wisdom.” He thinks that this suggests that SnA takes *sussūsā* as a truncated instr, which is “the definitive reading” (Sn:B 626).

¹⁶ Despite the reading *damo* in SA:Be 1, the gloss in Subcomy supports *dhamma*: Tattha “ime kusalā, ime akusalā ti ādinā te atthe yāthāvato dhāraṇato upadhāraṇato dhammo (SAṬ:Be 1:327). [2.2.1.3]

¹⁷ Here the two terms are respectively *sussūsam labhate paññam* and *sussūsana,paññam*.