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An Old Debate on Self

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by

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An Old Debate on Self



One of the famous discussions mentioned in our books took place between the Buddha and Saccaka Niganthaputta, in the city of Vesāli, the capital of the Licchavi Republic, which formed a part of the Vajjian Confederacy in ancient India. Today Vesāli is represented by the ruins of Raja Bial Ka Garb at Basarh and Bakhira in the Muzaffapur District of North Bihār, about twenty-seven miles northwest of Patna. In the 7th century of this era Yuan Chwang, the great Chinese monk and traveller, describes it as being 5000 *li* (a *li* is a third of an English mile) in circuit, that is to say, as a place of about ten or twelve square miles, and as a very fertile region abounding in mangoes, bananas, and other fruits. The foundations of the old city were 60 or 70 *li* in circuit and the walled part of it 4 or 5 *li* in circuit. At the time of the Chinese monk's visit to the city there were only a few bhikkhus there and of the hundreds of Buddhist monasteries that had been established in earlier times only three or four were not deserted or dilapidated. Yuan Chwang saw that the Dīgambara Jains were flourishing, that

various sects were living promiscuously, and devas were worshipped at Vesālī.

Vesālī was the birthplace of Mahāvira, known also as Nigantha Nataputta, the great Jaina teacher, who spent twelve of the last forty-two rainy seasons of his life at Vesālī. The Buddha visited Vesālī many times. His first visit to the place was in the fifth year of his enlightenment, when he spent the rainy season there. This visit took place at the invitation of the Licchavi princes when Vesālī was afflicted by famine and disease during a severe drought. It was on this occasion that the Blessed One is said to have asked the Venerable Ānanda Thera to recite the Ratana Sutta, the Saying on the Jewels, to produce in the minds of the people of the city confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

Vesālī was full of scenic beauty. It had many lovely shrines. On his last visit to the city, shortly before his passing away, the Blessed One, while at the Cāpāla shrine, told the Venerable Ānanda Thera, “Ānanda, fascinating is Vesālī, fascinating are the Udena shrine, the Gotamaka shrine, the Sattambaka shrine, the Bahuputta shrine,’ and the Sārāndada shrine. Fascinating is the Cāpāla shrine.”

The hall with the gabled house, Kūtāgārasālā, where the Buddha was residing when Saccaka visited him

was in the Great Wood, Mahāvana, which was partly natural, and partly planted, outside the city.

The Licchavis were Khattiyas, men of the noble class, who had many good qualities. they were friendly, hospitable, and not generally given to self-indulgence. Though some of their young men were not free from rough Manners and were easily roused to anger, and greedy, they have also been described as a diligent people, devoted to the service of the community hardy, and very energetic. After asking refuge in the Buddha they took enthusiastically to the practice of many good qualities. Their unity has been praised, though owing to the machinations of their enemies, perhaps, they in the end became divided and were destroyed by the Magadha king.

Saccaka, the son of a Jain woman, whose debate with the Buddha on the self is graphically told in the 35th Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya, was a public disputant who claimed to be wise, and who was respected by the Licchavis of Vesāli for his success in astrological predictions, and as a teacher and a disciplinarian. His father and mother had been taught five hundred theses each: they had both arrived at Vesāli on the same day, and had been found to be equals in the art of controversy. The Licchavis offered them a house and the means of livelihood. They lived as husband and wife and had four daughters and a

son. The daughters were taught a thousand theses and they wandered from place to place disputing with those who challenged them to debate and defeating them. These four used to go about with a Jambu [1] branch. On reaching a town or village they used to plant the branch, which they regarded as a flag, on a heap of sand, and made known to the people that anyone who threw down the branch should debate with them. Once they came to Savatthī and planted their Jambu branch at the entrance to the city. The Venerable Sāriputta Thera having found out the reason for its being there from some children told them, "Pull out that Jambu branch." "Venerable Sir, we cannot do that," said the children. The Thera: "Why are you so frightened? Pull it out. When those women come, tell them, 'It was pulled out at the Venerable Sāriputta Thera's request.'" And he also told the children, "Send them to debate with me." The women went to the monastery, debated with the great master of the Law and were defeated. After that they became bhikkhunīs in the Blessed One's Community of Nuns.

Saccaka, whose family name was Aggivessana, the brother of the four bhikkhunīs, was more intelligent than his sisters. He knew much besides the one thousand theses taught by his parents. He lived at Vesāli, his birthplace, teaching and training the

Licchavi princes in the various *sāstras* of the time. When he wandered in the city he used to wear an iron belt fearing that because of the excessive weight of his knowledge his belly might burst. And he used to say at meetings of the townsfolk, “I do not see any monk or brahmin, any leader of an order or group, or even one who makes out that he is a consummate one, perfectly enlightened, who, were I to dispute with him, should not shake, quake, and tremble, and sweat at the arm-pits. Were I to dispute with a dead post, even that would shake, quake, and tremble. Let alone a human being.”

Two statements in this discussion on the self need explanation. The first statement is this, “The questioned one’s head will fall to pieces.” This is an old Indian way of warning a person of the dreadful consequences of denying, subverting, or not acknowledging, the truth. The second statement is the one about the dramatic figure of Vajirapāṇi, who is the instrument for bringing about the dreadful consequences of denying the truth. He is identified with Sakka and Indra in the Pali commentaries, and is the fierce aspect of the wielder of the thunderbolt. In non-Theravāda Buddhism he underwent many changes. In Werner’s “A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology,” p. 451, Vajirapāṇi is described thus, “The thunderbolt-handed. A personification of force. In

Northern Buddhist countries a powerful subduer of evil spirits. Also a ferocious emanation of Vajrahara. A product of Mahayana and Tantric schools.” Vajirapāṇi stands for the force that compels a man to do what is right, when he is unwilling to do it. His introduction into the Saccaka, debate emphasises the intellectual plight in which Saccaka was.

Early one morning when the Buddha was staying at Vesālī the Venerable Thera Assaji, having dressed himself, and taken his bowl and robe, entered Vesālī for alms. Saccaka, who was then taking a walk in the town, saw the Venerable Assaji Thera coming in the distance, went up to him, exchanged greetings with him and standing at one side said this: “How, Venerable Assaji Thera, does the monk Gotama train his disciples? What is the kind of instruction generally given to the disciples of the monk Gotama?”

Assaji Thera: “Aggivessana, the Blessed One trains his disciples, instructing them generally thus: ÑForm is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, formations are impermanent and consciousness is impermanent. Form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, formations are not-self, and consciousness is not-self. All formations are impermanent, all states are not-self.”

Saccaka: “Now we know that the monk Gotama is

an utterer of what must not be heard. It would be good, were we to meet the monk Gotama some time, talk with him, and free him of his evil, wrong notion."

Just then five hundred Licchavis were put together on some business at the town hall, and Saccaka went there and said to them: "Come, good Licchavis, come. Today I am going to talk, with the monk Gotama. In talking with me, he stands by what Assaji, a well-known disciple of his, says, then as a sturdy man might tug, shove, and, pull, about, a fleecy ram by its fleece, or as a sturdy workman at a brewer's might put into a deep pool of water a malt-drying and holding it by its edge, tug, shove, and pull it about, I will, disputing with the monk Gotama, tug him, shove him, and pull him about; or as a sturdy tippler might jerk, and blow away, the dregs from toddy-straining bag, holding it by its edge, I will, disputing with the monk Gotama, him, jerk him, and blow him away; or as a royal sixty-year-old elephant might descend into a deep pond, and amuse himself what is called the sport of 'washing hemp,' I will, indeed, amuse myself 'hemp-washing' the monk Gotama. Come, good Licchavis, come. Today, I am going to talk with the monk Gotama."

Then some Licchavis said, "How will the monk Gotama be able to dispute Saccaka Niganthaputta's thesis? Saccaka Niganthaputta may well dispute the

monk Gotama's thesis."

And other Licchavis said, "How will Saccaka Niganthaputta be able to dispute the monk Gotama's thesis? The monk Gotama may well dispute Saccaka Niganthaputta's thesis."

And Saccaka, attended by the five hundred Licchavis, went to that part of the Great Wood where the hall with the gabled house was. At that time many bhikkhus were pacing up and down in the open, and Saccaka, going up to one of them, said, "Where, Venerable one, is the Venerable one, is the Venerable Gotama at present? We wish to see him," and the Bhikkhu said, "The Blessed One, Aggivessana, is sitting under a tree in the Great Wood."

Then Saccaka, with his large following of five hundred Licchavis, entered the Great Wood, and coming to where the Blessed One was, exchanged greetings with him, and sat at one side. The Licchavis too sat at one side. Some of them did so after saluting the Blessed One; some after exchanging greetings with him; some, after showing respect towards him with raised joined palms ; some, after announcing their family names; others, in silence.

And Saccaka said, "Were the Venerable Gotama to give me leave, I would ask a question regarding a certain point."

The Buddha: "Ask as you please, Aggivessana."

Saccaka: "How does the Venerable Gotama train his disciples? What is the kind of instruction generally given to the disciples of the Venerable Gotama?"

The Buddha: "Aggivessana, I train my disciples, instructing them generally thus: 'Bhikkhus, form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, formations are impermanent, and consciousness is impermanent. Form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, formations are not-self, and consciousness is not-self. All formations are impermanent; all states are not-self.'"

Saccaka: "A simile strikes me, Venerable Gotama."

The Buddha: "Come out with it, Aggivessana."

Saccaka: "Venerable Gotama, as all seeds and plants which grow, develop, and thrive, depend on the earth, and have the earth for their base, and as the doing of manual work depends on and is based on the earth, so the human being produces merit and demerit, by taking form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness as self and having made form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness the base."

The Buddha: "Aggivessana, do you say, 'Form is my self; feeling is my self; perception is my self; formations are my self; consciousness is myself?'"

Saccaka: “Precisely, Venerable Gotama. I do say, ‘Form is my self; feeling is my self; perception is my self; formations are my self; consciousness is my self.’ And that is what this large company too says.”

The Buddha: “Aggivessana, what can this large company do for you? Go on, Aggivessana. Unravel just your own thesis.”

Saccaka: “I do say, Venerable Gotama, that form is my self, feeling is my self, perception is my self, formations are my self, and consciousness is my self.”

The Buddha: “Then, Aggivessana, I shall question you again. Say what pleases you in reply. Would the power of an anointed, noble king, of a king like Pasenadi of Kosala, or like Ajātasattu of Magadha, the son of the Videha princess, prevail in his realm in executing those deserving execution, fining those who deserve to be fined, and banishing those deserving banishment?”

Saccaka: “It would, Venerable Gotama. Even the power of such communities and groups as the Vajjis and the Mallas prevails in the realms of those communities and groups in executing those deserving execution, fining those who deserve to be fined, and banishing those deserving banishment. What should one say of the power of an anointed noble king, of a king like Pasenadi of Kosala or like Ajātasattu of

Magadha, the son of the Videha princess? It would prevail, Venerable Gotama, and it is fit to prevail.”

The Buddha: “Aggivessana, how about this? You said, ‘Form is my self.’ Does your power prevail in form, when you say, ‘Let my form be so; let it not be so?’”

Then Saccaka was silent.

The Blessed One repeated the question and again Saccaka was silent. Then the Blessed one said, “Speak out, Aggivessana. For you this is not the time to be silent. If one who is questioned about a fact by the Perfect One for the third time does not make answer, the questioned one’s head will fall to pieces then and there. Thus it is said.”

At that time the spirit Vajirapāṇi stood in the air above the head of Saccaka holding his fiery, glowing, blazing, iron weapon of might, thinking, “If to the factual question put by the Blessed One for the third time, he does not make answer, I will make this Saccaka Niganthaputta’s head fall to pieces.” And the spirit Vajirapāṇi was visible both to the Blessed One and to Saccaka.

Then Saccaka Niganthaputta, terror-struck, horrified, shocked, seeking the protection, shelter, refuge, of the Blessed One, said, “Question me, Venerable Gotama, I shall answer.”

The Buddha: "How about this Aggivessana? You said form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness are the self. Does your power prevail in regard to these when you say 'Let my form, my feeling, my perception, my formations, or my consciousness be thus?'"

Saccaka: "It does not, Venerable Gotama."

The Buddha: "Ponder, Aggivessana, ponder and make answer. You are contradicting yourself. How about this, Aggivessana? Form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness, are they permanent or impermanent?"

Saccaka: "Impermanent, Venerable Gotama."

The Buddha: "Is what is impermanent pleasant or painful?"

Saccaka: "Painful, Venerable Gotama."

The Buddha: "Is it sound to regard what is impermanent, painful, and changeable as 'mine,' 'I' or 'my self?'"

Saccaka: "It is not, Venerable Gotama."

The Buddha: "How about this, Aggivessana? Could one who has clung to what is painful, gone over to it, and attached himself to it, see what is painful as 'mine,' 'I,' or my self,' live understanding things by

himself, and extinguish what is painful?”

Saccaka: “Could that indeed happen, Venerable Gotama? Indeed that could not happen, Venerable Gotama.”

The Buddha: “How about this, Aggivessana? In that case, could you have clung to, gone over to, attached yourself to, what is painful, see it as ‘mine,’ ‘I,’ or ‘myself?’”

Saccaka: “How could that not be, Venerable Gotama? It should be indeed thus, Venerable Gotama.”

The Buddha: “Aggivessana, were a man roaming in need of pith, looking for pith, seeking pith, on entering a forest with a sharp axe to see a great, straight, young, unflowered banana tree, lay axe to its root, and having laid it low, cut off the crown, and strip off the rind, he would not in stripping off the rind get even to sapwood. How should he get pith? In the same way, Aggivessana, when by me you were questioned on your assertion, made to establish yourself on your assertion, made to repeat your assertion, you showed yourself to be empty, inane, and defeated. Aggivessana, you declared at meetings of the townsfolk at Vesāli: “I do not see any monk or brahmin, any leader of an order or group, or even one who makes out that he is a consummate one who is

perfectly enlightened, who, were I to dispute with him, should not shake, quake, and tremble, and sweat at the armpits. Were I to dispute with a dead stump, even that would shake, quake, and tremble, let alone a human being.' But, Aggivessana, some drops of your sweat passing through your upper cloth are on the floor. I, Aggivessana, have no sweat on my body."

Saying that the Blessed One in that assembly bared the upper part of his golden body. On that Saccaka Niganthaputta sat silent, depressed, bowed down, dejected, perplexed, and confused.

Then the Licchavi prince Dummukha, seeing Saccaka Niganthaputta sitting silent, depressed, bowed down, dejected, perplexed and confused, spoke to the Blessed One thus, "Blessed One, a simile strikes me." And the Buddha said, "Tell it, Dummukha." Then the Licchavi prince said this: "Venerable Sir, it is just as if there were a crab in a pond near a village or market-town, and many boys and girls, having left that market town, were to approach that pond, get into it, lift the crab from the water, put it on dry land, and break and smash completely all the crab's claws, as it angrily puts forth claw after claw in succession, so that the crab, with all its claws smashed and broken would not be able to go into that pond as before, and should become the food of crows and cranes. Just in the same way has the

Blessed One broken all wrong views of Saccaka Niganthaputta and made it impossible for him to argue any more with the Blessed One.”

Saccaka stopped Dummukha from speaking further and, knowing that the Licchavi princes were wanting to ridicule him, turned the conversation to another direction and began asking from the Blessed One how he trained his disciples to carry out his teaching, to get beyond all doubt, and to abide in the teaching of the Master, without external support.

The Master explained to Saccaka the way of training in the principles of his teaching, which lead to the understanding that in none of the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, formations, or consciousness, is there naught of which it may be said, “this is mine, this am I, this is my self.” And how, freed from all ill through that understanding the Blessed One’s disciple reveres, honours, salutes, and esteems, only the Perfect One, saying:

“The Blessed One who has been enlightened teaches the Dhamma for producing enlightenment in others.

“The Blessed One who has been tamed teaches the Dhamma for producing the tamed state in others.

“The Blessed One who has become serene teaches the Dhamma for producing serenity in others

“The Blessed One who has crossed the ocean of suffering and reached safety teaches the Dhamma for making others cross that ocean and reach safety.

“And the Blessed One who has become completely extinct teaches the Dhamma, for producing complete extinction in others.”

Then Saccaka said, “Venerable Gotama, in debating with you I have been daring, bold. A man trying to attack an elephant in rut may escape harm, or he may escape harm from a great devouring fire in which he is caught, or he may escape from the jaws of a venomous snake without harm, but there is no escape possible for a man who gets caught in a controversy with the Venerable Gotama.”

In saying this Saccaka did not, according to the commentary to the Cūlasaccaka Sutta, praise the Buddha but his own self. Such praise as Saccaka’s is comparable to a king’s reference to the heroism, cleverness, and great power of enemies he has slain in battle, made in order to extol his own prowess and not the qualities of his opponents. And Saccaka’s comparisons were to show that he was learned, wise, and clever enough, to argue with one who was like an elephant in rut, a mighty fire, and a venomous snake.

The Buddha set forth his doctrine on another occasion too to this disputant of Vesālī, but he did not

become a follower of his. The Buddha's object in teaching Saccaka was to help him to obtain enlightenment in a future life. And it is said that after the Buddha's passing away Saccaka, who had been born in a past life as Senaka, the pundit mentioned in the Mahā Ummagga Jātaka, was reborn in a deva world, and later in Ceylon. He entered the Sangha in this country, and became an Arahat.

Notes

1. A tree that bears purple berries; in Sinhalese *madan*. [\[Back\]](#)

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