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**Sakka's Quest  
Buddha's Charter  
of Free Inquiry**

*Sister Vajira*



# **Sakka's Quest** **Sakka-pañhā Sutta**

## **Introduction, Translation and Comments**

by

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# Introduction



The Buddhist text (Sutta or Discourse) discussed here belongs to a group of Buddhist scriptures called Dīgha Nikāya, the Collection of Long Discourses, and is the Twenty-first Discourse in it. It tells the story of a deity descending from his heavenly realm to our earth for meeting and questioning the Buddha, the Enlightened One. So, at first glance, it may appear that it is quite a miraculous story, and some even may regard it as a 'fairy tale'; but it has a very realistic and quite topical background because that deity's visit to the Buddha had a purpose that concerns all humans in the very same way as it concerned that deity, Sakka, two thousand and five hundred years ago.

Before presenting to the reader the translation of the text, it seems desirable to give first some general information about it. The questions and answers themselves which form the core of the text, will be explained at the places where they occur. It is, however, not the purpose of what was originally a lecture to deal with them in full, which would require a separate treatment. Here will chiefly be stressed those characteristic qualities of Sakka which mark him an individual ripe for the first stage of sainthood, Stream-entry (*sotāpatti*). Such an individual, a Sotāpanna, breaks the lowest and most vital bonds that chain us to the sorrow-laden cycle of repeated births and deaths—to which also a

deity is subject—and enters the stream towards final deliverance.

The spot in India where our text is located and where the visit of the deity, Sakka, took place became famous throughout the Buddhist world and is remembered up to the present day as the Indasālaguhā, the Grotto of the Indasāla. Indasāla is the name of a tree which must have stood near that grotto. The village near the Grotto of the Indasāla was at that time called Ambasaṇḍa, and was inhabited by Brahmins. Today its name is Giriyeḷ, situated about six miles east of modern Rājgīr or Rājagaha; it is a lovely spot, surrounded by hills, with ancient ruins.

In later times, the scene described in our text—the heavenly visitors appearing before the Buddha—has been represented quite frequently in the sculptural art of India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and some of these works of considerable artistic merit are still preserved (see cover picture).

We shall now introduce briefly the heavenly personages appearing in our text. Sakka is chief of Tāvatiṃsā, the heaven of the Thirty-three gods, which still belongs to the world of sensual desire (*kāma-loka*), and ranges next but one to our own terrestrial sphere. Sakka and his gods of the Thirty-three are thus comparatively low deities.

As the Bhagavā, the Exalted One, himself says in our Sutta, it was indeed surprising that Sakka, king of gods, found the time and, what is more, actually thought of seeing the

Buddha. According to the texts, the deities of the Thirty-three have a lifetime of thirty-six millions of years. What is with them a day and a night are here on earth a hundred years. That means, those gods do not even spend a day-night while a man spends a full life. Since the texts tell us of several visits paid by Sakka to the Exalted One, we have to understand that he has visited the Buddha several times during only a single of his heavenly days, for the Master lived on earth as a Buddha, an Enlightened One, for less than half a century—which to Sakka is less than a day. And this frequency of Sakka's visits to the Bhagavā is indeed striking if we compare his attitude with our own attitude towards spiritual things—though our pleasures and activities are surely much less engaging than the pleasures and activities of such a powerful god.

Between Sakka's realm and ours, range the Cātumahārājika Devā, the Four Great Kings or Guardians of the Four Quarters. They are closely connected with Sakka and the Thirty-three gods. One of these Four Great Kings is Vessavana or Kuvera, lord over the Northern direction and the treasures of the Himalayan regions. He is mild and benevolent, and his is the Ideal Land of perfect beauty, harmony and abundance—the Utopia dreamt of by many a poet. One fairy of his suite occurs in the Sutta. Her name is Bhuñjati.

The Gandhabbas, subjects of the Four Great Kings, are the heavenly musicians attending on Sakka and the Thirty-three gods. The King of the Gandhabbas is Timbaru, famed for his

excellence in music, and his lovely daughter is Baddhā Sūriya-vaccasā, engaged to the son of Sakka's charioteer, Mātali.

Of the Gandhabbas one is repeatedly mentioned in the Suttas. It is Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, possessor of the miraculous *panduvīnā* which is said to have belonged once to Māra, the Evil One. This famous *panduvīnā*, some say, is a yellow lute of vilva-wood; others say it is a lyre of the same wood. In our Sutta, where the young Gandhabba, Pañcasikha, also plays his role, it is described as a lyre of red vilva-wood.

The deities mentioned so far are all voluntary subjects of Sakka and the Thirty-three, and are higher beings than men. Sakka, however, has also some powerful and ferocious foes—the Asuras, ranging lower than men. They are said to be a kind of giants, living in the ocean. Further it is said of them that they once were Sakka's brothers; for reasons unknown they were banished by Sakka into the ocean with the help of Sakka's thunderbolt. The hostility between Tāvatiṃsa Devas and Asuras becomes acute from time to time, and battles take place between them.

What now about the spiritual standard of all these beings? Early Buddhist tradition reveals that in general the Buddha and his great disciples show little regard for these pleasure-loving deities of inferior intellect and superficial understanding of the Dhamma. The Buddha and his early disciples call them the '*puthukāya*,' the common folk, as we

shall see. Only later, when actual knowledge of these beings disappeared, were intellectual abilities, superior to those of men, falsely attributed to them. A good proof of their inadequacy is given in our Sutta. The young Gandhabba, Pañcasikha, with his lyre of red vilva-wood, being requested by Sakka first to 'win over' the Bhagavā before he himself would come into presence of the Buddha, foolishly produces a song which is nothing more than a love-poem—though Pañcasikha tries much to give some spiritual airs to it. It may well be a beautiful song, but a man of tact and some understanding would hardly expect a personality like the Buddha even to listen to it much less to be pleased with it. But Sakka as well as Pañcasikha both firmly believed this. That is why the Bhagavā makes a somewhat ironical remark about it, as we shall see later. But polite as the Bhagavā is, he carries on a conversation with them and never fails to address Sakka as 'king of gods,' sometimes addressing him '*āyasmā*,' 'Venerable One.' Two further names of Sakka occur—Kosiya, being the name of his father, and Vasavā.

It is true that a great many of these deities are fond of the Bhagavā, not, however, for the Bhagavā's profound wisdom and pure virtue which they are hardly able to appreciate, but rather because they know that the appearance of a Buddha increases their power and weakens their opponents, the Asuras and other lower beings. They know that a Buddha makes many follow the good path and discourages them from following the evil path; and so he uplifts many to heaven and prevents many from downfall.

Sakka, however, is an exception altogether. He, as already indicated by the frequency of his visits to the Bhagavā, is sincerely devoted to the Buddha as the teacher of deliverance and aspires after the goal proclaimed by him.

One event that took place in his own realm evidently impressed him deeply and became the immediate cause of his present visit to the Bhagavā. He had seen two gods lower than himself, who formerly had been monks (bhikkhus) of the Bhagavā, suddenly, and before his very sight, transcend even him and pass into the Brahma-world, which is far higher than the realm of the Thirty-three. This happened after another god, who likewise was a former disciple of the Bhagavā, reminded them of the Buddha-sāsana, the Dispensation of the Buddha, and of their former aspirations which, in the enjoyment of heavenly pleasures, they had almost forgotten.

Sakka evidently had lived up to the principles of the Dhamma and had succeeded in purifying his mind from grosser defilements. His questions are put with great thoughtfulness and skill, and the profound answers were received with the joy that arises from understanding.

It is by the understanding of the Bhagavā's replies that Sakka, king of the Thirty-three gods, attains *sotāpatti*, the first stage of Sainthood, and joyfully proclaims his achievement. He sees now his possible future lives (which, for a Sotāpanna, cannot exceed seven in number) reduced to two at the most: one as a man, where he possibly will

achieve sainthood, or, failing that, he will become an Anāgāmi, Once-returner, spending his last life among the deities of the Pure Abodes (*suddhāvāsā*).

Sakka's attainment of *sotāpatti* during this discourse gives deep significance to this Sutta, and it forms a striking contrast to the elaborate framework of our text that depicts, in a sometimes humorous way, a world of ease and superficiality.

# Sakka's Quest

## I

1. Thus I heard. Once the Bhagavā [1] dwelt in Magadha, to the east of Rājagaha, in the Indasāla Grotto, on the Vediya-mountain, to the north of the Brahmin-village, Ambasaṇḍa. At that time there arose in Sakka, the king of gods, a desire to see the Bhagava and he thought to himself, "Where may the Bhagava at present abide, the Arahant, Sammā Sambuddha, the Holy One, fully enlightened?" And he beheld the Bhagavā staying in Magadha, to the east of Rājagaha, in the Indasāla Grotto, on the Vediya-mountain, to the north of the Brahmin-village, Ambasaṇḍa.

2. And Sakka, the king of gods, addressed the gods of the Thirty-three and Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, "Sirs, the Bhagavā dwells in Magadha, to the east of Rājagaha. What, sirs, if we were to go and see the Bhagavā, the Arahant, Sammā Sambuddha?"

"So be it! And good luck unto you!" said the gods of the Thirty-three and Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, in assent to Sakka, the king of gods; and Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, took his lyre of red vilva-wood and followed in attendance on Sakka, the king of gods.

And Sakka, the king of gods, surrounded by the gods of the Thirty-three and attended by Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, had, as quickly as a strong man might stretch out the bent arm or draw in the arm stretched out, vanished from the heaven of the Thirty-three and appeared in Magadha, to the east of Rājagaha, on the Vediya-mountain, to the north of the Brahmin-village, Ambasanda.

3. And, verily, at that time the Vediya-mountain together with the Brahmin-village, Ambasanda, was bathed in a splendid radiance, as if through the heavenly power of the gods. And the people round about in the village said, “As if set on fire, the Vediya-mountain shines today! As if burning and blazing! What may have happened today to the Vediya-mountain that it is bathed in a splendid radiance, together with the Brahmin-village, Ambasaṇḍa,—as if through the heavenly power of the gods?” And they were amazed, with hair standing on end.

4. Now Sakka, the king of gods, addressed Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, “Hard of access, my dear Pañcasikha, are Tathāgatas (Perfect Ones) to folks like us; mostly are they in retreat, absorbed in meditation, delighted therein. What, my dear Pañcasikha, if you first were to gain over the Bhagavā? Gained over by you, my dear, we afterwards shall draw near to see the Bhagavā, the Arahant, Sammā Sambuddha.”

“So be it! And good luck unto you,” said Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, in assent to Sakka, the king of gods, and

took his lyre of red vilva-wood and approached the Indasāla Grotto.

5. Having drawn near, he thought to himself, “From here it will be neither too far nor too near for the Bhagavā to hear the song,” and he stood aside. Standing aside, Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, let his lyre of red vilva-wood be heard and a song alluding to the Buddha, the Dhamma, to Arahants, and to love.

6. The song being over, the Bhagavā addressed Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, “The sound of your strings, Pañcasikha, harmonizes with that of your song, and the sound of your song with that of your strings; but, verily, Pañcasikha, your strings neither go beyond your song, nor does your song go beyond your strings. But when, Pañcasikha, did you compose these stanzas alluding to the Buddha, the Dhamma, Arahants and to love?”

“There was a time, Lord, when the Bhagavā dwelt at Uruvelā, on the bank of the Nerañjanā river, at the foot of the goatherds’ banyan-tree, soon after his supreme enlightenment. At that very time, Lord, was I enamoured of Baddhā Sūriya-vaccasā, the daughter of Timbaru, King of the Gandhabbas. This girl, however, Lord, was in love with another, with Sikkhaddhī, the son of the charioteer Mātali, for whom she longed. Since I could not win that girl by any means whatsoever, I took my lyre of red vilva-wood, approached the abode of Timbaru, king of the Gandhabbas, and, having drawn near, let my lyre of red vilva-wood be

heard and the song alluding to the Buddha, the Dhamma, Arahants and to love.

7. “The song being over, Baddhā Sūriya-vaccasā addressed me: ‘I did not see yet, Sir, that Bhagavā face to face. However, I have heard of the Bhagavā when I went to dance at the pleasure hall of the Thirty-three gods. Since you, Sir, spoke in praise of that Bhagavā, let there be a meeting between us today.’ And so, Lord, there was a meeting between that girl and me; but don’t let me speak on this any further.”

8. Now, Sakka, the king of gods, thought to himself: “Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, is in pleasant conversation with the Bhagavā and the Bhagavā with him.”

And he addressed Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba: “My dear Pañcasikha, you now pay my respects to the Bhagavā and say, ‘Sakka, Lord, the king of gods, with his ministers and suite pays homage at the feet of the Bhagavā.’”

“So be it! And good luck unto you!” said Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, in assent to Sakka, the king of gods, and did as requested.

“Happiness be unto Sakka, the king of gods, and his ministers and suite! For desirous of happiness are gods and men, Asuras, Nāgas, Gandhabbas and other common folks.” This is the way Tathāgatas greet these hosts of great power.

So greeted, Sakka, the king of gods, entered the Bhagavā’s Grotto of the Indasāla, saluted the Bhagavā and stood aside,

and so did the gods of the Thirty-three and Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba.

9. But verily, at that time those uneven spots of the Indasāla Grotto had become even, the narrow spaces widened, the darkness vanished, and light had arisen, as if through the heavenly power of the gods.

Thereupon the Bhagavā addressed Sakka, the king of gods, “Wonderful is this, quite wonderful, that the Venerable Kosiya, with so much work to do, despite his many obligations, yet has come here!”

“For a long time, Lord, was I desirous of seeing the Bhagavā; but engaged in many activities on behalf of the Thirty-three gods, I was not able to come. However, Lord, on one occasion when the Bhagavā was dwelling in Sāvattihī, in the Bower of the Salala creeper, I went to see the Bhagavā.

10. “But at that very time, Lord, the Bhagavā was seated in a state of absorption, and Bhuñjatī of Vessavana’s suite, with clasped hands saluting the Bhagavā stood near. Then I, addressing Bhuñjatī, said: ‘Sister, you pay my respects to the Bhagavā and say, ‘Sakka, Lord, the king of gods, with his ministers and suite pays homage at the feet of the Bhagavā.’ To my request Bhuñjatī replied, ‘Sir, it is not the proper time now to see the Bhagavā; the Bhagavā is in seclusion.’ ‘Well, sister, you then may salute the Bhagavā in my name after the Bhagavā has arisen from that absorption.’ Did, Lord, that sister salute the Bhagavā, and does the

Bhagavā remember her words?”

“That sister, king of gods, did salute me, and I do remember her words. I had arisen from that absorption through the sound of the Venerable’s chariot wheels.”

11. “From those gods, Lord, who were born before us in the realm of the Thirty-three, I have heard that whenever Tathāgatas arise in the world, Arahants, Sammā Sambuddhas, the heavenly hosts grow in number and the Asura hosts decrease. And that is true, Lord, I myself have realized it, for since the Tathāgata, the Arahant, Sammā Sambuddha, has appeared in the world, the heavenly hosts grew in number and *Asura* hosts decreased.

“Take this instance, Lord. There was, Lord, a daughter of the Sākyan clan in Kapilavatthu. Her name was Gopikā. She was devoted to the Buddha, the Dhamma and Saṅgha and was of accomplished virtue. Disgusted with the womanly nature, she cultivated the nature of a man, and at the breaking up of the body, after death, she rose to a happy state, to the heavenly world, to community with the gods of the Thirty-three, and obtained ‘sonship’ by us. And there they know him as ‘Gopaka, son of the gods; Gopaka, son of the gods.’

“But, Lord, three bhikkhus who had led the holy life under the Bhagavā were born in the lower rank of Gandhabbas. They enjoy the five sense pleasures surrounding them, and they come to wait upon and minister to us. This being so, Gopaka, the son of gods, admonished them: ‘Where were

your ears I wonder, Sirs, when you listened to the doctrine of the Bhagavā? I, having been only a female lay disciple, am now a god, son of Sakka, the king of gods. You, however, Sirs, who led the holy life under the Bhagavā have risen but to the lower rank of Gandhabbas. A sad sight indeed is this to us that we should see the followers of the higher life appearing in the lower rank of Gandhabbas!’

“Of those, Lord, admonished by Gopaka, the son of the gods, two gods regained mindfulness at once, and passed into the world of *Brahma Purohita*, and only one god remained in sensual pleasures.”

12. (Gopaka’s [2] Song)

“Gopikā, the Seer’s devotee [3] was I.  
Faithful to the Buddha and the Law,  
To the Community I happily ministered,  
Untiringly conforming to the Buddha’s Norm.

To Tāvatiṃsa’s realm I rose, am Sakka’s son,  
Of power great and splendour great,  
As ‘Gopaka’ they know me here,  
But, among Gandhabba-folks,  
The monks of Gotama I saw  
To whom we formerly, at home,  
Seated at the bhikkhus’ feet,  
Had offered food and drink.

Why did you, sirs, not grasp  
The Buddha’s Law, well-propounded,  
Evident, and recognized

By them who have eyes to see?

From you it was I too have learnt  
This teaching fair: Am Sakka's son,  
Of power great and splendour great,  
To Tāvatiṃsa's realm I rose.

But you, though choosing what is best,  
The unsurpassed Life of Purity,  
Have now appeared in lower rank:  
Inappropriate your rebirth seems!

A sad sight indeed is this to us—  
The followers of the Higher Life  
Appearing but in lower rank:  
As Gandhabba-folks, O sirs,  
You come to wait upon us gods!

I stayed at home, yet behold the difference:  
A woman then, today I am a man, a god,  
And heavenly delights are mine!"

Gopaka, stalwart of the Norm,  
Thus incited awe in them;  
Falling in with him, they spoke:  
"Well then,  
An effort let us make, let's strive on!  
Lest the servants we would be of others here!"

And two of them put forth their energy,  
The Norm of Gotama they called to mind;  
They cleansed their thoughts without delay,

And realized the wretchedness of carnal joys.

As an elephant might break his chains,  
So they cast off the bounds of fleshly lusts,  
The yokes of Māra, hard to overcome,  
And left behind the realm of Thirty-three.

Putting an end to passion,  
The stainless heroes transcended all:  
The gods who were assembled  
In Tāvatiṃsa's pleasure hall,  
Together with their chief and queens,  
Thrilled with this sight, Vāsavā,  
Lord over gods, amid celestial hosts,  
Spoke this:

“Alas! These, born in lower rank,  
They leave behind the Thirty-three!”

Beholding him, the deeply agitated,  
Gopaka spoke this to Vāsavā:  
“The Buddha verily is god among men,  
Conqueror over sense-desire,  
The Wise of Sākyans' clan!

These sons of His, on passing thence,  
Their insight lost, but got it back through me.  
Of those who stayed with us,  
One still remains among Gandhabba-folks.

But two trace out the path to Perfect Knowledge,  
Their minds set firm, and they now pity us!

For in whatever disciple  
The Law should manifest itself:  
Doubts do not beset his course.

We hail the Buddha who has crossed the flood  
And cut off doubts, the Victor, Chief of Men.  
Here from You they learnt the Norm—  
A blessing verily it was to them:  
Two to *Brahma-Purohita's* excellence attained!  
We too have come, O Lord,  
This Law, it is our quest!  
See us appearing here!  
Would, O Lord, that we  
A question from the Bhagavā may ask!"

13. Thereupon the Bhagavā thought to himself, "Long indeed has this Sakka been pure in mind; whatever question he will ask me it will be to good purpose, not vain; and the answer I shall give, he will quickly understand." And so the Bhagavā addressed Sakka, the king of gods, by this stanza:

"Free art thou O Vāsavā,  
To ask at will thy questions;  
And all thy problems I shall solve for you."

## II

1. Received into audience, Sakka, the king of gods, put the first question to the Bhagavā: “What bond, O Lord, holds gods and men, Asuras, Nāgas, Gandhabbas and other common folks who aspire for living in amity, in harmlessness, in clemency, in benevolence, without hostility, but yet who live in hostility, in violence, in cruelty, in malevolence, not in friendliness?” This was the question Sakka, the king of gods, put to the Bhagavā. The Bhagavā made answer:

“The bond, O king of gods, is envy and selfishness; bound by the bond of envy and selfishness, gods and men, Asuras, Nāgas, Gandhabbas and other common folks live in hostility, in violence, in cruelty, in malevolence; not in friendliness—even though they aspire for living in amity, in harmlessness, in benevolence, without hostility.” In this manner the Bhagavā answered the question put by Sakka, the king of gods. Edified, Sakka, the king of gods, approved of the Bhagavā’s saying and took delight in it, “Thus it is, O Blessed One. Conquered are my doubts, gone my uncertainty, having heard the Bhagavā’s answer to this question.”

**Comment.** Sakka obviously is concerned about the hostility as it exists between a great many beings of the sensual sphere (*kāma-loka*); between gods, men, Asuras, Nāgas, Gandhabbas and other common folk. But also something else did he observe. Animosity of any kind, be it open warfare or a single malicious thought, is unpleasant to anyone afflicted with it, and

so beings resolve not to surrender to it; but for the most part they fail utterly even as a habitual drunkard cannot by a mere resolution possibly abstain from intoxicants. And here, in the disparity between a mental resolution and the inability to follow it up, Sakka saw the problem; and the Buddha reveals to him that this is due not to something outward, but to conditions inherent in beings themselves—to envy and selfishness.

Of mental defilements, envy and selfishness (*issā-macchhariya*) are the most vital, existing in almost all beings of the sensual sphere in some degree or other. These defilements, however hidden they may be, by their very nature trespass on the domain of others, and so introduce ill-feeling which, at any occasion, may result in open hostility.

Sakka at once comprehends the importance of the Bhagavā's answer. He is jubilant to find the remedy to what so sorely aggrieved him, namely, to purify one's mind from envy and selfishness. Hero too his lofty spirit is revealed. It must be remembered that Sakka, as a deity, extremely seldom, perhaps once in millions of years, personally experiences the harmful result of envy and selfishness, namely animosity. His life for the most part is full of harmony because of the comparative weakness of these defilements within him. But Sakka, having once fully understood that envy and selfishness are evil, is no longer interested

in more or less of them; he wants to see nothing but the final destruction of envy and selfishness.

So deeply concerned is he with the matter that he now begins a radical inquiry into the conditions which bring on envy and selfishness and the conditions necessary for the eradication of these defilements. He does this with the admirable skill that was already evident from his first question.

2. And Sakka, the king of gods, approving of the Bhagavā's saying and delighting in it, put a further question: "But what, O Lord, brings on envy and selfishness? What is their origin? From what do they spring? What gives rise to them? What being present, envy and selfishness appear? What not being present, envy and selfishness do not appear?"

"What brings on envy and selfishness, O king of gods, are likes and dislikes. Likes and dislikes are their origin. From likes and dislikes do they spring. Likes and dislikes give rise to them. Likes and dislikes being present, envy and selfishness appear. Likes and dislikes not being present, envy and selfishness do not appear."

"But what, O Lord, brings on likes and dislikes? What is their origin? From what do they spring? What gives rise to them? What being present, likes and dislikes appear? What not being present, likes and dislikes do not appear?"

"What brings on likes and dislikes, O king of gods, is desire. Desire is their origin. From desire do they spring. Desire

gives rise to them. Desire being present, likes and dislikes appear. Desire not being present, likes and dislikes do not appear.”

“But what, O Lord, brings on desire? What is its origin? From what does it spring? What gives rise to it? What being present, desire appears? What not being present, desire does not appear?”

“What brings on desire, O king of gods, is (wrong) reflection. [4] Reflection is its origin. From reflection does it spring. Reflection gives rise to it. Reflection being present, desire appears. Reflection not being present, desire does not appear.”

“But what, O Lord, makes for (wrong) reflection? What is its origin? From what does it spring? What gives rise to it? What being present, reflection appears? What not being present, reflection does not appear?”

“What makes for (wrong) reflection, O king of gods, is multiplicity of perception. Multiplicity of perception is its origin. From multiplicity of perception does it spring. Multiplicity of perception gives rise to it. Multiplicity of perception being present, reflection appears. Multiplicity of perception not being present, reflection does not appear.”

**Comment.** In this set of questions and answers the core of the Buddha’s teaching is represented, the idea of conditionality (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), in a new formula. The condition of envy and selfishness (*issā-macchhariya*), likes and dislikes (*piyappiyā*), the

condition of likes and dislikes is desire (*chanda*); the condition of desire is (wrong) reflection (*vitakka*); and the condition of reflection is multiplicity of perception (*papañca-saññā-saṅkha*). By the cessation of multifarious perception reflection ceases; by the cessation of reflection desire ceases; by the cessation of desire likes and dislikes cease, and by the cessation of likes and dislikes envy and selfishness are uprooted, and so all animosity.

The idea of conditionality (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) is known to Sakka; that is evident from the way he questions. And it is indeed the profundity of Sakka's quest that has led to such philosophical heights. For now it has to be understood that envy and selfishness, and the hostility they imply, are so deep-rooted that their destruction ultimately becomes possible only when diversified perception ceases; in other words, envy and selfishness and hostility are inevitable facts of existence.

Multiplicity of perception is a simplified translation of *papañcā-saññā-saṅkhā*, a Pali term difficult to translate. *Papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* includes any perception that enters individual experience, anything perceived by mind or sense-faculties. *Papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* is the continual influx of multifarious perceptions which is evoked by, or finds response in craving. [5] It is the inner and outer world of an individual, dependent on former action

(kamma), and the cause of fresh one.

The cessation of diversified perception thus really means the cessation of existence itself (= cessation of kamma), the ultimate goal, Nibbāna. And this is evident to Sakka at once. He has found the comprehensive outlook that appeals to him; now he wants to know how this can be brought about.

3. “And how, O Lord, must a bhikkhu conduct himself to be endowed with the path fit for leading to the dissolution of the continual influx of multifarious perceptions?”

“Happiness, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. Sorrow too, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. And also indifference, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after.

“Happiness, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. And why? If one knows of a happiness: ‘This happiness when followed after by me makes evil states (*akusalā dhammā*) grow and good states (*kusalā dhammā*) vanish,’ then that happiness, the happiness connected with worldliness, should not be followed after. [6] And again, if one knows of a happiness: ‘This happiness when followed after by me makes evil states vanish and goods states grow,’ then that happiness, [the happiness that arises from truly understanding the

evanescent nature of all phenomena, and the detachment connected with such an understanding], [7] should be followed after. This may be done with reflection and discursive thinking (*savitakka-savicāra*) [8] or without reflection and discursive thinking (*avitakka-avicāra*). Of the two, that without reflection and discursive thinking is the better. [9] Happiness, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold as to be followed after and not to be followed after. If this was said, it was said for that reason.

“Sorrow too, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. And why? If one knows of a sorrow: ‘This sorrow when followed after by me makes evil states grow and good states vanish,’ then that sorrow [the frustration, sensual indulgence inevitably results in] should not be followed after. And again, if one knows of a sorrow: ‘This sorrow when followed after by me makes evil states vanish and good states grow,’ then that sorrow [the sorrow of a holy disciple who craves for accomplishment but has not yet achieved the destruction of the taints (*āsava*)] should be followed after. This may be done with reflection and discursive thinking or without reflection and discursive thinking. Of the two, that without reflection and discursive thinking is the better. Sorrow too, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. If this was said, it was said for that reason.

“And also indifference, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold: as to be followed after and not to be followed after.

And why? If one knows of an indifference: ‘This indifference when followed after by me makes evil states grow and good states vanish,’ then that indifference (the stupidity and dullness of an ordinary man who remains indifferent, intoxicated by delusion) should not be followed after. And again, if one knows of an indifference: ‘This indifference when followed after by me makes evil states vanish and good states grow,’ then that indifference [the true equanimity of a holy disciple, arising from insight and detachment] should be followed after. This may be done with reflection and discursive thinking or without reflection and discursive thinking. **[10]** Of the two, that without reflection is the better. Indifference too, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. If this was said, it was said for that reason.

“It is thus, O king of gods, that a bhikkhu must conduct himself to become fit for the path leading to the dissolution of the continual influx of multifarious perceptions.”

In this manner it was that Bhagavā answered the question put by Sakka, the king of gods. Edified, Sakka, the king of gods, approved of the Bhagavā’s saying and took delight in it: “Thus it is, O Bhagavā! Thus it is, O Sugata! Conquered are my doubts, gone is my uncertainty, having heard the Bhagava’s answer to this question.”

Comment. A task such as the dissolution of diversified perception rooted in diversifying of craving is but one of the many courses of training

towards the same ultimate goal of Nibbāna. It can be attempted only by a bhikkhu. That much is quite clear to Sakka. That is, he does not hope for its accomplishment in his present life as a deity, but dedicates himself to the life of a bhikkhu in a birth to come which will be in the human world, as he himself later announces.

It was said earlier that multiplicity of perception (*papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*) comprises the whole of possible experience, for every single perception, be it a form, a sound, an odour, a taste, a touch or an idea, is connected with one of the three feelings, either with happiness (*somanassa*), or with sorrow (*domanassa*), or with indifference (*upekkhā*). An untrained mind does neither comprehend this fact nor, and still less so, does he attempt to control the immensity of impressions, but indiscriminately follows after whatever feeling begets. But the Buddha declares that not any type of happiness, not any type of sorrow and not any type of indifference should be pursued, whilst, on the other hand, a certain happiness, a certain unhappiness and a certain indifference should be cultivated, as indicated in the context above. This is the standard that a trained mind applies to feelings, whether their pursuit is conducive to Nibbāna or not.

And so the path which the Buddha shows to Sakka is a radical re-evaluation of all experience, taking place

in a strenuous course of individual application. And this is *bhāvanā*, a 'making become; bringing into being; an actualization of the Dhamma which has to be pursued until what is now dimly perceived or not at all, becomes a dominant mental force through which one acts effortlessly, in perfect accordance with reality, freed from taints, (*āsava*).

And Sakka has understood this too. There remain to be clarified for him the moral conduct obligatory on a bhikkhu and the restraint of sense faculties.

4. And Sakka, the king of gods, approving of the Bhagavā's saying and delighting in it, put a further question: "And how, O Lord, must a bhikkhu conduct himself to be endowed with the moral restraint obligatory on him." [11]

"Bodily conduct, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. Conduct by speech too, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. And also pursuit (*pariyesanā*), O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after.

"Bodily conduct, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold as to be followed after and not to be followed after. And why? If one knows of a bodily conduct: 'This bodily conduct when followed after by me makes evil states grow and good states vanish, then that bodily conduct [killing, stealing and sexual acts] should not be followed after. And again, if one

knows of a bodily conduct: ‘This bodily conduct when followed after by me makes evil states vanish and good states grow,’ then that bodily conduct [abstaining from killing, stealing and sexual acts] should be followed after. Bodily conduct, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. If this was said, it was said for that reason.

“Conduct by speech too, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. And why? If one knows of a conduct by speech: ‘This conduct by speech when followed after by me makes evil states grow and good states vanish,’ then that conduct by speech [lying, slander, harsh words and frivolous talk] should not be followed after. And again, if one knows of a conduct by speech, ‘This conduct by speech when followed after by me makes evil states vanish and good states grow,’ then that conduct by speech [abstaining from lying, slander, harsh words and frivolous talk] should be followed after. Conduct by speech too, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. If this was said, it was said for that reason.

“And also pursuit, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. And why? If one knows of a pursuit: ‘This pursuit when followed after by me makes evil states grow and good states vanish,’ then that pursuit [worldly pursuit—*āmisā pariyesanā*] should not be followed after. And again, if one knows of a pursuit: ‘This pursuit when followed after by me

makes evil states vanish and good states grow,' then that pursuit [pursuit of the truth; *dhamma pariyesanā*] should be followed after. And also pursuit, O king of gods, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. If this was said; it was said for that reason.

“It is thus, O king of gods, that a bhikkhu must conduct himself to be endowed with the moral restraint obligatory on him.”

In this manner the Bhagavā answered the question put by Sakka, the king of gods. Edified, Sakka, the king of gods, approved of the Bhagavā's saying and took delight in it.

“Thus it is, O Bhagavā! Thus it is, O Sugata! Conquered are my doubts, gone is my uncertainty, having heard the Bhagavā's answer to this question.”

5. And Sakka, the king of gods, approving of the Bhagavā's saying and delighted in it, put a further question: “And how, O Lord, must a bhikkhu conduct himself to be endowed with restraint of his sense faculties?”

“Form, O king of gods, perceptible by the eye, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. Sound, O king of gods, perceptible by the ear, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. Odour, O king of gods, perceptible by the nose, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. Taste, O king of gods, perceptible by the tongue, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. Touch, O king of gods,

perceptible by the body, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after. Mind-object, O king of gods, perceptible by the mind, I declare to be twofold, as to be followed after and not to be followed after.”

When this was said, Sakka, the king of gods, spoke thus to the Bhagavā: “The meaning of what was said in brief by the Bhagavā, O Lord, I understand in full thus: A form, O Lord, perceptible by the eye, which makes evil states grow and good states vanish, should not be followed after; and again, O Lord, a form, perceptible by the eye; which makes evil states vanish and good states grow, should be followed after. A sound, O Lord, perceptible by the ear, which makes evil states grow and good states vanish should not be followed after; and again O Lord, a sound perceptible by the ear, which makes evil states vanish and good states grow, should be followed after. An odour, O Lord, perceptible by the nose, which makes evil states grow and good states vanish, should not be followed after, and again, O Lord, an odour, perceptible by the nose, which makes evil states vanish and good states grow, should be followed after. A taste, O Lord, perceptible by the tongue, which makes evil states grow and good states vanish, should not be followed after; and again, O Lord, a taste, perceptible by the tongue, which makes evil states vanish and good states grow, should be followed after. A touch, O Lord, perceptible by the body, which makes evil states grow and good states vanish, should not be followed after; and again, O Lord, a

touch, perceptible by the body, which makes evil states vanish and good states grow, should be followed after. A mind-object, O Lord, perceptible by the mind, which makes evil states grow and good states vanish, should not be followed after; and again, O Lord, a mind-object, perceptible by the mind, which makes evil states vanish and good states grow, should be followed after.

Thus do I understand the meaning in full, O Lord, of what was said in brief by the Bhagavā. Conquered are my doubts, gone is my uncertainty, having heard the Bhagavā's answer to this question."

6. And Sakka, the king of gods, approving of the Bhagavā's saying and delighting in it, put a further question: "Have, O Lord, all Samaṇas and Brāhmaṇas the same doctrine, the same moral code, the same aspiration, the same aim?"

"They have not, O king of gods."

"But why, O Lord, have they not?"

"Many are the conditions of mind, O king of gods, various are the conditions of mind existing in this world. To whatever condition, out of these, the beings adhere, to that only they obstinately and tenaciously cling, maintaining, 'Only this is truth, anything else is folly!' Therefore do not all Samaṇas and Brāhmaṇas have the same doctrine, the same moral code, the same aspiration, the same aim."

"But, O Lord, are all Samaṇas and Brāhmaṇas absolutely perfect, absolutely secure, absolutely purified, of absolutely

highest achievements?”

“They are not, O king of gods.”

“But why, O Lord, are they not?”

“Those *Samaṇas* and *Brāhmaṇas*, O king of gods, who have achieved deliverance through the destruction of craving, they only are absolutely perfect, absolutely secure, absolutely purified, of absolutely highest achievement. Therefore are not all *Samaṇas* and *Brāhmaṇas* absolutely perfect, absolutely secure, absolutely purified, of absolutely highest achievement.”

In this manner it was that the Bhagavā answered the question put by Sakka, the king of gods. Edified, Sakka, the king of gods, approved of the Bhagavā’s saying and took delight in it: “Thus it is, O Bhagavā! Thus it is, O Sugata! Conquered are my doubts, gone is my uncertainty, having heard the Bhagavā’s answer to this question.”

7. And Sakka, the king of gods, approving of the Bhagavā’s saying and delighted in it, addressed the Bhagavā and spoke: “Passion, [12] O Lord, is disease, passion is a cancer, passion is a dart. Passion drags a man about from one existence to another, so that he finds himself now up above, then down below. These problems, O Lord, which were rankling in me for a long time, and to which other *Samaṇas* and *Brāhmaṇas* have lent no ear, these the Bhagavā has solved for me, and has removed the dart of doubt and uncertainty.”

“Then, O king of gods, do you remember to have asked these questions from other Samaṇas and Brāhmaṇas?”

“I do remember, O Lord, to have done so.”

“And in which way did they explain them to you, O king of gods? If this is not inconvenient to you, you may speak.”

“Not, O Lord, is it inconvenient to me when the Bhagavā is present or others like him.”

“Then, O king of gods, you may speak.”

“Whom I deemed to be Samaṇas and Brāhmaṇas, O Lord, were hermits, living solitary in the forest. Them I approached and put these questions. But they made no answer, but rather asked of me a counter-question, ‘What is the name of the venerable one?’ Thus asked, I made answer, ‘I am, Sirs, Sakka, the king of gods.’ And they went on questioning me, ‘Pray, by what deed did the venerable king of gods rise to that state?’ And I expounded to them the Dhamma, as it was heard and understood by me, and they were satisfied, even with that little: ‘Verily, we have seen Sakka, the king of gods! And what we asked of him that he has answered!’ And they actually became my disciples, rather than *I* the follower of them.

“But I, O Lord, am the follower of the Bhagavā. A stream-enterer [13] am I, delivered from downfall, assured, bound for enlightenment.”

“Do you remember, O king of gods, ever before to have experienced such a feeling of satisfaction and happiness?”

“I do remember it, O Lord.”

“And in which way, O king of gods, do you remember it?”

“Once, O Lord, there took place a fight between gods and Asuras. In this fight, O Lord, the gods were victorious, and the Asuras were defeated. The fight being over, the battle being won, I thought to myself, ‘What there is of heavenly power and what there is of *Asura*-power, both will now be enjoyed by the gods!’ And so, O Lord, that feeling of satisfaction and happiness was mixed up with thoughts of war and battle, not leading to disenchantment, not leading to dispassion, not leading to cessation, not leading to higher knowledge, not leading to enlightenment, not leading to Nibbāna.

“But this feeling of satisfaction and happiness, O Lord, I experience, having heard the Dhamma from the Bhagavā, is not mixed up with thoughts of war and battle. This solely leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to inner calm, to higher knowledge, to enlightenment and to Nibbāna.”

8. “But, O king of gods, what reasons do you perceive to announce the experience of such a feeling of satisfaction and happiness?”

“Six reasons do I perceive, O Lord:  
While living here itself,  
Born a god as I am—  
Fresh potency of life I win.  
This I announce to you, O Lord.

This is, O Lord, the first reason.

Departed from the realm of gods,  
Heavenly potency being spent,  
Mindfully I choose the womb  
In which to be reborn my mind delights.

This is, O Lord, the second reason.

Unconfused in understanding,  
Delighted in the Buddha's Law,  
Wisely shall I dwell,  
Clearly comprehending, mindful.

This is, O Lord, the third reason.

And if, while faring along wisely,  
Enlightenment should be my part,  
I then would dwell in perfect knowledge,  
And thus achieve the end.

This is, O Lord, the fourth reason.

Or if, departed from the realm of men,  
Human potency being spent,  
Again I should become a god:  
Chiefest I would be of all the worlds divine.

This is, O Lord, the fifth reason.

Among the deities most sublime,  
Among Akanitṭha so glorious,  
I then would spend the last turn of life;  
That abode too awaits me.

This is, Lord, the sixth reason.

These are, O Lord, the six reasons I perceive to announce the experience of such a feeling of satisfaction and happiness.”

9. (Sakka’s Song)

“Seeking the Tathāgata, I wandered long,  
My mind in doubt, steeped in perplexity,  
With problems none could solve.

The Samaṇas of lonely dwellings,  
Their company I sought, sat near;  
Buddhas I imagined them to be.

‘What makes men reach accomplishment,  
What makes them fail?’ This I asked of them;  
But neither way nor method did they know.

And when they came to understand  
That Sakka of the gods it was  
Who had appeared to them,  
They even asked of me  
What skill brought me the fair result.

I taught them what I knew,  
The lore preserved among the folk,  
And they rejoiced and said,  
‘Vāsava it was we saw!’

But the Buddha I beheld today!  
Conqueror over Doubts:  
Freed am I from fear,

In finding him who truly knows!

Remover of the dart of craving,  
Enlightened, Man without Compare:  
Him the hero great I worship,  
Him, the Kinsman of the Sun!

The worship once I offered Brahmā,  
Together with the mighty gods,  
We offer now to you, O Lord.

The Enlightened One you are indeed,  
Teacher beyond compare:  
Throughout the world of gods and men  
Your equal none can find!"

10. And Sakka, the king of gods, addressed Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba: "Of great service have you been to me, my dear Pañcasikha, in so far as you first gained over the Bhagavā; gained over by you, my dear; we afterwards drew near to see the Bhagavā, the Arahant, Sammā Sambuddha. I appoint you to your paternal heritage. You shall be king over the Gandhabbas; and Baddha Sūriya-vaccasā, the sun maiden longed for by you, I give her to you."

And Sakka, the king of gods, having touched the earth with his hand, made three times this solemn utterance:

*"Namo tassa Bhagavato, Arahato, Sammā Sambuddhassa!  
Namo tassa Bhagavato, Arahato, Sammā Sambuddhassa!  
Namo tassa Bhagavato, Arahato, Sammā Sambuddhassa!"*

Honour to Him, the Exalted One, the Worthy, the Fully Enlightened!

Honour to Him, the Exalted One, the Worthy, the Fully Enlightened!

Honour to Him, the Exalted One, the Worthy, the Fully Enlightened!"

And while this discourse had taken place, there arose in Sakka, the king of gods, and also in another eighty thousand deities, the pure, spotless eye of the Dhamma:

*"Yaṃ kiñci samudaya-dhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodha-dhamman'ti"*

"Every phenomenon-of-origin is a phenomenon-of-dissolution."

Such were the questions which Sakka, the king of gods was invited to ask and were answered by the Bhagavā. Therefore is this exposition called "The Questions of Sakka."

# Notes

1. *Bhagavā*, “the Exalted One” is a frequent appellation of the Buddha. [\[Back\]](#)
2. ‘Gopaka’ is the masculine and ‘Gopikā’ the feminine form of the name. [\[Back\]](#)
3. *Upāsika*: a female lay disciple of a Buddha [\[Back\]](#)
4. By reflection is meant here a thought influenced by *āsavas* (taints). [\[Back\]](#)
5. Dh. 254: ‘*Papañcabhiratā pajā, nippapañcā Tathāgatā*’ ‘Mankind delights in diversity, but not Tathāgatas’ i.e., variety of experience is the very thing commonly wanted. Further references: Majjhima Nikāya Sutta 18; Suttanipāta vv. 530, 874, 916. [\[Back\]](#)
6. See Majjhima Nikāya 137 (pleasant, etc., feelings connected with worldliness and with renunciation). [\[Back\]](#)
7. Explanatory addition by the translator. [\[Back\]](#)
8. This refers to beneficial (*kusala*) reflection on the normal level of consciousness and to the tranquillized and reduced reflection existing in the first absorption

(*jhāna*). **[Back]**

9. This refers to the second and third state of absorption where reflection and discursive thinking are absent.

**[Back]**

10. The latter alternative refers to the fourth absorption.

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1. *Pātimokkha*. **[Back]**

2. *Ejā* (drive, urge) is a synonym of *taṇhā* ‘craving.’ **[Back]**

3. *Sotāpanna*—the first of the four stages of sainthood

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