DN 13 — Experts in the Three Vedas

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Text

Long Discourses 13

Experts in the Three Vedas

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was wandering in the land of the Kosalans together with a large Saṅgha of five hundred mendicants when he arrived at a village of the Kosalan brahmins named Manasākaṭa. He stayed in a mango grove on a bank of the Aciravatī River to the north of Manasākaṭa.

Now at that time several very well-known well-to-do brahmins were residing in Manasākaṭa. They included the brahmins Caṅkī, Tārukkha, Pokkharasāti, Jānussoṇi, Todeyya, and others.

Then as the students Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja were going for a walk they began a discussion regarding what is the path and what is not the path.

Vāseṭṭha said this: “This is the only straight path, the direct route that delivers one who applies it to the company of Divinity; namely, that explained by the brahmin Pokkharasāti.”

Bhāradvāja said this: “This is the only straight path, the direct route that delivers one who applies it to the company of Divinity; namely, that explained by the brahmin Tārukkha.”

But neither was able to persuade the other. So Vāseṭṭha said to Bhāradvāja, “Bhāradvāja, the ascetic Gotama—a Sakyan, gone forth from a Sakyan family—is staying in a mango grove on a bank of the Aciravatī River to the north of Manasākaṭa. He has this good reputation: ‘That Blessed One is perfected, a fully awakened Buddha, accomplished in knowledge and conduct, holy, knower of the world, supreme guide for those fit for training, teacher of gods and humans, awakened, blessed.’ Come, let’s go to see him and ask him about this matter. As he answers, so we’ll remember it.”

“Yes, worthy sir,” replied Bhāradvāja.

1. What is the Path and What is Not the Path

So they went to the Buddha and exchanged greetings with him. When the greetings and polite conversation were over, they sat down to one side and Vāseṭṭha told him of their conversation, adding: “In this matter we have a dispute, a disagreement, a difference of opinion.”

“So, Vāseṭṭha, it seems that you say that the straight path is that explained by Pokkharasāti, while Bhāradvāja says that the straight path is that explained by Tārukkha.

But what exactly is your disagreement about?”

“About what is the path and what is not the path, worthy Gotama. Even though brahmins describe different paths—the Adhvaryu brahmins, the Taittirīya brahmins, the Chāndogya brahmins, the Cāndrāyaṇa brahmins, and the Bahvṛca brahmins—all of them still lead someone who practices them to the company of Divinity.

It’s like a village or town that has many different roads nearby, yet all of them meet at that village. In the same way, even though brahmins describe different paths—the Adhvaryu brahmins, the Taittirīya brahmins, the Chāndogya brahmins, the Cāndrāyaṇa brahmins, and the Bahvṛca brahmins—all of them still lead someone who practices them to the company of Divinity.”

2. Questioning Vāseṭṭha

“Do you say, ‘they lead someone’, Vāseṭṭha?”

“I do, worthy Gotama.”

“Do you say, ‘they lead someone’, Vāseṭṭha?”

“I do, worthy Gotama.”

“Do you say, ‘they lead someone’, Vāseṭṭha?”

“I do, worthy Gotama.”

“Well, of the brahmins who are proficient in the three Vedas, Vāseṭṭha, is there even a single one who has seen the Divinity with their own eyes?”

“No, worthy Gotama.”

“Well, has even a single one of their tutors seen the Divinity with their own eyes?”

“No, worthy Gotama.”

“Well, has even a single one of their tutors’ tutors seen the Divinity with their own eyes?”

“No, worthy Gotama.”

“Well, has anyone back to the seventh generation of tutors seen the Divinity with their own eyes?”

“No, worthy Gotama.”

“Well, what of the ancient seers of the brahmins proficient in the three Vedas, namely Aṭṭhaka, Vāmaka, Vāmadeva, Vessāmitta, Yamadaggi, Aṅgīrasa, Bhāradvāja, Vāseṭṭha, Kassapa, and Bhagu? They were the authors and propagators of the hymns. Their hymnal was sung and propagated and compiled in ancient times; and these days, brahmins continue to sing and chant it, chanting what was chanted and teaching what was taught. Did they say: ‘We know and see where the Divinity is or what way he lies’?”

“No, worthy Gotama.”

“So it seems that none of those brahmins have seen the Divinity with their own eyes, and not even the ancient seers claimed to know where he is. Yet the brahmins proficient in the three Vedas say: ‘We teach the path to the company of that which we neither know nor see. This is the only straight path, the direct route that delivers one who applies it to the company of Divinity.’

What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? This being so, doesn’t their statement turn out to have no demonstrable basis?”

“Clearly that’s the case, worthy Gotama.”

“Good, Vāseṭṭha. For it is impossible that they should teach the path to that which they neither know nor see.

Suppose there was a queue of blind men, each holding the one in front: the first one does not see, the middle one does not see, and the last one does not see. In the same way, it seems to me that the brahmins’ statement turns out to be comparable to a queue of blind men: the first one does not see, the middle one does not see, and the last one does not see. Their statement turns out to be a joke—mere words, vacuous and hollow.

What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? Do the brahmins proficient in the three Vedas see the sun and moon just as other folk do? And do they supplicate and entreat them, following their course from where they rise to where they set with cupped palms held in worship?”

“Yes, worthy Gotama.”

“What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? Though this is so, are the brahmins proficient in the three Vedas able to teach the path to the company of the sun and moon, saying: ‘This is the only straight path, the direct route that delivers one who applies it to the company of the sun and moon’?”

“No, worthy Gotama.”

“So it seems that even though the brahmins proficient in the three Vedas see the sun and moon, they are not able to teach the path to the company of the sun and moon.

But it seems that even though they have not seen the Divinity with their own eyes, they still claim to teach the path to the company of that which they neither know nor see.

What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? This being so, doesn’t their statement turn out to have no demonstrable basis?”

“Clearly that’s the case, worthy Gotama.”

“Good, Vāseṭṭha. For it is impossible that they should teach the path to that which they neither know nor see.

2.1. The Simile of the Finest Lady in the Land

Suppose a man were to say, ‘Whoever the finest lady in the land is, it is her that I want, her that I desire!’

They'd say to him, 'My man, that finest lady in the land who you desire—do you know whether she's an aristocrat, a brahmin, a peasant, or a menial?' Asked this, he'd say, 'No.'

They'd say to him, 'My friend, that finest lady in the land who you desire—do you know her name or clan? Whether she's tall or short or medium? Whether her skin is black, brown, or dingy? Whether she comes from such-and-such village, town, or city?'

Asked this, he'd say, 'No.'

They'd say to him, 'My man, do you desire someone who you've never even known or seen?'

Asked this, he'd say, 'Yes.'

What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? This being so, doesn't that man's statement turn out to have no demonstrable basis?"

"Clearly that's the case, worthy Gotama."

"In the same way, doesn't the statement of those brahmins turn out to have no demonstrable basis?"

"Clearly that's the case, worthy Gotama."

"Good, Vāseṭṭha. For it is impossible that they should teach the path to that which they neither know nor see.

2.2. The Simile of the Ladder

Suppose a man was to build a ladder at the crossroads for climbing up to a stilt longhouse.

They'd say to him, 'My man, that stilt longhouse for which you're building a ladder—do you know whether it's to the north, south, east, or west? Or whether it's tall or short or medium?'

Asked this, he'd say, 'No.'

They'd say to him, 'My man, are you building a ladder for a longhouse that you've never even known or seen?'

Asked this, he'd say, 'Yes.'

What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? This being so, doesn't that man's statement turn out to have no demonstrable basis?"

"Clearly that's the case, worthy Gotama."

"In the same way, doesn't the statement of those brahmins turn out to have no demonstrable basis?"

"Clearly that's the case, worthy Gotama."

"Good, Vāseṭṭha. For it is impossible that they should teach the path to that which they neither know nor see.

2.3. The Simile of the Aciravatī River

Suppose the Aciravatī River was full to the brim so a crow could drink from it. Then along comes a person who wants to cross over to the far shore. Standing on the near shore, they'd call out to the far shore, 'Come here, far shore! Come here, far shore!'

What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? Would the far shore of the Aciravatī River come over to the near shore because of that man's call, request, desire, or expectation?"

"No, worthy Gotama."

"In the same way, Vāseṭṭha, the brahmins proficient in the three Vedas proceed having given up those things that make one a true brahmin, and having undertaken those things that make one not a true brahmin. Yet they say: 'We call upon Indra! We call upon Soma! We call upon Varuṇa! We call upon Īsāna! We call upon the Progenitor! We call upon the Divinity! We call upon Mahiddhi! We call upon Yama!'

So long as they proceed in this way it's impossible that they will, when the body breaks up, after death, be reborn in the company of Divinity.

Suppose the Aciravatī River was full to the brim so a crow could drink from it. Then along comes a person who wants to cross over to the far shore. But while still on the near shore, their arms are tied tightly behind their back with a strong chain.

What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? Could that person cross over to the far shore?"

"No, worthy Gotama."

"In the same way, the five kinds of sensual stimulation are called 'chains' and 'fetters' in the training of the Noble One. What five? Sights known by the eye, which are likable, desirable, agreeable, pleasant, sensual, and arousing. Sounds known by the ear … Smells known by the nose … Tastes known by the tongue … Touches known by the body, which are likable, desirable, agreeable, pleasant, sensual, and arousing.

These are the five kinds of sensual stimulation that are called 'chains' and 'fetters' in the training of the Noble One. The brahmins proficient in the three Vedas enjoy these five kinds of sensual stimulation tied, infatuated, attached, blind to the drawbacks, and not understanding the escape. So long as they enjoy them it's impossible that they will, when the body breaks up, after death, be reborn in the company of Divinity.

Suppose the Aciravatī River was full to the brim so a crow could drink from it. Then along comes a person who wants to cross over to the far shore. But they'd lie down wrapped in cloth from head to foot.

What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? Could that person cross over to the far shore?"

"No, worthy Gotama."

"In the same way, the five hindrances are called 'obstacles' and 'hindrances' and 'encasings' and 'shrouds' in the training of the Noble One. What five? The hindrances of sensual desire, ill will, dullness and drowsiness, restlessness and remorse, and doubt. These five hindrances are called 'obstacles' and 'hindrances' and 'encasings' and 'shrouds' in the

training of the Noble One.

The brahmins proficient in the three Vedas are obstructed, hindered, swathed, and enveloped by these five hindrances. So long as they are so obstructed it's impossible that they will, when the body breaks up, after death, be reborn in the company of Divinity.

3. Converging

What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? Have you heard that the brahmins who are elderly and senior, the tutors of tutors, say whether the Divinity is encumbered with possessions or not?"

"That he is not, worthy Gotama."

"Is his heart full of enmity or not?"

"It is not."

"Is his heart full of ill will or not?"

"It is not."

"Is his heart corrupted or not?"

"It is not."

"Does he wield power or not?"

"He does."

"What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? Are the brahmins proficient in the three Vedas encumbered with possessions or not?"

"They are."

"Are their hearts full of enmity or not?"

"They are."

"Are their hearts full of ill will or not?"

"They are."

"Are their hearts corrupted or not?"

"They are."

"Do they wield power or not?"

"They do not."

"So it seems that the brahmins proficient in the three Vedas are encumbered with possessions, but the Divinity is not. But would brahmins who are encumbered with possessions join together and converge with the Divinity, who isn't encumbered with possessions?"

“No, worthy Gotama.”

“Good, Vāseṭṭha! It’s impossible that the brahmins who are encumbered with possessions will, when the body breaks up, after death, be reborn in the company of Divinity, who isn’t encumbered with possessions.

And it seems that the brahmins have enmity, ill will, corruption, and do not wield power, while the Divinity has no enmity, ill will, or corruption, and who does wield power. But would brahmins who are opposite to the Divinity in all these things join together and converge with him?”

“No, worthy Gotama.”

“Good, Vāseṭṭha! It’s impossible that brahmins who are opposite to the Divinity in all these things will, when the body breaks up, after death, be reborn in the company of Divinity.

Now in this regard, Vāseṭṭha, those brahmins proficient in the three Vedas, having dived in, sink down. Having sunk down, they undergo drowning, imagining they are crossing to the dry shore. That’s why the three Vedas of the brahmins are called a ‘salted land’ and a ‘barren land’ and a ‘disaster’.”

When he said this, Vāseṭṭha said to the Buddha, “I have heard, worthy Gotama, that you know the path to company with Divinity.”

“What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? Is the village of Manasākaṭa nearby?”

“Yes it is.”

“What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? Suppose a person was born and raised in Manasākaṭa. And as soon as they left the town some people asked them for the road to Manasākaṭa. Would they be slow or hesitant to answer?”

“No, worthy Gotama. Why is that? Because they were born and raised in Manasākaṭa. They’re well acquainted with all the roads to the village.”

“Still, it’s possible they might be slow or hesitant to answer. But the Realized One is never slow or hesitant when questioned about the realm of divinity or the practice that leads to the realm of divinity. I understand the Divinity, the realm of divinity, and the practice that leads to the realm of divinity, practicing in accordance with which one is reborn in the realm of divinity.”

When he said this, Vāseṭṭha said to the Buddha, “I have heard, worthy Gotama, that you teach the path to company with Divinity. Please teach us that path and elevate this generation of brahmins.”

“Well then, Vāseṭṭha, listen and apply your mind well, I will speak.”

“Yes, worthy sir,” replied Vāseṭṭha.

4. Teaching the Path to the Divinity

The Buddha said this:

“It’s when a Realized One arises in the world, perfected, a fully awakened Buddha … That’s how a mendicant is accomplished in ethics. … Seeing that the hindrances have been given up in them, joy springs up. Being joyful, rapture springs up. When the mind is full of rapture, the body becomes tranquil. When the body is tranquil, they feel bliss. And when blissful, the mind becomes immersed.

They meditate spreading a heart full of love to one direction, and to the second, and to the third, and to the fourth. In the same way above, below, across, everywhere, all around, they spread a heart full of love to the whole world—abundant, expansive, limitless, free of enmity and ill will.

Suppose there was a powerful horn blower. They’d easily make themselves heard in the four quarters. In the same way, when the heart’s release by love has been developed like this, any limited deeds they’ve done don’t remain or persist there. This is a path to company with Divinity.

Furthermore, a mendicant meditates spreading a heart full of compassion …

They meditate spreading a heart full of rejoicing …

They meditate spreading a heart full of equanimity to one direction, and to the second, and to the third, and to the fourth. In the same way above, below, across, everywhere, all around, they spread a heart full of equanimity to the whole world—abundant, expansive, limitless, free of enmity and ill will.

Suppose there was a powerful horn blower. They’d easily make themselves heard in the four quarters. In the same way, when the heart’s release by equanimity has been developed and cultivated like this, any limited deeds they’ve done don’t remain or persist there. This too is a path to company with Divinity.

What do you think, Vāseṭṭha? When a mendicant meditates like this, are they encumbered with possessions or not?”

“They are not.”

“Is their heart full of enmity or not?”

“It is not.”

“Is their heart full of ill will or not?”

“It is not.”

“Is their heart corrupted or not?”

“It is not.”

“Do they wield power or not?”

“They do.”

“So it seems that that mendicant is not encumbered with possessions, and neither is the Divinity. Would a mendicant who is not encumbered with possessions join together and

converge with the Divinity, who isn't encumbered with possessions?"

"Yes, worthy Gotama."

"Good, Vāseṭṭha! It's quite possible that a mendicant who is not encumbered with possessions will, when the body breaks up, after death, be reborn in the company of Divinity, who isn't encumbered with possessions.

And it seems that that mendicant has no enmity, ill will, corruption, and does wield power, while the Divinity is the same in all these things. Would a mendicant who is the same as the Divinity in all things join together and converge with him?"

"Yes, worthy Gotama."

"Good, Vāseṭṭha! It's quite possible that that mendicant will, when the body breaks up, after death, be reborn in the company of Divinity."

When he had spoken, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja said to him, "Excellent, worthy Gotama! Excellent! As if he were righting the overturned, or revealing the hidden, or pointing out the path to the lost, or lighting a lamp in the dark so people with clear eyes can see what's there, worthy Gotama has made the teaching clear in many ways. We go for refuge to the worthy Gotama, to the teaching, and to the mendicant Saṅgha. From this day forth, may the worthy Gotama remember us as lay followers who have gone for refuge for life."