DN 21 — Sakka’s Questions

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Text

Long Discourses 21

Sakka’s Questions

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying in the land of the Magadhans, where east of Rājagaha there is a brahmin village named Ambasaṇḍā, north of which, on Mount Vediyaka, is Indra’s hill cave.

Now at that time Sakka, the lord of gods, grew eager to see the Buddha. He thought, “Where is the Blessed One at present, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha?”

Seeing that the Buddha was at Indra’s hill cave, he addressed the gods of the thirty-three, “Good fellows, the Buddha is staying in the land of the Magadhans at Indra’s hill cave. What if we were to go and see that Blessed One, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha?”

“Yes, lord,” replied the gods.

Then Sakka addressed the centaur Pañcasikha, “Dear Pañcasikha, the Buddha is staying in the land of the Magadhans at Indra’s hill cave. What if we were to go and see that Blessed One, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha?”

“Yes, lord,” replied the centaur Pañcasikha. Taking his arched harp made from the pale timber of wood-apple, he went as Sakka’s attendant.

Then Sakka went at the head of a retinue consisting of the gods of the thirty-three and the godling centaur Pañcasikha. As easily as a strong person would extend or contract their arm, he vanished from the heaven of the gods of the thirty-three and landed on Mount Vediyaka north of Ambasaṇḍā.

Now at that time a dazzling light appeared over Mount Vediyaka and Ambasaṇḍā, as happens through the glory of the gods. People in the villages round about, terrified, shocked, and awestruck, said, “Mount Vediyaka must be on fire today, blazing and burning! Oh why has such a dazzling light appeared over Mount Vediyaka and Ambasaṇḍā?”

Then Sakka addressed the centaur Pañcasikha, “My dear Pañcasikha, it is hard for one like me to get near the Realized Ones while they are on retreat practicing absorption, enjoying absorption. But if you were to charm the Buddha first, then I could go to see him.”

“Yes, lord,” replied the centaur Pañcasikha. Taking his arched harp made from the pale timber of wood-apple, he went to Indra’s hill cave. When he had drawn near, he stood to

one side, thinking, “This is neither too far nor too near; and he’ll hear my voice.”

1. Pañcasikha’s Song

Standing to one side, Pañcasikha played his arched harp, and sang these verses on the Buddha, the teaching, the Saṅgha, the perfected ones, and sensual love.

“O Bhaddā Suriyavaccasā, my Darling Sunshine,

I pay homage to your father Timbaru,

through whom was born a lady so fine,

to fill me with a joy I never knew.

As sweet as a breeze to one who’s sweating,

or when thirsty, a sweet and cooling drink,

so dear are you, Aṅgīrasi, to me—

just like the teaching is to all the saints!

Like a cure when you’re struck by fever dire,

or food to ease the hunger pain,

come on, Bhaddā, please put out my fire,

quench me like water on a flame.

As elephants burning in the heat of summer,

sink down in a lotus pond to rest,

so cool, full of petals and of pollen—

that’s how I would plunge into your breast.

Like elephants bursting bonds in rutting season,

beating off the pricks of lance and pikes—

I just don’t understand what is the reason

I’m so crazy for your shapely thighs!

For you, my heart is full of passion,

I’m in a besotted state of mind.

There is no going back, I’m just not able,

I’m like a fish that’s hooked up on the line.

Come on, my Bhaddā, hold me, fair of thighs!

Embrace me, maid of captivating eyes!

Take me in your arms, my lovely lady,
that's all I'd ever want or could desire.
Ah, then my desire was such a small thing,
my sweet, with your curling wavy hair;
now, like to arahants an offering,
it's grown so very much from there.
Whatever the merit I have forged
by giving to such perfected beings—
may that, my altogether gorgeous,
ripen in togetherness with you.
Whatever the merit I have forged
in this vast territory,
may that, my altogether gorgeous,
ripen in togetherness with you.
As the Sakyan, absorbed, did meditate
at one, alert, and mindful too,
the sage seeking the state free of death—
so I, oh my Sunshine, seek for you!
And just like the sage would delight,
once he had awakened to the truth,
so I would delight, my fine lady,
were I to become one with you.
If Sakka were to grant me one wish,
as Lord of the Thirty and Three,
my Bhaddā, you're all I would wish for,
so strong is the love in me.
Like a freshly blossoming sal tree
is your father, my lady so wise.
I pay homage to he, bowing humbly,

whose daughter is of such a kind."

When Pañcasikha had spoken, the Buddha said to him, "Pañcasikha, the sound of your strings blends well with the sound of your singing, so that neither overpowers the other. But when did you compose these verses on the Buddha, the teaching, the Saṅgha, the perfected ones, and sensual love?"

"This one time, sir, when you were first awakened, you were staying in Uruvelā at the goatherd's banyan tree on the bank of the Nerañjarā River. And at that time I was in love with Bhaddā Suriyavaccasā, who they call 'Darling Sunshine', the daughter of the centaur king Timbaru. But the sister desired another. It was the one named Sikhaṇḍī, the son of Mātali the chariot handler, who she loved. Since I couldn't win that sister by any means, I took my arched harp to Timbaru's home, where I played those verses.

When I finished, Suriyavaccasā said to me, 'Good fellow, I have not personally seen the Buddha. But I did hear about him when I went to dance for the gods of the thirty-three in the Hall of Clear Right. Since you extol the Buddha, let us meet up today.' And that's when I met up with that sister. But we have not met since."

2. The Approach of Sakka

Then Sakka, lord of gods, thought, "Pañcasikha is exchanging pleasantries with the Buddha."

So he addressed Pañcasikha, "My dear Pañcasikha, please bow to the Buddha for me, saying: 'Sir, Sakka, lord of gods, with his ministers and retinue, bows with his head at your feet.'"

"Yes, lord," replied Pañcasikha. He bowed to the Buddha and said, "Sir, Sakka, lord of gods, with his ministers and retinue, bows with his head at your feet."

"So may Sakka with his ministers and retinue be happy, Pañcasikha," said the Buddha, "for all want to be happy—whether gods, humans, titans, dragons, centaurs, or any of the other diverse creatures there may be."

For that is how the Realized Ones salute such illustrious spirits. And being saluted by the Buddha, Sakka entered Indra's hill cave, bowed to the Buddha, and stood to one side. And the gods of the thirty-three did likewise, as did Pañcasikha.

And at that time the uneven places were evened out, the cramped places were opened up, the darkness vanished in the cave and light appeared, as happens through the glory of the gods.

Then the Buddha said to Sakka, "It's incredible and amazing that you, the venerable Kosiya, who has so many duties and so much to do, should come here."

"For a long time I've wanted to come and see the Buddha, but I wasn't able, being prevented by my many duties and responsibilities for the gods of the thirty-three. This one time, sir, the Buddha was staying near Sāvatthī in the salaḷa tree hut. Then I went to Sāvatthī to see the Buddha. But at that time the Buddha was sitting immersed in some kind of meditation. And a divine maiden of Great King Vessavaṇa named Bhūjati was

attending on the Buddha, standing there paying homage to him with cupped palms.

So I said to her, ‘Sister, please bow to the Buddha for me, saying: “Sir, Sakka, lord of gods, with his ministers and retinue, bows with his head at your feet.”’

When I said this, she said to me, ‘It’s the wrong time to see the Buddha, as he’s in retreat.’

‘Well then, sister, please convey my message when the Buddha emerges from that immersion.’ I hope that sister bowed to you? Do you remember what she said?”

“She did bow, lord of gods, and I remember what she said. I also remember that it was the sound of your chariot wheels that pulled me out of that immersion.”

“Sir, I have heard and learned this in the presence of the gods who were reborn in the host of the thirty-three before me: ‘When a Realized One arises in the world, perfected and fully awakened, the heavenly hosts swell, while the titan hosts dwindle.’ And I have seen this with my own eyes.

2.1. The Story of Gopikā

Right here in Kapilavatthu there was a Sakyan lady named Gopikā who had confidence in the Buddha, the teaching, and the Saṅgha, and had fulfilled her ethics. Losing her attachment to femininity, she developed masculinity. When her body broke up, after death, she was reborn in a good place, a heavenly realm. In the company of the gods of the thirty-three she became one of my sons. There they knew him as the godling Gopaka.

Meanwhile three others, mendicants who had led the spiritual life under the Buddha, were reborn in the inferior centaur realm. There they amused themselves, supplied and provided with the five kinds of sensual stimulation, and became my servants and attendants.

At that, Gopaka scolded them, ‘Where on earth were you at, good fellows, when you heard the Buddha’s teaching! For while I was still a woman I had confidence in the Buddha, the teaching, and the Saṅgha, and had fulfilled my ethics. I lost my attachment to femininity and developed masculinity. When my body broke up, after death, I was reborn in a good place, a heavenly realm. In the company of the gods of the thirty-three I became one of Sakka’s sons. Here they know me as the godling Gopaka. But you, having led the spiritual life under the Buddha, were reborn in the inferior centaur realm. It is a sad sight indeed to see fellow practitioners reborn in the inferior centaur realm.’

When scolded by Gopaka, two of those gods regained their memory right away. They went to the host of the priests of Divinity, but one god remained attached to sensual pleasures.

“‘I was a laywoman disciple of the Clear-eyed One,

and my name was Gopikā.

I was devoted to the Buddha and the teaching,

and I faithfully served the Saṅgha.

Because of the clear rightness of the Buddha’s teaching,

I’m now a mighty, dazzling son of Sakka,
reborn in the Third Heaven.
And here they know me as Gopaka.
Then I saw some mendicants who I’d seen before,
dwelling in the host of centaurs.
They were disciples of Gotama
when I used to be a human.
I served them with food and drink,
and clasped their feet in my own home.
Where on earth were these good fellows at
when they learned the Buddha’s teachings?
For each must know for themselves the teaching
so well-taught, realized by the Clear-eyed One.
I was one who followed you,
having heard the fine words of the noble ones.
I’m now a mighty, dazzling son of Sakka,
reborn in the Third Heaven.
But you followed the best of men,
and led the supreme spiritual life,
but still you’re born in this lesser realm,
a rebirth unbefitting.
It’s a sad sight I see, good fellows,
fellow practitioners in a lesser realm.
Reborn in the host of centaurs,
only to wait upon the gods.
Meanwhile, I dwelt in a house—
but see my distinction now!
Having been a woman now I’m a male god,
blessed with heavenly sensual pleasures.”

Scolded by that disciple of Gotama,
comprehending Gopaka, they were struck with urgency.
“Let’s strive, let’s try hard—
we won’t serve others any more!”
Two of them roused up energy,
recalling the Buddha’s instructions.
Right away they became dispassionate,
seeing the drawbacks in sensual pleasures.
The fetters and bonds of sensual pleasures—
the ties of the Wicked One so hard to break—
they burst them like a bull elephant his ropes,
and passed right over the thirty-three.
The gods with Indra and the Progenitor
were all gathered in the Hall of Clear Right.
As they sat there, they passed over them,
the heroes desireless, practicing purity.
Seeing them, Vāsava was struck with urgency;
the master of gods in the midst of the group said,
“These were born in the lesser centaur realm,
but now they pass us by!”
Heeding the speech of one so moved,
Gopaka addressed Vāsava,
“There is a Buddha, a lord of men, in the world.
Known as the Sakyan Sage, he’s mastered the senses.
Those sons of his lost their memory;
but when scolded by me they gained it back.
Of the three, there is one who remains
dwelling in the host of centaurs.
But two, recollecting the path to awakening,

serene, spurn even the gods.

Such is the explanation of the teaching here:

not a single disciple doubts that.

We venerate the Buddha, the victor, lord of men,

who has crossed the flood and cut off doubt.

They attained distinction to the extent

they understood the teaching here;

two of them distinguished

in the host of the priests of Divinity.'"

We have come here, dear sir,

to realize this same teaching.

If the Buddha would give me a chance,

I would ask a question, dear sir."

Then it occurred to the Buddha, "For a long time now this spirit has led a pure life. Any question he asks me will be beneficial, not unbeneficial. And he will quickly understand any answer I give to his question."

So the Buddha addressed Sakka in verse:

"Ask me your question, Vāsava,

whatever you want.

I'll solve each and every

question you have."

The first recitation section is complete.

Having been granted an opportunity by the Buddha, Sakka asked the first question.

"Good fellow, what fetters bind the gods, humans, titans, dragons, centaurs—and any of the other diverse creatures— so that, though they wish to be free of enmity, violence, hostility, and hate, they still have enmity, violence, hostility, and hate?"

Such was Sakka's question to the Buddha. And the Buddha answered him:

"Lord of gods, the fetters of jealousy and stinginess bind the gods, humans, titans, dragons, centaurs—and any of the other diverse creatures— so that, though they wish to be free of enmity, violence, hostility, and hate, they still have enmity, violence, hostility, and hate."

Such was the Buddha's answer to Sakka. Delighted, Sakka approved and agreed with what the Buddha said, saying, "That's so true, Blessed One! That's so true, Holy One! Hearing the Buddha's answer, I've gone beyond doubt and got rid of indecision."

And then, having approved and agreed with what the Buddha said, Sakka asked another question:

"But good fellow, what is the source, origin, birthplace, and inception of jealousy and stinginess? When what exists is there jealousy and stinginess? When what doesn't exist is there no jealousy and stinginess?"

"The liked and the disliked, lord of gods, are the source of jealousy and stinginess. When the liked and the disliked exist there is jealousy and stinginess. When the liked and the disliked don't exist there is no jealousy and stinginess."

"But good fellow, what is the source of what is liked and disliked?"

"Desire is the source of what is liked and disliked."

"But what is the source of desire?"

"Thought is the source of desire."

"But what is the source of thought?"

"Judgments driven by the proliferation of perceptions are the source of thoughts."

"But how does a mendicant fittingly practice for the cessation of judgments driven by the proliferation of perceptions?"

2.2. Meditation on Feelings

"Lord of gods, there are two kinds of happiness, I say: that which you should cultivate, and that which you should not cultivate. There are two kinds of sadness, I say: that which you should cultivate, and that which you should not cultivate. There are two kinds of equanimity, I say: that which you should cultivate, and that which you should not cultivate.

Why did I say that there are two kinds of happiness? Well, should you know of a happiness: 'When I cultivate this kind of happiness, unskillful qualities grow, and skillful qualities decline.' You should not cultivate that kind of happiness. Whereas, should you know of a happiness: 'When I cultivate this kind of happiness, unskillful qualities decline, and skillful qualities grow.' You should cultivate that kind of happiness. And that which is free of placing the mind and keeping it connected is better than that which still involves placing the mind and keeping it connected. That's why I said there are two kinds of happiness.

Why did I say that there are two kinds of sadness? Well, should you know of a sadness: 'When I cultivate this kind of sadness, unskillful qualities grow, and skillful qualities decline.' You should not cultivate that kind of sadness. Whereas, should you know of a sadness: 'When I cultivate this kind of sadness, unskillful qualities decline, and skillful qualities grow.' You should cultivate that kind of sadness. And that which is free of placing the mind and keeping it connected is better than that which still involves placing the mind and keeping it connected. That's why I said there are two kinds of sadness.

Why did I say that there are two kinds of equanimity? Well, should you know of an equanimity: 'When I cultivate this kind of equanimity, unskillful qualities grow, and skillful qualities decline.' You should not cultivate that kind of equanimity. Whereas, should you know of an equanimity: 'When I cultivate this kind of equanimity, unskillful qualities decline, and skillful qualities grow.' You should cultivate that kind of equanimity. And that which is free of placing the mind and keeping it connected is better than that which still involves placing the mind and keeping it connected. That's why I said there are two kinds of equanimity.

That's how a mendicant fittingly practices for the cessation of judgments driven by the proliferation of perceptions."

Such was the Buddha's answer to Sakka. Delighted, Sakka approved and agreed with what the Buddha said, saying, "That's so true, Blessed One! That's so true, Holy One! Hearing the Buddha's answer, I've gone beyond doubt and got rid of indecision."

2.3. Restraint in the Monastic Code

And then Sakka asked another question:

"But good fellow, how does a mendicant practice for restraint in the monastic code?"

"Lord of gods, I say that there are two kinds of bodily behavior: that which you should cultivate, and that which you should not cultivate. I say that there are two kinds of verbal behavior: that which you should cultivate, and that which you should not cultivate. There are two kinds of search, I say: that which you should cultivate, and that which you should not cultivate.

Why did I say that there are two kinds of bodily behavior? Well, should you know of a bodily behavior: 'When I cultivate this kind of bodily behavior, unskillful qualities grow, and skillful qualities decline.' You should not cultivate that kind of bodily conduct. Whereas, should you know of a bodily behavior: 'When I cultivate this kind of bodily behavior, unskillful qualities decline, and skillful qualities grow.' You should cultivate that kind of bodily conduct. That's why I said there are two kinds of bodily behavior.

Why did I say that there are two kinds of verbal behavior? Well, should you know of a kind of verbal behavior that it causes unskillful qualities to grow while skillful qualities decline, you should not cultivate it. Whereas, should you know of a kind of verbal behavior that it causes unskillful qualities to decline while skillful qualities grow, you should cultivate it. That's why I said there are two kinds of verbal behavior.

Why did I say that there are two kinds of search? Well, should you know of a kind of search that it causes unskillful qualities to grow while skillful qualities decline, you should not cultivate it. Whereas, should you know of a kind of search that it causes unskillful qualities to decline while skillful qualities grow, you should cultivate it. That's why I said there are two kinds of search.

That's how a mendicant practices for restraint in the monastic code."

Such was the Buddha's answer to Sakka. Delighted, Sakka approved and agreed with what the Buddha said, saying, "That's so true, Blessed One! That's so true, Holy One! Hearing the

Buddha's answer, I've gone beyond doubt and got rid of indecision."

2.4. Sense Restraint

And then Sakka asked another question:

"But good fellow, how does a mendicant practice for restraint of the sense faculties?"

"Lord of gods, I say that there are two kinds of sight known by the eye: that which you should cultivate, and that which you should not cultivate. There are two kinds of sound known by the ear … smells known by the nose … tastes known by the tongue … touches known by the body … ideas known by the mind: that which you should cultivate, and that which you should not cultivate."

When the Buddha said this, Sakka said to him:

"Sir, this is how I understand the detailed meaning of the Buddha's brief statement: You should not cultivate the kind of sight known by the eye which causes unskillful qualities to grow while skillful qualities decline. And you should cultivate the kind of sight known by the eye which causes unskillful qualities to decline while skillful qualities grow. You should not cultivate the kind of sound, smell, taste, touch, or idea known by the mind which causes unskillful qualities to grow while skillful qualities decline. And you should cultivate the kind of idea known by the mind which causes unskillful qualities to decline while skillful qualities grow.

Sir, that's how I understand the detailed meaning of the Buddha's brief statement. Hearing the Buddha's answer, I've gone beyond doubt and got rid of indecision."

And then Sakka asked another question:

"Good fellow, do all ascetics and brahmins have a single doctrine, ethics, desire, and attachment?"

"No, lord of gods, they do not."

"Why not?"

"The world has many and diverse elements. Whatever element sentient beings insist on in this world of many and diverse elements, they obstinately stick to it, insisting that: 'This is the only truth, anything else is futile.' That's why not all ascetics and brahmins have a single doctrine, ethics, desire, and attachment."

"Good fellow, have all ascetics and brahmins reached the ultimate end, the ultimate sanctuary from the yoke, the ultimate spiritual life, the ultimate goal?"

"No, lord of gods, they have not."

"Why not?"

"Those mendicants who are freed through the ending of craving have reached the ultimate end, the ultimate sanctuary from the yoke, the ultimate spiritual life, the ultimate goal. That's why not all ascetics and brahmins have reached the ultimate end, the ultimate sanctuary from the yoke, the ultimate spiritual life, the ultimate goal."

Such was the Buddha's answer to Sakka. Delighted, Sakka approved and agreed with what the Buddha said, saying, "That's so true, Blessed One! That's so true, Holy One! Hearing the Buddha's answer, I've gone beyond doubt and got rid of indecision."

And then Sakka, having approved and agreed with what the Buddha said, said to him,

"Turbulence, sir, is a disease, a boil, a dart. Turbulence drags a person to be regenerated in one state of existence or another. That's why a person finds themselves in states high and low. Elsewhere, among other ascetics and brahmins, I wasn't even given a chance to ask these questions that the Buddha has answered. The dart of doubt and indecision has lain within me for a long time, but the Buddha has plucked it out."

"Lord of gods, do you recall having asked this question of other ascetics and brahmins?"

"I do, sir."

"If you wouldn't mind, lord of gods, tell me how they answered."

"It's no trouble when someone such as the Blessed One is sitting here."

"Well, speak then, lord of gods."

"Sir, I approached those who I imagined were ascetics and brahmins living in the wilderness, in remote lodgings. But they were stumped by my question, and they even questioned me in return: 'What is the venerable's name?' So I answered them: 'Good fellow, I am Sakka, lord of gods.' So they asked me another question: 'But lord of gods, what deed brought you to this position?' So I taught them the Dhamma as I had learned and memorized it. And they were pleased with just that much: 'We have seen Sakka, lord of gods! And he answered our questions!' Invariably, they become my disciples, I don't become theirs. But sir, I am the Buddha's disciple, a stream-enterer, not liable to be reborn in the underworld, assured, destined for awakening."

2.5. On Feeling Happy

"Lord of gods, do you recall ever feeling such joy and happiness before?"

"I do, sir."

"But how?"

"Once upon a time, sir, a battle was fought between the gods and the titans. In that battle the gods won and the titans lost. It occurred to me as victor, 'Now the gods shall enjoy both the nectar of the gods and the nectar of the titans.' But sir, that joy and happiness is in the sphere of the rod and the sword. It doesn't lead to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment. But the joy and happiness I feel listening to the Buddha's teaching is not in the sphere of the rod and the sword. It does lead to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment."

"But lord of gods, what reason do you see for speaking of such joy and happiness?"

"I see six reasons to speak of such joy and happiness, sir.

While staying right here,
remaining in the godly form,
I have gained an extended life:
know this, dear sir.
This is the first reason.
When I fall from the heavenly host,
leaving behind the non-human life,
I shall consciously go to a new womb,
wherever my mind delights.
This is the second reason.
Living happily under the guidance
of the one of unclouded wisdom,
I shall practice systematically,
aware and mindful.
This is the third reason.
And if awakening should arise
as I practice systematically,
I shall live as one who understands,
and my end shall come right there.
This is the fourth reason.
When I fall from the human realm,
leaving behind the human life,
I shall become a god again,
supreme in the heaven realm.
This is the fifth reason.
They are the finest of gods,
the glorious Akaniṭṭhas.
So long as my final life goes on,
there my home will be.

This is the sixth reason.

Seeing these six reasons I speak of such joy and happiness.

My wishes unfulfilled,

doubting and indecisive,

I wandered for such a long time,

in search of the Realized One.

I imagined that ascetics

living in seclusion

must surely be awakened,

so I went to sit near them.

‘How is there success?

How is there failure?’

But they were stumped by such questions

about the path and practice.

And when they found out that I

was Sakka, come from the gods,

they questioned me instead about

the deed that brought me to this state.

I taught them the Dhamma

as I had learned it among men.

They were delighted with that, saying:

‘We’ve seen Vāsava!’

Now since I’ve seen the Buddha,

who helps us overcome doubt,

today, free of fear,

I pay homage to the awakened one.

Destroyer of the dart of craving,

the Buddha is unrivaled.

I bow to the great hero,

the Buddha, Kinsman of the Sun.

In the same way that divinity ought be revered

by we gods, dear sir,

today we shall revere you—

come, let us revere you ourselves!

You alone are the Awakened!

You are the Teacher supreme!

In the world with its gods,

you have no rival."

Then Sakka addressed the centaur Pañcasikha, "Dear Pañcasikha, you were very helpful to me, since you first charmed the Buddha, after which I went to see him. I shall appoint you to your father's position—you shall be king of the centaurs. And I give you Bhaddā Suriyavaccasā, for she loves you very much."

Then Sakka, touching the ground with his hand, expressed this heartfelt sentiment three times:

"Homage to him, the blessed one, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha!

Homage to him, the blessed one, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha!

Homage to him, the blessed one, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha!"

And while this discourse was being spoken, the stainless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose in Sakka, lord of gods: "Everything that is liable to arise is liable to cease." And also for another 80,000 deities.

Such were the questions Sakka was invited to ask, and which were answered by the Buddha. And that's why the name of this discussion is "Sakka's Questions".