

Study and Discussion Questions for *Early Buddhist Discourses*

Chapter Thirteen: Discourse on the Threefold Knowledge (*Tevijja Sutta*)

Study Questions

- 1) What is the nature of the dispute between *Vāseṭṭha* and *Bhāradvāja*?
- 2) Explain the Buddha's initial response to *Vāseṭṭha*'s question, that none of these Brahmins (or their teachers) have seen *Brahmā* face-to-face. How is this like the simile of the blind following the blind?
- 3) Explain the Buddha's second objection—that these Brahmins and their teachers see the same sun and moon as others do. How is this like the simile of the man who claims to be in love with the most beautiful girl in the country? How is this like the simile of the man building a staircase for a mansion he knows nothing about?
- 4) The Buddha offers several more similes/analogies to the situation of these Brahmins relating to a person's attempts to cross a river. Briefly summarize these.
- 5) What are the five characteristics of sensual desire? Why are these considered “bonds” or “fetters” to spiritual achievement?
- 6) What are the five obstacles? How do these hold a person back from spiritual goals?
- 7) In what ways are Brahmins different from *Brahmā*, according to the Buddha, making union with *Brahmā* unlikely?
- 8) In what ways is a *bhikkhu* who lives the holy life similar to *Brahmā*, according to the Buddha, making union with *Brahmā* likely?
- 9) What are the most important elements of living the holy life, according to the Buddha? Include a description of the four highest Buddhist virtues.

Discussion Questions

- 1) The dispute between *Vāseṭṭha* and *Bhāradvāja* appears to assume that only one religious teacher or one religious doctrine can be right. But is there only *one* path to salvation? Could religious truth be plural, as sometimes described by the analogy that there are many paths that reach the top of a mountain?
- 2) Is the Buddha right to question the religious claims of the Brahmin sages who have not seen *Brahmā* face-to-face? On what basis should religious teachers claim authority for their doctrines?
- 3) The Buddha's criticism of the Brahmin sages suggests a strong rebuke of the dogmatism in the Brahmin (Hindu) teachings. Is dogmatism justified in the case of religious beliefs?
- 4) Knowledge of the three Vedas was at the center of the Hindu tradition at the time of the Buddha. Brahmins who possessed such profound, spiritual knowledge were thought to have the keys to salvation. Many other religious traditions also place ultimate soteriological importance on the knowledge of sacred texts—often construed as the precise word of God. Is the knowledge and understanding of sacred texts essential to

- achieving religious goals? How should Buddhists regard their own sacred texts? Does knowledge of the Buddha's discourses bring salvation, from a Buddhist point of view?
- 5) The Buddha again criticizes the Brahmin's religious claims because they lack empirical evidence to support them. See question 17 keyed to Chapter Twelve.
 - 6) Would the dissimilarities between *Brahmā* and the Brahmins who possess the threefold knowledge preclude a beatific union between them after death? Do the purported similarities between the trained *bhikkhu* and *Brahmā* suggest the likelihood of their union?
 - 7) How is the Buddha's conception of union with *Brahmā* radically different from the conception of such union held by the Brahmins who possess the threefold knowledge? Why did the Buddha suggest this new way of conceptualizing union with *Brahmā*? Why does the Buddha retain the notion of "union with *Brahmā*" at all?
 - 8) The four cardinal virtues (*brahmavihāras*) of Buddhism are: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Why are these particular virtues singled out as crucial to eliminating suffering and achieving happiness?
 - 9) How do these cardinal virtues compare with the highest virtues taught by other philosophical and religious traditions?