

Study and Discussion Questions for *Early Buddhist Discourses*

Chapter One: The Noble Quest (*Ariyapariyesana Sutta*)

Study Questions

- 1) Briefly contrast the noble and the ignoble quests.
- 2) What does the Buddha consider as “dangers?”
- 3) Why did the Buddha “go forth” from domestic life to a homeless life as a young man?
- 4) Who were the Buddha’s early teachers? What important skills and knowledge did he learn from them?
- 5) Why did the Buddha leave his teachers?
- 6) Summarize the Buddha’s attainment of *nibbāna* (enlightenment).
- 7) Why was the Buddha reluctant to teach immediately after reaching enlightenment?
- 8) What are the five characteristics of sensual pleasure? Why do these pose a problem for the noble quest (i.e., spiritual achievement)?
- 9) Recount the simile of the forest deer. Who/what is Māra?
- 10) Briefly summarize the four *jhānas*. List (in order) the further achievements of the accomplished *bhikkhu* (e.g., the plane of infinite space).
- 11) What is the highest level of achievement for the accomplished *bhikkhu*? (hint: what is completely destroyed by the *bhikkhu*’s wisdom?)

Discussion Questions

- 1) This discourse provides important information concerning the Buddha’s life and his reasons for taking up the “noble quest” for religious liberation. What are some of the qualities of the Buddha’s personal character that stand out in this discourse?
- 2) The “noble quest” is the Buddhist religious path—how does it compare and contrast with the path recommended by other religious traditions? What major factors central to other religious traditions are absent in Buddhism? Is the Buddha’s emphasis on psychological ethics comparable to that of other religious traditions?
- 3) Seeking after things liable to birth, old age, sickness, death, sorrow and moral impurity forms the basis for the “ignoble quest”—the type of life that leads away from happiness and religious liberation and towards bondage and suffering. Has the Buddha correctly identified the main obstacles to religious progress? Are there other obstacles that should be added to the list?
- 4) Is it reasonable that a person can or should turn away from the factors of the ignoble quest?
- 5) If Buddhism is not grounded in theism (the saving power of a God), why be moral? In other words, what connection is there between living a morally purified life and religious liberation (*nibbāna*)?
- 6) The Buddha describes the *dhmma* that leads to *nibbāna* as one that involves “aversion, dispassion, cessation, calmness, higher knowledge and awakening.” How is such a description at odds with the descriptions of the ultimate religious goals in other religious traditions? Why is there no promise of transcendental bliss in an afterlife in the Buddhist

- tradition? With relatively mundane goals like “aversion” and “dispassion,” is Buddhism open to the charge of pessimism?
- 7) The Buddha was at first reluctant to teach to others the *dhamma* he discovered. Why? Were his reasons good ones? Why did he change his mind? Does one have an obligation to share such a discovery?
 - 8) In a curious (perhaps even embarrassing) encounter, the very first person the Buddha meets after his enlightenment, the naked ascetic Upaka, spurns the Buddha’s teaching. Why was such an encounter—which must be considered somewhat embarrassing to the Buddhists—included in the discourse?
 - 9) Many religious traditions suggest that leaving the household or domestic life for an ascetic or monastic life is an important (if not necessary) step toward religious goals. The Buddha describes this as “going from home to homelessness.” Is leaving the domestic life critical to making religious progress? If so, why?
 - 10) Are sensual pleasures really as dangerous as the Buddha seems to say they are? While all-out hedonism may be an unjustifiable extreme, sensual pleasures seem to be an important part of human happiness. So how can the Buddha justify his emphasis on restraining the senses and developing an “aloofness from sense pleasures?” What, then, of the arts (which often celebrate the pleasures of sense experience)?
 - 11) The higher states of experience recommended by the Buddha and several other traditions of his time (e.g., the four *jhānas* and the various planes) are the product of long and arduous striving and so not immediately available to most people. Is there any reason, other than the authority of sages like the Buddha, to consider such accounts of higher states of experience plausible?
 - 12) The Buddha often personified evil by referring to *Māra*, the Evil One (a Buddhist “Satan”). Should *Māra* be considered in literal terms as a real being? Or is *Māra* better interpreted as a fictional being or a metaphor?