

How To Construct A Sutta

Gil Fronsdal

2026-03-12

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So, hopefully, as we go through this, everyone can follow along at the presentation. But I can say a little bit about the genesis, the origin of my study of the sutta, which is that I'm very fond of this saying that I understood before: nothing whatsoever is worth clinging to. That's the way I liked it. And now I translate it differently, but I've taught it and just repeated it, and I thought it was really great. Then about a year ago or so, I thought, well, I want to find out the actual passage. Where is it in the suttas?

And so I found it in this text that I don't think I had read before, the text for today. And so I thought that was kind of a somewhat strange text and interesting. As I looked at it, I said, wait, this has this literary structure that I've been familiar with in a few other suttas. And as far as I know, no one's ever reported or written about this structure in the Buddhist texts. It's a structure that was first found in Homer in the late, maybe, eighteen seventies. They found it in Homer, they found it in the Bible, and then they found it all over the place in a lot of different cultures.

It seems to be particularly prominent in oral cultures around the world, and maybe it's a natural kind of structure for the human mind to operate under. I've seen the structures being similar to how rituals can be structured, that you go into the ritual, there's a pivotal point in the ritual where something happens, and then you return to the world again. And so it's maybe a structure that's deep in human culture, the human mind, that is being replicated in the composition of these kinds of texts. I think of it as a storyteller's technique. And so what we have here in this text is that the narrator of the text has a huge role in the text we have.

The tradition is that all the suttas came from Ānanda because Ānanda accompanied the Buddha everywhere, and Ānanda had a very good memory. So he memorized everything, and he's like the court reporter. So, of course, whatever was written down by Ānanda, that's how it happened. But that's a fairly naïve piece of orthodox teaching, that all the suttas come from the Buddha and we can rely on them so that whatever it says there is the Buddha's teachings. One of the things that stands out in this sutta, *The Shorter Discourse on the Destruction of Craving*, is that it has this literary structure, and it has a lot of elements that are the words of the narrator, not the words of any of the characters.

So now we have someone's creativity, and everyone remembers things in selective ways and presents them in ways that they want to present something, sometimes for a larger purpose. And the question is, for what purpose was this particular text composed? Some of this involved the Buddha teaching something, and so maybe Ānanda was there. But there's no evidence that Ānanda went with Moggallāna, this monk, to Sakka's heaven to see what was going on, to do his court reporting and capture it

and be ready. So how did he learn this, if it was Ānanda?

But more likely, what we'll see is this text was written many centuries after the Buddha lived. And so one of the fascinating things about this text for me is how it's a very clear example of something that could not have come from the Buddha's time. And so it puts a big question mark behind all the suttas. Do we naïvely accept them all as teachings of the Buddha, or can we find evidence for historical stratifications of the texts, texts that were written early, middling, or fairly late in the history of the composition of these texts? And how late were some of these composed?

The earliest really concrete evidence for the Middle Length Discourses, for example, as a collected body of work in the form that we have today, is not until some point in the fifth century of the Common Era. So about a thousand years after the Buddha is when we get real evidence that we can rely on for dating, that this book existed at that time. And so a thousand years is a long time for things to change. And there's a very strong-eyed wish among Theravādin Buddhists to believe that this has been unchanged since the time of the Buddha.

There's an interesting phenomenon that we see through looking at Chinese translations of sūtras, suttas, texts. And that is, we see in Sanskrit versions of certain texts that over the centuries they were added to and changed. But the Chinese, when they translated a Buddhist text into Chinese, tended to preserve it the way it was translated. They didn't change it anymore after that. So I did my dissertation on a sūtra that was translated into Chinese in the year January. But the Sanskrit version that we have that survives of this text, the earliest manuscript, I don't remember anymore now, but it's a text that was probably completed about a thousand years later, so the year one thousand, one thousand one hundred, or something.

And there are a lot of additions to it. It's changed a lot since January. And so in India, there's no evidence of what the text looked like in Sanskrit in the beginning of the Common Era, but that was saved in China. And what we see is that there were some ways in which staying faithful to a text and keeping it exactly how it was passed down was not something that people in India were particularly inclined to do when it came to Buddhist sūtras. When I did my dissertation, it was on Mahāyāna sūtras, and it didn't occur to me to apply this principle to the Pāli Canon at first.

I thought, surely that must be a fairly consistent, unchanged kind of body of texts. But as I've been studying it more and more, there's no reason to think that's the case, that the Pāli Canon is quite fluid in these texts. It just happens to be, very well might be, the accident or the coincidence of when it was written down, and when it was written down in a form that survived down to the present, or when it was selected by someone to be put into the Middle Length Discourses. And then this famous teacher Buddhaghosa wrote his commentary on that text. So once he wrote the commentary on the Middle Length Discourses, then it wasn't going to change anymore.

And so it's relatively stable. But there's been some change since then. To give you an example of how these Buddhist texts can change over the years even in the modern era, in 1954 there was this Sixth

Council of Buddhist monks to talk about the suttas, the canon. It was a big deal. The Theravādin monks came from all kinds of Theravādin countries, and they didn't want to come to Burma for this meeting until the Burmese had someone in Burma who could recite from memory the entire canon.

And there was one monk who took that task on and learned to memorize it so he could go to that council and recite the whole thing from memory. Then later, he started a school in Burma teaching this to other people. And so they met, and they reviewed all the suttas, the different versions they had, kind of to standardize them, I suppose. At some point during that conference, they decided that they knew that in the long discourses of the Buddha there is the *Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness*, and then there's the ordinary discourse in the Middle Length Discourses, the ordinary discourse on the foundations of mindfulness.

The greater one has a long explanation about the Four Noble Truths. It's many pages long. And that's absent in the version of the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness in the Middle Length Discourses. At that council, they decided that was kind of a mistake. It must have dropped out someplace. So they took the long commentary about the Four Noble Truths from the long version and stuck it into the short version.

So now the Burmese version of that text is just the same length as the one in the long discourses. This is an example of how people decide how to change a sutta, and that's how it's now presented in Burma, with that change. So what I'm trying to say is suttas change, and they're fluid. And they would probably, if I was going to venture a guess, at least ninety percent, if not ninety-nine percent, of the different versions of suttas that have existed in India down through the centuries did not survive.

Sometimes we have only one version that survives, and that's the Pāli Canon. Sometimes we have different versions that survive in Chinese, some in Gāndhārī, a language of the ancient Pakistan area. And so we have these ancient suttas surviving in different languages. But even the ones that survived are probably just a small percentage of what actually existed at some point. And so we have some texts, and it's phenomenal what we have.

To really understand what's going on there in some historically accurate way takes textual archaeology. And some of that textual archaeology is no different than an archaeologist taking a brush and slowly brushing away the dirt and maybe finding one little bead or one little piece of evidence from which they can construct the story of a civilization or something. So it's a little bit of a thankless task to dive down into these suttas. But to get some kind of historical understanding of them, it takes a lot of careful work. I didn't say that my study of this text here was as careful as it could have been, but for some of you it was probably more careful than you cared for.

So what I want to start with is that the text we're looking at is called *The Shorter Discourse on the Destruction of Craving*. And it has this famous line, nothing whatsoever is worth clinging to, being attached to. And it has a precursor, a prequel, in the long discourses called *Sakka's Questions*. Both of these texts involve the god Sakka going to talk to the Buddha. In the long discourses, the one there,

Sakka's Questions, Sakkapañha, questions of Sakka, the Buddha is sitting in Sakka's cave.

Apparently Sakka had a cave. And so he's sitting there meditating, and Sakka doesn't want to really wake the Buddha up out of his meditation. He wants to be very careful and respectful. So he asks a kind of *gandhabba*. A *gandhabba* is kind of like a heavenly musician, to go and sing a song to wake the Buddha up so that Sakka can go and ask the Buddha a question.

And you don't really get a sense, at least in some of the English translations, that the song this heavenly musician sings is kind of erotic. It describes the beautiful body parts of the heavenly musician lady that he's in love with and that he's hoping to marry. And he talks about his love for this woman to be as devoted as an arahant is devoted to the Dharma. In terms of the Pāli, it's kind of a wild thing. It's like going up to the pope to get his attention and playing the Doors and, come on baby, light my fire.

And so it's a little unusual. So it's kind of a fun, strange kind of text to have this erotic kind of song being sung to the Buddha. And the Buddha comes out of his meditation, is very polite, and says that was a nice song you sang. Then a lot more goes on, but then the heavenly musician says, Sakka wants to talk to you. And the Buddha says, sure. Then Sakka asks all these questions.

And the last question he asks gets a reply that kind of begs a next question, but Sakka doesn't ask the next question. So now I'll show you the PowerPoint slide: How to construct a sutta to evoke wonder and amazement. Maybe that's the purpose of some of these texts, so just keep that in mind. And then here is one of the earliest pieces of Buddhist art, or Buddhist art from the earliest phase we have it.

This is from Bodhgayā, where the Buddha was enlightened. So there are these friezes, these rock engravings that survive. During that time, there are a lot of them in some of these ancient stupas that exist and temples that were made. Here, I don't know if you can see my cursor, but here is the cave. It's relatively small. It looks like it has a seat inside of it.

And this is Sakka's cave. And here on the side, the person you see there is Sakka. And I think it's Sakka, or it's that heavenly musician. I can't tell what the person has in their hand here, if that's a lute of some kind. But anyway, so here's the Buddha. During that time, we don't know quite why, but the Buddha was not depicted in these kinds of artwork. So here it's an empty chair.

But this is the little cave that he was meditating in when the musician sang his song with his musical instrument, and Sakka came and questioned the Buddha. What I'm showing you comes from the first century before the Common Era. And the story in the long discourses, the questions of Sakka, was important enough in the Buddhist milieu at that point that they made carvings of it.

And here we see it again. This is a little bit harder to tell. You have to kind of believe me. If you see the arch here going all the way around, it's broken off part of it. This is the cave as well, and there's people sitting on the side here kind of worshipping. And here we have a throne, a seat on the throne. Again, they're not going to show the Buddha because at that era, the first century before the Common Era, they didn't do that.

So again, this is a picture, and it's called the Indra'sālā Guhā. *Guhā* means cave, and Indra is another name for Sakka. And Bharhut is one of the great stupas that survived from ancient India. There were lots of friezes, lots of carved images, lots of sculpture on the gates and the walls and different places. And here we have Sakka's cave again. So again, it was an important story at the time.

Then here we have the second century Common Era in Mathurā, another place of Buddhist art, one of the first places in India where depictions of the actual Buddha appeared. And here we have Buddha again in the cave. To the right here is Sakka, and to the left is the heavenly musician singing erotic songs, and he's holding his lute here. So this is an important story.

Then let's see. In *Majjhima* 21, Sakka asks to talk to the Buddha. Then the Buddha said and thought to himself, "For a long time now, this spirit," meaning Sakka, "has led a pure life. Any question he asks me will be 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, whatever you want. Tell each and every question you have."

Now here's Sakka's first question to the Buddha in *Dīgha* discourse 21. 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 other diverse creatures so that though they wished to be free of enmity, violence, hostility, and hate, they still had enmity, violence, hostility, and hate?" So these kinds of questions make the suttas timeless because some of these issues are current in our society today. So this should be interesting. What keeps people bound so that they're caught up in enmity, violence, hostility, and hate?

And the Buddha answered him this way: "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." So jealousy and stinginess are here identified as an underlying condition for these painful states that people have. So that's his answer. Then there's about fourteen questions and answers that go on in the text between Sakka and the Buddha.

Sakka's last question is this: "Good fellow, have all ascetics and Brahmins reached the ultimate end, the ultimate sanctuary from the yoke, the ultimate spiritual life, the ultimate goal?" And the Buddha answers, "No. Only those who are liberated in the destruction of craving are the ones who have reached the ultimate end, the ultimate security from bondage, the ultimate holy life, the ultimate goal." So here's the Buddha's answer. And it seems like maybe the obvious next question is, well, how do you do that? How are you liberated by the destruction of craving? How do you reach the ultimate end?

That question is not asked in the long discourse, but Sakka does ask it in 37: "How in brief is a bhikkhu liberated in the destruction of craving, one who has reached the ultimate end, the ultimate security from bondage, the ultimate holy life, the ultimate goal, one who is foremost among gods and hu-

mans?” So that last phrase is not in *Dīgha* discourse 21, but the rest of it is pretty comparable. What’s bold is the same. So in this shorter discourse, *The Destruction of Craving*, this is where Sakka finally gets a chance to ask the Buddha this question.

Now what’s interesting about these texts is that if you remember, in *Dīgha* 21 the Buddha praised Sakka for living a pure life. He asked a question, he’ll understand quickly, to great benefit. And eventually in *Dīgha* discourse 21, Sakka becomes a stream-enterer, or says he’s a stream-enterer. He’s like a hot guy, a good practitioner, any teacher’s wonderful student. We don’t get that impression of Sakka in *Majjhima* 37.

In *Majjhima* 37, he seems totally caught up in his sensual pleasures. He asks this important question, and then it seemingly has no effect on him. And that’s part of what is very strange, that Sakka is portrayed this way in this text. It’s almost like a satire, maybe, or it’s very pointed. It’s very different than Sakka is usually depicted in the suttas, where he’s much more respectful.

Why has Sakka changed so dramatically between these two suttas? Clearly, that’s a different milieu, maybe, or a different time, or a different reason. Sometimes I look at these texts and wonder if *Majjhima* 37 is trying to make a kind of satire or parody of *Dīgha* 21. It certainly seems like it’s humorous and strange. What’s the purpose for this? So that’s part of the drama that’s going on here, maybe.

So I’ve talked now for a while, and there’s more to do, more slides, and more talking to be done. But do we want to pause for a moment and give you a chance to ask questions or make comments on what I’ve said so far? Otherwise, it’s just too much information all at once, maybe. Yes, Cody.

Questioner:

I noticed some interesting connections in Stephen Batchelor’s recent book where he talks about the intersection between the Greeks and the Buddhists of India. He gives a little explanation as to why they didn’t, or why they started, depicting the Buddha instead of showing kind of the absence of him. And I found it interesting that you mentioned that this particular storytelling modality was something that was inherited from other cultures as well. So I wonder if, if this is a later addition, that was a result of that cultural exchange, the same cultural exchange that resulted in the Buddha starting to be depicted differently in statues and whatnot.

Gil Fronsdal

Yeah. That’s an interesting question. I never thought of it that way. I kind of assumed that it wasn’t borrowed from somewhere else, but rather it spontaneously arises in different cultures, this kind of thing, because it’s so pervasive and all over the world. But your idea, you know, it is found in Homer, which is very important for the Greeks. So is it a technique that maybe was borrowed from, because the Greeks were making their way to India, to the edges of India? They were up there in what’s now Pakistan for a long time.

So that might be interesting things to consider, but I don’t know how we’re going to solve that. It is very hard to kind of understand the origins of where these texts were composed. But there is such a

strong suggestion that it was probably composed in western, kind of northwestern India, so not too far away from where the Greeks were. Mike?

Questioner:

Is it okay to ask a question that kind of skips ahead a bit?

Gil Fronsdal

Well, you can ask, but if I have permission not to answer.

Questioner:

Okay.

Gil Fronsdal

Or to put off the answer until I get to it.

Questioner:

So your essay mentions that kind of symmetric structure.

Gil Fronsdal

Yeah.

Questioner:

And there is something in there about, so we hear the Buddha's answer twice in the audio recording and in the text of the translation. And when I was both listening to the audio recording and reading the text, I was surprised that when Moggallāna returns to the Buddha, we don't get it a third time.

Gil Fronsdal

Oh, that's strange. In the, I didn't notice that. They're reading Sujato's translation.

Questioner:

Yeah.

Gil Fronsdal

And so maybe Sujato chose not to include that because it seemed for him just too redundant. I mean, there's a patience issue among Western audiences. And the idea of repetition is not so, especially when you read it, why do I bother? It's like, I got the point. But if you're chanting and singing these songs and performing them, the refrain of a song is as important as the other lyrics. You don't get tired of the refrain.

So I think in the oral culture, there was a very different receptivity for repetition than we have. So I suspect that Sujato just didn't include it. Because it's in translation, it's also in the Pāli that I've looked at.

Questioner:

That was my question.

Gil Fronsdal

Okay. So it does.

Questioner:

Appear the third time there.

Gil Fronsdal

Yeah. All right. Thank you. So before we go further into this text, I want to introduce you to these texts that were mentioned as maybe precursors to *Majjhima 37*. There's one text in the *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, chapter 51, sutta 14, and the title is *Moggallāna*. At one time, the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvattthī in Migāra's mother's mansion. So that's the same place where the Buddha is living in *Majjhima 37*.

Now on that occasion, a number of bhikkhus who dwelt on the ground floor of the mansion were restless, puffed up, personally vain, rough-tongued, rambling in their talk, muddle-minded, without clear comprehension, unconcentrated, scatterbrained, loose in their faculties. Wow. I mean, this is serious kind of misbehavior. They could have just said there's a bunch of monks being restless down there, but they really go into it. It makes me, you know, it's kind of strange. The Buddha was supposed to be this phenomenally effective teacher who could just get people enlightened just listening to his talks, and here the monks who are living in the same house as him are behaving this way.

That's quite a story to tell. It's almost hard to believe that this is the case. Then the Blessed One addressed the venerable Mahā Moggallāna thus, "Moggallāna, your brothers in the holy life dwelling on the ground floor of Migāra's mother's palace are restless," and so forth, "loose in their faculties. Go, Moggallāna, stir up a sense of urgency in these." And the sense of urgency is a word in Pāli, some of you know, the sense of, like, we gotta practice.

"Yes, venerable sir," the venerable Mahā Moggallāna replied. Then he performed a feat of spiritual power such that he made the mansion of Migāra's mother shake, quake, and tremble with his toe. Then those bhikkhus, shocked and terrified, stood to one side and said, "It is wonderful indeed. It is amazing indeed, sir. There is no wind in this mansion of Migāra's mother, which has a deep base and is securely planted, immobile, unshaking, yet it shook, quaked, and trembled."

Then the Blessed One approached those bhikkhus and said to them, "Why, bhikkhus, are you standing to one side shocked and terrified?" And they explained what had happened. "Bhikkhu Moggallāna, desiring to stir up a sense of urgency in you, made the mansion shake, quake, and tremble with his toe. What do you think? By having developed and cultivated what things has the bhikkhu Moggallāna become powerful and mighty?" So here he has gotten those monks' attention. They really got shocked at the quaking and shaking. And so they have a sense of urgency, and they're ready for teaching.

And what does he teach them? How Moggallāna was so powerful and mighty that he could shake the palace, his psychic powers, what he had. He didn't offer them liberation teaching. It's a little bit

strange, I think. The rest of the text is all about what they should do to develop, or what it took to develop, these powers that allow you to use your toe to shake a palace. Probably none of you ever thought that you wanted to develop that power before, and now you have something to look forward to. It's one part of the Dharma to be able to do that.

So this story, including the palace of Migāra's mother, is very close to the second act of *Majjhima 37*, where Mahā Moggallāna recognizes that someone, Sakka, doesn't have enough spiritual urgency. So he decides to wake him up. He touches with his toe and shakes the palace and gets his attention so that he'll listen to some kind of teaching or do something, that he'll remember the Buddha's teachings. So it's very similar, except the characters are changed. And here now, instead of Sakka, it's the Buddha. So to some degree, all this change here, and Sakka is the same as the restless monks.

So it's relatively easy to see this story, Mahā Moggallāna, as maybe the precursor for the second act in *Majjhima 37*. It seems almost like the same story. And then in the *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, we have a discourse in book seven, discourse number 61. In Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation, the title of it is *Dozing*. Some of you, maybe, have dozed during meditation. Never. I think it's maybe accidentally happened to me a few times.

On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling among the Bhaggas at Sumsumāragira. Now on that occasion, Mahā Moggallāna was sitting and dozing. When I was dozing in Japan, sitting retreat there with the abbot sitting next to me, he was just, I was wearing Zen robes with long sleeves, and he would just reach over and yank at my sleeve to wake me up. So that was very nice. Teachers notice their students dozing and wanted to do something about it.

And so it says here, "With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, the Blessed One saw venerable Mahā Moggallāna sitting and dozing." So he has a kind of telescopic view that he can see things far away with his mind eye, and he saw that Mahā Moggallāna was dozing. Then, "Just as a strong man might extend his drawn-in arm and draw in his extended arm, the Blessed One disappeared from the deer park and reappeared before venerable Mahā Moggallāna." The Blessed One sat down on the seat that was prepared for him and said—

So here we have the same story where Mahā Moggallāna goes to Sakka in the same way. As quickly as a person can straighten out a bent arm, that's how long it took the Buddha to travel on this earth from one place to another. But in *Majjhima 37*, it's for Moggallāna to go up to the heavens to visit Sakka up there. Then the Buddha gets his attention, shows up, and says, "Are you dozing?" And Moggallāna says, "Yes, sir."

"Therefore, Moggallāna, you should not attend to or cultivate the object that you were attending to when you became drowsy. By such means it is possible that your drowsiness will be abandoned." So if you were doing some meditation practice, don't do that one if you got drowsy doing it. Then it goes through all kinds of advice about what to do. If that doesn't work, try this. If that doesn't work, try this. If that doesn't work, try this. It goes through all these things.

Then after he tries all these things, the Buddha teaches Moggallāna different teachings, like, “You should train yourself thus. We will not approach families for alms with a head swollen with pride. If you train yourself thus, we will not engage in contentious talk.” I don’t know why that needs to be told to him, but it’s good advice, I suppose. Then the Buddha says, “Moggallāna, I do not praise bonding with everyone whatsoever, nor do I praise bonding with no one at all. I do not praise bonding with householders and monastics, but I do praise bonding with quiet and noiseless lodgings, far from the flurry of people, remote from human habitation, and suitable for seclusion.”

So it’s kind of interesting. There’s a place for bonding, but you want to bond to a place that’s good for meditation rather than to people. You can have your own opinions about that little teaching. It’s a little unusual, maybe. It’s not really liberation teaching. Maybe Mahā Moggallāna was meditating in a noisy social environment, and he was saying, maybe you should go somewhere else. But Mahā Moggallāna was already a senior monk, and the whole teaching is kind of nice and practical and useful, but there’s no liberation teaching here.

Maybe Mahā Moggallāna was getting a little bit tired of being preached at about all the things you can do to overcome drowsiness. Then Mahā Moggallāna said to the Blessed One, “Briefly, how is a bhikkhu liberated in the extinction of craving, one who has reached the ultimate conclusion, ultimate end, the ultimate security from bondage, lived the ultimate spiritual life, and gained the ultimate consummation?” It’s a different translation, but it’s the same wording that we’ve seen where Sakka asks the Buddha that question, the same question. So here we have the same question again.

Then the Buddha answers like he answers Sakka in *Majjhima* 37, where the Buddha gives seven statements, seven steps, for becoming fully awakened. So here we have a story that’s very similar in parts to act one of *Majjhima* 37, of someone going to the Buddha to ask the very question that was not asked in *Dīgha* 21. Then the Buddha gives the same answer that he gives in 37. So this may suggest that this text here in the *Numerical Discourses* is the precursor, the story that was used to compose act one in *Majjhima* 37.

The fact that they’re using the same words and the same ideas is more than just a coincidence. Somehow these texts are in relationship to each other, and it’s hard to be really sure what the exact relationship among them is. But I think it’s fair to seriously consider that these two suttas that I just read to you are the material from which *Majjhima* 37 was put together, or something like that. So now we go back to the slideshow.

Here the Buddha gives, at the top here, “Only those bhikkhus who are liberated in the destruction of craving are the ones who have reached the ultimate end, the ultimate security from bondage, the ultimate holy life, the ultimate goal.” That’s the Buddha’s final answer to Sakka in the fourteen questions in *Sakka’s Questions*. And when he gives that final answer, this is what Sakka says: “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.’”

Going beyond doubt and getting rid of indecision is kind of a description of stream-entry. He really understood. It was really beneficial for him. Then he says, “Turbulence, agitation, sir, is a disease, a boil, a dart. Turbulence drags a person to be regenerated in one state of existence or another.” In other words, it gets a person reborn. I bolded this word turbulence, and you’ll see why. Turbulence is almost a synonym for shake and quake.

Then also in *Majjhima* 21, Sakka as a stream-enterer says, “I am the Buddha’s disciple, a stream-enterer, not liable to be reborn in the underworld, destined for awakening. 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 the victor, now the gods shall enjoy both the nectar of the gods and the nectar of the titans.” So we have *ojā* here, and here we have *ejā*, the long e. It seems very similar that these are very strong, important words here, the nectar of the gods.

This *ojā*, apparently, I’ve read, is one way of referring to *soma*. And *soma* was kind of a psychedelic drink that they had in ancient Vedic times. But then Sakka says this: “That joy and happiness of *ojā*, of this nectar, belongs to the sphere of sticks and swords.” It’s kind of more of the same world, the same as the fighting he had done. “It doesn’t lead to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment, to *nibbāna*. But the joy and happiness I feel listening to the Buddha’s teachings is not in the sphere of sticks and sword. It does lead to disillusionment, dispassion, cessation, peace, insight, awakening, and extinguishment.”

So here Sakka really has understood well, and he now understands what kind of joy is worth pursuing. It’s a Dharma joy and happiness that’s worth having, listening to the Dharma. He’s not interested in celestial pleasures anymore. This is very different than the Sakka in *Majjhima* 37, where he also talks about the battle that he won: “Once upon a time, a battle was fought between the gods and the titans. In that battle, the gods won and the titans lost. When I returned from the battle as a conqueror, a victor, I created the Palace of Victory.” Then he goes on and on to talk about all the wonderful towers he has.

So here you see a very strong contrast between these two Pāli suttas. In the long discourses, Sakka understands the Dharma in a significant way, and he’s not going to have anything more to do with sensual pleasures, with battles and wars. He’s stepping out of that world in order to listen to the Dharma because he’s become a stream-enterer. In *Dīgha* 21, the text presents Sakka as if this is his first visit to the Buddha, the first time he meets him, and that’s all it takes for him to become a stream-enterer.

Then in *Majjhima* 37, you get a very different Sakka. He’s not interested in the teaching. He gets this wonderful liberation teaching, but he doesn’t appreciate it. He doesn’t delight in it. He doesn’t comment on it. He doesn’t show his own understanding. He doesn’t claim he has some kind of attainment from it. Instead, he goes back right away and decides to enjoy the palace he built and the pleasures he has and the maidens he has. So it’s a remarkably different presentation.

So in 37, when Moggallāna realizes that Sakka needs a sense of urgency, Moggallāna thinks, “This spirit lives much too negligently. Why don’t I stir up a sense of urgency in him?” Then Moggallāna used his psychic power to make the Palace of Victory shake and quake and tremble with his big toe. I put in the word for shake, *sankampeti*, because I’m doing a lot of teaching about *anukampā*, which I’m translating as care, as many of you know. Here you have the same root word, *kamp*. *Kamp* means to shake. So *anukampā* is the heart shaking or trembling or something in the presence of other people and the suffering of other people, perhaps.

Now here’s Sakka in *Dīgha* 21: “Turbulence is a disease, is a boil and a dart. Turbulence drives a person to be regenerated in one state of existence or another.” So this idea of shaking and turbulence, really seen as agitation, is kind of emphasized in both texts. So that’s the slideshow.

So we have this unusual text in *Majjhima* 37, and the way Sakka is depicted is unusual. If people are familiar with the other texts, which they probably were from those slides I showed you, that *Sakka’s Questions* was fairly popular, was well known, and if there are lots more carvings in India that survive of that cave, then all the caves seem pretty small. When I first read *Dīgha* discourse 21 and the Buddha meditating in Sakka’s cave, I imagined it to be a majestic grotto, just a huge place. In all the depictions of it, it just looks like a little niche, a little cubicle, or something in the side of a hill. Not much of a cave for a great god to be living in, in my mind.

But I guess everyone was used to simpler orders back then and was a little bit humbler than we are today when we want to think of grand things. So now I’ll pause. We are at the hour, and so I think this was offered as a one-hour program. The idea was to spend another half hour with those who want to stay and take questions and discussion about this. And then I’m going to have another half hour afterward with a subset of you who have signed up for this new certificate program that we have at IMC, who are doing some kind of ongoing study.

So we have these two extra times if any of you want to do that. So let me turn it over to you first now. I’ve talked a lot. Hopefully, you could follow and understand a little bit more how unusual *Majjhima* 37 is. So is there anything that you’d like to ask or say?

Questioner:

Thank you, Gil. I love this sutta, *Majjhima* 37. I was introduced to it maybe a year ago. And I find Sakka of the *Majjhima* very relatable, much more so than in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, because he has what I have heard called palace-induced amnesia. I did not make that up. I need to attribute it to Ajahn Kovilow or Nissābo, I can’t remember which one. But I can very much relate to having profound experiences of hearing these transformative teachings and being like, yeah, wow, I really get it. And then I come back to my home, and maybe it’s not quite like amnesia, but it’s so easy to forget. So that part where he had that palace-induced amnesia, I guess I just love that term, and like I said, I relate to it very much.

But here’s the other thing that I think is very interesting, this chiasmatic structure, I guess is how you pronounce it, and how you pointed out that when Moggallāna shook Sakka’s palace with his toe, that

was sort of like the dramatic climax. Right? The tension point where you build up to that and then that happens, and then what? And that, for me anyway, ties into something that you didn't mention, which I thought you would, which is how the first time I read this, one of the first things that popped out at me was how basically the fourth tetrad of the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* is mentioned here now a couple of times.

The fourth tetrad mentions, I guess, what I think of as the liberation sequence. Right? The *anicca*, *virāga*, *nirodha*, *paṭinissagga*.

Gil Fronsdal

Do say it in English for people who don't know the Pāli.

Questioner:

So impermanence, dispassion, cessation, and relinquishment.

Gil Fronsdal

Yeah. And so that's in the middle teachings of the Buddha's description of how to become liberated, those seven steps. Right. Yeah.

Questioner:

That's the destruction of craving. That's what happens. And so it echoes that final tetrad of the *Ānāpānasati*, and I don't think it's really found in that exact form, maybe in one or two other suttas that I'm familiar with, but I think that's really significant. So I guess I'm just wondering what you make of that, or whether you have any ideas about that particular language of the fourth tetrad. And also how it seems to me, as a practitioner, not really a scholar, I'm kind of a scholar wannabe, but really much more of a practitioner, that the first part of that liberation sequence, the *anicca*, or impermanence, I think is maybe what Moggallāna was trying to trigger.

That if Sakka had really paid attention to what he was pointing out, then maybe it would have gone all the way through that liberation sequence to relinquishment. So that's, for me as a practitioner, something that I found interesting. Yeah. So I guess that's all I have. I know it's maybe a little bit obscure, but I also am curious about why you translated it as clinging instead of adhering, as Bhikkhu Bodhi did, whether there was a conscious decision on your part about that.

Gil Fronsdal

I think there was a lot you said. And yeah, I think there's definitely a literary play here between the middle of the seven steps to liberation, where *anicca* is at the heart of it, with the shaking of the palace. And I think this is maybe a literary way to give emphasis to the importance of *anicca*. Now they're doing it on a celestial level. I could imagine that the worldly audience listening to this would have somehow also gotten some vigor, also gotten a sense of urgency, to know about this tremendous power that Moggallāna has and feel awe and wonder and somehow get some urgency around that, maybe.

Now, in this essay, I gave a lot of thought to how to translate this word that I had been reciting to myself as clinging, “Nothing is worth clinging to.” I decided that clinging isn’t so good because the word clinging appears later in a different way. It’s in step number five. So I didn’t want to translate two different Pāli words the same way. I liked clinging a lot. I wanted to keep it.

Adhering didn’t quite work for me because in English, for my English, it’s too easy to read as if adhering means adhering to some kind of belief system, some principle, some doctrine. In my mind, adhering is associated with doing that rather than with adhering to my sense of self, or my hatred, or my greed. It just kind of doesn’t work for me. So in this article, I translated it as attachment, “being attached to.” I thought I was really happy to do that because in popular English we often use the word attachment, but this poor word attachment has been unused by most translators of Pāli texts.

It’s somehow an orphan word in the Buddhist translation world. So I thought that’s a good word to use. It kind of is a combination of clinging and adhering. It fits nicely in both. And it’s an underused word, so I thought finally we can give this poor English word a Buddhist role. So that’s the reason.

Questioner:

And then just briefly, I wonder whether you could speak to the fourth tetrad and that liberation sequence, and how it’s sort of repeated almost verbatim from the fourth tetrad of the *Ānāpānasati*.

Gil Fronsdal

I don’t think it’s verbatim. I think it’s the same words and the same sequence, but each word is embedded in each step, so there’s a lot of text that goes around it. My sense is that these four steps are repeated frequently in the suttas. They’re quite common. It’s not just the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*. So to me it was, yeah, of course, it’s there. It’s a standard sequence of a description of the process to awakening, and so I just appreciated it.

I didn’t give it really more thought, but I think it certainly deserves more thought and consideration, how it works and why it’s there. And the way that my mind works around the suttas, for better or worse, I am always wondering about what’s later and what’s earlier, what was composed in historical strata. The *Ānāpānasati Sutta* kind of, if I shake it, sounds like a later sutta that was composed quite a long time after the Buddha. The reason I think that is because it’s a composite. It’s bringing together, it’s unifying, all these different teachings that existed already to try to show how they can work together. I think that belongs to a later era.

So maybe this idea of these four steps is from a later era and speaks to the era when *Majjhima 37* was starting to be written. But that’s just pure speculation. Great. So then, Meg, hi. It’s wonderful to see you. Yeah, Meg. Oops. There you go.

Questioner:

Well, actually, I missed most of it because the time change was not nine hours. It was eight.

Gil Fronsdal

Yeah. I learned that this morning.

Questioner:

Caring for everything, so I didn't really hear most of what you said. But there was one thing that really stumped me. All the monastics that I know have really exquisite *sīla*, and they would never say anything that was remotely deceptive. And I find it strange that Moggallāna was depicted in the second act as using deception when he asked Sakka to relate the teachings so that he could hear them too. He already heard them.

Gil Fronsdal

Oh, my understanding is that Moggallāna wasn't asking it for his own sake. He just wanted to know if Sakka, he was curious, did Sakka understand? Did Sakka remember? How important was this?

Questioner:

Oh, fine. But then why did he add "so that I can hear them too"?

Gil Fronsdal

Oh, yeah. That's a good question. I like that.

Questioner:

It doesn't make any sense at all.

Gil Fronsdal

Maybe. I appreciate your concern. One possible justification is that in the ancient world, there were no books. So they regularly asked each other to repeat the teachings that they already knew so they could hear them again. It was a common practice because you can't go to the library and look up the book again. You have to find someone to recite it for you.

And I kind of think that part of the reason why the Buddhist liberation teaching appears and is used three times in the sutta is because that also makes it a refrain that really makes a difference in the audience. They hear it, they hear it, they hear it again, and then they're more likely to remember it.

Questioner:

Yeah. That I totally get.

Gil Fronsdal

Yeah.

Questioner:

Okay. Great to see you. I hope I'll be able to see the rest of it later.

Gil Fronsdal

Yeah. It's being recorded, so it'll be posted at some point and everyone can look at it. Yes. So then we have Scott.

Questioner:

Hi. Thank you very much, Gil. I had one question, but then something you said raised another question. So the first one is, I thought I heard you say that 37 came together, or it looks like there were aspects of two other suttas, and I missed what the numerical sutta was.

Gil Fronsdal

Yes. The numerical sutta is in book seven, and it says discourse 61. And the title in Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation is *Dozing*.

Questioner:

Thank you.

Gil Fronsdal

Yeah. And these are both referenced in my essay as well, so you'll find information there too.

Questioner:

Okay. Thank you. And the second question then was, you just mentioned that you feel like the *Ānāpānasati* was a little bit of an amalgam of earlier teachings, which I had heard before. But then I became curious. Do you have a similar view of 119, mindfulness of the body?

Gil Fronsdal

Yeah. I think so. There also, I think what we seem to have in the three *sati* suttas, the three mindfulness discourses in the *Majjhima*, the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, the *Mindfulness of Breathing Sutta*, and then the *Mindfulness of the Body Sutta*, what they have in common is bringing together different lists, different teachings, and harmonizing them, putting them together. It seems at some point there was a strong tendency to want to show how things work together, hold things together in harmony, in unity.

Maybe there was a time when there started to be less unity in the suttas and more argument about what the right practice is and what the right teachings are. We do know that in later Buddhism, there became a real heavy divide between mindfulness and concentration practice, *jhāna* practice. And I don't know if this is the reason that made 119, but there we see mindfulness combined with *jhāna* practice. So they're harmonizing those, bringing those together there. So I think it's part of that unification effort.

Questioner:

So this seven-step process starts with, I quote, hearing that nothing is worth being attached to. And when I read that, I thought, it's not that easy. It's hard to hear it. And so I'm wondering if there's something about either Buddhist culture or the translations or something that I'm missing that would cause me to misunderstand what they're trying to say.

Gil Fronsdal

Wait. So hearing that nothing is worth being attached to, that's confusing for you? Or are all the steps

confusing?

Questioner:

What's confusing is, yeah, I could hear this. Is it kind of leading to enlightenment? Well, no. Only if I start practicing.

Gil Fronsdal

Yes. Good question. Excellent question. So you better be ready to write this down, memorize it, chant the answer I gave you. You should probably go and spend three months doing the three-month retreat at IMS. Then on maybe the ten days before the end, have someone read you this statement: nothing is worth clinging to, nothing is worth being attached to.

Your mind will maybe be so fertile, so ready, so prepared to understand how this can apply every moment of your life, that there's nothing to cling to, nothing to hold on to. Your life has become so simplified in that retreat context that it's really easy to see the moment-to-moment flow of attachment and freedom from it. And you've heard nothing is worth clinging to, and now you're hanging out right there on the edge between clinging and non-clinging. It's all you need for the rest of this process just to unfold on its own. So you have to prepare yourself for it. You don't just go watch Netflix and then open the book and say, how does this work?

Questioner:

Ash? Thanks, Gil, for this. In that same vein of the seven things that the Buddha gives instruction in, in the middle of it, it doesn't seem like it's just boom, boom, boom, everything will happen. For me, I read the key piece in number four, where we're abiding in observation or meditation of the inconstancy of that which is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sensation. And I think that's the easy thing to forget.

The humbling thing about this sutta is that even the great Indra can be made to look like a fool as a consumer of craving, of these palaces filled with nymphs and so forth. So anyway, that's what I draw out of it. The kernel in there in the middle, the earth-shaking toe, is the reminder that we just sit and observe what arises and passes as a sensation coming in through the six sense doors as pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. It seems huge to that practice.

Gil Fronsdal

But the question is, do we have to intentionally direct our attention to observe this? Or after three months on a retreat, does that actually become what you naturally see on your own? Is that just the unfolding of it? But I appreciate very much both Michelle and you pointing out how human it is to get, even Sakka. It's kind of inspiring now to hear your interpretation. Even Sakka, who was a stream-enterer, can lose track of all this. So if he can do it, how much more us. So let's be really careful. Let's not spend too much time in palaces. Palatial amnesia. Is that your word, Michelle?

Questioner:

Palace-induced amnesia.

Gil Fronsdal

Great. Bonnie, from your palace there.

Questioner:

Hi, Gil. I'm really appreciating what Ash and Mike just said. I was so struck by the instructions that were given to Sakka about not being attached to anything. And then very ironically, Sakka was not even attached to the teachings. He just let everything go, but that was not the point. So it brought up for me the whole question of how does one hold the teachings? As you described, of course, the teachings hold you when you're on a long retreat. But in daily life, one doesn't grasp them. You have to find some other way of abiding with them. So my mind just began to kind of play with this holding and grasping and attaching in regard to the teachings.

Gil Fronsdal

Yeah. This is very interesting to hear. I was looking back at what I read earlier where the Buddha is giving Mahā Moggallāna this teaching on bonding. I don't know what the Pāli is. I want to go back and see now. But from this numerical discourse, the Buddha said to Moggallāna, "I do not praise bonding with everyone whatsoever, nor do I praise bonding with no one at all. I do not praise bonding with householders or monastics, but I do praise bonding with quiet and noiseless lodgings far from the flurry of people, remote from human habitation, and suitable for seclusion."

So when I heard what you said, Bonnie, I thought maybe there's a healthy bonding to the teaching that is not exactly the same as clinging. And that's not what we have Sakka doing, as you said. He just kind of says, great, and then says he has important duties to do and go hang out with his maidens. Thank you.

So then part of the challenge for people like me, trying to have a real wish to understand the historical layering of these texts and when they were written, is that it's kind of a fool's errand because it's so hard to do and really hard to do well. But if you try to understand when *Majjhima* 37 might have been composed, one of the things that we quickly see is that there's a really wide range of time in which it was possible for it to have been composed. We can't really know within that range. It might be, like, a six-hundred-year period where there's kind of a black hole in time where we don't really know where and when it was composed, and when it was composed in its current form.

Because these texts were changing so much in ancient India, some of these texts have so many surviving versions. I think the *Āṅgulimāla Sutta*, there are seventeen different versions of the *Āṅgulimāla Sutta*. Which one is the real one? Is the Pāli one any realer than the others? And it turns out that the *Āṅgulimāla Sutta*, the Pāli version, is one of those Pāli texts that's constructed as a chiasmus, the same structure there as well. I used to read the *Āṅgulimāla Sutta* and thought it was kind of a strange, disjointed bunch of vignettes.

Then when I saw the structure, I saw that it fits perfectly. It's actually very tightly and carefully constructed to be this perfect chiasmatic structure for all kinds of reasons. And, you know, there are

seventeen different versions of it. Some of them are very, very simple. So I kind of like to think that when you have this storyteller's technique that's used so beautifully, it probably is many centuries after the Buddha. It suggests a time when suttas were not just being recorded or written down or memorized among the monastic community as simply a way of organizing the Buddha's teachings, but a time when suttas were used in order to present the Dharma to a much wider range of people than just monastics.

Maybe a popular audience. Maybe there were storytellers who wandered around and told these entertaining suttas for the laity. What was the purpose of some of these suttas? It was to inspire people with wonder and awe. Back in ancient India, issues of power and awe, psychic power, were pretty prominent and interesting for people.

And so we see that this whole thing with Mahā Moggallāna, one of the precursor texts for it, the Buddha even describes what it took for Moggallāna to develop his psychic powers, and that's the only purpose of the text. It's just a short little text, and it's laying out what you do, as if this was an important thing. So here we see that in 37, after Mahā Moggallāna shakes the palace, Sakka's maidens are in awe and wonder at what has just happened. They express their wonder at the power of some monk who could do that. And then even more amazement that the teacher for Mahā Moggallāna must really be powerful.

So this idea of power again is something that maybe became more important for a popular audience, or an audience of people for whom maybe enlightenment wasn't so prominent as an interest, but spiritual power and what was powerful was of interest to them because they worshiped them, they got merit with them. And Sakka himself, as Indra, was a very important god in ancient India, and in modern India as well. There were temples to Indra. There were people worshiping Indra. I wouldn't be surprised if Sakka as a Buddhist god was present on altars or in shrines in some of these Buddhist shrine places.

He was adopted into the Buddhist worldview because that's what people wanted or expected, or because there was already a strong orientation around this god. So when was this *Majjhima* 37 written? How was it composed? I've offered you some ideas. I think the primary take for me is that this text was certainly composed in its current form many centuries after the Buddha, and it's a carefully constructed text. There was a lot of thought and care that went into how it was put together.

So we see that, and we see the craftsmanship of the people who did it. Some of it is quite beautifully done. What perspective does that provide us with the other suttas? One of them for me is to be careful not to assume too easily that any sutta you're reading contains the teachings of the historical Buddha. It certainly may, but I think we have to have a little question mark with us and be willing to look at these texts for how they support our practice, how they support our way of seeing and understanding in Dharmic ways and in ways that are freeing and liberating for us.

And be careful that we don't get too dogmatic, too fundamentalist, around this is the truth, this is what

the Buddha taught, which I kind of think is a non-Buddhist thing to do. Hopefully, this was interesting for you, to get this kind of glimpse into these texts. Maybe it's different than how most of you have looked at these texts before. So I thank you for listening and being here. Now it's time to stop because I said I would meet with the people in the certificate program for half an hour, and some of them have been doing a more in-depth study of the *Majjhima*, so they probably have other things to say.

So for the rest of you, thank you very much for being part of it. And maybe if there's interest in these kinds of things, we'll do something like this again.