DIALECTIC IN EARLY BUDDHISM:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE DHANIYA SUTTA
OF THE SUTTA NIPĀTA

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§1. Dialogue (samsāda) giving rise to dialectic is a general method of teaching
of the Buddha. Being derived from Gk. dialýoς via Lat. dialogus (lit. -word)
the term conveys the sense of conversation between two (or more
persons). Dialectic (Skt. tarka/aphāsa; Pali. akka)2 plays a very significant
role in early Buddhism specially in its philosophy of education. Derived from
Gk. dialektike (dian-between+legein-to talk) through the medium of Lat.
dialectic (a) it means a logical argumentation. Both these methods genetically
connected with one another are found in early Buddhism as enshrined in the
Pali Tipiṭaka. The Buddha as a Master of discourse has used them effectually
in his sermons (dhamma-desanā). Our purpose in this article is to discuss the
part played by dialectic in the Dhaniya-sutta.

§2. The teaching of the Buddha took different forms according to the
psychology and the reasoning capacity of different individuals for whom it
was meant. Thus, for example, he would employ ānupabhi-kathā, the 'gradual
instruction' with regard to certain human types. This means a 'sermon by
degrees.' It is a kind of step by step exposition of the ever higher values of
four subiects. The first of these is dāna-kathā or instruction on the efficacy of
dāna or charity. The second is sila-kathā, instruction on righteousness of
ethical morality. Thirdly, the Master would instruct on the results of the
above two leading oneself to the sappu or the heaven (sappu-kathā). With
this background the Buddha would preach on the magga or the path (maggakathā) leading to nibbāna, the cessation of suffering. The story of Brahmāya,
for example, is relevant here. This sermon occurring in the Brahmāya-sutta
of the Majjhima Nikāya (2.5.1) clearly depicts the four stages referred to above.
This method of teaching is found in many other places of the Tipiṭaka.3

1. While the concept of dialogue means a conversation between two parties, the idea of
samsāda conveys the sense of speaking (and) together (togeth).
2. The term tarka derived from tark, to conjecture, reason etc., appears to go back to
Indo-European *trek (ep. Latin, trivium, intrivium - trick, puzzle). Originally the word
seems to have contained the idea of turning and twisting (P. T. S. Dic., q.c.).
3. "dānakathānā/sila-kathānā sappu-kathānā kāmadhāna-samāññeyam okāraya saññitasahā sakkhamā
nibbānaṃ pakāsati, yassa bhagavā akāyā brahmāyo evādhammam brahmāyaṃ...ya buddhānaṃ
sāmikamakkhopā dhammaṃdesaṃ tāṃ pakāsati."