

Saṅghāṭi,kaṇṇa Sutta

The Discourse on the Outer Robe's Corner | It 92 /90-92

Theme: He who practises the Dharma is near the Buddha

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008

Introduction

One important difference between Mahāyāna and Theravāda (as teachings) is that while the Mahāyāna tends to teach more *Buddha* (as myth), scholarly Theravāda tends to focus mostly on *dogma* (as theory). Both approaches arrive at the common result of *intellectualism* (as often exemplified by the Prajñā, pāramitā literature) and *scholasticism* (found in Abhidhamma). Such approaches tend to become ivory-tower exchanges by the leisurely class members that can become so exclusive as to leave out most other Buddhists. There is a lot to talk and think here, but very little really for meaningful and effective practice. For, only when talking and thinking stop is there a beginning of a beautiful and focussed mind.

My point is that, if we do not to discount the early suttas, then we must admit that *they teach less Buddha and more Buddha-Dharma*. They teach less dogma, but more mind-watching; less of trying to define liberation, but more of how to attain it. Furthermore, the Buddha disapproves of hero-worship. One of the Buddha's first acts is to declare that he himself honours the Dharma,¹ and one of his last words is that when the heavens honour him with divine flowers and music, he declares that this is not the highest honour—the *supreme worship* is to practise the Dharma.²

The Buddha story begins and ends with the Buddha declaring that the Teaching is always above the Teacher.³ In **the Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2), the Buddha declares his respect for the Dharma: “it is also proper for myself, I, honouring, respecting, this very Dharma, fully awakened to by me, dwell in dependence on it.”⁴ The Buddha, in his last instructions, as recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), declares

“Ānanda, it may be that you would think:

‘Gone is the Teacher’s word! We have no teacher.’

It should not be seen thus, Ānanda, for the Dharma-Vinaya [the Teaching and the Discipline] that I have taught and explained to you, will, at my passing, be your teacher.”

(D 16.6.1/2:154) = SD 9

Arguably, while the Buddha lived, there was a “Buddha cult” around him. People were drawn to him simply on account of his charisma. They were attracted to him as a person,⁵ and attributed to him omniscience, and various kinds of powers.⁶ Understandably, he has given clear teachings to counter such notions of him.⁷

Even today, we see people attracted to teachers, simply on account of guru charisma, attributing various knowledges, powers and sainthood upon them. Other than their lives orbiting or chasing around such stars or comets, such religious groupies lead sadly empty lives. Where they *transfer* or *project* their own qualities and needs on to the guru figure, they would not grow spiritually. Or, they might falsely think that their weaknesses or inabilities are being *compensated* merely by associating with such bigger-than-life figures. Such an unhealthy relationship often opens itself up to abuses and scandals.

The Buddha’s message in the short but significant **Saṅghāṭi,kaṇṇa Sutta** (It 92) is very clear: *spiritual learning and growth do not occur in the external world*, not even in the physical proximity with the

¹ **Gāraṇa S** (S 6.3/1:138-140) = SD 12.3.

² **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16.5.3/2:138) = SD 9; also **Miracles** = SD 27.5a (8.5).

³ See **Gāraṇa S** (S 6.2) = SD 12.3 Intro (2).

⁴ *Tam eva dhammam sakkatvā garukatvā upanissāya vihāsīm*, lit “I, having honoured, having respected, dwell dependent this very Dharma.” I have rendered this passage in the simple present. (S 6.2.13/1:140 = **Uruvelā S 1**, A 4.21/2:21) = SD 12.3.

⁵ The most famous case is that of **Vakkali**: see **Vakkali S** (S 22.87/3:119-124 & DhA 25.11/4:118 f) = SD 8.8.

⁶ On the Buddha’s omniscience, see **Kaṇṇaka-t,thala S** (M 90/2:125-133) = SD 10.8 Intro (2) & **Sandaka S** (M 76) = SD 35.7.

⁷ For a fuller discussion, see **The teacher or the teaching?** = SD 3.14.

best teacher, but they occur in our hearts and minds. We serve the teacher best by following his good teachings.

A closely related discourse here is **the Gadrabha Sutta** (A 3.81), where it is stated that an ass may closely follow behind a herd of cows and regard itself as a cow, but it is still an ass, all the same. Even so, a foolish monastic, without training, may be closely associated with famous monks or great establishments, but he remains a foolish monk, all the same.

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The Discourse on the Outer Robe's Corner

It 92/90-92

This was indeed spoken by the Blessed One, spoken by the Arhat [worthy one], thus have I heard.⁸

1a Bhikshus, even if [91] a monk should hold on to my outer robe's corner, following closely behind me, step for step;

yet, if he were covetous, strongly lusting after sense-pleasures, with a mind of ill will, with a mind of corrupted intentions,⁹ muddle-headed, without full awareness, lacking concentration, scatter-brained, loose in faculty,¹⁰

then, he is really far from me, and I from him.

1b What is the reason for this?

That monk, bhikshus, sees not the Dharma; not seeing the Dharma, he sees me not.¹¹

1c Bhikshus, even if a monk were to dwell a hundred yojanas¹² away,

but is not covetous, the mind not infatuated with great lust for strong sense-pleasures, not malevolent at heart, with a mind free of corrupted thinking, constantly mindful, fully aware, mentally focussed, guarded in sense-faculties,¹³

then, he is before me, and I before him.

1d What is the reason for this?

That monk, bhikshus, sees the Dharma; seeing the Dharma, he sees me.¹⁴

This is the meaning of what the Blessed One said. The meaning here is spoken thus:

[Interlinear translation:]

2 *Anubaddho'pi ce assa
mah'iccho ca vighātavā |
ejânugo anejassa*

Even if he were to follow him closely,
but he is great in desire, and discontented,
one shaken by passion to those who are unshaken,

⁸ *Vuttam h'etaṃ bhagavatā. Vuttam arahatā' ti me sutam.* This is said to be spoken by the laywoman **Khujj'-uttarā**: see SD 16.14 Intro (1).

⁹ *Paduṭṭha,mana,sāṅkappo.*

¹⁰ *So ca hoti abhijjhālū kāmesu tibba,sārāgo byāpanna,citto paduṭṭha,mana,sāṅkappo muṭṭha-s,sati asampajāno asamāhito vibbhanta,citto pākat'indriyo.* As at **Jīvika S** (It 91.4/89) n = SD 28.9b.

¹¹ *Dhammam hi so bhikkhave bhikkhu na passati, dhammam apassanto na mam passati.* Cf §1d n.

¹² A *yojana* is the yoke of an Indian plough (J 6:38, 42). As distance, it is as far as can be covered by a yoke of oxen, ie, about 11.25 km or 7 mi (DhA 1:108, 2:13).

¹³ *So ca hoti anabhijjhālū kāmesu na tibba,sārāgo abyāpanna,citto appaduṭṭha,mana,sāṅkappo upaṭṭhita,sati sampajāno samāhito ekagga,citto samvut'indriyo.*

¹⁴ *Dhammam hi so bhikkhave bhikkhu passati, dhammam passanto mam passati.* Cf **Vakkali S** (S 22.87.13/3:120) = SD 8.8.

- nibbutassa anibbuto |
giddho so vīta,gedhassa
passa yāvañ ca ārakā ||*
- uncooled to the cooled;
he is desirous to the desire-free,
see how far away he is!
- 3** *So ca dhamma-v-abhiññāya
dhammam aññāya paṇḍito |
rahado'va [92] nivato ca
anejo vūpasammati ||*
- But he who directly knows reality,
the wise with final knowledge in the Dharma,
and like a lake unstirred,
not passion-moved, he is stilled.
- 4** *Anejo so anejassa
nibbutassa ca nibbuto |
agiddho vīta,gedhassa
passa yāvañ ca santike 'ti ||*
- He is unshaken to those unshaken by passion,
and cooled to the cooled,
desire-free to the desire-free,
see how near he is!
- [Idiomatic translation:]
- 2** Even if he were to follow him,
For, he is great in desire, discontented.
Uncooled, he is far from the cooled.
- see how far he is from them!
Shaken by passion, he is far from the unshaken.
Desirous, he is far from the desire-free.
- 3** But he who directly knows reality,
like a lake unstirred,
- the wise with final knowledge in the Dharma,
unmoved by passion, is one stilled.
- 4** See how near he is to them!
the cooled to the cooled,
- How near the unshaken is to the unshaken,
and the desire-free to the desire-free.

This matter [meaning] too was spoken by the Blessed One. Thus I have heard.¹⁵

— evaṃ —

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¹⁵ *Ayam pi attho vutto bhagavatā. Iti me sutan ti.*