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(Dullābha) Mahā Cunda Sutta

The Discourse by Mahā Cunda (on the difficult to obtain) | A 6.46/3:355 f

Theme: Fellowship between scholars and meditators

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Between philistinism and bohemianism

1.1 “Vague Buddhism” is very common in Malaysia and Singapore during the 20th century and early 21st century, when this note was written.¹ Vague Buddhism is characterized by such statements as “the Buddha said this and that,” without citing the scripture reference or source. In fact, it is common to see very free rehash or jingles, mangled out of Buddhist scripture, in popular publications and publicity materials, such as, “The Buddha teaches that you can find the truth in all religions...” or “You must not accept any teaching on faith...” without any citation. So such remarks are as good as shop talk or temple gossip. Scriptural statements need to be cited so that some useful discussion, deeper understanding and spiritual fellowship would arise from them.

1.2 Systematic and effective training in Buddhist scripture was amazingly rare in our times. Anyone who has read some books on Buddhism or attending a retreat by some well known Dharma teacher often qualifies himself (or herself) to do the same without any other qualification. Sadly those who are qualified with some Buddhist degree are either so few and scattered that only small groups sometimes benefitted from their efforts. Such qualified local Buddhist scholars also tend to move in their own parochial circles or only materialize in prestigious seminars, so that we cannot really speak of any “Buddhist academic community” in our midst.

1.3 Here is a typical story, fictional but based on my own personal experiences. Once I asked a Buddhist education officer from a local organization who was in charge of Dharma propagation what his Buddhist qualification was. His reply was that he had none, but that he was a “practitioner.” When I asked what he meant by “practitioner,” he sang a litany of well known foreign monks whom he had met and whose writings he had read! As a bonus, he added that he has a degree in some field. This is in fact understandable, as it is a popular local fad or perception that if we have a degree in any field, or that we are white Buddhists, we at once, as it were, are qualified to speak on Buddhism!²

1.4 Looking closely at such attitudes, it is not difficult to notice *philistine* tendencies in the “unqualified” Buddhist teacher, and *bohemian* traits in the case of rare local degreed Buddhist scholar. A “**philistine**” is said to be someone who despises or undervalues learning and spirituality, especially one who is materialistic, and unthinkingly favours conventional social values, and things that have a cheap and easy appeal. A “**bohemian**,” on the other hand, is one who sees himself as a member of a bourgeois (upper or propertied class) or elitist social group, claiming to special avant-garde or innovative talents, well above the crowd. Both are extreme cases of individualists who in reality misuse or abuse or avoid learning, and both depend on the crowd for approval and happiness.³

1.5 A philistine Buddhist is likely to make remarks, such as, “We do not need to study suttas, as the true Dharma is in our hearts...” It would be interesting to ask and discuss what the speaker means by such a statement, for example, how well acquainted with the suttas he is to regard them as unnecessary for spiritual development, or whether he has attained some high attainment outside the Teaching.

A bohemian Buddhist would probably promote only a certain teacher or teaching that he approves of, and also to entertain an audience that is deemed to be lucrative and unquestioning. Details are not import-

¹ “Vague Buddhism” is of course not restricted to the Malaysian and Singaporean contexts, where it seems to be common in English-speaking Buddhist groups, esp amongst those new to Buddhism. The term in fact became popular amongst thinking Buddhists communicating on the Internet in the first decade of the 21st century.

² This is not to say that there are no good foreign practitioners and teachers (of any colour)! They are in fact an important staple for the education and wellbeing of the local Buddhist community. For a more detailed study, see “**I**”: **The nature of identity**, SD 19.1.

³ For a deeper study, see “**Me**”: **The nature of conceit**, SD 19.2a.

ant; for, the ends justify the means. At the end of the day, some other worldly pursuits would have priority over the Dharma he proudly proclaims. Dharma is merely a commodity for a bohemian Buddhist, or a shining button to announce his status. Such a problem, of course, does not occur only in our times, but is prevalent wherever learning is a vital aspect of spiritual training.⁴

2 Burden of texts, burden of meditation

2.1 The (Dullābha) Mahā Cunda Sutta (A 6.46) gives us a brief but useful case study from an early post-Buddha period (notice there is no mention of the Buddha), when the monastic system was well-populated and well-organized, and when monastics had, as it were, a choice of electives between scriptural learning and meditation.

This separation of monastic training into “the burden of texts” (*gantha, dhura*) and “the burden of insight” (*vipassanā, dhura*), at least in terminology, is well attested in the Commentaries,⁵ but not in the Canon itself, reflecting probably even a later time (the commentarial period). The Dhammapada Commentary, for example, even notes that there were monks who spent the first 5 years of tutelage (*nissaya*) with their teacher mastering the two burdens. Those who were too old usually took up only the burden of meditation, living a forest life.⁶

The Dhammapada Commentary glosses the “burden of texts” as “the study of the Buddha Words by way of a single collection (*nikāya*) or two, or the even the whole Tipiṭaka’ (*ekam vā dve vā nikāye saka-lam vā pana tepiṭakam buddha, vacanam uggaṇhitvā*).⁷

2.2 There is another well-known commentarial set, that of the three true teachings (*ti saddhamma*), that is, those of theory (*pariyatti saddhamma*), of practice (*paṭipatti*), and of realization (*paṭivedha*).⁸ The first, “the true teaching as theory” is glossed at the Tipiṭaka or “three baskets” (*tīṇi piṭakāni*).⁹ Such a practice, as such, reflects a time when the early Buddhist scripture was well organized into its three “baskets” (*piṭaka*) of Vinaya, Sutta and Abhidhamma, which is about a couple of centuries after the Buddha.

The (Dullābha) Mahā Cunda Sutta relates how monks who are meditators and those who are Dharma experts are at loggerheads. Such an event is probably a harbinger of the branching out of the training into the separate burdens of texts and of meditation. The lesson, however, is a simple one: they should appreciate one another through metta-based fellowship. This is of course much easier when they are *engaged* meditators on one side and *qualified* Dharma scholars on the other. True fellowship begins when we have touched some level of Dharma whether through the stillness of the heart or the clarity of the mind.

3 Mahā Cunda

Mahā Cunda is the younger brother of Sāriputta,¹⁰ under whom he joins the order and later gains arhathood after much strenuous effort. He is probably identical with Cunda Samaṇ’uddesa (“the novice”), so called before he is given full ordination (*upasampadā*), but that appellation remains (DA 3:907). **The Chann’ovāda Sutta** (M 144) records how Mahā Cunda accompanies Sāriputta on a visit to the sick Channa and admonishes him against suicide (M 144.11/3:266). After Sāriputta’s death, Cunda brings his relics in a bowl and presents them to the Buddha, who then praises Sāriputta (S 5:161 f). From the nature of the problem, mentioned in the (Dullābha) Mahā Cunda Sutta, it is likely that this occurs after the Buddha’s parinirvana.

⁴ Further, see SD 49.8 (9.1.3.3).

⁵ VA 3:561; AA 1:37, 132, 2:40; DhA 1:7 f, 68, 154, 2:240, 154, 4:38; ThaA 2:101, 3:117; ApA 275.

⁶ DhA 1:7, 2:239, 240, 4:38).

⁷ DhA 1:7.

⁸ VA 2:25; DA 3:898 = MA 4:115; SA 2:203; AA 5:33; SnA 1:328 f.

⁹ MA 4:115; VbhA 431.

¹⁰ AA 3:379; DhA 2:188; ThaA 1:261. Hence, he is the elder brother of Revata Khadira, vaniya (“of the acacia forest”), the youngest of the brothers (DhA 2:189). For details on Mahā Cunda, see SIN: Cunda Samaṇ’uddesa.

The Aṅguttara Commentary says that Sahājāti¹¹ was a market town (*nigama*, AA 3:379), probably located on the Ganges. This is where Soreyya Revata meets the elders led by Yasa regarding the 10 indulgences (V 2:200). Here, too, Mahā Cunda gives another teaching, **the (Nānā,vāda) Mahā Cunda Sutta** (A 10.24/5:41).

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The Discourse by Mahā Cunda (on Dharma scholars and meditators)

A 6.46/3:355 f

[355]

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time, Mahā Cunda was staying at Sahājāti in Cetī country.¹² There the venerable Mahā Cunda addressed the monks thus:

“Avuso bhikshus [Brother monks]!”¹³

“Avuso [Brother]!” The monks replied in assent to the venerable Mahā Cunda.

Practitioners and teachers at loggerheads

Then the venerable Mahā Cunda said this:

2 “Here, avuso, there are monks, engaged in Dharma,¹⁴ who despise the monks who are meditators thus: ‘These meditators think, “We are meditators! We are meditators!”—so they meditate and are caught up in meditation.¹⁵ What are they meditating on? Why are they meditating? How are they meditating?’¹⁶

As such, the monks engaged in Dharma are displeased with the monks who are meditators,

and the monks who are meditators are displeased with the monks engaged in Dharma—

and so they would not be practising for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many,

for the benefit, the good, the happiness of the common masses, and of gods and humans.

¹¹ Sahājāti, vll Be *Sayamjāti*; Se *Sañjāti*; Ce *Sahañcanika*. Comy says it is a market town (*nigama*) on the Ganges. On the 10 indulgences (V 2:200), see **Money and monastics**, SD 4.19-23.

¹² Cetī, Cetiya or Cedī country probably lay between the Yamuna and the Narmada rivers, next to Kuru country (V 4:108 f; J 1:360 f). DPPN says that there were probably two Cetī settlements, the older one being in the mountains (probably the present-day Nepal), and whose capital was Sothi, vatī (Skt Śuktimatī). This was probably the Cetī that Vessantara passed by on his exile to the Himalaya (J 6:514, 518). A river called Śuktimatī flowed past a city named Śuktimatī (*Mahābharata* 1.57.32; cf *Rgveda* 8.5,37-39). Finegan, however, says that this ancient city might have been located in the vicinity of present town of Banda (90 mi = 145 km) west of Allahabad (J Finegan, *An Archaeological History of Religions of Indian Asia*, NY: Paragon House, 1989:94).

¹³ *Avuso bhikkhavo*, a vocative used by seniors or amongst equals in the order of monks. Buddhist monks never address one another (even amongst equals) as “friend” as some have rendered *avuso*. Among the Thai Theravāda monks, however, a senior monk with whom one is familiar is addressed as “brother,” and seniors address junior monks by name.

¹⁴ “Monks engaged in Dharma,” *dhamma,yogī*, which Comy glosses as *dhamma,kathikā*, “reciters of the Dharma.” The equivalent today would be “monastic scholars.”

¹⁵ “Meditate, caught up in meditation,” *jhāyanti pajjhāyanti*. There is a wordplay (reflecting disapproval) on *pajjhāyanti*, fr *pajjhāyati* (*pa + jhāyati*), to be in flames, to waste, decay, dry up; fig: to be consumed or overcome with grief, disappointment or remorse (V 3:19, 4:5; A 2:214, 216, 3:57; J 3:534 *pajjhāti* mc). See foll n.

¹⁶ *Kim h’ime jhāyanti, kint’ime jhāyanti katham’ h’ime jhāyantī ti*. When a meditation is disapproved of, we usu hear or see the expression, “he meditates, over-meditates, under-meditates, out-meditates” (*jhāyati, pajjhāyati, nijjhāyati, apajjhāyati*): **M 50.13/1:334 = SD 36.4 (pl), 108.26-27/3:13 f = SD 33.5**. See prec n on *pajjhāyanti*.

3 Furthermore, avuso, here monks who are meditators despise the monks who are engaged in Dharma thus:

3.2 ‘These monks think, “We are engaged in Dharma! We are engaged in Dharma!”—so they are restless, arrogant, vain, sharp-tongued, rambling in talk, muddle-headed, without full awareness, lacking concentration, scatter-brained, loose in faculty.¹⁷ What kind of Dharma yogis are they? Why are they Dharma yogis? How are they Dharma yogis?’

3.3 As such, the monks who are meditators are displeased with the monks who are engaged in Dharma,

and the monks who are engaged in Dharma are displeased with the monks who are meditators—
and they would not be practising for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many,
for the benefit, the good, the happiness of the common masses, and of gods and humans.

4 Furthermore, avuso, here monks who are engaged in the Dharma only speak well of their own kind, but do not speak well of the monks who are meditators.

4.2 As such, both the monks engaged in Dharma [356] are displeased
and the monks who are meditators are displeased, too—

and so they would not be practising for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many,
for the benefit, the good, the happiness of the common masses, and of gods and humans.

5 Furthermore, avuso, here monks who are meditators only speak well of their own kind, but do not speak well of the monks who are engaged in Dharma.

5.2 As such, both the monks who are meditators are displeased
and the monks who are engaged in Dharma are displeased, too—

and so they would not be practising for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many,
for the benefit, the good, the happiness of the common masses, and of gods and humans.

Benefit of fellowship

Therefore, avuso, you should train thus:

6 ‘Being **those engaged in Dharma**, we will speak well of the monks who are meditators.’ Thus you should train yourselves.

6.2 And, avuso, what is the reason for this?

‘Marvellous indeed, avuso, are these people, hard to find in the world, who dwell with the body in touch with the death-free element.’¹⁸

Therefore, avuso, you should train thus:

7 ‘Being **meditators**, we will speak well of the monks who are engaged in Dharma.’ Thus you should train yourselves.

7.2 And, avuso, what is the reason for this?

¹⁷ *Uddhatā unnalā capalā mukharā vikiṇṇa, vācā abhijjhālu kāmesu tibba, sārāgo, byāpanna, citto paduṭṭha, mana, saṅkappo, muṭṭha-s, sati asampajāno asamāhito vibbhanta, citto pākat’indriyo.* This list also in **Jantu S** (S 2.25/1:61 f), where its Comy explains as follows: “**restless**” (*uddhatā*) means of a restless temperament due to perceiving unallowable as allowable, what is blameworthy as blameless (in accordance with the Vinaya), and conversely; “**arrogant**” (*unnalā*) means puffed up with empty conceit like a fat reed; “**vain**” (*capalā*) means vain on account of robes, bowl, adornment, etc; “**sharp-tongued**” (*mukharā*) means rough in speech; “**rambling in talk**” (*vikiṇṇa, vācā*) means unrestrained in speech, rambling aimlessly all day; “**muddle-headed**” (*muṭṭha-s, satino*) means bereft of mindfulness, without mindfulness, forgetting what has been done right here; “**without full awareness**” (*asampajānā*) means lacking in wisdom; “**lacking concentration**” (*asamāhitā*) means lacking access and full concentration, like a ship caught in strong currents; “**scatter-brained**” (*vibbhanta, cittā*; Comy *vibbhanta, cittā*) means with wandering minds, like foolish deer caught in the path; “**loose in faculty**” (*pākat’indriyā*) means with open faculties due to non-restraint like when they were still laymen. (SA 1:115)

¹⁸ “Who dwell with the body in touch with the death-free element,” *ye amataṃ dhātum kāyena phusitvā viharanti.* Here “body” is *nāma, kāya*, “the mind group,” ie feeling, perception, formations, consciousness as opposed to *rūpa, kāya*, ie “the body group,” ie form (AA 3:379). Together they form the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k, khandha*). On “death-free.” see DEB: amata.

‘Marvellous indeed, avuso, are these people, hard to find in the world, who having penetrated a deep subject with wisdom, see it [rightly and beneficially].’¹⁹

— evaṃ —

Reading List

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¹⁹ “Subject...[rightly and beneficially],” *attha,pada*, “a right word or profitable word, often referring to the holy texts” (A 2:189, 3:356 = 4:362; Dh 100) (CPD).