

(Ahitā) Thera Sutta The Discourse on the Elder (who is unbeneficial)

[Even famous teachers can have wrong views]

(A 5.88/3:114-116)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2007

1 “Even famous teachers can have wrong views”

The message of **the (Ahitāya) Thera Sutta** (A 5.88) is simple and clear: Even famous teachers can have wrong views, and in addition to that he *has seniority, is famous, receives much public donations, is deeply experienced in the Dharma, and is very learned*. The wrong views of such a teacher easily and deeply affect the public (including the gods) to their great detriment. Then there are those who, merely on account of these last four qualities, attribute charisma to that teacher, so that they perceive him not only as “right,” but as *the only one who is right*. Such a teacher easily attracts a cult.

On the other hand, a teacher with similar qualities, except that **he is of right view**, would greatly benefit the public as well as the gods. In this case, the blessings of such a teacher serve to enhance his credibility and popularity so that his audience has even greater in the teaching. While in the former case, the situation is more *teacher-centred*, in the latter case, it is more *teaching-centred*, that is, the teaching is placed above the teacher.¹

The advantage of giving *the highest priority to the teaching*, that is, the Buddha Dharma, is our faith is rooted in principles of truth and reality, and we can ourselves further investigate such teachings so that our own wisdom deepens. Indeed, we might even become better than the teacher. “Green comes from blue, but surpasses the blue” as the well known Chinese saying by Xunzi goes.²

The (Ahitāya) Thera Sutta also says that a famous teacher with wrong views also conduces to “the loss and suffering of **gods and humans**.” How does this occur? Although wrong view and right view are as different as black and white, there are innumerable shades of grey and other colours in between. Often certain colours are confused for others, or we could simply be colour-blind in that we are unable to distinguish the colours at all.

There are also *provisional* teaching, such as the accumulation of moral virtue (*śīla*) and merits (*puñña*), which although not evil are only wholesome (*kusala*) when they serve as the bases or steps for mental cultivation (*samādhi*), which in turn is the basis for liberating wisdom (*paññā*). Doing good tends to bring us happy rebirth, or heavenly births as gods. But even these states are impermanent, and we as a rule “fall” from heavenly states, unless we have attained some level of sainthood.³

On a more historical and practical level, the (Ahitāya) Thera Sutta (A 5.88) is a vital warning that grounding in right view is imperative especially when we are in a position of presenting or representing the Buddha Dharma. The more people respect us, or listen to us, or turn to us for spiritual help, the more constantly we have to examine our level of rightness. The point is that status, seniority, fame, wealth, and learning, advantageous as they may be in Buddhist work, are not sufficient standards for truth. The truth must stand above the teacher.⁴

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¹ See **The Teacher or the Teaching?** = SD 3.14.

² 青出於藍，而勝於藍。qīng chū yú lán, ér shèng yú lán (荀子, Xúnzi, 300-230 BCE).

³ See **(Nānā,karaṇa) Puggala S 1** (A 4.123/2:126-128) = SD 23.8a.

⁴ For a study on the historical significance of **(Ahitāya) Thera S** (A 5.88), see **How Buddhism Became Chinese** = SD 40b.

The Discourse on the Elder (who is unbeneficial)

(A 5.88/3:114-116)

The elder with wrong view

[A 3:114] **1** Bhikshus, the conduct [the way] of an elder,⁵ accomplished in five qualities, is not beneficial for the many, not for the good of the many, not for the happiness of the many: it is for the loss and suffering of gods and humans. What are the five?

2 (1) The elder is of long standing, long gone forth.

He is well known, famous, with a following of great crowds of householders and renunciants.

He is a recipient of robes, almsfood, lodging, and support for the sick and medical requisites.

He is deeply learned, an expert, a store of learning.

Those teachings that are good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, both in the spirit and the letter [both in meaning and phrasing], that affirms the holy life fully complete and pure—such teachings he has learned much, remembered, recited verbally, investigated with the mind, and penetrated well by view.⁶

But he is of wrong view and deviant vision.⁷

Having made the masses turn away from true Dharma, he establishes them in what is not true Dharma.

(2) Thinking, “The elder monk is of long standing, long gone forth,” [115] they come to hold this wrong view, too.⁸

(3) Thinking, “The elder monk is well known, famous, with a great following of householders and renunciants,” they come to hold this wrong view, too.

(4) Thinking, “The elder monk is a recipient of robes, almsfood, lodging and medicine and medication,” they come to hold this wrong view, too.

(5) Thinking, “The elder monk is learned, an expert, a store of learning,” they come to hold this wrong view, too.

Bhikshus, the conduct [the way] of an elder, accomplished in these five qualities, is not beneficial for the many, not for the good of the many, not for the happiness of the many: it is for the loss and suffering of gods and humans.

The elder with right view

3 Bhikshus, the conduct [the way] of an elder, accomplished in five qualities, *is* beneficial for the many, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many: it is for the benefit and happiness of gods and humans. What are the five?

4 (1) The elder is of long standing, long gone forth.

He is well known, famous, with a following of great crowds of householders and renunciants.

He is a recipient of robes, almsfood, lodging, and support for the sick and medical requisites.

He is deeply learned, an expert, a store of learning.

⁵ “Elder,” *thera*. Monks of less than 5 rains (years of rains retreat properly observed) are referred to as “newly ordained” (*nava* or *navaka*) (V 1:47; S 1:9, 2:218; Sn p93; DhA 1:92); monks between 5 and 10 rains are called “middling” (*majjhimaka*) (D 1:78; A 4:22); those of 10 rains are called “elder” (*thera*) (V 1:159, 290, 2:16, 212); and those of 20 rains and above, “great elder” (*mahā,thera*) (J 5:456). The last-named, however, may apply to any monk with great wisdom (A 2:22). Comys often speak of the “80 great elders” (*asīti mahā,thera*) (DhA 1:14, 19; cf *mahā,sāvaka*, Vism 98). Distinguished monks are often referred to as “community elder” (*saṅgha,thera*) (V 2:212, 303). See V:H 4:xi.

⁶ That is, by his wisdom. Cf **Gopaka Moggallāna S** (M 108.15/3:11) = SD 33.5; (**Ahitāya**) **Thera S** (A 5.88/-3:114-116) = SD 40.16.

⁷ *Micchā,dīṭṭhiko hoti viparīta,dassano.*

⁸ *Iti pi'ssa dīṭṭhānugatim āpajjanti.*

Those teachings that are good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, both in the spirit and the letter [both in meaning and phrasing], that affirms the holy life fully complete and pure—such teachings he has learned much, remembered, recited verbally, investigated with the mind, and penetrated well by view.⁹

And he is of right view and not of deviant vision.¹⁰

Having made the masses turn away from what is not true Dharma, he establishes them in true Dharma.

(2) “The elder monk is of long standing, long gone forth,” they come to hold this view, too.¹¹

(3) “The elder monk is well known, famous, with a great following of householders and renunciants,” they come to hold this view, too.

(4) “The elder monk is a recipient of robes, almsfood, lodging and medicine and medication,” they come to hold this view, too.

(5) “The elder monk is learned, an expert, a store of learning,” they come to hold this view, too.

Bhikshus, the conduct [the way] of an elder, accomplished in these five qualities, is beneficial for the many, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many: it is for the good and happiness of gods and humans.

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⁹ That is, by his wisdom. Cf **Gopaka Moggallāna S** (M 108.15/3:11) = SD 33.5; **(Ahitāya) Thera S** (A 5.88/3:114-116) = SD 40.16.

¹⁰ *Sammā, diṭṭhiko hoti aviparīta, dassano.*

¹¹ *Iti pi'ssa diṭṭhānugatim āpajjanti.*