

## **Personal and bold**<sup>1</sup>

Occasionally, translators of early Buddhist texts come across some interesting and difficult Pali expressions that are baffling and difficult to translate. In such cases, we often see a clear difference between the scholars with their uncertainties, and the practitioners with their intuitive<sup>2</sup> clarity. For, all our technical learning and mastery of grammar may still not tease out the true sense of the expression. On the other hand, if we are familiar with the Dharma spirit and the saints' ways – in other words, if we read the expression and the passage with faith and wisdom – we are more likely to understand with fair certainty what it really means.

A particularly interesting Pali phrase -- *āsajja upanīya* – is found in at least 3 suttas.<sup>3</sup> These Suttas record how the interlocutor has just acknowledged some accomplishment of the Buddha. In **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36), for example, the debater Saccaka declares his belief that the Buddha is cultivated both in body and mind. In **the (Pāṭihāriya) Saṅgārava Sutta** (A 3.-60), a pious brahmin states that the Buddha must be endowed with psychic powers, telepathic knowledge, and the ability to teach how to cultivate the mind. And in **the (Mahā,purisa) Vassa,kāra Sutta** (A 4.35), the crafty chief minister of Magadha, Vassa,kāra. voices his belief that the Buddha works for the benefit of mankind, has control over his mind, is able to attain dhyanas, and has destroyed the mental influxes. In all these cases, the Buddha seemingly disapproves of the praises.

In all these cases, the Buddha's reply, according to Analayo (in his *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya*), thinks that it "gives the impression as if the earlier statements by his visitors were made in an ironic manner."<sup>4</sup> (2011:730 n222). Other Majjhima translators put it even more strongly. I B Horner, in her 1954 translation, renders the phrase as "offensive and presumptuous"; the Burma Piṭaka Association gives it as "taunting and sarcastic"; Bodhi translates it as "offensive and discourteous."

Even if we do not know Pali, but are familiar with the suttas and practise the Dharma seriously, we would wonder how the Buddha would feel "offended" or "taunted" by such inspired remarks of the speakers concerned, or how he would find such praises "sarcastic" or "discourteous." Our common sense intuitively tells us that such translations simply does not reflect the real situation.

Even without going into the grammatical and technical details of the expressions,<sup>5</sup> we can tease out its true meaning from the context of each of the sutta passages, and examine each of them

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<sup>1</sup> This reflection is based on "*āsajja upanīya*," **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36,10.2) @ SD 49.4 (3).

<sup>2</sup> Scholars often use "intuitive" euphemistically (sometimes sarcastically) to describe a practitioner's interpretation of scripture which they regard as lacking scholarly quality or approval. Personally, I think "intuitively" is the perfect word to describe how we, as practitioners, should read and reflect on the suttas -- with spontaneity and joy. To be unintuitive is to be unjoyful.

<sup>3</sup> The 3 are **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36,10), SD 49.4; **(Pāṭihāriya) Saṅgārava Sutta** (A 3.60,7), [SD 16.10](#); and **(Mahā,purisa) Vassa,kāra Sutta** (A 4.35), SD 82.9. There is a 4<sup>th</sup> sutta, **(Ceto,vimutti) Anuruddha Sutta** (M 127), where the arhat Anuruddha says this to Kaccāna, who is probably not yet fully awakened then. (M 127,17), SD 54.10.

<sup>4</sup> Analayo 2011:730 n222.

<sup>5</sup> Such details can be found in the translation of **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36,10) and its introduction, SD 49.4.

against related sutta passages. There are at least two other important sutta passages which give us a good idea what the expression *āsajja upanīya* means, and how it should be translated.

The first passage is found in **the Cūḷa Hatthi, padôpama Sutta** (M 27), which tells us of the meeting between the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi and the wanderer Pilotikā, who has just returned from meeting the Buddha. Jāṇussoṇi asks Pilotikā about the Buddha, “Do you think he is wise?”

Pilotikā replies, “But who am I, sir, that I would know the recluse Gotama’s clarity of wisdom? Indeed, one must surely have to be the recluse Gotama’s equal, too, to know his clarity of wisdom!”<sup>6</sup> When asked by Jāṇussoṇi why he is so devoted to the Buddha, Pilotikā replies that it is because the Buddha is able to convince any kind of audience regarding the Dharma – whether the audience comprises nobles, or priests, or householders, or recluses.

Pilotikā is saying that as far as true praise goes, only those equal to us or wiser than us can meaningfully praise us. So, too, it is only proper for us to praise others when we are wiser or more mature, or, at least, as wise as they are.

A second sutta passage that will help us better understand the phrase *āsajja upanīya* is found in **the Kāraṇa, pālī Sutta** (A 5.194), which recounts the meeting between the brahmins Kāraṇa, pālī and Piṅgiyānī, who has just returned from meeting the Buddha. Kāraṇa, pālī asks Piṅgiyānī the same question about the Buddha, “Do you think he is wise?”

Piṅgiyānī replies that we must be as wise as the Buddha, or perhaps wiser, to praise him. In other words, if we, who are not awakened like the Buddha, were to praise him, it is an empty praise, being presumptuous, or even disrespecting him. When asked why he is so devoted to the Buddha, Piṅgiyānī replies that he finds the Dharma to be like excellent food – satisfying, filling, and fragrant -- and cooling like a delightful lotus pond on a hot day. In short, the Dharma is good in every way for him.<sup>7</sup>

These two passages teach us to be wary of praises and praising. Before we praise someone we should really know the person, his quality and ability (there is, of course, the chance that we may be wrong). The Sutta describes both Pilotikā and Piṅgiyānī as being deeply respectful of the Buddha that they do not dare vainly praise the Buddha, lest they are misperceived as being better than he.

These two passages give us the disciples’ or “public” side of the practice of praising. Now, we go back to the Buddha’s own response to praises, as already noted at the start. In the 4 Suttas cited, we see the Buddha rejecting the praises from others. He is not like a God or god who is perceived by believers to need or demand praises and worship from others. If we praise God, for example, are we not presuming that we know better than God?

In **the (Majjhima) Sappurisa Sutta** (M 113), the Buddha instructs on the qualities of the true individual and the false empty person, and the nature of praises.<sup>8</sup> On a simple level, a truly wise parent or teacher’s praise is well worth it, if he actually brings the best out of others. Conversely, it behooves us to praise our children, students and charge, when we know them really well,

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<sup>6</sup> M 27,2.4-6 @ [SD 40a.5](#).

<sup>7</sup> A 5.194,1.4+5 @ [SD 45.11](#).

<sup>8</sup> M 113 @ [SD 23.7](#).

for their benefit. Otherwise, beware of those who praise us: are they simply being personal and bold, presuming to know us better than we know ourselves.

The correct translation of *āsajja upanīya* here then would be something like, “personal and bold.” The Buddha tells those who praise him here as being “personal and bold.” We do not imagine the Buddha here as feeling taunted, offended or even annoyed in anyway. He is merely telling his praisers not to presume things. “Do you really know me to say such praises?” How can they really know the Buddha when they have not yet cultivated the Dharma to fruition themselves?<sup>9</sup>

Only a saint will truly know another saint, or an arhat may truly know another.<sup>10</sup> The Buddha is the first arhat, and he is able to know anyone’s virtue and personality as he wishes. Hence, his praise or rebuke, and his teachings, are true and beneficial for us. In other words, we are reminded to be worthy of praising others, especially those we see as being praiseworthy!

The Buddha, however, is a truly compassionate teacher. For, even though the questioner is presumptuous, still the Buddha declares to Saccaka, “Surely, these words spoken are rather personal and bold, but I shall nevertheless explain (the Dharma) to you.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, it is not wrong to conclude (and to reflect on) the reminder: Before we praise others, let us examine if we are ourself worthy of praise and of praising others. And we need to reflect on this as often as possible – and be surprised by the insights that arise from it over time.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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<sup>9</sup> In **Sampasādanīya Sutta** (D 28), when Sāriputta praises the Buddha, he asks Sāriputta whether he has known all the Buddhas of the past, the future, and the present one. Sāriputta replies that he does so keeping to “the drift of the Dharma” (*dhamm’anvaya*), meaning that he understands the Dharma as an arhat, an awakened being, himself (D 28,1+2), [SD 14.14](#).

<sup>10</sup> On the impartiality of one saint to another, see (**Saṅgha**) **Bala Sutta** (A 9.5,6(4)), [SD 2.21](#).

<sup>11</sup> **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36,10.2), SD 49.4.