Sabbhi Sutta
The Discourse on the Good | S 1.31/1:16-18
Theme: Associating with the good
Translated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2010

1 Introduction

1.1 THE SABBHI SUTTA VERSES. The verses of the Sabbhi Sutta (S 1.31), each spoken by a devata, appear verbatim in the Siva Sutta (S 2.21), where all these verses are spoken by the devaputra Siva alone, with the Buddha giving the same answer.1 These verses must be ancient, coming from a common floating stock of popular sayings or gnomes (short pithy saying expressing a general truth).

1.2 MEANING OF SABBHI. Sabbhi is an anomalous form, that is, the instrumental or ablative plural2 of santa (adj “being, good, wise”). However, it can also be used as in the dative (giving) case, as in S 384 = Dh 151 and the Sanskrit Udāna Varga 1.28. As noted below [2.2], both sat (= santa) and sabbhi occur in this verse.

2 Origin story

2.1 THE SHIP OF 700. The Satullapakāyikā are a class of devas in the heaven of the Thirty-three (tāvatiṁsa). The Saṁyutta contains a whole group of suttas3 which recount how some of these devas visit the Buddha, asking him several questions on different topics or uttering various aphorisms in verse.

According to Buddhaghosa (SA 1:54 f), in a previous birth, they are a merchant ship’s crew. Their ship, carrying 700 men, is caught in a terrible storm, and is on the verge of sinking. They each began praying invoking their respective gods. One of them, however, sits calmly “like a yogi” in the middle of the panic-stricken crew. When the terrified crew asks him why he is untroubled, he replies that he is recalling the good deeds he has done just before the voyage. Since this would assure him of a happy rebirth, he has no fear.

The others then seek his guidance. He divides them into seven groups of one hundred each, and, above the storm, shouts the three refuges and the five precepts to them, exhorting them to only reflect on moral virtue which would be their refuge.

2.2 MEANING OF SATULLAPA. The shipmates keep to the precepts as the waters rise and swallow up their ship. They are reborn in Sakra’s heaven, each with his own celestial palace (vimāna). Their teacher has a golden palace a hundred yojanas in the middle of the others. Hence, they are called Satullapā because they shout the precepts in groups of one hundred (sata ullapā). As soon as they arise there, they realize the reason for their happiness. Then they visit the Buddha to praise their wise teacher. (SA 1:54 f)

Satullapā can also be resolved as sat (= sant) + ullapa, “shouting out the good.”4 Sant is the present participle of atthi (“it is”), meaning “being, existing,” and also has the sense of “good, true.”5 We see both sat and sabbhi (from the title) [1.2] used in this verse from the Jarā Maraṇā Sutta (S 384) and the Dhammapada:

Jīranti ve rāja,rathā sucittā
atho sarīram pi jaraṁ upeti
sataṁ ca dhammo na jaram upeti
santo have sabbhi pavedayanti.

The rajah’s well-crafted chariots wear out, like them, the body, too, goes on to decay, but the true [good] Dharma decays not, the good, indeed, declare it to the good.

(S 384/3.3/1:71 = Dh 151) = Uv 1.287

1 S 2.21/1:56 f.
2 DPL 461, santo; but at S 384d = Dh 151d, it is used as a dative: see Dh:G(B) 228 n160; Dh:N 100 n151; cf S:B 400 n207.
3 S 1.31-40/116-31.
4 Bodhi tr satullapppp somewhat freely as “extolling the good”: see S:B 363 n59.
5 D 1:61, 152; A 1:176; It 62 f; Sn 98, 124.
6 S 1:17; Dh 151.
7 For discussions on sabbhi, see Dh:G(B) 228 n160; Dh:N 100 n151; S:B 400 n207.

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Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anāthapiṇḍika’s park in Jeta’s grove near Sāvatthī.

Then, when the night had passed, a number of devatas of the Satullapa host, of surpassing beauty, lighting up the whole of Jeta’s grove, approached the Blessed One, saluted him and stood at one side.

Then, one devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Buddha:

Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha
sabbhi kubbetha santhavāṁ
sataṁ saddhammam-aññāya
seyyo hoti na pāpiyō ti.

Let one associate only with the good,
to the good be close:
through knowing the true Dharma,
one is better, not worse.

And then, another devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Buddha:

Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha
sabbhi kubbetha santhavāṁ
sataṁ saddhammam-aññāya
paññā labbhati nâññatō ti.

Let one associate only with the good,
to the good be close:
through knowing the true Dharma,
one gains wisdom, not from another.

And then, another devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Buddha:

Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha
sabbhi kubbetha santhavāṁ
sataṁ saddhammam-aññāya
soka,majjhe na socatī ti.

Let one associate only with the good,
to the good be close:
through knowing the true Dharma,
one sorrows not amongst the sorrowful.

And then, another devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Buddha:

Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha,
sabbhi kubbetha santhavāṁ
sataṁ saddhammam-aññāya
nāti,majjhe virocatī ti.

Let one associate only with the good,
to the good be close:
through knowing the true Dharma,
one shines in the midst of relatives.

And then, another devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Buddha:

Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha
sabbhi kubbetha santhavāṁ
sataṁ saddhammam-aññāya
sattā gacchanti suggatin ti.

Let one associate only with the good,
to the good be close:
through knowing the true Dharma,
beings go to heaven.

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8 Satullapa, kāyika: see Intro (1.1). The verses of this discourses appear verbatim in Siva S (S 2.21), where all the devatas’ verses are spoken by the devaputra Siva alone, with the Buddha giving the same reply (S 2.21/1:56 f).

9 This verse recurs in Mahā Suta, soma J (J 537/5:483)

10 Comy: Just as oil is not obtained from sand, even so wisdom does not come from another (aññato), from a blind fool. Just as oil is obtained from sesamum seeds, even so wisdom comes from knowing the true Dharma and by associating with a wise person. (SA 1:56)
And then, another devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Buddha:

\[
\text{Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha} \quad \text{Let one associate only with the good,}
\text{sabbhi kubbetha santhavaṁ} \quad \text{to the good be close:}
\text{sataṁ saddhammam-aññāya} \quad \text{through knowing the true Dharma,}
\text{sattā tiṭṭhati sātatan ti.} \quad \text{beings abide happily.}^{11}
\]

Then, another devata said this to the Blessed One:

"Which one, Blessed One, is well spoken?"

“You have all spoken well, each in your own way; but listen to me, too: \[18\]

\[
\text{Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha} \quad \text{Let one associate only with the good,}
\text{sabbhi kubbetha santhavaṁ} \quad \text{to the good be close:}
\text{sataṁ saddhammam-aññāya} \quad \text{through knowing the true Dharma,}
\text{sabba,dukkhā pamuccatī ti.} \quad \text{one is free from all suffering.”}^{84}
\]

The Blessed One said this. The devatas, joyful, saluted the Blessed One, circumambulated him rightwise, and then disappeared right there.\[15\]

— evam —

100922; 100923

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11 Comy takes sātataṁ as an adv from satata, “continually,” which clearly does not fit the context. Here I follow Bodhi, who takes sātataṁ (“happily”) to be an adj adv from the abstract n of sāta, “pleasant, agreeable.”

12 “In a way,” pariyāyena, which Comy glosses as kāraṇena, “for a reason,” reflecting a late sense, which does not apply here. In the suttas, pariyāya has a simple sense of “in a way, in a manner of speaking,” ie, their verses are only provisionally true, correct only in a mundane way. The Buddha’s verse, on the other hand, is definitive (nippa-riyāyena) as it directly points to true reality. See Pariyāya nippariyāya = SD 68.2.

13 This closing para in Ee.

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