

23

Sarabha Sutta

The Discourse to Sarabha | A 3.64

Theme: A wanderer tries to degrade the Dharma and the Buddha's response

Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

1 Summary and highlights

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND SIGNIFICANCE

1.1.1 The Sarabha Sutta (A 3.64) is an interesting study on how the Buddha deals with a malicious ex-monk, a wanderer “infiltrator,” who claims to have understood Buddha Dharma, and disillusioned by it, has given up the training to return to being a wanderer [§3]. Then, he goes on to publicly undermine the Dharma-Vinaya [§4]. But there is more than meets the eye. [\[1.1.2\]](#)

1.1.2 At first blush, the Sarabha Sutta seems to report a case of attempted **religious sabotage** by some ungratified wanderers, more concerned with material gains and worldly success than with spiritual truth and liberation. We are reminded of the obtrusive and dishonest religious polemics of triumphalist evangelists of our own times in belittling other religions and encroaching on others' faith under the pretext of their “religious duty” to spread “the Word” to save the world. Just as worrisome, however, is the steadily growing numbers of such sects and groups, piously and deviously seeking to carve out material gains from the world for “God, glory and gold.” [\[1.1.3\]](#)

1.1.3 Underpinning the narrative of Sarabha Sutta is the theme of **religious economics**, especially that of the quest for wealth and domination by a religious group. The popularity of the Buddha in terms of his personal conduct and effective teachings, and the noble examples of most of his early monastics, won the respect and, with that, patronage, of the masses, especially the wealthy and the powerful.

The key problem here is that religion is seen as a means of social control and as a cash-cow instead of being *a path of spiritual liberation*. While sectarian faiths tend to look to the crowd for its success, early Buddhism focuses on liberation of **the individual**¹ as the foundation of a wholesome society that values beauty and truth in life, and pervaded by spirituality.²

1.2 THE “3 OUTCOMES” [§34]

1.2.1 The Pali of the “3 outcomes”

1.2.1.1 Section 34 of the Sarabha Sutta [§34] deals with what it calls the “3 outcomes” (*tiṇṇam thānānam*) of not answering the Buddha when he asks a fair question [\[1.2.2\]](#). We only know there are 3 separate statements from the Pali passages. However, unlike English, there is almost no punctuation marks, as evident in these passages as shown below [\[1.2.1.4\]](#).

However, we can often know phrases or even where a sentence, quote or idea ends by the close quote, *iti* or *'ti* in short. However, often the sentences can be very long in the absence of commas, semicolons and full stops in Pali. (Editors, however, are sometimes kind enough to add these for us, but this is a modernism.)

¹ On true individuality, see **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

² On beauty and truth as the pillars of early Buddhist spirituality, see SD 40a.1 (8.1.2).

Particles like *vā*, usually translated as “or” (as a disjunctive), and *ca*, usually translated as “and” (as a conjunctive), do not always translate so in English. Even the particle *pi* is famously polysemic—as many important Pali words are³—and can mean “also, even (so), but,” and so on. We need to read their context, and translate them *contextually* into good idiomatic English.

Then again, when these particles appear as part of a compound (there are often a number of them in a Pali sentence), we have to decide whether to read it as *vā* (“or”), or as *va or eva* (both of them showing emphasis (the latter can also mean “merely” and so on), or as *iva* (comparative “like ...”). We also need to identify *pi* (“too,” etc) or *api* (“moreover, further, later (*api ratte*, “later in the night’),” etc). It also helps to remember that all these particles are enclitic: they hang on after a word and are never found independently at the start of a sentence or phrase.

1.2.1.2 An important reason for such an odd Pali idiosyncrasy (“odd” by our modern English standards) is because Pali was originally an oral language.⁴ It is a very harmoniously sounding language—especially with its feature of “euphonic combinations” or *sandhi*). In other words, all the particles we mentioned are euphonic inserted especially with key words, partly to highlight them, but mostly to give a euphonic flow suitable for chanting, almost like singing (but not so, since monastics are not allowed to sing or recite in a melodious manner or long-drawn with melismata).⁵ [1.2.1.3]

As such, the best, even the only, way to know the beginning and end of the sentence, quotes or phrase is its **context**—how the passage or passages as a whole, speak to us. We have to imagine the early Buddhists listening to a Pali recital, just as we read books today. As they listened, they at once, as it were, make out the sentences, phrases, words—and most importantly—the sense of the whole passage. We need to do this, too—listen to the Pali texts, not so much *read* it—in order to fully tease out its true import and teaching.⁶

1.2.1.3 The Gīta-s,sara Sutta (A 5.209)

SD 51.23(1.2)

Gīta-s,sara Sutta

The Discourse on the Singing Voice | A 5.209/3:251 ≈ Cv 5.3.1 (V 2:108)

Traditional: A 5.5.1.9 = Aṅguttara Nikāya 5, Pañcaka Nipāta 5, Pañcama Paññāsa 1, Kimila Vagga 9

Theme: Why the texts should not be chanted in a musical manner

*Pañc’ime bhikkhave ādīnavā āyatakena
gīta-s,sarena dhammaṃ bhaṇantassa.*

Katame pañca?

Attanā pi tasmim̐ sare sārājati

pare pi tasmim̐ sare sārājanti

gahapatikā pi ujjhāyanti

yath’eva mayaṃ gāyāma

ev’ime samaṇā sakyaputtiyā

gāyantīti sara,kuttim pi nikāmayamānassa

Bhikshus, there are these 5 dangers in reciting the Dharma with a drawn-out musical sound.

What are the five?

- (1) One becomes infatuated with the sound itself.
- (2) Others become infatuated with the sound itself.
- (3) Householders complain, “Just as we sing, so, too, do these recluses, the sons of the *evam* Sakyas!”
- (4) There is a disruption in mental concentration

³ On Pali polysemy, see SD 1.1 (4.4.5); SD 10.16 (1.3.1-1.3.2).

⁴ *Pāli* or *pāli* orig means simply “text,” as opposed to *aṭṭhakathā*, “commentary,” and what is not “canonical.”

⁵ The 7th of the 10 precepts binding on all novice and monastics is that of *nacca,gīta,vādita,visūka,dassanā vera-maṇī*, “(the training) against dancing, singing and music, and the seeing of unseemly shows” (Khp 1 f; KhpA 36). The story and rule against monastics singing and dancing is found at **Cv 5.2.6** (V 2:106).

⁶ The Pali texts were first written down prob in Asoka’s time or later—certainly by the last decades BCE in Sri Lanka. See Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983:10.

samādhissa bhaṅgo hoti, for one desiring to refine the sound.
pacchimā janatā diṭṭhānugatim āpajjanti (5) Posterity will follow one's example.⁷
Ime kho bhikkhave pañca ādīnavā These, bhikkhus, are the 5 dangers in reciting
āyatakaṇa gītassarena dhammaṃ bhaṇantassāti. the Dharma with a drawn-out musical sound.

— evaṃ —

This text recurs in **the Vinaya** (Cv 5.3.1), when the incorrigible group of 6 monks sang the Dharma in a long-drawn musical way.⁸ For a related study, on the 5 benefits of being inspired (*pāsādika*) with a mind brightened with faith, see **the Apāsādika Sutta 2** (A 5.218).⁹

1.2.1.4 Below we have the tricky passage [§29] from the manuscripts of the 4 main Theravāda traditions of Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, along with the Pali Text Society's edition. The Siamese edition (Se) is given first since this is how, to us today, the ancient "oral" Pali looks like!

Siamese (Se)

29 ... *aññena vā aññaṃ paṭicarissati bahiddhā kathaṃ apanāmessati kopaṇ ca dosaṇ ca appaccayaṇ ca pātukarissati tuṇhī, bhūto vā maṅku, bhūto patta-k, khandho adho, mukho pajjhāyanto appaṭibhāno nisīdissati seyyathāpi sarabho paribbājako*

Notice that in the Siamese edition (Se), **vā** (highlighted in bold) occurs twice—as in the Sinhalese edition (Ce) (Table column 2), too. They do not function disjunctively here (separating phrases or sentences), but given only euphonic harmony to the text for a smoother recitation. The Myanmar or Burmese edition (Be) of the same text has only one **vā** (see Table column 1). Despite such differences—which are merely "cosmetic"—the context and import of these passages are all the same.

<u>Burmese (Be)</u>	<u>Sinhalese (Ce)</u>	<u>Pali Text Society (Ee)</u> ¹⁰
<i>aññena vā aññaṃ paṭicarissati,</i>	<i>aññena vā aññaṃ paṭicarissati</i>	<i>aññena vā aññaṃ paṭicarissati</i>
<i>bahiddhā kathaṃ apanāmessati,</i>	<i>bahiddhā kathaṃ apanāmessati,</i>	<i>bahiddhā kathaṃ apanāmessati</i>
<i>kopaṇ ca dosaṇ ca appaccayaṇ ca pātukarissati.</i>	<i>kopaṇ ca dosaṇ ca appaccayaṇ ca pātukarissati.</i>	<i>kopaṇ ca dosaṇ ca appaccayaṇ ca pātukarissati,</i>
<i>Tuṇhī, bhūto maṅku, bhūto patta-k, khandho</i>	<i>Tuṇhī, bhūto vā maṅku, bhūto patta-k, khandho</i>	<i>tuṇhī, bhūto vā maṅku, bhūto vā patta-k, khandho</i>
<i>adho, mukho pajjhāyanto appaṭibhāno nisīdissati,</i>	<i>adho, mukho pajjhāyanto appaṭibhāno nisīdissati.</i>	<i>adho, mukho pajjhāyanto appaṭibhāno nisīdissati</i>
<i>seyyathāpi sarabho paribbājako.</i>	<i>Seyyathāpi sarabho paribbājako.</i>	<i>seyyathāpi sarabho paribbājako.</i>

Table 1.2. Collation of Pali passages of §29

⁷ On related future dangers, see **Anāgata, bhaya S** (A 5.79), SD 77.17.

⁸ C 5.3.1 (V 2:108).

⁹ A 5.218/3:256 f (SD 110.9).

¹⁰ This is also known as the "European" edition. See Norman, 1983:1.

The Sinhalese or Ceylonese edition (Ce) below is identical to that of Se above, as we have noted. The Pali Text Society or European edition (Ee) (Table column 3) has three occurrences of *vā*. This edition is, in turn, based on various Burmese, Siamese and commentarial texts.¹¹

All these passages translate as:

29 Indeed, when he is being questioned, pressed and parleyed, it is impossible, there is no chance, that he would not fall into one or other of these 3 outcomes:

1. he would try to evade the question by another, or divert the discussion to an irrelevant topic; or
2. he would show anger, hatred or sulkiness; or
3. he would sit silent, dismayed, his shoulders drooping, face down [hanging his head], glum, unable to speak—

30 as in the case of the wanderer Sarabha. [§§29-30]

1.2.1.5 There is a parallel of the Sarabha Sutta in Chinese translation in **the Saṃyukta Āgama** (SĀ 970), which gives us this very same 3 outcomes, thus:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| (1) 彼則遼落，說諸外事； | <i>bǐ zé liáo luò, shuō zhū wàishì;</i> |
| (2) 或忿恚、慢覆，對闕不忍，無由能現； | <i>huò fèn huì, màn fù, duì hé bù rěn. wú yóu néng xiàn,</i> |
| (3) 或默然抱愧低頭，密自思省。 | <i>huò mòrán bàokuì dītóu, mì zì sī xǐng</i> |

- (1) Not knowing the reason, unable to answer, bringing up unrelated topics;
- (2) **or** was very resentful, retorting arrogantly, agitated and impatient, unable to reason;
- (3) **or** was speechless, feeling ashamed, hanging his head, keeping to himself, lost in brooding.
(SĀ 970 @ T2.250b.21-23)

1.2.2 Why Sarabha’s head does not split into 7 pieces

1.2.2.1 Now, we have another interesting sutta puzzle—which I really love, as it helps us understand better the wealth of Pali literature. A number of suttas mention a mythical tradition or literary device which says that whenever the Buddha asks a “reasonable question” (*saha, dhammika pañhā*),¹² and the challenger does not answer him, that is, withholds his answer, after he has been asked thrice, his head will shatter into seven pieces! [§§12-30]

In **the Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3), for example, the Buddha is recorded as challenging the arrogant brahmin youth Ambaṭṭha, thus:

“A reasonable question, Ambaṭṭha, has arisen: in spite of your wishes, it should be answered. If you do not answer, or were to evade the question in any way, or were to remain silent, or were to depart, your head would surely right here shatter into seven pieces!”¹³

(D 3,1.20/1:94) + SD 21.3 (4)¹⁴

¹¹ See *The Aṅguttara Nikāya*, part III ed E Hardy. London, 1896:v-vii.

¹² See SD 21.3 (1.1.3).

¹³ *Sace na vyākarissasi aññena vā aññam paṭicarissasi, tuṇhi vā bhavissasi, pakkamissasi vā, Etth’eva te sattadhā muddhā phalissati.* On this head-splitting comment, see SD 21.3 (4.1); SD 44.1 (1.2.1.2).

¹⁴ A similar, more dramatic, yet humorous, incident involves Saccaka the nirgrantha’s son: **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35,13-14/1:231 (SD 26.5).

1.2.2.2 Why doesn't Sarabha's head shatter into 7 pieces even after he fails to answer the Buddha's thrice-asked question? There are at least three explanations for this.

Firstly, the contexts of the other two sutta passages—with brahmin youth Ambaṭṭha (D 3) and with Saccaka the nirgrantha's on (M 35)—significantly differ from that of the Sarabha Sutta (A 3.64). Both Ambaṭṭha and Saccaka *know* the answers to the Buddha's questions, but they each refuses to respond, since it will prove the Buddha right and so discredit them.

It is their vision of **Vajira, pāṇī**,¹⁵ a fierce yaksha hovering mid-air, ready to hurl his blazing thunderbolt of molten iron at him that terrifies him into keeping to the debate decorum. In other words, this is merely a face-saving device for the offending party—to fall silent is to lose face here. It is also a *deus ex machina*¹⁶ to free up the stalled debate, that also vindicates the Buddha as having spoken fairly.¹⁷

1.2.2.3 Secondly, the wanderer **Sarabha** is a very different kind of protagonist in the Sarabha Sutta from the roles of Ambaṭṭha in **the Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3) or of Saccaka in **the Cūḷa Saccaka Sutta** (M 35). While Ambaṭṭha and Saccaka appear intelligent and cunning, engaged in a debate with the Buddha, Sarabha, on the other hand, seems to be rather foolish and gullible character who actually has no answers to give because he does not know them! He is used by his peers, the wanderers of Rājagaha, to infiltrate the Buddhist sangha to find out its “secret” of success [2.1.2].

From the commentarial background story [2.2], we may surmise that Sarabha's going around the city discrediting the Buddha Dharma is his own foolish idea—this is perhaps another reason for the violent abuses Sarabha suffers by the mouths of his own colleagues at the end of the Sutta [2.1.3.3]. Clearly, Sarabha is not a very wise person.

Moreover, unlike Ambaṭṭha and Saccaka, he does not challenge the Buddha himself. He lacks the wisdom to do. At least for this reason alone, there is no role for Vajirapāṇī—who seems to only threaten those who misuse their intelligence in dishonest or dishonorable ways towards the Buddha. Sarabha is simply a used hollow man.

1.2.2.4 Thirdly, the “head-shattering” threat—a popular literary device of the time—is just that: a literary device: the Indian *deus ex machina* [1.2.2.2]. It is a dramatic device to break an impasse in a debate, ironically, for saving the face of the offender—the dishonest or dishonorable debater who refuses to answer or speak so as to admit defeat. Although the Buddha is depicted as making such a threat, we do not have a single occasion when anyone's head actually did shatter. It would clearly have been against the Buddha's character and compassion for this to happen.

1.3 PLOTS AGAINST THE BUDDHIST MONKS

1.3.1 The Sarabha Sutta is an account of early Indian Buddhism in its heydays, when it became successful and popular so as to attract a majority of urban supporters. Apparently, this development negatively affected the fortunes of those wanderers who had turned to religion as a livelihood and for worldly support. Hence, they sent Sarabha to spy on the local Buddhists to learn the secret of their success. At the same time, they also desperately hoped to discredit the Buddhists in any way they could, just to garner more support for themselves.

1.3.2 The Sundarī Sutta (U 4.8). Of such accounts, this is probably the least dramatic of them, but no less interesting. The most dramatic and desperate plot against the Buddhists is that directed to the Buddha

¹⁵ SD 21.3 (4.2).

¹⁶ On deus ex machina, see SD 49.8b (11.2.2.1).

¹⁷ See SD 21.3 (4.1.4).

himself, as recorded in **the Sundarī Sutta** (U 4.8). This Sutta recounts the wanderers' plot against the Buddha that is more elaborate and sinister, involving accusations of the Buddha's "immorality" with a beautiful young female wanderer, Sundarī.

She is secretly and treacherously murdered by the wanderers themselves, who then hide her body in the monastery premises so that it is easily found and the Buddha implicated in the crime. In the end, with the king's investigation and intervention, all turn out right, and the true perpetrators are punished.¹⁸

1.3.3 The wanderers' plots

1.3.3.1 A couple of interesting points should be noted of the wanderers' plots against the Buddha and his community. The first is that **the Sarabha incident** (A 3.64) occurs in Rāja,gaha, capital of Kosala, ruled by king Pasenadi (c 563-c 483 BCE),¹⁹ a devout supporter of the Buddha. The king's nephew, Ajāta-sattu rules in Sāvattihī, capital of Magadha, but he is not well-disposed to the Buddha, until probably the last year of Buddha's life.²⁰

1.3.3.2 Secondly, **the Sundarī Sutta** (U 4.8) incident is located in Sāvattihī, capital of Magadha, ruled by Ajāta,sattu (r 492-460), but who, at that time, after being defeated by his maternal uncle, Pasenadi, decides to renounce the throne.²¹ Hence, here, too, we see Pasenadi investigating the case, showing his concerns about the Buddha's personal integrity—this is recorded in **the Bāhitika Sutta** (M 88),²² which should be studied after the Sundarī Sutta.²³ [1.3.2]

1.3.3.3 A third account of the wanderers' plot against the Buddha is given in **the Bāhitika Sutta** (M 88). The Sutta only recounts king Pasenadi's efforts in investigating to find the real perpetrators and clear the Buddha's name—there is no mention of any wanderers' plot. No reason is given why Pasenadi does not confront the Buddha himself—this must surely be on account of his devotion to the Buddha and confidence in his personal integrity.

Instead, he interviews Ānanda in an almost routine manner, but asking probing questions as if already certain that the Buddha, being innocent, will have no problem with them. At the end of the interview, Pasenadi is not only convinced by Ānanda of the Buddha's innocence and integrity, but he is inspired or, at least, relieved by the outcome of the meeting. He convinces Ānanda to accept a sizeable piece of "foreign cloth" (*bāhitika*) as an offering.²⁴

1.4 DIALECTICS

Of the textual accounts of the wanderers' plots to discredit the Buddha, **the Sarabha Sutta** is unique in that the Buddha himself is the one who sorts things out. Upon being informed by some monks that Sarabha falsely claiming that he has understood the Buddha Dharma as a monk, which prompts him to give up the training, suggesting that it is inefficacious. Thus, he hopes to discredit the Buddha.

¹⁸ U 4.8/43-45 (SD 49.23).

¹⁹ Pasenadi is of the same age as the Buddha, both dying at 80 in 483 BCE, a date proposed by scholars. See Kulke & Rothermund 2004:55.

²⁰ See **Sāmañña,phala S** (M 2) + SD 8.10, (1.3).

²¹ On the battles between Pasenade and Ajāta,sattu, see **Saṅgāma S 1** (S 3.14/1:83 f), SD 109.7 and **Saṅgāma S 2** (S 3.15/1:84), SD 109.8.

²² M 88/2:112-117 (SD 49.12).

²³ See SD 49.23 (1.2.1).

²⁴ M 88/2:112-117 (SD 49.12).

The manner in which the Buddha approaches and interrogates Sarabha, openly questioning him before an assembly of wanderers may be described as “dialectical.” Technically, **dialectics** is an inquiry into philosophical or didactic [learning] contradictions and their solutions. Basically, we can say that the Buddha may not respond to any attempt at discrediting him as a *person* or *teacher*. However, since he holds the Dharma above himself, he does not tolerate anyone who maligns the Dharma.

2 Sarabha

2.1 THE SUTTA BACKGROUND

2.1.1 Sarabha is the name of a wanderer (*paribbājaka*) who joins the Order and soon after left it. Sarabha is probably a personal name, which simply means a kind of deer.²⁵ He does not seem to appear anywhere else in the suttas. Hence, Sarabha is probably a common name in the Buddha’s time. In **the Sarabha Sutta** (A 3.64), Sarabha is a wanderer (*paribbājaka*) who joins the order but soon after leaves it. [2.2]

2.1.2 Background story

In the background story, **the Commentary**, tells us that the wanderers, failing to find any fault in the Buddha’s conduct, think that his power is due to a “conversion magic” (*āvattanī,māyā*), which he and his disciples practise once a fortnight behind closed doors. Sarabha is instructed by his fellow wanderers to join the order to learn this secret, and then return to share it with them.

Sarabha agrees to find out what this “magic” is and learn it. Hence, he goes to Mount Vulture Peak, where he shows great humility to all the monks there. An elder, taking pity on him, ordains him. In due course, he learns the Pātimokkha (the monastic code)²⁶, which, he realizes, is what the wanderers have taken to be the Buddha’s “conversion magic.” He thinks he has discovered the secret of the Buddha Dharma.

Having learned it, he returns to the wanderers and teaches it to them. Then, he goes about with them in the city boasting that he knows the Buddha’s teaching and has found it worthless. Then, he goes around Rājagaha proclaiming that he knows the Dharma-Vinaya of the monks, and that is why he has left their order. (AA 2:295-304)

2.1.3 Sarabha’s folly

2.1.3.1 The Sarabha Sutta (A 3.64) records that when the Buddha is told of this, he visits the wanderers’ park, on the banks of the Sappinī river. There he invites Sarabha to repeat his statement. But even after the Buddha has invited him thrice, Sarabha only sits in silence.

The Buddha then declares to the wanderers that no one can say that his claim to awakening was unjustified, or that his Dhamma, when practised, does not lead to the destruction of the influxes. After the Buddha leaves, the wanderers teased and abused Sarabha.

²⁵ See eg **Sarabha,miga J** (J 483), told by the Buddha in reference to Sāriputta’s wisdom, after the descent from Tāvātimsa, having taught the Abhidhamma there. The Buddha arrived in Saṅkassa, where he asks a number of questions, all of which none except Sāriputta is able to answer in detail, even when the Buddha’s question is brief. In the Jātaka, the Bodhisattva was a wise talking stag who saves the life of his own hunter, the king and teaches him Dharma. (J 483/4:263-275). It is found in **Jātaka,mālā** as Sarabha J (Jtkm 25). There is also the longer **Sarabh’aṅga J** (J 522), told by the Buddha in connection with Moggallāna’s death at the hands of bandits (J 522/5:125-151).

²⁶ On the Pātimokkha, see SD 46.19 (.3.2.3.1).

2.1.3.2 Why do the wanderers upbraid Sarabha? [§§40-48]. It is unlikely because he tried to spy on the Buddha —dishonourable as it may be—but more likely because he has failed in his mission. The Buddha, in his lion-roar [§§26-39] declares the real secrets of the Buddha Dharma—basically this is his awakening and that of his arhats. In other words, it is not something that can be stolen, or even imitated. We need to cultivate for it; only then, we are transformed by self-awakening.

Clearly, then, Sarabha is merely the scapegoat because the Buddha has himself come to their home ground and by declaring what makes the Buddha Dharma unimpeachable, and so exposing Sarabha for what he really is—a fraud. The wanderers themselves have urged Sarabha to answer the Buddha, with the hope that he actually has some wisdom to answer the Buddha.

Sadly—to the wanderers’ embarrassment—Sarabha is either unwilling or unable to answer the Buddha’s challenge *three* times. Hence, Sarabha has himself to blame for not standing up for the wanderers. Yet, none of the wanderers themselves is able to answer the Buddha, too. Hence, they, too, have themselves to blame. Understandably, they are upset with both themselves and with Sarabha, but it is easier for the crowd to punish the scapegoat, the crowd’s shadow.

2.1.3.3 We may also surmise that Sarabha’s going around the city defaming the Buddha and his followers is his own foolish idea—this is perhaps another reason for the violent abuses Sarabha suffers at the mouths of his own colleagues. Clearly, the various religious groups want to ensure that they look good and holy, so as to be worthy of public adoration and support. To openly defame another teacher or his following is not the best of public relations, especially when it back-fires. Now, it is clear that the wanderers are scheming Jesuits, and are not even good at it!

2.2 RELATED SUTTA. The commentarial story behind the Sarabha Sutta (AA 2:295-304) [2.2] is similar to that of **the (Arahatta) Susīma Sutta** (S 12.70), but the latter has a happier ending with Susīma actually learning the greatest “secret” of the Buddha Dharma: arhathood.²⁷

2.3 NAMES WITH SARABHA IN THEM

2.3.1 The Sarabha,migā Jātaka (J 483)

The Sarabha,migā Jātaka is told by the Buddha in reference to Sāriputta’s wisdom, after the descent from Tāvatiṃsa, having taught the Abhidhamma there. The Buddha arrives in Saṅkassa, where he asks a number of questions, all of which none except Sāriputta is able to answer. He answers in detail even when the Buddha’s question is brief.

In the Jātaka, the Bodhisattva is a wise talking stag who saves the life of his own hunter, the king, and teaches him Dharma (J 483/4:263-275). It is found in **Jātaka,mālā** as Sarabha J (Jtkm 25).

2.3.2 The Sarabh’aṅga Jātaka (J 522)

2.3.2.1 There is also the longer **Sarabh’aṅga J** (J 522), told by the Buddha in connection with Moggallāna’s death at the hands of bandits. In the Jātaka, the Bodhisattva is born as Jotipāla, the son of the purohita (chaplain) of the king of Benares. Jotipāla grows up to be a skilled archer. He proves himself so well in a great archery competition, that the king decides to make him his commander-in-chief.

2.3.2.2 However, in the night, a sense of spiritual urgency (*samvega*) arises in him, and he is compelled to renounce the world. He leaves for Kapiṭṭha,vana on the Godhāvārī river, where he becomes an ascetic. His parents and the king visit him, and are converted. Sarabh’aṅga’s following soon grows into

²⁷ S 12.70/2:119-128 (SD 16.8).

the thousands. When the forest becomes too crowded with his followings, he sends out 6 of his 7 pupils and their followers to other parts of the country.

2.3.2.3 One of Sarabh’āṅga’s pupils, Kisa,vaccha, is ill-treated by king Daṇḍakī of Kumbhavatī and his army; he later dies. It is said that, on this account, Daṇḍakī and his kingdom are destroyed by natural disaster. Three other kings—Kaliṅga, Atthaka and Bhima,raṭṭha—hearing of this, visit Sarabh’āṅga, as they, too, have heard of similar stories of a similar fate of other kings who insulted holy men. Sarabh’āṅga instruct the 3 kings, and as they listen, the desire to renounce arises in them. They become ascetics under him. (J 522/5:125-151)

2.3.3 The elder Sarabhaṅga

2.3.3.1 Sarabhaṅga Thera comes from a brahmin family of Rājagaha, and is given his name in accordance to the family traditions. He grows up to be an ascetic, and makes for himself a hut of reed stalks, which he had broken off. Hence his name, Sarabhaṅga (“reed-plucker”).

2.3.3.2 The Buddha, noticing his readiness for attaining arhathood, visits him and teaches him the Dharma. He listens and then joins the order, attaining arhathood in due course. He continues to live in his hut until it decays and crumbles away.

When asked why he does not repair it, he replies that he has looked after it during his time as an ascetic, but now he find no urgency for such mundane activities. He then declares his awakening knowledge (*aññā*) in a set of verses (Tha 487-493). (ThaA 2:203-206)

2.3.4 The pratyeka-buddha Sarabh’āṅga

Sarabh’āṅga is the name of a pratyeka-buddha (*pacceka,buddha*), one fully awakened arising outside of a buddha-period, and who does not establish the Dharma-Vinaya. He is mentioned in **the Isigili Sutta** (M 116), one of the 500 pratyeka-buddhas who once dwelled at Isigili, one of the 5 hills surrounding Rāja,gaha. (M 116/3:70)

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Sarabha Sutta

The Discourse to Sarabha

A 3.64

Thus have I heard.

Sarabha degrades the Dharma-Vinaya

- 2** At one time, the Blessed One was staying on Mount Vulture’s Peak outside Rāja,gaha.
- 3** At that time, a wanderer named Sarabha had recently left this Dharma-Vinaya.

4 He spoke in public²⁸ in Rāja,gaha, thus:

“I have understood the teaching of the recluses who are Sakya sons.²⁹ Having understood the teaching of the recluses who are Sakya sons,³⁰ I have, therefore, left that Dharma-Vinaya.”³¹

The monks report to the Buddha

5 Then, some monks, at dawn, having dressed themselves, taking bowl and robe, entered Rāja,-gaha for almsfood.

6 They heard the wanderer Sarabha speaking in public in Rāja,gaha, thus:

“I have understood the teaching of the recluses who are Sakya sons. Having understood the teaching of the recluses who are Sakya sons (*sakya,puttiya*), I have, therefore, left that Dharma-Vinaya.”

7 Then, those monks, having walked for almsfood, after their meal, returned from their almsround, and approached the Blessed One.

Having approached the Blessed One, they saluted him and sat down at one side.

8 Sitting at one side, these monks said to the Blessed One:

“A wanderer named Sarabha had recently left this Dharma-Vinaya.

9 He spoke in public in Rāja,gaha, thus:

‘I have understood the teaching of the recluses who are Sakya sons. Having understood the teaching of the recluses who are Sakya sons, I have, therefore, left that Dharma-Vinaya.’

10 It would be good, bhante, if the Blessed One were to go to the wanderers’ park on the bank of the Sappinikā (river),³² and, out of compassion, approach the wanderer Sarabha.”

11 The Blessed One consented by his silence.

The Buddha questions Sarabha

12 Then, in the evening, the Blessed One, having emerged from his solitude, went to the wanderer’s park on the bank of the Sappinikā and approached the wanderer Sarabha.

13 Having approached, he sat down on a prepared [186] seat, and said to the wanderer Sarabha:

14 “Is it true, Sarabha, that you spoke thus:

‘I have understood the teaching of the recluses who are Sakya sons. Having understood the teaching of the recluses who are Sakya sons, I have, therefore, left that Dharma-Vinaya.’

15 When this was said, the wanderer Sarabha remained silent.

16 For a second time, the Blessed One said to the wanderer:

“Tell us, Sarabha, what you have understood of the Dharma of the recluses who are Sakya sons.³³

17 If you have not completely mastered it, I will complete it for you.³⁴

²⁸ “In public” (*parisatim*). *Parisatim*, more commonly, *parisati* (Skt *pariṣadi*), is loc sg of *parisā* (“assembly”); see V:H 3:298,6. For refs, see PTC: *parisā* (p204). Clearly, Sarabha would be addressing the public to win them over, rather than before his colleagues.

²⁹ *Aññāto mayā samañānaṃ sakyaputtiyānaṃ dhammo*.

³⁰ “Sakya sons,” *sakya,puttiya*, ie, the disciples of the Sakyas’ son (*sakya,putta*), which refers to the Buddha, as in **Sundarī S** (U 4.8,11), SD 49.23. On the terms, see SD 49.23 (2).

³¹ *Aññāya ca panāhaṃ samañānaṃ sakyaputtiyānaṃ dhammaṃ evāhaṃ tasmā dhamma,vinayā apakkanto’ti*.

³² *Sappinikā*, “little Sappinī (she-snake).” This is either the Sappinī river itself or a smaller stream feeding it. On its bank is a wanderers’ park (*paribbājakārāma*), the residence of a number of famous wanderers of the time (A 3.64/-1:185, 4.30/2:29, 4.185/2:176; S 6.11/1:153). The river prob rises in [Gijjha,kūta](#) (V 1:109), hence its fast currents (VA 1049), and flows between the village of Andhaka,vinda and Rājagaha. Today it is prob the Panchane river (or Pañ-chāna: Law, *Geography of Early Buddhism*, London, 1932:38.

³³ *Vadehi sarabha kinti te* aññāto samañānaṃ sakyaputtiyānaṃ dhammo*. *Be:Ph(ayre) omits *te*.

If you have completely mastered it, I will rejoice.”³⁵

18 For the second time, the wanderer remained silent.

Sarabha remains silent a third time

19 For a third time, the Blessed One said to the wanderer Sarabha:

"Sarabha, the teaching of the recluses who are Sakya sons is declared by me.

Tell me, Sarabha, *what you have understood of the Dharma of the recluses who are Sakya sons.*

20 *If you have not completely mastered it, I will complete it for you.*

If you have completely mastered it, I will rejoice."

21 For the third time, the wanderer Sarabha remained silent.

22 Right then, the wanderers of Rājagaha said to the wanderer Sarabha:

"Avuso, you may ask the recluse Gotama whatever you may wish; the recluse Gotama invites you to do so."³⁶

23 Tell us, avuso Sarabha, *what you have understood of the Dharma of the recluses who are the Sakya sons!*

24 *If you have not completely mastered it, the recluse Gotama will complete it for you.*

If you have completely mastered it, the recluse Gotama will rejoice."

25 When this was said, the wanderer Sarabha sat silent, dismayed, his shoulders drooping, face down [hanging his head], glum, unable to speak [at a loss for words].³⁷

The lion-roar: the 3 intrepidities

26 Then, the Blessed One, knowing that the wanderer is *dismayed, his shoulders drooping, face down, glum, unable to speak*, said to the wanderers:

27 (1) "Wanderers,³⁸ if anyone were to speak thus:

'While you claim to be fully awakened, you are not fully awakened about these things,'³⁹ **[187]**

28 I would question, press and parley with him about it."⁴⁰

³⁴ *Sace te aparipūraṃ bhavissati ahaṃ paripūressāmi.* Only Be:Ph -pūressāmi.

³⁵ *Sace pana te paripūraṃ bhavissati ahaṃ anumodissāmīti.* Be:Ph omits *pana te*.

³⁶ *Yad eva kho tvaṃ āvuso samaṇaṃ gotamaṃ yāceyyāsi tad eva te samaṇo gotamo pavāreti.*

³⁷ *Evaṃ vutte sarabho paribbājako tuṅhī, bhūto maṅku, bhūto patta-k, khandho adho, mukho pajjhāyanto appaṭi-bhāno nisīdi.* On why Sarabha's head does not split in 7 pieces despite his not answering a justified question, see (1.2.2). Cf the cases of the followers of Mettiya and Bhummajaka (Cv 4.4.7 @ V 2:78,23), and of the wanderer Nigrodha, **Udumbarikā Sīha.nāda S** (D 25,20) + SD 1.4, where see for further refs.

³⁸ All MSS *paribbājaka* (voc pl) throughout; only Ee *paribbājako*.

³⁹ *Sammā, sambuddhassa te paṭijānato ime dhammā anabhisambuddhā'ti.* This is the 1st of the 4 intrepidities (*catu vesāraja*) of the Buddha: see (**Catukka**) **Vesāraja S** (A 4.8,2), SD 51.19. However, here the Buddha makes only 3 claims of intrepidity [§§27+31+35], omitting the 3rd.

⁴⁰ *Tam ahaṃ tattha sādhuḥkaṃ samanuyuñjeyyaṃ samanugāheyyaṃ samanubhāseyyaṃ.* The verbs (underlined) are derived respectively from these forms in pres 3 sg:

samanuyuñjati, "to cross-question," *sam + anu + √YUÑJ + a + ti = saṃ* ("focused") + **anuyuñjati**, "to call to account" (*anu*, "after" + **yuñjati**, "to engage, join with," from √YU(Ñ)J, "to yoke");

samanugāhati, "to question closely," *sam + anu + √GĀH + a + ti = sam + anugāhati*, "to plunge into" (*anu*, "after, again" + **gāhati**, "to immerse, penetrate," from √GĀH, "to plunge");

29 Indeed, when he is being questioned, pressed and parleyed,⁴¹ it is impossible, there is no chance, that he would not fall into one or other of these 3 outcomes:⁴²

1. he would try to evade the question by another, or divert the discussion to an irrelevant topic;⁴³ or
2. he would show anger, hatred or sulkiness;⁴⁴ or
3. he would sit silent, dismayed, his shoulders drooping, face down [hanging his head], glum, unable to speak⁴⁵—

30 as in the case of the wanderer Sarabha.

31 (2) *If, wanderers, anyone were to speak thus:*

*'While you claim to have destroyed the mental influxes,*⁴⁶ *you have not (really) destroyed them,'*⁴⁷

32 *I would closely question, press and parley with him about it.*

33 *Indeed, when he is being questioned, pressed and parleyed, it is impossible, there is no chance, that he would not fall into one or other of these 3 outcomes:*

he would try to evade the question by another, or divert the discussion to an irrelevant topic; or

he would show anger, hatred or sulkiness; or

he would sit silent, dismayed, his shoulders drooping, face down [hanging his head], glum, unable to speak—

34 *as in the case of the wanderer Sarabha.*

35 (3) *If, wanderers, anyone were to speak thus:*

*'When he teaches the Dharma to someone for the sake of the spiritual goal, when he works on it, it would not lead that practitioner out (of the world) to the complete ending of suffering,'*⁴⁸

samanubhāsati, “to converse, study together,” *sam + anu + √BHĀS + a + ti = sam + anubhāsati*, “to speak after” (*anu + bhāsati*, “to speak,” from √BHĀS, “to speak”).

These 3 verbs (pres 3 sg) appear as *samanuyuñjayi samanugāhati samanubhāsati* in (Majjhima) **Devadūta S** (M 130,4+5+6+7+8/3:179-182), SD 2.23; (**Dasaka**) **Vyākaraṇa S** (A 10.84/5:156), SD 82.20.

⁴¹ “(Being) questioned, pressed and parleyed,” *samanuyuñjyamāno samanugāhiyamāno samanubhāsiyamāno*: cf the cases of the monk Aritṭha, **Alaggadūpama S** (M 22,3.4/1:130 etc), SD 3.13; the wanderer Saccaka, **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35,22.2/1:233), SD 26.5; the monk Sāti, **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38,3.4+3.5/1:257), SD 7.10; one who claims final knowledge, **Vyākaraṇa S** (A 10.84/ 5:156); a boaster, **Kaṭṭhī S** (A 10.85/5:158+160), SD 68.8; one who claims final knowledge, (**Dasaka**) **Aññā S** (A 10.86/5:162), SD 12.15.

⁴² *So vata mayā sādhuḥkaṃ samanuyuñjyamāno samanugāhiyamāno samanubhāsiyamāno aṭṭhānam etaṃ an-avakāso yaṃ so tiṇṇaṃ ṭhānānaṃ nāññataraṃ ṭhānaṃ nigaccheyya*. On a technical issue in tr the passage on the “3 outcomes” (*ṭhāna*), see (1.2).

⁴³ *Aññena vā aññāṃ paṭicarissati bahiddhā kathaṃ apanāmessati*. “Evade the question by another,” *aññena aññāṃ* (or *aññen’aññāṃ*) *paṭicarati*, or simply *paṭicarati*, “to be evasive (in answering a question), answering a question by alleging another, to shelve the question.” Comy glosses *paṭicarati* as “to conceal, prevaricate, camouflage” (*paṭicchādessati*, AA 2:302). See **Vinaya** (V 2:85×3, 101×2, 4:1, 35, 36×2, 37×3); **Anumāna S** (M 15,3-7/1:96-98 ×4), SD 59.3; **Bhaddāli S** (M 65,23-26/1:442-444 ×8), SD 56.2; **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,48/1:250), SD 49.4; **Sarabha S** (A 3.64,29/1:187), SD 51.23; **Kathā,vatthu S** (A 3.67,4/1:198×2), SD 46.11; **Karaṇḍava S** (A 8.10,2/4:168), SD 59.11; **Assa Khaluṅka S** (A 8.14,13/4:193), SD 7.9; **Vbh** 387.

⁴⁴ *Kopaṇ ca dosaṇ ca appaccayaṇ ca pātukarissati*.

⁴⁵ *Tuṇhī,bhūto vā maṅku,bhūto vā patta-k,khandho adho,mukho pajjhāyanto appaṭibhāno nisīdissati*. On this silence, see SD 44.1 (2.1.5).

⁴⁶ See (1.2.3.1 (10) n).

⁴⁷ *Khīṇ’āsavassa te paṭijānato ime āsavā aparikkhīṇā’ti*: see **Vesārajja S** (A 4.8) + SD 51.19 (1.2.4.2(6) n).

⁴⁸ *Yassa kho pana te atthāya dhammo desito, so na niyyāti tak,karassa sammā dukkha-k,khayāyāti*. Comy takes *yassa atthāya* as “the purpose for which” the Dharma is taught, ie, the destruction of the 3 unwholesome roots (greed, hate and delusion), and *dhammo* as the meditation on the foul, etc. The vb *niyyāti* means “to get out” (of

36 *I would question, press and parley with him about it.*

37 *Indeed, when he is being questioned, pressed and parleyed, it is impossible, there is no chance, that he would not fall into one or other of these 3 outcomes:*

he would try to evade the question by another, or divert the discussion to an irrelevant topic; or

he would show anger, hatred or sulkiness; or

he would sit silent, dismayed, his shoulders drooping, face down [hanging his head], glum, unable to speak—

38 *as in the case of the wanderer Sarabha.*

39 Having roared his lion-roar in the wanderers' park on the bank of the Sappinikā, the Blessed One departed through the air.⁴⁹

The wanderers chastise Sarabha

40 Then, not long after the Blessed One had left, the wanderers crowded all around the wanderer Sarabha, and teased and verbally abused him, thus.⁵⁰

41 “Avuso Sarabha, just as **an old jackal** in a great forest, thinking to roar a lion-roar, can only let out a jackal's howl,⁵¹

42 even so, you, avuso Sarabha, like an old jackal in a great forest, thinking to roar a lion-roar, *can only let out a jackal's howl;*

43 even so, you, avuso Sarabha, thinking to roar a lion-roar which none other than only the recluse Gotama can roar, **[188]** *only let out a jackal's howl.*⁵²

44 Avuso Sarabha, just as **a chick**, thinking to crow like a cock, can only cheep like chicken,⁵³

samsara, ie, the complete end of suffering. On *tak,karassa*, “of that doer,” cf “the noble and liberating view that accordingly leads the practitioner to the complete destruction of suffering” (*yā'yam diṭṭhi ariyā niyyānikā niyyāti tak,karassa sammā,dukkha-k,khayāya*), **Kosambiya S** (M 48,7/1:322), SD 64.1. For the Chin versions of this intrepidity, see SĀ 27.6 (T2.645c10-11) & EĀ 46.4 (T2.776c28-777a2).

⁴⁹ *Atha kho bhagavā sappinikā,tīre paribbājak'ārāme tikkhattum sīha,nādaṃ naditvā vehāsaṃ pakkāmi.* Cf **Pāṭika S** (D 24,2.6+2.7/3:23+24), SD 63.3; (**Anicca**) **Sīha S** (S 22.78/3:84), SD 42.10; (**Catukka**) **Sīha S** (A 4.33/2:33), SD 42.10; (**Pañcaka**) **Sīha S** (A 5.99/3:121), SD 81.6; (**Dasaka**) **Sīha,nāda S** (A 10.21/5:33), SD 81.2. Comy adds that the Buddha, by his direct knowledge, attains the 4th dhyana, and determines that he and the whole sangha leave by air for the great vihara at Mount Vulture's Peak (**Vehāsaṃ pakkāmīti abhiññā,pādakaṃ catuttha-j,jhānaṃ samāpajjivā vuṭṭhāya adhiṭṭhāya saddhim bhikkhu,saṅghena ākāsaṃ pakkhandi. Evam pakkhando ca pana taṃ,khaṇaṃ,ñeva gijjha.kūṭa,mahā.vihāre patiṭṭhāsi**, AA 2:303). The Chin version here simply says that “he (the Buddha) rises from his seat and departed” (從坐起而去 *cóng zuò qǐ ér qù*) (SĀ 970 @ T2.250b27).

⁵⁰ *Atha kho te paribbājakā acira,pakkantassa bhagavato sarabhaṃ paribbājakaṃ samantato vācāya sannitodakena sañjambharim akaṃsu.* Be Ee *sannitodakena*; Ce *sattitodakena*. Be Ce *sañjambharim*; Ee *sañjambharim*. **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9), says that after the Buddha departs, the wanderers verbally abuse the wanderer Poṭṭhapāda (D 9,31/1:189), SD 7.14. On the monk Tissa (the Buddha's paternal cousin) being verbally abused: (**Assu**) **Tissa S** (S 21.9/2:282), SD 103.10.

⁵¹ *Seyyathāpi āvuso sarabha brah'āraññe jara'sigālo sīha,nādaṃ nadissāmīti segālakaṃ yeva nadati bheraṇḍakaṃ yeva nadati.* Be *siṅgālakaṃ*; Ce *segālakañ-*; Ee Ke Se *segālakaṃ*.

⁵² *Evam eva kho tvaṃ āvuso sarabha, aññatr'eva samaṇena gotamena sīha,nādaṃ nadissāmīti, segālakaṃ yeva nadasi bheraṇḍakaṃ yeva nadasi.*

⁵³ *Seyyathāpi āvuso sarabha ambaka,maddarī* phussaka,ravitaṃ ravissāmī ti ambaka,maddari,ravitaṃ yeva ravati.* Be *ambuka,sañcarī*; Ce Ee Se *ambaka,maddarī*. Be *purisaka,ravitaṃ*; Ce Ee *phussaka,ravitaṃ*; Ke Se *pussa-ka,ravitaṃ*. The word *ambaka.maddari* is obscure, but Comy says that it is a “small chicken” (*khuddaka,kukkuṭikā*) and glosses *phussaka* as “a large chicken” (*makā.kukkuṭa*) (AA 2:304,14 f). The Chin version (SĀ 970) is helpful: “Just as a woman tries to make a man's sound, but the moment she voices, she makes only a woman's sound” (譬如女人欲作丈夫聲，發聲即作女聲 *pìrú nǚren yù zuò zhàngfu shēng, fāshēng jí zuò nǚ shēng*, T2.250c3). In fact, the

45 even so, you, avuso Sarabha, *thinking to roar a lion-roar which none other than only the recluse Gotama can roar*, you only let out a chick's cheep.

46 Avuso Sarabha, just as **a bull** in an empty cow-pen, thinks he bellows deeply,⁵⁴

47 even so, you, avuso Sarabha, *think to make a deep bellow that none but the recluse Gotama can bellow*.⁵⁵

48 Thus did the wanderers all around the wanderer Sarabha teased and verbally abused him.⁵⁶

— evaṃ —

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Pali *purisaka, ravitaṃ* may tr as “the man’s cry” and *ambakā* (from *ambā*. “mother”: CPD) is a “poor woman” (A 3:349,1); cf *ambaka, paññā*, “a woman’s wisdom,” D 2:96,23 = V 1:232.9). It is possible that the Chin tr preserved an older version which was lost or forgotten by commentarial times.

⁵⁴ *Seyyathāpi āvuso sarabha usabho suññāya gosālāya gambhīraṃ naditabbaṃ maññati*. Comy explains that the older bulls are not there (AA 2:304). Clearly, the peace of an empty cow-pen is likely to make the (young) bull’s bellow sound deep and gruff like that of the older bulls.

⁵⁵ *Evam eva kho tvaṃ āvuso sarabha aññatr’eva samaṇena gotamena gambhīraṃ naditabbaṃ maññasīti*.

⁵⁶ The Chin version gives a different ending. 時，舍羅步梵行弟子於舍羅步面前呵責毀訾已，從坐起去。shí, Shě-luóbù fànxíng dìzǐ, yú Shěluóbù miànqián hēzé huǐ zǐ yǐ, cóng zuò qǐ qù. (T2.250c07). Then, the brahmachari Sarabha’s followers having scolded, abused and reviled him to his face, got up from their seats and departed. (Note that the Chin here uses 梵行, *brahmacarī*, instead of *paribbājaka*.)