

## Self-overestimation and its dangers

Source: **Sunakkhatta Sutta, self-overestimation and its dangers**. Translated by Piya Tan ©2025.

### 1.1.1 Summary

The **Sunakkhatta Sutta** (M 105) records a meeting in Vesāli between the Buddha and Sunakkhatta, a young Licchavī monk [§6]. Sunakkhatta asks the Buddha whether monks who declare their final knowledge before the Buddha do so because they have actually attained it, or from an overestimation of themselves.

The Buddha replies that they are of both kinds. He teaches both kinds of people, except for those who ask questions unrelated to Dharma-training. Those who overestimate themselves do so because they are *intent on material things (the 5 cords of sense-pleasures)* [§7], *wrongly viewing them as being permanent*. Yet there are others who are intent on dhyaana meditation; and yet still others who are intent on attaining nirvana.

A Sutta highlight is **the parable of the man wounded by a poisoned dart**, which illustrates the danger of overestimating one's spiritual progress and attainment [1.1.2]. The heart of the Sutta is an important exposition on **imperturbability** (*aneñja*), the stilled mind that brings awakening and characterizes it [§§10 f]. The Sutta closes with the Buddha advising Sunakkhatta against being distracted by sense-experiences.

### 1.1.2 The parables of the man wounded with a poisoned dart

**1.1.2.1** To illustrate how those monks overestimate themselves and how those who are properly intent on the path, the Buddha gives the 2 parables of **the man wounded by a poisoned dart**. Together, these parables form the most elaborate version of the parable of the physician and the man wounded with a poisoned dart [1.1.2.2].

In the **1<sup>st</sup> version**—alluding to those who *overestimate* themselves in path attainment [§5]—the physician unknowingly leaves some trace of toxin in the wound after nursing it. Despite the physician leaving instructions regarding diet, keeping the wound clean, and proper precautions and hygiene, the victim neglects them, thinking he is healed. In due course, the wound festers and the victim dies. [§§19-23]

In the **2<sup>nd</sup> version**—illustrating those who are *properly intent* on the path [§5]—the dart-surgeon does a good job of nursing the wound, leaving no trace of toxin at all. The victim carefully follows the physician's instructions regarding *diet, keeping the wound clean, and proper precautions and hygiene*. In due course, the victim is healed and enjoys good health. [§§24-27]

**1.1.2.2** A shorter parable of the physician and the man wounded with a poisoned dart occurs in the **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta Sutta** (M 63). This parable warns us against being caught up in speculative thoughts and asking questions that are unrelated to Dharma training. These speculations to be avoided are those regarding *whether the universe is eternal or not, whether it is finite or infinite; whether the body and soul are identical or separate; and whether in the afterlife, a being exists, does not exist, both or neither*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63,5-8) + SD 5.8 (2 + 6); also **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14) @ SD 49.8 (12.4.2.5). The Buddha left speculative views (*diṭṭhi,gatāni*) "unexplained" (*avyākata*) and such questions "set aside" (*thapanīya*). They are listed in: **Poṭṭha,pāda S** (D 9), SD 7.14; **Pāsādikā S** (D 29), SD 40a.6; **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63), SD 5.8; **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72), SD 6.15; **Vaccha,gotta Saṃyutta** (S 33/3:257-262); and **Avyākata Saṃyutta** (S 44/4:374-403); **U 66/7.6**; SD 7.12 intro. For philosophical discussions, see Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:242-276, 473-476. **Milinda,pañha** skillfully uses the "twin-horned question" by way of Buddhist apologetics: Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 334 f, 350-352.

## 1.2 THE BUDDHA'S WARNING TO SUNAKKHATTA

**The Sunakkhata Sutta** (M 105) seems to be the earliest canonical record we have of **Sunakkhatta**, who serves as a case of a renunciant following wrong views or a seeker after the wrong ideals. The Buddha's teachings to Sunakkhatta also warns him against the dangers of a renunciant giving up the training. In an ominously premonitory tone, the Buddha warns Sunakkhatta that constant distractions due to sense-experiences will bring about "**death in the discipline of the noble ones**," that is, when one "commits some defiling offence," so that "one abandons the training and reverts to the low life" [§22].

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

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