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Āṇi Sutta

The Discourse on the Drum Peg | S 20.7

Theme: How to prevent the disappearance of the Dharma

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003, 2023

1 Introduction

1.1 The Āṇi Sutta (S 20.7) belongs to the category of teachings dealing with the “Dharma-ending age” [1.2]. Such suttas list those modes of thinking and conduct that are not conducive for the growth of the teaching, but in fact would contribute to its demise. Such qualities, when we harbour them, would prevent us from growing spiritually.

Early Buddhist prophecies regarding **the decline of the teaching and of the Sangha** are found all over the Nikāyas, for example,

Cakka,vatti Sīhanāda Sutta	D 26/3:58-79	SD 36.10
Ovāda Sutta 1-3	S 16.6-8/2:203-210	SD 1.10(4) = 3.14(9)
Saddhamma Paṭirūpaka Sutta	S 16.13/2:224 f	SD 104.10
Āṇi Sutta	S 10.7/2:266 f	SD 11.13
Adhamma Vagga 1-2	A 1.10,33-42/1:18 f, 1.11/1:19 f	SD 104.14
(Duka) Saddhamma Sammosā Sutta	A 2.2,10/1:58 f	SD 104.13
(Pañcaka) Kimbila Sutta	A 5.201/3:247	SD 5.201
(Chakka) Kimbila Sutta	A 6.40/3:339 f	SD 106.13
(Sattaka) Kimbila Sutta	A 7.56/4:84	SD 106.14

1.2 The “Dharma-ending” idea is the basis of an interesting subject of study not yet fully examined by many scholars.¹ The Aṅguttara Nikāya, for example, contains an interesting set of 4 suttas all entitled **Anāgata,bhaya Sutta**, the Discourses of Future Dangers (A 5.77-80). The first two suttas are inspirational, while the latter two are prophetic.²

For a special study, see the essay, **The Dharma-ending Age** (SD 1.10), where these 4 Suttas have been translated.

1.3 THE MRIDANGAM

1.3.1 The Āṇi Sutta here employs a historical analogy, that of the “**mridangam**” (*mudīṅga*, vl *mutīṅga*; Skt *mṛd-aṅga*, literally “body of clay”),³ a double-headed Indian barrel drum. In modern times, it is called *mridanga*. **The Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2), mentions *bheri ... mutīṅga*.⁴ A *mutīṅga/mṛdaṅga* is a barrel-shaped drum played horizontally with the hands beating both drumheads. The *mridangas* have stretched skin with a central circle of black paste that gives a different playing surface. In north India, it is called *pakhwaj*. The *mridangam* is today used in most Carnatic (south of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh) concerts

¹ Except, for example, Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time*, 1991 & Liz Williams, “Red Rust, Robbers and Rice Fields: Women’s part in the precipitation of the decline of the Dhamma.” *Buddhist Studies Review* 19,1 2002:41-47.

² **Anāgata,bhaya S 1** (A 5.77/3:100-102), SD 1.10(3.1); **Anāgata,bhaya S 2** (A 5.78/3:103-105), SD 1.10(3.2), **Anāgata,bhaya S 3** (A 5.79/3:105-108), SD 1.10(3.3), **Anāgata,bhaya S 4** (A 5.80/3:108-110), SD 1.10(3.4),

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mridangam>.

⁴ D 2,90/2:79, SD 8.10.

as accompaniment to both vocal and instrumental performances. Also called *saṅgīta maddalaṃ*, it is believed to be the oldest of all percussion instruments. A *bheri* is a small conical drum.

1.3.2 The Saṃyutta Commentary says that such a drum of the Dasârahas, called Summoner [Āṇaka] [§2], made from the claw of a giant crab, produced a sound that could be heard for 12 leagues (135 km) around to summon the people to assemble on festival days (SA 2:228). The “pegs” (*āṇi*) here probably refer to the pins inserted together with straps (as seen in this picture). When the drumheads are well-pegged, the whole drum would be covered with straps so that its cracks and flaws are not seen or difficult to see.



Fig 1.3 A modern mrdingam or mirutangkam (Indian barrel drum)

1.4 “POETS” OF MODERN LEARNING

1.4.1 Who are the “poets”?

1.4.2.1 At the heart of this Sutta, the Buddha warns us against being drawn to worldly learning—the work of “poets” (*kavī*)—at the cost of the spiritual life. The Pali word *kavī*, usually translated at “poet,” has been here broadly rendered as “thinkers [poets and scholars]” or more broadly, “writers,” both academic and creative [6], that is, encompassing worldly thinkers and writers, including academic scholars and literary authors. Hence, *kavī* is a shorthand (synecdoche) for various types of scholars and creative people.

1.4.2.2 The very short **Kavī Sutta** (A 4.203) speaks of 4 kinds of poets or scholars (*kavī*):

(1) <i>cintā, kavī</i>	based on their thoughts	philosophers; theologians
(2) <i>suta, kavī</i>	based on tradition, myths, dogmas, or science	historians; scientists
(3) <i>attha, kavī</i>	based on language, words and meanings of texts	philologists; ethnographers
(4) <i>paṭibhāna, kavī</i> ⁵	based on their own creativity (like the elder Vaṅgīsa)	creative writers; poets

1.4.2 Modern learning and Buddha Dharma

1.4.2.1 While philosophy, Buddhist studies, philology and literature can help us better understand and appreciate the Buddha Dharma, we should be sure not to prioritize worldly teachings above the teaching. The Buddha’s warning here is a grave reminder neither to let worldly learning water down the teaching, nor should we be distracted from the spiritual life by worldly learning.

1.4.2.2 On the other hand, after the Buddha’s time, much of his teachings underwent revisions, like the idea of dharmas (*dhammā*), individual moments of reality having their own “self-nature” (*sabhāva*),

⁵ A 4.230/2:230; AA 3:211; DA 1:95.

upheld by the Abhidhamma.⁶ Other revisions, even radical changes, contradict the Buddha’s teachings, for example, in these ways:

- rejecting that there is **only 1 buddha** that there are numerous (deified) Buddha even in the same universe; beliefs in non-existent (non-historical) cosmic Buddhas⁷
- rejecting the **arhat** ideal that arhats are still awakened⁸
- contradicting the historical **bodhisatta** that there are eternal Bodhisattvas who are “enlightenment beings”⁹
- contradicting **impermanence** Paradises centering around a particular cosmic Buddha¹⁰
- contradicting **non-self** (1) the Abhidharma claims that there are dharmas or momentary states with their “own-nature” (*sabhāva*; Skt *svabhāva*)¹¹
(2) the Chinese Buddhist belief in an eternal soul¹²
- contradicting **the gradual path** (1) the dogma of Buddha-nature, that we are already “enlightened,” but only need to accept this idea¹³
(2) that enlightenment is “sudden”¹⁴
- enlightenment is seen not as **state** but as a status that is conferred by a teacher or some lineage authority¹⁵

While we can and should *respect*¹⁶ that these are developments as other “Buddhisms,” we should not see them as in any way keeping to the teachings of the historical Buddha. Learned scholars and scientists are now disproving that such teachings are, to say the least, problematic, and that some of the key Abhidharma teachings are neither true nor correct. However, no learned scholar or authority, nor any religion—though they may reject early Buddhism— has proven the basic early Buddhist teachings as false. This however does not mean anything when we ourselves do not practise the Buddha Dharm.

1.4.3 The mirutangkam and Theseus’ ship

1.4.3.1 The parable of the mirutangkam (drum-head) interestingly parallels the paradox of Theseus’ ship. However, while the Buddha uses the mirutangkam parable to warn us of the counterfeit Dharma, the Theseus’s¹⁷ ship paradox is a reflection on nonself.¹⁸ While remembering the original purpose of the mirutangkam parable, it is useful for us to reflect that the Buddha’s teaching is about **nonself**. This teaching should be well remembered, too, so that it is not lost or adulterated.

⁶ See eg SD 60.1e (1.8.6).

⁷ On the deified Buddha, see SD 36.2 (7.1).

⁸ On the arhat ideal, see SD 3.15 (3.9).

⁹ On Mahāyāna Bodhisattva, see SD 36.2 (7.3).

¹⁰ On Cosmic Buddha and their Paradises, See SD 40.3.

¹¹ On “own-nature” (*sabhāva*), see SD 60.1e (1.8.6).

¹² On soul-belief in Chinese Buddhism, see SD40b.4.

¹³ On Buddha-nature, see SD 40b.2 (2.3.2, 7.3.3).

¹⁴ On “sudden enlightenment,” see SD 40b.2 (2.2.4).

¹⁵ On enlightenment as status, and on Buddhist lineages, see SD 40b.2 (2.3.6); SD 40b.5.

¹⁶ “Respect” means to accept others or other teachings “as they are,” without following them.

¹⁷ In Greek mythology, Theseus was the famed killer of the Minotaur (“the man-bull of Minos, the first king of Crete),” and the ancient national hero of Athens.

¹⁸ SD 26.9 (1.6.1.1).

1.4.3.2 The Greek historian, **Plutarch** (c46-c127), recorded an ancient problem that goes back to the times of the Greek mythology, in what is known as “the ship of Theseus” or “Theseus’ paradox,” translated into English by John Dryden, thus:

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned [from Crete] had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, inso-much that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.

(Plutarch’s *Theseus*, tr John Dryden) <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/theseus.html>

Plutarch thus questions *whether the ship would remain the same since it has been entirely replaced, piece by piece, or is it still the same ship?* As a corollary, we can question what happens if the old replaced parts were used to build another ship. Which of the two is the original “ship of Theseus”?¹⁹

We may here claim that the second ship is *not* the original, since the original no longer exists. Similarly, if we say that A dies and is reborn as another human B, he is clearly not A, since A is dead. Of course, we could say that it is A’s *consciousness* that becomes B. In this case, B would very likely inherit some, if not all, of A’s characteristics. Here, we have the case of continuity.²⁰

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Āṇi Sutta

The Discourse on the Drum Peg

S 20.7

[266]

1 [The Buddha was] staying at Sāvattḥī.

2 “Bhikshus, once in the past there was a **mridangam** [barrel drum]²¹ of the Dasārahas²² that was called the Summoner [Āṇaka].²³

3 Whenever the Summoner cracked, the Dasārahas inserted a peg.²⁴ [267] There came a time, bhikshus, when the Summoner’s original drumhead disappeared and only a collection of pegs remained.

4 Even so, bhikshus, this will be the case in the future.

¹⁹ For other examples, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship_of_Theseus. See also A G Wagner, “The Zen of Theseus: Language and reality from a Buddhist philosophical perspective,” in (ed) S Homan, *Playing With Reality*, Routledge, 2022:118-125.

²⁰ See SD 26.9 (1.7.2).

²¹ “Mridangam,” *mudiṅga*, vl *mutiṅga*: see (1.3).

²² Comy says that the Dasārahas (lit, “those worthy of 10”) were a kshatriya clan, so called because “they took a tenth portion of the paddy sprouts” (*satato dasa, bhāgaṃ gaṇhiṃsu*) (SA 2:227). All the Thai trs render *satato* as ถือเอาสิบส่วนจากข้าวกล้า “to take 10 parts of the paddy sprouts.” The word *sata* is tr as ข้าวกล้า, “paddy sprouts (seedlings ready for transplant).”

²³ “Summoner,” *ānaka*, as at J 2:344, 2:237 (J 267). On summoning by drum, see J 2:70, 4:171, 256.

²⁴ “Peg,” *āṇi*, “the pin of a wheel axle; a lynch-pinch; a peg” (CPD), a wedge, a shim.

5 When the discourses spoken by the Tathagata,²⁵ profound,²⁶ deep in meaning,²⁷ supramundane,²⁸ connected with emptiness,²⁹ are being spoken, they have no desire to listen to them, they do not lend their ears to them, they do not apply their minds to understand them, and they will not think that these teachings should be studied and mastered.

6 But when those discourses that are **poetry** [worldly writings] composed by **poets** [writers and scholars],³⁰ beautiful in word and phrase, composed by outsiders,³¹ spoken by their disciples, are being spoken, they will desire to listen to them, they will lend their ears to them, they will apply their minds to understand them, and will think that these teachings should be studied and mastered.

6.2 Thus, bhikshus, the discourses spoken by the Tathagata, profound, deep in meaning, supramundane, connected with emptiness, would disappear.

7 Therefore, bhikshus, you should train yourself thus:

When **the discourses spoken by the Tathagata**,

profound, deep in meaning, supramundane, connected with emptiness, are being spoken, we should have the desire to listen to them, we should lend our ears to them, we should apply our minds to understand them, and we should regard these teachings as being worthy of studying and mastering.

Thus, bhikshus, you should train yourselves.³²

— evaṃ —

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²⁵ §§6-6.1 recur in **(Duka) Parisā S 6** (A 2.5.6): see SD 51.17 (3.2.6).

²⁶ "Profound," *gambhīra*, ie by way of its texts (*pāli, vāseṇa*) like **Salla S** (Sn 3.8) or **Sallekha S** (M 8) (SA 2:229).

²⁷ "Deep in meaning," *gambhīr'attha*, like **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43) (SA 2:229).

²⁸ "Supramundane," *lok'uttara*, ie pointing to the supramundane goal (SA 2:229).

²⁹ "Connected with emptiness," *suññatā, paṭisaṃyutta*, ie explaining only the nature of beings as empty, as in the **Saṅkhitta Saṃyutta** [untraced, prob **Asaṅkhata Saṃyutta**] (SA 2:229). See §7n.

³⁰ "Thinkers [poets and scholars]," *kavī*, usu tr as "poets," but here has a general connotation or synecdoche for worldly thinkers. Scholars and writers. **Kavī S** (A 4.230) speaks of 4 kinds of kavī: one who writes or composes a work after thinking (*cintā, kavī*), one who composes a work after listening (to talks, legends, myths, etc) (*śuta, kavī*), one who writes relying on the meanings of things (*attha, kavī*), and one who uses his own creative ideas, like the elder Vaṅgīsa (*paṭibhāna, kavī*) (A 4.230/2:230; AA 3:211; DA 1:95). See Intro.

³¹ "Outsiders," *bahirakā*, ie those outside the Dharma-Vinaya (SA 2:229).

³² These last two paras [§§6-7] are almost identical to those at **Dhamma, dinna S** (S 55.53, 3.2/5:407), SD 46.4, where Comy gives examples somewhat different from here: "profound" like **Salla S** (Sn 3.8); "deep in meaning" like **Cetanā S** (prob S 12.38-40/2:65-67); "supramundane," like **Asaṅkhata Saṃyutta** (S 43); "connected with emptiness," like **Khajjaniya S** (S 22.79/3:86-91) (SA 3:291).