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Kathāvatthu Sutta

The Discourse on Points for Discussion | A 3.67

Theme: Answering questions and the qualities of a true Dharma speaker

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Dedicated to the Buddhist Fellowship Youths, Singapore

1 Early Buddhism as psychotherapy

The Buddha Dharma, from the very first discourse to the five monks, preserved in **the Dhamma-cakka-pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11)¹ to his very last words as recorded in **the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta** (D 16),² is effectively a 45-year long session of spiritual counselling on a cosmic scale. The Buddha's teaching consummates the spirituality of his listeners, awakens beings from ignorance and craving, shows them the path to awakening, and uplifts others from suffering, or at least teaches them the possibility of liberating themselves from the sufferings of the samsaric cycle—and continues to do so.

The main purpose of the Buddha Dharma is *a person-centred re-enacting of the Buddha's self-awakening*, or on a more general level, *the basic purpose of the Buddha Dharma is that of personal counselling and self-healing*. What has been attracting mind scientists and specialists is that Buddhism offers

- (1) a broad and versatile vocabulary of the mind that often challenges current scientific notions and provides new ways of looking at the mind;³
- (2) coherent theories of mind, being and healing that are effectively challenging Cartesian dualism and Freudian fundamentals, supporting the concept of self-transcending neuroplasticity (brain-healing, attention-training etc);⁴
- (3) details and effective techniques to create and maintain altered states of consciousness, generally known as "meditation" (especially by way of the first-person experience);
- (4) dramatic case histories of how the Buddha and his disciples counsel and heal the aged,⁵ the ailing,⁶ the dying,⁷ those suffering great loss,⁸ the emotionally troubled,⁹ a serial killer,¹⁰ and so on;
- (5) living examples of those who have or are benefitting from meditation training, especially contemplative monastics and regular meditators;¹¹
- (6) modern mind sciences now have the technology and instruments to put to test the methods and claims of Buddhist meditation, and so far the results have been very instructive and rewarding.¹²

2 Sutta summary and comments

2.1 TOPICS OF DISCUSSION. The sutta opens with the Buddha simply stating the three "**topics of discussion**" (*kathāvatthu*) [§1], that is, whatever we think or talk about, are all *time bound*. They are either

¹ S 56.11/5:420-424 @ SD 1.1.

² D 16/2:72-167 @ SD 9.

³ See **Meditation and consciousness**, SD 17ab esp **Dve Khandha S** (S 22.48/3:47 f), SD 17.1a, & **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a.

⁴ On **Buddhist psychology and dualism**, see Wallace 1999:33-36 (ch 3). On **Buddhist and Freudian psychologies**, see eg Padmasiri de Silva 1996, 1997:123-148. On **neuroplasticity**, see **Meditation and consciousness**, SD 17.8c (9.13).

⁵ See eg **Nakula, pitā S** (S 22.1/3:1-5), SD 5.4.

⁶ See eg **Nakula S** (A 6.16/3:295-298), SD 5.2.

⁷ Eg **Gatī Mahānāma S 1-2** (S 55.21-22/369-371), SD 23.1ab; **Anātha, piṇḍika S 1-2** (S 55.26-27/380-387), SD 23.2ab.

⁸ See **Kisā Gotamī**, SD 43.2; **Paṭācārā**, SD 43.3.

⁹ See eg **Vakkali S** (S 22.87/3:119-124), SD 8.8.

¹⁰ See **Aṅguli, māla S** (M 86/2:97-105), SD 5.11.

¹¹ See eg Brahmavamso 2006.

¹² See **Consciousness and Meditation**, SD 17.8c: see biblio for more refs.

about the past, the future, or the present. Without proper sense-restraint, our experiences of the present, if we find them *pleasant*, often result in *sense-desire* (*kāma-c, chanda*), and if we *dislike* them, often result in *ill will* (*vyāpāda*). From meditation teachings and experience, we know that thinking about *the past* often leads to *remorse* (*kukkucca*), while speculating or planning *the future* often brings on *restlessness* (*ud-dhacca*). When our mind is in the grip of *distractions*, we begin to lose our mental energies, and feel *sloth and torpor* (*thīna, middha*), that is, mental and physical discomfort. When we are *uncertain* about any of these experiences or unmindfully *ignore* the present moment (that is, fail to regard them as impermanent), *doubt* (*vicikicchā*) is likely to arise. These are **the 5 hindrances** (*pañca, nīvaraṇa*) to mental focus and progress.¹³

2.2 THE 4 WAYS OF ANSWERING QUESTIONS. This section deals with **the 4 right ways of dealing with questions** [§2]. A teacher, counsellor or discussant should be skilled in knowing when to answer “yes or no” to a category question, or to give a detailed answer to an analytical question, or to counter-question (when the question is unclear or to help the questioner discover the answer himself), or not to respond at all to a question that is “wrongly put,” that is, a trick question or one that has no spiritual benefit. There is much to benefit, at the proper time, to approach a teacher, counsellor or discussant who understands and practises these 4 ways of answering questions.¹⁴

2.2.1 Categorical answer

2.2.1.1 This is person the most common way of answering. It is a question that is answered simply *yes* or *no*, in a similar direct way. Here’s a well known example from **the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59):

“Now, what do you think, bhikshus, is **form** permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, bhante.”

(S 22.59,12/3:67), SD 1.2¹⁵

A number of examples of this type of question can be found in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2). For example, when king Ajāta,sattu asks the Buddha:

Could you, bhante, point out a similar **fruit of recluseship**,¹⁶ visible here and now?”

“Yes, it is, maharajah.

(D 2,34.2/1:60 + 37.2/1:61), SD 8.10

2.2.2 Analytical answer

2.2.2.1 An analytical question is one that needs a detailed answer discussing issues, or after making a distinction, as appropriate. Our Sutta commentary gives this example,

“Is the impermanent the eye?” which should be answered by a further distinction, thus: “Not only the eye, but the ear, the nose, etc, are also impermanent.” (AA 2:308)

This is the most common way that the Buddha answers (and most teachers would answer) questions on the Dharma. The classic example of such an answer is clearly the one that the Buddha gives to Subha in **the (Brahma,vihāra) Subha** (M 99), in connection with the brahmin claim that renunciants (the Buddhist monastic) are not accomplished in “the right way that is the wholesome dharma.” The Buddha famously replies, “In this matter, young brahmin, I am one who speaks on account of analysis.¹⁷ I am not one who speaks one-sidedly.”¹⁸

¹³ For details, see eg (Nīvaraṇa) Saṅgārava S (S 46.55/5:121-126), SD 3.12 & Nīvaraṇa,phāna Vagga (A 1.2), SD 16.3.

¹⁴ See SD 44.1 (3.1.0).

¹⁵ This example is from AA 2:308 (comy to A 3.67).

¹⁶ “The fruits of recluseship,” *sāmañña,phala*, see SD 8.10 (2.1) n.

¹⁷ *Vibhajja,vādo kho aham ettha, māṇava*, ie “I’m one who speaks after having analysed the matter.” See SD 38.6 (2.3.1).

¹⁸ *Nāham ettha ekamsa,vādo*. M 99,4/2:197,9-18 + SD 38.6 (2.3.2).

2.2.2.2 Other examples of analytical answers are given to the brahmin Ujjaya in **the Ujjaya Sutta** (A 4.39),¹⁹ and the householder Vajjiya,māhita’s response to the wanderers, recorded in **the Vajjiya,māhita Sutta** (A 10.94).²⁰

2.2.3 Counter-question

2.2.3.1 A question to be answered by a counter-question is appropriate when the question is unclear or it helps the questioner discover the answer himself. Our Sutta commentary gives this example:

“Does the eye have the same nature as the ear?” An appropriate counter-question would be
“With respect to what?”

If they reply, “With respect to impermanence,” then we should answer “Yes.” (AA 2:308)

2.2.3.2 Other examples of replying with a counter-question are found in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2).²¹ **The Kevalāḍḍha Sutta** (D 11) records an interesting example of how the Buddha corrects a monk’s question that has been wrongly put, thus:

Your question should not be phrased in this way: ‘Where, bhante, do these 4 primary elements—earth, water, fire, wind—cease without remainder?’ Instead, it should be phrased like this:

Where do earth, water, fire, wind find no footing?
Here long and short, small and great, fair and foul,
Name and form totally cease without remainder? (D 11,85.2/1:223), SD 1,7

2.2.3.3 Another famous example is Mallikā’s answer to king Pasenadi’s question, “Mallikā, is there or not one who is more beloved than your own self?” She replies, There is no one, maharajah, dearer to me than myself. Is there, maharajah, anyone more dear to you than yourself?” This is found in **the (Piyā) Mallikā S** (S 3.8 = U 5.1).²²

2.2.4 Question to be set aside

2.2.4.1 A question to be set aside or left unanswered is one that is “wrongly put,” that is, a trick question or one that has no relevance to the spiritual life or has no spiritual benefit. A well known example is this: “Is the soul the same as the body?” This question should be set aside, saying, “This has not been declared by the Tathagata.”²³

2.2.4.2 Other cases of a question or questions set aside include the following:

Pāsādika Sutta	The undeclared questions are not related to the holy life	D 29/3:136	SD 40a.6
Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta	The 10 or 14 undeclared questions	M 63/1:426-432	SD 5.8
(Aggi) Vaccha,gotta Sutta	The 10 undeclared theses & 4 alternatives	M 72/1:483-489	SD 6.15
(Dasaka) Uttiya Sutta	The Buddha’s silence	A 10.95/5:193 f	SD 44.17
Khemā Therī Sutta	Why the Buddha does not answer the 4 questions about the saint after death	S 44.1/4:375-380	SD 63.6
Sīha Sutta	Questions wrongly put answer rightly	Mv 6.31.7 @ V 1:235	

2.3 THE PRINCIPLES OF DISCOURSE. This section deals with **the principles of discourse** (***) [§3], that is, the proper way for effective and beneficial discussion. The first principle is that of understanding *what is possible to occur and what not*. The details of these “possibilities and impossibilities” (*thānāthāna*) is given in **the Bahu,dhātuka Sutta** (M 115) and **the Kiñci Saṅkhāra Sutta** (A 6.93), and, very briefly stated, this means that, for one with right view, whatever is impermanent, suffering, or non-self, cannot be otherwise. It is impossible for a person with right view to consciously commit evil karma

¹⁹ A 4.39/2:42 @ SD 79.9.

²⁰ A 10.94/5:190.14-20 @ SD 87.3.

²¹ D 2,34,2/1:60 + 37,2/1:61), SD 8.10, also: §14-15.

²² S 3.8/1:75 = U 5.1/47, SD 38.7.

²³ This example is from AA 2:308 (copy to A 3.67). For more details, see **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10.

(such as killing of one’s parents), and that no evil can rise from a conscious good deed, nor good from a conscious evil deed, and so on.²⁴

The two parties discussing a matter (be it between equals, or between a teacher and a pupil) must keep to or progress from statements previously made, that is, “agreed assumptions” (*parikappa*), so that the discussion can be fruitful. Furthermore, the discussion should be kept within what is known (*aññata,-vāda*)—there is no point discussing what is unknown or unknowable! On a higher level, this term refers to keeping to the Buddha’s or arhat’s knowledge, that is, what is possible to be known by the awakened mind.

Finally, the discussion must progress systematically and ethically. For example, a discussion should not be undertaken at an improper or uncondusive venue, time or conditions. A proper time sequence should be followed, that is, after a question or problem is resolved, we should progress to the next step, or spend enough time so that both parties understand each other, and so on. We should only approach a teacher, counsellor or discussant who keeps to these principles of discourse.

2.4 TEACHING DECORUM

2.4.1 Teaching. A good teacher, counsellor or discussant **keeps to a decorum** [§4], that is, he does not prevaricate or wander from one topic to another (*nāññenāññam paṭicarati*) aimlessly and fruitlessly. He does not go off the point being discussed (*na bahiddhā katham apanāmeti*) nor chatter away as he likes. Furthermore, he does not show anger, aversion or discontent (*na kopañ ca dosañ ca appaccayañ ca pātukaroti*), no matter how the discussion progress or how the questioner behaves.

2.4.2 Questioning. The next section [§5] continues from §4, listing **further points of decorum** for the discussion. A good teacher, counsellor or discussant does not put the questioner down (*na abhiharati*), that is, does not discourage him in any way, such as when he asks an improper or “silly” question. This also means that he should not make any moral judgement while listening to him, but to thoroughly understand the mind of the questioner first. Furthermore, he should not intimidate him (*na abhimaddati*) with sutta verses or religious pronouncements; nor should he ridicule him (*na anupajagghati*). Finally, he does not fuss over the questioner’s mistakes or weaknesses (*na khalitam gañhāti*). Simply put, he is an empathic listener or counsellor.

2.4.3 Stages of effective discourse. A wise and compassionate teacher, counsellor or discussant will “instruct, inspire, rouse and gladden” his audience or client with the Dharma.²⁵ This action sequence reflects the basic structure of the Buddha’s teaching method:

- (1) he instructs: the Dharma is shown;
- (2) he inspires: the listeners are filled with enthusiasm;
- (3) he rouses: they are fired with conviction and commitment; and
- (4) he gladdens: they are filled with joy.

The Commentaries²⁶ explain that by **instructing**, the Buddha removes the listener’s delusion; by **inspiring** him, heedlessness is dispelled; by **rousing** him, indolence is expelled; and by **gladdening**, brings the practice to a conclusion. In short, when we teach the Dharma to benefit others, we should do our best to bring instruction, inspiration, motivation and joy to the listener.

2.5 BEING ATTENTIVE. A good teacher, counsellor or discussant is always **attentive** (*ohita,sota*) and **a good listener** (*sa,upanisa*) [§6]. The Commentaries explain *sa,upanisa* as meaning, “with prerequisite, with condition (for progress)” (*sa,upanissayo sa,paccayo*, AA 2:312); and as “with cause, with condition (for progress)” (*sa,kāraṇam sa-p,paccayaṃ*, SA 2:53). With all the above skills, he would not only be able to satisfactorily answer the questioners, but also resolve his difficulty and inspire him to grow spiritually. The bottom line is not to collect guru figures nor seek idols to admire and worship, but associate with someone who is both willing and able to guide us spiritually, and change our lives for the better.

²⁴ M 115,12-19/3:64-67, SD 29.1 & A 6.93/3:439, SD 12.14.

²⁵ *Dhammiyā kathāya sandassetvā samādhapetvā samuṭṭejetvā sampahamsetvā*. These 4 qualities are, in fact, the sixth or last of the ideal skills of a Dharma speaker: see **(Dhamma,desaka) Udāyī S** (A 5.159/3:184), SD 46.1; see also SD 11.4 (4.3).

²⁶ Eg DA 1:293; UA 242; cf VA 1:65; MA 2:35.

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The Discourse on the Points for Discussion

A 3.67

- 1 Bhikshus, there are these 3 topics for discussion.²⁷ What are the three?
 One may talk about the past, saying, “Thus it was in the past.”
 One may talk about the future, saying, “Thus it will be in the future.”
 One may now talk about now in the present, saying, “Thus it is now in the present.”

The 4 ways of answering a question

2 Bhikshus, when engaged in discussion, an individual should be known whether he is fit to talk with or unfit to talk with.²⁸

Bhikshus, if this person, when asked a question,
 does not give a categorical [yes or no] answer to a question that should be answered categorically,
 does not give an analytical [qualified] answer to a question that should be answered analytically,
 does not give a counter-question to a question that should be counter-questioned,
 does not put aside a question that should be put aside—

then, bhikshus, he is an individual who is unfit to talk with.

2.2 But, bhikshus, if an individual, when asked a question,²⁹

- (1) gives a **categorical [yes or no] answer** to a question that should be answered categorically,³⁰
 (2) gives an **analytical [qualified] answer** to a question that should be answered analytically,³¹
 (3) gives a **counter-question** to a question that should be counter-questioned,³²
 (4) **puts aside a question** that should be put aside³³—

then, bhikshus, he is an individual fit to talk with.

The 4 principles of discourse

3 Bhikshus, when engaged in discussion, an individual should be known whether he is fit to talk with or unfit to talk with.

Bhikshus, if an individual, when asked a question,
 does not keep to what is possible and what is impossible,
 does not keep to agreed assumptions,
 does not keep to known teachings, [198]
 does not keep to proper procedure,

then, bhikshus, he is an individual unfit to talk with.

3.2 But, bhikshus, if an individual, when asked a question,

- (1) **keeps to what is possible and what impossible**,³⁴
 (2) **keeps to agreed assumptions**,
 (3) **keeps to known teachings**,³⁵

ṭhānāṭhāne saṅṭhāti
parikappe saṅṭhāti
aññata, vāde saṅṭhāti

²⁷ Qu at Kvu 15.3.6/1:513 = Kvu:SR 296; cf Kvu 1.6.60/1:140 f.

²⁸ *Kathāsampayogena bhikkhave puggalo veditabbo, yadi vā kaccho yadi vā akaccho 'ti.*

²⁹ See **Pañha, vyākaraṇa S** (A 4.42/2:46), SD 46.12; **Saṅgiti S** (D 33, 1.11(28)/3:229).

³⁰ *Ekamsa, vyākaraṇīyaṃ pañhaṃ ekamsena vyākaroti.*

³¹ *Vibhajja vyākaraṇīyaṃ pañhaṃ vibhajja vyākaroti.*

³² *Paṭipucchā vyākaraṇīyaṃ pañhaṃ paṭipucchā vyākaroti.*

³³ *Ṭhapanīyaṃ pañhaṃ ṭhapeti.*

³⁴ Cf Kvu 3.1.4/1:229.

(4) keeps to proper procedure.*paṭipadāya saṅṭhāti*

then, bhikshus, he is an individual fit to talk with.

The 3 points of decorum of discourse**4** Bhikshus, when engaged in discussion, an individual should be known whether he is fit to talk with or unfit to talk with.Bhikshus, if an individual, when asked a question,
evades the issue by wandering from one thing to another,
leads the discussion astray [off the point],
shows anger, aversion and discontent,

then, bhikshus, he is an individual unfit to talk with.

4.2 But, bhikshus, if an individual, when asked a question,

(1) does not evade the issue by wandering from one topic to another.³⁶**(2) does not lead the discussion astray [not go off the point].**³⁷**(3) does not show anger, aversion or discontent.**³⁸

then, bhikshus, he is an individual fit to talk with.

The 4 points of decorum of discourse**5** Bhikshus, when engaged in discussion, an individual should be known whether he is fit to talk with or unfit to talk with.Bhikshus, if an individual, when asked a question,
attacks him (the questioner),
crushes him,
ridicules [laughs at] him,
holds on to [delights in] his blunders,

then, bhikshus, he is an individual unfit to talk with.

5.2 But, bhikshus, if an individual, when asked a question,

(1) does not put down [the questioner],*na abhiharati***(2) does not crush him,***na abhimaddati***(3) does not ridicule [laugh at] him,***na anupajagghati***(4) does not grasp at his little mistakes.***na khalitam gaṇhāti*

then, bhikshus, he is an individual fit to talk with.

Attentiveness during a discussion**6** Bhikshus, when engaged in discussion, an individual should be known whether he is attentive (*sa,upaniso*)³⁹ or inattentive (*anupaniso*).⁴⁰ Bhikshus,**one who does not lend ear is not attentive,***anohita,soto bhikkhave anupaniso hoti***one who lends ear is attentive.***ohita,soto sa,upaniso hoti*6.2 Attentive, one clearly knows one quality, comprehends one quality, abandons one quality, and realizes one quality.⁴¹

³⁵ Be; Ee *aññā,vāda*. Alt tr: “the teaching of one who knows.” Comy glosses as “teachings that are understood, that are known” (*aññāta,vāde jānita,vāde*, AA 2:309).

³⁶ *Nāññenāññam paṭicarati*.

³⁷ *Na bahiddhā katham apanāmeti*.

³⁸ *Na kopaṇ ca dosaṇ ca appaccayaṇ ca pātukaroti*.

³⁹ *Sa,upaniso*. Comy glosses as “with prerequisite, with condition (for progress)” (*sa,upanissayo sa,paccayo*, AA 2:312); also “with cause, with condition” (*sa,kāraṇam sa-p,paccayam*, SA 2:53). For defs, see **Upanisā S** (S 12.23/-2:30), SD 6.12 (1). Cf Sn 322; D 2:217,3.

⁴⁰ *Kathā,sampayogena bhikkhave puggalo veditabbo yadi vā sa,upaniso yadi vā anupaniso 'ti*.

6.3 Clearly knowing one quality, comprehending one quality, abandoning one quality, and realizing one quality, one touches right release.⁴²

6.4 For, that is the purpose of discussion, that is the purpose of counsel, that is the purpose of drawing near, that is the purpose of lending ear—that is to say, the liberation of the mind through no clinging.⁴³ [199]

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|---|--|
| <p>7 <i>Ye viruddhā sallapanti
vinivīṭhā samussitā
anariya,guṇam āsajja
aññam-aññam vivaresino </i></p> | <p>When discussing, they are angered,
inflexible [dogmatic], arrogant,
attacking traits that are ignoble,
seeking to expose one another.</p> |
| <p>8 <i>Dubbhāsitaṃ vikkhalitaṃ
sampamohaṃ parājayam
aññam-aññassābhinandanti
tad ariyo katha nācare </i></p> | <p>Faltering with misspoken speech,
confounded by defeat,
they thus delight in one another—
this is not how a noble one behaves.</p> |
| <p>9 <i>Sace c'assa kathā,kāmo
kālam aññāya paṇḍito
dhamm'atṭha,paṭisaṃyuttā
yā ariya,caritā kathā </i></p> | <p>If there is in him the desire to speak,
the wise knows the right time,
what connected is with Dharma and the goal,
talk on the conduct of the noble ones:</p> |
| <p>10 <i>Tam katham kathaye
dhīro aviruddho anussito
anupādinna manasā
apalāso asāhaso </i></p> | <p>This is the speech spoken (by the wise)—
the wise, without anger, without arrogance,
with a detached mind,
unspiteful, non-violent.</p> |
| <p>11 <i>Anusuyyāyamāno so
sammad-aññāya bhāsati
subhāsitaṃ anumodeyya
dubbhaṭṭhe nāvasādaye </i></p> | <p>He is free of envy;
he speaks fully well knowing,
approving of the word well spoken,
not disheartened by what is ill-spoken.</p> |
| <p>12 <i>Upārambham na sikkheyya
khalitañ ca na gāhaye
nābhicare nābhimadde
na vācam payutaṃ bhaṇe⁴⁴ </i></p> | <p>Not training for the sake of reproach [of polemics],
and not grasping at a fault,
not reviling, not crushing,
he utters not a word of ulterior motive.</p> |
| <p>13 <i>Aññāt'attham pasād'attham
sataṃ ve hoti mantanā
evam kho ariyā mantenti
esā ariyāna mantanā
etad aññāya medhāvī
na samusseyya mantaye 'ti </i></p> | <p>For the sake of knowing, for inspiring faith,
indeed, counselling what is true,
thus the noble one's counsel—
advising in this noble manner,
knowing this, the wise
should counsel without arrogance.</p> |

⁴¹ *So sa,upaniso samāno abhijānāti ekaṃ dhammaṃ, parijānāti ekaṃ dhammaṃ, pajahati ekaṃ dhammaṃ, sacchikaroti ekaṃ dhammaṃ.* Comy says that these qualities are, respectively, the noble truth of the path, the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the arising of suffering, and the noble truth of the ending of suffering. (AA 2:312)

⁴² *So abhijānanto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, parijānanto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, pajahanto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, sacchikaronto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, sammā,vimuttim phusati.*

⁴³ *Etad atthā bhikkhave kathā, etad atthā mantanā, etad atthā upanisā, etad attham sotāvadhānam yad idam anupādā cittassa vimokkho 'ti,* A 1:198,34 = V 5:164,33. See **Kīṭa, giri S** (M 70) & **Caṅki S** (M 95), where *sotāvadhāna* appears as the 4th stage in the 12-step spiritual training (M 70,23-24/1:480@ SD 11.1) = (M 95,20/2:173 @ SD 21.15); see also **Dūta S** (A 8.16), SD 46.7 (2).

⁴⁴ Cf Sn 711b, 930b.

— evaṃ —

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