

23

Sundarī Sutta

The Discourse on Sundarī | U 4.8

Theme: Forbearance and lovingkindness in the face of adversity

Translated by Piya Tan ©2016

1 Sutta significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND HIGHLIGHTS

1.1.1 Summary

1.1.1.1 [§§1-3] On account of the popularity and success of the Buddha and his monastic community, the wanderers of other sects suffer loss of support from the public.

[§§4-7] The wanderers hatch a plot to discredit the Buddha and his monastic community. They recruit the beautiful young, devoted but naïve female wanderer, Sundarī. She is to conduct herself by pretending to frequent Jeta,vana to give the impression that she is having affairs with the monks there. The wanderers then kill her and leave her body hidden in Jeta,vana.

1.1.1.2 [§§8-12] The wanderers report to the king that a female wanderer is missing, and is last seen visiting Jeta,vana. Upon investigating, Sundarī’s body is found in Jeta,vana—just as the wanderers have planned. Now they paraded her body all over the city, claiming that Sundarī is murdered by the Buddhist monks to hide their indiscretions.

[§§13-14] The wanderers’ plot seem to work as the public denounce the monks.

1.1.1.3 [§§15-17] The harassed monks report the matter to the Buddha.

[§§18-19] The Buddha declares that the whole matter will settle within a week, and teaches the monks a well known verse [§19], which is variously perceived as a curse or an act of truth by the public.

[§§20-22] This skilful means of the Buddha works, as the public realize that the Buddhist monks are serious about their innocence. The slandering does, indeed, die out within the week.

[§§23-25] The monks marvel at the Buddha’s wisdom. The Sutta closes with the Buddha uttering an udana for the occasion.

1.1.2 Highlights

1.1.2.1 Besides the account given in **the Bāhitika Sutta** (M 88)—which records king Pasenadi’s investigating the Buddha regarding the wanderers’ accusation—the only other canonical account of this story is found in **the Sundarī Sutta** (U 4.8).

1.1.2.2 The non-canonical texts contain further accounts of the Sundarī story. The Udanā Commentary, the Dhammapada Commentary, the Jātaka Commentary, the Sutta Nipāta Commentary, the Chinese Aṭṭhaka,vagga and a Tocharian fragment of the Udānālaṅkāra give varying detailed accounts of the Sundarī story.¹

1.1.2.3 An interesting feature of **the Sundarī Sutta** (U 4.8) is the public perception that “These recluses of the Sakyas’ son have asserted an act of truth [have caste a curse] (*sapanti*)”² [§22]. The verb

¹ For details, see SD 49.12 (2).

² Comy says that the people react to the Buddha’s verse (Dh 306) by thinking, “These recluse who are disciples of the Sakyas’ son cast a curse, speak as if bringing it upon (*āpādentā*) us as we make accusations without substantiating them,” (such a bad karma leads to hell), or “They cast a curse to awaken us to the lack of responsibility for our

sapanti (pl) means “they curse, take an oath.” This is, of course, the populist perception. In the case of the Buddha and the monks, it was simply an act of truth (*sacca,kiriya*).

In a situation where one party accuses another of a misdeed, especially a serious one, and there is no way to prove either side right or wrong, the usual *deus ex machina*³ is that of an act of truth (*sacca,kiriya*). This is a truth statement made by the accused or innocent party, and the declaration is then made that *by the power of this truth*, the truth will be revealed, thus exposing the actual guilty party.

Although the public or the ignorant may perceive such an act to be a curse (*sāpa*), there is no ill intent involved at all in the case of the Buddha or the early Buddhists. In the case of commentarial stories, however, often some terrible effect would be invoked, qualifying it as a curse.⁴

1.2 RELATED SUTTAS

1.2.1 The Sundarī Sutta (U 4.8) is closely related to **the Bāhitika Sutta** (M 88). In terms of narrative continuity, the Bāhitika Sutta account records an important event within a week of the first day the wanderers’ public accusations against the Buddhist monks. This prompted king Pasenadi of Kosala to investigate the matter. This investigation must have taken place before the rumours die down [§22]. Hence, for a continuous narrative, we may break off at §19 and go on to read the Bāhitika Sutta, and then return to continue reading from there.⁵

1.2.2 It should be noted, however, that there is an interesting but significant difference between the account given in the Sundarī Sutta and the one in the Bāhitika Sutta. In the former, the wanderers accuse the monks of sexual impropriety without mentioning the Buddha. In the latter, however, it is the Buddha who is the subject of king Pasenadi’s investigation.

This should not be regarded as a discrepancy or conflicting account. The wanderers accuse the Buddhist monastic community, as a whole, hoping to discredit it, and win public support and patronage over to themselves. However, in terms of trying to uncover the truth, naturally Pasenadi has to investigate the leader of the monastic community himself, that is, the Buddha. In the end, the investigation concludes happily with the king convinced of the Buddha’s innocence.

2 On the term *sakya,putta*

2.1 WHO ARE THE SAMANĀ SAKYA,PUTTIYĀ?

2.1.1 *Sakya,putta*

2.1.1.1 The term *sakya,putta*, “the Sakya son,” as a generic term for any disciple of the Buddha (sometimes including the Buddha himself) is very common both in the Vinaya⁶ and the suttas.⁷ This is the term that the non-Buddhists usually use to refer to the early Buddhists.

action” (having done it, we do not own it up) (UA 261). Instead of Ee *āpādentā*, Be *sapatham karontā* (“making an assertion”); Ce Se has *sāpam dentā* (“casting a curse”). See UA:M 711 n736.

³ On *deus ex machina*, see SD 49.8b (11.2.2.1).

⁴ See SD 39.2 (2).

⁵ **Bāhitika S** (M 88), SD 49.12.

⁶ In Vinaya, *sakya,putto* occurs 38 times in Pārājika Pāli; 29 times in Pācittiya Pāli; 13 times in Mahā,vagga; 5 times in Culla,vagga; *sakya,puttam*, 21 times in Pār; 10 in Pāc; 1 in Mv; 2 in Cv.

⁷ In suttas, *sakya,putto* occurs 9 times in Dīgha, 17 times in Majjhima, 1 in Saṃyutta, 6 times in Aṅguttara, 1 time in Udāna, 5 times in Sutta Nipāta; *sakya,puttam* occurs 2 times in Vv.

2.1.1.2 *Sakya,putta* sometimes refers to the Buddha. After all, he is already famously known as “the Sakya sage” (*sakya,muni*).⁸ The term *sakya,putta* referring to the Buddha, however, is less common than as a generic term for the monks [2.1.1.]. This usage is found both in the Vinaya⁹ and the suttas.¹⁰

2.1.1.3 The term *sakya,putta* often appears in the suttas in reference to the monks (other than the Buddha himself). The references are common to monks who are actually from the Sakya clan themselves, such as Upananda¹¹ and Hatthaka.¹² In fact, the Commentary to **the Kimbila Thera,gāthā** (Tha 155 f) glosses *sakya,putta* as “the Sakya princes such as Anuruddha and so on” (*anuruddha-t,ther’ādayo sakya,-raja.kumārā*, ThaA 2:31).

The term, however, is also used to refer to non-Sakya monks or Buddhist monastics in general, such as in **the Sundarī Sutta**.

2.1.2 Sakya,puttiya

2.1.2.1 The term *sakya,puttiya* (literally, “of the Sakya,putta”), “(disciple) of the Sakya son,” is even more restricted, meaning, “a disciple or follower of the Buddha.”¹³ This term is found in the Sundarī Sutta, where it is the term used by the wanderers of other sects for the Buddhist monastic community in Sāvathī. This term is used by the wanderers in **the Sarabha Sutta** (A 3.64) to refer to the Buddhist monks as a community in Rāja,gaha.¹⁴

2.1.2.2 Masefield correctly translated *samaṇā sakya,puttā* as “the followers of the Sakyans’ son” (note the plural “Sakyans”) (eg, U:M 75; UA:M 627). We may, however, render this phrase more fully, although a bit awkwardly, as “the recluses who are sons of the Sakyas,” which, then, as a generic term, includes the Buddha, too. This clearly applies to the Sundarī Sutta, where I have rendered the phrase as “recluses of the Sakyas’s son.”

2.2 THE MONKS OR THE BUDDHA?

The Sundarī Sutta gives us the impression that *only* sangha members—the recluses of the Sakyans son (*samaṇā sakya,puttiyā*) (U 43) are the victim of abuses by those who spread the rumours, and by those who believe them or, for any reason, dislike the Buddha. However, if we consider the insidious plot of the heretical wanderers, it is the Buddha himself that they see as the source of their losses. In other words, at least in the Sundarī Sutta, we should understand *samaṇā sakya,puttiyā* as being inclusive of, or implies, the Buddha, too.

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⁸ Khp 4 = Sn 39 (Ratana S v4); Vv 80 (Chatta Māṇavaka Vv v1) = VvA 230*; Pv 82* = PvA 249; Bv 65*; V 1:310*; Ap 1:42* = ThaA 2:101*; Nc:Be 207; KhpA 180; SnA 1:278, 2:408; UA 154* = ItA 1:138*; VvA 231; ApA 280.

⁹ *Sakya,putta* referring to the Buddha in Vinaya, only Mv @ V 1:35, 40, 41, 242, 245; Pār @ V 3:1.

¹⁰ *Sakya,putta* or *sakya,kulā* referring to the Buddha in suttas: **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3/1:87, 88); **Soṇa,danda S** (D 4/1:111, 112); **Kūṭa,danta S** (D 5/1:127, 128); **Mahāli S** (D 6/1:150); **Lohicca S** (D 12/1:224); **Te,vijja S** (D 13/1:236); **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41/1:285); **Verañjaka S** (M 42/1:290); **Brahma,nimantanika S** (M 49/1:330); **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60/1:400); **Magandiya S** (M 75/1:502); **Raṭṭha,pāla S** (M 82/2:55); **Brahm’āyu S** (M 91/2:133, 134, 141×2); **Sela S** (M 92/2:146×2 = Sn 3.7/pp105, 105); **Caṅkī S** (M 95/2:164×2); **Vāseṭṭha S** (M 98/2:196 = Sn 3.9/p116); **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140/3:328); **Nagara,vindeyya S** (M 92/3:290); **Veḷu,dvāreyya S** (S 55.7/5:352); **Venāga,pura S** (A 3.63/1:180); **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65/1:188); (**Pañcaka**) **Nāgita S** (A 5.30/3:30); (**Chakka**) **Nāgita S** (A 6.42/3:341); **Yasa S** (A 8.86/4:340); **Udapāna S** (U 7.9/78); **Pārāyana Vg** (Sn Sn 5.0/991d, 996c); **Cūḷa Ratha Vv** (Vv 63,20/p92), **Kaṇḍaka Vv** (Vv 81,19/p119)

¹¹ Mv 1.52.1 (V 1:79); **Samudda J** (J 296/2:441,15), **Dabbha,puppha J** (J 400/3:332,5).

¹² Pāc 1.1 (V 4:1). Hatthaka loves holding discussions with the sectarian heretics.

¹³ Mv 1.23.2 (V 1:44); **Pahārāda S** (A 8.19/4:202), SD 45.18; **Sigāla S 1** (S 2:272), **Sigāla S 2** (S 2:272); U 44 f.

¹⁴ A 3.64,6/1:185 (SD 51.23).

Sundarī Sutta

The Sundarī Discourse

U 4.8

Thus have I heard.

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in Jeta’s grove, in Anātha,piṇḍika’s park, outside Sāvathī.¹⁵

The Buddha’s success

2 Now, at that time, the Blessed One, being revered, respected, held in high esteem, venerated, and honoured,¹⁶

gained robes, alms-food, lodging, and support for the sick and medical supplies.¹⁷

The community of monks, too, *being revered, respected, held in high esteem, venerated, and honoured, gained robes, alms-food, lodging, and support for the sick and medical supplies.*

3 The wanderers of outside sects, however, were not revered, not respected, not held in high esteem, not venerated, and not honoured, and did *not* gain robes, alms-food, lodging, or support for the sick and medical supplies.

The wanderers recruit Sundarī

4 Then, those wanderers of outside sects, unable to endure the respect for the Blessed One and for the community of monks, approached [44] the female wanderer, Sundarī,¹⁸ and said to her:

“Can you, sister, do a favour for your relatives?”¹⁹

5 “What, sirs, can I do? What can possibly be done by me? For my relatives, I’m willing to sacrifice my own life!”²⁰

6 “In that case, sister, you should frequently go to Jeta’s grove.”

“Yes, sirs,” the female wanderer Sundarī replied to those wanderers of outside sects. She frequented Jeta’s grove.

7 When the wanderers of outside sects knew that the female wanderer Sundarī had been clearly seen by the masses to be frequenting Jeta’s grove, they killed her, and then cast her right there in a hollow in Jeta’s grove’s monsoon moat.²¹

¹⁵ Sāvathī is the capital of Kosala, ruled by king Pasenadi.

¹⁶ “Revered ... honoured,” *sakkato hoti garukato mānito pūjito apacito*, a stock passage,

¹⁷ These are the 4 basic supports (*catu paccaya*) of renunciants: see **Sabb’āsava S** (M 2,13-16), SD 30.3 & **Santutthi S** (A 4.27), SD 104.8.

¹⁸ On Sundarī, see SD 49.12 (2).

¹⁹ *Ussahasi tvam bhagini nātīnam attham kātun’ti*. Only Be + Comy has *tvam*. Cf **Maṇi,sūkara J** (J 2:415) for more details; also DhA 3:474; SnA 2:518-520.

²⁰ *Kyāham ayyā karomi, kim mayā na sakkā* [Ee Se *kkim mayā sakkā*] *kātum, jīvitampi me pariccattam nātīnam atthāyāti*.

²¹ *Atha nam jīvitā voropetvā tath’eva jetavanassa parikhā,kūpe nikkhipivā*. Be UA *parikhā,kūpe*; Ee *parikhāya kūpe*; Se UA:Se *parikkhā,kūpe*. This “monsoon moat” is prob a large drain (called “monsoon drain” locally) to drain water away during the rains. The “hollow” (*kūpa*, which can also mean “cavity, well”) is prob a long hole so that the body hidden there would not be easily seen.

The plot thickens

8 Then, they approached king Pasenadi of Kosala,²² and said to him:

“There is, maharajah, this female wanderer, Sundarī. She is not to be seen!”²³

9 “Where do you suspect she is?”

“Jeta’s grove, maharajah.”

“In that case, check Jeta’s grove.”

10 Then, the wanderers of outside sects searched Jeta’s grove, and retrieved the body from where she was left in the monsoon moat. They put it on a litter and had it taken into Sāvattḥī, going from high-road to highroad, from crossroads to crossroads, inciting²⁴ people, saying:

11 “See, good sirs, the deed of the recluses of the Sakyas’ son!

Shameless are these recluses of the Sakyas’ son. They are immoral, bad in nature, liars, incelibates [not brahmacharis]. Yet, they claim to be dharmacharis, samacharis, brahmacharis²⁵ who are truthful, virtuous, good in nature!

12 There is no recluseship in them! There is no holy living in them!

Destroyed is their recluseship! Destroyed is their holy living!²⁶

Where is their recluseship? Where is their holy living?

Gone is their recluseship! Gone is their holy living!

How can a man performing a man’s task deprive a woman of life?”²⁷

Populist reaction

13 Then, because of that, the people in Sāvattḥī, upon seeing the monks, accosted, abused, scolded, vexed them with discourteous and harsh words, thus:

“*Shameless are these recluses of the Sakyas’ son. They are of immoral, bad in nature, liars, incelibates [not brahmacharis]. Yet, they claim to be dharmacharis, samacharis, brahmacharis who are truthful, virtuous, good in nature!*

14 *There is no recluseship in them! There is no holy living in them!*

Destroyed is their recluseship! Destroyed is their holy living!

Where is their recluseship? Where is their holy living?

Gone is their recluseship! Gone is their holy living!

How can a man performing a man’s tasks deprive a woman of life?”

The monks report to the Buddha

15 Then, some monks, having dressed themselves at dawn, taking bowl and robe, entered Sāvattḥī for alms. [45] Then, after the alms-round, having finished their meals of alms-food, approached the Blessed One, saluted him and sat down at one side.

²² The idea of approaching the king is to use his authority to authenticate their false claims against the Buddha. On king Pasenadi’s investigating the Buddha, see **Bahitika S** (M 88), SD 49.12.

²³ *Yā sā mahārāja sundarī paribbājikā, sā no na dissatīti.* For Be Se UA *dissati*, Ee reads *dassati*, “she sees.”

²⁴ “Inciting,” *ujjhāpesuṃ*, from *ujjhāpeti*,” to harass, vex, irritate; make a complaint; rousing ill will” (V 4:38; M 1:126; S 1:209).

²⁵ “Dharmacharis, samacharis, brahmacharis,” *dhama, cārino sama. cārino brahma, cārino*, ie, respectively, those who practise the Dharma, who live harmoniously, who are keep to a celibate holy life.

²⁶ “Holy living,” Be Ce Se *brahmaññaṃ* throughout = *brahma, cariya*; E *brāhmaññaṃ*. “brahminhood.” The context here clearly dictates the former.

²⁷ *Katham hi nāma puriso purisa, kiccaṃ karitvā ithim jīvitā voropessatīti. Purisa, kicca*, lit, “what is to be done by a man” is a euphemism for the sex act, as noted by Comy: “They spoke this in connection with sexual intercourse” (*methuna, paṭisevanam sandhāya vadanti*, UA 260).

16 Sitting thus at one side, the monks said to the Blessed One:

“Just now, bhante, the people in Sāvattihī, upon seeing the monks, accosted, abused, scolded, vexed them with discourteous and harsh words, thus:

‘Shameless are these recluses of the Sakyas’ son. They are of immoral, bad in nature, liars, incestives [not brahmacharis]. Yet, they claim to be dharmacharis, samacharis, brahmacharis who are truthful, virtuous, good in nature!

17 *There is no recluseship in them! There is no holy living in them!*

Destroyed is their recluseship! Destroyed is their holy living!

Where is their recluseship? Where is their holy living?

Gone is their recluseship! Gone is their holy living!

How can a man performing a man’s tasks deprive a woman of life?”

The Buddha’s response

18 “Bhikshus, this noise will not last long. It will last but 7 days. With the passing of 7 days, it will die out!²⁸

So, bhikshus, when you see these people who have *accosted, abused, scolded, vexed* you with *discourteous and harsh words*, you should reprove them with this verse:

19 *Abhūta, vādī nirayaṃ upeti
yo cāpi²⁹ katvā na karomi c’āha
ubho’pi te pecca samā bhavanti
nihīna, kammā manujā par’atthāti*

Who speaks falsely goes to hell,
who, having done, says he’s not done it,
after death, both, too, will be the same—
men of base karma in the hereafter.

(Dh 306³⁰ = It 42 = Sn 661)

The people’s change of heart

20 Then, the monks, having learned this verse before the Blessed One, reproved with this verse those people *who have accosted, abused, scolded, vexed* the monks with *discourteous and harsh words*:

21 *Who speaks falsely, goes to hell,
after death, both, too, will be the same* *who, having done, says he’s not done it,
men of base karma in the hereafter.* [§18]

22 Then, it occurred to the people:

“These recluses of the Sakyas’ son are not responsible (for the misdeed). It was not done by them. These recluses of the Sakyas’ son have asserted an act of truth [have cast a curse]!”³¹

Indeed, the noise did not last long, *only for 7 days*. At the end of 7 days, it disappeared.

The closing teaching

23 Then, some monks went before the Blessed One, saluted him, and sat down at one side.

Sitting thus at one side, they said to the Blessed One:

“It is marvellous, bhante! It is wonderful, bhante!

What well spoken word this is, bhante, of the Blessed One, that is to say:

²⁸ This passage recurs at Mv 1.24.6 (V 1:43) in another context.

²⁹ Be *yo vāpi*; Be:Ka Ce Ee Se so.

³⁰ See DhA 3:477.

³¹ *Akārakā ime samaṇā sakyaputtiyā, na-y-imehi kataṃ, sapant’ime samaṇā sakyaputtiyā’ti.* The vb *sapanti*, means “they curse”: see (1.1.2.3).

‘*Bhikshus, this noise will not last long. It will last but seven days. With the passing of seven days, it will die out!*’ [§17] The noise, bhante, has stopped!

24 Then, the Blessed One, knowing the significance of the occasion, uttered this udana [verse of uplift]:

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| 25 <i>Tudanti vācāya janā asaññatā
sarehi saṅgāma, gatam ’va kuñjaram
sutvāna vākyaṃ pharusam udīritam
adhivāsaye bhikkhu aduṭṭha, citto ’ti.</i> ³² | Unrestrained people pierce (others) with words,
like an elephant pierced with arrows in the battle-field.
Hearing words harshly uttered,
a monk with an unhating heart endures it. ³³ |
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— evaṃ —

[For **Bibliography**, see the end of SD 49c]

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³² Cf Dh 320; Sn 623.

³³ On the figure of a patient elephant, cf Tha 31.