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## (Catukka) Dhamma,kathika Sutta

The (Fours) Discourse on the Dharma Speaker | A 4.139 = Pug 4.7  
Theme: The 4 kinds of Dharma speakers and their respective audiences  
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2014

### 1 Grammatical analysis

#### 1.1 SUTTA OVERVIEW

##### 1.1.1 The 4 kinds of Dharma speakers

**1.1.1.1 The Dhamma,kathika Sutta** is found in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (A 4.139) as well as in **the Puggala Paññatti** (Pug 4.7), the fourth book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. It is a short text listing 4 kinds of Dharma speakers—those who speak little (*appa*) or speak much (*bahu*), on what is unbeneficial (*asahita*) or what is beneficial (*sahita*)—and two kinds of audience or congregation—the skilled (*kusala*) and the unskilled (*akusala*).

Technically, with all these configurations, we will have a total of **8 situations**, as follows:

	<u>speaks little</u>	<u>speaks much</u>	<u>the unbeneficial</u>	<u>the beneficial</u>	
(1) <u>unskilled audience</u> <sup>1</sup>	✓		✓		
(2) <u>unskilled audience</u>		✓	✓		
(3) <u>unskilled audience</u>	✓			✓	omitted
(4) <u>unskilled audience</u>		✓		✓	omitted
(5) <u>skilled audience</u>	✓		✓		omitted
(6) <u>skilled audience</u>		✓	✓		omitted
(7) <u>skilled audience</u>	✓			✓	
(8) <u>skilled audience</u>		✓		✓	

We will below [1.1.4] discuss why the Sutta mentions only 4—that is (1), (2), (7) and (8)—out of these eight possible occasions for the Dharma speaker and his audience or congregation.

**1.1.1.2** Besides this translation, at least three others are available, but they have all been differently translated.<sup>2</sup>

**The 4 kinds of Dharma speakers** are listed as follows:

- |  |                                     |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| (1) one who says <u>little</u> and what is <u>unbeneficial</u> [not the teaching]; | <i>appañ ca bhāsati asahitañ ca</i> |
| (2) one who says <u>little</u> and what is <u>beneficial</u> [the teaching];       | <i>appañ ca bhāsati sahitañ ca</i>  |
| (3) one who says <u>much</u> and what is <u>unbeneficial</u> ; and                 | <i>bahuñ ca bhāsati asahitañ ca</i> |
| (4) one who says <u>much</u> and what is <u>beneficial</u> .                       | <i>bahuñ ca bhāsati sahitañ ca</i>  |

**1.1.2 The Dharma speakers' audiences.** The Sutta also describes the nature of the audience or congregation of each of the 4 kinds of Dharma speakers, that is, the audience or congregation:

<sup>1</sup> "Audience" here applies the teaching more broadly. In the Sutta context, "congregation" would be more appropriate, as it refers to a specific Buddhist or religious situation.

<sup>2</sup> B C Law, Pug:L 1924:59; F L Woodward, Pug:W 1933:141; Bhikkhu Bodhi, A:B 2012:518.

(1+3) is unskilled in discerning what is beneficial or not; or *na kusala*  
 (2+4) is skilled in discerning what is beneficial or not. *kusala*

Here, we can take “beneficial” (*sahita*) as meaning “good” or “wholesome” (*kusala*). *Kusala*, as applied to the respective audiences or congregations, means “well-informed and discerning,” essentially knowing what is right or wrong, what is good or bad. In other words, the audience is either wise or unwise (foolish).

### 1.1.3 The Dharma speaker and his audience

Altogether, we have these 4 kinds of Dharma speakers and their respective audiences or congregations:

- |  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| (1) the Dharma speaker says <i>little</i> of the <i>unbeneficial</i> | to an <i>unskilled</i> congregation; |
| (2) the Dharma speaker says <i>little</i> of the <i>beneficial</i>   | to an <i>skilled</i> congregation;   |
| (3) the Dharma speaker says <i>much</i> of the <i>unbeneficial</i>   | to an <i>unskilled</i> congregation; |
| (4) the Dharma speaker says <i>much</i> of the <i>beneficial</i>     | to an <i>skilled</i> congregation.   |

Of these 4 settings, (1) and (2) are **unhelpful** on account of the teaching being *unbeneficial* and the congregation *unskilled* in the good and the bad. Settings (3) and (4) are **helpful** since the teaching—little or much—is *beneficial*, and the congregation is *skilled*.

### 1.1.4 Why the Sutta mentions only 4 kinds of Dharma speaker and their audiences?

**1.1.4.1** The Sutta, however, mentions only four situations out of the possible eight [1.1.1.1], that is, occasions (1), (2), (3) and (4). The first reason for this is based on the idea of an “economy of Dharma”: whether we listen little or much of Dharma, as long as we put it into practice, we would enjoy its benefit, that is, wisdom and awakening. This interpretation is supported by **Dh 19-20** [1.1.5].

**1.1.4.2** In this connection, we should also understand “skilled” (*kusala*) as meaning, firstly, “skillful” in discerning between right and wrong—what is moral or immoral (in terms of the moral precepts)—and acting rightly, but also in discerning good and bad (and choosing good). Secondly, we should understand “skilled” here as referring to right effort—ending a bad habit, abstaining from it, initiating a good act, and cultivating it<sup>3</sup>—or, in short, it refers to diligence (*appamāda*).<sup>4</sup>

**1.1.4.3** Note that the Dharma speaker who speaks on **the unbeneficial** (*asahita*)—little or much—has a congregation that is unskilled (*akusala*) [§§2+4], while the Dharma speaker who speaks on **the beneficial** (*sahita*)—little or much—has a congregation that is skilled (*kusala*) [§§3+5].

**An unskilled congregation** is very likely to fall for one who speaks on the unbeneficial, which a **skilled congregation** is more likely to follow a speaker of the beneficial. The reason why the unskilled congregation falls for the bad speaker is probably because it is attracted to the speaker rather than benefitting from what he teaches: a bad congregation places the teacher above the teaching. A skilled congregation, on the other hand, is more likely to listen to the speaker for the Dharma that he teaches.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On the 4 right efforts (*samma-p, padhāna*), see **(Cātu) Padhāna S** (A 4.14), SD 10.2.

<sup>4</sup> On diligence (*appamāda*), see **Pamāda Vihāri S** (S 35.97), SD 47.6.

<sup>5</sup> See **The teacher or the teaching?** SD 3.14.

A bad teacher attracts an unskilled congregation. A good and wise teacher attracts a skilled congregation. In other words, the speaker and his respective congregation reflect one another in wisdom and diligence.

Or, if we follow the drift of the Sutta: the kind of teacher we listen or follow will mould our personality—whether we are wise and diligent, or not: *we tend to mirror our teacher.* Hence, the Sutta refrain: “Such a Dharma speaker is reckoned a Dharma speaker for just such a congregation.” [§§2.2, 3.2, 4.2, 5.2]

### 1.1.5 Dhammapada verses

**1.1.5.1** The following pair of verses from the Twin Chapter (*yamaka vagga*) of the **Dhammapada** are instructive in connection with the Sutta teaching:

<p><i>Bahum pi ce sahitaṃ bhāsamano na tak,karo hoti naro pamatto gopo’va gāvo gaṇayaṃ paresaṃ na bhagavā sāmaññaṃsa hoti</i></p>	(Dh 19)	<p>Though much he recites the sacred texts, but the heedless man who acts not accordingly, is like a cowherd who counts the cows of others: he has no share of the holy life. [he is not a partaker of recluseship].</p>
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<p><i>Appam pi ce sahitaṃ bhāsamano dhammassa hoti anudhamma.cārī Dharma, rāgañ ca dosañ ca pahāya moham samma-p,pajāno suvimutta,citto anupādayāno idha vā huram vā sa bhagavā sāmaññaṃsa hoti</i></p>	(Dh 20)	<p>Though little he recites the sacred texts, but he practises the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, having abandoned lust, hate and delusion, understanding fully, rightly, his mind well freed, not grasping what is here, neither the hereafter— he has a share of the holy life. [he is a partaker of recluseship]</p>
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**1.1.5.2** The Dhammapada Commentary says that a **foolish person** comes to listen to the Dharma, but after the instructions, does not, even for the moment a cock takes to flap its wings, attend to reflecting on impermanence, and so on. He does not enjoy any of the benefits of the Dharma, just as a cowherd guards the cattle of others, but not owning them, other than earning the day’s wages, he does not enjoy any of the “5 products of a cow” (*pañca,go,rasa*, “the 5 bovine flavours”) (that is, the milkfoods: milk, cream, buttermilk, butter and ghee).<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the one practises the Dharma, even for a brief moment, is like the owner of the herd. He is able to rightly enjoy the 5 milkfoods. He has a share of the Buddha Dharma, that is, he is truly a Dharma practitioner who gains wisdom of true reality and, in due course, awakening. (DhA 1:157, **The Dhammapada Commentary** on Dh 19-20 [1.1.5.1], explains *sahita* as referring to the Tipiṭaka (DhA 1:157), thus making it the cognate with the Sanskrit *samhitā*, that is, the Vedas. However, here we should simply take it as historically referring only the Dharma-Vinaya.<sup>7</sup> [1.3.3.2]

**1.2 PALI TEXT.** Since the Pali text of the Sutta is rather short, and it helps for us to be familiar with its key terms, it is here reproduced in full, based on the Burmese (6<sup>th</sup> Council) version:

<sup>6</sup> Respectively, *khira, dadhi, takka, navanīta, sappi* (Mv 6.34.21 @ V 1:244,34, where the Buddha declares them allowable for monastics at any time, esp where food is difficult to obtain, as part of the “Meṇḍaka allowance,” *meṇḍaka anujānana*). On the Meṇḍaka allowance, see SD 4.19 (7.3).

<sup>7</sup> See J R Carter & M Palihawadana, *The Dhammapada*, NY & Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 1987:107

1 *Cattāro’me bhikkhave dhamma,kathikā. Katame cattāro?*

2 *Idha bhikkhave ekacco dhamma,kathiko*

*appañ ca bhāsati            asahitañ ca,  
parisā c’assa            na kusalā hoti            sahitāsahitassa.*

*Eva,rūpo bhikkhave dhamma,kathiko eva,rūpāya parisāya<sup>8</sup> dhamma,kathiko tv-eva saṅkhaṃ gacchati.*

3 *Idha pana bhikkhave ekacco dhamma,kathiko*

*appañ ca bhāsati            sahitañ ca,  
parisā c’assa            kusalā hoti            sahitāsahitassa.*

*Eva,rūpo bhikkhave dhamma,kathiko eva,rūpāya parisāya dhamma,kathiko tv-eva saṅkhaṃ gacchati.*

4 *Idha pana bhikkhave ekacco dhamma,kathiko*

*bahuñ ca bhāsati            asahitañ ca,  
parisā c’assa            na kusalā hoti            sahitāsahitassa.*

*Eva,rūpo bhikkhave dhamma,kathiko eva,rūpāya parisāya dhamma,kathiko tv-eva saṅkhaṃ gacchati.*

5 *Idha pana bhikkhave ekacco dhamma,kathiko*

*bahuñ ca bhāsati            sahitañ ca,  
parisā c’assa            kusalā hoti            sahitāsahitassa.*

*Eva,rūpo bhikkhave dhamma,kathiko eva,rūpāya parisāya dhamma,kathiko tv-eva saṅkhaṃ gacchati.*

6 *Ime kho bhikkhave cattāro dhamma,kathikā’ti.*

*Eva,rūpo bhikkhave dhamma,kathiko eva,rūpāya parisāya dhamma,kathiko tv-eva saṅkhaṃ gacchati.*

### 1.3 SAHITA AND ASAHITA

**1.3.1** The Aṅguttara Commentary on the Sutta is only 19 words in 4 short sentences (AA 3:133). The Puggala Paññatti Commentary gives a slightly longer explanation, but only in 10 lines (PugA 224). The Commentary here glosses the key-word **sahita** (“benefit, beneficial”) as *attha,yutta* (“yoked with benefit”). Clearly, *sahita*—resolved as *saha* (“with”) + *hita* (“benefit, good”)— if glossed as *attha*, we must take **attha** as meaning “benefit,” which would include a sense of “purpose.”

**1.3.2** Bodhi translates *attha* as “meaning” (one of its several senses), but which clearly does not apply here. Woodward renders it as “to the point,” which is too narrow. And Law renders it broadly as “relevant.”

**1.3.3 The Dhamma,desaka Udāyī Sutta** (A 5.159) says that a Dharma speaker has these 5 qualities:

- (1) he gives a progressive teaching;
- (2) he teaches in a manner that suits the audience;
- (3) he teaches out of compassion;
- (4) he teaches not for the sake of material gain; and
- (5) he teaches without hurting himself or others.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Be *eva,rūpāya parisāya*; Ee *eva,rūpāyaṃ parisāyaṃ*.

<sup>9</sup> A 5.159/3:184 (SD 46.1).

From these teachings, we can surmise, too, that there is a pervading sense of beneficence and purpose. This further supports the fact that *attha* here [1.3.1] is best translated as “benefit and/or purpose.”

### **1.3.3 Meaning of *sahita***

**1.3.3.1** Both the Sutta Commentary, the Sutta context, and also other suttas such as **A 5.159** [1.3.2], clearly demand that *sahita* be rendered as “beneficial,” which broadly describes the nature of a good Dharma speaker, who does *not* merely explain the meaning, or speaks to the point or relevantly. “Beneficial” covers all the senses given in the Dhamma,desaka Udāyī Sutta A 5.159) [1.3.2]. Conversely, we should translate the antonym, *asahita* as “unbeneficial.”

**1.3.3.2** According to **the Dhammapada Commentary** on Dh 19-20 [1.1.5.1], *sahita*, explains it as referring to the Tipiṭaka (DhA 1:157), thus equalizing it with the Sanskrit *saṃhitā*, that is, the Vedas. The word *saṃhitā* literally means “conjoined,” a special reference to the flow of sounds by sandhi of the words of the Vedas. While the brahmins place great emphasis on the efficacy of sounds and its effect, the Buddha stress on the meaning of the word, its practice and benefits in bringing about wisdom and awakening.

The commentarial gloss on *sahita* as the Tipiṭaka is, of course, late, simply because there were no “three baskets” of teachings in the Buddha’s time, not even in the Abhidhamma—only the Dharma-Vinaya. It becomes technical and scholastic if we include the Abhidhamma in the interpretation of the canonical usage of *sahita*.

It is wise, for practical purposes, to limit the sense of *sahita* here, only to **the Dharma-Vinaya**, but again primacy must be given to the “Dhamma” as the suttas, since the much of the Vinaya is post-Buddha, too. The rule of thumb is to use the Vinaya (or the Abhidhamma, too) where it helps us to better understand the suttas and the holy life.

**1.3.3.3** Hence, here—in **the Dhamma,kathika Sutta**—we should understand *sahita* primarily as meaning “what is beneficial or good (in terms of the Dharma),” and secondarily, as what is found, explicitly or implicitly, *in the texts*, that is the suttas, and those teachings that help explicate the sutta teachings.

Hence, we can conclude that while the bad Dharma speaker—speaking little or much—speaks what is *unbeneficial* and *not found in the suttas*, the good Dharma speaker—speaking little or much—speaks what is beneficial and what is found in the suttas. Hence, the good Dharma speaker teaches what is related to the goal of the Dharma and his congregation practises accordingly.

**1.4 THE REFRAIN.** All the translators seem to have missed the sense of *eva,rūpāya parisāya dhamma,-kathiko tv-eva saṅkham gacchati* in the refrain [§2.2 = 3.2 = 4.2 = 5.2], where *eva,rūpāya parisāya* has a dative or genitive structure. That is, it means “to, of or for such a congregation.”

*Tv-eva* = *tu eva* [id] where *tu* is an enclitic particle meaning “however, but, rather,” sometimes merely an expletive; *eva* is an emphatic particle, meaning “only, just.” Hence, the phrase should here be translated as “reckoned as a Dharma speaker for just such a congregation.”

## **2 Sutta commentary**

**2.1 GURUS.** The Sutta is not about 4 kinds of Dharma speakers in general, but *specifically* refers to those who are only as good as the audience’s response to their teaching. Hence, we have the refrain: “**Bhikshus, such a Dharma speaker is reckoned as a Dharma speaker for just such a congregation**”

(*eva,rūpo bhikkhave dhamma,kathiko eva,rūpāya parisāya dhamma,kathiko tv-eva saṅkhaṃ gacchati*).

[1.4]. In other words, such a Dharma speaker is just like his audience, not someone better who is able to uplift or better his audience. Perhaps, the audience, or some its members, are even better than he is.

Hence, we can also say that this Sutta is about 4 kinds of sectarian or cult gurus who may give short or long talks to their congregations which may or may not benefit the latter. Such “teachers” are only so in terms of their congregation: *the crowd defines them, and they define the crowd*. This is a very private view on Buddhism that we should avoid.

**2.2 RELATED SUTTAS.** The Dhamma,kathika Sutta should be studied with **the (Dhamma,desaka) Udāyī Sutta** (A 5.159) [1.3.2], where the Buddha gives a list of qualities of a Dharma speaker, and also deals with the cultish, cunning, or exploitative guru. The Sutta Introduction (SD 46.1 (3)) there has a section on “The dynamics of teaching Dharma,” and also gives a list of related suttas.

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## (Catukka) Dhamma,kathika Sutta The (Fours) Discourse on the Dharma Speaker

A 4.139 = Pug 4.7

1 Bhikshus, there are these 4 kinds of Dharma speakers. What are the four?

2 (1) Here, bhikshus, a certain Dharma speaker  
says little, but what is **unbeneficial**, and  
his congregation is unskilled in (discerning)  
what is beneficial and what is not.<sup>10</sup>

2.2 Bhikshus, such a Dharma speaker is reckoned a Dharma speaker for just such a congregation [an assembly].<sup>11</sup>

3 (2) But here, bhikshus, a certain Dharma speaker  
says little, but what is **beneficial**, and  
his congregation is skilled in (discerning)  
what is beneficial and what is not.

3.2 Bhikshus, such a Dharma speaker is reckoned a Dharma speaker for just such a congregation.

4 (3) But here, bhikshus, a certain Dharma speaker  
says much, but what is **unbeneficial**, and  
his congregation is unskilled in (discerning)  
what is beneficial and what is not.

4.2 Bhikshus, such a Dharma speaker is reckoned a Dharma speaker for just such a congregation.

5 (4) But here, bhikshus, a certain Dharma speaker  
says much, but what is **beneficial**, and  
his congregation is skilled in (discerning)  
what is beneficial and what is not.

<sup>10</sup> *Idha pana bhikkhave ekacco dhamma,kathiko appaṇ ca bhāsati asahitaṇ ca, parisā ca na kusalā hoti sahitāsa-hitassa.*

<sup>11</sup> *Eva,rūpo bhikkhave dhamma,kathiko eva,rūpāya parisāya dhamma,kathiko tv-eva saṅkhaṃ gacchati.* Alt tr: “Bhikshus, such a Dharma speaker is regarded as a Dharma speaker who is just like his assembly.” On **tv-eva**, see (1.4).

5.2 *Bhikshus, such a Dharma speaker is reckoned a Dharma speaker for just such a congregation.*

6 These, bhikshus, are the 4 kinds of Dharma speakers.

— evaññ —

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