

# 11

## Kathā, vatthu Sutta

The Discourse on Points for Discussion | A 3.67

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

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008

*Dedicated to the Buddhist Fellowship Youths, Singapore*

### 1 Early Buddhism as psychotherapy

**1.1** The Buddha Dharma, from the first discourse to the 5 monks, preserved in **the Dhamma, cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11)<sup>1</sup> to his very last words as recorded in **the Mahā, parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16),<sup>2</sup> is effectively a 45-year session of spiritual counselling on a cosmic scale. The Buddha's teaching consummates the spirituality of his listeners, uplifts beings from ignorance and craving, shows them the path to awakening, and frees others from suffering, or at least teaches them the possibility of liberating themselves from the samsaric cycle—and the Dharma continues to teach us all this.

**1.2** The main purpose of the Buddha Dharma is **a person-centred re-enacting of the Buddha's 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;<sup>3</sup>
- (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);<sup>4</sup>
- (3) detailed 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,<sup>5</sup> the ailing,<sup>6</sup> the dying,<sup>7</sup> those suffering great loss,<sup>8</sup> the emotionally troubled,<sup>9</sup> a serial killer,<sup>10</sup> and so on;
- (5) living examples of those who have or are benefitting from meditation training, especially contemplative monastics and regular meditators;<sup>11</sup>
- (6) modern mind sciences now have the technology and opportunity to put to test the methods and claims of Buddhist meditation, and so far the results have been very instructive and rewarding.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>1</sup> S 56.11/5:420-424 (SD 1.1).

<sup>2</sup> D 16/2:72-167 (SD 9).

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

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

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

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

<sup>7</sup> Eg **Gati Mahānāma S 1-2** (S 55.21-22), SD 23.1ab; **Anātha, piṇḍika S 1-2** (S 55.26-27), SD 23.2ab.

<sup>8</sup> See **Kīsā Gotamī**, SD 43.2; **Paṭācārā**, SD 43.3.

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

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

<sup>11</sup> See eg Brahmavamso 2006.

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

## 2 Sutta summary and comments

**2.1 TOPICS OF DISCUSSION.** The sutta opens with the Buddha stating the 3 “**topics of discussion**” (*kathāvatthu*) [§1], that is, whatever we think or talk about, are all *time-bound*. They are either 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 experiences, we know that thinking about *the past* often leads to worry (*kukkucca*), while speculating or planning *the future* often brings on restlessness (*uddhacca*). When our mind is *distracted*, we begin to lose our mental energies, and feel sloth and torpor (*thīna, mid-dha*), that is, mental and physical discomfort. When we are *uncertain* about any of these experiences or mindlessly *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.<sup>13</sup>

### **2.2 THE 4 WAYS OF ANSWERING QUESTIONS**

**2.2.0** This section is on **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 categorical question, or give a detailed, qualified 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 from approach, at the proper time, a teacher, counsellor or discussant who understands and practises these 4 ways of answering questions.<sup>14</sup>

#### **2.2.1 Categorical answer**

**2.2.1.1** This is perhaps the simplest way of answering a question. A categorical question is one that has a simple *yes* or a *no* answer, or it is a question with multiple-choice answers (however we can only choose one answer), or a very short clear answer, even a single-word, answer. In other words, it can be a “closed” question, one that elicits only assent or dissent, agreement or disagreement. Or, there can only be one correct answer (*ekamsika*) to it.

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

“Is it possible, bhante, for you to point out a similar **fruit of recluseship**,<sup>15</sup> visible here and now?”  
 “Yes, it is, maharajah.” (D 2,34.2/1:60 + 37.2/1:61), SD 8.10

**2.2.1.3** Take this well known passage from **the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59), where we have three examples of a categorical question:

“Now, what do you think, bhikshus, is **form** permanent or impermanent?”  
 “Impermanent, bhante.”  
 “Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory [painful] or satisfactory [pleasurable]?”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For details, see eg (**Nīvaraṇa**) **Saṅgārava S** (S 46.55), SD 3.12 & **Nīvaraṇa,phāna Vagga** (A 1.2), SD 16.3.

<sup>14</sup> Further see SD 44.1 (3.1.0).

<sup>15</sup> “The fruits of recluseship,” *sāmañña,phala*, see SD 8.10 (2.1) n.

“Unsatisfactory, bhante.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus:

‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self?’<sup>17</sup>

“No, bhante.”

(S 22.59,12/3:67), SD 1.2<sup>18</sup>

All the categorical answers have been underscored. Note that a categorical answer need not be a “yes” or a “no.” Assent (agreement) or dissent (disagreement) can be expressed in a variety of ways, as exemplified in the first two answers.

**2.2.1.4** A categorical answer can sometimes be more than a single yes or no. Here is an example from **the Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38),

“Bhikshus, what do you think? Has this monk Sāti, the fisherman’s son, kindled even a spark of wisdom in this Dharma and Discipline?”<sup>19</sup>

“How can this be, bhante? No, bhante.”

(M 38,6), SD 7.10

**2.2.1.5** Technically, a categorical answer is one that is “determinable” (*ekaṃsika*), as shown in the passage from **the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9):

“And what, Poṭṭhapāda, are **the things that have been declared by me to be determinable [ascertainable]**?<sup>20</sup>

‘This is suffering,’

Poṭṭhapāda, I have declared this as a determinable teaching;

‘This is the arising of suffering,’

Poṭṭhapāda, I have declared this as a determinable teaching;

‘This is the ending of suffering,’

Poṭṭhapāda, I have declared this as a determinable teaching;

‘This is the path leading to the ending of suffering,’  
teaching.”

Poṭṭhapāda, I have declared this as a determinable

(D 9,33.5) SD 7.14

<sup>16</sup> *Dukkham vā sukham vā*. Here, the alt tr, “painful,” reminds us that whatever brings us pain or discomfort (bodily or mentally) is not liked by us. When the pain is gone, we feel some pleasure. However, even pleasure is impermanent, and when it is gone, we feel pain. Hence, both the painful and the pleasant are “suffering” (*dukkha*). It is useful to understand this difference between pain and suffering. Simply put, pain is natural (we have a physical but conscious body, so we feel pain, tolerable or intolerable, which is a sign of irritability or sensitivity of our experiences); suffering is optional: we can train our minds not to be attached to what is pleasant or to reject what is unpleasant, and to regard even the neutral as being impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. This is called the “perception of impermanence.” See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

<sup>17</sup> *Etam mama, eso’ham asmi, eso me attāti*. These are “the 3 graspings” (*ti,vidha gāha*), ie, of view (*diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*), of conceit (*māna*) (MA 2:111, 225). The notion “This is mine” arises through craving (*taṇhā*); the notion “This I am” arises through conceit (*māna*); the notion “This is my self” arises through views (*diṭṭhi*). These three considerations represent respectively the 3 kinds of mental proliferation (*papañca*) of self-view (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*), and of conceit (*māna*) (Nm 280; Vbh 393; Nett 37 f). The opposite formula, *n’etaṃ mama, n’eso’ham asmi, na mēso attā ti*, is applied below to the 5 aggregates [§§17-21]. See Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:32 f. For detailed studies, see **I: The nature of identity**, SD 19.1; **Me: The nature of conceit**, SD 19.2a; **Mine: The nature of craving**, SD 19.3.

<sup>18</sup> Cf AA 2:308 (comy to A 3.67), which quotes the 1<sup>st</sup> question-and-answer here as the example.

<sup>19</sup> A similar context for this stock phrase is the Buddha’s rebuke of Ariṭṭha (**Alagaddūpama S**, M 22,7), SD 3.13. Comy there remarks that this phrase refers to “one who has not cultivated the ‘warmth of understanding’ (*ñāṇ’usmā*) that can mature the ‘seed of wisdom’ (*paññā,bījā*, MAṬ) for winning the paths and fruits.” (MA 2:104).

<sup>20</sup> *Katame ca te poṭṭhapāda mayā ekaṃsika dhammā desitā paññattā?*

### 2.2.2 Analytical answer

**2.2.2.1** An analytical question is one that needs a detailed answer, discussing issues analytically. It is an “open” or “open-ended” question. Our Sutta commentary gives this example,

“Is the eye impermanent?” which should be answered by a further distinction, thus: “Not only the eye, but the ear, the nose, etc, are also impermanent.” [2.2.2.5] (AA 2:308)

This is the most common way that Dharma questions are answered by the Buddha (and most other teachers).

**2.2.2.2** A classic example of such an answer is clearly the one that the Buddha gives to Subha in **the (Brahma, vihāra) Subha Sutta** (M 99), in connection with the brahmin’s claim that renunciants (the Buddhist monastics) 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.<sup>21</sup> I am not one who speaks one-sidedly.”<sup>22</sup> The Buddha is saying that this is a question that must be given an *analytical* answer, that is, a detailed answer with proper reasoning.

**2.2.2.3** Another famous example is **the Mahā Kamma Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 136), where the Buddha explains that

“When the wanderer Potali,putta’s question should have been analyzed before being answered, Samiddhi, this misguided person, answered it *categorically!*”<sup>23</sup>

The wanderer Potali,putta earlier asked Samiddhi this analytical question:

“Avuso Samiddhi, having done an intentional deed through the body, through speech, through the mind, what does one experience?”<sup>24</sup>

Samiddhi’s answer is wrong clearly because the term “intentional deed” (*sañcetanikaṃ kammaṃ*) is ambiguous (at least to Samiddhi), as it can refer to good karma, bad karma, or neutral karma. In such a situation, the answer should be analytical, so that all these aspects are covered. Hence, the Buddha responded with “a great analysis of karma” (*mahā, kamma, vibhaṅga*).<sup>25</sup>

**2.2.2.4** Take this opening question from **the Sakkāya Pañha Sutta** (S 38.15),

“What now, avuso Sāriputta, is self-identity?”

The answer takes up the rest of the Sutta.

**2.2.2.5** This helpful example comes from **the Dīgha Commentary** (by Buddhaghosa):

<sup>21</sup> *Vibhajja, vādo kho aham ettha, māṇava*, ie “I’m one who speaks, having analysed the matter.” See SD 38.6 (2.3.1).

<sup>22</sup> *Nāham ettha ekaṃsa, vādo*. M 99,4/2:197,9-18 + SD 38.6 (2.3.2).

<sup>23</sup> *Iminā ca ānanda samiddhinā mogha, purisena potali, puttassa paribbājakassa vibhajja, vyākaraṇīyo pañho ekaṃsena vyākato’ti*. “Categorically,” *ekaṃsena*, lit “one-sidedly,” one-pointedly, absolutely, definitely, certainly (cf D 3;229; A 1:97, 246), ie, an answer without analysis.

<sup>24</sup> *Sañcetanikaṃ āvuso samiddhi kammaṃ katvā kāyena vācāya manasā kiṃ so vediyatiti?* (M 136,2.5), SD 4.16.

<sup>25</sup> M 126/3:207-214, SD 4.16.

“Now, is the eye impermanent?” (*aniccam nāma cakkhun’ti*). The answer should be:

“It is not the eye alone, but also the ear, the nose ... (*na cakkhum eva, sotam pi aniccam ghānam pi aniccan’ti*). (DA 2:567)

**2.2.2.6** Other examples of analytical answers are given to the brahmin Ujjaya in **the Ujjaya Sutta** (A 4.39),<sup>26</sup> and the householder Vajjiya, māhita’s response to the wanderers, recorded in **the Vajjiya, māhita Sutta** (A 10.94).<sup>27</sup>

### **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 seeing,” then we should answer “No.”

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

However, notes Jayatilleke, “It is clear that this ambiguity could have been dealt with, without the necessity for the counter-question.” (1963:286). In other words, we can also answer it analytically, “In respect to seeing, they do not have the same nature, but in respect to *impermanence*, they have the same nature.”

**2.2.3.2** Other examples of replying with a counter-question are found in **the Sāmañña, phala Sutta** (D 2).<sup>28</sup> **The Kevaḍḍha 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 to you 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 Sutta** (S 3.8).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> A 4.39/2:42 @ SD 79.9.

<sup>27</sup> A 10.94/5:190.14-20 @ SD 87.3.

<sup>28</sup> D 2,34,2/1:60 + 37,2/1:61), SD 8.10, also: §14-15.

<sup>29</sup> S 3.8/1:75 = U 5.1/47, SD 38.7.

### 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.”<sup>30</sup>

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

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

### 2.3 THE PRINCIPLES OF DISCOURSE

**2.3.1** This section deals with **the principles of discourse** (*kathā,vatthu*) [§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 is not*. The details of these “possibilities and impossibilities” (*ṭhānāṭhāna*) are 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 bad karma (such as killing of one’s parents), and that no bad can rise from an intentional good deed, nor good from an intentional bad deed, and so on.<sup>31</sup>

**2.3.2** 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 is about keeping to the Buddha’s or arhat’s knowledge, that is, what is possible to be known by the awakened mind.

**2.3.3** Finally, the discussion must progress systematically and ethically. For example, a discussion should not be undertaken at 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.

<sup>30</sup> This example is from AA 2:308 (copy to A 3.67). For more details, see **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10.

<sup>31</sup> M 115,12-19/3:64-67, SD 29.1 & A 6.93/3:439, SD 12.14.

## 2.4 TEACHING DECORUM

**2.4.1 Teaching.** A good teacher, counsellor or discussant **keeps to 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 progresses 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 gaṇhāti*). Simply put, he is an empathetic 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.<sup>32</sup> 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, inspired to remember and practise the Dharma. |

The Commentaries<sup>33</sup> 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 listeners.

## 2.5 BEING ATTENTIVE

### 2.5.1 *Sa, upanisā* as “closely attentive”

**2.5.1.1** A good teacher, counsellor or discussant is not only **attentive** (*ohita, sota*), but **closely attentive** (*sa, upanisā*) [§6]. In important ways, *sa, upanisā* is the Sutta’s key-word. Interestingly, it appears as *upaniso* (masculine), which means “based on, dwelling, living near” such as in the phrase, “devas who dwell in the moon ... devas who dwell in the sun” (*candassūpanisā deva ... suriyassūpanisā devā*, D 2:259,-23\*). We can render its meaning as “dependent on,” such as, that these devas live “dependent on” (*upanissaya*, DA 690,12) the sun or the moon.

We can take this meaning as one of the connotations of *sa, upanisa*, that is, a good student lives, at least for a time—the first 5 years of monkhood for a monk—in dependence (*nissaya*) with a competent

<sup>32</sup> *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).

<sup>33</sup> Eg DA 1:293; UA 242; cf VA 1:65; MA 2:35.

teacher. This is to assure that the student's personality, too, is spiritually prepared to a clear and full vision of the teaching. This means overcoming his emotional difficulties, overcoming selfishness, cultivating his mind and developing insight wisdom.

**2.5.1.2 Dependence (*nissaya*)** [2.5.1.1] entails that the student is often in the learning presence of the teacher. By itself, *upanisā* means "sitting up close (as a faithful student)" [2.5.2.1]. The word *sa,upanisā* is resolved as *sa*, "with" + *upanisā*. However, we need to take it as single expression, literally meaning, "sitting up respectfully close (to the teacher) with faith so as to be attentive," or more idiomatically, "closely attentive."

"*Sitting up*" reflects the readiness to learn; "*respectfully*" means accepting the teacher unconditionally, and "*close*" enough to hear the teacher fully and clearly, and yet keeping a proper social distance so that the student is reminded that his task is that of learning and the teacher to teach.

"*Faith*" refers to the student's attitude of unconditional listening, so that he is able to apply his wisdom to analyze what he learns, and to build upon that, even when, at first, he may have various difficulties with the learning, with his duties, or even with the teacher.

### **2.5.2 Sa,upanisā & anupanisā mistranslated**

**2.5.2.1** The form used here is *upanisā* (feminine), whose Sanskrit cognate is the better known *upaniṣad*<sup>34</sup> (the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit form is *upaniṣā*). Its meaning is defined by A Dictionary of Pali (DP), as "sitting near (a teacher) to listen, attention; secret knowledge." The Sutta passage with this important term is quoted in Parivāra of the Vinaya<sup>35</sup> and by Buddhaghosa in his Visuddhi,magga.<sup>36</sup>

**2.5.2.2** The Commentaries explain *sa,upanisa* [Ṣ6] as meaning, "with prerequisite, with condition (for progress)" (*sa,upanissayo sa,paccayo*, AA 2:312); and as "with cause, with condition (for progress)" (*sa,kāraṇaṃ sa-p,paccayaṃ*, SA 2:53). All this, however, is the technical sense, applied to the dependent arising and dependent ending formulas,<sup>37</sup> but which does not apply here, in the Kathā,vatthu Sutta, where it has a non-technical sense.

So far, no translators seem to be aware of the actual context of the words *sa,upanisā* and *anupanisā* in the **Kathā,vatthu Sutta** (A 3.67). They seem to accept the Commemorial explanation, rendering it in terms of causes and conditions. The key passage (**Ṣ6.4**) is quoted in the Vinaya and the Visuddhi,magga, and their translators, too, probably did not check or ascertain the Sutta source and context.<sup>38</sup> There is a lesson in humility here: a sutta translation progresses, not merely by the efforts of one translator alone, but, often enough, on account of the insights as well as oversights of previous translators.

<sup>34</sup> Cf *śraddhayōpaniṣadā = śraddhayā upaniṣadā*, "with faith ... (in) the hidden connections" (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 1.1.10; tr P Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads*, NY: OUP, 1998:171); traditional tr, "with faith in the Upaniṣad."

<sup>35</sup> V 5:164,33.

<sup>36</sup> Vism 1.32/13.

<sup>37</sup> See **Upanisā S** (S 12.23), SD 6.12.

<sup>38</sup> F L Woodward: "assured" (A:W 179); Bodhi: "who has a supporting condition" (A:B 288); I B Horner: "the causal relation" (V:H 5:267 = V 5:164,33, qu A 3.67); Ñāṇamoli: "support" (Vism:Ñ 13 = Vism 1.32/13, qu A 3.67). Thanissaro, "drawing near or not drawing near" ([A:T ad loc](#)), is closer to the idea of being attentive, but it is too literal, missing the actual mental aspect. See CPD *upa-ni-sā* & *upa-ni-sā*; DP *upanisa* & *upanisā* (esp *sa-upanisā*, "attentive").



### 2.5.3 The Sutta's drift

**2.5.3.1 The drift of the Kathā,vatthu Sutta** (A 3.67) is that of religious discourse, or better, “spiritual exchange,” especially between teacher and pupil, or between seekers and those from whom we think we can learn. If words are the wrappers of wisdom, or the packaging with which we sell our views, then such wrappers and packagings should be carefully examined for the worth of their contents and the authenticity and spirituality of the seller, especially as advised in this Sutta.

**2.5.3.2** The nature of religion is such that, as a rule, much is left to the imagination, and that all our ideas, views and visions are mind-made (Dh 1+2). This means that, if we are not familiar with the ground-rules laid out in the sutta teachings, then we effectively relegate ourselves to the views and fancies of gurus, and, on account of our naivete and piety, we are likely to uphold them as being above the teaching.<sup>39</sup>

The bottom line is not to follow the crowd and groupthink, not to collect guru-figures, not to seek idols to adore and worship, but to associate with a wise and wholesome teacher who is both willing and able to guide us spiritually, and change our lives for the better in accordance with the Dharma.

— — —

## Kathā,vatthu Sutta

### The Discourse on the Points for Discussion

A 3.67

- 1 Bhikshus, there are these **3 topics for discussion**.<sup>40</sup> What are the three?  
 About the past, one would say, “So it was in *the past*.”  
 About the future, one would say, “So it will be in *the future*.”  
 About the present, one would say, “So it is now in *the present*.”<sup>41</sup>

### The 4 ways of answering a question

2 Bhikshus, when engaged in discussion, it should be known whether an individual is fit to talk with or unfit to talk with.<sup>42</sup>

2.2 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 [a 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*.

2.3 But, bhikshus, if an individual, when asked a question,<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See **The teacher of the teachings**, SD 3.14.

<sup>40</sup> Qu at Kvu 15.3.6/1:513 = Kvu:SR 296; cf Kvu 1.6.60/1:140 f.

<sup>41</sup> *Etarahi vā bhikkhave paccuppannaṃ addhānaṃ ārabbh kathāṃ katheyya* [Be *katheyyaṃ*].

<sup>42</sup> *Kathāsampayogena bhikkhave puggalo veditabbo, yadi vā kaccho yadi vā akaccho 'ti*.

<sup>43</sup> See **Pañha,vyākaraṇa S** (A 4.42/2:46), SD 46.12; **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,1.11(28)/3:229).

- (1) gives a **categorical answer** to a question that should be answered categorically,<sup>44</sup>  
 (2) gives an **analytical answer** to a question that should be answered analytically,<sup>45</sup>  
 (3) gives a **counter-question** to a question that should be counter-questioned,<sup>46</sup>  
 (4) **puts aside a question** that should be put aside<sup>47</sup>—

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

### The 4 principles of discourse

**3** Bhikshus, when engaged in discussion, *it should be known whether an individual 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 is impossible**,<sup>48</sup>
- (2) **keeps to agreed assumptions**,
- (3) **keeps to known teachings**,<sup>49</sup>
- (4) **keeps to proper procedure**,

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

*ṭhānāṭhāne saṅṭhāti  
 parikappe saṅṭhāti  
 aññata, vāde saṅṭhāti  
 paṭipadāya saṅṭhāti*

### The 3 points of decorum of discourse

**4** Bhikshus, when engaged in discussion, *it should be known whether an individual 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 [goes off the point],
- shows anger, aversion or 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**,<sup>50</sup>
- (2) **does not lead the discussion astray**,<sup>51</sup>
- (3) **does not show anger, aversion or discontent**,<sup>52</sup>

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

<sup>44</sup> Ie, a “yes or no” answer. *Ekamsa, vyākaraṇīyaṃ pañhaṃ ekamsena vyākaroti.*

<sup>45</sup> Ie, a “qualified” answer. *Vibhajja vyākaraṇīyaṃ pañhaṃ vibhajja vyākaroti.*

<sup>46</sup> Questioned in return for clarification, etc. *Paṭipucchā vyākaraṇīyaṃ pañhaṃ paṭipucchā vyākaroti.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ṭhapanīyaṃ pañhaṃ ṭhabeti.*

<sup>48</sup> Cf Kvu 3.1.4/1:229.

<sup>49</sup> 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).

<sup>50</sup> *Nāññenāññāṃ paṭicarati.*

<sup>51</sup> *Na bahiddhā kathaṃ apanāmeti.*

<sup>52</sup> *Na kopaṇ ca dosaṇ ca appaccayaṇ ca pātukaroti.*

## The 4 points of decorum of discourse

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

Bhikshus, if an individual, **when asked a question**,

- attacks 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),**
- (2) **does not crush him,**
- (3) **does not ridicule [not laugh at] him,**
- (4) **does not grasp at his little mistakes,**

*na abhiharati  
na abhimaddati  
na anupajagghati  
na khalitarā gaṇhāti*

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

## Attentiveness during a discussion

6 Bhikshus, when engaged in discussion, it should be known whether an individual is closely attentive (*sa, upaniso*)<sup>53</sup> or not closely attentive (*anupaniso*).<sup>54</sup>

Bhikshus,

**one who does not lend an ear is *not* closely attentive,  
one who lends an ear is *closely attentive*.**

*anohita, soto bhikkhave anupaniso hoti  
ohita, soto sa, upaniso hoti*

6.2 Being attentive,

one clearly knows one thing,  
comprehends one thing,  
abandons one thing, and  
realizes one thing.<sup>55</sup>

*abhijānāti ekaṃ dhammaṃ  
parijānāti ekaṃ dhammaṃ  
pajahati ekaṃ dhammaṃ  
sacchikaroti ekaṃ dhammaṃ*

6.3 *Clearly knowing one thing,  
comprehending one thing,  
abandoning one thing, and  
realizing one thing,*

one touches right freedom.<sup>56</sup>

*sammā, vimuttiṃ phusati*

6.4 For, that is the purpose of  
that is the purpose of  
that is the purpose of  
that is the purpose of

discussion,  
counsel,  
drawing near,  
lending an ear—

*etad-atthā kathā  
etad-atthā mantanā  
etad-atthā upanīsā  
etad-atthā sot'āvādhanaṃ*

<sup>53</sup> *Sa, upaniso* comes from *upanisa* (Skt *upaniṣad*). On *upanisa* & *upanisā* (both Skt *upaniṣad*), see (2.5).

<sup>54</sup> *Kathā, sampayogena bhikkhave puggalo veditabbo yadi vā sa, upaniso yadi vā anupaniso 'ti. Sa, upaniso, "attentive," anupaniso, "inattentive":* see prec nn.

<sup>55</sup> *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)

<sup>56</sup> *So abhijānanto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, parijānanto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, pajahanto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, sacchikaronto ekaṃ dhammaṃ, sammā, vimuttiṃ phusati.*

that is to say, the liberation of the mind through non-clinging.<sup>57</sup> [199] *yad-idam anupāda,cittassa vimokkho'ti*

### Verses on right discourse

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>7 <i>Ye viruddhā sallapanti<br/>viniviṭṭhā samussitā  <br/>anariya,guṇam āsajja<br/>aññam-aññam vivaresino   </i></p>   | <p>When discussing, they are angered,<br/>inflexible [dogmatic], arrogant,<br/>attacking traits that are ignoble,<br/>seeking to expose one another.</p>  |
| <p>8 <i>Dubbhāsitaṃ vikkhalitaṃ<br/>sampamohaṃ parājayaṃ  <br/>aññam-aññassābhinandanti<br/>tad ariyo katha nācare   </i></p>  | <p>Faltering with misspoken speech,<br/>confounded by defeat,<br/>they thus delight in one another—<br/>this is not how a noble one behaves.</p>  |
| <p>9 <i>Sace c'assa kathā,kāmo<br/>kālam aññāya paṇḍito  <br/>dhamm'aṭṭha,paṭisaṃyuttā<br/>yā ariya,caritā kathā   </i></p>  | <p>If there is in him the desire to speak,<br/>the wise one knows the right time,<br/>what is connected with Dharma and the goal,<br/>talk on the conduct of the noble ones:</p>  |
| <p>10 <i>Taṃ kathaṃ kathaye<br/>dhīro aviruddho anussito  <br/>anupādinnena manasā<br/>apalāso asāhaso   </i></p>  | <p>This is the speech spoken (by the wise)—<br/>the wise, without anger, without arrogance,<br/>with a detached mind,<br/>unspiteful, non-violent.</p>  |
| <p>11 <i>Anusuyyāyamāno so<br/>sammad-aññāya bhāsati  <br/>subhāsitaṃ anumodeyya<br/>dubbhaṭṭhe nāvasādaye   </i></p>  | <p>He is free of envy;<br/>he speaks fully well knowing,<br/>approving of the word well spoken,<br/>not disheartened by what is ill-spoken.</p>   |
| <p>12 <i>Upārambhaṃ na sikkheyya<br/>khalitañ ca na gāhaye  <br/>nābhihare nābhimadde<br/>na vācam payutaṃ bhane<sup>58</sup>   </i></p>   | <p>Not training for the sake of reproach [of polemics],<br/>and not grasping at a fault,<br/>not reviling, not crushing,<br/>he utters not an ulterior word.</p>  |
| <p>13 <i>Aññāt'atthaṃ pasād'atthaṃ<br/>sataṃ ve hoti mantanā  <br/>evaṃ kho ariyā mantenti<br/>esā ariyāna mantanā  <br/>etad aññāya medhāvī<br/>na samusseyya mantaye'ti   </i></p> | <p>For the sake of knowing, for inspiring faith,<br/>indeed, counselling what is true,<br/>thus the noble ones counsel—<br/>advising in this noble manner,<br/>knowing this, the wise<br/>should counsel without arrogance.</p> |

— evaṃ —

<sup>57</sup> *Etad atthā bhikkhave kathā, etad atthā mantanā, etad atthā upanisā, etad atthaṃ sotāvadhānaṃ yad idaṃ anupādā cittassa vimokkho 'ti*, A 1:198,34 = V 5:164,33. See **Kīṭa, giri S** (M 70) & **Caṅkī S** (M 95), where *sotāvadhāna* appears as the 4<sup>th</sup> 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).

<sup>58</sup> Cf Sn 711b, 930b.

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