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Dubbaṅṇiya Sutta

The Discourse on the Ugly | S 11.22

Theme: The anger-eating demon

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2016, 2019

1 Summary and highlights

1.1 SUMMARY. The **Dubbaṅṇiya Sutta**, “the discourse on the ugly” (S 11.22), is a short humorous and instructive text on how anger is overcome. The Buddha relates a story of how once an “anger-eating” demon or yaksha (*yakkha*) [1.2.2] sits on the throne of Sakra, the lord of the devas of Tāvātimsa and the realm of the 4 great kings.¹ When the devas protest and try to remove him from the seat of their highest power, they are unable to do so.

The more the devas berate the yaksha, the more radiantly beautiful he becomes. Failing to remove the yaksha, they approach Sakra himself. Realizing the nature of the yaksha—that he is an “anger-eater” (*kodha, bhakkha*) [§10]—he feeds on anger—Sakra acts in just the contrary manner: by *being humble, patient and lovingkind*. The anger-eater is thus reduced to nothing. The Sutta closes with Sakra instructing the devas on **non-anger** in 2 verses [§§15-16] [2.2].

1.2 HIGHLIGHTS

1.2.1 The “anger-eater”

1.2.1.1 The Sutta says that an “**ugly, dwarfish yaksha**” (*yakkho dubbaṅṇo okoṭimako*) sits on Sakra’s throne. The word **dubbaṅṇa** comes from *du* (a negating particle) + *vaṅṇa* (beautiful), “not beautiful.” The rare Pali word, **okoṭimaka** (BHS *avakoṭimaka*, BHSD sv) means “thick and dwarfish,” and is usually found in the stock phrase *dubbaṅṇo okoṭimako*.

The Commentary adds that he is of “the colour of a burnt stump” (*jhāma, khāṇu, vaṅṇo*) and that he is “squat and pot-bellied” (*lakunṭako mah’odaro*) (SA 1:354,11 f). Hence, the yaksha can be described as one who is “dirty-dark, squat and pot-bellied”—“like a Punch-silhouette,” says Mrs C A F Rhys Davids (S:RD 1:304 n1).²

1.2.1.2 The dirty-dark, squat and pot-bellied yaksha sits on Sakra’s yellowstone throne [1.2.3]. “The more *furious, offended and protesting* the Tāvātimsa devas were towards the yaksha, **the more beautiful, the more comely, the more charming he became!**” [§9]. Clearly, this yaksha is no ordinary spirit!

The Commentary tells us that he is actually a form-realm brahma (*eko rūpāvacara brahmā*). Having heard about Sakra’s patience, he comes down to Tāvātimsa to test him [2.2.2.1]. In fact, it is impossible for any malevolent spirit (*avaruddhaka, yakkha*) to infiltrate Tāvātimsa, which is so well guarded (SA 1:354,13-17).³ [3.2.1]

1.2.2 Yaksha (*yakkha*)

1.2.2.1 The yakshas (P *yakkha*; Skt *yakṣa*) are indigenous Indian nature-spirits or tutelary deities [1.2.2.2], who, in Buddhist mythology, are of two kinds: the terrestrial yakshas, who are like the raksha-

¹ Tāvātimsa and the realm of the 4 great kings are “earth-bound heavens”: SD 54.3a (3.5.1).

² For refs, see CPD: *okoṭimaka*.

³ On how the Buddha overcomes the anger of an abuser, see **Akkosaka Bhāra, dvāja S** (S 7.2), SD 84.2.

shas (*rākṣasa*), that is, a kind of cannibalistic ogre or demon that haunts the wilderness to waylay and devour unwary travellers.

The celestial yakshas are the attendants of Vessavaṇa (Skt *vaiśravaṇa*), the divine guardian king of the northern quarter. It is possible that the two are identical beings, differentiated only by their habitat. The yaksha of the **Dubbaṇṇiya Sutta** (S 11,22), however, is clearly neither a terrestrial nor celestial, but merely an apparition assumed by a brahma [2.1.1.2].

1.2.2.2 The yaksha apparition in the Sutta [1.2.2.1] may well have been **Māra**, who is also a yaksha. Māra is first mentioned in the suttas as being a *yaksha* (*yakkha*), a nature spirit,⁴ that is, in the **(Mahā) Padhāna Sutta**'s last verse (Sn 449c). Then, in the **Mahā,samaya Sutta** [3.2.1.1], he evolves into a demigod, an *asura*. The **Brahmā Nimantanika Sutta** (M 49) describes him as a powerful *deva* called Vasa,vatti amongst the Para,nimitta,vasavatti devas, the highest of the sense-worlds.⁵

Māra feeds us with worldliness and, in turn, feeds on our greed, hate and delusion. Māra forever works to maintain the status quo, the way things are in their proper measures. Only in breaking out of Māra's power on earth and in heaven can we be truly free.⁶ We can thus understand how the anger-eating yaksha of the **Dubbaṇṇiya Sutta** (S 11.22) is defeated by Sakra by his wholesome virtues, especially non-anger and patience.⁷ [3.1.2.2]

1.2.3 Sakra's throne

1.2.3.1 Sakra's seat is the "**Paṇḍu,kambala**" stone-throne (*paṇḍu,kambala,silā*).⁸ It is called *paṇḍu,kimbala* because it looks like a red blanket (*ratta,kambala*)⁹ or is red like the *jaya,sumana* or midday-flower.¹⁰ The seat is said to be very cool; hence, it is probably covered by a red blanket, which is also a symbol of beauty and luxury.¹¹

The throne is located under the Tāvatiṃsa **coral tree** (*pāricchattaka kovilāra*).¹² It measures 60 yojanas (fathoms)¹³ high, 50 yojanas wide and 15 yojanas deep. When Sakra sits on it, it is so soft that it sinks

⁴ SD 51.11 (1.3.2.4(4)).

⁵ M 49 (SD 11.7); SD 51.11 (3.2.1.2).

⁶ Māra as a yaksha, SD 51.11 (3.2.1). On the yaksha, Vajira,pāṇī, SD 21.3 (4.2.6). See also SD 54.2 (3.2.2; 3.2.3.2).

⁷ On Sakra's patience, see (**Khanti**) **Vepa,citti S** (S 11,4), SD 54.6.

⁸ Fully *paṇḍu,kambala,silāsana*: DA 3:698,11; MA 5:90,10 f; CA 24,13; J 2:93,2, 5:136,6 f, 153,8; DhA 1,5*. As *paṇḍuka,kambala,varāsana* (the noble throne of woollen-blanketed yellowstone): KhpA 122,8 = SnA 1:300. As *paṇḍu,kambala,silā*: B 24.5/89.11; MA 1:225,31, 2:155,18; AA 1:125,24; DhA 1:273,9-12 (DhA:B 1:320); BA 146,16. The phrase, *paṇḍu,kambala*, "dyed or red blanket" (in a description of a comfortable and luxurious room) occurs as D 2:187,24, 191,22, 193,18, 195,4 f, 197,2; A 4:393,23 f; Sn 689b; DA 1:10,24; SA 1:125,13, 3:119,11, 50,15; J 6:500; SnA 2:487,24 f (*gandhāra,ratta,kambala*); PvA 138,20-22; Vism 7.82/216,35.

⁹ MA 5:7,5-16; SA 1:125,13; NmA 3:438,10 f. *Paṇḍu*, however, has a range of colours beyond red: see **Vekhanassa S** (M 80,4 n), SD 40a.15.

¹⁰ *Jaya,sumana*, *Pentapetes phoenicea*, a tree with large red flowers and linear-lanceolate leaves with crenate margin, of the family Malvaceae; so called because the red flowers bloom at noon and close the following dawn: <http://www.malvaceae.info/Genera/Pentapetes/Pentapetes.php>. DA 2:482,5; MA 1:225,31; DhA 1:273,7-13. Cf *bandhu,jīvaka*: SD 49.5b (1.7.1).

¹¹ See **M 79**,11+12/2:33 (SD 91.4), **M 80**,6+8/2:41 (SD 40a.15), **M 120**,17/3:102 (SD 3.4); **S 2.29**/1:64 (SD 86.8).

¹² *Bauhinia variegata*. The coral tree seems to be a magical tree in the Nandana garden, that grew as a result of the *kovilāra* tree Magha planted outside his resthouse, the Sudhamma hall: **Magha V** (DhA 2.7,33), SD 54.22. The *pāricchattaka* (*Bauhinia variegata*) is sometimes called *kovilāra* (*Erythrina indica*) (VvA 174,13 f) but as earth-bound trees they are different species: Indian coral tree, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erythrina_variegata. The *citta,pātali* in the asura world is the counterpart of the *pāricchattaka*, but the flowers are different (DhA 1:280;

down to the middle of his body.¹⁴ It is said that he sits alongside three other devas—Pajāpati, Varuṇa and Īsāna—and is only “the first amongst equals.” He is, however, regarded as “lord of the devas” (*devānam inda*) on account of his various virtues.¹⁵

1.2.3.2 The Buddha sits on this throne whenever he visits Tāvatiṃsa, such as during the 7th rains-retreat, when he teaches his mother.¹⁶ It is said that Sakra fears that the seat may be too high for the Buddha, but the Buddha, perceiving his thought, sits on it, covering it completely with the folds of his robe.¹⁷ Sakra’s distinguished guests, such as Mandhāta, Sādhīna,¹⁸ Guttīla and Nimi,¹⁹ were also allowed to sit with him on his throne.

1.2.3.3 When Sakra’s life-span draws near its end, or his merit is exhausted, or a righteous being is in need of his help, or his position is challenged by someone’s noble deed, the throne warms up, attracting his attention. He will then act accordingly to remedy the situation or test his challenger and reward him accordingly.²⁰ [2.1.1.2]

2 Sutta significance

2.1 THE DEVAS FEED THE ANGER-EATER

2.1.1 “Furious, offended and protested” [§4]

2.1.1.1 When the devas saw the deformed yaksha sitting on Sakra’s seat in the assembly hall, they were “furious, offended and protested” (*ujjhāyanti khiyyanti vipācenti*). These words should be understood thus: to be “offended” (*ujjhāyati*) is “to become irritated, grumble, murmur, complain, protest”; to be “furious” (*khiyati*) is “to become chafed or heated, to become vexed, angry; to take offence”; and “protested” (*vipāceti*), literally, “to get cooked,” means “to become indignant, annoyed, fretted.”²¹ Imaginably, this means that they feel angry; they verbalize their anger; and they try to physically remove the yaksha.

SnA 485) [SD 54.2 (3.2.3.6) (4)]. It is possible that, in some contexts, *paricchattaka* is an adj meaning “shady or shady all around, like an umbrella”), esp in the celestial context. See DPPN: pāricchattaka.

¹³ On the fathom (*yojana*) as height, or the “lesser yojana” (1.8 m = 6 ft). The size of such tree is not difficult to imagine, such as the Vitraya Ramunong (the tree of souls) of the Na’vi on their world, Pandora in the Avatar movie (James Cameron, 2009). See SD 47.8 (2.4.4).

¹⁴ Sakra’s seat sinks down: DA 2:482,5-7; MA 1:225,32; DhA 1:273,12 f. See also **Magha V** (DhA 2.7,61), SD 54.22.

¹⁵ See SD 54.8 (4.3.4).

¹⁶ The Buddha staying and teaching in Tāvatiṃsa: AA 1:101,4-6, 126,7-9; Nm 2:445,8 f, 447,28-31; DhA 3:218,13-16, 4:80,8 f (Aṅkura); BA 168,21 f; J 4:265,19; Miln 350,2-4.

¹⁷ AA 1:125,19-126,2; DhA 3:217,3-15.

¹⁸ On Sādhīna, see **Magha V** (DhA 2.7,50 n on Sādhīna), SD 54.22.

¹⁹ The 4 humans who bodily went to Tāvatiṃsa are: king Mandhāta (J 258/2:310-314), king Sādhīna (J 494/4:356, 23-25), Guttīla the musician (J 243/2:248-257), and king Nimi (J 541/6:96-129; M 83,12/2:79-82, SD 60.8). These 4 (the Bodhisattva in his past lives) are mentioned at MA 3:318,8-14; Miln 115,19 f.

²⁰ Sakra’s seat warming up: MA 5:90,10 f; SA 2:378,17 f; DhA 1:17,11 f, 2:133,7 f; ThaA 1:209,11 f; ApA 35,13; BA 148,20; CA 24,13; J 1:32,12 f, 330,11 f, 3:53,9, 3:129,7, 4:8,27 f, 238,17 f, 5:92,2.

²¹ On this phrase, cf Skt *avadhyāyati dhriyati vivācayati* (Divy 492): see PED: vipāceti. For technical details, see tr text [§4].

2.1.1.2 We are told that this is no ordinary yaksha, but an apparition projected by a brahma from a form-realm heaven who wants to test Sakra’s famed patience [1.2.1.2]. The devas clearly lack this patience and instinctively see the yaksha as violating the symbol of the heavenly power: non-chalantly sitting on Sakra’s throne [1.2.3]. The devas are understandably upset by this ugly apparition that has the hubris to occupy uninvited the highest seat in heaven, that is, Sakra’s throne.

Hence, the devas reacted not out of “righteous anger” but rather it is a “mob reaction” of anger against the disrespect shown to a celestial icon, a symbol for the devas themselves. None of the devas themselves would presume to take this seat; how much more a non-Tāvātimsa being! The fact that the spirit is an “ugly, dwarfish yaksha” (while the Tāvātimsa devas are the most beautiful of the devas) does not help.

2.1.2 “Pained, ashamed, disgusted”

2.1.2.1 The devas are said to be “furious, offended and protested” at the yaksha’s disrespectful action [2.1.1]—this is merely a worldly reaction of negative emotions. The suttas, in fact, record a better known disapproving reaction, one with a *spiritual significance*, towards any situation that counters the spirit of the Buddha Dharma, that is, against moral virtue, mental concentration or insight wisdom.

The **Kevaḍḍha Sutta** (D 11) records the Buddha’s famous rejection of the use of miraculous or psychic display as a proof of the truth and worth of the teaching, stating its dangers—that what is seen as a “miracle” may be disproved not to be so by others or debunked in a future time. Hence, the Buddha declares, “**I am pained, ashamed, disgusted**” (*aṭṭiyāmi harāyāmi jigucchāmi*)²² by such psychic display.²³ Furthermore, he teaches that the greatest of miracles is that of **instruction** or education (*anusāsani, pāṭihāriya*).²⁴

2.1.2.2 The component verbs of the phrase **aṭṭiyati harāyati jugucchati**²⁵ can be explained thus:

(1) Aṭṭiyati means to “be pained, troubled, sickened, distressed, disgusted, horrified, worried, bored, or incommoded (with).” It is the denominative²⁶ of *aṭṭa* (Skt *ārta*), “hurt, afflicted, tormented, desperate” (Sn 694). The Commentary on the Amba, laṭṭhika Rāhulōvāda Sutta (M 61) glosses **aṭṭiyitabbam** as *aṭṭena pīlītena bhavitabbam*, “one should be distressed, (feel) harassed” (MA 3:129). The Majjhima Commentary on the Vitakka, saṅṭhāna Sutta (M 20) explains **aṭṭiyeyya** as “(he) would be troubled” (*aṭṭo dukkhito bhāveyya*, MA 2:90). The Vinaya Commentary says that one is troubled by such a situation, thus, “now when will I be free from the sickness?” (*kadā nu kho gilānato muccissāmāti aṭṭiyanti*, VA 467).

(2) Harāyati is the denominative of *hiri* (moral shame), and thus means “ashamed.” The Majjhima Commentary glosses *harāyeyya* as *lajjeyya*, “one would be ashamed” (MA 2:90), and *harāyitabbam* as *lajjitabbam*, “one should be ashamed” (MA 3:129). We may see *aṭṭiyati* as being pained by the understanding of the karmic consequences of our actions. The term for this is **ottappa**, “moral fear,” which is often paired with moral shame (*hiri*).

²² The stock *aṭṭiyāmi harāyāmi jigucchāmi* is also found in **Vuṭṭha S** (A 9.11,4/4:377, spoken by a certain monk). The form *aṭṭiyāmi harāyāmi* is found in **Vijayā S** (S 5.4/530*/1:31), **Khemā Thī** (Thī 140), and **Khallāṭiya Pv** (Pv 1.10.-2/8).

²³ **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,4-7) + SD 1.7 (3).

²⁴ D 11,8/1:214 (SD 1.7).

²⁵ For 3rd sg *aṭṭiyati harāyati jigucchati*, “he is pained, ashamed, disgusted,” see **Nibbidā**, SD 20.1 (2.3); SD 54.14 (2). In a teaching relating to Rāhula (imp *aṭṭiyitabba harāyitabba jigucchitabba*), see **Amba, laṭṭhika Rāhul’ovada S** (M 61,17), SD 3.10; SD 1.17 (3). On the Buddha’s disapproval of the monk Piṇḍola: **Piṇḍola Bhāra, dvāja**, SD 27.6a (1.1.4).

²⁶ A denominative is a verb der from a noun or adjective, eg “man” (a fleet) or “localize.”

Moral shame is rooted in self-regard or self-respect; hence, we would not commit wrong out of the compassion or love for others, of how this would shame them, too, or that they would blame us. **Moral fear**, on the other hand, is rooted in other-regard or other-respect; hence, we abstain from wrong-doing out of the wisdom or understanding how significant others or society in general would retaliate to or be affected by our action: more broadly, it is a fear of negative karmic consequences.²⁷

(3) **Jigucchati** (Skt *jugutsati*) means to “shun, avoid, loathe, detest, be revulsed at, be disgusted with, be horrified at” an act or a situation. It is a desiderative or reduplicative²⁸ of √GUP, “to protect.” The Majjhima Commentary explains *jigucchitabbam* as “one should arouse disgust (in oneself) as if looking at dung” (*gūtham disvā viya jigucchā uppādetabbā*, MA 3:129). [2.1.2.3]

2.1.2.3 When we understand **aṭṭiyati** as referring to an act moved by moral fear, and **harāyati** as being motivated by moral shame, then **jigucchati** is the act of being revulsed (*nibbidā*) at an unwholesome act or situation. On a deeper level, this is the experience of seeing true reality, endowing us with the wisdom of knowing just what to avoid and exactly what to do with our life.

Existentially, **nibbindati**, “to be revulsed,” is a feeling of total discontentment with the world. From the time of our birth, our lives are defined by our parents, who are, in turn, dictated by social norms, regarding how we should be raised and what roles we are to play. Our worth is measured and we are taught to measure the worth of almost every aspect of our life and of others.

This measuring is even more pronounced when we live in a modern urban environment. Even as we are schooled, we are graded and our schooling performance defines what job we can get, how much we earn, and so on. Society, even our religion, would measure our worth, and salaried or rewarded accordingly. We are accorded respect and power according to these measures, call them *class, profession, status, title*, etc.

Even those who have renounced the world are measured by how much holiness they *have* compared to other renunciants in terms of *looks, voice, holiness and teachings* given by them.²⁹ **True renunciation** only begins when we notice such **measures**; when we understand why they occur; then, we reject such measures with revulsion. Only then, we are really free from the world: we become **immeasurable** in our love, compassion, joy and peace. This is how revulsion leads to the path of awakening.³⁰

2.2 HOW SAKRA DEFEATS THE ANGER-EATER

2.2.1 Sakra announces his name [§13]

2.2.1.1 §§11-13 of the Sutta describes how Sakra deals with the yaksha on his throne. First, he assumes this posture: “**Arranging his outer robe to one side (over his left shoulder), knelt down on his right knee on the ground.**” [§12]. This is the way that devas show respect to their superiors, such as the Buddha. In other words, Sakra is here showing his humility, putting himself on a lower level than the yaksha, ready to learn what the yaksha has to say or teach.

2.2.1.2 Then, Sakra, “**Raising his hands in lotus-gesture [in anjali], he announced his name thrice**” [§12], addressing the yaksha politely as “good sir” (*mārisa*). Each time Sakra announces his name (as a

²⁷ See **Moral shame and moral fear**, SD 2.5.

²⁸ “Desiderative” = showing wish or desire; “reduplicative” = comprising a repetition.

²⁹ See **Rūpa S** (A 4.65); **Puggala S** (Pug 4,22): SD 3.14 (7).

³⁰ **Nibbidā**, SD 20.1.

polite gesture of introducing himself to a respected guest), the yaksha “turned uglier and more deformed until he disappeared altogether!”

The Commentary tells us that the yaksha, in reality, is a **brahma** who has heard of Sakra’s famed humility—just as Sakra often tests the sincerity of ascetics and those making spiritual effort, the brahma now tests Sakra’s true nature. Clearly, Sakra passes the test with the disappearance of the yaksha [§13].

2.2.2 Sakra’s wisdom. From the Sutta account, it is clear that Sakra knows exactly what he is doing: he is certainly confident, yet civil, in his approach to the yaksha. We are not told whether he is a stream-winner at this time. However, when we recall how as the youth **Magha**,³¹ he and his 33 friends, humbly and diligently toiled to level roads, plant trees, dig wells, build a resthouse, and so on for parched and weary travelers, and how this won him his Sakra-state, it is no surprise that humility and patience come naturally to him.³²

2.2.3 Sakra’s verses on non-anger

S 941*

2.2.3.1 Na sūpahata,citto’mhi (S 941a). The Commentary states that the prefix **su-** in *sūpahata* is a “mere indeclinable” (*nipata,mattarā*); thus, we should resolve the compound as *su upahata,citto’mhi* (SA 1:354,23 f). **Upa-hata** (hit, tormented, afflicted, injured, broken, spoiled, destroyed, ruined) is the past participle of *upahanati* or *upahanti* (ts), “to torment.”

The Subcommentary on the phrase adds that Sakra speaks of his own nature thus, “Because of the presence of patience, lovingkindness and pity (*khanti,mettā’nuddaya*) in me, my mind is unafflicted by others”³³ (SAPṬ:Be 1:343). Considering the Sutta context, we should understand that this is only Sakra’s private reflection. However, he may have mentioned such qualities after he has dealt with the “anger-eating” monster.

2.2.3.2 N’āvattena suvānayo (S 941b = S 1:238,20*). The Commentary resolves **nāvattena** as *na āvaṭṭena*, not as *-vaṭṭena* (SA 1:354,25); *vaṭṭa* means “a circle, cycle, round (of samsara).” **Āvaṭṭa** means “a whirlpool, vortex; uproar,”³⁴ a well known metaphor that occurs in the following suttas:

Cātumā Sutta	(M 67,14/1:459,31 f = A 2:123,16)	danger of whirlpools (of 4 fears)	SD 34.7
Nadi,sota Sutta	(It 4.10/114,16 f)	the 5 cords of sensual pleasures	SD 52.11
Asitabhū Jātaka	(J 234/2:230,17)	the whirlpool of sensuality	
Bhūri,datta Jātaka	(J 543/6:161,30)	whirlpool in the Yamunā	
Milinda,pañha	(Miln 197,19)	sufferings of samsara	

The word **suvānayo** is resolved as *su ānayo*, with a sandhi infix **-v-** between the two vowels (*u-* and *ā*). *Suvānayo* recurs in **the Māra Dhītu Sutta** (S 4.25) in **S 507b***, where **lust** (*rāga*), instead of *anger*, is the defilement to which an arhat is not drawn (SD 36.6).

³¹ SD 39.1 (2.2). DA gives a very long account of Sakra’s “purity” (*visuddhi*), ie, a life of moral virtue and public service from the time he was the young prince Magha (DA 3:710,22-718,21). The Magha story is also found in J 1:199-206 & DhA 2.7b/1:265-280.

³² On Sakra’s patience, see **(Khanti) Vepa,citti S** (S 11,4), SD 54.6.

³³ **Upahata,citto’mhīti khanti,mettānuddayā,sabbhāvato parasmim upahata,citto’mhīti sakko attano sabhāvaṃ vadati** (SAPṬ:Be 1:343).

³⁴ S 4:157,9, 179,10, 180,27, 181,9; It 57,12; J 6:161,30; Miln 122,7.

Ānayo means “to be brought, led.”³⁵ The Commentary explains the line, “**not easily sucked into anger’s vortex,**” as meaning that: “I’m not one who easily falls under anger’s power” (*kodha, vase vatteturū na sukaro’mhi*, SA 1:354,25).³⁶

2.2.3.3 Na vo cirāhaṃ kujjhāmi (S 941c). The Commentary says that **vo** here is simply an “indeclinable” (*nipāta, mattam*) (SA 1:354,26). Technically, it signifies a dative of reference (to the general sense of a statement, that is, a dative of advantage). This form is obsolete in modern English but is found in Latin, for example: *laudāvit mihi fratrem*, “he praised my brother” (out of regard for me); *laudāvit frātre meum* (implies no such intention).

2.2.3.4 The two lines, **S 941cd***, allude to the 7th (the last) of Sakra’s famous 7 vows. **The Vatapada Sutta** (S 11.11) lists it as follows: “As long as I live, may I be free from anger, and, should anger arise in me, may I quickly dispel it” (*yāva, jīvaṃ akkodhano assaṃ sace’pi me kodho uppajjeyya, khippam eva naṃ paṭivineyyan’ti*).³⁷

S 942

2.2.3.5 Kuddhāham na pharusam brūmi (S 942a). All the manuscripts give this reading, except the Sinhalese (Ce) which omits **na**, metri causa (to keep the poetic rhythm). However, even with **na**, we only need to resolve either the 4th or the 5th syllable, that is, respectively, read *kuddhāhan-na* (counting the last 2 syllables as 1) or read the first *-a-* as a schwa (very short vowel, as “ph’rusam”) in *pharusam*.

2.2.3.6 Na ca dhammāni kittaye (S 942b). The Commentary does not explain *dhammāni*, a rare neuter plural of *dhamma*, the notoriously most polysemic of Pali words.³⁸ However, we do have a helpful clue in this usage in at least two canonical Jātaka verses: in **the Saṅkha, pāla Jātaka** (J 524)³⁹ and **the Ummadantī Jātaka** (J 527),⁴⁰ where we have *satañ ca dhammāni sukittitāni*, “the qualities of the good are well-proclaimed.” Clearly here, the neuter plural form *dhammāni* refers to personal virtues, and the same applies to S 942b.⁴¹

3 Humour in the Sutta

3.1 HUMOUR: A BRIEF DEFINITION

3.1.1 Description

³⁵ Adj (mfn) ger of *ā-neti* (CPD sv); as ifc *su-ānaya* (PmA 518,14); *su-v-ānayo* (S 1:124,21* = J 1:80,1; S 1:238,20*).

³⁶ On water imagery, see SD 52.10b (1.3).

³⁷ S 11.11,4 (SD 54.12).

³⁸ See, eg, J R Carter, “Traditional definitions of the term dhamma,” *Philosophy East and West* 26,3 July 1976: 329-337 <http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-PHIL/carter.htm>; Carter, *Dhamma: Western academic and Sinhalese Buddhist interpretations*, Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1978. Rev by George D Bond, *Journal of the International Assoc of Buddhist Studies* 8,2 1985:135-137.

³⁹ J 524/5:172,23.

⁴⁰ J 527/5:221,27.

⁴¹ *Dhamma* used in this neuter form, meaning “good practice; a good quality or characteristic or attainment” is also found at V 2:248,18, 251,3; M 2:5,26; S 5:337,18; A 4:140,6; Dh 384 (cf DhA 4:140,11 f ≈ UA 68,23 f); J 1:280,3*, 280,6’, 5:221,27*, 225,28’.

3.1.1.1 Let us begin with a simple definition of humour for the purpose of seeing the significance of the story of the “anger-eating demon” in **the Dubbanniya Sutta** (S 11.22).⁴² None of the major academic disciplines have given a fully satisfactory definition of *humour*. In modern usage, humour generally described as referring to the ludicrous, or to our faculty of seeing and enjoying what is amusing.

3.1.1.2 Most modern psychologists agree that the perception of the incongruous and the inconsistent is a cause of humour. It is detected by an alert and open mind with a sharp capacity for quick observation and comparison. It demands some detachment from the normal difficulties of life, a kind of superiority from the routine run of things.

3.1.1.3 Although humour and **wit** are closely related, that is, their subject is, as a rule, the same, but their treatment of it differs. Humour is usually kindlier, and in its genuine form, includes compassion or sympathy; hence, it is more of a feeling. Wit, on the other hand, is likely to be sharper and likelier to hurt or ridicule by its cleverness; and is often the function of the intellect.⁴³

We may add that **humour** is, as a rule, “good”—as in “good-humoured”—motivated by a positive emotion (such as love or respect), even with the aim of correcting or defusing a situation of incongruity or inconsistency. **Wit**, dealing with the same or a similar situation, will often put the other party in some position of embarrassment or disadvantage.

Hence, while humour often offers its subject (the “victim”) some levity or grace, especially not losing face before others, wit often manifests itself as hubris or sarcasm, belittling or disapproving the other party. In either case, the person of humour or wit is likely to be one who usually fully understands that gravity or significance of the situation; hence, it is an expression of his wisdom or cunning in the perception of it.

Generally, however, humour is the broader term of which wit is an aspect, especially when the humour is subtle or profound. Both humour and wit are likely to be of positive value when it is used in a teaching or story of humane or spiritual significance. On a profound level, Buddhist humour highlights the **dichotomy** of a situation; hence, we are distracted from the single-mindedness of the path and the oneness of awakening.

3.1.2 Humour and religion

3.1.2.1 In religion, especially Buddhism, **humour** is usually perceived in the tension between congruity and incongruity. A truly good religion should characteristically and universally be concerned with congruity regarding notions of order, ethics, meaning, purpose and salvation. Religion generally tries to bring human desires, hopes, acts, thoughts and feelings into conformity with some form of cosmic norm or natural order of things, and in the case of early Buddhism, it is liberation from the oppressive cycle of lives and deaths or samsara.

Any concern with the world must invariably experience or inevitably result in facing a range of incongruities against the right or true nature of things. Such an encounter may be characterized as tragic (such as the visions of the first 3 sights by the Bodhisattva)⁴⁴ or as **humorous** (such as the anger-eating demon of S 11,22). Humour, then, “involves a perception of incongruity generated by the inclusion of an unex-

⁴² For a special study on humour in early Buddhism, see **The Buddha’s humour**, SD 98.1 (pending).

⁴³ A readable, though dated, article John Reid, “Humour,” *Encyclopaedia of Religions and Ethics*, 1914 6:872 f.

⁴⁴ These 3 sights are those of an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and the 4th is that of a recluse: see **Mahā’pa-dāna S** (D 14,2.1-2.14) + SD 49.8b (1.0.4.4 + 1.0.4.5).

pected event, logic or perception that calls into question, at least temporarily, some standard expectation, belief or orientation.” (R Gardner, 2005:4194)⁴⁵

3.1.2.2 In the study of religions, the term “**trickster**” is given to a type of mythic figure or set of mythic figures distinguished by his or their skill at trickery and deceit. In early Buddhism, this trickster figure is that of **Māra**.⁴⁶ He is said to have 3 daughters—Taṇhā, Aratī and Rāgā—clearly allegories of craving, discontent and lust, respectively, but who fail to seduce or distract the Buddha in any way.⁴⁷

Māra is often depicted as trying to distract **the Bodhisattva** (the Buddha before his awakening) from his spiritual quest, promising him world domination as a “wheel-turner” (*cakka,vatti*), a universal monarch,⁴⁸ or to give up the ascetic life for the comfort and good life of doing merit.⁴⁹ Either way, Māra’s aim is to keep us within this cyclic world of rebirths and redeaths. Although Māra stalks the Bodhisattva throughout his 6 years of spiritual quest and a year after his great awakening, the Buddha remains unmoved, even when Māra threatens him with violence.⁵⁰

Māra is well known to **the Buddha and the arhats** (those awakened like the Buddha himself) for what he really is: a religious trickster and existential distractor, who has no power over them on account of their liberating wisdom. In a humorous account, for example, when Māra enters Moggallāna’s belly to distract him, he is at once told to be ashamed of himself to fall so low as to disrespect his own erstwhile *uncle!*⁵¹

3.2 WHY THE DUBBAṆṆIYA SUTTA IS HUMOROUS

3.2.1 Who really is the “anger-eater”?

3.2.1.1 The Sutta opens with a certain “**ugly, dwarfish yaksha**” [1.2.1.1] occupying Sakra’s throne, the centre of Tāvātimsa power-structure [§3]. We are at once confronted with diametrically contrasting incongruity: an ugly yaksha on *the* seat of power in the realm of the most beautiful devas. The demon sits nonchalantly on Sakra’s seat unaffected in the least by the angry protests of the devas—who are supposed to be more powerful than such a puny ugly demon. This is the 2nd incongruity in this confrontation.

3.2.1.2 It is as if the ugly demon is teasing and taunting the devas without making any effort at all! We are told that the more anger the devas direct to the demon, “the more beautiful, the more comely, the more charming” he becomes! [§5]. The demon seems to enjoy the ruckus he has caused and the attention he is getting. The devas are, as it were, tricked into feeding the demon with more power. In this sense, the demon is playing the role of **a trickster** [3.1.2.2].

3.2.1.3 Upon hearing about the demon, Sakra at once knows that he is “**an anger-eater**” (*kodha,-bhakkha*), a trickster [1.2.1]. Hence, he is not tricked by him, and knows just what to do. We must imag-

⁴⁵ R Gardner, *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed, 2005. Further see John Lippitt, “Humour and religion: Humour, irony, and the comic in western theology and philosophy,” op cit 6:4221 f.

⁴⁶ For a special study, see **Māra**, SD 61.8; also SD 43.9 (1.1).

⁴⁷ **Māra Dhītu S** (S 4.25), SD 36.6.

⁴⁸ See **Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda S** (26) + SD 36.10 (2); SD 36.9 (3).

⁴⁹ See Sn 426 + 429 in (**Mahā**) **Padhāna S** (Sn 3.2), SD 51.11. Cf **Satta Vassa S** (S 4.24,3.2*), SD 36.5.

⁵⁰ On Māra and his legion assaulting the meditating Bodhisattva, see SD 52.1 (16.1).

⁵¹ **Māra Tajjanīya S** (M 50), SD 36.4. On Māra in the Buddha’s life, see SD 52.1 (16).

ine Sakra even smiling as he approaches the anger-eating demon with all the right moves. He does *not* feed the anger-eater: he shows him every courtesy, respect and patience.

Here, we see a 3rd incongruity: the lord of the devas not only lets the anger-eating demon occupy his throne (a worldly spot), but conducts himself in an anger-free manner (a spiritual reality). The devas are probably surprised with respect and admiration at their lord. When, as the audience, we understand the incongruity of the occasion, we will surely see the **humour** of the situation. On account of Sakra, goodness, the demon is gradually diminished and then totally disappears. [§13]

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Dubbaṇṇiya Sutta

The Discourse on the Ugly

S 11.22

- 1 In Jeta's grove at Sāvattihī.
- 2 There, the Blessed One said this:

A yaksha on Sakra's seat

3 "Bhikshus, once upon a time, a certain **ugly, dwarfish yaksha**⁵² sat down on the seat of Sakra, lord of the devas.

4 Thereupon, bhikshus, the Tāvatiṃsa devas were **offended, furious [showed their anger] and protested**:⁵³

'It's terrible, indeed, sirs! Amazing, indeed, sirs!⁵⁴ This ugly, dwarfish yaksha sat down on the seat of Sakra, lord of the devas!'

5 Bhikshus, the more the Tāvatiṃsa devas were offended, furious and protested to the yaksha, *the more beautiful, the more comely, the more charming* he became!⁵⁵

The anger-eater

6 Then, bhikshus, the Tāvatiṃsa devas approached Sakra, the lord of the devas, and said this to him:

- 7 'Good sir, there is here *this certain ugly, dwarfish yaksha* [238] sitting down on your seat.

⁵² "Ugly, dwarfish yaksha," *yakkho dubbaṇṇo okoṭimako*: dirty dark, squat and pot-bellied, "like a Punch-silhouette" (S:RD 1:304 n1). *Dubbaṇṇa* = *du* (a negating particle) + *vaṇṇa* (beautiful), "not beautiful"; Comy: "the colour of burnt stump" (*jhāma, khāṇu, vaṇṇo*, SA 1:35411). *Okoṭimako* (BHS *avakoṭimako*, BHSD sv). For details, see (1.2.1.1) + (3.2.1.1).

⁵³ "Were furious, offended and protested," *ujjhāyanti khiyyanti vipācenti* (pres 3 pl): this is stock. *Ujjhāyati* (BHS *avadhyāyati*), "to become indignant or irritated, grumble, murmur, complain, protest." *Khīyati* (Be *khiyyayati*) (BHS *dhriyati/kṣipati/kṣīyati*), "to become chafed or heated, to become vexed, angry; to take offence." *Vipāceti* (BHS *vi-vācayati*), lit, "to get cooked," "to get angry, become annoyed, protested." CPD: *ujjhāyati*. For details, see (2.1).

⁵⁴ *Acchariyaṃ vata bho, abbhutaṃ vata bho*; also at **Cūḷa Taṇhā, saṅkhaya S** (M 37,15), SD 54.9. For its usual tr, see eg **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.11/2:107,7, 4.25/129,23), SD 9; **Mahā S īha, nāda S** (M 12.64/1:83,21), SD 49.1.

⁵⁵ *Yathā yathā bhikkhave devā tāvatimsā ujjhāyanti khiyanti vipācenti, tathā tathā so yakkho abhirūpa, taro c'eva hoti dassanīya, taro ca pāsādika, taro ca*.

8 Thereupon, the Tāvatiṃsa devas *were offended, furious and protested:*

“It’s terrible, indeed, sirs! Amazing, indeed, sirs! This ugly, dwarfish yaksha sat down on the seat of Sakra, lord of the devas!”

9 Good sir, the more the Tāvatiṃsa devas were offended, furious and protested to the yaksha, *the more beautiful, the more comely, the more charming* he became!

10 ‘Now, good sirs, this yaksha must as an **“anger-eater”**!’⁵⁶

Sakra vanquishes the anger-eater

11 Then, bhikshus, Sakra, the lord of the devas, approached the anger-eating yaksha.⁵⁷

12 Arranging his outer robe to one side (over his left shoulder), he knelt down on his right knee on the ground. Raising his hands in lotus-gesture [in anjali], he announced his name thrice:

‘I, good sir, am Sakra, lord of the devas. I, good sir, am Sakra, lord of the devas.’⁵⁸

13 Bhikshus, the more Sakra, lord of the devas, *announced his name* to the yaksha, the uglier and the more deformed he became! He turned uglier and more deformed until he disappeared altogether!

Sakra’s verses on non-anger

14 Then, bhikshus, Sakra, the lord of the devas, having sat down on his own seat, instructing the Tāvatiṃsa devas, on that occasion, uttered these verses:

15 *Na sūpahata, citto’ mhi*⁵⁹
*n’āvaṭṭena suvānayo*⁶⁰
*na vo*⁶² *cirāhaṃ kujjhāmi*⁶³
kodho mayi nāvatiṭṭhati

(S 941)

Not one afflicted in mind am I,
nor easily sucked into anger’s⁶¹ vortex.
When I do get angry, it is not for long;
anger lingers not in me.

⁵⁶ *So hi nuna mārisā kodha, bhakkho yakkho bhavissatīti* [3.2.1.2].

⁵⁷ Comy: Sakra hears from the devas: “That yaksha is unshaken by any harsh means, but means of humility and being steadfastly patient, one can rout him,” and so approaches him desiring to rout him. (*devānaṃ sutvā “na sak-kā esa pharusena cāletuṃ, nīca, vuttinā pana khantiyaṃ ṭhitena sakkā palāpetuṃ’ti tathā palāpetu, kāmo upasaṅkami*). (SA 1:354,17-19). Clearly, however, Sakra, himself a streamwinner, is virtuous and wise enough to adopt the right strategy to overcome the yaksha. On Sakra as a streamwinner, see SD 54.8 (1.2.4).

⁵⁸ This is a civil gesture when first meeting others of some significance. King Pasenadi of Kosala similarly introduces himself to a parade of “holy men” (actually his spies) in **Satta Jaṭila S** (S 3.11 = U 6.2), SD 14.11.

⁵⁹ Comy states that *su* in **S 941a*** is a mere indeclinable (*nipāta, mattaṃ*), and thus we should resolve the cpd as *su upahata, citto’ mhi* (SA 1:354,23 f). [2.2.3.1]

⁶⁰ **S 941b***: Be Ce read *nāvattena suvānayo*; Ee1 Se *nāvaṭṭena suvānayo*; Ee2 *n’āvaṭṭe na suvānayo*. [2.2.3.2].

⁶¹ *Suvānayo* recurs at **S 507b*** (**Māra Dhītu S**, S 4.25), where lust (*rāga*), instead of *anger*, is the defilement to which an arhat is not drawn (SD 36.6). [2.2.3.2].

⁶² Comy: *Vo* is an indeclinable (*nipāta*) (SA 1:354,26). [2.2.3.3]

⁶³ **S 941cd*** allude to the 7th of Sakra’s vows: see **Vatapada S** (S 11.11,4), SD 54.12. [2.2.3.4]

<p>16 <i>kuddhâham na pharusam brūmi</i>⁶⁴ <i>na ca dhammāni kittaye</i>⁶⁵ <i>sanniggaṇhāmi</i>⁶⁶ <i>attānaṃ</i> <i>sampassaṃ attham attano'ti</i>⁶⁷</p>	<p>(S 942)</p>	<p>When angry, I speak not harshly nor do I laud (my own) virtues. I hold myself well restrained, seeing my own good.”⁶⁸</p>
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— evaṃ —

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⁶⁴ **S 942ab** follows Be Ee1+2 Se but Ce omits *na* in line a, metri causa. Even with *na*, we only need to resolve either the 4th or the 5th syllable [2.2.3.5]. Comys give no further explanations.

⁶⁵ Cf **Saṅkha, pāla J** (J 524/5:172,23) & **Ummadantī J** (J 527/5:221,27): *satañ ca dhammāni sukittitāni*, “the qualities of the good are well-proclaimed,” which shows that the rare neut pl *dhammāni* refers to personal virtues.

⁶⁶ The ger *sanniggaṇhantā*, “restraining,” is listed in a register of synonyms for “living apart,” *patulīna, cara* (ie away from the crowd and worldliness), a life of restraint, explaining the way of the monastics, the learners (stream-winners, etc) and the arhats: (regarding each of the 6 senses) *patilīnenta patikuṭṭenentā parivaṭṭenta sanniruddhantā sanniggaṇhantā sannivārentā rakkhantā gopentā caranti vicaranti viharanti iriyanti vattenti pārenti yapenti yāpenti* (Nm 1:130).

⁶⁷ This line is stock (in verses), sometimes preceded by *tasmā hi paṇḍito poso ...*, “Thus, the wise person, (seeing his own good)”: **Anātha, piṇḍik’ovāda S** (M 143/3:362 x2*), SD 23.9; **Jeta, vana S** (S 1.48/1:34 x3); **Dahara S** (S 3.1/-1:70), SD 42.11; **Pabbatūpama S** (S 3.25/1:102); **Saṃvara J** (J 462/4:134,4); **Mahā Vaṇija J** (J 493/4:354,22); V 2:147, 164.

⁶⁸ This close quote marks the end of the Buddha’s word that starts at §3.