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Saṅghāṭi,kaṇṇa Sutta

The Discourse on the Outer Robe's Corner | It 92

Theme: How to be close to the Buddha

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008

1 Buddha Dharma as teacher

1.1 THE SUPREME WORSHIP

One important difference between Mahāyāna and Theravāda (as teachings) is that while the Mahāyāna tends to teach more *Buddhas* (as myth), Theravāda tends to focus mostly on *dogma* (as theory). Both approaches arrive at the common result of intellectualism (as exemplified by the Prajñā, pāramitā literature) and scholasticism (found in Abhidhamma).

Such approaches tend to become ivory-tower exchanges amongst the leisurely class-members that can become so exclusive as to leave out most other Buddhists who are “ordinary” or “low class.” There is a lot to talk and think here, but very little really for meaningful and effective practice. For, only when talking and thinking stop, and we act and live in Dharma, is there a beginning of a beautiful and focused mind.

My point is that, if we do not discount the early suttas, then we must admit that they teach less Buddha and more Buddha-Dharma. Teaching less or no dogma, there is more mind-watching; less of trying to *define* liberation, but more of how to *attain* it. Furthermore, the Buddha disapproves of hero-worship. One of the Buddha's first acts is to declare that he himself honours the Dharma,¹ and one of his last words is that when the heavens honour him with divine flowers and music, he declares that this is not the highest honour—the supreme worship is to practise the Dharma.²

1.2 BUDDHA DHARMA AS TEACHER

The Buddha story begins and ends with the Buddha declaring that the teaching is always above the teacher.³ In **the Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2), the Buddha declares his respect for the Dharma: “it is also proper for myself, I, honouring, respecting, this very Dharma, fully awakened to by me, dwell in dependence on it.”⁴ The Buddha, in his last instructions, as recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), declares

“Ānanda, it may be that you would think:

‘Gone is the Teacher's word! We have no teacher.’

It should not be seen thus, Ānanda, for the Dharma-Vinaya [the Teaching and the Discipline] that I have taught and explained to you, will, at my passing, be your teacher.”

(D 16,6.1/2:154), SD 9

1.3 BUDDHA AS CULT FIGURE

Arguably, while the Buddha lived, there was a “Buddha cult” around him. People were drawn to him simply on account of his charisma. They were attracted to him as a person—as in the famous case of the

¹ **Gārava S** (S 6.3/1:138-140), SD 12.3.

² **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16.5.3/2:138), SD 9; also **Miracles**, SD 27.5a (8.5).

³ See **Gārava S** (S 6.2), SD 12.3 (2).

⁴ *Tam eva dhammani sakkatvā garukatvā upanissāya vihāsīmi*, lit “I, having honoured, having respected, dwelt dependent this very Dharma.” I have rendered this passage in the simple present. (S 6.2.13/1:140 = **Uruvelā S 1**, A 4.21/2:21), SD 12.3.

elder **Vakkali**⁵—often on the basis of his personality and powers, such as his omniscience.⁶ Understandably, he gave teachings to counter such wrong and unhelpful notions about him.⁷

Even today, we see people attracted to **teachers**, simply on account of guru charisma, attributing various knowledges, powers and sainthood upon them. Other than their lives orbiting or chasing around such stars or comets, such religious groupies lead sadly empty lives. Where they *transfer* or *project* their own qualities and needs onto the guru figure, they would not grow spiritually. Or, they might falsely think that their weaknesses or inabilities are being *compensated* merely by associating with such bigger-than-life figures. Such an unhealthy relationship often opens itself up to abuses and scandals.

1.4 LEARNING WITHIN

The Buddha’s message in the short but significant **Saṅghāṭi,kaṇṇa Sutta** (It 92) is very clear: spiritual learning and growth do not occur in the external world, not even in the physical proximity with the best teacher, but they occur in our hearts and minds. We serve the teacher best by following his good teachings.

A closely related discourse here is **the Gadrabha Sutta** (A 3.81), where it is stated that an ass may closely follow behind a herd of cows and regard itself as a cow, but it is still an ass, all the same. Even so, a foolish monastic, without training, may be closely associated with famous monks or great establishments, but he remains a foolish monk, all the same.

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Saṅghāṭi,kaṇṇa Sutta

The Discourse on the Outer Robe’s Corner

It 92

1 This was indeed spoken by the Blessed One, heard by me spoken by the Arhat.⁸

1.2 Bhikshus, even if [91] a monk **should hold on to my outer robe’s corner**, following closely behind me, step for step; yet, if he were covetous, strongly lusting after sense-pleasures, with a mind of ill will, with a mind of corrupted intentions,⁹ muddle-headed, without clear comprehension, lacking concentration, scatter-brained, loose in faculty,¹⁰ then, he is really far from me, and I from him.¹¹

2 What is the reason for this?

⁵ The most famous case is that of **Vakkali**: see **Vakkali S** (S 22.87/3:119-124 & DhA 25.11/4:118 f), SD 8.8.

⁶ On the Buddha’s omniscience, see **Kaṇṇaka-t,thala S** (M 90/2:125-133). SD 10.8 (2) & **Sandaka S** (M 76), SD 35.7.

⁷ For a fuller discussion, see **The teacher or the teaching?** SD 3.14.

⁸ *Vuttam h’etaṃ bhagavata, vuttam arahatā’ti me sutam*. This is said to be spoken by the laywoman **Khujj’uttarā**: see SD 57.26 (1.2.2.3): see SD 16.14 (1).

⁹ *Paduṭṭha,mana,saṅkappo*.

¹⁰ *So ca hoti abhijjhālū kāmesu tibba,sārāgo byāpanna,citto paduṭṭha,mana,saṅkappo muṭṭha-s,sati asampajāno asamāhito vibbhanta,citto pākat’indriyo*. As at **Jīvika S** (It 91,4/89) n, SD 28.9b.

¹¹ On the true purpose of renunciation, represented by living on alms, see **Jīvika S** (It 91), sd 28.9B.

That monk, bhikshus, **sees not the Dharma**; not seeing the Dharma, he sees me not.¹²

2.2 Bhikshus, even if a monk were to dwell a hundred yojanas¹³ away,
but he is not covetous,

lustfully excited in sense-pleasures,
not malevolent at heart,
with a mind free of corrupted thinking,
constantly mindful,
clearly knowing,
mentally focused,
single-minded in meditation,
guarded in sense-faculties,¹⁴

*anabhijjālu
kāmesu na tibba,sārāga
avyāpanna,citta
appaduṭṭha,mana
upaṭṭhita,sati
sampajāna
samāhita
ekagga,citta
saṃyut'indriya*

then, he is before me, and I before him.

3 What is the reason for this?

That monk, bhikshus, sees the Dharma; seeing the Dharma, he sees me.¹⁵

4 This is the matter [meaning] of what the Blessed One said;¹⁶ concerning which he said thus:¹⁷

[Interlinear translation:]

5 *Anubaddho'pi¹⁸ ce assa
mah'iccho ca vighātavā |
ejānugo anejassa
nibbutassa anibbuto |
giddho so vīta,gedhassa
passa yāvañ ca ārakā ||*

Even if he were to follow closely,
but he is great in desire, and discontented,
to one unmoved by passion, he is one running after it;
to the cooled, he is *not* cooled;
to the desire-free, he is desirous:
see, how far away he is!

6 *So ca dhamma-v-abhiññāya
dhammam aññāya paṇḍito |
rahado'va [92] nivato ca
anejo vūpasammati ||*

But he who directly knows reality,
the wise with final knowledge in the Dharma,
like a lake unstirred, and
not passion-shaken, he is stilled.

7 *Anejo so anejassa
nibbutassa ca nibbuto |
agiddho vīta,gedhassa
passa yāvañ ca santike 'ti ||*

He is unshaken to those unshaken by passion,
cooled to the cooled, and
desire-free to the desire-free:
see how near he is!

¹² *Dhammaṃ hi so bhikkhave bhikkhu na passati, dhammaṃ apassanto na maṃ passati.* Cf §1.4 n.

¹³ A *yojana* is the yoke of an Indian plough (J 6:38, 42). As distance, it is as far as can be covered by a yoke of oxen, ie, about 11.25 km or 7 mi (DhA 1:108, 2:13).

¹⁴ *So ca hoti anabhijjālū kāmesu na tibba,sārāga avyāpanna,citto appaduṭṭha,mana,saṅkappo upaṭṭhita,sati sampajāno samāhito ekagga,citto saṃvut'indriyo.*

¹⁵ *Dhammaṃ hi so bhikkhave bhikkhu passati, dhammaṃ passanto maṃ passati.* Cf **Vakkali S** (S 22.87,2/3:120), SD 8.8.

¹⁶ *Attha* is polysemic: we can take “matter” as referring to the preceding, and “meaning” as given in the foll.

¹⁷ *Etam atthaṃ bhagavā avoca, tatth'etaṃ iti vuccati.* This may be seen thus: the former phrase refers to the teaching in meaning (*attha*) (true reality), reflecting the 1st 2 noble truths; the latter is its purpose (*attha*).

¹⁸ *Ee anubandho pi.*

[Idiomatic translation:]

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|---|---|
| <p>(8) Even if he were to follow him,
For, he is great in desire, discontented.
Uncooled, he is far from the cooled.</p> | <p>see how far he is!
Shaken by passion, he is far from the unshaken.
Desirous, he is far from the desire-free.</p> |
| <p>(9) But he who directly knows reality,
like a lake unstirred,</p> | <p>The wise with final knowledge in the Dharma,
unmoved by passion, is one stilled.</p> |
| <p>(10) See how near he is to them!
the cooled to the cooled,</p> | <p>How near the unshaken is to the unshaken,
and the desire-free to the desire-free.</p> |

This matter [meaning] too was spoken by the Blessed One. Thus I have heard.¹⁹

— evaṃ —

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¹⁹ *Ayam pi attho vutto bhagavatā. Iti me sutan ti.*