

SD 61.6 Sambahulā (Bhikkhū) Sutta

The Discourse on Some (Monks)

or, (Māra) Sambahulā Sutta The (Māra) Discourse on Some

Theme: Māra works to hinder renunciation

S 4.21

Translated by Piya Tan ©2009, 2024

1 Sutta summary

1.1 AN EXTERNAL DISTRACTION

Māra, in the guise of a venerable brahmin, “with a large matted topknot, clad in an antelope hide, old, crooked like a roof bracket, wheezing, holding a staff of udumbara wood” [§2], visits some monks at Silāvātī and beseeches them to enjoy pleasures since they are still young. They should not abandon the pleasures of this life to run after matters involving time [§3].

The monks reply that worldly desires are matters that are “time-consuming, full of suffering, full of despair, and the danger in them is still greater” [§4]. The Dharma practised by them, however, is “directly visible, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise.” The brahmin departs discomfited [§5], and when the matter is reported to the Buddha, he identifies the brahmin with Māra, “who had come to make you blind.” [§10]

1.2 AN INTERNAL DISTRACTION

1.2.1 Leaving the training

While the **Sambahulā (Bhikkhū) Sutta** (S 4.21) is a short sutta on how a rival ideology (depicted by Māra) can challenge the renunciation ideals of early Buddhism—that is, as a challenge from outside of Buddhism—renunciants also face challenges from within themselves, such as when thoughts of dissatisfaction arise within a monk or a nun, making them give up the training and return to the lay (low) life (*sikkham paccakkhāya hīnāya, vattati*).

1.2.2 Moliya Phagguna

The **Kakacūpama Sutta** (M 21), a classic discourse in the virtue of patience and non-violence, is taught in connection with the monk Moliya Phagguna. He often spends long hours chatting with nuns until very late, going against the Vinaya rules by instructing them beyond 5 or 6 sentences, and trivializing the serious offences (MA 2:95). His infatuation with the nuns is so deep that he would show anger to anyone who speaks ill of them, and the nuns would similarly fuss over any disapproval of Phagguna.¹

In the **Kajāra Sutta** (S 12.32), Phagguna is reported to have left the order and returned to lay life.²

1.2.3 Citta the elephant trainer’s son

1.2.3.1 The Citta Hatthi, sārīputta Sutta (A 6.60) relates the fascinating story of the elder Citta who has special skill in distinguishing subtle differences in the meanings of words. Despite being able to attain dhyana, he gives up the training 6 times due to moral lapses. Only upon renouncing the 7th time and leading a solitary meditative life is he able to attain arhathood.

¹ M 21/1:122-124 (SD 38.1).

² S 12.32/2:50 (SD 83.6).

1.2.3.2 Citta’s final renunciation is recorded both in **Citta Hatthi, sārīputta Sutta** (A 6.60,60-67) and the **Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9).³ The Commentaries recount the story of why Citta went forth 7 times. In the time of Kassapa Buddha (the one before Gotama), he and a friend were monks. When his companion was dissatisfied with monkhood, Citta, coveting his companion’s monastic requisites, spoke in praise of the householder’s life, inducing him to leave the order. As a result, in his last life, he left the order 6 times before his last ordination whereby he gained awakening.⁴

2 Time for everything, time for nothing

2.1 A TIME FOR EVERYTHING?

2.1.1 Māra’s time, Dharma’s timelessness

2.1.1.1 The Sambahulā (Bhikkhū) Sutta records **Māra** in the guise of an old brahmin speaking enticingly to a group of diligent young meditating monks:

“You, sirs, have gone forth while young, lads with black hair, endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, without having dallied with sensual pleasures. Enjoy human sensual pleasures, sirs; do not abandon what is directly visible in order to pursue what takes time.”

The monks reply spiritedly:

“We have not abandoned what is directly visible, brahmin, in order to pursue what takes time. We have abandoned what takes time in order to pursue what is directly visible. For the Blessed One, brahmin, has stated that sensual pleasures are time-consuming, full of suffering, full of despair, and the danger in them is still greater, while **this Dharma** is directly visible, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise.” [§§3 f]

2.1.1.2 Māra appears rather desperate—in fact, he reacts disapprovingly to the monks’ response [§5]—because he fears that these monks will gain spiritual insight and so break free from his samsaric realm. Māra assumes the form of a venerable brahmin hoping to induce the young monks devoted to their spiritual practice to give up the training to live worldly lay lives.

Clearly, from the way the monks report the incident to the Buddha, they are not impressed by a strange looking old brahmin. They thought it was odd that someone as authoritative as a brahmin would go around dressed in matted hair. Perhaps, we here are seeing Māra as unfamiliar with Buddhist practice and practitioners. He is simply trying to use religious authority to manipulate others. Māra may seem to have failed—mainly because those young monks are very close to the Buddha socially and spiritually. Māra is, however, very quick in learning the wiles of influencing and inducing others to his will.

2.1.2 Samiddhi and the devata

2.1.2.1 The (Devatā) Samiddhi Sutta (S 1.20) preserves a similar account of a diligent young monk being told to “enjoy life” first before renouncing. The Saṃyutta Commentary tells us that the elder Sam-

³ D 9,56/1:202 f (SD 7.14).

⁴ MA 2:378 f; AA 3:402. For details of Citta’s first renunciation, see **Kuddāla Jātaka** (J 70/1:311-315) and **Citta-hattha Vatthu** in the Dhammapada Comy (DhA 3.5/1:305-313).

iddhi is “well-endowed, pleasantly handsome” (*samiddho abhirupo pasadiko*).⁵ Once, in the dawn light, as Samiddhi, dressed in a single robe, is drying himself on the riverbank, a female devata appears to him. Hovering mid-air, she addresses him with this subtly salacious verse:

Not having feasted, ⁶ you look for food, O bhikshu.	Having feasted, you look not for food!	
Having feasted, O bhikshu, then look for food—	let not time slip by!	(S 42)

Samiddhi replies to her in Dharma-spirited candour:

I know not indeed what time is:	time is hidden, it cannot be seen.	
Therefore, not having eaten, I seek alms—	let not time slip by! ⁷	(S 43)

2.1.2.2 The devata then alights on the ground and speaks with earthy directness to the venerable Samiddhi:

“You have gone forth while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, though your mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces, you shaved off your hair and beard, put on the saffron robe, and went forth from the household life into the homeless life, *without having fully enjoyed sense-pleasures*.

Enjoy human pleasures, bhikshu!

Do not abandon what is visible right here (*sanditṭhika*) to run after what takes time (*kālika*).”

“I have *not* abandoned **what is visible right here**, avuso [friend], to run after what takes time. I have abandoned *what takes time*, avuso, to run after what is visible right here (*sanditṭhika*).

For, avuso, the Blessed One has declared that **sense-pleasures are time-consuming**, full of suffering, full of despair, and great is the danger therein,

while this Dharma is visible right here, immediate [time-free], inviting one to come and see, accessible, to be personally known by the wise.”

When the devata asks Samiddhi to explain these profound words, Samiddhi replies that he is newly ordained, and that it would be best to approach the Buddha himself for a good explanation. Inspired by Samiddhi, the devata agrees that they meet the Buddha.⁸

2.2 AN ANACHRONISM

2.2.1 Āśrama and assama

2.2.1.1 Some scholars think that the story in **the Sambahulā (Bhikkhū) Sutta** of the brahmin trying to induce the young monks to revert to lay life and enjoy sensual pleasures was based on the brahmini-

⁵ SA 1:39,3 f.

⁶ There is a wordplay on “having feasted” (*bhutva*) or “eaten, consumed, enjoyed” which can refer to food or, as intended here, to sense-pleasures.

⁷ See SD 21.4 (2) for an explanation of key terms.

⁸ S 1.20/1:8-12 (SD 21.4).

cal doctrine of the 4 stages of life (Skt *āśrama*) [2.2.2]. Such an ideology was, however, not known in the Buddha's time.

The word **assama** (Skt *āśrama*) as used in the early Buddhist texts always refers to a non-Buddhist "hermitage." As a rule, an *assama* referred to a forest dwelling of an ascetic, either a brahmin or a matted-hair ascetic (*jaṭila*) with leaf-huts (*paṇṇa,sālā*), near which was a meditation walkway (*caṅkama*), and which is located not far from a village for their alms (*gocara,gāma*) (SnA 581,14 f).⁹

Assama, in the sense of brahminical stages of life is not mentioned at all in any of the early Buddhist texts. The earliest usage of *assama* as "stage of life" is recorded in the 11th century Buddhist dictionary, *Abhidhāna-p,paḍipikā* (Abhp 409).

2.2.2 Brahminical asrama doctrine?

2.2.2.1 Scholars think that the story of Māra (in the guise of a brahmin) appearing as a proponent of the brahminical idea that renunciation (*sannyāsa*) must be postponed until after one has enjoyed a full married life, that is, until old age, and relate this to the brahminical ideology of the "4 stages of life" (*āśrama*). This idea was first and fully recorded in **Mānava Dharmaśāstra** (Manu's Code of Law),¹⁰ henceforth, "the Manu" for short.

Early scholars have generally regarded the composition of the Manu:

as a gradual process at the hands of anonymous and successive compilers, editors, and copyists lasting for several centuries, the same sort of agentless process that many have thought lies behind the composition of the great epic Mahābhārata.¹¹ These compilers and editors, we are told, did nothing more than gather together proverbial sayings, moral maxims, and legal axioms that were floating in the mouths of people and handed down from generation to generation. ... The first to propose such a hypothesis was E Washburn Hopkins (1885:268).¹²

(Olivelle 2005:5)

2.2.2.2 What concerns us here is the date of the Manu. An early authority on the Manu, Georg Bühler (1886), analyzing all the data he had, concluded that the Manu must have existed by the 2nd century CE, and was probably composed between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE.¹³ Recent scholars have accepted the approximate date of the Manu's composition as being between the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE.¹⁴

The purpose of this tedious exercise in comparative literature and textual dating is clear. Even if the brahminical ideology of the 4 stages of life (*āśrama*) was first formulated in the Manu in the 2nd century

⁹ Detailed descriptions of an **assama** as "hermitage" of various individuals: Sumedha, B 2:29-33 (BA:Ce 62,17-65,7) ≈ J 1:6,11-10,29*; Sāriputta, Ap 15,6-17,24 = ThaA:Ce 2:95,9*-97,8*; Uruvela Kassapa, V 1:24,19, 26,1); other *jaṭilas*, V 1:246,26, 4:109,2, D 2:339,28) the brahmin Rammaka, M 1:160,26; Bāvari Sn 979.

¹⁰ See P Olivelle, *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution*, NY: Oxford Univ Press, 1993. On the Mānava Dharmaśāstra's unitary authorship, see Olivelle (tr), *Manu's Code of Law*, Oxford, 2005:7, 19, 21.

¹¹ This idea has been rejected by leading scholars. See Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 2001; Madeleine Biardeau, cited by Hiltebeitel, p165 ("I prefer to suppose the creation of a sole Brahman of genius"). James Fitzgerald offers a more complicated compositional history, with a final Gupta redaction (Hiltebeitel 2001:25 f). Olivelle 2005:5-7.

¹² E W Hopkins, "On the Professed Quotations from Manu Found in the Mahābhārata," *J of the American Oriental Soc* 11 1885:239-275

¹³ Georg Bühler (tr), *The Laws of Manu*, SBE 25, Oxford, 1886: cxvii.

¹⁴ D C Sircar, *Studies in Indian Coins*, Delhi, 1968:52; Olivelle 2005:25.

BCE, it was a few centuries after the Buddha. Anyway, even if the idea was known during the Buddha's time, the point of the Sutta teaching is that Māra is trying to uphold the status quo of worldly life, including discouraging people from renouncing the world to dedicate their lives to reaching the path that frees them from Māra's realm, samsara.

3 Māra tries to arouse fear in us

SD 61.6(3)

Pāsāṇa Sutta

The Discourse on the Boulder

S 4.11/1:109¹⁵

S 1.4.2.1 Saṃyutta Nikāya 1 Sagāthā Vagga 4, Māra Saṃyutta 2, Dutiya Vagga 1

Theme: Māra works to arouse fear in us when we try to do good

- 1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying on Mount Vulture Peak at Rājagaha.
- 2 At that time, the Blessed One was sitting out in the open in the thick darkness of the night while it was raining lightly drop by drop.¹⁶
- 3 Then, Māra the evil one, wishing to arouse fear, terror, and hair-raising in the Blessed One, shattered a number of huge boulders not far away from him.
- 4 Then, the Blessed One, knowing, "This is Māra the evil one," addressed Māra the evil one in verse:

<p>4.2 <i>sa ce pi kevalaṃ sabbaṃ gijjhakūtaṃ calessasi n'eva sammā vimuttaṃ buddhānaṃ atthi iñjitaṃ ti</i></p>	<p>467</p>	<p>Even if you make the whole of Vulture Peak quake all over, the awakened are unshaken; for they are fully liberated.</p>	<p>d c</p>
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- 5 Then, Māra the evil one, realizing, "The Blessed One knows me, the well gone one knows me!" sad and downhearted, vanished right there.¹⁷

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¹⁵ For tr S 4.11 with nn, see SD 61.25.

¹⁶ *Ratt'andha, kāra, timisāyaṃ abbhokāse nisinno hoti, devo ca ekam ekam phusāyati.* This is stock: SD 36.3 (1.1).

¹⁷ *Dukkhī dummano tatth'ev'antaradhāyi.* Ee omits this para. This stock occurs some 32 times in Saṃyutta in connection with Māra [SD 61.9 (3.1.2)].

Sambahulā (Bhikkhū) Sutta

The Discourse on Some (Monks)

S 4.21

Thus have I heard.

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying at **Silāvati**¹⁸ in Sakya country.¹⁹

Now at that time, a number of monks were dwelling not far from the Blessed One—diligent, ardent, and resolute.

2 Then **Māra the evil one** appeared in the form of a brahmin, with a large matted topknot, clad in an antelope hide, old, crooked like a roof bracket, wheezing, holding a staff of udumbara wood.²⁰

3 He approached those monks and said to them:

“You, sirs, have gone forth while young, lads with black hair, endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, without having dallied with sensual pleasures. Enjoy human sensual pleasures, sirs; do not abandon what is directly visible in order to pursue what takes time.”²¹

4 “We have not abandoned what is directly visible, brahmin, in order to pursue what takes time. We have abandoned what takes time in order to pursue what is directly visible.

For the Blessed One, brahmin, has stated that sensual pleasures are time-consuming, full of suffering, full of despair, and the danger in them is still greater, while **this Dharma** is directly visible, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise.” **[118]**

5 When this was said, the brahmin shook his head,²² wagged his tongue, and knitted his eyebrows until there were three furrows in his brow, and then, leaning on his stick, left.²³

6 Then the monks approached the Blessed One. Having approached, they saluted the Blessed One and sat down at one side. Sitting at one side, they said this to the Blessed One:

7 “Here, bhante, we were dwelling not far from the Blessed One, diligent, ardent, and resolute.

¹⁸ The elder Bandhura is said to be born in this village (ThaA 1:2308).

¹⁹ This Sutta is reported at SD 61a (2.3.3.1).

²⁰ Brāhmaṇa, vaṇṇaṃ abhinimminivā mahantena jaṭanduvena ajinakkhipa, nivattho jinno gopānasi, vanko ghuru, ghuru, passāsi udumbara, daṇḍaṃ gahetvā (S 4.21/1:117 f), SD 103.7. Comy: “The staff of udumbara wood, slightly crooked, was for the sake of showing that he was of few wishes (*app’iccha, bhava*, an ascetic virtue).” (SA 1:181, 26-28). In the Vedic sacrifices, udumbara wood was used for all kinds of ritual purposes; the sacrificial post, ladle, and amulets were made of this wood (Macdonell & Keith, *Vedic Index, sv udumbara*).

²¹ On how a female devata tries to seduce a young monk in the same way: [2.1.2]. On how young monks, lads “in the prime of life, who have not dallied with sensual pleasures, can live the holy life without being overcome with sensual desire,” see **Piṇḍola Bhāra, dvāja S** (S 35.127), SD 27.6a (2.5).

²² When the naked ascetic Upaka first meets the Buddha and hears his proclamation, Upaka, similarly “shaking his head, took a byway and left” (V 1:7; M 26,25/1:171). This body language clearly reflects bewilderment or disbelief. Upaka however later joins the sangha. On his non-returning, see SD 12.1 (4+5).

²³ This gesture of frustration and disapproval is also seen in the brahmin Daṇḍapāṇi the Sakya, after his views are rejected by the Buddha: **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18,5/1:109,1 f), SD 6.14.

7.2 Then a **certain brahmin**, with a large matted topknot, clad in an antelope hide, old, crooked like a roof bracket, wheezing, holding a staff of udumbara wood, approached us.

7.3 Having approached us, he said this:

'You, sirs, have gone forth while young, lads with black hair, endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, without having dallied with sensual pleasures. Enjoy human sensual pleasures, sirs; do not abandon what is directly visible in order to pursue what takes time.'

8 When this was said, bhante, we said this to the brahmin, [§4]

'We have not abandoned what is directly visible, brahmin, in order to pursue what takes time. We have abandoned what takes time in order to pursue what is directly visible.

*For the Blessed One, brahmin, has stated that sensual pleasures are time-consuming, full of suffering, full of despair, and the danger in them is still greater, while **this Dharma** is directly visible, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise."*

9 When this was said, bhante, the brahmin *shook his head, wagged his tongue, and knitted his eyebrows until there were three furrows in his brow, and then, leaning on his stick, left.* [§5]

10 [The Blessed One:] That, bhikshus, is not a brahmin; that was Māra the evil one, who had come to make you blind.²⁴

11 Then the Blessed One, knowing the significance of this, on that occasion, uttered this verse:

*yo dukkhaṃ adakkhī yato nidānaṃ
kāmesu so jantu kathaṃ nameyya
upadhīṃ viditvā saṅgo ti loke
tass'eva jantu vinayāya sikkho ti*

S 488

A person who has seen the source whence suffering, how could he [they] bend to sensual pleasures. Having known that acquisition is a bond in the world, let a person train for its removal.

evaṃ

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²⁴ *Māra eso pāpimā tuyhaṃ vicakkhu, kammāya āgato. Vicakkhu, kammāya*, lit, "for making eyeless." Comy: This was out of a desire to destroy the wisdom-eye of those in the assembly. He is unable to destroy the Buddha's wisdom eye, but he could do so for those in the assembly by creating a frightening sight or noise (SA 1:176,8 f): see **Pāsāna S** (S 4.11) [3].