

SD 64.12h

Cora,rāja Sutta

The Discourse on Thieves and Kings

A 2.38

Theme: Wholesome and effective authority

For an earlier translation, see **SD 47.7** (2014)

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The Cora,rāja Sutta (A 2.38) states that when **robbers** [bandits] (*cora*) are strong, so kings are weak and they tour the country ill at ease. Brahmins and householders, too, work and move about ill at ease. Even so, when evil monks are strong, well-behaved monks sit silently in the midst of the sangha or resort to outlying provinces. The teaching then declines.

On the other hand, when **kings** are strong, then robbers are weak, so kings tour the country at ease. Brahmins and householders, too, work and move about at ease. Even so, when well-behaved monks are strong, evil monks are weak; they sit silently amongst the sangha or leave for the provinces. The teaching, too, prospers.

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 The 2 wheels

1.2.1.1 Although the Sutta seems to say that good governance or proper authority brings peace, progress and prosperity to society, even a country, the mention of “evil monks” and of “well-behaved monks” clearly points to the vital practice of the Vinaya and respect for the Dharma. The Sutta teaching is also structured on the “2 wheels” (*cakka*) of authority, that is, the wheel of power (*āṇā,cakka*) and the wheel of Dharma (*dhamma,cakka*).¹

“**The wheel of power**” refers to the ruling or governing secular authority, while “**the wheel of Dharma**” refers to the proper practice of the teachings and realization of the true reality. The Dharma wheel here broadly refers to the various levels of **renunciation** (*nekkhamma*) that are gained or worked at by the sangha of monastics and by the lay community.

1.2.1.2 “Renunciation,” as practice, encompasses the letting go of the 3 unwholesome roots—*greed, hatred and delusion*—as soon as any arise and preventing them from re-arising, so that we act inspired by *non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion*.

1.2.2 The wheels of renunciation

1.2.2.1 When we take “**the wheel**” (*cakka*) as referring to proper Dharma practice, there are another 2 wheels we should consider: those of monastic renunciation (*saṅgha*), and of the lay discipline (*gihī-vinaya*). “Monastic renunciants” are the monks and nuns who have left the world and properly keep to the Vinaya, practising the Dharma by precept and by example. “Lay practitioners” are those who keep to

¹ SD 14.11 (4.1); SD 36.10 (5.4.1.2); SD 59.15 (2.2.3); SD 60.1c (9.6.3.3, 13.1.4); SD 61.17 (3.12.3 f, 4.1.2.1); SD 61.5a (3.2.2.3); SD 64.10 (2.3.1.2).

at least the 5 precepts² and right livelihood,³ and keep to some level of mindfulness and awareness in their quest and enjoyment of wealth and sense-pleasures.⁴

1.2.2.2 While **the laity**, as a rule, keeps to a minimally moral life guided by the 5 precepts, there are some who are moved to dedicate more of their time to **Dharma work**. However, we should not confuse Guru-worship or hero-worship for genuine interest in a deeper understanding of the Dharma or working to propagate the Buddha word.

Crudely put, Guru-worship is like handing one's remote to an external authority figure, whereas true Dharma work is diligence in learning Dharma and how it can be used for bettering oneself and the happiness of others. Ideally, one also inspires others in such a Dharma-spirited sutta-centred study and wisdom-based mental cultivation.⁵

There is only one true goal in such a Dharma work, that is, the understanding of what **streamwinning** is and the attainment of streamwinning in this life itself. This means that we should make every effort to understand at least **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1) or any of the other 9 suttas of the Okkanta Saṃyutta (S 25).⁶

2 Thieves and evil monastics

2.1 EVIL MONASTICS AS THIEVES

2.1.1 Two terms, one sense

The Cora,rāja Sutta (A 2.38) contrast between thieves (*cora*) [§1] and evil monks (*papa bhikkhu*) [§2] is interesting, perhaps even intended. While “thieves” is a metaphor for situations that make society unsafe and degrade its prosperity, “evil monks” or bad monastics are real causes for the serious failure of the sangha and lasting degradation of Buddhism. There is in fact a play on the 2 terms—“thieves” and “evil monks”—that is, they both refer to the same kind of insidious person capable of widespread and lasting damage to what is good for the world and for the spirit.

2.1.2 “Modernizing” Buddhism

2.1.2.1 Monastics who are caught up with worldliness, or exploit faith as a means of parasitic living are said to be drawn to “**gains, honours, praises**” (*lābha, sakkāra, siloka*).⁷ Many modern monastics are drawn to the academic profession partly because of the worldly prestige and wealth it promises, or because they see the academic task as that of the “duty of book learning” (*gantha, dhura*), without the need for meditation.⁸ While such a pursuit may give Buddhism a broad base for a modern appreciation

² On the practice of the 5 precepts, see SD 64.12g (2.2.1.3).

³ On right livelihood, see **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8 esp (2).

⁴ On a healthy enjoyment of wealth and of sensual pleasures, see SD 64.12b (2.2.1.2); on wealth also (2.3-2.6). On the best benefits of wealth, see **Ādiya S** (A 5.41), SD 2.1.

⁵ On full-time lay Dharma work, see SD 37.8 (1.5.4).

⁶ **S 25.1/3:225 + SD 16.7; (Anicca) Vedanā S** (S 25.5/3:226), SD 17.3(4.5.1); **(Anicca) Saññā S** (S 25.6/3:227), SD 17.4(10); **(Anicca) Khandha S** (S 25.10/3:227 f), SD 42.17.

⁷ **Bhindi S** (S 17.33), SD 46.24; **(Pañcaka) Nāgita S** (A 5.30), SD 55.12a; SD 61.5 (3.1.3).

⁸ **(Dullābha) Mahā Cunda S** (A 6.46/3:355 f) relates a conflict between monks who were dedicated to meditation and monks who focused on sutta learning. This teaching does not endorse the option of 2 “duties or burdens” (*dhura*) that a monastic may have (which is a comy suggestion), but rather the dangers of conflict between the 2. See SD 4.6 (2).

of a timeless Dharma, there are also real dangers of secular and worldly challenges that the system as well as the student must face.⁹

The efforts to “modernize” Buddhism, especially by monastics, often induce a secularization, that is, some significant laicization and decline in monastic Buddhism, as is clearly evident in modern Sinhala priestly Buddhism. Often such efforts or proposals seem to be induced by a preoccupation with “answering” the Christian missionary challenges (which were dominant in the country). Furthermore, such “modernization” often entails a discounting, even a dismissal, of the Vinaya and Vinaya training¹⁰—the robe is taken merely as *a source of status or charisma*, not a tool of renunciation practice for the sake of awakening.¹¹

2.1.2.2 Monastics who attempt to “modernize” the unique and specialized tools the Buddha taught for attaining the path and the unconditioned should be certain that they do not renege on the ordination vow they have taken, which was witnessed by the sangha. This is not only wrong speech, but is also wrong practice. When such a monastic stays on in their robes, putting up a false front of what he neither believes nor practises, he is said to be a “**thief**” (*cora*), whether he acts stealthily or openly.¹²

Renunciation as a monastic has only one purpose—that of training for the path. When it is easy even for a lay practitioner to gain **streamwinning** in this life itself [1.2.2.2], isn’t it even easier for a monastic, living a life of renunciation introduced by the Buddha, to gain the path in this life, too?

A monastic is one who has renounced the world to work for awakening in this life itself. If they stray from this singular purpose of renunciation, and take up salaried jobs or, worse, get involved in commercial enterprises, or use money, then they are said to be “**thieves**” (*cora*) in the teaching, “who bring bad and suffering to the people.”¹³ The same can be said of monastics who do not practise Dharma—they eat the country’s alms as thieves, even when they do their own cooking or pay for their food; especially when they do so.¹⁴

The Commentaries say that

a false monk eats the country’s alms as a **thief**;
a good monk, who eats without reflecting on it, is a *debtor*;
a saint on the path takes his almsfood as an *heir*;
an arhat is **the owner** of his almsfood.¹⁵

⁹ Buddhist studies as a lay pursuit have no such difficulties, unless Buddhist studies is seen merely as an academic or worldly pursuit.

¹⁰ The leading voice in Sinhala “Buddhist modernism” or secularism is that of Walpola Rahula (1907-1997); see D L McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, Oxford, 2008:50-52, 205; S Raghavan, “[Ven Walpola Rahula and the politicization of the Sinhala Sangha](#),” *J of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 1, Oct 2011:114-133. For criticisms by Sinhala scholars, see SD 60.1c (1.8.2.2).

¹¹ See eg the case of a Sinhala mission in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in the late 20th century: (**Aṭṭhaka**) **Khaluṅka S** (A 8.14), SD 7.9 (4.4.2.3).

¹² See *Susīma*’s confession: **Arahatta Susīma S** (S 12.70,58), SD 16.8. See also SD 45.18 (2.3.3.2).

¹³ *Evam jina, sāsanassa cora hutvā mahā, janassa ahitāya dukkhāya uppanno* (MA 2:305), Buddhaghosa’s commentary on **Mahā Taṇha, saṅkhaya S** (M 38). A monastic who lives on alms, but does not practise renunciation is also said to be a thief (MA 5:32, SA 2:199). See also (**Arahatta**) **Susīma S** (S 12.70,58/2:127), SD 16.8.

¹⁴ See **Arahatta Susīma S** (S 12.70,58), SD 16.8; also SD 45.18 (2.2.2.3).

¹⁵ MA 5:32; SA 2:199; cf SA 1:100 thieves are those who cause ruin in the world. See SD 49.2 (1.1.3).

2.2 WHO IS AN EVIL MONASTIC?

2.2.1 An evil monastic is spiritually dead

2.2.1.1 The (Udāna) Uposatha Sutta (U 5.5) describes **evil monastics** as follows:

a person who is immoral, of bad character, of impure and suspicious conduct, secretive in deeds, not a recluse but pretending to be one, incelibate but pretending to be celibate,¹⁶ rotten to the core, lustful and filthy by nature¹⁷ ...

Even though he sits in the midst of the sangha,
yet he is far away from the sangha, and the sangha is far away from him.¹⁸

(U 5.5,8(3)), SD 59.2b

The Sutta goes on to characterize an evil monastic as a carcase, a dead body that is cast ashore by the ocean:

Bhikshus, just as the great ocean does not associate with the dead, a carcase:
whatever that is dead, a carcase,
the great ocean **quickly carries it to shore**, washes it onto dry land¹⁹—
so, too, bhikshus,
the sangha does not commune with a person who is immoral, of bad character.

2.2.1.2 The Piṇḍolya Sutta (S 22.80) speaks of an evil monastic as one who benefits neither from the monastic life nor from the lay life, since they neither keep to the Vinaya nor the 5 precepts; they are caught up with sense-experiences and sense-pleasures:

19 In this way, bhikshus, this son of family is one who has gone forth, but he is **covetous**, strongly lusting after sense-pleasures,
with a mind of ill will,
with a mind of corrupted intentions,²⁰
muddle-headed, without clear knowing, lacking concentration, scatter-brained,
loose in faculty.²¹

19.2 Bhikshus, just as **a firebrand for a funeral pyre**, lit on both ends, and smeared with dung in the middle, cannot be used as firewood in the village, nor in the forest,²²

¹⁶ Or, “Not living the holy life (*brahma, cariya*), but pretending to do so.”

¹⁷ *Evam evaṃ kho pahārāda yo so puggalo dussīlo pāpa, dhammo asuci, saṅka-s, sara, samācāro paṭicchanna, kam-manto assamaṇo samaṇa, paṭiñño abrahmacārī brahmacārī, paṭiñño anto, pūti avassuto kasambu, jāto.* §13.2 up to here recurs in **Aggi-k, khandhūpama S** (A 7.68/4:134), SD 89.12. See SD 45.18 (2.3.4.1).

¹⁸ *Kiñcāpi so hoti majjhe bhikkhu, saṅghassa sannisinno, atha kho so ārakā’va saṅghamhā saṅgho ca tena.* Cf **Saṅghāṭi, kaṇṇā S** (It 92,2/91), SD 24.10a: see SD 45.18 (2.3.4.2).

¹⁹ See **Pahārāda S** (A 8.19), SD 45.18 (2.3).

²⁰ “With a mind of corrupted intentions,” *paduṭṭha, mana, saṅkappo.*

²¹ *Abhijjhālu kāmesu tibba, sārāgo, vyāpanna, citto paduṭṭha, mana, saṅkappo, muṭṭha-s, sati asampajāno asamāhito vibbhanta, citto pākat’indriyo.* For a longer list of terms describing a deviant monk, see **Jantu S** (S 2.25/1:61), SD 54.13, & its comy: see also S:B 392 n176.

²² Comy says that the Buddha uses the funeral-pyre fire-brand parable not referring to immoral monks, but in reference to totally virtuous persons who are lazy (*alasa*) and as such are destroyed by such faults as covetousness, etc (SA 2:302). The metaphor is well known: see **Chavālāta S** (A 4.95.2) n, SD 64.5.

in just the same way, bhikshus, do I speak of this person—he has abandoned his household wealth, and yet does not fulfill the purpose of asceticism.²³ (S 22.80,19), SD 28.9a

2.3 SELF-REFORMATION

2.3.1 The making of an end of suffering is possible

The **Piṇḍolya Sutta** (S 22.80) records one of the most moving declarations the Buddha has ever made about the monastic life of renunciation:

18.2 ²⁴This, bhikshus, is **the lowest of livelihoods**, that is to say, alms-gathering.²⁵
This is an abusive term in the world: ‘You scrap-collector! You wander about with bowl in hand!’²⁶

And yet, bhikshus, sons of family intent on the goal, take it up for a good reason; not from the fear of rajahs, nor from the fear of thieves, nor on account of debts, nor for the sake of livelihood.

18.3 But rather they do so, thinking,
‘I am immersed in birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair; overwhelmed by suffering, overcome by suffering.

Perhaps, there is a making an end of this whole mass of suffering to be found!’²⁷

(S 22.80,18), SD 28.9a

2.3.2 Susīma’s confession

The **(Arahatta) Susīma Sutta** (S 12.70) closes with this beautiful passage on the elder Susīma’s confession before the Buddha that he had been an evil monk, and thus chooses to reform himself.

58 Then, the venerable Susīma bowed down with his head at the Blessed One’s feet and said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, I have transgressed—just as one foolish, as one confused, as one unskillful—that I went forth as **a thief of the Dharma** in such a well-taught Dharma and Vinaya [Teaching and Discipline] as this!”²⁸

²³ On the parable of the cremation brand, see **Jīvika S** (It 91/3.5.2), SD 28.9b (2).

²⁴ **Piṇḍolya S** (S 22.80), where §§18.2-19.2 form **Jīvika S** (It 3.5.2/89 f), SD 28.9b, where it also has concluding verses.

²⁵ *Antam idaṃ, bhikkhave, jīvikanāṃ yad idaṃ piṇḍolyaṃ* = It 89,10 qu at DA 1:103,10 & Sadda,nīti 360,27 = *lāmakāṃ*.

²⁶ *Abhisāpōyaṃ, bhikkhave, lokasmim piṇḍolo vicarasi pattapāṇi ti*. Comy glosses **abhisāpa** with *akkosa* (“he scolds”). It adds: “For, when people are angered, they abuse their antagonist by saying, ‘You should put on a monk’s robe, get yourself a skull-bowl (*kapāla*), and roam about seeking alms!’” (SA 2:300). Here, instead of the usual *patta* (almsbowl), *kapāla* is used, indicating a kind of bowl used by non-Buddhist ascetics: this seems to have a pejorative sense.

²⁷ As at **Nalaka,pāna S** (M 68.5e/1:463), SD 37.4.

²⁸ *Accayo maṃ bhante accagamā yathā,bālaṃ yathā,mūḷhaṃ yathā,akusalaṃ, svāham evaṃ svākhyāte dhamma,vinaye dhamma-t,thena ko pabbajito*. On false renunciants as **thieves**: SD 45.18 (2.3.3.2); SD 49.2 (1.1.3), SD 54.13 (2.4.2.4).

Bhante, may the Blessed One accept my transgression as a transgression, so that I may henceforth show restraint!”²⁹

59 “Indeed, Susīma, you have transgressed—just as one foolish, as one confused, as one unskillful—that you went forth as a thief of the Dharma in such a well-taught Dharma and Vinaya [Teaching and Discipline] as this. [128]

60 It is as if, Susīma, they were to catch a thief, a criminal, and bring him before the rajah, saying: ‘Your majesty, he is a thief, a criminal! Punish him as you please!’

The rajah would say thus to them:

‘Come, men,³⁰ bind this man’s arms tightly behind his back with a strong rope, shave his head, and take him from cross-road to cross-road, beating a harsh-sounding drum! Then take him through the southern gate, to the south of the city and there behead him!’

Then the rajah’s men, having bound this man’s arms tightly behind his back with a strong rope, shave his head, take him from cross-road to cross-road, beating a harsh-sounding drum. Then, they take him through the southern gate, to the south of the city, and there behead him.

61 What do you think, Susīma, would that man experience pain and displeasure [physical pain and mental pain]³¹ because of that?”

“Yes, bhante.”

62 “No matter how much pain and displeasure that man would experience because of that, going forth as a thief of the Dharma in such a well-taught Dharma and Vinaya as this has results that are far more painful, far more bitter, and, moreover, it leads to the lower world.

63 But, Susīma, since you see your transgression as a transgression, and make amends in accordance with the Dharma, we³² accept it.

For, Susīma, it is **progress in the discipline of the noble ones** when, seeing a transgression as a transgression, one makes amends in accordance with the Dharma, and shows restraint henceforth.”

(S 12.70,59-63), SD 16.8

One may have been an evil monk; one remains so in one’s arrogance and ignorance, which only leads to painful suffering. Yet, when one sees one’s evil way as it is, one is seeing true reality, and thus one turns away from Māra. In accepting oneself thus as one really is, one turns to the Buddha, and the path opens up before one. It is never too late to turn to the Dharma; it lessens one’s sufferings.

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²⁹ *Tassa me bhante bhagavā accayaṃ accayato paṭiggaṇhātu āyatim saṃvarāyā ti.* On confession, see **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2) @ SD 8.10 (5).

³⁰ “Men,” *bho*, a familiar address to equals or inferiors, often tr as “sir,” but less refined than *āvuso*.

³¹ *Dukkhaṃ domanassaṃ*

³² “We forgive,” *paṭigaṇhāma*, lit “we accept”; here the 1st pl is not the royal pronoun, but the Buddha, on behalf of the Sangha, forgives the transgression.

Cora,rāja Sutta

The Discourse on Thieves and Kings

A 2.38

1 “Bhikshus, when robbers are strong, kings are weak.

At that time, the king is not at ease when re-entering [his capital], or when going out, or when touring the outlying provinces.

At that time, brahmins and householders, too, are not at ease when re-entering [their towns and villages], or when going out, or when attending to work outside.

2 So too, when evil monks are strong, well-behaved monks are weak.

At that time the well-behaved monks sit silently in the midst of the sangha³³ or they resort to the outlying provinces.

This is for the harm of the many, for the unhappiness of the many, for the ruin, harm, and suffering of the many, of devas and humans. [69]

3 Bhikshus, when kings are strong, robbers are weak.

At that time, the king is at ease when re-entering [his capital], and when going out, and when touring the outlying provinces.

At that time brahmins and householders, too, are at ease when reentering [their towns and villages], and when going out, and when attending to work outside.

4 So too, when well-behaved monks are strong, evil monks are weak.

At that time, the evil monks sit silently in the midst of the sangha or they depart for other regions.³⁴

This is for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the good, welfare, and happiness of the many, of devas and humans.”

—evaṃ—

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³³ *Tuṇhī, bhūtā tuṇhī, bhūtā’va saṅgha, majjhe saṅkasāyanti.* Comy: “Sitting very silently in the midst of the sangha, they are unable to open their mouths and utter even a single word, but just sit there as if brooding.” (AA 2:142,26-29).

³⁴ Be *yena vā pana tena pakkamanti* (pref); Ee Ce Se *yena vā pana papatanti*.