

Respecting the Dharma

Excerpt from **SD 61.26: (Māra) Kin Nu Sīha Sutta, are there others who can teach like the Buddha?** © Piya Tan 2024.

1.2.1 During Dharma teachings, there is always some kind of distraction. Usually we are each distracted in our own way. Here the Sutta presents a case of a major distraction as the whole congregation is able to see Māra challenging the Buddha. We are not told how Māra appears to everyone, except that only the Buddha knows him.

1.2.2 Taking Māra as playing a mythical role of “**the distractor**,” we can imagine him as anyone from the crowd or someone outside the crowd, since it is a public teaching. Clearly, Māra appears as someone who looks prominent in some way to hold the crowd’s attention. On a simple level, we can imagine someone, lacking faith or respect, asking the Buddha how he knows all the things he is talking about.

Hence, the question is not about knowing the Dharma, but about the Buddha’s authority or qualification as a Dharma teacher. This is, of course, a valid question. Today, we are likely to accept the fact that if the speaker were a successful professional or has some kind of title (like “Dr”) or any academic title, he should be “qualified” or rather *entitled* to talk on Buddhism.

1.2.3 It would be interesting to investigate why the social trend is to look up to the status of a speaker rather than the **wisdom** of a teacher. Perhaps, it is because such a society (like Singapore or Malaysia) is evolving economically and politically, and there is great emphasis on material progress (wealth, infrastructure, technology, etc), and the country’s education stresses more on material success and status. Thus Buddhism is seen as merely a means or tool for this material explosion. Hence, a higher premium is placed on teachers who are perceived to be able “deliver” these worldly blessings

1.2.4 When a Buddhist teacher or leader is defined by his race, status, title, wealth, or power, then, what he teaches is likely to be a “privatized” brand of Buddhism. Hence, the speaker may say: “I don’t know much about Buddhism ... ” or “This are my personal views” In fact, Buddha Dharma is the last thing that is ever taught or known by such teachers.

Teachers and speakers who desire the support of others or take Buddhism as a means of earning a living, are likely to preach some marketable form of Buddhism labelled “mindfulness,” “Abhidhamma,” “scientific Buddhism,” or “modern Dhamma,” and to claim (subtly or openly) to have some kind of powers or status. All this is likely to be attractive marketing strategies in a materialistic society.

1.2.5 In **the Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2), the Buddha advises us to seek a good teacher to guide us in the cultivation of moral conduct, meditation and wisdom. However, when we are unable to do so, we should seek this guidance from the teaching or Dharma itself. The Buddha himself, not seeing anyone with his understanding and mastery of the Dharma, declares, “Let me, then, honour, respect, and dwell in dependence only on **this very Dharma** to which I have fully awakened.” In other words, even the Buddha respects the Dharma, the teaching.

To respect the teaching above the teacher means that:

- (1) **moral conduct** (*sīla*) (the Vinaya or the precepts) is to be followed and respected by both monastics and the laity;
- (2) **mental cultivation** (*samādhi*) means that monastics should train themselves in meditation to gain dhyana, and to be calm and mindful, and to inspire the laity to do the same;
- (3) **wisdom** (*paññā*) should be cultivated from a calm and clear mind that is mindful and aware to gain insight into true reality, that is, the impermanence of all life and all things of this world.

1.2.6 To respect Dharma means giving Buddha Dharma priority in our lives and community. When Buddhism is new in a country (like Malaysia or Singapore)¹ we are likely to depend on race-based Buddhism: Thai Buddhism, Sinhalese Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism and Japanese Buddhism. If any such mission puts Buddhism above race, then, it will promote local Buddhism. That is, promoting local vocations (sangha) and encouraging locals to master the Dharma for themselves and produce local Dharma-spirited teachers.

Our colonial masters have left but we still have foreign Buddhist masters colonizing us. Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it, a samsaric history. The Buddha teaches us to be self-reliant (*atta,saraṇa*),² but we welcome and share Dharma with all who seek or love Dharma.

Buddhism in the old “Buddhist” countries such as China,³ Japan,⁴ and Korea,⁵ because of their history, are seeing their Sangha (monastic systems) becoming secularized; this is also fast happening in Sri Lanka.⁶ Many of their priests are openly earning a living, taking up academic education, even living like the laity. The Buddhism that they preach is often ritualistic and business-like (like “merit-transfer”). In fact, when we join such a group, we are actually financially supporting the priests, paying for Buddhist services, and following some ethnic customs rather than those of early Buddhism (what the Buddha has taught).

1.2.7 My point is that if we really wish to nurture a truly socially integrated and spiritually living Buddhism that will attract local Buddhists, especially the educated and talented individuals, we have to start laying the foundations, growing the Bodhi sapling in our own soil, now. We will then see the good karma of our **great commission** fruit into a Dharma-spirited Buddhism in the next generation. Otherwise, we are only conditioning our children and posterity to continue serving and funding foreign Buddhisms, and never really knowing Buddha Dharma.⁷

Further, Buddhists in the old “Buddhist” countries—India, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Khmer, Vietnam, China, Korea, Japan and elsewhere—should also work to

¹ Traditional Buddhism is only about a century old in Malaysia and Singapore. Sutta-based Buddhism is only available to us in recent decades. We have to work hard for **early Buddhism**, or we will get the Buddhism that we deserve, and we will never know what it really is.

² D 3:58,7, cf DA 3:98,8 = SA 3:326,17; DA 2:193,1 = SA 3:302,2 (*atta,gatikā hotha, mā añña.gatikā*).

³ On Buddhism in China, see **How Buddhism Became Chinese**, SD 40b.

⁴ On Buddhism in Japan, see **Monastics, sex and marriage**, SD 66.13.

⁵ On Buddhism in Korea, see SD 66.13 (4.5).

⁶ On Buddhism in Sri Lanka, see SD 60.1f (6.1.1). On the fate of Theravāda in SE Asia, see SD 60.1f (6.1).

⁷ In the future when you are reading this, look around to see if there are local Buddhist centres that teach early Buddhism, filled with educated and talented people who are making significant improvements to local social services, education and culture. I do foresee such a time.

revive early Buddhism, making Buddhism more relevant and beneficial to our times. Such changes usually begin as an idea, then a group works at it over time, over generations. When education, science and culture can progress, making us more humane, why not Buddhism be reformed to be closer to Buddha Dhamma.

This is happening with Buddhism in the West. It begins with our own personal lives.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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