

Āṇi Sutta

The Discourse on the Drum Peg

[How to prevent the disappearance of the Dharma]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 20.7/2:266 f)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

Introduction

Early Buddhist prophecies regarding the decline of the Teaching and the Order are found all over the Nikāyas, for example,

- the Cakka,vatti Sīhanāda Sutta (D 26),
- the three Ovāda Suttas (S 16.6-8),
- the Saddhamma Paṭirūpaka Sutta (S 16.13/2:224 f),
- the Āṇi Sutta (S 10.7/2:266 f);
- the two Adhamma Suttas (A 1.10.34-42, 1.11.1-10/1:18-20);
- the Saddhamma Sammosā Sutta (A 2.2.10/1:58 f);
- the three Kimbila Suttas (A 5.201, 6.40, 7.56) and others.

All these suttas are found in the article on “The Dharma-ending Age” (Sutta Discovery 1,10, 2003).

It is an interesting subject of study not yet examined by many scholars.¹ The Aṅguttara Nikāya, for example, contains an interesting set of four suttas all entitled **Anāgata,bhaya Sutta**, the Discourses of Future Dangers (A 3:100-110). The first two suttas are inspirational and the latter two are prophetic.

The Āṇi Sutta here employs a historical analogy, that of the “mirutangkam” (*mudīṅga*, vl *mutīṅga*; Skt *mṛdaṅga*, lit “body of clay”), a double-headed Indian barrel drum. In modern times, it is called *mridanga*. **The Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 1.2.90/ 2:79), mentions *bheri...mutīṅga*. A *mutīṅga/mṛdaṅga* is a barrel-shaped drum played horizontally with the hands beating both drumheads. The *mridangas* have stretched skin with a central circle of black paste that gives a different playing surface. In north India, it is called *pakhwaj*. The *mridangam* is today used in most Carnatic (south of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh) concerts as accompaniment to both vocal and instrumental performances. Also called *saṅgīta maddalam*, it is believed to be the oldest of all percussion instruments. A *bheri* is a small conical drum.

The Saṃyutta Commentary says that the Dasāraha drum, made from the claw of a giant crab, produced a sound that could be heard for 12 leagues (135 km) around to summon the people to assemble on festival days (SA 2:228). The “pegs” (*āni*) here could refer to the pins inserted together with straps (as seen in this picture). When the drumheads are well-pegged, the whole drum would be covered with straps so that it becomes unrecognizable.



A modern mridanga (Indian kettle drum)

¹ Except, for example, Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time*, 1991 & Liz Williams, “Red Rust, Robbers and Rice Fields: Women’s part in the precipitation of the decline of the Dhamma.” *Buddhist Studies Review* 19,1 2002: 41-47.

At the heart of this sutta, the Buddha warns us against being drawn to worldly learning—the work of “poets” (*kavī*)—at the cost of the spiritual life. The Pali word *kavī*, usually translated as “poet,” has been here broadly rendered as “thinkers [poets and scholars]” [6], that is, with the connotation of worldly thinkers and writers, including academic scholars. The very short **Kavī Sutta** (A 4.203) speaks of four kinds of *kavī*: the poet who composes after thinking (*cintā,kavī*), the poet who composes after listening (to legends, myths, etc) (*suta,kavī*), the poet who writes relying on the meanings of things (*attha,kavī*), and the poet who uses his own creative ideas like the elder Vaṅḡisa (*paṭibhāna,kavī*) (A 4.230/2:230, AA 3:211, DA 1:95). The Buddha’s warning here concerns our own times against placing worldly learning above spiritual life.

The Discourse on the Drum Peg (S 20.7/2:266 f)

[266]

1 [The Buddha was] staying at Sāvathī.

2 “Monks, once in the past there was a mirutangkam [barrel drum]² of the Dasārahas³ that was called the Summoner [Āṇaka].⁴

3 Whenever the Summoner cracked, the Dasārahas inserted a peg.⁵ [267] There came a time, monks, when the Summoner’s original drumhead disappeared and only a collection of pegs remained.

4 Even so, monks, this will be the case in the future.

5 When the discourses spoken by the Tathagata, profound,⁶ deep in meaning,⁷ supramundane,⁸ connected with emptiness,⁹ are being spoken, they have no desire to listen to them, they do not lend their ears to them, they do not apply their minds to understand them, and they will not think that these teachings should be studied and mastered.

² “Mirutangkam,” *mudiṅga*, vl *mutiṅga* (Skt *mṛdaṅga*, lit “body of clay”), a double-headed Indian barrel drum, the modern *mridanga* [see picture]. As at **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 1.2.90/ 2:79), where *bheri...mudiṅga* are mentioned. A *mṛdaṅga* is a barrel-shaped drum played horizontally with the hands beating both ends. Comy says that the drum, made from the claw of a giant crab, made a sound that could be heard for 12 leagues (135 km) around to summon the people to assemble on festival days (SA 2:228). The *mridangas* have stretched skin with a central circle of black paste that gives a different playing surface. In north India, it is called *pakhwaj*. The *mridangam* is today used in most Carnatic (south of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh) concerts as accompaniment to both vocal and instrumental performances. Also called *saṅgīta maddalam*, it is believed to be the oldest of all percussion instruments. A *bheri* is a small conical drum.

³ Comy says that the Dasārahas were a kshatriya clan, so called because “they took a tenth portion of the paddy sprouts” (*satato dasa,bhāgaṃ gaṇhimsu*) (SA 2:227). All the Thai trs render *satato* as ถือเอาสิบส่วนจากข้าวกล้า “from the paddy sprouts.” The word *sata* is tr as ข้าวกล้า, “paddy sprouts (ready for transplant).”

⁴ “Summoner,” *Āṇaka*, as at J 2:344, 2:237 (J 267). On summoning by drum, see J 2:70, 4:171, 256.

⁵ “Peg,” *āṇi*, “the pin of a wheel axle; a lynch-pinch; a peg” (CPD), a wedge, a shim.

⁶ “Profound,” *gambhīra*, ie by way of its texts (*pāli,vāsenā*) like **Salla S** (Sn 3.8) or **Sallekha S** (M 8) (SA 2:229).

⁷ “Deep in meaning,” *gambhīr’attha*, like **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43) (SA 2:229).

⁸ “Supramundane,” *lok’uttara*, ie pointing to the supramundane goal (SA 2:229).

⁹ “Connected with emptiness,” *suññatā,paṭisaṅgyutta*, ie explaining only the nature of beings as empty, as in the **Saṅkhitta Sāmyutta** [untraced, probably **Asaṅkhata Sāmyutta**] (SA 2:229). See §7n.

6 But when those discourses that are poetry [and worldly writings] composed by poets [and thinkers],¹⁰ beautiful in word and phrase, composed by outsiders,¹¹ spoken by their disciples, are being spoken, they will desire to listen to them, they will lend their ears to them, they will apply their minds to understand them, and they will think that these teachings should be studied and mastered.

Thus, monks, the discourses spoken by the Tathagata, profound, deep in meaning, supramundane, connected with emptiness, would disappear.

7 Therefore, monks, you should train yourself thus:

When the discourses spoken by the Tathagata, profound, deep in meaning, supramundane, connected with emptiness, are being spoken, we should have the desire to listen to them, we should lend our ears to them, we should apply our minds to understand them, and we should regard these teachings as being worthy of studying and mastering.

Thus, monks, you should train yourselves.¹²

—evam—

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¹⁰ “Thinkers [poets and scholars],” *kavī*, usu tr as “poets”, but here has a general connotation of worldly thinkers and writers, incl academic scholars. The **Kavī S** (A 4.230) speaks of four kinds of *kavī*: the poet who composes after thinking (*cintā,kavī*), the poet who composes after listening (to legends, myths, etc) (*suta,kavī*), the poet who writes relying on the meanings of things (*attha,kavī*), and the poet who uses his own creative ideas like the elder Vaṅṅisa (*paṭibhāna,kavī*) (A 4.230/2:230; AA 3:211; DA 1:95). See *Intro*.

¹¹ “Outsiders,” *bahirakā*, ie those outside the religion (SA 2:229).

¹² These last two closing paragraphs are almost identical to those at **Dhammadinna S** (S 55.53/5:407) where Comy gives examples somewhat different from here: “profound” like **Salla S** (Sn 3.8); “deep in meaning” like **Cetanā S** (probably S 12.38-40/2:65-67); “supramundane” like **Asaṅkhata Saṅyutta** (S 43); “connected with emptiness” like **Khajjaniya S** (S 22.79/3:86-91) (SA 3:291).