

Mahā Cunda Sutta

The Discourse by Mahā Cunda

[Fellowship between scholars and meditators]
(Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.46/3:355 f)
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Between philistinism and bohemianism

“Vague Buddhism” is very common in Malaysia and Singapore during the 20th century and early 21st century, when this note was written.¹ *Vague Buddhism* is characterized by such statements as “the Buddha said this and that,” without citing the scripture reference or source. In fact, it is common to see very free rehash or jingles, mangled out of Buddhist scripture, in popular publications and publicity materials, such as, “The Buddha teaches that you can find the truth in all religions...” or “You must not accept any teaching on faith...” without any citation. So such remarks are as good as shop talk or temple gossip. Scriptural statements need to be cited so that some useful discussion, deeper understanding and spiritual fellowship would arise from them.

Systematic and proper training in Buddhist scripture was amazingly rare in our times. Anyone who has read some books on Buddhism or heard some talks from a well known Dharma speaker often qualifies himself (or herself) to do the same without any other qualification. Sadly those who are qualified with some Buddhist degree are either so few and scattered that only small groups sometimes benefitted from their efforts. Such qualified local Buddhist scholars also tend to move in their own parochial circles or only materialize in prestigious seminars, so that we cannot really speak of any “Buddhist academic community” in our midst.

Here is a typical story, fictional but based on my own personal experiences. Once I asked a Buddhist education officer from a local organization who was in charge of Dharma propagation what his Buddhist qualification was. Simply put, his reply was that he had none, but that he was a “practitioner.” When I asked what he meant by “practitioner,” he sang a litany of well known foreign monks whom he had met and whose writings he had read! As a bonus, he added that he has a doctorate in some field. This is in fact understandable, as it is a popular local perception that if you have a doctorate in any field, or that you are a white Buddhist, you at once, as it were, qualify to speak on Buddhism.²

Looking closely at such attitudes, it is not difficult to notice *philistine* tendencies in the “unqualified” Buddhist teacher, and *bohemian* traits in the case of rare local degreed Buddhist scholar. A “philistine” often is someone who despises or undervalues learning and spirituality, especially one who is materialistic, and unthinkingly favours conventional social values, and things that have a cheap and easy appeal. A “bohemian,” on the other hand, is one who sees himself as a member of a bourgeois (upper or propertied class) or elitist social group, claiming to special avant garde or innovative talents, well above the crowd. Both are extreme cases of individualists who in reality misuse or abuse or avoid learning, and both depend on the crowd for approval and happiness.³

A philistine Buddhist is likely to make remarks, such as, “We do not need to study suttas, as the true Dharma is in our hearts...” It would be interesting to ask and discuss what the speaker means by such a statement, for example, how well acquainted with the suttas he is to regard them as unnecessary for spiritual development, or whether he has attained some high attainment outside the Teaching.

¹ “Vague Buddhism” is of course not restricted to Malaysia and Singapore, but common in English-speaking Buddhist groups who are new to Buddhism. The term in fact became popular amongst thinking Buddhists communicating on the Internet in the first decade of the 21st century.

² This is not to say that there are no good foreign practitioners and teachers (of any colour)! They are in fact an important staple for the education and wellbeing of the local Buddhist community. For a deeper study, see **“I” the nature of identity** = SD 19.1.

³ For a deeper study, see **“Me” the nature of conceit** = SD 19.2a.

A bohemian Buddhist would probably promote only a certain teacher or teaching that he approves of, and also to entertain an audience that is deemed to be lucrative and unquestioning. Details are not important; for, the ends justify the means. At the end of the day, some other worldly pursuits have priority over the Dharma he proudly proclaims. Dharma is merely a commodity for a bohemian Buddhist, or a shining button to announce his status.

Such a problem of course did not begin in our times, but occurs wherever learning is a vital aspect of spiritual training. The Mahā Cunda Sutta gives us a brief but useful case study from the Buddha's own time. It relates how monks who are meditators and those who are Dharma experts are at loggerheads. The lesson is a simple one: they should appreciate one another through metta-based fellowship. This is of course much easier when they are *engaged* meditators on one side and *qualified* Dharma scholars on the other. True fellowship begins when we have touched some level of Dharma whether through the stillness of the heart or the clarity of the mind.

2 Mahā Cunda

Mahā Cunda was the younger brother of Sāriputta (AA 3:379; DhA 2:188; ThaA 1:261), under whom he joined the Order and later won arhathood after much strenuous effort. He is probably identical with Cunda Samaṇ'uddesa (Cunda the Novice), so called before his monk ordination (*upasampadā*), but an appellation that stuck (DA 3:907). **The Chann'ovāda Sutta** (M 144) records how Mahā Cunda accompanied Sāriputta on a visit to the sick Channa and, admonished him against suicide (M 144.11/3:266). After Sāriputta's death, Cunda brought his relics in a bowl and presented them to the Buddha, who then praised Sāriputta (S 5:161 f). From the nature of the problem mentioned in the Mahā Cunda Sutta, it is likely that it occurred after the Buddha's parinirvana.

The Aṅguttara Commentary says that Sahājāti⁴ was a market town (*nigama*, AA 3:379), probably located on the Ganges. This is where Soreyya Revata meets the elders led by Yasa regarding the 10 indulgences (V 2:200). Here, too, Mahā Cunda gives another teaching, **the (Nānā,vāda) Mahā Cunda Sutta** (A 10.24/5:41).

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⁴ Sahajāti, vll Be *Sayamjāti*; Se *Sañjāti*; Ce *Sahañcanika*. Comy says it is a market town (*nigama*) on the Ganges. On the 10 indulgences (V 2:200), see **Money and monastics** = SD 4.19-23.

The Discourse by Mahā Cunda

(A 6.46/3:355 f)

[355]

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time, Mahā Cunda was staying at Sahajāti in Cetī country.⁵ There the venerable Mahā Cunda addressed the monks thus:

“Brother monks!”⁶

“Brother!” The monks replied in assent to the venerable Mahā Cunda.

Practitioners and teachers at loggerheads

Then the venerable Mahā Cunda said this:

2 “Here, brothers, there are monks engaged in Dharma⁷ who despise the monks who are meditators thus: ‘These meditators think, “We are meditators! We are meditators!”—so they meditate and are consumed in meditation.⁸ What are they meditating about? Why are they meditating? How are they meditating?’

As such, the monks engaged in Dharma are displeased with the monks who are meditators, and the monks who are meditators are displeased with the monks engaged in Dharma—and so they would not be practising for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the benefit, the good, the happiness of the common masses, and of gods and humans.

3 Furthermore, brothers, here monks who are meditators despise the monks who are engaged in Dharma thus: ‘These monks think, “We are engaged in Dharma! We are engaged in Dharma!”—so they are restless, arrogant, vain, sharp-tongued, rambling in talk, muddle-headed, without full awareness, lacking concentration, scatter-brained, loose in faculty.⁹ What Dharma yogis are they? Why are they Dharma yogis? How are they Dharma yogis?’

⁵ Cetī, Cetiya or Cedī country probably lay between the Yamuna and the Narmada rivers, next to Kuru country (V 4:108 f; J 1:360 f). DPPN says that there were probably two Cetī settlements, the older one being in the mountains (probably the present-day Nepal), and whose capital was Sotthi,vaṭī (Skt Śuktimatī). This was probably the Cetī that Vessantara passed by on his exile to the Himalaya (J 6:514, 518). A river called Śuktimatī flowed past a city named Śuktimatī (*Mahābharata* 1.57.32; cf R̥gveda 8.5.37-39). Finegan, however, says that this ancient city might have been located in the vicinity of present town of Banda (90 mi = 145 km) west of Allahabad (J Finegan, *An Archaeological History of Religions of Indian Asia*, NY: Paragon House, 1989:94).

⁶ “Brother monks!” *āvuso bhikkhavo*, a vocative used by seniors or amongst equals in the order of monks. Buddhist monks never address one another (even amongst equals) as “friend” as some have rendered *āvuso*. Among the Thai Theravāda monks, however, a senior monk with whom one is familiar is addressed as “brother,” and seniors address junior monks by name.

⁷ “Monks engaged in Dharma,” *dhamma,yogī*, which Comy glosses as *dhamma,kathikā*, “reciters of the Dharma.” The equivalent today would be “monastic scholars.”

⁸ “Meditate, consumed in meditation,” *jhāyanti pajjhāyanti*. There is a wordplay (reflecting disapproval) on *pajjhāyanti*, fr *pajjhājati* (*pa + jhāyati*), to be in flames, to waste, decay, dry up; fig: to be consumed or overcome with grief, disappointment or remorse (V 3:19, 4:5; A 2:214, 216, 3:57; J 3:534 *pajjhāti mc*).

⁹ *Uddhatā unnalā capalā mukharā vikiṇṇa,vācā abhijjhālu kāmesu tibba,sārāgo, byāpanna,citto paduṭṭha,-mana,saṅkappo, muṭṭha-s,sati asampajāno asamāhito vibbhanta,citto pākat’indriyo*. This list also in **Jantu S** (S 2.25/1:61 f), where its Comy explains as follows: “**restless**” (*uddhatā*) means of a restless temperament due to perceiving unallowable as allowable, what is blameworthy as blameless (in accordance with the Vinaya), and conversely; “**arrogant**” (*unnalā*) means puffed up with empty conceit like a fat reed; “**vain**” (*capalā*) means vain on account of robes, bowl, adornment, etc; “**sharp-tongued**” (*mukharā*) means rough in speech; “**rambling in talk**” (*vikiṇṇa,-vācā*) means unrestrained in speech, rambling aimlessly all day; “**muddle-headed**” (*muṭṭha-s,satino*) means bereft of mindfulness, without mindfulness, forgetting what has been done right here; “**without full awareness**” (*asampajānā*) means lacking in wisdom; “**lacking concentration**” (*asamāhitā*) means lacking access and full concentration, like a ship caught in strong currents; “**scatter-brained**” (*vibbhanta,cittā*; Comy *vibbhanta,cittā*) means with wan-

As such, the monks who are meditators are displeased with the monks who are engaged in Dharma, and the monks who are engaged in Dharma are displeased with the monks who are meditators—and they would not be practising for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the benefit, the good, the happiness of the common masses, and of gods and humans.

4 Furthermore, brothers, here monks who are engaged in the Dharma only speak well of their own kind, but do not speak well of the monks who are meditators.

As such, both the monks engaged in Dharma [356] are displeased and the monks who are meditators are displeased, too—and so they would not be practising for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the benefit, the good, the happiness of the common masses, and of gods and humans.

5 Furthermore, brothers, here monks who are meditators only speak well of their own kind, but do not speak well of the monks who are engaged in Dharma.

Benefits of fellowship

As such, both the monks who are meditators are displeased and the monks who are engaged in Dharma are displeased, too—and so they would not be practising for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the benefit, the good, the happiness of the common masses, and of gods and humans.

Therefore, brothers, you should train thus:

6 ‘Being those engaged in Dharma, we will speak well of the monks who are meditators.’ Thus you should train yourselves.

And, brothers, what is the reason for this?

‘Marvellous indeed, brothers, are these people, hard to find in the world, who dwell with the body in touch with the deathless element.’¹⁰

Therefore, brothers, you should train thus:

7 ‘Being meditators, we will speak well of the monks who are engaged in Dharma.’ Thus you should train yourselves.

And, brothers, what is the reason for this?

‘Marvellous indeed, brothers, are these people, hard to find in the world, who having penetrated a deep subject with wisdom, see it [rightly and beneficially].’¹¹

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dering minds, like foolish deer caught in the path; “**loose in faculty**” (*pākat'indriyā*) means with open faculties due to non-restraint like when they were still laymen. (SA 1:115)

¹⁰ “Who dwell with the body in touch with the deathless element,” *ye amataṃ dhātuṃ kāyena phusitvā viharanti*. Here “body” is *nāma,kāya*, “the mind group,” ie feeling, perception, formations, consciousness as opposed to *rūpa,kāya*, ie “the body group,” ie form (AA 3:379). Together they form the 5 aggregates (*pañca-khandha*).

¹¹ “Subject...[rightly and beneficially],” *attha,pada*, “a right word or profitable word, often referring to the holy texts” (A 2:189, 3:356 = 4:362; Dh 100) (CPD).