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Sabbhi Sutta

The Discourse on the Good | S 1.31/1:16-18

Theme: Associating with the good

Translated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2010

1 Introduction

1.1 THE SABBHI SUTTA VERSES. The verses of **the Sabbhi Sutta** (S 1.31), each spoken by a devata, appear verbatim in **the Siva Sutta** (S 2.21), where all these verses are spoken by the devaputra Siva alone, with the Buddha giving the same answer.¹ These verses must be ancient, coming from a common floating stock of popular sayings or gnomes (short pithy saying expressing a general truth).

1.2 MEANING OF SABBHI. *Sabbhi* is an anomalous form, that is, the instrumental or ablative plural² of *santa* (adj “being, good, wise”). However, it can also be used as in the dative (giving) case, as in S 384 = Dh 151 and the Sanskrit Udāna Varga 1.28. As noted below [2.2], both *sat* (= *santa*) and *sabbhi* occur in this verse.

2 Origin story

2.1 THE SHIP OF 700. The **Sat’ullapa,kāyikā** are a class of devas in the heaven of the Thirty-three (*tāvātimsa*). The Saṃyutta contains a whole group of suttas³ which recount how some of these devas visit the Buddha, asking him several questions on different topics or uttering various aphorisms in verse.

According to Buddhaghosa (SA 1:54 f), in a previous birth, they are a merchant ship’s crew. Their ship, carrying 700 men, is caught in a terrible storm, and is on the verge of sinking. They each began pray invoking their respective gods. One of them, however, sits calmly “like a yogi” in the middle of the panicking crew. When the terrified crew asks him why he is untroubled, he replies that he is recalling the good deeds he has done just before the voyage. Since this would assure him of a happy rebirth, he has no fear.

The others then seek his guidance. He divides them into seven groups of one hundred each, and, above the storm, shouts the three refuges and the five precepts to them, exhorting them to only reflect on moral virtue which would be their refuge.

2.2 MEANING OF SAT’ULLAPA. The shipmates keep to the precepts as the waters rise and swallow up their ship. They are reborn in Sakra’s heaven, each with his own celestial palace (*vimāna*). Their teacher has a golden palace a hundred yojanas in the middle of the others. Hence, they are called Satu’llapā because they shout the precepts in groups of one hundred (*sata ullapā*). As soon as they arise there, they realize the reason for their happiness. Then they visit the Buddha to praise their wise teacher. (SA 1:54 f)

Sat’ullapa can also be resolved as *sat* (= *sant*) + *ullapa*, “shouting out the good.”⁴ *Sant* is the present participle of *atthi* (“it is”), meaning “being, existing,”⁵ and also has the sense of “good, true.”⁶ We see both *sat* and *sabbhi* (from the title) [1.2] used in this verse from **the Jarā Maraṇā Sutta** (S 384) and **the Dhammapada**:

*Jīranti ve rāja,rathā sucittā
atho sarīram pi jaram upeti
satañ ca dhammo na jaram upeti
santo have sabbhi pavedayanti.*

The rajah’s well-crafted chariots wear out,
like them, the body, too, goes on to decay,
but the true [good] Dharma decays not,
the good, indeed, declare it to be good.

(S 384/3.3/1:71 = Dh 151) = Uv 1.28⁷

¹ S 2.21/1:56 f.

² DPL 461, *santo*; but at S 384d = Dh 151d, it is used as a dative: see Dh:G(B) 228 n160; Dh:N 100 n151; cf S:B 400 n207.

³ S 1.31-40/116-31.

⁴ Bodhi tr *satu’llappppp* somewhat freely as “extolling the good”: see S:B 363 n59.

⁵ D 1:61, 152; A 1:176; It 62 f; Sn 98, 124.

⁶ S 1:17; Dh 151.

⁷ For discussions on *sabbhi*, see Dh:G(B) 228 n160; Dh:N 100 n151; S:B 400 n207.

There is, in fact, a wordplay on *sat*, which can here also mean “a or the hundred(s).” Hence, we can also render *sat’ullapa* as “the hundreds who shouted out (goodness).” This explanation is not found in the Commentaries, but is the preferred gloss.

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The Discourse on the Good

S 1.31/1:16-18

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika’s park in Jeta’s grove near Sāvattthī.

2 Then, when the night well advanced,⁸ a number of devatas of the Sat’ullapa host,⁹ of surpassing beauty, lighting up the whole of Jeta’s grove, approached the Blessed One, saluted him and stood at one side. [17]

3 Then, one devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Blessed One:

*Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha
sabbhi kubbetha santhavaṃ
sataṃ saddhammam-aññāya
seyyo hoti na pāpiyô ti.*

Let one associate only with the good,
to the good be close:
through knowing the true Dharma,
one is better, not worse.¹⁰

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4 And then, another devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Blessed One:

*Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha
sabbhi kubbetha santhavaṃ
sataṃ saddhammam-aññāya
paññā labbhati nāññatô ti.*

Let one associate only with the good,
to the good be close:
through knowing the true Dharma,
one gains wisdom, not from another.¹¹

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4 And then, another devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Blessed One:

*Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha
sabbhi kubbetha santhavaṃ
sataṃ saddhammam-aññāya
soka,majjhe na socatî ti.*

Let one associate only with the good,
to the good be close:
through knowing the true Dharma,
one sorrows not amongst the sorrowful.

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6 And then, another devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Blessed One:

*Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha,
sabbhi kubbetha santhavaṃ
sataṃ saddhammam-aññāya
ñāti,majjhe virocâtî ti.*

Let one associate only with the good,
to the good be close:
through knowing the true Dharma,
one shines in the midst of relatives.

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⁸ “When the night was well advanced” (*abhikkantāya rattiyā*), in the deep of the night, ie, in the 2nd (*abhikkantā bhante ratti, nikkhanto paṭhamo yāmo*, V 2:236,9; A 4:204; KhpA 114).

⁹ Sat’ullapa,kāyika: see Intro (1.1). The verses of this discourses appear verbatim in **Siva S** (S 2.21), where all the devatas’ verses are spoken by the devaputra Siva alone, with the Buddha giving the same reply (S 2.21/1:56 f).

¹⁰ This verse recurs in **Mahā Suta,soma J** (J 537/5:483)

¹¹ Comy: Just as oil is not obtained from sand, even so wisdom does not come **from another** (*aññato*), from a blind fool. Just as oil is obtained from sesamum seeds, even so wisdom comes from knowing the true Dharma and by associating with a wise person. (SA 1:56)

7 And then, another devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Blessed One:

<i>Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha sabbhi kubbetha santhavaṃ satam saddhammam-aññāya sattā gacchanti suggatin ti.</i>	Let one associate only with the good, to the good be close: through knowing the true Dharma, beings go to heaven.	82
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8 And then, another devata, standing at one side, uttered this verse in the presence of the Blessed One:

<i>Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha sabbhi kubbetha santhavaṃ satam saddhammam-aññāya sattā tiṭṭhanti sātatan ti.</i>	Let one associate only with the good, to the good be close: through knowing the true Dharma, beings abide happily. ¹²	83
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9 Then, another devata said this to the Blessed One:

“Which one, Blessed One, is well spoken?”

“You have all spoken well, each in your own way,¹³ but listen to me, too: [18]

<i>Sabbhi-r-eva samāsetha sabbhi kubbetha santhavaṃ satam saddhammam-aññāya sabba,dukkhā pamuccatī ti.</i>	Let one associate only with the good, to the good be close: through knowing the true Dharma, one is free from all suffering.”	84
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The Blessed One said this. The devatas, joyful, saluted the Blessed One, circumambulated him right-wise, and then disappeared right there.¹⁴

— evaṃ —

100922; 100923; 110726

¹² Comy takes *sātataṃ* as an adv from *satata*, “continually,” which clearly does not fit the context. Here I follow Bodhi, who takes *sātataṃ* (“happily”) to be an acc adv from the abstract n of *sāta*, “pleasant, agreeable.”

¹³ “In a way,” *pariyāyena*, which Comy glosses as *kāraṇena*, “for a reason,” reflecting a late sense, which does not apply here. In the suttas, *pariyāya* has a simple sense of “in a way, in a manner of speaking,” ie, their verses are only provisionally true, correct only in a mundane way. The Buddha’s verse, on the other hand, is definitive (*nippariyāyena*) as it directly points to true reality. See *Pariyāya nippariyāya* = SD 68.2.

¹⁴ This closing para in Ee.