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Kuṭikā Sutta

The Discourse on a Little Hut | S 1.19
 Theme: The Buddha has renounced everything
 Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

1.1.1 The Kuṭikā Sutta (S 1.19) comprises 5 verses: 3 spoken by a deity with the Buddha’s response after each of the first two. In the 1st verse, the deity asks the Buddha whether he has not “a little hut ... a nest ... a line ... bondage” [S 37*]. The deity’s apophatic (negative) language¹ suggests that he (or she) is wondering whether the Buddha is really living the recluses’ life.

1.1.2 When the Buddha replies that he had none of these [S 38*], the deity, having used puns in his verse, seems still uncertain or unsatisfied, and wants to ensure that the Buddha understands the point of his question. Hence, he asks the Buddha to *define* his terms [S 39*]. The Buddha does just that [S 40*].

1.1.3 The last verse is spoken by the deity as a thanksgiving (*sadhu, kāra*), praising the Buddha [S 40*]. We thus see a good case of the usage of the “2 languages” [1.2.1]— the worldly or conventional language and Dharma language, both of which are pregnant in the deity’s verse as pun [S37*].

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 The 2 languages

1.2.1.1 In the 1st verse of the Kuṭikā Sutta, the deity, in question, uses **puns**² to ask the Buddha whether he is a true renunciant [S 37*]. That the deity is clearly punning is evident from his 2nd question [S 39*], where he asks the Buddha what he exactly means by those terms, and the Buddha obliges [S 40*]. Again, the closing verse (that of the deity) confirms that he is punning, since he praises the Buddha for *not* having any “a little hut ... a nest ... a line ... bondage” [S 37*], that is, for being a true renunciant.

1.2.1.2 The Kuṭikā Sutta is instructive in showing us how puns are used to express the 2 languages, the worldly and the Dharma. Simply, “**Dharma language**” is a broad term for the teaching pregnant in a figure or allusion, but such expressions can still be “conventional” as understood by the uninstructed outsiders. Our task, then, is to bridge the gap between the worldly and the Dharma languages and help uplift the mind and heart of our audience.

In this case, both the questioner (the deity) and the Buddha initially uses apophatic language [1.1]. The deity asks the Buddha “don’t you have” a little hut, etc [S 37*]. The Buddha replies that he does not have any little hut, etc [S 38], and then explains what this means [S 40]. The Buddha is simply responding to the deity’s question.

1.2.1.3 The idea of the “2 languages” is rooted in **the Neyy’attha Nīra’attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6), where the Buddha advises us, when reading a sutta, to ascertain the “teaching level” of the passage or word,

¹ On apophasis, see SD 40a.1 (6.3).

² On puns, see SD 54.3b (1.1.2).

that is, whether it is implicit (*neyy'attha*), whose meaning is to be drawn out, or explicit (*nīt'attha*), whose meaning is already clear.³ An **implicit teaching** is one expressed in worldly language, that is, the worldly senses of “a little hut ... a nest ... a line ... bondage” [S 37*].

The Buddha, in his reply [S 38*], uses worldly language (simple enough for the deity to understand only on the word, *vyāñjana*, level). However, after the deity asks him to define his terms [S 39*], the Buddha then explains them on **the explicit Dharma** level, that is “a little hut” = a mother (to birth and rebirth), “a nest” = a wife (his own family and worldliness), with its “line” = children and lineage—this is because he does not have any more “bondage” = craving. [2]

The Commentaries speak of “conventional truth” (*sammuti sacca*) and “ultimate truth” (*param'attha sacca*). In this case, while the words “a little hut ... a nest ... a line ... bondage” [S 37*] point to conventional truths, the Buddha's answer on S 39* points to the ultimate truth.⁴

2 Sutta terms

2.1 “A LITTLE HUT.” The Commentary (SA 1:37 f) explains that the deity is punning on the words in his initial question [S 37*], and thus, wants to see whether the Buddha knows this. To the deity, says the Commentary, our mother (*mātā*) is “a little hut” (*kuṭṭikā*) because we dwell in her womb for 10 months. There is a wordplay here on “little hut” (*kuṭṭikā*) which reminds us of a small “room or inner chamber” (*gabbha*), which also means “womb.”⁵

2.2 “THE LITTLE NEST.” The “**little nest**” (*kulāvaka*) refers to a “wife” (*bharyā*) because, after a hard day's work, the husband seeks the comfort of his wife, or resorts to the company of women in the way that birds, after searching for food during the day, return to rest in their nests at night. This, of course, refers to the worldly routine of one caught up in family life.

2.3 “LINES SPREADING.” The “**lines spreading**” (*santānakā*) are so called because they extend (*santāna*) the family lines. Family life, as a rule, means social relationships and networking as the bases for the community, which in turn forms a nation. Buddhism, however, sees such lineages and networks as the structure for samsara or cyclic existence. The Buddha did not make it that way: he is merely pointing out the true reality of the situation.

2.4 “BONDAGE”

2.4.1 The deity understands “**bondage**” (*bandhana*) not merely as the connections that is the burden of such relationships, lineages and networkings, but something more profound and real, that is craving. This is the root for such relationships, lineages and networkings. All such processes are cyclic, and as such, unending in itself—they constitute samsara (*samsāra*).

2.4.2 The purpose of the Buddha's teaching, then, is to “end” samsara—or more correctly, to end the samsaric cyclic within oneself—to attain a joyful still from the ceaseless cycle of rebirths and redeaths. Despite such a vision, **life** is regarded as the most sacred condition. Technically, there is no end to life. Death simply means that the physical body is unable to continue due to the failure of some vital organ or system failure. Life simply moves on to evolve again in a new body, sense-based, form-based or form-

³ A 2.3.5+6/1:60 (SD 2.6b).

⁴ SD 2.6b (2); SD 7.14 (4.2).

⁵ Cf **Dh 294** f, “mother” (*mātā*) is a figure or allegory for “craving” (*taṇhā*).

less. For this reason, the 1st precept is about not depriving anyone of life, including not committing suicide.

2.5 THE BUDDHA’S REPLY

2.5.1 S 40* is the Buddha’s final answer to the deity’s questions [S 37*+39*]. The Buddha replies that since he is fully awakened and liberated, he will never again dwell in a mother’s womb (never be reborn), nor support a wife (since he has neither desire to have nor to be), nor beget children (since his “family” is a spiritual one, encompassing anyone who walks the path of awakening).

2.5.2 The Commentary states that the deva asks the additional two questions because he is astonished by the Buddha’s quick reply and wants to know if he has understood the meaning of the question and has attained liberation himself. Satisfied with the Buddha’s answer and state, he thrice salutes the Buddha with “sadhū” (*sāhu*), once for each of the answers to his questions. Having made an offering of incense, garlands and so on, he returns to his heavenly world. (SA 1:38,9-12)

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Kuṭikā Sutta

The Discourse on a Little Hut

S 1.19

1 At Sāvattṭhī.

(A deity:)

<p>2 <i>Kacci te kuṭikā n’atthi</i> <i>kacci n’atthi kulāvakā</i> <i>kacci santānakā n’atthi</i> <i>kacci mutto’si bandhanāti</i></p>	(S 37)	<p>Don’t you have a little hut? Don’t you have a nest? Don’t you have lines spreading? Are you from bondage freed?</p>
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(The Blessed One:)

<p>3 <i>Taggha me kuṭikā n’atthi</i> <i>taggha n’atthi kulāvakā</i> <i>taggha santānakā n’atthi</i> <i>taggha mutto’mhi bandhanāti</i></p>	(S 38)	<p>Neither little hut is there for me, for sure, nor nest is there for me, for sure; nor, surely, are there lines spreading; surely, free from bondage am I.</p>
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(The deity:)

<p>4 <i>Kin tâham⁶ kuṭikam brūmi</i> <i>kin te brūmi kulāvakam</i> <i>kin te santānakam⁷ brūmi</i> <i>kin tâham brūmi bandhanan’ti</i></p>	(S 39)	<p>What hut do I speak of to you? Of what nest do I speak of to you? What are the lines that I speak of to you? Of what bondage do I speak to you?</p>
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⁶ *Kin tâham* = *kim te aham*.

⁷ Be Se *santānakam*; Ce Ee2 Se *santānake*. For consistency, the reading *santānake* is preferable.

(The Blessed One:)

- 5 *Mātaram kuṭikam brūsi* It is a mother that you call a little hut.
bharyam brūsi kulāvakam It is a wife that you call a nest.
putte santānake brūsi The lines spreading you speak of are children.
taṇham⁸ me brūsi bandhanan'ti (S 40) It is of craving that you speak to me.

(The deity:)

- 6 *Sāhu te kuṭikā n'atthi* Good it is that you have not a little hut.
sāhu n'atthi kulāvakā Good it is that you have not a nest.
sāhu santānakā n'atthi 'Tis good you have no lines spreading.
sāhu mutto'si bandhanāti (S 41) 'Tis good from craving you are freed.

— evaṃ —

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⁸ Be Ce Ee Se *taṇham*; Be:Ka *taṇhā*.