Sutta Stories - The Preservation of Truth

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Caṅkī Sutta, Middle Length Discourses*,* brahmin, warrior, noble, India, Buddha, caste, *kṣatriya, khattiya,* Bhikkhu Bodhi, question, aikido, blind, faith, tradition, preference, reason, intuit, discover, monk, *bhikkhu*, practice, direct experience, arrive, become, actualize

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This week, I would like to tell stories of the Buddha from the suttas, the ancient literature of our tradition. The suttas purport to be the direct records of the Buddha. I will not be sharing stories that are often told about the Buddha. Rather, I will share stories that contain wonderful teachings. Some may not be great stories, but they contextualize and highlight the teachings of the Buddha.

The first story is a discourse called the *"Caṅkī Sutta."* It is number 95 in the *Middle Length Discourses*. I am particularly fond of this sutta. When I teach courses on the suttas, especially courses on the *Middle Length*

Discourses, I like to start with the *"Caṅkī Sutta."* The story pivots on an important teaching the Buddha gives on the preservation of truth.

How do we preserve the truth? To offer this at the beginning of a study on the ancient teachings addresses the question: "How do we study these texts and preserve the truth – stay truthful to them – as we do so?" Not to accept the teachings naively. Not to accept the teachings as true because that is what is in the text. How do we relate to the teachings if we do not have our own direct experience of them? How do we talk about it?

The story has to do with brahmins visiting the Buddha. Represented in the text is some of the tension in ancient India between the brahmin caste and the warrior/noble caste – the *kṣatriya* (Sanskrit) or *khattiya* (Pali) caste – which the Buddha came from. India was a very hierarchical, stratified culture. The brahmin caste and the warrior/noble caste vied for the top position. Some of the brahmin priests, the priests of the Brahmanical religions, were phenomenally wealthy and controlled lots of territories. The warrior/noble caste were often the rulers.

In the text, the Buddha is camped out near a town, where a brahmin by the name of Caṅkī lives. Caṅkī is phenomenally wealthy. He had been given land. Caṅkī

is like a medieval lord who received territory from the king. The wealth of the territory is his, and the people of the territory work for him. Caṅkī is also very learned in Brahmanical lore.

One day, Caṅkī learns that the brahmins in his town have heard a good report about the Buddha, that the Buddha is a wonderful teacher. Caṅkī and the brahmins decide to visit the Buddha and hear his teachings. However, a group of 500 brahmins, who are visiting the town from other places, get upset that Caṅkī, the great ruler of the territory, is going to visit the Buddha. The visiting brahmins say to Caṅkī, “It is inappropriate for you to visit the Buddha because you are so wonderful.” They relate the ways in which Caṅkī is wonderful. The visiting brahmins say: “The Buddha should come to see you because you are so elevated. You should not go to the Buddha.”

Caṅkī says: “Oh, no, no. The Buddha is actually more wonderful.” He lists the special qualities of the Buddha to argue, “Yes, it is appropriate for me to go see the Buddha, not for the Buddha to come to me.” So they all go to see the Buddha.

The Buddha and the brahmins are sitting having a conversation about the Dharma. Amongst them sits a 16-year-old brahmin priest, a student of the Brahmanical teachings. The brahmin student keeps

interrupting the Buddha. At some point, the Buddha speaks to him.

We do not know how the Buddha spoke to the brahmin student, what his tone of voice was. We do not know how to translate the Pali word into English. Bhikkhu Bodhi translated it as the Buddha “rebuked” the brahmin student for interrupting the conversation between the elder brahmins and himself. Another meaning for the Pali word is that the Buddha simply stopped him and said, “You know, you should not interrupt when the elders are speaking.”

Then one of the elder brahmins, maybe Caṅkī, says: “Oh, it is okay, Venerable Buddha. This young man is one of the most learned of our brahmin students. He has memorized all the ancient texts, the histories of the past, and the philosophy. He knows it all. Please, it is okay that he is a part of the conversation.”

In the very formal, polite culture of the time, the Buddha probably needed clear permission from the elder brahmins to converse with the brahmin student. Otherwise, the Buddha’s behavior would have been rude to the elder brahmins.

Having gotten the elder brahmins’ permission, the Buddha looks at the brahmin student. The brahmin student thinks, “Oh, good, the Buddha is now ready to

hear my question." The brahmin student says: "The brahmins say definitively that our sacred texts are the only ones that are true, and everything else is wrong. What does the Buddha think about this?"

The Buddha does what he often does in these kinds of circumstances – he asks counter questions. The Buddha asks the brahmin student:

> *Is there any brahmin in the current generation who has directly known and seen the truths of these ancient texts – that they know it for themselves through their direct experience?*

The brahmin student replies, "No."

The Buddha says:

> *What about their teachers, the generation before them, and the generation before them? Did any of them say they directly knew and saw the truth of these teachings?*

The brahmin student replies, "No, they never said they directly saw it themselves."

The Buddha says,

> *If you go back seven generations?*

The brahmin student replies, "Nope, no one in seven generations said they directly knew and saw for themselves."

The Buddha says,

If you go back to those people who composed the sacred literature, did they ever make a claim, maybe in the literature, that they directly knew and saw the truth for themselves?

The brahmin student answers, “No, there is no proof that they claim they saw it directly for themselves.”

Then the Buddha makes a big statement. But before I say this – earlier in the text, when describing the great qualities of the Buddha, Caṅkī says, “The Buddha never harmed any brahmin.” So what is about to be said might be seen as a bit offensive. But there may be a way of understanding it that is not offensive. It may be like an aikido move to counter the conceit or arrogance of the brahmin student, who believes that his truth is the only truth. The Buddha says:

Well, what you are saying is like a row of blind people, one holding the shoulder of the next. The one in the front cannot see, the one in the middle cannot see, and the one in the back cannot see. The brahmins are like a row of blind people going along.

The brahmin student says: “Well, we have it on faith. We do not directly know and see for ourselves. We have it on faith.” The Buddha says:

What is known on faith may be true. But also, it might not be true. There is no certainty just because it is taken on faith that it is true.

The brahmin student says, “It is in our oral traditions and our texts.” The Buddha says:

> *Just because it is part of the tradition, it might be true, but it might not be true. There is no way of really knowing just because it is traditional.*

The Buddha then states that there are five things that may or may not be true. Things taken on faith. Things taken as being true because we like them, we prefer them. Things taken as true because they are the tradition. Things taken as true because we have reasoned them out for ourselves, they are logical. Lastly, things taken as true because of intuitive understanding – we intuitively feel or sense that they are true. The Buddha says that in each of these circumstances, sometimes it might be that it is true and sometimes it is not. There is no way of understanding which it is based on those sources.

The brahmin student asks, “Well, how do we preserve the truth then?” This is the pinnacle of the text and why I like it so much. The Buddha says that we preserve the truth by stating the basis upon which we make a claim. If we take something on faith, we say, “It is my faith that this is true.” If we take it upon our preferences, we say, “It is my preference that this is true.” If it is based on the tradition, the texts, or teachers, then we say, “This is what the tradition says is true.” Or we say: “I reasoned it

out for myself. That is why I think it is true." Or we say, "I have an intuitive sense that this is true."

So we are not claiming what is true. We are claiming how we come to understand what we think is the truth. We are claiming we have faith or reasons to believe it is so.

Then it is possible to be in dialogue with people. People understand what we are basing our claims on. We can go back and look at the texts. We can examine their reasoning. We can appreciate the faith that someone has. It is the idea of being clear about the basis upon which we take something to be true – "It is my interpretation. It is my this or that" – as opposed to just claiming it is true. This is the pivot of the text.

The brahmin student continues by asking, "Well, how do we discover the truth for ourselves?" The Buddha replies:

> *If you want to discover it for yourself, go find a monk, a bhikkhu, who has come to your village. Spend a long time checking that teacher out. Make sure that person does not exhibit any traces of having greed, hatred, and delusion that might skew how they talk about the truth. Where they might be motivated to twist or bend the truth for the purposes of their desires, aversions, or delusions. Really check someone out first. When you are confident*

that they do not seem to exhibit any kind of greed, hate, and delusion that might skew how they give the teachings, then listen to their teachings. Reflect on them. Take them in and think about them for yourself. Once you have reflected on them deeply, then engage in the practice wholeheartedly. Then, in your practice, enter into the world of direct experience, until the direct experience opens up, and you discover the truth for yourself.

Then the brahmin student asks, “Is that all there is – just discovery?” The Buddha replies:

No, there is one more step, and that is the final arrival at truth.

So not just discovering what the truth is, but arriving at it.

In talking about the discovery of the truth, the Buddha is making another aikido move. This is my interpretation – I say this so that I preserve the truth. Rather than talking about abstract truth, the Buddha is pointing the brahmin student to how you could practice to have the direct experience the Buddha values the most. It is through practice – mindfulness practice, concentration practice – that this is accomplished.

The Buddha continues:

> *Once you have the discovery of truth, then to arrive at truth, you do the same practice repeatedly, again and again, until you are fully integrated into it.*

Then there is no separation between yourself and the truth. In a sense, you become the truth. It does not say this in the text, but we become the truth. Then everyone is happy, and that is the end of the story.

This is not necessarily a great story. But it is a fascinating story that sets up the context for the importance of emphasizing the preservation of truth among people who hold onto the truth out of faith, tradition, or reason.

There is another way of going about it, which is to not take the teachings – even Buddhist teachings – on faith, or because they are in the texts, therefore they are true. That is always provisional. What is not provisional is when we have actualized it for ourselves: “This is what I know. I have experienced it myself."

The direct experience of the truth we have ourselves. “Now I know.” We can arrive at truth by continuing to practice what we have discovered.

That is the story. I hope that you appreciated it. Thank you.