AN 3.67 — Kathāvatthu Sutta (Topics of Conversation)

English translation by Bhikkhu Candana.

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Text

67. Kathāvatthu Sutta (Topics of Conversation) Bhikkhus, these are the three topics of conversation. What three?

Either a conversation is about the past, such as: ‘it was so in the past.’

Or it is a conversation about the future, such as: ‘it will be so in the future.’

Or it is a conversation about the present, such as: ‘it is so at present.’

“Bhikkhus, by the way a person engages in a conversation, it should be known whether he is in fact someone fit to have a discussion with, or not.

“Bhikkhus, when such a person is asked a question that needs a direct answer, and he fails to give the direct answer; when asked a question that needs an explanatory answer, he fails to give the explanatory answer; when asked a question that invites or needs a counter question, he fails to counter question; and when asked a question that requires for it to be put aside, and he fails to put it aside, then it should be known that this person is unfit to have a discussion with.

“But Bhikkhus, when this person is asked a question that needs a direct answer, and he gives the direct answer; when asked a question that needs an explanatory answer, he gives the explanatory answer; when asked a question that needs a counter question, he counter-questions; and when asked a question that requires for it to be put aside, and he does put it aside, then it should be known that this person is fit for engaging in a conversation with.

“Bhikkhus, by the way a person engages in a conversation, it should be known whether he is in fact someone fit to have a discussion with, or not.

“Bhikkhus, if this person is asked a question and he does not stand strongly in his position in relation to the other’s; if he does not adhere to his understanding and keeps shifting his position in relation to the other’s; if he does not know how to demonstrate or express his views and has no method to defend his argument; and if he does not stand firm to the

truth of what he thinks is valid about his argument, then it should be known that this person is unfit for conversation.

“But Bhikkhus, if this person is asked a question and he does stand strongly in his position in relation to the other’s; if he does adhere to his understanding instead of shifting his position in relation to the other’s; if he knows how to demonstrate and express his views, while using various methods to defend his argument; and if he does stand firm to the truth of what he thinks is valid about his argument, then it should be known that this person is fit for conversation.

“Bhikkhus, by the way a person engages in a conversation, it should be known whether he is in fact someone fit to have a discussion with, or not.

“Bhikkhus, if when asked a question, this person evades the question and leads the conversation aside to irrelevant matters, or shows resentment or ill-temper, malice and mistrust, then it should be known that this person is unfit for conversation.

“But Bhikkhus, if when asked a question, this person does not evade the question and does not lead the conversation aside to irrelevant matters, nor shows resentment or ill-temper, malice or mistrust, then it should be known that this person is fit for conversation.

“Bhikkhus, by the way a person engages in a conversation, it should be known whether he is in fact someone fit to have a discussion with, or not.

“Bhikkhus, if when asked a question, this person swears, belittles, mocks, and seizes an opportunity by focusing on a slight error, then it should be known that this person is unfit for conversation.

“But Bhikkhus, if when asked a question, this person does not swear, or belittle, or mock, nor focuses on a slight error, then it should be known that this person is fit for conversation.

“Bhikkhus, by the way a person engages in a conversation, it should be known whether he is in fact someone fit to have a discussion with, or not.

“Without attentive listening, there is no foundation, but with attentive listening, there is a foundation. Therefore, the one who has such a foundation, can know things thoroughly, and by knowing things accurately, he dispels specific things and realizes specific things. He who knows thoroughly, knows to dispel specific things and to realize specific things, and thereby to experience the specific Release, which is Liberation. “Bhikkhus, it is for this reason that a conversation takes place. And where there is consultation, there has to be the foundation of careful and attentive listening present in the individual. After all, that is what sets the person on the straight Path to the complete Liberation of the Heart, by no longer gripping onto anything.

‘While speaking with the intent to harm, being rigid in one’s opinions, Ignoble and full to the brim with pride, lacking any virtue whatsoever, One simply keeps looking for an opening or an opportunity to attack another, Preparing to pounce at the slightest error that the other makes, As one speaks harshly, rejoicing in another’s defeat, Much like a hunter towards its prey.

But this is not how the Noble Ones converse, at all. For, the wise person knows how to wait for the right moment to speak; Talking only on The Dhamma, or the lives of the Noble Ones. Thus, lacking any pride whatsoever, They make no enemies and do not become elated; With hearts that no longer grip or grab onto anything, They are merciful and harmless towards those with opposing views to theirs.

Without jealousy or envy, Basing one’s speech on one’s own right understanding and knowledge, He speaks only to discuss words that are good, While inspiring confidence and satisfying one’s desire for the harmonious and good end. This is the way Noble Ones discuss and converse, Not engaging in anything evil or wrong, Lacking any harsh words or intent of harm, Thus, the wise truly speak little, sharing knowledge and spreading reconciliation. This indeed is how the Noble Ones speak.’