

An Examination of Devadatta's Position in Early Indian Buddhism: Is His a Case of Victimization and Grave Injustice

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In every religion

The best Person to be followed as an example

Vs

The worst person to be avoided as an example

Cousin rivalry is a recurrent theme in world literature.

During the *Vassāvāsa* that followed his entry into the Saṃgha, Devadatta acquired the power of *iddhi*, possible to those who are still of the world (*puthujjanika-iddhi*) (**Vin.II.183**).

Devadatta is praised as a quintessential example of an ideal monk, who had right views, preached the correct dhamma (A.IV.402).

“Godhīputta is of great psychic power (*mahiddhiko*), Godhīputta is of great splendour (*mahānubhāvo*).” (Vin.II.189).

The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* mentions him as the one who had the right view and could preach the correct dhamma. (A.IV.402).

He is also mentioned as an eloquent teacher, who “gladdened, rejoiced, roused, delighted the monks far into the night with talk on *dhamma*.” (BD.V.280).

Some found in him a ready friend who was at their service both in prosperity and adversity. (DhA.I.65).

The Buddha in the *Udānaṃ* (Ud.I.5) praises Devadatta and includes him amongst those eleven Elders who were particularly praiseworthy:

Sāriputta,
Mahāmogallāna,
Mahākassapa,
Mahākaccāyana,
Mahākotṭhita,
Mahākappina,
Mahācunda,
Anuruddha,
Revata,
Devadatta,
Ānanda.

The Buddha calls Devadatta as one of those monks who have “put away evil, who have **destroyed the fetters**, the wise ones.” (Ud.I.5).

Does it mean Devadatta has become an arahant? And if so,
Then hasn't he passed beyond the retribution of Karma?

Or

Can an arahant fall ?

But after this, Devadatta is suspected of evil designs who became not only jealous of the Buddha's fame but also became eager for gain and fame. (S.II.156).

Devadatta enlists the support of crown prince Ajātasattu.

Devadatta manifested himself to Sāriputta as a young boy clad in a girdle of snakes. Ajātasattu was tremendously impressed with Devadatta's display of his supernatural power and became his loyal patron showering all kinds of favours on him. (Vin.II.184.).

Devadatta approached the Buddha and pointed out to him that as he was getting old, he should let Devadatta assume leadership of the Saṃgha.

The Buddha outrightly rejected his request and snubbed him for entertaining such thoughts. ([Vin.II.188](#)).

Devadatta is very upset.

The Buddha told the monks to carry out the formal act of information against Devadatta in Rājagaha:

“whatever Devadatta should do by gesture and by voice, in that neither the Awakened One nor Dhamma nor the Order should be seen, but in that only Devadatta should be seen.” ([BD.V.264-65](#)).

The Buddha asked Sāriputta to inform against Devadatta in Rājagaha. But Sāriputta expressed hesitation.

But the Buddha pointed out that just as Sāriputta's former praise had been true, now his condemnation will be equally true. (Vin.II.189).

Some lay devotees protest against the act of information and feel that it is nothing but jealousy against Devadatta's gains and honours (Vin.II.190).

Devadatta in league with Ajātasattu sends killers but the assassins sent by him are dissuaded from such an act by the charisma, insight, and kindness of the Buddha. (Vin.II.190-193).

Then Devadatta tries to kill the Buddha by rolling down a boulder on to him from a hilltop. Though the boulder is miraculously destroyed, splinters from the boulder draw blood from the Buddha's foot.

Then

Devadatta sets a mad killer elephant on the Buddha, but the Buddha tames the elephant through his loving-kindness. (Vin.II.194-94).

According to Pāli Buddhism, these plans of Devadatta to harm the Buddha were the result of the Buddha's evil deeds in previous births. (Ap.[II.300-01](#)).

It is indeed very strange that no action has been taken against Devadatta so far!!
But why no action?
Why was not he expelled from the Saṃgha ?

B. Mukherjee (B. Mukherjee, *Die Überlieferung von Devadatta, dem Widersacher des Buddha, in den kanonischen Schriften*, Munich, 1966: 120) points out in his ground-breaking study that not only that Devadatta was not expelled from the Saṃgha, he even went over to the Buddha as a monk and demanded the imposition of the five austere practices.

After having failed to kill the Buddha, Devadatta along with four other companions goes to the Buddha and requests him that the following five austere (*dhuta*) practices be imposed on the Saṃgha and that their violation be treated as sinful:

1. *ārañṇaka*: Monks should dwell all their lives in the forest.
2. *piṇḍapātika*: alms by begging and no acceptance of invitations for meals.
3. *paṃsukūlika*: Monks should wear robes made of discarded clothes.
4. *rukḅhamūlika*: Monks should live at the foot of a tree, not under a roof.
5. *macchamaṃsaṃ na khādeyyuṃ*: Monks should abstain completely from fish and flesh ([Vin.III.171.](#)).

The Buddha leaves the option to the monks and enjoins Devadatta not to bring out a schism in the Saṃgha:

“Whoever wishes, let him be a forest-dweller; whoever wishes, let him dwell in the neighbourhood of a village; whoever wishes, let him be a beggar for alms; whoever wishes, let him accept an invitation; whoever wishes, let him wear rags taken from the dust-heap; whoever wishes, let him accept a householder’s robes. For eight months, Devadatta, lodging at the foot of a tree is permitted by me [i.e., except during the rains]. Fish and flesh are pure in respect of three points: if they are not seen, heard or suspected (to have been killed for him).” (BD.I.298).

However, Devadatta in turn, according to the account, accuses the Buddha of being prone to luxury and abundance especially because “people esteem austerity.” (Vin.III.171-172).

Davadatta then goes ahead (in the *Uposatha* ceremony) through the formalities of creating the first schism in the Saṃgha and leaves for Gayāsīsa along with 500 supporting monks.

The Buddha sends Sāriputta and Moggallāna to Devadatta's camp.
After arriving, though these two seem to have approved of Devadatta's dhamma.

But when Devadatta goes to sleep, they convince the 500 'wayward' monks to return to the Buddha.

Kokālika then wakes up Devadatta and reveals the bad news to him.

Devadatta is shocked by the events and he falls ill.

However, when Devadatta breaths his last nine months later, he makes a dying declaration that he was **still a follower of the Buddha** (DhA.I.147; Mil.111).

Though Devadatta falls into Niraya Hell, yet he is assured that after a hundred thousand aeons he would be born as a *paccekabuddha* by the name of Aṭṭhissara. (Mil.111; DhA.I.125).
However, according to the *Saddharmapuṇḍrīka*, Devadatta would be born as a Buddha by the name of Devarāja (Chapter.XI, stanza 46).

It is quite curious to see that as one moves away from the Buddha chronologically, the criticism of Devadatta becomes more and more scathing. Thus, in the different commentaries of the *Nikāyas* and later texts such as the *Jātakas*, Devadatta is depicted as the quintessential example of a wicked person.

For instance, as many as 88 *Jātakas* (i.e., 16% of the total) centre around the condemnation of Devadatta.

Nature of the character of Devadatta	<i>Jātaka</i> no.
A fake ascetic.	11, 277, 492
A person of bad principles, bad leader, and a bad companion	12, 26, 397
A pretender, an ungrateful person, a plotter, a traitor, a drunkard, and a murder.	21, 57, 58, 72, 110, 111, 112, 131, 142, 143, 160, 168, 174, 204, 206, 208, 210, 220, 221, 241, 308, 329, 335, 342, 350, 358, 364, 389, 404, 407, 416, 445, 448, 452, 457, 471, 472, 473, 482, 500, 505, 508, 516, 517, 530, 533, 546
A liar, low, mean, unwise, double-faced, inefficient, dishonest, shameless, self-destructive, criminal-minded, disobedient, unjust, harsh, and cruel person.	1, 3, 10, 113, 139, 141, 150, 184, 193, 194, 209, 224, 231, 240, 294, 295, 313, 353, 357, 367, 422, 438, 466, 503, 506, 514, 518, 543, 547
Heretical, deserter, schism-creator, jealous & anti-Buddha.	122, 222, 243, 326, 474, 544
A wicked man who attempted human sacrifice.	542

Interestingly, three *suttas* are named after Devadatta in the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*.
Once mention is also made of the text of a sermon delivered by Devadatta.

How does one reconcile a contradictory description of Devadatta?

In one of the dilemmas, discussed in the *Milindapañha*, king Milinda asks Nāgasena

“But, venerable, Nāgasena, your people say that Devadatta was altogether wicked, full of wicked dispositions, and that the Bodhisatta was altogether pure, full of pure dispositions. And yet Devadatta, through successive existences, was not only quite equal to the Bodhisatta, but even sometimes superior to him, both in reputation and in the number of his adherents.” (Mil.200).

Nāgasena replies:

“Devadatta ... was a protection to the poor, put up bridges and courts of justice and rest-houses for the people, and gave gifts according to his bent to the Samaṇas and Brāhmaṇas, to the poor and needy and the wayfarers, it was by the result of that conduct that, from existence to existence, he came into the enjoyment of so much prosperity. For of whom, O king, can it be said that without generosity and self-restraint, without self-control and the observance of the Uposatha, he can reach prosperity?”(Mil.204).

A critical review of all the references appears to indicate that stories regarding Devadatta being an opponent of the Buddha since childhood are only later additions.

The differences between the Buddha and Devadatta appear to have arisen out of some serious issues which may have been personal and/or related to the functioning of the Saṃgha.

It certainly cannot be denied that after the death of the Buddha and with the passage of time, the positive side of the character of Devadatta is overshadowed by the vitriolic condemnation as most of this condemnation appears in later Buddhist literature. (R.A. Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values & Orientations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994: 176 fn32).

The statements of some of the contemporaries of the Buddha also seem to point to the fact that criticism of Devadatta was not justified.

For instance, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta is quoted by Pāli texts as saying that by maligning Devadatta as incorrigible (*atekiccho*), the Buddha was being unfair to him. (M.I.392-93).

So much so that once even Ānanda who was a constant companion of the Buddha is said to have been unsure about the criticism of Devadatta. (A.III.402).

The episodes relating to Devadatta have been analysed systematically by Mukherjee (B. Mukherjee, *Die Überlieferung von Devadatta, dem Widersacher des Buddha, in den kanonischen Schriften*, Munich, 1966) and Bareau (A. Bareau, "Étude du bouddhisme," *Annuaire du Collège de France*, 1988-89: 533-47).

Both of them have pointed out quite convincingly that most of the episodes maligning Devadatta are a fabrication of later times.

Devadatta's positive character becomes darker and darker as time goes by and one can discern an attempt to white wash the positive side of his character as more and more blame is heaped on him- all in spite of his (in some accounts) previously saintly character. All this appears to be nothing but a misrepresentation intended to tarnish his character. (A. Bareau, *Op. Cit.* 542).

Ray has argued that Devadatta was not an evil doer but a saint and that the most important reason for the vilification was his strict identification with forest Buddhism as it did not go well with settled monasticism.(R.A. Ray, *Op. Cit.*171).

Critical examination of source material indicates that Devadatta was not bad at all.

In the Sarvāstivāda-Vinaya, we are told that for twelve years after his admission into the Order, Devadatta conducted himself with faultless deeds and thoughts. He read and recited the *sūtras*, lived according to proper discipline, and strove in his practice of Dharma. (Mukherjee, Op. Cit. 120).

In the *Saddharmapuṇḍrīka Sūtra* Devadatta is depicted in a former life as a forest renunciant who assisted Buddha Sākyamuni to Buddhahood, and the Buddha calls him his ‘spiritual-friend’ (*kalyāṇamitra*) in effect his teacher (H. Kern (tr), *Saddharma-Puṇḍrīka or the Lotus of the True Law*, Sacred Books of the East, no. 32, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884: Chapter.XI, stanza 46).

It was through training under Devadatta as his teacher, the Buddha tells us, that he was able to perfect the qualities by which he eventually became a Buddha.

(H. Kern (tr), *Saddharma-Puṇḍrika or the Lotus of the True Law*, Sacred Books of the East, no. 32, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884: Chapter.XI, stanza 46).

According to the Buddha himself, in the future, Devadatta will be greatly revered and honored and shall become no less than the greatly revered *Tathāgata* Devarāja, who shall lead innumerable beings to Enlightenment. His relics will not be divided and shall be kept in a single gigantic stūpa worshipped by gods and humans. So holy will this stūpa be that those who circumambulate it may hope for realization as an arhant, a pratyekabuddha, or a Buddha. Finally, in the future, a great blessing shall come to those who hear about Devadatta: for those hearing this chapter of the *Saddharmapuṇḍrīka Sūtra* and gaining from it shall be liberated from rebirth in the three lower realms (*Saddharma-Puṇḍrīka* , Chapter.XI, stanza 46).

It appears that the schism created by Devadatta was successful and Sāriputta and Moggallāna were either unsuccessful in winning back all those dissident monks who had left with Devadatta for Gayāsīsa or Devadatta succeeded later in recruiting some of his own.

Over seven centuries later, Faxian saw near Sāvathī a community of disciples following Devadatta who rendered homage to the three previous Buddhas but not to the Sākyamuni Buddha. (S. Beal, *The Travels of Fah-hian and Sung yun*, London, 1869: 82).

Xuanzang saw three monasteries in Bengal where the followers of Devadatta were in residence. (Thomas Watters (tr), *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, vol. 2, London, 1904-05, 2nd Indian edition, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1973: 191).

Xuanzang also saw a cave known as the Devadatta *samādhi* that was located near Rājagaha. (Thomas Watters (tr), *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, vol. 2, London, 1904-05, 2nd Indian edition, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1973: 155).

It is suggested that

- (a) the reason for Devadatta's schism was indeed his adherence to certain austerities, which the mainstream community from which he and his group seceded, was not willing to follow.
- (b) The stories relating to his support to Devadatta for eliminating the Buddha, seem to have been inventions of the fertile minds of anti-Devadatta monks.
- (c) He was a saint who was victimized and must be rehabilitated.