

*Wheel Publication No. 93*

**The Eight Marvellous  
and Wonderful Truths  
from the Mahāvastu**

*Bhikkhu Khantipālo*



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A Visākha Offering

by

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**Buddhist Publication Society**  
**Kandy • Sri Lanka**

**The Wheel Publication No: 93**

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First published: 1966 (as *A Visākha Offering*)

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

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# Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā-Sambuddhassa

*Sukho Buddhānaṃ uppādo,  
Sukhā Saddhammadesanā,  
Sukhā Saṅghassa sāmaggī,  
Samaggānaṃ tapo sukho.*

Happy is the birth of Buddhas,  
Happy is the Dhamma's teaching,  
Happy is the Sangha's harmony,  
Of those in harmony, happy is their striving.

Dhammapada 194

## Sources

The text used here is that in the Mahāvastu (iii 200ff) which is close to the Dīgha Nikāya version (at DN ii 220ff). Due to the imperfect state of the Mahāvastu text, only six or seven truths appear in the text as we have it (according to whether one counts the statement about the celestials as a truth or not (and here it has been transferred to the opening section), instead of the required number of eight. There are two

truths which are found in Pali but absent from Mahāvastu and these have therefore been inserted (numbers two and five) and cast in the form of the Mahāvastu. Brackets in the text of these two truths indicate that the material so enclosed has been drawn from the Sanskrit and added to give a uniform appearance. Quotations of the remaining truths and other passages are from The Mahāvastu, Volume III, translated by J. J. Jones, in the Sacred Books of the Buddhists, Volume XIX. A few minor changes have been made. For the sake of uniformity, Sanskrit forms of Buddhist terms are used throughout.

# The Eight Marvellous and Wonderful Truths

Everyone devoted to the Buddhadhamma or sympathetic to that Teaching, and all those who take interest in the welfare of mankind, can only be glad if indeed not joyful upon the Visākha day (Vesak) which celebrates three great events in the life of the Sage of the Sakyas: his Birth, his Enlightenment and his Parinibbāna. When we reflect upon the life and practice of the Enlightened One and how he undertook the difficult life of a wandering bhikkhu, not only for the sake of those whom he taught personally but also for future generations, then dwells the mind in tranquil joy. The same infusion of peace that quietens turmoil and allays fears will be the fruit of reflection upon any, either one or all, of the Three Gems. Only peace and joy, tranquillity and sublime happiness result from such recollection whether the mind is turned upon the Buddha, the Dhamma (Teaching) or the Sangha (Community). A reflection of this type which actually covers all Three Jewels is found in the ancient Mahāgovinda Sutta of the Long Discourses (Dīgha Nikāya) and in the Sanskrit of the *Mahāvastu* (Mahāgovindiya Sūtra). In both cases this discourse is related to Lord Buddha by Pañcasikha the celestial minstrel.

The events it describes are set in the celestial realm of the

Thirty-Three Gods and most of the extract with which we are concerned quotes the speech of Sakra (Pali *Sakka*), sovereign of celestials. He is addressing them in the presence of the great Brahma who has come there on “some business of the celestials.” It so happened that many new celestial beings had been reborn there later than the rest, but who excelled them in the five celestial (deva) attributes of length of life, power, glory, honour and retinue. Whereupon some other celestials said:

“Verily, friends, these are disciples of the Exalted One. They lived the life of purity, and at death upon the dissolution of the body they were reborn in heaven among the celestials of the Thirty-Three ...”

Then, Lord, <sup>[1]</sup> some others of the celestials said, “Friends, would it be possible that four ... three ... two ... Tathāgatas, Arhans and Perfect Buddhas arose in the world (together) and taught Dharma. It would be for the welfare of celestials and men. The hosts of titans (asura) would wane; the hosts of celestials (deva) would wax.”

When this had been said, Lord, Sakra, sovereign of celestials, spoke to the celestials of the Thirty-Three, saying, “But this too, friends, is impossible and inopportune, that at one and the same time, four ... three ... two ... Tathāgatas, Arhans and Perfect Buddhas should appear in the world and teach Dharma.”

... "When, friends", said he, "(just one) Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha has arisen in the world, the hosts of celestials wax."

If we think about it, this appears to be a rather clever statement on the part of Sakra. He does not launch straight into a description of the Eight Marvellous and Wonderful Truths about to be expounded. Rather than to begin by telling the celestials of deep truths of the Dharma, he first prepares their minds using a well-known device in teaching: he catches their interest by referring to a situation in which they themselves are involved.

This statement by Sakra implies of course that, due to the teaching of Dhamma, men take up the good life of giving, pure moral conduct and the cultivation of the sublime states and mind-development and so after death arise in the celestial worlds. Their foes, the titans, do not receive 'reinforcements' in this way since there are fewer men who misuse power or wrongly crave for it.

If the waxing of the celestial hosts and the waning of the titans gives but little comfort to us on earth, even though the lutes of heaven resound with accompanying joyful deva-anthems, there is yet another interpretation of this statement possible. It is sure that upon the appearance of a Buddha in the world, all the noble qualities in mankind receive encouragement to develop. Either men hear the Dhamma direct from Lord Buddha or they receive it from one of his enlightened disciples. At the same time, the hosts of low

and unprofitable states are seen as such in the clear light of the Dhamma. These are the titan hosts in every man—the greed, envy, sensuality, stubbornness, pride, conceit, malice, grudge-bearing, hatred, dislike, stupidity and ignorance; it is natural that they should wane where a Buddha teaches Dhamma. The celestial hosts which wax upon this joyful occasion are of course generosity, gentleness, compassion, altruistic joy, patience, energetic striving, gratitude, humility, wisdom and so forth.

... And when Sakra, lord of the celestials of the Thirty-Three, saw that the celestials were glad, thrilled, elated, joyful and pleased, he said, “If, friends, you were to hear the Eight Marvellous and Wonderful Truths about the Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha, you would be still more glad, thrilled, elated, joyful and pleased.”

When this had been spoken, Lord, the celestials of the Thirty-Three said to Sakra, their sovereign, “Lord Kausika, we should like you then to proclaim the Eight Wonderful and Marvellous Truths about the Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha.”

## First Marvellous and Wonderful Truth

*“Friends, I do not see, whether I survey the past or present, any master arisen in the world who has so*

*wrought for the welfare of the multitude like this Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha. For the beautifully proclaimed Dharma and Discipline of the Tathāgata, Arhan and Samyak Sambuddha bears on this present life and is independent of time. It welcomes and it guides and is for the inward comprehension of those who are wise. For this well-proclaimed Dharma and Discipline means the crushing of pride, the suppression of longing, the destruction of clinging, the breaking-up of sensorial states, the end of craving, passionlessness, cessation and Nirvana. Again, friends, I say that I do not see, whether I survey the past or present, any teacher of such a Dharma and Discipline arisen in the world other than this Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha.”*

How is that Lord Buddha *has so wrought for the welfare of the multitude*? Seeing beings adrift upon the ocean of saṃsāra, has he not out of compassion shown the advantages of moral conduct, the fruits of generosity, the results of actions good or ill, the way to develop the mind and to remove the hindrances, the further reaches of the way wherein the nature of the world is seen in clarity and the highest benefit—the ending of dukkha with ultimate perfection experienced? After the Enlightenment, he determined to teach because great compassion was born after seeing the wretched conditions of beings subject all to birth-and-death. For forty-five years out of compassion for beings he travelled about teaching anyone who wished to learn. The

Teacher, having compassion for us, left us his greatest gift, the Jewel of the Dhamma.

Every day thousands, millions recite the ancient description of this fine Dhamma Jewel. In Pali, this runs: *Svākkhāto Bhagavatā Dhammo, sandiṭṭhiko akāliko, ehipassiko, opanayiko, paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhīti* — 'The Dhamma of the Exalted One is beautifully proclaimed, bears on this present life and is independent of time. It welcomes and it guides and is for the inward comprehension of those who are wise.'

Well or *beautifully proclaimed* means that the Dhamma is not a patchwork system but has an underlying unity. It is Dhamma (from *dhr̥* = to uphold), being that law which supports or upholds and governs both physical and psychological phenomena. It has a *bearing on this present life* and one should not think of waiting to see its results after death or in another life. "Whether Tathāgatas arise or whether they do not arise—this being, that becomes; by the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that becomes not; from the cessation of this, that ceases"—so is the Dhamma *independent of time*. It did not begin at any particular time and while the forces of conditionality act and react it will continue to be true. Was there ever another religious teaching in which one was invited by the founder to "come-and-see"? Not to come-and-believe which is the usual cry, but to come and judge from what one learns. This is what Buddhadhamma offers. Only a teacher who is quite fearless, having nothing to hide, can offer a Dhamma which is *ehipassiko*. It *guides* one forward step by step. These steps

along the Path are also described in great detail and clarity by the Perfect Buddha who has himself already travelled along that way. We are not expected to vault or leap along the Path for its steps are well-graded. We are told elsewhere that just as the great ocean shelves out gently, gradually deepening, so does Dhamma-practice gradually deepen to Dhamma-realization. Naturally enough this is for *the inward comprehension of those who are wise*.

In many places we are told that the Dhamma taught by Lord Buddha is not just a system of philosophy beaten out and devised by him and thus must not be treated as being merely such. No one does justice to Lord Buddha who merely studies Buddhism (or only interests himself in the Pali language) in the same way as one may study algebra or zoology. No Buddhist 'philosophy' exists only to be studied; for whatever is found in all the voluminous pages of the various Collections and in the even greater piles of Commentaries, all this is meant to illumine the way that is to be trodden. Just as Lord Buddha practised what he taught (*yathā vādī tathā kāri*), so should we as students of the way do likewise. To make this possible, the Teaching is divided into two. Firstly, indispensable for realization of Dhamma, is Discipline (Vinaya) which includes all the various groups of moral precepts and steps of training. These, when practised in our everyday lives, give rise to excellent conduct (*carāṇa*). Secondly is learning and practice of Dhamma which in due time ripens to the fruit of wisdom (*vidyā*).

Not only the Perfect Buddha should be described as *Vidyācaraṇa* (possessed of wisdom and conduct), so too we, his followers, should endeavour that this description becomes true of us.

Those who are wise practise this Dhamma so that it comes to be clearly seen and attained to by them. Apart from blind faith, apart from books, apart from lectures and discussions, apart from intellectual considerations, this Dhamma comes to shine in the hearts of those who have made it their own. It shines there always, quite independently of all accidents of place and circumstance. And in the face of this light, Māra and his daughters and armies have been put to precipitate flight. Precisely what this Dhamma-realization means, for one who has experienced it, is given in the third part of this truth where is listed the end of *pride, longing, clinging, craving* and *the breaking up of the dominance of sensorial states*, while *passionlessness, cessation and Nirvana* are the positive side to this supreme experience.

Surely this is enough to make one feel *glad, thrilled, elated, joyful and pleased*; but a further truth is to come ...

## Second Marvellous and Wonderful Truth

*“Again (friends), the Exalted One (Arhan and Perfect Buddha) has in truth well pointed out: ‘this is skilful’; and well pointed out: ‘that is unskilful’; that ‘this is with*

*obstruction and that without obstruction'; that 'this should be followed and that should not be followed'; that 'this is base and that exalted'; that 'this pertains to brightness and that to darkness'—this pair of opposites has also been pointed out. And a master of such a character, (friends), who discloses knowledge thus of these pairs of opposites, namely: the skilful-unskilful, obstructing-unobstructing, the followable and not-followable, the base and exalted, the bright and the dark, (I [2] do not see arisen in the world whether I survey the past or present, other than this Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha)."*

Very exactly has the Great Teacher outlined the profitable way to go. Very carefully has he guarded his followers against all the dangers that could easily arise for them should they stray off the Path. Here, however, he differs from other religious teachers for they have delimited their religious doctrines by saying, "You must believe this thing or that and believe in this way—to believe otherwise is to be heretical and damnable." Not so Lord Buddha, who was not concerned with enforcing mere beliefs, tangles of views, or the endless wilderness of religious dogmas upon others, but who was very much concerned with which spiritual path of practice people set their feet to. He therefore instructs, not in terms of beliefs but having regard for what is profitable, what is skilful, for that which leads to growth among the 'celestial hosts' of noble qualities in man—that is Dhamma.

To do this, he frequently contrasted the effects of practising

in one way with that of practising the opposite. That is, by presenting the contrast in pairs of opposite factors, he outlined clearly what is the true Path. One factor of a pair would lead, if practised, to the increase of the interior 'titan hosts' and thus should be carefully avoided. It is for this reason that Buddhist terminology speaks of 'unskilful' (*akusala*) rather than the vague and unmeaning 'bad.' The reverse applies to the opposite factor which since it increases what is Dhamma, is spoken of as 'skilful' (*kusala*) and not as merely 'good.'

Very definitely, certain actions if practised are said to act as *obstructions* to one's progress on the Path. They are, literally, 'that-which-is-to-be-avoided.' In spite of the very clear directions of Lord Buddha on this point, at least one disciple is known to us by name (Ariṭṭha, formerly of the vulture-killers; see MN No. 22) who somehow persuaded himself that, "There are things called 'obstructions' by the Exalted One. As I understand His teaching, these things are not necessarily obstructive to one who pursues them." [3] As this disciple was bhikkhu and therefore, while he retained his robes, bound to uphold the celibate life, the Commentary tells us that in this instance the danger which he considered not dangerous, or the obstruction not obstructive, was the indulgence by a bhikkhu in sexual intercourse. This is but one example and many more might be found that are more or less serious. One that comes to mind is the person who eagerly takes up the practice of meditation while continuing to indulge in unrestrained and

even unskilful conduct. One who regards obstructions declared to be such by Lord Buddha as not really obstructive is placing himself in a very dangerous position where whatever he attempts of the training will be sure to go wrong, sometimes disastrously wrong.

That which is *without obstruction* implies at least that it does not lead to the diminution of Dhamma in one's heart and may increase it. This very much depends on the state of mind which underlies certain actions. Thus, a Buddhist on a Holy Day goes and respects a stupa (relic-mound), builds miniature stupas of sand within the temple grounds, circumambulates a holy place, perhaps turning the prayer-wheels there, burns incense and makes prostrations, lights candles or lays flowers on a shrine. Does he do these things because they are a tradition or just out of habit? If so, then his actions will certainly be *without obstruction* though not adding much to his practice of Dhamma. Or does he perform such acts full of veneration and with a mind one-pointedly fixed upon those who have seen Enlightenment? If so, then he does indeed honour their memory because he sincerely and devotedly increases the power of Dhamma in his own heart.

Much the same might be said of the next pair of opposites. There are whole discourses where Lord Buddha pointed out *what should be followed and what should not be followed* (see for instance, MN No. 8). Similarly, the Vinaya (Rules of Conduct for bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs) basically consists of stating what should not be done and indicating what is the

proper course of conduct in any given situation. For lay-people there is a striking case of this in the Five Precepts which should not be broken, while their positive counterparts, the Five Ennobling Virtues (loving-kindness, right livelihood, contentment, truthfulness and heedfulness), most certainly should be followed.

Again, that which is accounted '*base*' is whatever drags one's character down in the swamps of greed, into the fires of hatred, or amidst the mists of delusion. Conversely, the '*exalted*' raises one beyond the sway of these unskilful passions and gives rise to an increased ability to practise and a greater understanding of Dhamma.

What is it that permits one to understand more? This is an action which is *bright* and which, far from obscuring intelligent practice, actually promotes it. The reverse of this is *darkness* which hems one in and leads one nowhere except to greater confusion and misery.

And we, if we are followers of Lord Buddha, have such a Teacher who tirelessly pointed out these *pairs of opposites* and ever exhorted us to choose the skilful, the unobstructing, and so on. Should we not rejoice in this truth as did those celestials in ancient times and feel in our hearts *glad, thrilled, exalted, joyful and pleased*? But listen to the words of Sakra as he continues...

## Third Marvellous and Wonderful Truth

*“And friends, the Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha has won students who are entered into the Way, and Arhans who abide in immovable states. The Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha sends them away, and makes his home in the forests, which are remote, isolated, away from the habitations of men, abodes unknown to men, and most fitting for seclusion. There he dwells by himself aloof from the crowd, all alone, giving himself to concentration. A master so intent on concentration, friends, I do not see arisen in the world, whether I survey the past, or present other than this Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha.”*

One of the blemishes of a religion mentioned in the Suttas is that when it is proclaimed by a teacher, none (or few) listen to the doctrine. Or if they do listen, they do not practise; or practising that teaching, due to its inherent defects few or none come to realize it. Hence it is significant that it is proclaimed here—*the Perfect Buddha has won disciples*, moreover that they are not only *students who are entered into the Way (srotāpanna, sakridāgāmin, anāgāmin)* but also the Consummate Ones, *Arhans who abide in immovable states*. To have the assurance that there are those ‘who abide in immovable states,’ so different from our frail, transitory and flickering minds, is a good reason indeed for the arising of profound joy.

At this point, our text relates something which at first looks rather strange. It says that Lord Buddha, *sends them* (the Arahans) *away*. It is possible that this is an allusion to the

time when Lord Buddha sent forth the sixty Arhans to spread the Dhamma saying: “Go, O bhikkhus, and wander forth for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, in compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, for the welfare of celestials and men. Proclaim, O bhikkhus, the glorious Dhamma, preach a life of holiness, perfect and pure”. [4]

However, it is not so much his life of teaching which is emphasized when we are told that the *Perfect Buddha...makes his home in the forests which are remote...and most fitting for seclusion*, but rather the early period after the Enlightenment when quite often Lord Buddha dwelt alone. There is a good picture of this earliest life in the Sangha to be found in the Rhinoceros Sutta (Suttanipāta). The picture painted is of the outdoor life with bhikkhus living individually or in small groups in bamboo groves, sacred woods outside villages and towns or in the depths of the great forest which then covered so much of the Ganges valley.

Sometimes Lord Buddha lived in this way even after he had been presented with ‘parks’ for the residence of the Sangha; but at other times both he and they wandered, unattached and with few needs from place to place discussing the Dhamma with all those who were interested.

*Aloof from the crowd* he certainly was, even when dwelling near cities or visiting the courts of kings. He was aloof from the passions which throng the worldly man’s mind and yet he was the Greatly Compassionate One. In purity and

wisdom aloof, in compassion ever willing to help with Dhamma those who wished for help.

Whether in populous or isolated places, the Buddha's mind remained quite naturally intent on concentration. Who could be other than *glad, thrilled, elated, joyful and pleased* at the marvel of the great Teacher *aloof from the crowd* and the wonder of the perfected disciples, *who abide in immovable states*. Another cause for marvel and wonder follows...

## Fourth Marvellous and Wonderful Truth

*“Again, friends, the Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha gets choice solid and soft food of proper and exquisite flavour, and he makes his meals thereof. But he eats without indulgence and wantonness, being aware of the peril in pleasures of sense, knowing the way of escape, and being free of intoxication. A master, friends, who eats his food so free from self-indulgence, I do not see arisen in the world, whether I survey the past or present, other than this Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha.”*

Just in case any of the celestials were beginning to let their attention stray, Sakra who is obviously well-versed in the arts of teaching, introduces here a subject which may well be as much discussed in the realms of the Thirty-three as it is on earth. At the word 'food' any minds which may have

wandered from Sakra's truths will surely have returned, for it is said to have been of 'exquisite flavour' a subject on which those celestials would doubtless have been experts. If it were not possible to account for the introduction of this truth in this way then it might seem that after the lofty heights of the fourth truth, Sakra strangely descends to a very mundane matter. But this is not so. He is intent on showing the celestials that Lord Buddha's transcendent attainments have very plain and practical consequences which all could see for themselves.

Religious history could furnish us with some interesting examples of 'teachers' whose mighty attainments have been shown to be rather forced, if not altogether a pretence, in some trying or quite ordinary situation in which they exhibited signs of greed or hatred or fell into confusion. Further, we might learn how such inflated 'teachers' had excused their still uncontrolled passions—perhaps they were just 'testing the faith of their disciples,' or posing that sages, such as they, dwelt on such mysterious, nay, incomprehensible planes, that their actions could not be equated with those of ordinary men. Their anger was, of course, always 'righteous.'

In contrast to this sort of hypocrisy, the example of the Perfect Buddha generated the utmost devotion in those who knew him intimately as well as in those who chanced to meet him. Even with *choice solid and soft food of proper and exquisite flavour* there could be no relapse into a state where greed would arise and likewise no possibility of dislike

aroused when food was insufficient, coarse or unpleasing to the tongue. One who is a Samyak Sambuddha has no roots of unskill (*akusala-mūla*) remaining—and one who has them is no Buddha.

Sakra wishes to drive home his point and he repeats that the Exalted One *eats without indulgence and wantonness*. Now this is extraordinary for there is not an ordinary man or woman in the world who does not have his or her favourite foods and who is not willing to spend time and money upon obtaining them. Whether they are often able to indulge their appetites depends on whether their merit is such that it permits them to do so. Even though the Exalted One's food was sometimes (but not always) of exquisite flavour and he therefore had the chance to please the tongue, still no pleasure cravings were born of tongue-contact. He was aware, unlike the majority of men, of *the peril in pleasures of sense* and again unlike them took food as a sick man takes medicine—that his body might be preserved for use as an instrument of Dhamma.

The subject of 'food' has a very profound and extensive significance in Buddhadhamma. In this context, however, the other types of 'food' (*āhāra*)—contact-food, the food of volitional thought and consciousness-food—are not mentioned. All foods whether nourishing the body or the mental functions are really ingestions of certain aspects of the world. They are appropriations, the making 'mine' of what in no wise belongs to me. Appetites physical and mental sustain the illusion of the self; they stimulate an

intoxication, making an 'I' where no 'I' exists and creating the delusion of 'mine' where nothing can possibly 'belong to me.'

From these perils and intoxications, however, the Perfect Buddha knows *the way of escape*—which is mindfulness (*smṛti, sati*) and the recollections connected with it; besides he is one who eats his food *free from self-indulgence*. When the perfect knowledge (*ajñā, aññā*) dawns that in fact there is no self in what is normally taken to be one, how then can there be indulgence of a self? With this great truth Sakra and the celestials rejoiced, and surely we would be abject beings not to feel with them *glad, thrilled, elated, joyful and pleased*.

## Fifth Marvellous and Wonderful Truth

*“Again (friends), the Exalted One (Arhan and Perfect Buddha) in truth speaks according to his actions and acts according to his speech. And (friends), a master of such a character who has so practised as-speaking, so-doing; as-doing, so-speaking according to the truth of Dharma (I [5] do not see arisen in the world whether I survey the past or present, other than this Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha).”*

This is a marvellous quality of Lord Buddha and one can see

in it a connection with the previous truth. Both there and here, Sakra is teaching us that Lord Buddha has no hypocrisy in his nature. He does not instruct in one way and then, when no one is looking, do something quite the reverse. Not one example of such a thing can be found in the forty-five years of his teaching. Is this not remarkable?

Let us make a comparison whereby we may understand just how remarkable this is. It seems that Napoleon, to take one example, was worshipped at a distance by many who had no idea of all sides of his character and who therefore made much of his glory and announced intentions. His aide-de-camp could take a different view since he knew well a side of the emperor not seen by outsiders. How was this in the case of Lord Buddha? The Venerable Ānanda was the disciple closest to him and for a great many years was the personal attendant of the Lord. Had there been any discrepancy between Lord Buddha's teaching and his personal actions, would these not have been known to him? Such defects cannot be hidden for ever. In an uneventful life a person may seem calm and get along well in friendship with most people, but even then there always comes the testing-time, the time of some quite unexpected event for which he has not provided and cannot guard against. It is then that the roots of unskill (greed, hate and delusion) show themselves. Has not Lord Buddha said this himself on many occasions? (See MN No. 21, for a good example).

But Lord Buddha led quite an eventful life of travel, forever meeting with new personalities and new situations. And yet

these unskilful qualities were never seen by the Venerable Ānanda, never seen by him during his twenty-five years devoted service to the Lord! He indeed deeply revered Lord Buddha and knew better than other disciples more distant from the Lord, that he was one who constantly and quite naturally practised “As-speaking, so-doing; as-doing, so-speaking.” And this was his constant way of life, the Enlightened way of life, the perfection of the Path, the natural way ‘according to the truth of Dhamma.’

Not only was this apparent to those who were his devoted followers. It is related in the Brahmāyu Sutta (MN No. 91) how Brahmāyu, an aged brahmin, instructed his disciple Uttara to go and meet the revered Gotama. After he had met him, “for seven months the brahmin youth, Uttara, like a constant shadow, followed the Lord closely” from the time when he appeared in the morning until he saw him retire. Uttara, after having minutely observed and considered Lord Buddha’s conduct, could report to his teacher at the end of seven months, that indeed the revered Gotama was exactly what was reported about him—an Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha.

If there had been the slightest difference between ‘speaking’ and ‘doing’ in the case of Lord Buddha, then his own words would have been sufficient to reveal the discrepancy. For he also advised bhikkhus to examine his words and conduct so as to satisfy themselves that no longer are any ‘mixed’ states (of skill and unskill) or ‘dark’ states remaining in the Tathāgata (See MN No. 47). Only one who has the

fearlessness of complete and perfect Enlightenment is able to invite such critical inspection. The malodorous flowers of hypocrisy have no chance for growth in the pure garden of Enlightenment. One Enlightened has nothing to hide.

This is the end of all hypocrisy whatever, the end of all two-faced action. It is the abolition of all those mental tendencies which lead men to have 'double standards of conduct'—to seem upright and honest but, when the veils are removed, to be revealed as corrupt, perverted and full of emotional conflicts. It is the end of being a log rotten within, a simile several times used by Lord Buddha to counter hypocrisy. One who has won to this state is no longer a 'whited sepulchre,' outwardly pleasing but inwardly foul.

It is a test of our practise of Dhamma as to how far this conflict between appearances and reality is lessened. The more one finds oneself, 'As-speaking, so-doing; as-doing, so-speaking,' the more has one made the true Dhamma enter into one's heart. It has then certainly become a personal reason to join the celestials and feel with them *glad, thrilled, exalted, joyful, and pleased*.

But Sakra goes on to tell of another truth to give us joy ...

## Sixth Marvellous and Wonderful Truth

*"Again, friends, it is out of his knowledge that the Exalted*

*One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha teaches the Dharma and Discipline, not out of unknowing. [6] And friends, a master so possessed of the method of teaching Dharma I do not see arisen in the world, whether I survey the past or present, other than this Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha."*

Sakra now makes this very plain statement that the Teaching, some of which he has outlined in previous truths, is born of knowledge. The word for this is *abhiññā* (Pali: *abhiññā*) and by this term his listeners were meant to understand "the direct intuitional knowledge gained through discipline and meditation (*sīla-samādhi*)" and not the traditional priestly knowledge from texts handed down from teacher to pupil.

Although the conditions affecting the birth and growth of a new religion are many, of prime importance is the character of the founder. Naturally, characters may be widely different but two primary roots in such persons will affect their teachings one way or the other. The first is unknowing (*avidyā*) and the second knowledge (*jñāna*). [7] *Avidyā* has the sense of "not knowing completely, knowing only segmentally or partly" and therefore is better translated by "unknowing" since "ignorance" means "total lack of knowledge." There will be many species more or less highly evolved, in the genus of teachers whose doctrines are taught *out of unknowing* but we are not concerned with them here, nor with their partial views of reality. But there can be only

one species in the genus of those who teach Dhamma out of knowledge since “Truth is one without a second” (Sn 884). They are called Perfectly Enlightened Ones.

Having declared to the celestials that the basis of Lord Buddha’s Dhamma is knowledge, Sakra goes on to praise the ways in which it was taught. Elsewhere the Buddha is frequently called *Sāstā devamanusyānām* (Teacher of Celestials and Men), and this not for nothing for he taught all who were able to understand him. We know of his discourses and answers to celestials and of his admonitions to demons (*yakṣa*); but outnumbering these by far are the teachings addressed to men. They were given to all men who questioned or who stood in need of Dhamma. His explanations differed in range and content of subject just as the understanding and the requirements of men vary. He suited his replies to match exactly the character and knowledge of the inquirer. A farmer was answered in similes drawn from agriculture while learned brahmins were shown the greater knowledge of the Buddha drawn from a source beyond all their books. With this great ability to give everyone the right Dhamma ‘food,’ it is not surprising that he came to be known as Teacher of Celestials and Men.

This unexcelled adaptation of his teaching to fit the needs of people and circumstances is known as skill-in-means (*upāya*). It was labelled by the envious disciples of other teachers “Gotama’s enticing-device.” The basis of his ‘enticing’ was very simple: truth and penetrating wisdom,

non-harming and compassion. These elements were often woven into a gentle dialectic which resolved the doubts and delusions of many, and brought to them devotion and appreciation (*pasāda*) of the teaching. We know how often this happened since at the end of many discourses one passage in particular is repeated: “It is wonderful, Lord, marvellous indeed, Lord. As if, Lord, one were to turn up what was face down, to uncover what was concealed, to point the way to one who is lost, or to carry a lamp into the darkness with the thought.” Also, “Those who have eyes will be able to see objects so has the Dhamma been expounded in many ways by the Lord.”

For being among those able to benefit from the Dhamma so well-expounded out of knowledge, we cannot fail to be *glad, thrilled, elated, joyful and pleased*. But for the further benefit of celestials and men, Sakra now proceeds to the seventh truth...

## Seventh Marvellous and Wonderful Truth

*“This Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha, friends, has crossed the sea of doubt, is rid of perplexity and has won assurance in good states. A master, friends, who has so passed beyond doubt I do not see arisen in the world, whether I survey the past or present, other than this*

*Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha."*

Sakra first tells the celestial hosts that the Buddha *has crossed the sea of doubt*. One who has doubts is not yet enlightened, for the possession of doubts implies incomplete understanding whereas a Perfect Buddha has penetrated to the whole truth. But, it might be objected, it is possible to be deceived about lack of doubts. Many teachers and philosophers have been quite sure that they were right. To provide for this objection, Sakra tells us that the Buddha is *rid of perplexity*.

Only one who is puzzled or has a desire to know will ask questions. The Buddhas need never question others (nor themselves) in order to understand the nature of Dhamma. Certainty based on pride in one's own philosophic constructions is one thing while that arising through insight into the Three Marks (*lakṣana*) is quite another.

As if to give the greatest confidence to the celestials, Sakra finally says of the Buddha that he *has won assurance in good states*. This is the seal to his former statements for 'assurance in good states' cannot ripen to perfection where the frost of doubt and the blight of perplexity are found.

The Buddha, having passed beyond doubt, established a Dhamma where nothing need remain in doubt. Doubt (*vicikitsā*) is never in the Dhamma but only in perplexed minds and as it is among the unskilful concomitants. Lord Buddha encourages everyone by wise examination of the

Dhamma to overcome their doubts.

Without doubt was the Exalted One! For *A master, friends, who has so passed beyond doubt* and who teaches the Dhamma devoid of doubt—should not we all be *glad, thrilled, exalted, joyful and pleased?*

The last and greatest truth, Sakra has reserved until the minds of the celestials are steeped in tranquil joy...

## Eighth Marvellous and Wonderful Truth

*“Again, friends, Nirvana and the Way leading to Nirvana as taught by this Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha run together one into the other. Just as, friends, the waters of the Ganges and the Jumna flow one into the other and run together into the great ocean, so do Nirvana and the Way leading to Nirvana as taught by this Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha flow together. A master, friends, with such a well-revealed Nirvana and Way leading to Nirvana I do not see arisen in the world, whether I survey the past or present, other than this Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha.”*

Here is the cause for highest joy! Quite naturally the Way when practised leads to Nirvana and Nirvana is the natural outcome of that way.

In the simile, the lesser stream of the Jumna can be taken as the Way (*marga*) taught by Lord Buddha. It is the way of training for the man who sees his own mental afflictions (*klesa*) and is willing to make effort. He has wise faith that this way once led to the Enlightenment of Lord Buddha; he is one who not only places his trust in, but practices the way itself; and lastly he may have the benefit of a noble friend (a meditation master) who having travelled along that way can point it out to others. In brief, he has gone for Refuge to the Triple Gem. His faith in these refuges gives him the strength to go onward—even though obstacles appear to be very great. But it will be a great consolation to him if he realizes that the Dhamma is so to speak 'on his side' for if his life truly accords with it he will progress quite naturally 'towards' Nirvāna, just as the waters of the Jumna flow by nature onwards to their union with those of the Ganges.

The mighty spate of the Ganges into which the Jumna flows represents the experience during life of Nirvana, meaning here the most profound understanding of its nature. It is the fruit of perfection and the destruction of all the host of mental ills: greed, hatred, delusion and the rest. It is the summit of Buddhist endeavour so ardently longed for by those who practise the Holy Dhamma.

Although people in Lord Buddha's days, as now, frequented the union of such rivers and regarded them as 'holy' places, this simile shows that the real rivers, those of practice and attainment, are not to be found by going anywhere, nor ultimately is it places which are to be

esteemed as 'holy.' Sakra, in using this simile and knowing well the sacred associations of the Ganges in India, has given a characteristically Buddhist meaning to these rivers and their union by pointing out that they flow within anyone who practises the Dhamma. It is also fitting that the broad Ganges together with its famous and illimitable sands often used as a symbol for the inexpressible in Buddhist works, should here represent Nirvana which is also the Inexpressible. For although one may consider Nirvana under many aspects such as Enlightenment, gnosis, freedom or purity, a complete description forever evades one.

These two rivers, the Ganges and the Jumna *flow one into the other and run together into the great ocean* and while the very perfection of the way is shown quite naturally to be the perfection of the fruit, how should the latter part of this phrase be interpreted? One who has experienced Enlightenment is said to have traversed the whole way with no need to strive further, nor any idea that he has yet anything left to do—he has 'done what had to be done.' The finest of fruits is his, no longer is Nirvana read about, talked about, thought about but is actually an experience he has and from which he cannot be separated. Such a sage, we are told, is aware of how the distortions (*vipallāsa*) used to play havoc with his perceptions, colouring his emotional reactions and affecting the concepts formed by him. Formerly he will have had such attitudes to saṃsāra, the wandering-on, as assuming its permanence, enjoyability, substantiality and beauty. After having the knowledge of

Enlightenment it is said to look rather different, for the wandering-on is then, without any emotional attachment, seen to be a flux of changing events; that which is bound up with unsatisfactory experience being scarcely a place in which to 'have fun'; further, that all its manifestations are without substance and in their nature void, while that which one formerly seized on as beautiful, being impelled to do so by the passions, is now seen as lacking inherently beautiful qualities.

On the other hand, one Enlightened sees permanence in quite another quarter, for Nirvana is called the Permanent. It is also known to him as the highest happiness and is seen by those who are truly noble (*arya*) as devoid of substance and lacking that which could be interpreted as a metaphysical self. As to beauty, both the Blessed One and his disciples who saw events-as-they-really-are, were appreciative of the fair aspects of the forest in which they lived without having greed or grasping for them. Most highly valued by them were surely the beautiful deeds (*kalyāṇa-karma*) with which then as now the wise man adorns his mind, speech and body.

Further, when we are unenlightened we have not only distorted impressions of *saṃsāra*, but also mistaken notions about Nirvana, the more so since words are no substitute for direct knowledge. Whether it is words in books, by way of conversation or lecture, or whether it is the interior stream of words, however precise we try to be concerning "what Nirvana must be like," Nirvana can never be adequately

contained. Our distorted picture of both saṃsāra and Nirvana might in fact be compared to the belief that the waters in the Ganges and Jumna run upwards and backwards from the ocean to the mountains!

But we find that the text of this truth stresses that Nirvana is *well-taught and well-revealed*, so how can this be done apart from words? In formulating a reply, we should remember that Sakra has here some authority to speak from his personal experience, since his attainment of Stream-entry is recorded in the Suttas. [8] For him, as it must be for us, that well-taught and well-revealed Nirvana can only be found within the limits of “this six-foot carcass” and its consciousness. It is there that the arising and declining of the fivefold heaps (*skandha*) according to conditionality, must be apprehended. If saṃsāra, the wandering-on, is ‘here’ all around and in us and we are caught up in it as flies upon flypaper, then equally, Nirvana is ‘here.’ It is ‘here’ since the understanding of conditionality and in particular of the conditioned arising of dukkha, which is the gateway to Nirvana, cannot take place except within ‘our own’ mentality and materiality (*nāma-rūpa*). Where else indeed could it take place? While this is easily and quickly said in words it is quite another matter directly to perceive Nirvana.

Just as a scientist who wishes to record infra-red or ultra-violet light must use special equipment to allow him to investigate what his eyes are unable to see, so the followers of the Exalted One have to use the special equipment

provided by him—the way consisting of the aspects of moral conduct, collectedness and wisdom. Only then shall we come to know the unknown, to 'see' Nirvana with 'the eyes of wisdom' (*prajñācaksuh*).

One who has done this—often called “One-who-knows, one-who-sees”—is a living example of the way come to its perfect fruit and while his life lasts he is like those two great rivers as they *run together into the great ocean*. In his life will be found all that has ever been most precious for those who follow the Buddhist way. From the seeds of his striving for purity in moral conduct, grows in Enlightenment the white lotus of perfect purity in all the spheres of thought, speech and action. Since he has sincerely tried to make his life the active expression of loving-kindness, compassion and joy with others, Enlightened he is one who pours as from a vessel the ambrosia of perfect compassion upon those still trapped and wandering in *saṃsāra*. And, as during his training he developed a vigilant mindfulness becoming aware of unskillful thoughts as they arose so that they went to destruction, upon becoming one-who-knows-and-sees, he wields the sword of penetrative wisdom, instantly able to detect views which lead others astray (*mithyā drishti*).

Sages such as this, and such were the great disciples of the Buddha-time together with some teachers of today, as they pass in this way through their lives, in time come to the great ocean. No longer will the patchwork of the five heaps hold together. Ungrieving and unconcerned with what after all does not belong to him, such a sage lets what is material

return to the four great elements and since, what is mental arises only in connection with a body that he knows must cease when the body is no more. This state which he approaches is called Nirvana-without-substrata (of existence) and it is this which is compared to the great ocean of which the depths and the extent are not easy to gauge. Nirvana is known, just as the ocean is seen to be by those in its midst, as the Unlimited.

When this had been said, Lord, the celestials of the Thirty-three were still more glad and thrilled, elated and joyful, pleased and happy.

And they said to Sakra, sovereign of celestials, "Therefore, friend Kausika, we should like you to proclaim again the eight marvellous and wonderful truths about the Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha."—"Well then, again friends...," and Sakra repeated those eight truths as before.

When he had so spoken the celestials of the Thirty-Three were still more thrilled, elated, joyful, pleased and happy.

Then, Lord, when the Great Brahma saw that the celestials of the Thirty-Three were so increased in happiness, he said to Sakra, Lord of celestials: "Therefore, friend Kausika, we would like you to proclaim again the eight marvellous and wonderful truths about the Exalted One, Arhan and Perfect Buddha."

And at the end of this third recital, the celestials of the Thirty-three were still more thrilled, elated, pleased, and happy. Truly, they took delight in what was worth delighting in.

Who can fail to rejoice when following such a Master the like of whom Sakra says, “I do not see arisen in the world, whether I survey the past or the present”! But why is this? We are told that many Buddhas have proclaimed the Dhamma in the past and that many more will do so in the future. The answer to this lies in the timelessness of the Dhamma. It is not limited to any particular time, place or person. As the Buddha is reported to have told Vakkali Thera: “Whoso sees the Dhamma, he sees me.”

How shall we see this Dhamma? How shall we also be able to experience the joy aroused by Dhamma among the celestials? This is not possible if we only beckon to the further shore to come here, or just contemplate from a distance what we imagine are its beauties. When, like a strong man, we bind our loincloth and plunge into the stream then the Dhamma is near at hand. On that further shore lie the real joys and peace of Dhamma; but to enjoy them we must first get there. And to do this we need the practice of Dhamma (*praṭipatti-dharma*).

Meanwhile it only remains to set out on the journey—which over 2500 years ago resulted in such a wonderful discovery. Whatever method we use to cross over, whether raft, boat or bridge, one aspiration we should bear in mind, however

long the journey and however rough the waters: “May we, having crossed, lead others across; ourselves free, set others free; ourselves comforted, give comfort to others; ourselves released, give release to others. May this come to pass for the welfare and happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the sake of the great multitude, and for the welfare and happiness of celestials and men.”

# Notes

1. As mentioned above, Pañcasikha, the celestial minstrel, is speaking to Lord Buddha
2. The Pali here is in the 1st person plural.
3. See *The Discourse on the Snake Simile* (The **Wheel No. 48/49**).
4. Possibly this also refers to the Buddha's frequent periods of seclusion when, as the texts say, he was to be approached only by the person bringing his meals. The Pali commentators remark that also in the midst of company the Buddha, entering the state of Fruition Attainment (*phalasangāpatti*), was able to be mentally aloof and detached; to 'dismiss' mentally the thought of the company's presence—Ed.
5. Again the Pali here is in the 1st person plural.
6. The translation has 'ignorance' (see below).
7. The terms used in the Mahāvastu are *anabhijñā* and *abhijñā* respectively.
8. See *Sakka's Quest* (The **Wheel No. 10**).

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