

[The Discourse that Set the Dharma-Wheel Rolling]

[Dharmacakrapravartanasūtram]

Translated by Ānandajoti Bhikkhu

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Introduction

The following text has been established through a comparison of S. Lefman's edition of Lalitavistara of 1902 with P. L. Vaidya's edition of 1958. Both are published in Devanāgarī script. For a few verses I have also consulted F. Edgerton's edition in his Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Reader of 1953. An invaluable resource has been the same author's Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary also published in 1953.

The discourse and verses that are reproduced below come as the culmination of the text known as the Lalitavistara (An Elaboration of the Play [of the Buddha]), a Vaipūlyasūtra that is one of the central texts of the Mahāyāna, which was probably finalised in the first centuries of the Common Era. According to Nariman¹ it is based on a text that originally belongs to the Sarvāstivādī school.

The sūtra follows the Bodhisattvā from his decision to leave the Tuṣita Heaven, through his birth, going-forth, and Awakening and ends with his teaching what would be known as the Dharmacakrapravartanasūtra. Here I have included the Meeting at R̥ṣipatana, which is much the same as the parallel story found in the Pāḷi Vinayaṭṭaka, then the Discourse itself, which also is very close to the Pāḷi version, but with some interesting variations which I have recorded in the notes, and the verses that follow, which offer an alternative ending to the first teaching.

The verses add additional teachings to that outlined by that discourse, including the teachings on impermanence, emptiness, conditional origination, and the selfless nature of all phenomena, and so it constitutes a summary of the teaching, which is well worth a greater audience than it has so far received.

A number of the verses are quite obscure, and I have noted these in the text which follows in the hope that someone will be able to enlighten me on these matters. I have added the metrical markers and shown by the use of breves how I believe the text needs to be scanned, as this clearly shows that underneath the Sanskritisation of the text lie ancient verses written in a kind of Prākṛt that cannot be too far removed from the original dialect(s). This therefore reveals that although the text has received great elaboration at the hands of its redactors there is still an ancient core that must have been passed down in Buddhist monastic circles from the earliest times.

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¹ Literary history of Sanskrit Buddhism, p. 18.

[1: The Meeting at R̥ṣipātana]

Thus, monks, the Realised One while walking on walking tour through the (various) States approached the great city of Vārāṇasī, and after approaching, dressing at the right time, picking up his bowl and robe, he entered the great city of Vārāṇasī for alms,² after walking for alms there, when he was returning from the alms-round after the meal, he approached the Deer Park in R̥ṣipātana and the auspicious group-of-five.

The auspicious group-of-five saw the Realised One coming from afar and after seeing (him) they stopped what they were doing, (and said): “That ascetic Gautama who is coming, friends, is loose, given to luxury, has forsaken the striving. Even when formerly living an austere life he was not able to experience for himself a state beyond (ordinary) human beings, a distinction of what is truly noble knowledge and insight, so how now, when he lives with devotion and clinging to bringing in food for the gross material body?

It is unsuitable, he is loose and given to luxury. No one should go out to meet him, or rise up for him, or take his bowl and robes, or give him a seat, or give him a drink, or set up a footstool, (but) after putting out extra seats, he should be told: ‘Know that these are extra seats friend Gautama, if you wish you can sit down.’ ”

Venerable Ājñāna Kauṇḍinya could not endure it in his mind, but nor could he oppose it.

As, monks, the Realised One was approaching the auspicious group-of-five they took no delight on being on their seats, and had a desire to rise. Just as a bird inside a cage when the bottom of the cage is consumed by fire wishes to rise up quickly and wishes to escape the heat of the fire, just so, monks, as the Realised One was approaching near to the auspicious group-of-five so they took no delight on being on their seats, and had a desire to rise.

Why is that?

There is no being in the (various) classes of beings who, having seen the Realised One, does not rise from their seat. Just as the Realised One was approaching the auspicious group-of-five so the auspicious group-of-five were unable to bear the glory and majesty of the Realised One, trembling they rose from their seats, and having broken their agreement, and rising someone went out to meet him, someone rose up for him and took his bowl and robes, someone offered him a seat, someone set up a footstool, someone set up water for washing his feet, and they said: “Welcome to you friend

² This detail about first going for alms is absent from the Pāḷi account in the Mahākhandhaka.

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Gautama, welcome to you friend Gautama, please sit down on the prepared seat.”Then the Realised One, monks, sat down on the prepared seat.

The auspicious group-of-five exchanged with the Realised One some polite and pleasing talk while seated, and while sitting on one side the auspicious group-of-five said this to the Realised One: “Your faculties, friend Gautama, are very clear, purified is your skin and bright, the complexion of your face is pure, have you, friend Gautama, experienced for yourself a state beyond (ordinary) human beings, a distinction of what is truly noble knowledge and insight?”

After that was said, monks, the Realised One said this to the auspicious group-of-five: “Do not, monks, address the Realised One by the word ‘friend’, that will not be for your welfare, benefit and happiness for a long time, the Deathless has been experienced by me, monks, and the Path to the Deathless, I am an Awakened One, monks, all-knowing, all-seeing, one who has cooled off, without pollutants, I have power over all things, and I teach the Doctrine, monks, you should come, listen, undertake and give an ear, I am advising and instructing, having been properly instructed by me, properly trained, you will be free from the pollutants, freed in mind, freed through wisdom, and in this very life, having seen directly, having attained, you will be able to say:

‘Destroyed is (re)birth for us,
accomplished is the spiritual life,
done is what ought to be done,
there is no more of this mundane state - this we know’.

Now didn’t this occur to you: ‘This ascetic Gautama who is coming, friends, is loose, given to luxury, has forsaken the striving. Even when formerly living an austere life he was not able to experience for himself a state beyond (ordinary) human beings, a distinction of what is truly noble knowledge and insight, so how now, when he lives with devotion and clinging to bringing in food for the gross material body?

It is unsuitable, he is loose and given to luxury. No one should go out to meet him, or rise up for him, or take his bowl and robes, or give him a seat, or give him a drink, or set up a footstool, (but) after putting out extra seats he should be told: “Know that these are extra seats friend Gautama, if you wish you can sit down.” ’

And having said ‘Come monks!’ to them, whatever signs or marks of their belonging to an outside sect they had all of them in an instant were destroyed, and thereupon the three robes and bowl appeared, their hair was shorn, and their deportment was like monks who have been ordained for a hundred years, they were restrained, and this was their going-forth, their higher ordination, their monkhood.

The Discourse that Set the Dharma-Wheel Rolling

In Lalitavistara about six pages of text are found here in which the Buddha decides where to teach, which is followed by many signs and wonders, and a gathering of the gods from all over the universe who request him to set the Dharma-Wheel rolling, at which point he sits down and delivers his first discourse:

[2: The Discourse that Set the Dharma-Wheel Rolling]

Then the Realised One, monks, in the first watch of the night agreed (to teach) by keeping silent, in the middle watch of the night he took delight in what was to be said, in the last watch of the night he addressed the auspicious group-of-five, (saying): “There are these two extremes, monks, that one who has gone forth ought not to descend to, which is this:

being joined and clinging to the pleasure in sense pleasures, which is low, vulgar, worldly, not very noble, not connected with the goal, not (helpful) for the spiritual life in the future, not leading to world-weariness, dispassion, cessation, deep knowledge, Complete Awakening, and Emancipation; and this, which is not the middle practice: devotion to self-mortification, which is painful, not connected with the goal, painful in this very life and in the future where it results in pain.

Not having approached either of these two extremes, monks, the Doctrine of the middle practice is being taught by the Realised One, which is this:

right view
right thought
right speech
right action
right livelihood
right endeavour
right mindfulness
right concentration.

The Four Noble Truths

There are these Four Noble Truths, monks. Which four? Suffering, the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

Herein, what is suffering?

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birth is suffering
also old age is suffering
also sickness is suffering
also death, being joined to what is not dear, being separated from what is dear, is suffering
also not to obtain what one seeks for is suffering
in brief, the five constituent parts (of mind and body) that provide fuel for attachment are suffering.

This is said to be suffering.

Herein, what is the arising of suffering?

it is that craving which leads to continuation in existence,
which is connected with enjoyment and passion.

This is said to be the arising of suffering.

Herein, what is the cessation of suffering?

It is the complete fading away and cessation without remainder of the birth of that craving,
which greatly enjoys this and that, and is connected with enjoyment and passion.

This is [said to be] the cessation of suffering.

Herein, what is the practice leading to the cessation of suffering?

It is the noble eightfold path, which is this:

right view
right thought
right speech
right action
right livelihood
right endeavour
right mindfulness
right concentration.

This is said to be the noble truth of the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

These, monks, are the four noble truths.

Realisation

‘This is suffering’, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

‘This is the arising of suffering’,³ to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

‘This is the cessation of suffering’, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

‘This is the practice leading to the cessation of suffering’, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

Now that to which “this is suffering” refers (i.e. suffering itself) ought to be fully known, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

Now that to which “this is the arising of suffering” refers (i.e. craving) ought to be given up, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

Now that to which “this is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering” refers (i.e. Emancipation) ought to be experienced, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

Now that to which “this is the noble truth of the practice leading to the end of suffering” refers (i.e. the practice itself) ought to be developed, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things

³ In the Pāli version of this discourse the order is somewhat different: knowledge of the truth of suffering is followed by the thought that it ought to be fully known and then by the realisation that it has been fully known; similarly with the others.

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reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

Now that to which “this is the noble truth of suffering” refers has been fully known, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

Now that to which “this is the noble truth of the arising of suffering” refers has been given up, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

Now that to which “this is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering” refers has been experienced, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

Now that to which “this is the noble truth of the practice leading to the end of suffering” refers has been developed, to me, monks, regarding these previously unheard-of things reflecting wisely and practising continuously, knowledge arose, vision arose, understanding arose, comprehension arose, intelligence arose, wisdom arose and light became manifest.

Declaring the Awakening

For as long as to me, monks, in regard to these four noble truths reflected upon wisely and turned like this, in three ways, twelvefold, knowledge and insight was (still) arising, for that long, monks, I did not declare that I was a Full and Perfect Sambuddha with unsurpassed complete awakening; but when knowledge and insight was no longer arising, and in regard to these four noble truths, monks, turned like this, in three ways, twelvefold, knowledge and insight had arisen (and I knew): sure is my liberation of mind, wisdom and liberation have been experienced, then I, monks, did declare that I was a Full and Perfect Sambuddha with unsurpassed complete awakening and knowledge and insight arose:

‘Destroyed is (re)birth for me,
accomplished is the spiritual life,
done is what ought to be done,
there is no more of this mundane state’ - this I know.
This is what was said in that place.

[3: Verses on Setting Rolling the Dharma-Wheel]

Having a voice resounding like Brahmā, like the song of a Kinnara,⁴
Having ten-million⁵ rays radiating (from his body),
Having cultivated truth continually for many millions of aeons,⁶
The Self-made⁷ Sage of the Śākyaans addressed Kauṇḍinya:

“The eye is impermanent, inconstant, and so is the ear, the nose,
The tongue, the body, the mind --- (all) are suffering, non-self, empty.
Naturally quiescent like clumps of grass, inanimate,
There is neither Self here, nor a Person or a Soul.⁸

All things are produced with a condition and a cause,
Having put aside all extreme views, (it is) as clear as the sky:
There is no doer, nor is there one who experiences,
He sees no deed done, whether it be bad or good.

The constituent parts⁹ arise through conditions, and so there is suffering,
It is produced just as thirst is through the cutting off of water.
Seeing equanimity towards (conditioned) things through the Path,
It is completely destroyed, with the cessation of those things subject to decay.

With the production of various thoughts that are not wise
Comes ignorance,¹⁰ no one is a producer of it,

⁴ *Kinnara*-s are semi-divine like creatures, having a bird’s body and a human’s face, their song is renowned as being exceptionally beautiful.

⁵ Lit: *a thousand myriads* (1,000 x 10,000), which equals ten million (10,000,000); in the next line *koṭi* means *ten million*, but the repetition sounds awkward in English, so I render it as *million*.

⁶ The perfection of truth (*satyapāramitā*) is the only perfection the Bodhisattva always maintained unbroken from the time of his making the vow to become a Buddha.

⁷ So called because he discovered the truth for himself.

⁸ *Nara* (lit: *a person, a man*) and *Jīva* (lit: *life or the life-principle*) are both used here as an equivalent of *Ātma, Self*.

⁹ The constituent parts of mind and matter: body, feelings, perceptions, (volitional) processes, and consciousness.

¹⁰ This begins a versification of the conditional origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) formula.

Verses on Setting Rolling the Dharma-Wheel

The cause for volitional (processes) is given,¹¹ there is no maker of them,
Consciousness arises, made by conditions,

With consciousness there is then an arising of name and form,
With name and form originate the six sense spheres,
Contact is said to fall upon the six sense spheres,
With contact the three feelings follow along,

Whatever feelings there are, all are said to be joined with craving,
From craving is born a whole mass of suffering,
From attachment comes the whole round of existence,
Because of continuation of existence birth arises for him,

With birth as foundation come the sufferings of old-age and sickness,
And many and various rebirths in the round of existence.
Thus from all these conditions there are worldly inhabitants,
There is no Self or Person encountered anywhere.

Where there is no imagining or doubt that is said to be wisdom,
Whatever comes from wisdom, in that there is no ignorance at all.
In whatever place there is cessation of ignorance
There is a cessation of all decay and the factors of existence which are destroyed by decay.¹²

Thus conditionality has been understood by the Realised One,
Because of that the Self-made One declares himself (Awake).
I do not say that the constituent parts, the sense-spheres, or the elements are the Buddha,
Without an understanding of conditions no-one can become a Buddha.

There is no room here for those who have gone forth as heretics,
When speaking of emptiness in connection with such things,
(Only) those who are fully purified beings, who live (like) former Buddhas,
Who speak pleasantly, get to know the Nature (of things).”

Thus the Dharma-Wheel (understood) in twelve ways was set rolling,
It was understood by Kauṇḍinya, and the three jewels came into existence.¹³

¹¹ ...is given as ignorance.

¹² I am unsure about the translation of these two lines.

Verses on Setting Rolling the Dharma-Wheel

The Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha, these are the three jewels,
This cry passed from one to another as far as the Brahmā realm.

The dust-free (Dharma) Wheel was set rolling by the Lord of the World,
And the three jewels, which are exceedingly rare, arose in the world.
Having first converted Kauṇḍinya, the five monks
And six hundred million gods were purified by the Vision-of-the-Dharma,¹⁴

And another eight hundred million gods from the Element of Form¹⁵
Had their vision purified by the Dharma-Wheel being set rolling.
Eighty-four thousand human beings who had assembled
Also had their vision purified, and were freed from all bad destinations.¹⁶

At that moment in the ten directions¹⁷ without end this cry (concerning) the Buddha
Went forth, resounding, sweet, pleasing, beautiful, it was heard in the firmament:
“The supreme Dharma-Wheel, has been set rolling by the One Possessing Ten-Powers,
By the Śākya sage, by no other, after he had approached Ṛṣipatana, close to Vārāṇasī.”

In the ten directions all of the hundred Buddhas¹⁸ fell silent,
And the leading sages who attended on them all asked the Victorious Ones:
“Why have the Ones Possessing Ten-Powers after hearing this sound,
Interrupted their Dharma talk thus? What is the reason they have so quickly silenced their
speech?”

“Through a hundred previous existences Awakening was accomplished
With energy and strength, and many hundred-thousand Awakening-Beings were left behind.
So through beneficial actions and purification¹⁹ the auspicious Awakening was attained,
The Wheel has been rolled three times,²⁰ therefore we have become silent.”

¹³ With Kauṇḍinya’s realisation and ordination the third jewel, the Saṅgha came into being, alongside the Buddha and the Dharma.

¹⁴ The Vision-of-the-Dharma arises when attaining the Paths and Fruits of sainthood.

¹⁵ I.e. the Brahmā gods.

¹⁶ I.e. they all attained to Stream-Entry (*Sotāpatti*), and were no longer subject to falling into the lower realms.

¹⁷ The four main directions (East, South, West, North) and the intermediate directions (South-East, etc.), above and below.

¹⁸ It must mean in other realms of existence, as only one Buddha arises in a world-system at any one time.

¹⁹ S.v. *uttapta* in BHSD for this meaning.

Verses on Setting Rolling the Dharma-Wheel

“After hearing these words, those billions²¹ of sages, after developing
The strength of friendliness, advanced towards the auspicious and highest Awakening,
(Thinking): “We also will train under the Sage, engaged in giving rise to energy,
Quickly we will become supreme in the world, and will offer the Vision-of-the-Dharma (to
others).”

At this point in Lalitavistara there is a long prose passage which begins with the Bodhisattvā Maitreya asking the Buddha to explain more about the rolling of the Dharma-Wheel. It begins as a panegyric on the Wheel itself, and then goes into a long list of titles that the Buddha is known by, which spans some 14 pages in Lefman’s edition, before the verses are taken up again:

The deep, hard to see, subtle Dharma-Wheel has been set rolling, which the Māras cannot grasp, nor any of the outside heretics.

The non-adhering, non-proliferating, non-arising, non-producing Dharma-Wheel has been set rolling, which is pure,²² and naturally empty.

Without effort and without leaving off effort, without signs and characteristics, the Buddha praises the Wheel which explains the nature of equanimity.

A magical mirage, a dream, the moon in the water, an echo - just so is the Wheel that was set rolling by the Lord of the World.

The entrance to (understanding) conditionality, which is neither annihilation nor eternalism, the Dharma-Wheel, which cuts off all (wrong) views, is remembered as such.

(Empty) forever like space, free from doubt, luminous, the explanation of the middle (Path), free from extremes -- such is the Dharma-Wheel said to be.

Free from being and non-being, without Self or non-Self, the Dharma-Wheel is said to be the explanation of Nature and of birth.

²⁰ The three times referred to are: the truth itself, the necessity for its full realisation and the realisation of it (see Dhammacakkappavattanasuttaṃ elsewhere on this website).

²¹ Lit: hundred ten-millions (= 1,000,000,000).

²² S.v. *vivikta* in BHSD for this meaning.

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True from bottom to top, this is real and factual, the unique explanation of the nature (of things) - such is the Dharma-Wheel said to be.

The state of the eye is empty, and so also with the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind --- they are empty of self, inanimate.²³

This Wheel is such-like, the Dharma-Wheel that has been set rolling, it Awakens the unawakened beings, therefore it is called the awakened (teaching).

By myself the state and characteristic of Nature have been understood without the teaching of others, (I am) therefore Self-made, a Visionary.

I have attained mastery of all things, so am said to be the Lord of Dharma, I am the knower of the right and wrong way in (all) things, therefore I am said to be the Leader.²⁴

As there are unfriendly people I will discipline them in the Discipline, (I have) attained the discipline of perfection, therefore I am called the Great Leader.

To those beings who have lost their way I point out the Path supreme, and lead them to the farther shore, therefore I am the Great Leader.

Through knowing the bases of sympathy²⁵ I welcome the people crossing through the forest of the Cycle (of birth and death), therefore I am the Caravan-Leader.

I have power over all things, therefore I am the Victorious Master of the Dharma, having set the Dharma-Wheel rolling I am said to be the Dharma-King.

I am the Lord-Giver of Dharma, the Teacher, the unsurpassed Lord of the Dharma, I am Siddhārtha (the Accomplished One), who has made the sacrifice, fulfilled hopes, accomplished blessings.

I am the Comforter, the One with Insight into Safety, the Hero, the One who has put down Great Evil, the One who has Overcome all Battles, the One who is Freed and by whom the people are freed.

²³ Edgerton (BHSD s.v. *nirīha*) gives the meaning here as *indifferent*, but it seems to me the better meaning is as in the translation.

²⁴ There is a play on the sounds *naya*, *anaya*, and *nāyaka* here, which does not come across well in the English.

²⁵ In Lalitavistara (beginning of Chapter 13) these are listed as *dāna*, *priyavākya*, *arthakriyā*, *samānārthatā*, *giving*, *lovely speech*, *beneficial actions*, *even-handedness*.

Verses on Setting Rolling the Dharma-Wheel

I am the Light of the world, the Light of Wisdom and Knowledge, I am the Destroyer of the darkness of nescience, the Torch-bearer, the Great Light.

I am the Great Doctor, the Great Knower, the Great Physician for the defilements, the unsurpassed Surgeon for beings pierced by the defilements.

I am endowed with all the characteristics, resplendent with all the marks,²⁶ having a body auspicious on all sides, (but) who resembles the lowly.²⁷

I am the One Strong with the Ten Strengths, the most Mature of the Mature, I am the Great Sage, the Head, endowed with eighteen special qualities.²⁸

This is the short explanation of the setting rolling of the Dharma-Wheel, the Realised One's beautiful virtues have thus been given and set forth.

The Buddha's knowledge is endless, just like the Great Sky, while speaking of it aeons may be destroyed, but the virtues of the Buddha will never decay.

²⁶ Characteristics and marks of a Great Man, it means.

²⁷ I.e. appears as a normal human being.

²⁸ There is a list in the Mahāyutpatti of the 18 *āveṇika*-s (s.v. *āveṇika* in BHSD): the Realised One has no perplexity, hurry, loss of mindfulness, lack of composure, manifold perception, lack of reflective equanimity; or any putting down of wholesome desire, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, freedom; he has knowledge of what precedes and what follows all bodily, verbal and mental actions, and has set rolling past, future, and present means of non-attachment, non-revenge, knowledge and insight.