

# 1 The Dīgha Nikāya: *The Discourse of Ambattha* (ca. 5th–1st Century BCE)

Introduced by Sven Bretfeld

## Introduction

Traditional Buddhist sources are not against the idea of strong, authoritative worldly leadership – as long as it is driven by ethical principles of righteousness, justice, and modesty. A king embodying these principles would be called a *dharma-rāja* – a dharma king or righteous king. Violence – especially violence in self-defence or to punish criminals – does not, in itself, contradict the ideal of a dharma king. However, occasionally, special dharma kings appear, who do not have to resort to warfare or punishment at all. These so-called *cakravartins*, or wheel-turning monarchs, embody the principles of dharma so well that they can rule, and even conquer new territory, merely by winning people over through their exemplary lifestyle, noble charisma, and illustrious reputation. The properties of such a ruler are not achieved by mere coincidence, but as the result of a long karmic preparation, spanning innumerable lifetimes of merit accumulation. This resembles the karmic preparation of a bodhisattva for supreme awakening.<sup>1</sup>

According to legend, Siddhārtha Gautama himself had the chance to become such an ideal worldly ruler, but chose instead to achieve the supreme state of Buddhahood. This choice was available because Siddhārtha Gautama was born with the thirty-two major marks of a “Great Man” (*mahāpuruṣa*). The birth of a Great Man is a rare cosmic event that happens only a few times per world-cycle – if at all. It is the conclusion of a special aspiration, spanning millions of lifetimes. In all of these former lives a Great Man will have systematically collected good karma (*punya*), explicitly dedicating the beneficial power of his good deeds to the one moment in which he would attain one of two possible ultimate goals: either enthronement as an ideal king – a wheel-turning monarch (*cakravartin*), who rules the world in peace and righteousness – or the moment of supreme awakening (*saṃyaksambodhi*), which would turn him into a supreme Buddha who would open the gates to deathlessness by revealing to the world the path to nirvana.

The concept of the Great Man seems to stem from ancient Indian lore, and is perhaps not unlike the Jewish messiah concept. It is the hope for the arrival of a pre-

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the *cakravartin* concept, see Stanley S. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

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dicted ‘chosen one,’ who will turn the world into a better place. The following story suggests that this prophecy was part of the Indian Vedic – that is, pre-Buddhist – tradition, but this cannot be confirmed by the extant Vedic material. The myth of the Great Man seems to combine the hopes for an idealised hero figure in the political and the religious spheres. However, unlike the Jewish messiah, the Indian Great Man would fulfil only one of the two aspects of the prophecy, depending on his chosen path. Siddhārtha Gautama chose the religious path, becoming a supreme Buddha. In some texts he introduces himself as the “Thus-Come” (*tathāgata*), implying that he is the one everybody has been waiting for. Some 100 years later, King Aśoka (304–232 BCE) would choose the other path; he is identified in the Buddhist tradition as a wheel-turning monarch. Both – the Buddha and Aśoka – are depicted with the thirty-two major marks of a Great Man (that is, the bodily features making every Buddha image unmistakable, such as the protuberance on top of the head (*uṣṇīṣa*), the tuft of hair between the eyebrows (*ūrṇa*), or the wheel symbol on the soles of the feet; the distinctive long earlobes are among the eighty minor marks of a Great Man). The *tathāgata* and the *cakravartin* are, in a way, twin figures of the cosmic process – though they are not monozygotic twins, as they are distinguished by their ‘career choices’: one has to play the role of a religious saviour, the other the role of saviour of the political world.

In the following passage from the early Buddhist scriptural collection *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Brahman (Vedic priest) Pokkharasati has heard that the ascetic Gotama (Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha) will spend the night in a jungle close by. The Brahman has heard rumours that Gotama is believed to be a fully enlightened Buddha by his followers. Therefore, he sends his pupil Ambattha to the place where Gotama is staying, to find out whether the rumours are true. Before Ambattha leaves, Pokkharasati teaches his pupil about the prophecy of the Great Man, and how to recognize such a being.

## Bibliographical Information

Thomas W. Rhys Davids and Joseph Estlin Carpenter, eds. *The Dīgha Nikāya*. vol. 1. 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1980; 88–89.

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1.4. And Pokkharasati said to Ambattha: ‘Ambattha, my son, the ascetic Gotama . . . is staying in the dense jungle of Icchānankala. And concerning that Blessed Lord a good report has been spread about . . . Now you go to see the ascetic Gotama and find out whether this report is correct or not, and whether the Reverend Gotama is as they say or not. In that way we shall put the Reverend Gotama to the test.’

1.5. ‘Sir, how shall I find out whether the report is true, or whether the Reverend Gotama is as they say or not?’ ‘According to the tradition of our mantras, Ambattha, the great man who is possessed of the thirty-two marks of a Great Man has only two courses open to him. If he lives the household life he will become a ruler, a wheel-turning righteous monarch of the law,<sup>1</sup> conqueror of the four quarters, who has established the security of his realm and is possessed of the [p. 88/89] seven treasures.<sup>2</sup> These are: the Wheel-Treasure, the Elephant-Treasure, the Horse-Treasure, the Jewel-Treasure, the Woman-Treasure, the Householder-Treasure, and, as seventh, the Counsellor-Treasure. He has more than a thousand sons who are heroes, of heroic stature, conquerors of the hostile army. He dwells having conquered this sea-girt land without stick or sword, by the law. But if he goes forth from the household life into homelessness, then he will become an Arahant, a fully-enlightened Buddha, one who draws back the veil from the world.<sup>3</sup> And, Ambattha, I am the passer-on of the mantras, and you are the receiver.’

## References

- Davids, Thomas W. Rhys and Joseph Estlin Carpenter, eds. *The Dīgha Nikāya*, vol. 3. 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1911. [DN]  
 Stede, William, ed. *Sumangala-vilāsinī: Buddhaghosa's commentary on the 'Dīgha-nikāya'*. London: Pali Text Society, 1971. [DA]

<sup>1</sup> [editorial note 144 in the original] See DN 17.

<sup>2</sup> [editorial note 145 in the original] See DN 17.

<sup>3</sup> [editorial note 146 in the original] *Loke vivattacchaddo*: a difficult expression. I follow DA. The ‘veil’ is that of ignorance, etc.