

7 The Dīgha Nikāya: *The Discourse of the Lion's Roar of a Wheel-Turning Monarch* (ca. 5th–1st Century BCE)

Introduced by Sven Bretfeld

Introduction

The next passage is a much older version of the *Anāgatavaṃsa* story of the downfall of human civilisation, though with some differences – both major and minor. The biggest difference is that, this time, a cause for the moral decline is given: the world remains in order only as long as kings follow the ideal of a wheel-turning monarch. In the passage, this is described as having been the case for seven generations of kings, all honoured with the celestial wheel treasure (see above). When a king dies, the wheel vanishes, and when his son has proven that he is continuing his father's merciful and wise politics, the wheel appears again. The eighth ruler interrupts this line, and starts to “rule the people according to his own ideas.” As a consequence, the celestial wheel treasure no longer appears, and the realm starts to deteriorate. No reason is given for the king's refusal to act like his wise ancestors, however. The story seems to imply that he is simply foolish, greedy, and selfish. His neglect of the people's welfare sets in motion a chain reaction of moral decay. The people become poor, and start to depend on theft. Over time they resort to killing, lying, and other crimes. With the increasing immorality of the people, their lifespans and beauty decrease. The turning point is similar to the *Anāgatavaṃsa*: a seven-day massacre depopulates the earth (though a violence-inducing rain is not mentioned in this version) and the eventual few survivors gradually return to moral behaviour. When the world's morality is again in full bloom, the first wheel-turning monarch appears, followed a little later by the Buddha Maitreya.

The major point of this version is that the moral decline and near extinction of humankind is caused by political failure. This motif is still drawn upon by modern Buddhist authors.

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Bibliographical Information

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8. ‘And a second wheel-turning monarch did likewise, and a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth, and a seventh king also . . . told a man to see if the Wheel had slipped from its position (*as verse 3*). [p. 63/64] And seven days after the royal sage had gone forth the Wheel disappeared.

9. ‘Then a man came to the King and said: “Sire, you should know that the sacred Wheel-Treasure has disappeared.” At this the King was grieved and felt sad. But he did not go to the royal sage and ask him about the duties of a wheel-turning monarch. Instead, he ruled the people according to his own ideas, and, being so ruled, the people did not prosper so well as they had done under the previous kings who had performed the duties of a wheel-turning monarch. Then the ministers, counsellors, treasury officials, guards and doorkeepers, and the chanters of mantras came to the King and said: [p. 64/65] “Sire, as long as you rule the people according to your own ideas, and differently from the way they were ruled before under previous wheel-turning monarchs, the people do not prosper so well. Sire, there are ministers . . . in your realm, including ourselves, who have preserved the knowledge of how a wheel-turning monarch should rule. Ask us, Your Majesty, and we will tell you!”

10. ‘Then the King ordered all the ministers and others to come together, and he consulted them. And they explained to him the duties of a wheel-turning monarch. And, having listened to them, the King established guard and protection, but he did not give property to the needy, and as a result poverty became rife. With the spread of poverty, a man took what was not given, thus committing what was called theft. They arrested him, and brought him before the King, saying: “Your Majesty, this man took what was not given, which we call theft.” The King said to him: “Is it true that you took what was not given – which is called theft?” “It is, Your Majesty.” “Why?” “Your Majesty,

I have nothing to live on.” [p. 65/66] Then the King gave the man some property, saying: “With this, my good man, you can keep yourself, support your mother and father, keep a wife and children, carry on a business and make gifts to ascetics and Brahmins, which will promote your spiritual welfare and lead to a happy rebirth with pleasant result in the heavenly sphere.” “Very good, Your Majesty”, replied the man.

11. ‘And exactly the same thing happened with another man.

12. ‘Then people heard that the King was giving away property to those who took what was not given, and they thought: “Suppose we were to do likewise!” And then another man took what was not given, and they brought him before the King. [p. 66/67] The King asked him why he had done this, and he replied: “Your Majesty, I have nothing to live on.” Then the King thought: “If I give property to everybody who takes what is not given, this theft will increase more and more. I had better make an end of him, finish him off once for all, and cut his head off.” So he commanded his men: “Bind this man’s arms tightly behind him with a strong rope, shave his head closely, and lead him to the rough sound of a drum through the streets and squares and out through the southern gate, and there finish by inflicting the capital penalty and cutting off his head!” And they did so.

13. ‘Hearing about this, people thought: “Now let us get sharp swords made for us, and then we can take from anybody what is not given [which is called theft], [p. 67/68] we will make an end of them, finish them off once for all and cut off their heads.” So, having procured some sharp swords, they launched murderous assaults on villages, towns and cities, and went in for highway-robbery, killing their victims by cutting off their heads.

14. ‘Thus, from the not giving of property to the needy, poverty became rife, from the growth of poverty, the taking of what was not given increased, from the increase of theft, the use of weapons increased, from the increased use of weapons, the taking of life increased – and from the increase in the taking of life, people’s life-span decreased, their beauty decreased, and as a result of this decrease of life-span and beauty, the children of those whose life-span had been eighty thousand years lived for only forty thousand.

‘And a man of the generation that lived for forty thousand years took what was not given. He was brought before the King, who asked him: “Is it true that you took what was not given — what is called theft?” “No, Your Majesty”, he replied, thus telling a deliberate lie.

15. ‘Thus, from the not giving of property to the needy, . . . the taking of life increased, and from the taking of life, lying increased, [p. 68/69] from the increase in lying, people’s life-span decreased, their beauty decreased, and as a result, the children of those whose life-span had been forty thousand years lived for only twenty thousand.

‘And a man of the generation that lived for twenty thousand years took what was not given. Another man denounced him to the King, saying: “Sire, such-and-such a man has taken what was not given”, thus speaking evil of another.¹

16. ‘Thus, from the not giving of property to the needy, . . . the speaking evil of others increased, and in consequence, people’s life-span decreased, their beauty decreased, and as a result, the children of those whose life-span had been twenty thousand years lived only for ten thousand.

‘And of the generation that lived for ten thousand years, some were beautiful, and some were ugly. And those who were ugly, being envious of those who were beautiful, committed adultery with others’ wives.

17. ‘Thus, from the not giving of property to the needy, . . . sexual misconduct increased, and in consequence people’s life-span decreased, their beauty decreased, and as a result, the children of those whose life-span had been ten thousand years lived for only five thousand.

‘And among the generation whose life-span was five thousand years, two things increased: harsh speech and idle chatter, in consequence of which people’s life-span decreased, their beauty decreased, and as a result, the children of those whose life-span had been five thousand years [p. 69/70] lived, some for two-and-a-half thousand years, and some for only two thousand.

‘And among the generation whose life-span was two-and-a-half thousand years, covetousness and hatred increased, and in consequence people’s life-span decreased, their beauty decreased, and as a result, the children of those whose life-span had been two-and-a-half thousand years lived for only a thousand.

‘Among the generation whose life-span was a thousand years, false opinions² increased . . . and as a result, the children of those whose life-span had been a thousand years lived for only five hundred.

‘And among the generation whose life-span was five hundred years, three things increased: incest, excessive greed and deviant practices³ . . . and as a result, the children of those whose life-span had been five hundred years lived, some for two hundred and fifty years, some for only two hundred.

1 [editorial note 793 in the original] Even though the charge was justified! But the denunciation was malicious.

2 [editorial note 794 in the original] *Micchā-dīṭṭhi*: see n.708[: *Sammā-dīṭṭhi*. This, or ‘Right Seeing’ is the literal rendering (‘Right Vision’ would be an unwise redering, because liable to be misleading!). *Dīṭṭhi* here is a singular, and denotes ‘seeing things as they really are’, whereas ‘views’ in the plural are always wrong. It should be noted that when not prefixed with the word *sammā*, *dīṭṭhi* means ‘speculative opinions’, and the like, which are not based on ‘seeing things as they really are’. The formal opposite of *sammā-dīṭṭhi* is *micchā-dīṭṭhi*, a term generally reserved for especially pernicious views (cf. n.245). *Sammā-dīṭṭhi* and the rest are sometimes rendered ‘Perfect View’, and so on, but this only refers to the supramundane path as described in MN 117.]

3 [editorial note 795 in the original] *Micchā-dhamma*. DA says ‘men with men, women with women’.

‘And among those whose life-span was two hundred and fifty years, these things increased: lack of respect for mother and father, for ascetics and Brahmins, and for the head of the clan.

18. ‘Thus, from the not giving of property to the needy, . . . [p. 70/71] lack of respect for mother and father, for ascetics and Brahmins, and for the head of the clan increased, and in consequence people’s life-span and beauty decreased, and the children of those whose life-span had been two-and-a-half centuries lived for only a hundred years.

19. ‘Monks, a time will come when the children of these people will have a life-span of ten years. And with them, girls will be marriageable at five years old. And with them, these flavours will disappear: ghee, butter, sesame-oil, molasses and salt. Among them, *kudrūsa*-grain⁴ will be the chief food, just as rice and curry are today. And with them, the ten courses of moral conduct will completely disappear, and the ten courses of evil will prevail exceedingly: for those of a ten-year lifespan there will be no word for “moral”⁵ so how can there be anyone who acts in a moral way? [p. 71/72] Those people who have no respect for mother or father, for ascetics and Brahmins, for the head of the clan, will be the ones who enjoy honour and prestige. Just as it is now the people who show respect for mother and father, for ascetics and Brahmins, for the head of the clan, who are praised and honoured, so it will be with those who do the opposite.

20. ‘Among those of a ten-year life-span no account will be taken of mother or aunt, of mother’s sister-in-law, of teacher’s wife or of one’s father’s wives and so on – all will be promiscuous in the world like goats and sheep, fowl and pigs, dogs and jackals. Among them, fierce enmity will prevail one for another, fierce hatred, fierce anger and thoughts of killing, mother against child and child against mother, father against child and child against father, brother against brother, brother against sister, just as the hunter feels hatred for the beast he stalks . . . [p. 72/73]

21. ‘And for those of a ten-year life-span, there will come to be a “sword-interval”⁶ of seven days, during which they will mistake one another for wild beasts. Sharp

4 [editorial note 796 in the original] Said by RD to be ‘a kind of rye’. The dictionaries are less specific.

5 [editorial note 797 in the original] *Kusala* (see n.790 [The word rendered ‘good’ is the same, *kusala*, as rendered just previously by ‘wholesome’. The literal ‘skilful’ is also sometimes to be preferred. A case where variation in translation is desirable – but it should be indicated.]). The real meaning is ‘skilful’ in regard to knowing the karmic consequences of one’s actions – in other words not having *micchā-diṭṭhi* (see n.708).

6 [editorial note 798 in the original] RD’s note is barely intelligible, or at least unhelpful: *Sattha* is sword; *antarakappa* is a period included in another period. Here the first period, the one included, is seven days. See Ledi Sadaw in the *Buddhist Review*, January 1916 – a journal not all readers will have to hand. On *Antarakappa*, Childers (as often) is more helpful than PED: ‘Each Asankheyyakappa [“incalculable aeon”] contains twenty Antarakappas, an Antarakappa being the interval that elapses while the age of man increases from ten years to an asankheyya, and then decreases again to ten years.’ Clearly this immense period – which, in regard to the human life-span, is not canonical – is not meant here, but the reference to ‘ten years’ is relevant. DA distinguishes three kinds of *Antarakappa*:

swords will appear in their hands and, thinking: “There is a wild beast!” they will take each other’s lives with those swords. But there will be some beings who will think: “Let us not kill or be killed by anyone! Let us make for some grassy thickets or jungle-recesses or clumps of trees, for rivers hard to ford or inaccessible mountains, and live on roots and fruits of the forest.” And this they will do for seven days. Then, at the end of the seven days, they will emerge from their hiding-places and rejoice together of one accord, saying: “Good beings, I see that you are alive!” And then the thought will occur to those beings: “It is only because we became addicted to evil ways that we suffered this loss of our kindred, so let us now do good! What good things can we do? Let us abstain from the taking of life – that will be a good practice.” And so they will abstain from the taking of life, and, having undertaken this good thing, will practise it. And through having undertaken such wholesome things, they will increase in life-span and beauty. [p. 73/74] And the children of those whose life-span was ten years will live for twenty years.

22. ‘Then it will occur to those beings: “It is through having taken to wholesome practices that we have increased in life-span and beauty, so let us perform still more wholesome practices. Let us refrain from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct, from lying speech, from slander, from harsh speech, from idle chatter, from covetousness, from ill-will, from wrong views; let us abstain from three things: incest, excessive greed, and deviant practices; let us respect our mothers and fathers, ascetics and Brahmins, and the head of the clan, and let us persevere in these wholesome actions.”

‘And so they will do these things, and on account of this they will increase in life-span and in beauty. The children of those whose life-span is twenty years will live to be forty, their children will live to be eighty, their children to be a hundred and sixty, their children to be three hundred and twenty, their children to be six hundred and forty; the children of those whose life-span is six hundred and forty years will live for two thousand years, their children for four thousand, their children for eight thousand, and their children for twenty thousand. The children of those whose life-span is twenty thousand years will [p. 74/75] live to be forty thousand, and their children will attain to eighty thousand years.

Dubbhikkhantarakappa, *Rogantarakappa*, and *Satthantarakappa*, caused by greed, delusion and hatred respectively. RD ignores all this.

Cf. EB under *Antarakalpa*, where a parallel to this commentarial passage is cited from the 11th-century Sanskrit-Tibetan dictionary called *Mahāvīyutpatti*. The article concludes: ‘Yet, the context in which the term *satthantara-kappa* occurs in the Dīgha Nikāya (III, 73) seems to suggest that the word could also be used in a very general sense to mean a period which is not of the same duration as an *antarakappa*.’ The context in fact suggests that this period of one week marks a turning-point which is the beginning of an *Antarakappa* in the sense mentioned by Childers.

23. 'Among the people with an eighty thousand-year lifespan, girls will become marriageable at five hundred. And such people will know only three kinds of disease: greed, fasting, and old age.⁷ And in the time of those people this continent of Jambudipa will be powerful and prosperous, and villages, towns and cities will be but a cock's flight one from the next.⁸ This Jambudipa, like Avīci,⁹ will be as thick with people as the jungle is thick with reeds and rushes. At that time the Vārānasi¹⁰ of today will be a royal city called Ketumatī, powerful and prosperous, crowded with people and well-supplied. In Jambudipa there will be eighty-four thousand cities headed by Ketumatī as the royal capital.

24. 'And in the time of the people with an eighty thousand-year life-span, there will arise in the capital city of Ketumatī a king called Sankha, a wheel-turning monarch, a righteous monarch of the law, conqueror of the four quarters . . . (as verse 2).

25. 'And in that time of the people with an eighty thousand-year life-span, [p. 75/76] there will arise in the world a Blessed Lord, an Arahant fully-enlightened Buddha named Metteyya,¹¹ endowed with wisdom and conduct, a Well-Farer, Knower of the worlds, incomparable Trainer of men to be tamed, Teacher of gods and humans, enlightened and blessed, just as I am now. He will thoroughly know by his own super-knowledge, and proclaim, this universe with its devas and maras and Brahmas, its ascetics and Brahmins, and this generation with its princes and people, just as I do now. He will teach the Dhamma, lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle, lovely in its ending, in the spirit and in the letter, and proclaim, just as I do now, the holy life in its fullness and purity. He will be attended by a company of thousands of monks, just as I am attended by a company of hundreds.

26. 'Then King Sankha will re-erect the palace once built by King Mahā-Panāda¹² and, having lived in it, will give it up and present it to the ascetics and Brahmins, the beggars, the wayfarers, the destitute. Then, shaving off hair and beard, he will don

7 [editorial note 799 in the original] There will be, it seems, no real disease at all: death will result only from excessive or inadequate nourishment or the inevitable onset of old age. Accidents also seem to be excluded.

8 [editorial note 800 in the original] This seems to be the meaning of a doubtful expression.

9 [editorial note 801 in the original] In the commentaries and later literature Avīci denotes the lowest of the hells (or 'purgatories', as RD and other translators have it, to indicate that no such hell is eternal). This, and a parallel passage at AN 3.56, is the only passage in the first four Nikāyas where it is mentioned, and 'hell' does not seem to be its meaning (RD renders it 'the Waveless Deep'), though its exact sense is doubtful. Warder, in his paraphrase of this Sutta (*Indian Buddhism*, 168) says parenthetically: "like purgatory", the Buddha remarks ambiguously, thinking probably of his preference for seclusion.' The Buddhist hells grow steadily worse in the popular imagination, but most of their horrors find little support in the Suttas (though see MN 129, 130). Cf. n.244 and Introduction, p. 40.

10 [editorial note 802 in the original] Benares.

11 [editorial note 803 in the original] The next Buddha, perhaps better known by the Sanskrit name Maitreya.

12 [editorial note 804 in the original] This had been drowned in the Ganges.

yellow robes and go forth from the household life into homelessness under the supreme Buddha Metteyya. Having gone forth, he will remain alone, in seclusion, ardent, eager and resolute, and before long he will have attained in this very life, by his own super-knowledge and resolution, [p. 76/77] that unequalled goal of the holy life, for the sake of which young men of good family go forth from the household life into homelessness, and will abide therein.¹

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I SB: It needs to be noted that the moral recovery of humanity happens in a religious interim period, when the *sāsana* of Gautama has already vanished from earth, and Maitreya's new *sāsana* has not yet arisen. By implication, this means that morality or ethics is not tied to the Buddhist religion. To a certain degree, some kind of 'default ethics' are innate in humankind, and can be either activated or eclipsed. As a macro-social effect, morality oscillates in the *loka* sphere between 0 and 100% dependent on – or independent of – the *sāsana*, as a morality-enhancing power. These 'default ethics' are called *kuśala dharma* in the *Anāgata-vamsa*. This wording connects this idea to the Buddhist system of inner-worldly (*laukika*) ethics, from which the ethical categories are also taken (refrain from stealing, killing, lying, etc.)