

[VERSES ON THE ROLLING OF THE DHARMA-WHEEL]

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INTRODUCTION

The 45 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, following which the verses compiled here begin. After these verses only the Conclusion to the Lalitavistara follows in which the Sūtra itself and its preservation are urged upon the reader and listener.

The verses themselves offer an alternative ending to the first teaching, in which the Buddha adds additional teaching 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.

[VERSES ON SETTING ROLLING THE DHARMA-WHEEL]²

Having a voice resounding like Brahmā, like the song of a Kinnara,³
Having ten-million⁴ rays radiating (from his body),
Having cultivated truth continually for many millions of aeons,⁵
The Self-made⁶ Sage of the Sakyans addressed Kauṇḍinya: [31]

“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.⁷ [32]

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. [33]

The constituent parts⁸ 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. [34]

With the production of various thoughts that are not wise
Comes ignorance,⁹ no one is a producer of it,
The cause for volitional (processes) is given,¹⁰ there is no maker of them,
Consciousness arises, made by conditions, [35]

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, [36]

² Lalitavistara Chapter 26 vv.31-75. The title has been given by the present editor based on the contents. Numbers are given according to Vaidya's edition, Lefman's edition didn't number the verses.

³ *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.

⁴ Lit: *a thousand myriads* (1,000 x 10,000), which equals ten million (10,000,000); below *koṭi* means *ten million*, but the repetition sounds awkward in English, so I render it as *million*.

⁵ 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.

⁶ So called because he discovered the truth for himself.

⁷ *Nara* (lit: *a person, a man*) and *Jīva* (lit: *life* or *the life-principle*) are both used here as an equivalent of *Ātma, Self*.

⁸ The constituent parts of mind and matter: body, feelings, perceptions, (volitional) processes, and consciousness.

⁹ This begins a versification of the the conditional origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) formula.

¹⁰ ...is given as ignorance.

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, [37]

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. [38]

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.¹¹ [39]

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 a understanding of conditions no-one can become a Buddha. [40]

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).” [41]

Thus the Dharma-Wheel (understood) in twelve ways was set rolling, it was understood by
Kaundinya, and the three jewels came into existence.¹² [42]

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. [43]

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. [44]

Having first converted Kaundinya, the five monks and six hundred million gods were purified by
the Vision-of-the-Dharma,¹³ [45]

And another eight hundred million gods from the Element of Form¹⁴ had their vision purified by
the Dharma-Wheel being set rolling. [46]

Eight-four thousand human beings who had assembled also had their vision purified, and were
freed from all bad destinations.¹⁵ [47]

¹¹ I am very unsure about the translation of these two lines.

¹² With Kaundinya’s realisation and ordination the third jewel, the Saṅgha came into being, alongside the Buddha and the Dharma.

¹³ The Vision-of-the-Dharma arises when attaining the Paths and Fruits of sainthood.

¹⁴ I.e. the Brahmā gods.

¹⁵ I.e. they all attained to Stream-Entry (*Sotapatti*), and were no longer subject to falling into the lower realms.

At that moment in the ten directions¹⁶ 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 Sakyan sage, by no other, after he had approached Ṛṣipatana, close to Vārāṇasī. [48]

In the ten directions all of the hundred Buddhas¹⁷ 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?” [49]

“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 purification¹⁸ the auspicious Awakening was attained, the Wheel has been rolled three times,¹⁹ therefore we have become silent.” [50]

“After hearing these words, those billions²⁰ 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).” [51]

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. [52]

The non-adhering, non-proliferating, non-arising, non-producing Dharma-Wheel has been set rolling, which is pure,²¹ and naturally empty. [53]

¹⁶ The four main directions (East, South, West, North) and the intermediate directions (South-East, etc.), up and down.

¹⁷ It must mean in other realms of existence, as only one Buddha arises in a world-system at any one time.

¹⁸ S.v. *uttapta* in BHSD for this meaning.

¹⁹ The three times referred to are: the truth itself, the necessity for its full realisation and the realisation of it (see Dhammacakkappavattanasuttam elsewhere on this website).

²⁰ Lit: hundred ten-millions (= 1,000,000,000).

²¹ S.v. *vivikta* in BHSD for this meaning.

Without effort and without leaving off effort, without signs and characteristics, the Buddha praises the Wheel which explains the nature of equanimity. [54]

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. [55]

The entrance to (understanding) conditionality, which is neither annihilation nor eternalism, the Dharma-Wheel, which cuts off all (wrong) views, is remembered as such. [56]

(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. [57]

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. [58]

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. [59]

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.²² [60]

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). [61]

By myself the state and characteristic of Nature have been understood without the teaching of others, (I am) therefore Self-made, a Visionary. [62]

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.²³ [63]

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. [64]

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. [65]

Through knowing the bases of sympathy²⁴ I welcome the people crossing through the forest of the Cycle (of birth and death), therefore I am the Caravan-Leader. [66]

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. [67]

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. [68]

²² Edgerton (BHSD s.v. *nirīha*) gives the meaning here as *indifferent*, but it seems to me the better meaning is as in the translation.

²³ There is a play on the sounds *naya*, *anaya*, and *nāyaka* here, which does not come across well in English.

²⁴ In Lalitavistara (beginning of Chapter 13) these are listed as *dāna*, *priyavākya*, *arthakriyā*, *samānārthatā*, *giving*, *lovely speech*, *beneficial actions*, *even-handedness*.

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. [69]

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. [70]

I am the Great Doctor, the Great Knower, the Great Physician for the defilements, the unsurpassed Surgeon for beings pierced by the defilements. [71]

I am endowed with all the characteristics, resplendent with all the marks,²⁵ having a body auspicious on all sides, (but) who resembles the lowly.²⁶ [72]

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.²⁷ [73]

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. [74]

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. [75]

²⁵ Characteristics and marks of a Great Man, it means.

²⁶ I.e. appears as a normal human being.

²⁷ There is a list in the Mahāvvyutpatti 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.