Saṅkha’s Story
Paccekabuddhas Teach Awakening
from the Commentary to Dhammapada 290
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Preface

The following story is extracted from the Dhammapada Commentary to verse 290. The commentarial story tells how Vesālī, the capital of the Vajjian country, at one point suffered from famine, ghosts and disease. After trying other teachers who were unable to solve the crisis, they decided to request the Buddha to help. The Buddha, who was residing at Rājagaha, knowing that by reciting the Ratana-suttaṁ¹ all problems will be resolved, agreed.

Bimbisāra, the King of Magadhā, on the southern side of the Ganges, and the Licchavī princes of the Vajjīs on the northern side, clear the road for him and establish a great festival, which Sakka, the King of the Gods, also joins.

The Buddha instructs his faithful disciple Ānanda in the discourse, and he recites it while walking round the city. Not only are the inhabitants saved, but thousands attain Path and Fruit. After these successes the monks gather and talk about the parade from Rājagaha to Vesālī, and the Buddha explains how such a magnificent festival came about as a result of a previous deed he had performed, and relates a previous life-story.²

The main interest in the story is that it shows Paccekabuddhas teaching, and even to the point where their pupil attains Awakening, which goes against the oft-heard statement that Paccekabuddhas do not teach. The situation, however, is that they do not set up a Dispensation (Sāsana), which is something very different.

¹ The Discourse on the Treasures, Khp. 6.
² This is one of many previous life stories not found in the Jātaka collection.
The story is retold in the Khuddhapāṭha Commentary, with much elaboration and some variations;\(^3\) and also compare Mahāvastu,\(^4\) where the setting is the same, but a somewhat different story is told: there the pupil becomes a Buddha, and his (unnamed) Father erects parasols over him, the outcome of which is glory in many future lives, and eventually he becomes the Buddha having the parasols raised up to Heaven at Vaiśāḷī.

\(^3\) An important one is noted at the relevant place below.

\(^4\) Mahāvastu 1. pp. 267-270.
The Occasion

...amongst the monks, after they had returned from the alms-round in the evening time, while they were sitting in the Dhamma Hall, this conversion arose:

“Indeed, the Buddhas are very powerful! Indeed gods and men have faith in the Teacher! Both on this side and the other side of the Ganges along a pathway for eight leagues, because they had faith in the Awakened One the ground was made smooth by the Kings, sand was scattered, and various coloured flowers were strewn about knee-deep. Through the power of the Nāgas the waters of the Ganges were covered with lotuses of five colours, and as far as the dwelling place of the Highest of the High Divinities parasols upon parasols were raised and the inside of the whole universe became like one great ornament and festival.”

After the Teacher came and asked: “What is the talk about, monks, amongst those who have assembled together at present?” They explained what had been said.

“Monks, this worship and respect didn't arise through the power of my being an Awakened One, nor through the powers of the Nāgas, Gods and High Divinities. It arose through the power of trifling donations I made in the past.”

Hearing that the monks begged him to show them the past.

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5 That is, in the highest Brahmā realms.
The Past Deeds

In the past, in Takkasilā, there was a brāhmaṇa called Saṅkha. His son, a sixteen year old student called Susīma approached his Father one day and said: “I wish to go to Bārāṇasī, Dear, to learn the scriptures.”

Then his Father said to him: “Alright, Dear, a brāhmaṇa called so-and-so is my friend, you could go and learn them from him.”

He agreed saying: “Good!” and he went to Bārāṇasī and approached the brāhmaṇa and explained he had been sent by his Father.

Then he accepted him, saying: “He is my friend's son,” and relieved his anxiety, and on an auspicious day he began to recite the scriptures.

Learning quickly and learning a great deal he retained what he had learned just like precious oil that is placed in a golden vessel is borne without loss. In no long time he learned everything from his teacher's lips, and he became skilled in making recitation of the teaching, and he could understand the beginning and middle of it, but not the end.

After approaching his teacher, he said: “I see the beginning and the middle of this teaching, but not the end.”

Having heard that, the teacher said: “I also do not see it, Dear.”

When this was said, he said: “Then, teacher, who knows the end?”

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6 Lit: the mantras; the verses of the Vedas, or ancient Hindu texts, is what it means.

7 Lit: Lion's oil, but it is unclear whether this means the oil was taken from Lions, or whether it just indicated its preciousity.
Being asked, he said: “There are seers living in Isipatana, \( ^8 \) Dear, they know, go and ask them.”

When this was said by the teacher he approached the Paccekabuddhas and asked: “Do you know the end of the teaching?”

“Yes, we know.”

“Will you teach it to me?”

“We will not teach one who has not gone-forth, if you want to know the meaning of the end, you should go forth.”\(^9\)

In reply he said: “Good!” and he went forth in their presence.

They said to him: “You should learn this,” and saying: “You should dress thus, and you should cover yourself thus,” and so on, they taught him good conduct.

Training right there, and having the supporting conditions, in no long time he attained the Pacceka Awakening, and throughout the whole of the city of Bārāṇasī, like a full-moon in the sky, he attained the highest gains and the highest fame.

As the deeds he had performed in past lives led only to a short lifespan, in no long time he was Finally Emancipated.

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\(^8\) The name means the Seer's Park, it is just outside Bārāṇasī, where the Buddha gave his first teaching.

\(^9\) In the Commentary to the Khuddakapāṭha, which is based on earlier accounts (and is therefore itself later), it is at pains to mention that the Paccekabuddhas only taught minor things like wearing the robes; but the strong implication here is that they were able to teach not just the beginning (like wearing of robes), but also the end, which was the condition for Susīma's Awakening.
Then the Paccekabuddhas and the populace, after performing the funeral ceremonies, and gathering the relics, had a Shrine built at the gate to the city.

The brāhmaṇa Saṅkha, thinking: ‘My son has been gone a long time. I would like to know what happened,’ and desiring to see him, left from Takkasilā and gradually reached Bārāṇasī. Seeing the populace gathered round and thinking: ‘Surely one of these will know what happened to my son,’ he approached and asked: “A student called Susīma came here, does anyone know what happened to him?”

“Yes, brāhmaṇa, we know: after learning the Three Vedas from a certain brāhmaṇa, and going-forth and attaining Pacceka Awakening, he was Finally Emancipated, and this is the Shrine we established for him.”

He beat the ground with his hand, cried and wept, went to the courtyard of the Shrine and removed the grass, carried sand in his outer robe, and sprinkled it in the courtyard of the Shrine, and sprinkled water all round from his water pitcher, worshipped with wild flowers, erected his robe as a flag, bound his own parasol over the Shrine and departed.

The Result of the Deeds

The Teacher, after showing them the past, said: “Then, monks, I was the brāhmaṇa Saṅkha. I removed the grass in the courtyard of the Pacceka Buddha Susīma's Shrine. Because of that deed of mine the Kings cleared the road for eight leagues around of thorns and stumps and made the ground clean and even.

I sprinkled sand there. Because of that deed of mine sand was sprinkled on the road for eight leagues.
I worshiped there with wild flowers. Because of that deed of mine various coloured flowers were sprinkled round the road for eight leagues, and five-coloured lotuses covered the top of the waters of the Ganges for one league.

I sprinkled the ground all round with water from my water pitcher. Because of that deed of mine it rained flowers down on Vesālī.

I erected my robe there, and bound the parasol. Because of that deed of mine as far as the dwelling place of the Highest of the High Divinities there were flags, robes and parasols upon parasols raised on high, and the inside of the whole universe became like one great ornament and festival.

Thus, monks, this worship and honour did not arise for me because of the power of being an Awakened One, nor through the powers of the Nāgas, Gods and High Divinities, but because of the power of trifling donations I made in the past.”

After saying that he taught the Dhamma by reciting this verse:

“If he could see a great happiness by abandoning a limited happiness,
A wise man should give up that limited happiness, considering the greater happiness.”

As many times happens the story hardly fits in with the verse; the story tells of someone who did a small deed and got a great reward, whereas the verse is about someone who gave up a little in order to gain a greater good.