

### *Dhammapada stories, wisdom and human transformation*

One of the most famous quotes of the Buddhist tradition is the first verse of the *Dhammapada*: 'Mind is the forerunner of states. Mind is chief; they are made by mind. If one speaks or acts with unskilful mind, suffering follows one, even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox' (Dhp 1). The *Dhammapada* has proved perhaps the most transportable and deeply respected texts of the tradition, being constantly translated, read and loved, its verses considered as distillations of the wisdom of early Buddhist teaching.<sup>i</sup>

Historically, one of the principal means by which the Buddhist tradition has been communicated in Southern Buddhist regions has been through *Dhammapada* and other commentarial stories, describing comparable moments of insight. The narratives associated with this collection, the *Dhammapada-atthakathā*, are, however, almost unknown outside Southeast and Southern Asia.<sup>ii</sup> These often intricate and complex tales have entertained, diverted, taught, and perhaps most importantly, suggest models for meditative and developmental transformation. For this first verse, for instance, there is a long and intricate background story, describing two wealthy brothers, Mahāpāla and Cuḷapāla. One day, as Mahāpāla sees so many people going to listen to the Buddha, he decides to go too. As the story says: 'now when the Buddha teaches the law, they have regard to the predispositions of the hearers for the Refuges, the Moral precepts, and Retirement from the world. Thus they always teach the *dhmma* with reference to the disposition of the individual' (DhpA6). So on that day, seeing Mahāpāla, the Buddha considers his disposition, and teaches accordingly, in a graduated way. His first teaching here follows a pattern frequently found in the *suttas* too: generosity, morality, heaven, the folly of seeking sense pleasures, and the blessings of seclusion.<sup>iii</sup> But we get here what we rarely read in *suttas*: an account of the idiosyncratic way the meditator finds his own means of transformation and a path to wisdom. In a painful parallel to his progress on the meditative path, after becoming a monk, Mahāpāla, given a meditation object by the Buddha, becomes ill with eye infections. Despite, or perhaps even because of this pain, his progress is rapid, and he swiftly attains arahatship in the middle of the darkest part of the night, just as his sight is finally lost.<sup>1</sup> After this, kindly treated by other monks, he teaches them the path to arahatship. After many other incidents, the Buddha gives the verse at the end, describing the karma Mahāpāla brought with him from maliciously misusing medical powers when treating an eye patient many lives ago (DhpA 13-24).

The story makes all sorts of points tangentially about the path to wisdom: and, as so often, the first story of a Buddhist collection encapsulates the themes and style of the whole.<sup>iv</sup> For, just as the first verse of the *Dhammapada* articulates the pre-eminence of mental state, central to that collection, this story anticipates the anecdotal, personal journey, through many lifetimes, that animates *Dhammapada* stories. Complex past causes affect the lives of those involved, teaching is geared to

the individual, and other features, less quantifiable, highlight essential background features of the path as it is described in the stories: the kindness of the fellow monks who look after the new arahat, for instance, convey a sense of sangha felt so necessary for mutual support and collective life. The 'blindness', that coincides with the losing of the fetters, and the opening of a different kind of vision, anticipates the way attaining path is linked to occasionally surprising, supporting or paradoxical events in the world. Throughout interrelationships between people, events and meditative practice a complete and comprehensive salvific path is described, which the meditator, crucially, finds for him or herself. So, *Dhammapada* stories provide us with a humanized, embodied wisdom: the suitability of dispositions to different objects, the intervention of the teacher at crucial points, and the creative discernment by the individual practitioner attaining liberating wisdom are described in a way that the discourses of the *Nikāyas* do not attempt.

In the *suttas*, the Buddha teaches, guides, gives discourses and undertakes debates with his followers and interested querents. Through these, his teachings are communicated as specific to individuals and situations, and the argumentation and the means by which the Buddha engages his followers is skillfully conveyed. Similes adjust teachings to specific people; arguments are tailored and addressed to each person. The emphasis is, however, on verbal, doctrinal teachings. Features exhibited less markedly in *suttas* are such 'backstories', accounts of the experiential path whereby each individual actually attains to a stage of path, and the means and process whereby intuitive wisdom is integrated through observation of the natural world. So commentarial stories provide an important complement to *suttas*, and show the human struggle in the attaining of wisdom. Let us look at how these features are exhibited, in one or two other stories.

Another *Dhammapada* story demonstrates, through a more pleasant route, appropriate to that individual, the close and careful ways by which the route to liberating wisdom is first taught with the appropriate preparations, extended, and then, importantly, completed, through the creative collaboration between the Buddha, the teacher, and practitioner. A young man is struggling unsuccessfully with meditation. He is asked to recollect 'the foul', by visually considering the sight of a decomposing corpse. He cannot progress. The Buddha, seeing him with his divine eye, realizes the exercise is doomed to failure, and that his object is unsuitable. He divines that he is now, and was in many past lives, a hereditary goldsmith, and needs a different meditation. So he visits him and conjures a magical vision of a golden-red flower. The young man takes this object, and murmuring the words, 'red, red', soon enters *jhāna*, the meditation described as characterized by initial thinking, discursive examination, joy, happiness and one-pointedness: a peaceful bodily, emotional and mental unification. He attains the next three *jhānas*. His mind, now untroubled by painful feeling and even excessively pleasant feeling, becomes fluid and flexible. It is only at this stage that the Buddha recognizes his preparedness to develop wisdom. He causes the flower, the basis of his meditative attainments, to wither and blacken. The boy, established in calm (*samatha*), gains insight (*vipassanā*)

too: he sees the three signs, impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and the lack of a solid and enduring self (*anattā*), understood through the decomposition of this visual object. The Buddha leaves the boy. But now, an important and often overlooked feature of the commentarial tradition's depiction of the route to enlightenment is emphasised. He has to complete the next stage through his own creative interpretation of events that go on around him. Attuned, the young man passes a bank of flowers, some lustrous and fresh, others putrefying. He reaches further insight into these three 'signs'. Finally the teacher returns: he sees the young man is ready for the last stage of insight. Making a magical image of himself, he brushes the boy's cheek. Through the combination of surprise and the aptness of this external event, the boy is filled with devotion, the last necessary step in his own path, and attains arahatship (DhpAIII 428–9; story for *Dhammapada*, verse 285).

As so often in early Buddhist narrative, sustained examination of the detail of the tale and the pedagogic process reveals much that theory cannot. Specificity of object to individual, appropriateness of different objects at various stages of development, and variety of method in a graduated path are essential to the meditator's success. The meditator has been given an object that does not suit; he is given another, dovetailing with his predisposition and past experience. When he has achieved results in calm, he is asked to observe the object differently: he sees its defects, in a way that produces insight, rather than frustration, and, through a mixture of his own creative observation, of the bank of dead and live flowers, and the surprise of an odd and apposite step by his teacher inspiring a moment of faith (*saddhā*), achieves awakening. Modern interpretations might vary on features such as 'magical' flowers, visits from a teacher who projects himself to the meditator to give guidance, or the occurrence of 'past lives' that have active influence on present disposition. But whether these features are taken as metaphors, imaginative ways of describing idiosyncrasies of temperament or literal truths, a process of creative collaboration between teacher, pupil and the choice of object is shown, with careful assessment of past and present factors that might influence its success. The individual, in *Dhammapada* stories, is shown to have created his own karma over many lives, an individual inheritance that affects what will work for him or her. This story also demonstrates neatly that there is an appropriate time for advice and intervention, but also, equally crucially, times to hold back. Some objects are shown as suitable at different times and, the realization of an intuitive rather than a mechanical or simply doctrinal wisdom, is shown, requiring spontaneous discernment on the part of the practitioner.

The interplay of character, environments, and distinct, precisely delineated individual paths, in this and other Pāli collections, indicate that in Buddhist practice and theory, no technique or doctrine stands alone. A careful pedagogic method, friendly contact at the right time and a stress on adaptability all emphasise wisdom based on experience and loving kindness. Transformation arises from internal creativity and observation: in the end, it can never be taught, however much the

presence of the teacher, so important in the Southern Buddhist teachings, may be for giving direction and for the final confirmation and validation of any one personal path.

In *Dhammapada* stories meditation objects are carefully chosen, as in the first story, and sometimes, where there a graduated path is different for various people, arise haphazardly in the world around. The stories include many means to finding liberating wisdom: practitioners, often unsuccessful in their initial practice, see bursting rain drops, transforming and changing, that produce liberating insight (DhpA III 165; Dhpv.170), or a forest fire, seen as like the consuming of defilements (DhpA I 280–1, Dhp v.31), or a mirage, exhibiting the illusory and the transient (DhpA I 336; Dhp v.337). In such stories, meditators who find such objects are sometimes given a verse that helps them attain enlightenment, or, spontaneously, articulate their own liberating insight, though it is always supported and validated by the Buddha as well.

In another story, the kind of contradiction beloved by the Chan/Seon/Zen schools is exhibited. A young man is unable to progress in his meditative practice as a monk, which, as we have seen, is a favourite theme, presumably intended to arouse confidence where it may be flagging, as all such meditators in the *Dhammapada* stories do indeed achieve their goal. Just as he has given up and is leaving to go home, the Buddha meets him, giving him a pure white cloth, which he asks him to rub continuously, saying to himself 'purity, purity'. The boy does this, for quite a while. The trouble is, the more he rubs, the more the cloth gets dirty, until it becomes quite filthy. At this point, guided by the Buddha, who teaches him of the impurity of the passions, the young man becomes enlightened. Making magical multiple images of himself all over the monastery, he gives a deep shock to his exemplary brother, who had discouraged him from adhering to the meditative life (DhpA I 239–55, *Dhammapada* verse 25). This friendly tale, presenting the transformation of liberating wisdom as being enabled through an intuitive, apparently contradictory insight, reminds us of Eastern Buddhist liberation stories. Wonhyo, famously, on his way to China from Korea, spent a night in an underground cave, and when thirsty, drank from a vessel he found there:

When I awoke this morning I saw it was not clean water I drank, but putrid rainwater gathered within a human skull, when I drank it, it was truly refreshing, and I slept afterwards in great content. After my discovery this morning, I vomited and felt great discomfort. The water in the morning is no different from last night. When I did not know what it was, I found it refreshing, but when I found out, I felt discomfort. The dirtiness or the cleanliness of an object does not reside in the object itself, but rather depends on the discrimination within our mind. Now therefore, I realize that everything is created by the mind. Because I have realized this truth, I cannot suppress my joy, nor the wish to dance and sing.<sup>v</sup>

As we have seen, meditation objects, meditation teachers, and aspirant meditators, all need to work together for a successful outcome: the cause (*paccaya*) of strong support (*upanissaya*), is seen

manifest in all sorts of ways, through transformatory insight based on running water, mirages, forest fires, or, as in this last story, a puzzling paradox that enables the meditator to rise above the conventional into a different, formulation of the truth. In a modern biography, Mahā Boowa Ñānasampanno writes of Khao Anālayo's path to insight: 'One evening after he swept the ground around his hut, he went off to take a bath. As he was walking along, he saw how the rice growing in the fields was golden yellow and almost ripe. This immediately made him think and question. "The rice has sprouted and grown because there is a seed that has caused it to grow.'" Reflecting on the process of growth from the seeds to the plant, he sees the origin of the *kilesas* in his own heart and ignorance, and, meditating and pacing up and down all night, finally finds liberating wisdom: 'At dawn, just as it was beginning to get light, his wisdom was able to break through to a final conclusion. *Avijjā* [ignorance] then fell away from the *citta* without any remainder. The contemplation of the rice stopped at the point where the rice was ripe never to sprout again...At that point it was clearly evident to him that the *citta* had stopped creating any more births in the various realms of existence...Then the sun began to shine brightly in the sky, while his heart began to get brighter and brighter as it left the realms of *avijjā* and went towards the wonder of Dhamma where it reached *vimutti* – freedom – as the sun rose above the mountains. It was truly a most auspicious and wonderful occasion'.<sup>vi</sup>

The taking of natural objects as means of liberating insight is a feature of many modern accounts of the arising of wisdom, at every level, from the modest beginner to the experienced practitioner. In this account, seeds giving rise to plants, and the consonance between the growing light of dawn and the awakening of the practitioner, demonstrate the continuity of modern practice from ancient origins: natural transformation in the outside world elicits and reflects inner change too.

So *Dhammapada* stories have much to offer in modern meditative and educational contexts. They provide a model for pedagogical guidance, a way of personal tailoring of meditation subject to practitioner, and a sense of a graduated, personal path of development geared to individual requirements and needs, all features that could be regarded as great strengths of the Southern Buddhist tradition. Narrative is a particularly helpful means of communicating applicability and personal transformation: inherently specific, and often richly varied, it offers a way of approaching the cultivation of wisdom that, through the intricacies of events, seems to dissolve rigidity of view and fixity of method and practice. Indeed, these seem to require loving kindness and humour for their real appreciation.

Despite this heritage, Buddhist narrative, although closely associated with the limbs (*aṅgas*) of the teaching, has received less attention in modern studies of Buddhism. It is now possible to access most *suttas* on the internet and they are, rightly, often consulted. *Dhammapada* stories, are however, almost unknown, read now only by scholars and those with a special interest. But they are subtly precise in their pedagogy, as well as being straightforwardly entertaining, a reminder of the literal

centrality of the factor of joy in the seven factors of awakening, so deeply associated with health of mind and body in the Southern Buddhist traditions. Their embodied wisdom, and their description of a transformation that is both inevitable, in the process of change from one life to another, as well as consciously chosen, in the individual's observation of the natural world and the mind, guided by the teacher and helped by friends, demonstrate the vitality, warmth and practical usefulness of this discursively anecdotal narrative tradition. Historically central to Southern Buddhist lay and monastic education, the stories provide important guidelines on the path to conscious transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> The collection has been translated into languages throughout the world. Peter Harvey writes: 'Its popularity is reflected in the many times it has been translated into Western languages'. See *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 322. A recent paperback translation of the *Dhammapadam*, for instance, has been produced by Penguin Classics (Valerie Roebuck, *Dhammapadam*, London: Penguin, 2010). This helpfully gives shortened versions of the story at the end.

<sup>2</sup> For translations, see E.W. Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends* (first published in the Harvard Oriental Series 1921) 3 vols, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990. The stories in this paper may be found in vol. 1, 146-58; vol. 3, 161-3 (Goldsmitik); vol. 1, 325 (Forest Fire); vol. 2, 30 (Mirage); vol. 3, 4 (Mirage and Rain Bubbles), and vol. 1, 303 (The Dirty Cloth).

<sup>3</sup> See Cousins, L.S. 'Buddhism', in Hinnells, J. ed. *Penguin Handbook of World Religions*.

<sup>4</sup> On this subject, see S. Shaw, 'Crossing the Wilderness: How the Buddha Narrates His Own Travels', Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies Website (2004). Accessed on 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2012:

<http://www.ocbs.org/lectures-a-articles-ocbsmain-121/written-article-layout/46-crossing-the-wilderness-how-the-buddha-narrates-his-own-travels>.

<sup>5</sup> Jeong Byeong-Jo, *Master Wonhyo, An Overview of His Life and Teachings*, Korean Spirit & Cultural Promotion Project, YI, Seoul: Diamond Sutra Restoration Group, 2010, 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Venerable Ajahn Khao Anālayo*, Udon Thani: Forest Dhamma Publications, 2006, 88-89.