

THE WHEEL-TURNING MONARCH

1. Taking Refuge in Oneself

SO I HAVE HEARD. At one time the Buddha was staying in the land of the Magadhans at Mātulā.* There the Buddha addressed the mendicants, “Mendicants!”

“Venerable sir,” they replied. The Buddha said this:

“Mendicants, live as your own island, your own refuge, with no other refuge. Let the teaching be your island and your refuge, with no other refuge.* And how does a mendicant do this? They meditate observing an aspect of the body—keen, aware, and mindful, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. They meditate observing an aspect of feelings ... mind ... principles—keen, aware, and mindful, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. That’s how a mendicant lives as their own island, their own refuge, with no other refuge. That’s how they let the teaching be their island and their refuge, with no other refuge.

You should roam inside your own territory, the domain of your fathers.* If you roam inside your own territory, the domain of your fathers, Māra won’t catch you or get hold of you. It is due to undertaking skillful qualities that merit grows.*

2. King Dalhanemi

Once upon a time, mendicants, there was a king named Dalhanemi who was a wheel-turning monarch, a just and principled king. His dominion extended to all four sides, he achieved stability in the country, and he possessed the seven treasures.* He had the following seven treasures: the wheel, the elephant, the horse, the jewel, the woman, the treasurer, and the counselor as the seventh treasure. He had over a thousand sons who were valiant and heroic, crushing the armies of his enemies. After conquering this land girt by sea, he reigned by principle, without rod or sword.

Then, after many years, many hundred years, many thousand years had passed, King Dalhanemi addressed one of his men, 'My good man, when you see that the heavenly wheel-treasure has receded back from its place, please tell me.'*

'Yes, Your Majesty,' replied that man.

After many thousand years had passed, that man saw that the heavenly wheel-treasure had receded back from its place. So he went to King Dalhanemi and said, 'Please sire, you should know that your heavenly wheel-treasure has receded back from its place.'

So the king summoned the crown prince and said, 'Dear prince, my heavenly wheel-treasure has receded back from its place. I've heard that when this happens to a wheel-turning monarch, he does not have long to live. I have enjoyed human pleasures. Now it is time for me to seek heavenly pleasures. Come, dear prince, rule this land surrounded by ocean! I shall shave off my hair and beard, dress in ocher robes, and go forth from the lay life to homelessness.'

And so, after carefully instructing the crown prince in kingship, King Dalhanemi shaved off his hair and beard, dressed in ocher robes, and went forth from the lay life to homelessness.* Seven days later the heavenly wheel-treasure vanished.

Then a certain man approached the newly anointed aristocrat king and said, 'Please sire, you should know that the heavenly wheel-treasure has vanished.' At that the king was unhappy and experienced unhappiness. He went to the royal sage and said, 'Please sire, you should know that the heavenly wheel-treasure has vanished.'

When he said this, the royal sage said to him, 'Don't be unhappy at the vanishing of the wheel-treasure. My dear, the wheel-treasure is not inherited from your father.* Come now, my dear, proceed in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch.* If you do so, it's possible that—on a fifteenth day sabbath, having bathed your head and gone upstairs in the royal longhouse to observe the sabbath—the heavenly wheel-treasure will appear to you, with a thousand spokes, with rim and hub, complete in every detail.'

2.1. The Noble Duty of a Wheel-Turning Monarch

'But sire, what is the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch?'

'Well then, my dear, relying only on principle—honoring, respecting, and venerating principle, having principle as your flag, banner, and authority—provide just protection and security for your court, troops, aristocrats, vassals, brahmins and householders, people of town and country, ascetics and brahmins, beasts and birds.* Do not let injustice prevail in the realm.* Provide money to the penniless in the realm.*'

And there are ascetics and brahmins in the realm who avoid intoxication and negligence, are settled in patience and gentleness, and who tame, calm, and extinguish themselves. From time to time you should go up to them and ask and learn: * "Sirs, what is skillful? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated? Doing what leads to my lasting harm and suffering? Doing what leads to my lasting welfare and happiness?" Having heard them, you should reject what is unskillful and undertake and follow what is skillful.

This is the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch.'

2.2. The Wheel-Treasure Appears

'Yes, Your Majesty,' replied the new king to the royal sage. And he proceeded in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch.

While he was proceeding in that duty, on a fifteenth day sabbath, he had bathed his head and gone upstairs in the royal longhouse to observe the sabbath. And the heavenly wheel-treasure appeared to him, with a thousand spokes, with rim and hub, complete in every detail. Seeing this, the king thought, 'I have heard that when the heavenly wheel-treasure appears to a king in this way, he becomes a wheel-turning monarch. Am I then a wheel-turning monarch?'

Then the anointed king, rising from his seat and arranging his robe over one shoulder, took a ceremonial vase in his left hand and besprinkled the wheel-treasure with his right hand, saying, 'Roll forth, O wheel-treasure! Triumph, O wheel-treasure!'

Then the wheel-treasure rolled towards the east. And the king followed it together with his army of four divisions. In whatever place the wheel-treasure stood still, there the king came to stay together with his army. And any opposing rulers of the eastern quarter came to the wheel-turning monarch and said, 'Come, great king! Welcome, great king! We are yours, great king, instruct us.' The wheel-turning monarch said, 'Do not kill living creatures. Do not steal. Do not commit sexual misconduct. Do not lie. Do not drink alcohol. Maintain the current level of taxation.' And so the opposing rulers of the eastern quarter became his vassals.

Then the wheel-treasure, having plunged into the eastern ocean and emerged again, rolled towards the south. ... Having plunged into the southern ocean and emerged again, it rolled towards the west. ...

Having plunged into the western ocean and emerged again, it rolled towards the north, followed by the king together with his army of four divisions. In whatever place the wheel-treasure stood still, there the king came to stay together with his army. And any opposing rulers of the northern quarter came to the wheel-turning monarch and said, 'Come, great king! Welcome, great king! We are yours, great king, instruct us.' The wheel-turning monarch said, 'Do not kill living creatures. Do not steal. Do not commit sexual misconduct. Do not lie. Do not drink alcohol. Maintain the current level of taxation.' And so the rulers of the northern quarter became his vassals.

And then the wheel-treasure, having triumphed over this land surrounded by ocean, returned to the royal capital. There it stood still by the gate to the royal compound at the High Court as if fixed to an axle, illuminating the royal compound.

3. On Subsequent Wheel-Turning Monarchs

And for a second time, and a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth, and a seventh time, a wheel-turning monarch was established in exactly the same way. And after many years the seventh wheel-turning monarch went forth, handing the realm over to the crown prince.

Seven days later the heavenly wheel-treasure vanished.

Then a certain man approached the newly anointed aristocrat king and said, 'Please sire, you should know that the heavenly wheel-treasure has vanished.' At that the king was unhappy and experienced unhappiness. But he didn't go to the royal sage and ask about the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. He just governed the country according to his own ideas.* So governed, the country's people did not prosper like before, as they had when former kings proceeded in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch.*

Then the ministers and counselors, the treasury officials, military officers, guardsmen, and professional advisers gathered and said to the king, * ‘Sire, when governed according to your own ideas, the country’s people do not prosper like before, as they did when former kings proceeded in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. In your realm are found ministers and counselors, treasury officials, military officers, guardsmen, and professional advisers—both ourselves and others—who remember the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. Please, Your Majesty, ask us about the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. We will answer you.’

4. On the Period of Decline

So the anointed king asked the assembled ministers and counselors, treasury officials, military officers, guardsmen, and professional advisers about the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. And they answered him. After listening to them, he provided just protection and security. But he did not provide money to the penniless in the realm. * And so poverty grew widespread.

When poverty was widespread, a certain person stole from others, with the intention to commit theft. * They arrested him and presented him to the king, saying, ‘Your Majesty, this person stole from others with the intention to commit theft.’

The king said to that person, ‘Is it really true, mister, that you stole from others with the intention to commit theft?’*

‘It’s true, sire.’

‘What was the reason?’

‘Sire, I can’t survive.’

So the king provided some money to that person, saying, ‘With this money, mister, keep yourself alive, and provide for your mother and father, part-

ners and children. Work for a living, and establish an uplifting religious donation for ascetics and brahmins that's conducive to heaven, ripens in happiness, and leads to heaven.'*

'Yes, Your Majesty,' replied that man.

But then another man stole something from others. They arrested him and presented him to the king, saying, 'Your Majesty, this person stole from others.'

The king said to that person, 'Is it really true, mister, that you stole from others?'

'It's true, sire.'

'What was the reason?'

'Sire, I can't survive.'

So the king provided some money to that person, saying, 'With this money, mister, keep yourself alive, and provide for your mother and father, partners and children. Work for a living, and establish an uplifting religious donation for ascetics and brahmins that's conducive to heaven, ripens in happiness, and leads to heaven.'

'Yes, Your Majesty,' replied that man.

People heard about this: 'It seems the king is providing money to anyone who steals from others!'* It occurred to them, 'Why don't we steal from others?' So then another man stole something from others.

They arrested him and presented him to the king, saying, 'Your Majesty, this person stole from others.'

The king said to that person, 'Is it really true, mister, that you stole from others?'

‘It’s true, sire.’

‘What was the reason?’

‘Sire, I can’t survive.’

Then the king thought, ‘If I provide money to anyone who steals from others, it will only increase the stealing. I’d better make an end of this person, finish him off, and chop off his head.’*

Then he ordered his men, ‘Well then, my men, tie this man’s arms tightly behind his back with a strong rope. Shave his head and march him from street to street and square to square to the beating of a harsh drum. Then take him out the south gate and make an end of him, finish him off, and chop off his head.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ they replied, and did as he commanded.

People heard about this: ‘It seems the king is chopping the head off anyone who steals from others!’ It occurred to them, ‘We’d better have sharp swords made. Then when we steal from others, we’ll make an end of them, finish them off, and chop off their heads.’* They had sharp swords made. Then they started to make raids on villages, towns, and cities, and to infest the highways. And they chopped the heads off anyone they stole from.

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, poverty became widespread. When poverty was widespread, theft became widespread. When theft was widespread, swords became widespread. When swords were widespread, killing living creatures became widespread. And for the sentient beings among whom killing was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people lived for 80,000 years, but their children lived for 40,000 years.*

Among the people who lived for 40,000 years, a certain person stole something from others. They arrested him and presented him to the king, say-

ing, 'Your Majesty, this person stole from others.'

The king said to that person, 'Is it really true, mister, that you stole from others?'

'No, sire,' he said, deliberately lying.

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, poverty, theft, swords, and killing became widespread. When killing was widespread, lying became widespread. And for the sentient beings among whom lying was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 40,000 years had children who lived for 20,000 years.

Among the people who lived for 20,000 years, a certain person stole something from others. Someone else reported this to the king, 'Your Majesty, such-and-such person stole from others,' he said, going behind his back.

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, poverty, theft, swords, killing, and lying became widespread. When lying was widespread, backbiting became widespread. And for the sentient beings among whom backbiting was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 20,000 years had children who lived for 10,000 years.

Among the people who lived for 10,000 years, some were beautiful, some were ugly. And the ugly beings, coveting the beautiful ones, committed adultery with the wives of others.*

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, poverty, theft, swords, killing, lying, and backbiting became widespread. When backbiting was widespread, sexual misconduct became widespread. And for the sentient beings among whom sexual misconduct was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 10,000 years had children who lived for 5,000 years.

Among the people who lived for 5,000 years, two things became widespread: harsh speech and talking nonsense.* For the sentient beings among whom these two things were widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 5,000 years had some children who lived for 2,500 years, while others lived for 2,000 years.

Among the people who lived for 2,500 years, desire and ill will became widespread. For the sentient beings among whom desire and ill will were widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 2,500 years had children who lived for 1,000 years.

Among the people who lived for 1,000 years, wrong view became widespread.* For the sentient beings among whom wrong view was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for 1,000 years had children who lived for five hundred years.

Among the people who lived for five hundred years, three things became widespread: illicit desire, immoral greed, and wrong custom.* For the sentient beings among whom these three things were widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people who lived for five hundred years had some children who lived for two hundred and fifty years, while others lived for two hundred years.

Among the people who lived for two hundred and fifty years, these things became widespread: lack of due respect for mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, and failure to honor the elders in the family.

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, all these things became widespread—poverty, theft, swords, killing, lying, backbiting, sexual misconduct, harsh speech and talking nonsense, desire and ill will, wrong view, illicit desire, immoral greed, and wrong custom, and lack of due respect for mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, and failure to honor the elders in the family. For the sentient beings among whom these things were widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people

who lived for two hundred and fifty years had children who lived for a hundred years.*

5. When People Live for Ten Years

There will come a time, mendicants, when these people will have children who live for ten years.* Among the people who live for ten years, girls will be marriageable at five.* The following flavors will disappear: ghee, butter, oil, honey, molasses, and salt. The best kind of food will be finger millet,* just as fine rice with meat is the best kind of food today.*

The ten ways of doing skillful deeds will totally disappear, and the ten ways of doing unskillful deeds will explode in popularity.* Those people will not even have the word 'skillful', still less anyone who does what is skillful.* And anyone who disrespects mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, and fails to honor the elders in the family will be venerated and praised, just as the opposite is venerated and praised today.

There'll be no recognition of the status of mother, aunts, or wives and partners of teachers and respected people.* The world will become dissolute, like goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, and dogs and jackals.*

They'll be full of hostility towards each other, with acute ill will, malevolence, and thoughts of murder. Even a mother will feel like this for her child, and the child for its mother, father for child, child for father, brother for sister, and sister for brother. They'll be just like a deer hunter when he sees a deer—full of hostility, ill will, malevolence, and thoughts of killing.

Among the people who live for ten years, there will be an interregnum of swords lasting seven days.* During that time they will see each other as beasts.* Sharp swords will appear in their hands, with which they'll take each other's life, crying, 'It's a beast! It's a beast!'

But then some of those beings will think, 'Let us neither kill nor be killed! Why don't we hide in thick grass, thick jungle, thick trees, inaccessible riverlands, or rugged mountains and survive on forest roots and fruits?*' So that's what they do.

When those seven days have passed, having emerged from their hiding places and embraced each other, they will come together and cry in one voice, * 'Fantastic, dear foe, you live! Fantastic, dear foe, you live!'

6. The Period of Growth

Then those beings will think, 'It's because we undertook unskillful things that we suffered such an extensive loss of our relatives. We'd better do what's skillful. What skillful thing should we do? Why don't we refrain from killing living creatures? Having undertaken this skillful thing we'll live by it.'* So that's what they do. Because of undertaking this skillful thing, their lifespan and beauty will grow. Those people who live for ten years will have children who live for twenty years.

Then those beings will think, 'Because of undertaking this skillful thing, our lifespan and beauty are growing. Why don't we do even more skillful things? What skillful thing should we do? Why don't we refrain from stealing ... sexual misconduct ... lying ... backbiting ... harsh speech ... and talking nonsense. Why don't we give up covetousness ... ill will ... wrong view ... three things: illicit desire, immoral greed, and wrong custom. Why don't we pay due respect to mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, honoring the elders in our families? Having undertaken this skillful thing we'll live by it.' So that's what they do.

Because of undertaking this skillful thing, their lifespan and beauty will grow. Those people who live for twenty years will have children who live for forty years. Those people who live for forty years will have children who live for eighty years, then a hundred and sixty years, three hundred

and twenty years, six hundred and forty years, 2,000 years, 4,000 years, 8,000 years, 20,000 years, 40,000 years, and finally 80,000 years. Among the people who live for 80,000 years, girls will be marriageable at five hundred.

7. The Time of King Saṅkha

Among the people who live for 80,000 years, there will be just three afflictions: greed, starvation, and old age.* India will be successful and prosperous. The villages, towns, and capital cities will be no more than a chicken's flight apart. And the land will be as crowded as hell with people, like a thicket of rushes or reeds. The royal capital will be Varanasi, renamed Ketumatī. And it will be successful, prosperous, populous, full of people, with plenty of food.* There will be 84,000 cities in India, with the royal capital of Ketumatī foremost.

And in the royal capital of Ketumatī a king named Saṅkha will arise, a wheel-turning monarch, a just and principled king. His dominion will extend to all four sides, he will achieve stability in the country, and possess the seven treasures.* He will have the following seven treasures: the wheel, the elephant, the horse, the jewel, the woman, the treasurer, and the counselor as the seventh treasure. He will have over a thousand sons who are valiant and heroic, crushing the armies of his enemies. After conquering this land girt by sea, he will reign by principle, without rod or sword.

8. The Arising of the Buddha Metteyya

And the Blessed One named Metteyya will arise in the world—perfected, a fully awakened Buddha, accomplished in knowledge and conduct, holy, knower of the world, supreme guide for those who wish to train, teacher of gods and humans, awakened, blessed—* just as I have arisen today.* He will realize with his own insight this world—with its gods, Māras and Brahmās, this population with its ascetics and brahmins, gods and humans—and

make it known to others, just as I do today. He will teach the Dhamma that's good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, meaningful and well-phrased. And he will reveal a spiritual practice that's entirely full and pure, just as I do today. He will lead a Saṅgha of many thousand mendicants, just as I lead a Saṅgha of many hundreds today.*

Then King Saṅkha will have the sacrificial post once built by King Mahāpanāda raised up.* Having reigned, he will abdicate, offering charity to ascetics and brahmins, paupers, vagrants, nomads, and beggars. Then, having shaved off his hair and beard and dressed in ocher robes, he will go forth from the lay life to homelessness in the Buddha Metteyya's presence.* Soon after going forth, living withdrawn, diligent, keen, and resolute, he will realize the supreme end of the spiritual path in this very life. He will live having achieved with his own insight the goal for which gentlemen rightly go forth from the lay life to homelessness.

Mendicants, live as your own island, your own refuge, with no other refuge. Let the teaching be your island and your refuge, with no other refuge. And how does a mendicant do this? It's when a mendicant meditates by observing an aspect of the body—keen, aware, and mindful, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. They meditate observing an aspect of feelings ... mind ... principles—keen, aware, and mindful, rid of covetousness and displeasure for the world. That's how a mendicant lives as their own island, their own refuge, with no other refuge. That's how they let the teaching be their island and their refuge, with no other refuge.

9. On Long Life and Beauty for Mendicants

Mendicants, you should roam inside your own territory, the domain of your fathers. Doing so, you will grow in life span, beauty, happiness, wealth, and power.

And what is long life for a mendicant? It's when a mendicant develops the basis of psychic power that has immersion due to enthusiasm, and active effort. They develop the basis of psychic power that has immersion due to energy, and active effort. They develop the basis of psychic power that has immersion due to mental development, and active effort. They develop the basis of psychic power that has immersion due to inquiry, and active effort. Having developed and cultivated these four bases of psychic power they may, if they wish, live for the proper lifespan or what's left of it. This is long life for a mendicant.

And what is beauty for a mendicant? It's when a mendicant is ethical, restrained in the monastic code, conducting themselves well and seeking alms in suitable places. Seeing danger in the slightest fault, they keep the rules they've undertaken. This is beauty for a mendicant.

And what is happiness for a mendicant? It's when a mendicant, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters and remains in the first absorption, which has the rapture and bliss born of seclusion, while placing the mind and keeping it connected. As the placing of the mind and keeping it connected are stilled, they enter and remain in the second absorption ... third absorption ... fourth absorption. This is happiness for a mendicant.

And what is wealth for a mendicant? It's when a monk meditates spreading a heart full of love to one direction, and to the second, and to the third, and to the fourth. In the same way above, below, across, everywhere, all around, they spread a heart full of love to the whole world—abundant, expansive, limitless, free of enmity and ill will. They meditate spreading a heart full of compassion ... rejoicing ... equanimity to one direction, and to the second, and to the third, and to the fourth. In the same way above, below, across, everywhere, all around, they spread a heart full of equanimity to the whole world—abundant, expansive, limitless, free of enmity and ill will. This is wealth for a mendicant.

And what is power for a mendicant? It's when a mendicant realizes the undefiled freedom of heart and freedom by wisdom in this very life. And they live having realized it with their own insight due to the ending of defilements. This is power for a mendicant.

Mendicants, I do not see a single power so hard to defeat as the power of Māra. It is due to undertaking skillful qualities that merit grows.”

That is what the Buddha said. Satisfied, the mendicants approved what the Buddha said.

WHAT CAME FIRST

SO I HAVE HEARD.* At one time the Buddha was staying near Sāvattthī in the Eastern Monastery, in the stilt longhouse of Migāra’s mother.*

Now at that time Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja were living on probation among the mendicants in hopes of being ordained.* Then in the late afternoon, the Buddha came downstairs from the longhouse and was walking mindfully in the open air, beneath the shade of the longhouse.

Vāseṭṭha saw him* and said to Bhāradvāja, “Reverend Bhāradvāja, the Buddha is walking mindfully in the open air, beneath the shade of the longhouse. Come, reverend, let’s go to the Buddha. Hopefully we’ll get to hear a Dhamma talk from him.”

“Yes, reverend,” replied Bhāradvāja.

So they went to the Buddha, bowed, and walked beside him.

Then the Buddha said to Vāseṭṭha, “Vāseṭṭha, you are both brahmins by birth and clan, and have gone forth from the lay life to homelessness from a brahmin family. I hope you don’t have to suffer abuse and insults from the brahmins.”

“Actually, sir, the brahmins do insult and abuse us with their typical insults to the fullest extent.”

“But how do the brahmins insult you?”

“Sir, the brahmins say: ‘Only brahmins are the best caste; other castes are inferior. Only brahmins are the light caste; other castes are dark. Only brahmins are purified, not others. Only brahmins are Brahmā’s rightful sons, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā. You’ve both abandoned the best caste to join an inferior caste, namely these shavelings, fake ascetics, primitives, black spawn from the feet of our kinsman.* This is not right, it’s not proper!’ That’s how the brahmins insult us.”

“Actually, Vāseṭṭha, the brahmins are forgetting their tradition when they say this to you. For brahmin women are seen menstruating, being pregnant, giving birth, and breast-feeding.* Yet even though they’re born from a brahmin womb they say: ‘Only brahmins are the best caste; other castes are inferior. Only brahmins are the light caste; other castes are dark.* Only brahmins are purified, not others. Only brahmins are Brahmā’s rightful sons, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’ They misrepresent the brahmins, speak falsely, and make much bad karma.

1. Purification in the Four Castes

Vāseṭṭha, there are these four castes: aristocrats, brahmins, peasants, and menials. Some aristocrats kill living creatures, steal, and commit sexual misconduct. They use speech that’s false, divisive, harsh, and nonsensical. And they’re covetous, malicious, with wrong view. These things are unskillful, blameworthy, not to be cultivated, unworthy of the noble ones—and are reckoned as such. They are dark deeds with dark results, criticized by sensible people. Such things are exhibited in some aristocrats.* And they are also seen among some brahmins, peasants, and menials.

But some aristocrats refrain from killing living creatures, stealing, and committing sexual misconduct. They refrain from speech that’s false, divisive, harsh, and nonsensical. And they’re content, kind-hearted, with right

view. These things are skillful, blameless, to be cultivated, worthy of the noble ones—and are reckoned as such. They are bright deeds with bright results, praised by sensible people. Such things are exhibited in some aristocrats. And they are also seen among some brahmins, peasants, and menials.

Both these things occur like this, mixed up in these four castes—the dark and the bright, that which is praised and that which is criticized by sensible people. Yet of this the brahmins say: ‘Only brahmins are the best caste; other castes are inferior. Only brahmins are the light caste; other castes are dark. Only brahmins are purified, not others. Only brahmins are Brahmā’s rightful sons, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’

Sensible people don’t acknowledge this. Why is that? Because any mendicant from these four castes who is perfected—with defilements ended, who has completed the spiritual journey, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, achieved their own true goal, utterly ended the fetters of rebirth, and is rightly freed through enlightenment—is said to be foremost by virtue of principle, not against principle.* For principle, Vāsetṭha, is the best thing for people in both this life and the next.

And here’s a way to understand how this is so.

King Pasenadi of Kosala knows that the ascetic Gotama has gone forth from the neighboring clan of the Sakyans. And the Sakyans are his vassals.* The Sakyans show deference to King Pasenadi by bowing down, rising up, greeting him with joined palms, and observing proper etiquette for him. Now, King Pasenadi shows the same kind of deference to the Realized One. But he doesn’t think: ‘The ascetic Gotama is well-born, I am ill-born.* He is powerful, I am weak. He is handsome, I am ugly. He is influential, I am insignificant.’ Rather, in showing such deference to the Realized One he is only honoring, respecting, and venerating principle. And here’s another

way to understand how principle is the best thing for people in both this life and the next.

Vāseṭṭha, you have different births, names, and clans, and have gone forth from the lay life to homelessness from different families. When they ask you what you are, you claim to be ascetics, followers of the Sakyan. But only when someone has faith in the Realized One—settled, rooted, and planted deep, strong, not to be shifted by any ascetic or brahmin or god or Māra or Brahmā or by anyone in the world—is it appropriate for them to say: ‘I am the Buddha’s rightful child, born from his mouth, born of principle, created by principle, heir to principle.’* Why is that? For these are terms for the Realized One: ‘the embodiment of principle’, and ‘the embodiment of divinity’, and ‘the manifestation of principle’, and ‘the manifestation of divinity’.*

There comes a time when, Vāseṭṭha, after a very long period has passed, this cosmos contracts.* As the cosmos contracts, sentient beings are mostly headed for the realm of streaming radiance. There they are mind-made, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, moving through the sky, steadily glorious, and they remain like that for a very long time.

There comes a time when, after a very long period has passed, this cosmos expands. As the cosmos expands, sentient beings mostly pass away from that host of radiant deities and come back to this realm.* Here they are mind-made, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, moving through the sky, steadily glorious, and they remain like that for a very long time.*

2. The Earth’s Nectar Appears

But the single mass of water at that time was utterly dark.* The moon and sun were not found, nor were stars and constellations, day and night, months and fortnights, years and seasons, or male and female. Beings were simply known as ‘beings’.* After a very long period had passed, the earth’s

nectar curdled in the water.* It appeared just like the curd on top of hot milk-rice as it cools. It was beautiful, fragrant, and delicious, like ghee or butter. And it was as sweet as pure dwarf-bee honey.* Now, one of those beings was reckless. Thinking, 'Oh my, what might this be?' they tasted the earth's nectar with their finger.* They enjoyed it, and craving was born in them.* And other beings, following that being's example, tasted the earth's nectar with their fingers. They too enjoyed it, and craving was born in them.

3. The Moon and Sun Appear

Then those beings started to eat the earth's nectar, breaking it into lumps. But when they did this their luminosity vanished. And with the vanishing of their luminosity the moon and sun appeared, stars and constellations appeared, days and nights were distinguished, and so were months and fortnights, and years and seasons. So far had the world evolved once more.

Then those beings eating the earth's nectar, with that as their food and nourishment, remained for a very long time. But so long as they ate that earth's nectar, their bodies became more solid and they diverged in appearance; some beautiful, some ugly. And the beautiful beings looked down on the ugly ones: * 'We're more beautiful, they're the ugly ones!' And the vanity of the beautiful ones made the earth's nectar vanish. They gathered together and bemoaned, 'Oh, what a taste! Oh, what a taste!' And even today when people get something tasty they say: 'Oh, what a taste! Oh, what a taste!' They're just remembering an ancient primordial saying, but they don't understand what it means.*

4. Ground-Fungus

When the earth's nectar had vanished, ground-fungus appeared to those beings.* It appeared just like a mushroom. It was beautiful, fragrant, and delicious, like ghee or butter. And it was as sweet as pure dwarf-bee honey.

Then those beings started to eat the ground-fungus. With that as their food and nourishment, they remained for a very long time. But so long as they ate that ground-fungus, their bodies became more solid and they diverged in appearance; some beautiful, some ugly. And the beautiful beings looked down on the ugly ones: 'We're more beautiful, they're the ugly ones!' And the vanity of the beautiful ones made the ground-fungus vanish.

5. Bursting Pods

When the ground-fungus had vanished, bursting pods appeared, like the fruit of the kadam tree.* They were beautiful, fragrant, and delicious, like ghee or butter. And they were as sweet as pure dwarf-bee honey.

Then those beings started to eat the bursting pods. With that as their food and nourishment, they remained for a very long time. But so long as they ate those bursting pods, their bodies became more solid and they diverged in appearance; some beautiful, some ugly. And the beautiful beings looked down on the ugly ones: 'We're more beautiful, they're the ugly ones!' And the vanity of the beautiful ones made the bursting pods vanish.

They gathered together and bemoaned, 'Oh, what we've lost! Oh, what we've lost—those bursting pods!' And even today when people experience suffering they say: 'Oh, what we've lost! Oh, what we've lost!' They're just remembering an ancient primordial saying, but they don't understand what it means.

6. Ripe Untilled Rice

When the bursting pods had vanished, ripe untilled rice appeared to those beings. It had no powder or husk, pure and fragrant, with only the rice-grain. What they took for supper in the evening, by the morning had grown back and ripened. And what they took for breakfast in the morning had grown back and ripened by the evening, leaving no trace showing. Then

those beings eating the ripe untilled rice, with that as their food and nourishment, remained for a very long time.

7. Gender Appears

But so long as they ate that ripe untilled rice, their bodies became more solid and they diverged in appearance. And female characteristics appeared on women, while male characteristics appeared on men.* Women spent too much time gazing at men, and men at women. They became lustful, and their bodies burned with fever. Due to this fever they had sex with each other.

Those who saw them having sex pelted them with dirt, clods, or cow-dung, saying,* ‘Get lost, filth! Get lost, filth!’* How on earth can one being do that to another?’* And even today people in some countries, when carrying a bride off, pelt her with dirt, clods, or cow-dung.* They’re just remembering an ancient primordial saying, but they don’t understand what it means.

8. Sexual Intercourse

What was deemed as unprincipled at that time, these days is deemed as principled.* The beings who had sex together weren’t allowed to enter a village or town for one or two months. Ever since they excessively threw themselves into immorality, they started to make buildings to hide their immoral deeds.* Then one of those beings of idle disposition thought, ‘Hey now, why should I be bothered to gather rice in the evening for supper, and in the morning for breakfast? Why don’t I gather rice for supper and breakfast all at once?’*

So that’s what he did. Then one of the other beings approached that being and said, ‘Come, good being, we shall go to gather rice.’ ‘There’s no need, good being! I gathered rice for supper and breakfast all at once.’ So that

being, following their example, gathered rice for two days all at once, thinking: 'This seems fine.'*

Then one of the other beings approached that being and said, 'Come, good being, we shall go to gather rice.' 'There's no need, good being! I gathered rice for two days all at once.' So that being, following their example, gathered rice for four days all at once, thinking: 'This seems fine.'

Then one of the other beings approached that being and said, 'Come, good being, we shall go to gather rice.' 'There's no need, good being! I gathered rice for four days all at once.' So that being, following their example, gathered rice for eight days all at once, thinking: 'This seems fine.'

But when they started to store up rice to eat, the rice grains became wrapped in powder and husk, it didn't grow back after reaping, leaving a trace showing, and the rice stood in clumps.*

9. Dividing the Rice

Then those beings gathered together and bemoaned, 'Oh, how wicked things have appeared among beings!* For we used to be mind-made, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, moving through the sky, steadily glorious, and we remained like that for a very long time. After a very long period had passed, the earth's nectar curdled in the water. But due to bad, unskillful things among us, the earth's nectar vanished, then the ground-fungus vanished, the bursting pods vanished, and now the rice grains have become wrapped in powder and husk, it doesn't grow back after reaping, traces are left showing, and the rice stands in clumps. We'd better divide up the rice and lay down boundaries.'* So that's what they did.

Now, one of those beings was reckless. While guarding their own share they took another's share without it being given, and ate it.*

They grabbed the one who had done this and said, ‘You have done a bad thing, good being, in that while guarding your own share you took another’s share without it being given, and ate it. Do not do such a thing again.’

‘Yes, sirs,’ replied that being. But for a second time, and a third time they did the same thing, and were told not to continue.* And then they struck that being, some with fists, others with stones, and still others with rods.* From that day on stealing was found, and blame, and lying, and the taking up of rods.*

10. The Elected King

Then those beings gathered together and bemoaned, ‘Oh, how wicked things have appeared among beings, in that stealing is found, and blaming and lying and the taking up of rods! Why don’t we elect one being who would rightly accuse those who deserve it, blame those who deserve it, and expel those who deserve it?’* We shall pay them with a share of rice.’*

Then those beings approached the being among them who was most attractive, good-looking, lovely, and illustrious, and said, * ‘Come, good being, rightly accuse those who deserve it, blame those who deserve it, and banish those who deserve it.* We shall pay you with a share of rice.’ ‘Yes, sirs,’ replied that being. They acted accordingly, and were paid with a share of rice.

‘Elected by the people’, Vāseṭṭha, is the meaning of ‘elected one’, the first term applied to them.*

‘Lord of the fields’ is the meaning of ‘aristocrat’, the second term applied to them.*

‘They please others with principle’ is the meaning of ‘king’, the third term applied to them.*

And that, Vāseṭṭha, is how the ancient primordial terms for the circle of aristocrats were created; for those very beings, not others; for those like them, not unlike; by virtue of principle, not against principle. For principle, Vāseṭṭha, is the best thing for people in both this life and the next.

11. The Circle of Brahmins

Then some of those same beings thought, ‘Oh, how wicked things have appeared among beings, in that stealing is found, and blaming and lying and the taking up of rods and banishment! Why don’t we set aside bad, unskillful things?’* So that’s what they did.

‘They set aside bad, unskillful things’ is the meaning of ‘brahmin’, the first term applied to them.*

They built leaf huts in a wilderness region where they meditated pure and bright, without lighting cooking fires or digging the soil. They came down in the morning for breakfast and in the evening for supper to the village, town, or royal capital seeking a meal.* When they had obtained food they continued to meditate in the leaf huts.

When people noticed this they said, ‘These beings build leaf huts in a wilderness region where they meditate pure and bright, without lighting cooking fires or digging the soil. They come down in the morning for breakfast and in the evening for supper to the village, town, or royal capital seeking a meal. When they have obtained food they continue to meditate in the leaf huts.’

‘They meditate’ is the meaning of ‘meditator’, the second term applied to them.*

But some of those beings were unable to keep up with their meditation in the leaf huts in the wilderness. They came down to the neighborhood of a village or town where they dwelt compiling texts.*

When people noticed this they said, ‘These beings were unable to keep up with their meditation in the leaf huts in the wilderness. They came down to the neighborhood of a village or town where they dwelt compiling texts. Now they don’t meditate.’

‘Now they don’t meditate’ is the meaning of ‘reciter’, the third term applied to them.* What was deemed as worse at that time, these days is deemed as best.

And that, Vāseṭṭha, is how the ancient primordial terms for the circle of brahmins were created; for those very beings, not others; for those like them, not unlike; by virtue of principle, not against principle. For principle, Vāseṭṭha, is the best thing for people in both this life and the next.

12. The Circle of Peasants

Some of those same beings, taking up an active sex life, applied themselves to various jobs.

‘Having taken up an active sex life, they apply themselves to various jobs’ is the meaning of ‘peasant’, the term applied to them.*

And that, Vāseṭṭha, is how the ancient primordial term for the circle of peasants was created; for those very beings, not others; for those like them, not unlike; by virtue of principle, not against principle. For principle, Vāseṭṭha, is the best thing for people in both this life and the next.

13. The Circle of Menials

The remaining beings lived by hunting and menial tasks.

‘They live by hunting and humble tasks’ is the meaning of ‘menial’, the term applied to them.*

And that, Vāseṭṭha, is how the ancient primordial term for the circle of menials was created; for those very beings, not others; for those like them, not unlike; by virtue of principle, not against principle. For principle, Vāseṭṭha, is the best thing for people in both this life and the next.

There came a time when an aristocrat,* brahmin, peasant, or menial, deprecating their own vocation, went forth from the lay life to homelessness, thinking, 'I will be an ascetic.'

From these four circles, Vāseṭṭha, the circle of ascetics was created; for those very beings, not others; for those like them, not unlike; by virtue of principle, not against principle. For principle, Vāseṭṭha, is the best thing for people in both this life and the next.

14. On Bad Conduct

An aristocrat, brahmin, peasant, menial, or ascetic may do bad things by way of body, speech, and mind. They have wrong view, and they act out of that wrong view. And because of that, when their body breaks up, after death, they're reborn in a place of loss, a bad place, the underworld, hell.

An aristocrat, brahmin, peasant, menial, or ascetic may do good things by way of body, speech, and mind. They have right view, and they act out of that right view. And because of that, when their body breaks up, after death, they're reborn in a good place, a heavenly realm.

An aristocrat, brahmin, peasant, menial, or ascetic may do mixed things by way of body, speech, and mind. They have mixed view, and they act out of that mixed view. And because of that, when their body breaks up, after death, they experience both pleasure and pain.

15. The Qualities That Lead to Awakening

An aristocrat, brahmin, peasant, menial, or ascetic who is restrained in body, speech, and mind, and develops the seven qualities that lead to awakening, becomes extinguished in this very life.

Any mendicant from these four castes who is perfected—with defilements ended, who has completed the spiritual journey, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, achieved their own true goal, utterly ended the fetters of rebirth, and is rightly freed through enlightenment—is said to be the foremost by virtue of principle, not against principle. For principle, Vāsetṭha, is the best thing for people in both this life and the next.

Brahmā Sanaṅkumāra also spoke this verse:

‘The aristocrat is best among people
who take clan as the standard.
But one accomplished in knowledge and conduct
is first among gods and humans.’

That verse was well sung by Brahmā Sanaṅkumāra, not poorly sung; well spoken, not poorly spoken; beneficial, not harmful, and I agree with it.* I also say:

The aristocrat is best among people
who take clan as the standard.
But one accomplished in knowledge and conduct
is first among gods and humans.”

That is what the Buddha said. Satisfied, Vāsetṭha and Bhāradvāja approved what the Buddha said.