

Stories of Old

Gathered from the Pali Commentaries

Translated by

Nyanaponika Thera
Ñāṇamoli Thera
Soma Thera

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Sources and Translators

These stories have been collected from the ancient commentaries to the Pali Canon that were compiled and translated in Sri Lanka by Venerable Buddhaghosa in the 5th century CE.

- 1 The Arahāt Milakkha Tissa is a free rendition by Ñāṇamoli Thera from the *Manorathapurāṇī* (the Commentary to the Anguttara Nikāya).
- 2 *The Elder Tissa of Cittalapabbata* is a free rendition by Ñāṇamoli Thera from the *Manorathapurāṇī*.
- 3 *The Elder Dhammadinna's Ministry* was translated by Ñāṇamoli Thera from the *Manorathapurāṇī*.
- 4 *The Elder Mahā-Siva* was translated by Ñāṇamoli Thera from the *Manorathapurāṇī*.
- 5 *The Elder Tissabhūti* was translated by Ñāṇamoli Thera from the *Manorathapurāṇī*.
- 6 *Sabhiya* was translated by Nyanaponika Thera from the Commentary to Suttanipāta.
- 7 *The Red Lotus* was translated by Nyanaponika Thera from the Commentary to Suttanipāta.
- 8 *The Unattractive Tree* was translated by Nyanaponika Thera from the Commentary to Suttanipāta.
- 9 *The Thorn in the Flesh & the Thorn in the Heart* was translated by Nyanaponika Thera from the Commentary to the Samyutta Nikāya.
- 10 *How to Recognize Saints* was translated by Nyanaponika Thera from the Commentary to the Samyutta Nikāya.
- 11 *Slow to Fade Away* was translated by Ñāṇamoli Thera from the *Manorathapurāṇī*.
- 12 *The Story of King Halfpenny* was adapted from the Pali by Soma Thera.

The first five stories are sited in ancient Sri Lanka.

Rohana (Sinhalese 'Ruhunu'), mentioned in the first story, is an old regional division of Sri Lanka in its south.

Mahāgāma, now called Māgama, was the capital of Rohana.

Tissamahārāma (in the second story) is also in the south of Sri Lanka, and still exists under the same name as a place of pilgrimage. Tissamahāvihāra is identical with it.

Cittalapabbata (also in the second story), was a monastery 20 kms east of Tissamahārāma. It is frequently mentioned in the *Visuddhimagga* as an abode of arahats, and is the present-day historical site called Situlpava in the Yala National Park, 20 kms. east of Tissamahārāma.

Talaṅgara (or Talaṅgara) (in the third story) may be identical with the town of Tangalla, in Sri Lanka's South, 40 kms. West of Tissamahārāma.

1. The Arahat Milakkha Tissa

About two thousand years ago there was a young man living in Rohana not far from the southern capital of Mahāgāma. He came from a family of hunters, and they lived near the great monastery of Gāmendavāla.

When he grew up, he decided to take a wife and raise a family. So he worked hard, trapping creatures in the jungle, selling the meat and making a profit. He was in fact very diligent in this for some years, and he was able to lay up for himself quite a little money and quite a lot of future suffering.

One day he went into the woods as usual, and as he felt hungry, he killed a deer caught in one of his traps, grilled the meat over a fire and ate it. Then he was thirsty but there was no water, so he had to walk a long way to the great monastery of Gāmendavāla. When he got there, he went to where the drinking water was kept; but though ten pitchers were there as usual, he found them all empty. He was parched by then, and losing his temper a little, he exclaimed:

“Well really! All these bhikkhus living here and not a drop of water for visitors!”

The Elder Cula Pindapātika Tissa overheard him, and went to him; but glancing at the water pitchers, he saw that they were all full. He thought, ‘This man is about to turn into a living ghost.’ He said:

“Lay follower, if you are thirsty, here is water, drink it.”

Taking one of the pitchers, he poured some water into the man’s hands. As he drank, it seemed to vanish away as if put in a red-hot pan. Though he drank till all the pots were really empty, his thirst was still not quenched.

The Elder, who knew him well, said:

“Lay follower, you are half a ghost already. It is because of all the cruel things you do. What is going to become of you?”

The young man said nothing, but after he had saluted the Elder and departed, the words worked like jungle thorns deep into his mind as he walked along. Suddenly his indecision left him. He went the round of all his traps and broke them. He returned home, where he told his wife that he must leave her and the children and he made arrangements for their welfare. Then he loosed the deer and birds he had caught and caged, broke his spear and turned his back upon his home.

He went straight to the monastery and asked to be admitted as a novice. The same Elder told him:

“Friend, life gone forth into homelessness is hard. Will you be able to live it?”

He assured the Elder that his experience, as he saw it, allowed him no alternative. So the Elder admitted him and gave him the monk’s name of Milakkha Tissa. He duly instructed him in the general meditation on the parts of the body. He lived quietly for a while, studying the Buddha’s word, meditating and doing the various duties.

Reading the discourses one day with his teacher, they came to the passage in the Devadutta Sutta, which, says: ‘Then the warders of hell throw him back into the great hell again.’

He asked: “Do they really take a being who has just escaped from such immense suffering and throw him back again into the great hell, venerable sir?”

“They do, friend. All that is made by beings’ evil deeds alone.”

“Can it be seen, venerable sir?”

“No. But I will show you something like it.”

The Elder called the novices and had them pile wet wood on the top of a flat rock. Then they saw him so act as to draw from hell by supernormal power a tongue of fire no bigger than a firefly, which he guided towards the wood. As soon as it reached it there was a flash, and the wet wood was turned to ashes. The other looked at the Elder and asked:

“Venerable sir, how many vocations are there in this dispensation?”

“There are two, friend. The *vasadhura*, or vocation of practice; and the *ganthadhura*, or vocation of books.”

“Venerable sir, books are for clever people. But I have faith, and that is based on suffering, which I can see for myself. Let me follow the vocation of practice. Give me a special meditation subject, venerable sir.”

The Elder told him all that he must do, and he expounded a special meditation subject to him, explaining to him how to develop both concentration and insight into the true nature of experience.

From then on he lived very strictly, doing the regular duties now at the monastery of Cittalapabbata, now at Gāmendavāla and now at Kājaragāma. He was so anxious not to neglect his task that whenever he felt drowsy he would put a plait of wet straw on his head and sit with his feet in water.

Once at Cittalapabbata after meditating through two watches of the night, he put the wet straw on his forehead to keep off the sleepiness that weighed down on him towards dawn. Then he heard the voice of a novice chanting on the slope of the Eastern Rock this verse from the Arunavatiya Sutta:

“Arise, arise, bestir your hearts
And strive to know the Buddha’s word
As tuskers crush a shed of rushes
Deal Māra’s hordes the final blow
Since he that will in diligence
Live out this Law and discipline
Shall leave the roundabout of rebirths
And make an end of suffering”

The words seemed as if addressed directly to him. The flooding happiness they brought him heralded the onset of concentration. Then the new transparent clearness in his mind enabled him to see for himself without depending on others the true conditioned nature of all existence, and he reached the fruit of the path of non-return. Soon afterwards, with a supreme effort he attained arahatship, whereon he uttered this exclamation:

“With wetted straw upon my head
I walked the night until I knew
The path’s fruit that is last but one
But now I have no doubts at all.”

2. The Elder Tissa of Cittalapabbata

Many centuries ago there was a novice called Tissa who lived with his preceptor at Tissamahārāma. Gradually he found himself growing discontented with the bhikkhu life though he could not explain to himself for what reason; and in spite of himself a wish to return to lay life kept troubling his mind. For some time he did his best to get rid of this thought by busying himself with the dyeing and washing of robes, the baking of his bowl with oil, the mending of old robes, and by as many other devices as he could think of, but with no success. So at length he went to his preceptor and told him about it.

Now the old teacher knew his pupil well, and he had seen in him the latent possibility of great spiritual advancement; now too he saw that with the help of favourable circumstances the novice's discontent might disappear. However, he knew that it would be useless and even harmful to try and persuade him by direct argument; his pupil would have to be helped to discover for himself his own talents. So the Elder said to him:

"Tissa, we are getting old. And here at Tissamahārāma all the bhikkhus' lodgings belong to the community. We have nowhere a place of our own where we can grow old and die in peace. Will you go to Cittalapabbata and make a dwelling place there for us according to the vinaya rules that shall be our own personal property?"

The novice did not have to be asked again before he agreed, and at once he was eager to set off in order to start the work. His preceptor told him:

"Tissa, while you are doing the building work there, do not forget the way you have been taught; keep your meditation subject always in mind and practice the development of it at regular intervals."

The novice promised to follow this advice. Then he took leave of his preceptor and set out for Cittalapabbata eighteen miles away through the jungle. When he got there, he first put up at the monastery in the forest; and then began looking for a suitable place nearby to make into a dwelling for his preceptor. Eventually he found a suitable overhanging rock.

After getting the consent of the resident bhikkhus, and after making sure that no creatures' nests or even anthills would be destroyed, he set about thoroughly clearing the site and levelling the ground under the rock. Then he built a wall which had the rock's overhang for its roof, and in that wall he fitted a door and a window. Then he prepared a floor in the new room and made a step in front of the door. And outside he constructed a long walk for walking up and down on. As furniture for the room, he made a bed and chair. All this took him a long time with much hard work. All the days that he was engaged on it he kept up his study of the Samyutta Nikāya; and he never let a day pass without a period spent on practicing his meditation subject. At last it so happened that one day, simultaneously, he finished the building work and got the room ready for occupation; completed his study of the Samyutta Nikāya; and succeeded in attaining a measure of concentration by means of his meditation subject. Since all these three things came to fruition at the same time, it was with no little satisfaction that he went on the following day to Tissamahārāma. And he told his preceptor:

"Venerable sir, the work on the cave is finished. Now it is ready for you to live in."

The Elder paused in thought. Then without looking up he said quietly:

"Tissa, all this has been very difficult for you, and you have worked hard. Now go back there today and live alone in that cave by yourself for this one night."

The novice was surprised, but he agreed; and that same day he made the long journey back to Cittalapabbata. He was tired when he arrived. However, he washed his feet and entered the cave and sat down. The sun had already set, and the stillness of the night was all around him. In

that transparent quiet he considered step by step the work he had just completed and the thought came to him:

“A work of pure love has been done by me for my preceptor.”

For a long time this thought sustained him until suddenly rapture arose and came flooding over him like the breaking of an ocean wave. In that propitious moment all conditions favoured him, and for that reason he was able to master the rapture and to establish insight upon it. He saw this experience of his as due to conditions; and this insight he was able to extend to the whole of the three planes of existence. In all kinds of existence he saw that there could be nothing not subject to impermanence, to suffering, and to the law of no-self; that whatever is inseparable from the idea of arising is inseparable from the idea of cessation. During the course of the night he was able to carry this insight so far in strength that all craving in him ceased, and with the exhaustion of all taints he reached arahatship.

After many years, when the novice Tissa had become the Elder Tissa, long after his preceptor had passed away, he completed his life-span in that same cave, and he attained final Nibbāna there, by the element of extinction without result of past clinging left. He had long been known as the Elder Tissa of Cittalapabbata. They took his relics and built a shrine over them, and they called it Tissa's Shrine.

3. The Elder Dhammadinna's Ministry

A. The Elder Mahā-Nagā's Cure

The Elder Dhammadinna, who lived at Talāṅgara, was the instructor of a large community of bhikkhus. He was one of the great ones with cankers destroyed who possessed the four kinds of analytical knowledge. One day, as he was sitting in his own day-time quarters, he wondered:

"Has our teacher, the Elder Mahā-Nagā who lives at Uccavālika, brought his work of recluship to its conclusion or not?"

He saw that the Elder Mahā-Nagā was still an ordinary man, and he knew that if he did not go to him, he would die an ordinary man. He rose up into the air with supernormal power and alighted near the Elder who was sitting in his day-time quarters. He paid homage to him, doing his duty, and sat down at one side. To the question:

"Why have you come unexpectedly, friend Dhammadinna?"

Dhammadinna replied, "I have come to ask a question, venerable sir."

"Ask, friend. If we know, we shall say."

He asked a thousand questions.

The Elder Mahā-Nagā replied without hesitation to each question. To Dhammadinna's remark, "Your knowledge is very keen, venerable sir; when was this state attained by you?" he replied:

"Sixty years ago, friend."

"Do you practice concentration, venerable sir?"

"That is not difficult, friend."

"Then make an elephant, venerable sir."

The Elder Mahā-Nagā made an elephant, all white.

"Now, venerable sir, make that elephant come straight at you with his ears outstretched, his tail extended, putting his trunk in his mouth and making a horrible trumpeting."

The Elder did so. Seeing the frightful aspect of the rapidly approaching elephant, he sprang up and started to run away. Then the Elder with cankers destroyed put out his hand, and catching him by the hem of his robe, he said:

"Venerable sir, is there any timidity in one whose cankers are destroyed?"

Then he recognized that he was still an ordinary man. He knelt at Dhammadinna's feet and said:

"Help me, friend Dhammadinna."

"Venerable sir, I will help you; that is why I came. Do not worry."

Then he expounded a meditation subject to him. The Elder took the meditation subject and went up on to the walk, and with the third footstep, he reached arahatship.

B. The Elder Mahā-Tissa's Cure

There was an Elder, Mahā-Tissa by name, who had obtained the eight meditative attainments when he was still a novice. The defilements of mind, being suppressed by his attainments, did not make an appearance, and his instruction showed him to be close to the noble path. So for sixty years he was unaware of his still being an ordinary man, and not an arahat.

Then one day, the order of bhikkhus sent a message from Tissamahāvihāra at Mahāgāma to the Elder Dhammadinna, who was dwelling in Talāṅgara, to come and preach a sermon on the Dhamma. After the elder consented, he thought, "There is no bhikkhu who is more senior with me. Having made the Elder Mahā-Tissa, my meditation teacher, the senior of the order (*sanghathera*), I will go..."

Surrounded by the order of bhikkhus, he went to the Elder's dwelling, and offering his duty to the Elder he sat down at one side.

The Elder said: "Well, Dhammadinna, it is long since you came."

"Yes, venerable sir. The order of bhikkhus sent me a message from Tissa-Mahāvihāra. I will not go alone but would like to go with you. That is why I came."

After a long and friendly talk, he asked "When, venerable sir, did you attain this state?"

"As many as sixty years ago, Dhammadinna."

"But, venerable sir, do you practice the attainments?"

"Yes, friend."

"Can you construct a lotus pool, venerable sir?"

"That is not difficult, friend."

He constructed a lotus pond in a place opposite to them.

"Make a lotus plant there, venerable sir," and the Elder did so.

"Now show a big flower there," and it was done.

"Show the form of a sixteen-year-old maiden in it," and the Elder did as was said.

Thereupon Dhammadinna said: "Venerable sir, reflect upon her as beautiful again and again."

As the Elder looked upon the form of the maiden created by him, lust arose in him. Knowing thus that he was still an ordinary man, he knelt down by his pupil saying, "Good man, be my support!"

"It is for that reason I came, venerable sir."

He calmed the Elder by means of the contemplation of the foul; expounded a meditation subject to him; and went outside in order to give the Elder an opportunity. Having dissolved the formation (created by his supernormal power and his lustful thought-formation as well), when he came out of his day-quarters, he had already reached arahatship, together with the four kinds of analytical knowledge.

Then, after making him senior of the order,¹ the Elder Dhammadinna went to Tissamahāvihāra and preached a sermon on the Dhamma.

¹ It seems that he goes alone. The story is not so clear on the reasons for making the Elder Mahātissa the senior monk of the community. One would expect this to be for the reason that Mahātissa would take care of the monastery in his absence because Dhammadinna says that there is no more elder monk staying near him (*mama santike*). However, when Dhammadinna goes to Mahātissa he says that he would like him to come along. (BPS editor)

4. The Elder Mahā-Siva

In the Tissamahāvihāra at Mahāgāma lived the Elder Mahā-Siva who was the teacher of a large community of disciples, expounding to them the Tipiṭaka by way of text and meaning. Guided by his instruction, a very great number of bhikkhus had attained to sainthood.

In one of these bhikkhus, joy had arisen due to his full penetration of truth, and he thought: "Is there this bliss in our teacher?"

On directing his attention to it, he knew that the Elder Mahā-Siva was still a commoner. He thought: "There is a way by which I shall arouse the Elder's sense of urgency!"—and he went out from his own dwelling place to visit the Elder. He paid homage to him and after offering the duty he sat down.

Then the Elder said to him: "Why have you come, friend the alms-food eater (*pindapātika*)?"

"If you will grant me an opportunity, I have come to learn a portion of the Dhamma, venerable sir."

"Many, friend, are learning. I cannot tell you a time."

When that monk did not get an opportunity in the whole day and night, he said to the Elder: "Since there is thus no time, how will you find time for death?"

Then the Elder thought: "This one has not come for learning; but he has come for arousing a sense of urgency in me."

The other then said: "Venerable sir, an Elder bhikkhu should be as I am"—and he paid homage to the teacher and then rose up into the sapphire-coloured sky and departed.

From the time of the other's departure, the Elder was filled with a sense of urgency. He delivered his day lesson and evening lesson, and placing his bowl and outer robe within his hands' reach, he took the lesson in the early morning. Then taking his bowl and outer robe he went out of the monastery with another bhikkhu who was leaving; and resolved on the thirteen strict ascetic virtues (*dhutanga*). He took as his resting place an overhanging rock outside the village. Preparing the cave, he put aside bed and chair, and made the mental resolution: "Without reaching sainthood, I will not spread my bedding on the couch," and he betook himself to the ambulatory.

While he was applying himself, saying: "Today I shall obtain sainthood! Today I shall obtain sainthood!" the *pavāraṇā*² ceremony came round. When the *pavāraṇā* ceremony drew near, thinking: "I shall abandon the commoner's state. I shall celebrate the *pavāraṇā* in purity,"—he fatigued himself exceedingly in striving. Being unable for that *pavāraṇā* to arouse either Path or Fruition, he said: "Even for one like me who has initiated insight it is unobtainable. Ah, difficult it is to obtain arahatship!"

Continuing the practice, with chiefly standing and walking, he did the duties of a recluse for thirty years. Now one day, while the great *pavāraṇā* ceremony was going on, he saw the full moon. Thinking: "Which is the purer, the moon's disc or my virtue?"—he observed: "On the moon's disc, there is the mark of the hare to be seen, but since my higher ordination up to this very day there has been no spot or stain,"—and he became filled with rapture and joy. Because his knowledge was mature, he suppressed the rapture and reached arahatship together with the four kinds of analytical knowledge.

² *pavāraṇā* (lit. "invitation") is the ceremony at the end of the monastic rainy season when the monks invite each other to point out any faults, before they declare their purity from unconfessed offences

5. The Elder Tissabhūti

An Elder, Tissabhuti by name, came to stay in the great Maṇḍalārāma monastery at Kallagāma. While he was in the village on his alms-round, he noticed a person of the opposite sex. Lust arose in him. Without moving from where he stood, he poured the rice gruel into his young attendant's bowl. He suppressed the improper thought by means of insight, and returned to the monastery. But it reappeared to him in a dream. He considered: "If this thought grows, it will drag me to the four states of woe."

He went to his teacher. After paying homage to him, he stood at one side and said: "I have caught a sickness. If I can cure it, I shall come back. Do not expect me for the day recitation or the evening recitation, but expect me for the morning one."

Then he went to the Elder Mahā-Saṅgharakkhita. The Elder was repairing his leaf hut. Without looking up he said: "Put down your bowl and outer robe, friend."

"Venerable sir, I have caught a sickness. I shall put them down, if you can cure it."

"Friend, you have come to one who can cure your sickness. Put them down."

He thought: "The bhikkhu, our teacher, speaks kindly. He would not speak like this unless he knew." And he put down the bowl and the outer robe. Then after he had undertaken the duties to the Elder, he sat down at one side.

The Elder knew that he was of lustful temperament, and so, as a meditation subject, he expounded the contemplation of the impurity of the body to him; that is, the progressive stages of a decaying corpse. Then the Elder Tissabhūti got up. After he had slung his bowl and outer robe over his shoulder, he paid repeated homage to the Elder.

"Why do you show such gratitude, Tissabhūti?"

"Venerable sir, if I succeed in doing what I have to do, it will be well. If not, then this is the last time you will see me."

"Go, friend Tissabhūti. For one, who is as devoted to his practice as you are, it will not be hard to gain jhāna or insight or path or fruition."

When he had made a suitable reply to the Elder's words and had shown his gratitude, he went to the shade at the root of a bush that he had noticed as he came. He spread his refuse-rag robe, and seating himself on it cross-legged, he made the contemplation of the impurity of the body as his meditation subject clear before him. He established insight and severed his greed for the five strands of sense desire by means of the path of non-return. Then he arose and paid homage to his teacher. Next day he arrived back for the morning recital.

6. Sabhiya

In the Sabhiya Sutta of the Sutta-nipāta we read about a wandering ascetic called Sabhiya. A deity, who in a former life had been a kinsman of his, appeared to him and taught him certain questions which he should put to ascetics and brahmins whom he might meet on his wandering. “Under him who can give an answer to these questions, thou shouldst live the holy life”—said the deity.

That deity however, say the teachers of old, was not exactly a blood relation of Sabhiya, but a fellow monk of his in a previous existence, who dearly wished his welfare and progress as parents do for their own child. Here is the story of their past.

Under the dispensation of Kassapa Buddha³ when that Awakened One had already passed away, three sons of noble families went forth into the homeless life as monks. They lived in the forests and only now and then they visited the nearest city to worship there at the golden cetiya⁴ and to listen to an exposition of the Dhamma. But sometimes even that short absence from the forest was unwelcome to them and they preferred to remain in their sylvan solitude striving earnestly for mind’s deliverance.

But, in spite of their strenuous life, they could not gain even the smallest attainment. Finally they spoke among themselves: “By going out for alms food, we still pay too much regard to our life. But he, who is so anxiously concerned to preserve his life, surely cannot win to any supramundane state. And to die as an ordinary man unfreed of the fetters is most grievous and shameful. Let us then tie a ladder, climb on a steep rock and, discarding the ladder without regard for life and body, let us do the recluse’s work!” So they did.

The oldest among the three, endowed with favouring qualities of mind, attained on that very day to sainthood, together with the six supernormal powers (*abhīñña*). By his magic power he rose up into the air and went to the Himalayas. The almsfood obtained there, he brought to his fellow monks on the lonely rock.

But the others said: “Your own work, venerable sir, has been done. Your task is accomplished. But for us who are still unfreed, it will be a waste of time even to talk to you. Please do not come here again!”

When the Elder saw that in no way could he persuade his friends, he left.

After two or three days, one of the other two became a non-returner,⁵ endowed with five of the supernormal powers. And when he had done like the first Elder and failed to persuade the third to accept almsfood, he also left. But the third monk, in spite of strenuous effort, could not attain to any higher achievement.

On the seventh day after their ascent of the rock, he died and was reborn in a heavenly world of the sense sphere. On that very day the other two also passed away; the canker-free saint into parinibbāna, and the non-returner appeared in the sublime heaven of the pure abodes where non-returners spend their last existence.

The third of the friends, reborn as a deity, traversed to and fro, through many existences, the six heavenly realms of the sense sphere, enjoying whatever happiness they can give. After exhaustion of that kamma he departed from these worlds and, during the time of our Buddha

³ A Buddha of the past

⁴ *Pagoda, dagoba*

⁵ A non-returner has reached the third of four stages of emancipation culminating in sainthood (arahatship); he does not come back to this world but, during the one existence before him, in the pure abodes, he reaches perfect deliverance.

Gotama, he was reborn on earth, in the womb of a female ascetic. He received the name Sabhiya and, having come to age, he became a wandering ascetic. He was an accomplished disputant and was widely feared and never conquered in religious controversies.

Now that brahma of the pure abodes, his former companion in the holy life, remembered him, and he saw that Sabhiya had no knowledge that there was a Buddha on earth. In order to set Sabhiya on the road where he could meet the Buddha he taught him those several questions which are recorded in the discourse, and said: "Under him who can answer them, lead thou the holy life!"

He did not tell Sabhiya of the Buddha because he knew that if he was an earnest seeker after the goal, and saw the shallowness of the other ascetics and priests, he would not fail to recognize the Buddha. Therefore, he only told him how to question well and wisely.

As we read in the discourse, Sabhiya met the Buddha and had all his questions answered. He became a bhikkhu and soon attained to sainthood.

7. The Red Lotus

Once the Blessed One lived near Sāvattthī at the Jeta Grove in Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. At that time the venerable Sāriputta had as his personal attendant a young monk who had been ordained under him and was a goldsmith's son. The venerable Sāriputta thought: "For young people, the contemplation of the body's impurity is a suitable subject of meditation," and for conquering lust, he instructed him in that meditation.

But the young monk's mind could not get even to the stage of becoming familiar with the subject, and he said so to the venerable Sāriputta: "This is of no help to me."

But the therā⁶ thought: "For young people this is surely suitable," and he gave him again the very same subject of meditation. But even after four months of effort the monk did not obtain even the smallest result. Thereupon the therā took him to the Blessed One, and the Master said:

"To know what is suitable for him, is not within the range of your capacities, Sāriputta. He is one who has to be guided by a Buddha."

The monk had been born in a goldsmith's family throughout five hundred lives. Hence the Blessed One knew: "A red object will be suitable to him."

And the Blessed One, by his supernormal power, created a red lotus of radiant colour, and placed it into the hands of the monk, saying: "Well, O monk, plant this lotus in sandy soil at a shady spot of the monastery. Then, facing it, sit down with legs crossed, and think, "Red, red."

The monk did as he was told, and almost immediately he attained, in succession, to all four jhānas, those sublime states of full meditative absorption, and he even was able to enter into them in their reverse as well as their normal order.

Now the Master resolved in his mind: "May the lotus wither!"

When the monk emerged from his meditation, he saw the red lotus withered and discoloured, and he thought: "This radiant form has now been crushed by decay!" Obtaining from that a vivid perception of impermanence, he then applied it to himself, and, continuing his contemplation, he understood: "What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is not self," and he saw the three planes of existence as if enveloped in flames.

Not far from him there was a lotus pond. Boys had gone into it gathering lotus flowers and had put them on a heap at the shore. When the monk looked at the scene, the red lotus blossoms which were still in the water, appeared to him like tongues of flames in a burning reed thicket; and the falling petals seemed to plunge into a chasm. And among the flowers that were lying on the land, those on top that were withered appeared to him as if seared by fire.

Stirred by that sight he contemplated on life's processes, and still more the three planes of existence appeared to him like a house enveloped in flames that does not give any refuge and safety.

Then the Blessed One, sitting in his room, emitted his bodily aura that rose above the monk and spread over his face. The monk looked up and thought: "What is that?"

Then it appeared to him as if the Blessed One had come and stood close by. Seeing this, the monk rose from his seat and paid homage with clasped hands. Then the Master, knowing his fitness, taught Dhamma by speaking this illuminating verse:

⁶ The elder Sāriputta.

“Who severs lust entire,
Like into the pond descending
One uproots lotus plants,
Such a monk discards ‘here’ and ‘beyond’
As snakes slough outworn skin”

8. The Unattractive Tree

Once there lived a king of Benares called Brahmadata. Every four months he used to ride to his royal park to amuse himself in sports and frolics. One day in the middle of the summer, when he had gone again to the park, he saw at the entrance of it an ebony tree in full bloom and with dense foliage. Plucking one of the flowers, he entered the park.

The courtier who rode behind him thought, "This must be a very distinguished flower that the king has taken!" and sitting on his elephant's back, he too plucked a flower. So too did the entire large entourage. And when, finally, there were no blossoms left, they took the leaves. Void of blossoms and leaves, the tree was left with its bare trunk.

And so the king saw it when he returned from the park in the evening.

"What has happened to the tree?" he thought. "When I went to the park, coral-like blossoms adorned it, shining through the emerald green of its leaves. And now it is quite bare, and neither blossoms nor leaves are to be seen!"

While he so mused, he saw close-by another tree, without any blossoms but amply covered with foliage. And the king thought: "That other tree, with its branches heavy with beautiful flowers, was attractive to the crowd, and within a short time distress befell it. But this tree here, because it has nothing attractive to show, still stands inviolate and unharmed. So also my kingdom is attractive and desirable to many, like that blossoming tree.

"But monkhood is unattractive like this tree without blossoms. Hence, as long as this kingdom of mine has not yet been plundered and ransacked like that blossoming tree, it is fit to go forth into the homeless life clad in the monk's dull-coloured and inconspicuous robes, like that other tree with its unattractive foliage."

Thinking thus, he gave up his kingdom and became a monk. Developing insight, he realized a Silent Buddha's Awakening (*pacceka-bodhi*).

Hence it was said:

"Discarding laymen's garb and ways
Like coral tree its foliage sheds,
Clad in the ochre robe go forth
And fare alone like the rhinoceros!"

(Sutta Nipāta v. 64)

9. The Thorn in the Flesh and the Thorn in the Heart

Once there lived twelve monks in a forest, devoted to meditative effort. One day when at sunset the gong had been sounded, one of the monks, an Elder, had left the ambulatory and, for shortening the way, he went across a grassy patch. A thorn hidden in the grass pierced the sole of his foot. The thorn was very long and sharply pointed, and caused severe pain as if a heated iron rod had pierced the foot.

The Elder thought to himself: "Now, shall I pull out this thorn or that other thorn that constantly pierces our heart?"

And he thought further: "When pierced by an external thorn, there is no fear of falling into the states of woe; but there is such danger from that other thorn that always hurts us inwardly."

So he ignored the pain and, walking the whole night up and down on the ambulatory, he did his meditation.

At daybreak he gave a sign to a monk who passed. When that monk came near and asked him what he wanted, he said: "A thorn has hurt me, friend."

"When did it happen, venerable sir?"

"Last evening, friend."

"But why did you not call, venerable sir? We would have come and extracted the thorn and treated the wound with oil."

"I have striven, friend, to pull out that other thorn that constantly hurts us deep within."

"And did you succeed, venerable sir?"

"Partly, friend."

10. How to Recognize Saints

At the monastery on the Cittala Hill, there lived an Elder who was a canker-freed saint. As his personal attendant he had a novice who was ordained in old age. One day the old novice went on almsround together with the Elder, and carrying the Elder's alms bowl and outer robe, he walked behind him. While they so went, the old novice asked the Elder: "Those who are saints, how do they look? How can we recognize them?"

The Elder said: "There is an old person who carries a saint's bowl and robe, fulfils all duties towards him, and even goes along with him—yet he cannot recognize saints. So hard to know, friend, are the saints!"

And not even then did the old novice understand.

11. Slow To Fade Away

“Lust” said the Enlightened One, “is slow to fade away.” It is, add the teachers of old, like lampblack that sticks for a long time. Lust does not go away even for two or three successive existences. To illustrate this, there is a story.

A man, it seems, had an illicit relation with his brother’s wife. He was dearer to that woman than her own husband. She said to him: “If this affair becomes known there will be a great scandal. Kill your brother.”

He was shocked and said: “Stop it, hag. Do not say that again.”

She was silent. After a few days had passed, she spoke of it again. His mind wavered. After that, when she had mentioned it for the third time, he said: “What shall I do to find an opportunity?”

Then she explained the means to him: “Do as I tell you. In a certain place near a big hollow tree there is a washing place. Wait there with a sharp hatchet.” He did so. When the elder brother came home after working in the forest, she pretended to be nice to him and said: “Come, husband, I will look at your head.” After she had looked, she said: “Your head is dirty.” Then she gave him a ball of crushed myrobalan paste, and sent him off, saying: “Go and wash your head at such and such a place, and come back.”

He went to the washing place she had told him. He smeared his head with myrobalan paste, bent forward to pour the water on his head and began to wash. Then the other came out from inside the hollow tree and struck him on the spine, killing him, and then went home.

The other was unable to throw off his affection for his wife and was reborn in that same house as a rat snake. He would go near to her over where she was standing or sitting and fall on her body from the roof. Then, thinking: “This must be him again!”—she had him killed.

On account of his affection for her, he was again reborn in that same house as a dog. As soon as she set out anywhere on foot he went after her. When she went to the forest, he followed her. When people saw this, they mocked her, saying: “The hunter has gone out with the dog! What place are they going to?” So she had him killed again.

Again he was reborn at the same household as a calf, and likewise he followed her everywhere. Then when people saw her they mocked her, saying: “The cow herd has gone out. Where will the cows wander?” She had him killed on the spot.

Since he was still unable to break off his affection for her, he was reborn for the fourth time, this time in her womb with the recollection of former lives. Eventually, he saw that he had been killed by her in his last four existences; he thought: “I have been reborn in the womb of such an enemy!” From then on he would not let her touch him with her hand. If she touched him he shrieked and cried. Only his grandmother could look after him.

Later on, when he was grown, his grandfather said: “My dear, why would you not let your mother touch you with her hand, and why, when she touched you, did you cry out aloud and shriek?”

When he was asked this by his grandfather, he said: “She is not my mother, she is my enemy.” He then told him all that had occurred. The grandfather embraced him and wept saying: “Come, my dear, what business have we living in such a place.”

The grandfather then went with him to a certain monastery. They both went forth into the monk life and living there they both attained arahatship.

12. The Story of King Halfpenny

For long, men have:

- craved for the unlovely, believing it to be lovely;
- craved for unhappiness, believing it to be happiness;
- craved for the impermanent, believing it to be permanent; and
- craved for what is not self, believing it to be self.

In those who have such a perverted view of the facts of life, craving grows. “Like a creeper grows the craving of the negligent man”—that is, of a man who has not taken pains to understand the true nature of life. “He leaps hither and thither desiring fruits, like an ape in the woods.”

Most complex is this craving in the common man who has not been instructed in the Buddha’s teaching. It often seems as if it would be futile to expect any movement on his part towards right understanding which leads to the cessation of craving. Still, even such an uninstructed man’s conscience may prick him, owing to some good training in past lives, and make him change his character, as the following story shows.

Long ago, a labourer, who lived at the north gate of Benares, had earned a halfpenny (*addhamāsaka*) by carrying water, and hid it under a tile of the boundary wall near the gate. While earning his livelihood as a water-carrier he lived, from time to time, with a poor woman at the south gate of the town.

One day she told him:

“Today there is a festival in the town. Let us amuse ourselves, if you have money.”

“I have,” said the man.

“How much?”

“A halfpenny.”

“Where is it?”

“Under a tile of the north boundary wall, twelve yojanas from here, is my treasure. Have you any money on you?”

“I have,” said the woman.

“How much?”

“A halfpenny.”

“Then with your halfpenny and my halfpenny, we have a penny. And with the penny we can buy garlands, perfumes and drink and find pleasure.”

“Fetch your halfpenny,” said the woman.

“My dear, don’t worry. I shall fetch it,” said the man, and went to bring his treasure, pleased and excited, because he had got the idea of enjoyment from the woman.

The labourer, who was strong as an elephant, covered six yojanas. He was excited with greed, and at midday was going along the road near the king’s palace, treading on hot sand which was like flameless glowing coal spread out. The man had rolled palm leaves stuck in his ears for ornament, was dressed in dirty rags, and was singing a wanton song.

The king of Benares at that time was the bodhisatta; his name was Udaya. King Udaya, who was standing at the open window, saw the labourer and was curious to know about the man's errand. He had the labourer brought to the palace. To the labourer the king said:

"The earth has turned to live coals; the ground is like burning cinders; but you sing a wanton song. Does not the heat burn you? The sun glows above and the sand scorches below. But you sing a wanton song. Does not the heat burn you?"

"No, sire, the heat does not burn me; desires burn me. The many things that I have to do because of passion, these do burn me; the heat does not."

Then he made known his errand to the king, and added:

"Her words, when she sent me off on this journey, 'Fetch the halfpenny, then both of us will amuse ourselves,' do not leave my heart, and as I ponder on them the fire of passion burns me."

"But in this hot weather what is the comforting thought owing to which you go singing a wanton song?"

"Sire, the thought, 'Having got the money, I shall amuse myself with her' makes me content, and sing."

"Does the treasure you have hidden at the north gate amount to a hundred thousand?"

"No, sire."

"Does it amount to half a hundred thousand?"

"No, sire."

Then questioning him further, the king found out that the treasure was a halfpenny, and said this:

"Good man, don't go at this hot time. I shall give you a halfpenny."

But the man wished to have both the king's halfpenny and the halfpenny under the tile of the boundary wall. Although the king increased his offer to a crore and more, the man would not stop the journey to get his halfpenny. Then the king offered the man half of Benares, and only then did the labourer agree to cancel his journey to the north gate. But it is said that he chose that half of Benares where his halfpenny was hidden! Later the labourer was known as King Halfpenny (Addhamāsaka Rāja).

One day the two kings went to a park. There, after amusing himself, King Udaya rested with his head on King Halfpenny's lap and fell asleep. And when Udaya was sleeping, Halfpenny thought:

"Why should I not kill King Udaya and become king of the whole of Benares?"

But quickly remorse overtook Halfpenny, and he awoke King Udaya, and confessed to him the treacherous thought that had crossed his mind. King Udaya offered to Halfpenny the whole of Benares and agreed to be Halfpenny's viceroy. But Halfpenny said:

"I have no use for the kingdom, sire. Take back your kingdom. I shall go forth. I have seen the root of sensuality. Sensuality grows with the thought of it. I shall never more think sensually."

And then he said this:

“Desire, I saw your root.
From thought do you spring.
I shall not think of you, and you shall not be in me.
Little desire is not enough,
and much desire does not bring satisfaction.
Truly he who is awake should penetrate foolish prattling desires.”

Then the labourer who became King Halfpenny renounced the world and became a Paccekabuddha.⁷

⁷ A Silent Buddha.

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