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Māgadha Sutta

The Māgadha Discourse | S 2.4

Theme: The sources of light and heat

Translated by Piya Tan ©2011

Introduction

1.1 The Māgadha Sutta (S 2.4) recurs as verses S 259-261 in **the Pajjota Sutta** (S 1.26) but without this introductory line:

*Sāvattthi.nidānaṃ.
Ekam-antaṃ t̥hito kho māgadho devaputto
bhagavantaṃ gāthāya ajjhabhāsi.*

Originating at Sāvattthī.
The devaputra Māgadha, standing at one
side, uttered this verse to the Blessed One...
(S 2.4/1:47), SD 36.8

Both discourses speak of the four kinds of light, that is, the moon, the sun, fire, and the Buddha. While the first two are of physical matter and the third a primary element, the fourth is a figure for awakening. The Buddha is “fire” in the sense that he has burned away (*tapati*) all his defilements; as such, he is awakened to the “light” (*ābha*) of liberating wisdom; and he goes on to brighten up (*pabhāsati*) our lives with his compassion and wisdom. Hence, the Buddha is the foremost of lights.

1.2 The theme of light, fire and heat are popular in early Buddhism. Hence, we find similar verses elsewhere. In **the Sela Sutta** (Sn 3.7), this verse is spoken by the Buddha in thanksgiving to the matted-hair ascetic Keṇiya:

*Nakkhattānaṃ mukhaṃ cando
ādicco tapataṃ mukhaṃ
puññaṃ ākaṅkhamānānaṃ
saṅgho ve yajataṃ mukhaṃ 'ti*

The moon is the foremost amongst the stars,
the moon is the foremost shining thing.
For those desiring merit through sacrifice,
the sangha [the holy community] is indeed the foremost.
(Sn 569; MA 3:407 = SnA 2:456)

This verse (and its story) is retold in the Vinaya (V 1:246).

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The Māgadha Discourse

S 2.4/1:47

Originating at Sāvattthī.

The devaputra Māgadha, standing at one side, uttered this verse to the Blessed One:

259 *Kati lokasmim pajjotā
tehi loko pabhāsati¹
bhagavantaṃ puṭṭhum āgamma
kathaṃ jānemu taṃ mayan 'ti.*

How many lights are there in the world,
by which the world is lit?
We have come to ask the Blessed One:
How are we to understand this?

260 *Cattāro loke pajjotā
pañcam 'ettha na vijjati
divā tapati ādicco
rattim ābhāti candimā*

²There are four lights in the world,
no fifth is there to be found.
The sun lights the days,
the moon brightens the night.

¹ Be Ce Ee *pakāsati*; Se *pabhāsati*. See 67b*.

² These 2 main verses (66-67) are qu at BA 15.

261 *Atha aggi divā,rattim
tatha tatha pabhāsati³
sambuddho tapataṃ⁴ seṭṭho
esā ābhā anuttarā'ti*

Then there is fire, day and night,
it shines in various regions.
The self-awakened is the best that shines:
he is the light supreme.

— evaṃ —

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³ Be Ce Ee *pakāsati*; Se *pabhāsati*. See 65b*.

⁴ *Tapata*, adj of *tapati*, “he shines, gives out heat/light, is bright”: “the sun is the foremost burning thing” (*ādicco tapataṃ mukhaṃ*, M 2.146*); see Intro (1.2).