

1.7 Seeing the Light

Visual symbols in Buddhism

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1. The Buddha's enlightenment

It was during the first watch of the Enlightenment night (6.00-10.00 p.m.) that the Bodhisattva developed the first true knowledge, that is, **the knowledge of the recollection of past lives**. In the middle watch (10.00 p.m.-2.00 a.m.), he developed the second true knowledge, that is, **the knowledge of the perception of the arising and passing away of beings** which enabled him to see the cycles of death and rebirth of other beings faring according to their karma. And, in the last watch of the night (2.00-6.00 a.m.), he developed the third true knowledge, that is, **the knowledge of the destruction of passions**. Understanding the nature of things as they truly are, he finally attained to Perfect Enlightenment and Nirvana.

Just as dawn broke, the Bodhisattva, sitting facing the rising sun, became enlightened as the Buddha, **the Kinsman of the Sun** (*ādicca,bandhu*, V 2:296; D 2:287; Sn 54).

2. Dhammacakka-p,pavattana Sutta

‘This Noble Truth that is the Path leading to the Ending of Suffering’ has been cultivated—thus, monks, with regard to things unheard of before, there arose in me **vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight and light**. (S 56.11.12/5:422)

...when my **knowledge and vision** of these Four Noble Truths as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects are thoroughly purified in this way, then I claimed to have awakened to the incomparable full enlightenment in this world with its gods, its Māras, and its Brahmās, this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its rulers¹ and people.

The **knowledge and vision** arose in me:

‘Unshakable is my liberation [of the mind]. This is my last birth. Now there is no more rebirth [for me]!’” (S 56.11.14/5:423)

3. The Buddha's radiant image

(a) Dhammapada verses

The Dhammapada Commentary records many occasions when the Buddha projected **a radiant or luminous image of himself** (what we might today call a *hologram*) to give teachings, usually uttering the Dhammapada verses (DhA 1:259, 282, 316; 2:202 269 f, 275, 277; 3:9, 111, 166, 428; 4:53, 99, 118 f).

(b) Vakkali's seeing

The Teacher, perceiving that he [Vakkali] was depressed and weary of the world, thought to himself,

“If this monk receives no comfort nor consolation from me, he will destroy his predisposition to the attainment of the Path and the Fruits.”

¹ *deva*, here in the sense of “devas by convention” (*sammati,deva*), i.e. kings. The other 2 types of *deva* are “gods by rebirth” (*upapatti,deva*) and “gods by purification” (*visuddhi,deva*), i.e. the Buddhas, Pratyeka Buddhas and Arhants. (CNid 307 KhA 123). See n7.

Accordingly he sent forth a radiant image of himself and displayed himself before the gaze of the monk. The moment the monk saw the Teacher, the weight of sorrow which oppressed him vanished. Then the Teacher, as though filling the dry bed of a lake with a torrent of water, caused intense joy and satisfaction to spring up within the monk, and pronounced the following, [4:119]

381. Full of joy and satisfaction, the monk who has perfect faith in the Religion of the Buddha
Will reach the Place of Peace, Cessation of Existence, Happiness.

Having pronounced this Stanza, the Teacher stretched forth his hand to Elder Vakkali and said,

Come, Vakkali! fear not, as you look upon the Tathāgata [Buddha Thus Come].
I will lift you up, even as one extricates an elephant that has sunk in the mire.

Come, Vakkali! fear not, as you look upon the Tathāgata.
I will lift you up, even as one releases the sun from the maw of Rāhu.

Come, Vakkali! fear not, as you look upon the Tathāgata.
I will lift you up, even as one releases the moon from the maw of Rāhu.

(“Whosoever beholds the Law, he beholds me.”
DhA 25.11/4:118 f, tr Burlingame, DhA:B 3:263)²

4. The Buddha’s aura

(a) The rainbow colours³

(1) Buddhist colours

Traditionally, the Buddha’s rays or halo comprises the colour of the rainbow: **red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet**. In the ancient texts these colours have been conflated into the five Buddhist colours: blue (*nīla*), yellow (*pīta*), red (*lohitaka*), light orange-ochre (*mañjeṭṭha/ka*), white (*odāta*) or crystal (*phalika*), and a composite of them (*pabhassara*) (V 1:25; cf M 1:509, 511).⁴ A Buddha image or statue often has **a flame** (*ketu, mālā*, “garland of rays”) of these colours on its crown, showing that it is a representation of Buddha and not a disciple.

(2) The Vinaya

Then at the end of the night the serpent’s flames became extinguished, but **the multicoloured rays** (*accī*) of the One of Supernatural Powers (*iddhimata*) remained, and multicoloured flames, blue, light orange-ochre, red, yellow and crystal were on body of **Āṅgī, rasa** [whose body emits rays]. Having put the king of snakes into his bowl, he showed him to the brahmin [matted hair ascetic Uruvelā Kassapa]. (V 1:25)

(3) **Buddha, vaṁsa Commentary** (on the Kakusandha Buddha story)

² *Buddhist Legends* [Dhammapada Commentary] tr E W Burlingame, Harvard Oriental Series 28-30. Harvard University Press, 1921. Various reprints.

³ For some details, see for example Toshiichi Endo, *Buddha in Theravada Buddhism*, 1997:146-156.

⁴ In Western religious art, the halo of light around a holy figure’s head is called a “nimbus”. The circle of light around the body is called a “mandorla” (lit “almond” from its shape in Western religious art, but possibly related to the Skt *maṇḍala*). Such representations of holiness first appeared in Indian Buddhist art in the late 3rd century CE. It is believed that the motif was brought to the East by Alexander’s Greek invaders.

Then that man-eating yakkha, seeing that **the Sun of Sages** (*muni, divasa, kara*) had arrived by a forest-path and was emitting **rays of the six hues** like the sun encircled by a rainbow, thought, “He of the Ten Powers⁵ has come here out of compassion for me.” (BA 254 = BA:H 362)

(4) Dhammapada Commentary

He sent forth a luminous image of himself, and although a hundred leagues away, appearing to be seated face to face with them, present in visible form, diffusing **six-coloured rays of light**,⁶ pronounced the following stanza...

(“Monks and the tree-spirits.” DhA 3.6/1:316, tr Burlingame, DhA:B 2:19)⁷

(b) Mahā Kassapa’s conversion

The events of Pippali’s religious life after he and his wife Bhaddā Kāpilānī renounced the world and parted ways are recorded in the **Cīvara Sutta** (S 16.11/2:217-222) and its Commentary (SA 2:162-164). When the earth trembled at the parting of the two people, the Buddha knew about it and through his Buddha-eye perceived that Pippali was ready for conversion. All by himself, the Buddha walked some 6 km (3 *gāvutā*) to meet his future pupil, one of his deeds, amongst many others, often praised (MA 2:136, 148; J 4:180 f.)

The Buddha stopped along the highway between Rājagaha and Nālandā and sat down at the Bahu, -puttaka Cetiya (the Shrine of Many Children) to wait for Pippali. It is said that for this occasion, he did not sit like an ordinary ascetic but displayed all the glory of a Buddha, **radiating rays of light that illuminated the whole surrounding** and manifesting all his 32 marks of the great man.⁸ When Pippali arrived and saw the Buddha, he at once thought: “This must be my master for whose sake I have gone forth!” He approached the Buddha, prostrated before him and declared: “The Blessed One, Lord, is my teacher, and I am his disciple! The Blessed One, Lord, is my teacher, and I am his disciple!”

Henceforth, he was known as **Mahā Kassapa**, but no explanation has been given for this change, but it might have been his clan (*gotta*) name (DPPN 2:477 n4). As regards his title *mahā*, “the great”, the Buddhavaṃsa Commentary notes: “Compared with Uruvelā Kassapa, Nadī Kassapa, Gayā Kassapa,

⁵ “He of the Ten Powers,” *dasa, bala* or more fully *dasa, bala, nāṇa*. The 10 powers are: (1) knowledge of the possible and the impossible (*thānāṭhāna nāṇa*), such as in the analysis of karma (M 57, 135, 136), and the possibility regarding the realm, circumstances, time and effort, all of which would impede or reinforce the result; and also the cause of karma, etc; (2) knowledge of the result of karma (*kamma, vipāka nāṇa*); (3) knowledge of the way leading to all destinies and goals (*sabbattha, gāminī, paṭipadā*); (4) knowledge of the world with its various elements (*nānā, dhātu nāṇa*) (M 115.4-9/3:62 f); (5) knowledge of the different dispositions of beings (*nānādhimuttika nāṇa*); (6) knowledge of the maturity level of beings in terms of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom (*indriya, paropariyatta nāṇa*) (Vbh §§814-827); (7) knowledge of the defilements, cleansing and emergence in the cases of the meditations, liberations, concentrations and attainments (*jhān’ādi, saṅkiles’ādi nāṇa*); (8) knowledge of the recollection of (his own) past lives (*pubbe, nivāsānussati nāṇa*); (9) knowledge of the passing away and arising of beings (according to their karma) (*cutūpapāta nāṇa*); (10) knowledge of the destruction of the mental defilements (*āsava-k, khaya nāṇa*) (M 1:69; A 5:33; Vbh 336). See **Mahā Sīhanāda S** (M 12.9-20/ 1:69-71) for details.

⁶ Our Buddha’s aura is said to extend to a fathom (*vyāma-p, pabhā*, J 1:12, 90; B 1:45; Miln 75; BA 297; VvA 213) all around. A *vyāma* or *byāma* is a “fathom,” here meaning the distance from the finger-tips of the two outstretched arms.

⁷ *Buddhist Legends* [Dhammapada Commentary] tr E W Burlingame, Harvard Oriental Series 28-30. Harvard University Press, 1921. Various reprints.

⁸ Apparently, these marks of a Great Man or “Superman” (*mahā, purisa lakkhaṇa*) are not permanent physical features but can be manifested (in part or in full) by the Buddha at will. See **Lakkhaṇa S** (M 30), **Brahmāyu S** (M 91.5-9, 28 ff), **Sela S** (M 92.10, 13 ff); cf **Piṇḍapāta, pārisuddhi S** where Sāriputta’s skin is described as “pure and bright” due to his “abiding in voidness” that is the “abiding of a great man” (M 151.2/3:294).

Kumāra Kassapa, lesser and minor elders, this elder was *great*; hence he is called Kassapa the Great” (AA 1:163; BA 50).

(c) The five-coloured Buddhist flag

The five traditional Buddhist colours are found on the international Buddhist flag, jointly designed by J R de Silva and Colonel Steele Olcott, the founding president of the Theosophical Society (1875) to mark the modernization or revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka following the arrival of Olcott and H P Blavatsky in 1880, when they publicly took the Five Precepts (Sinhalese *pansil*). The flag was first used in 1888 when Vesak was declared a public holiday in Sri Lanka. The World Fellowship of Buddhists, during a conference in the mid-1950s, adopted this five-coloured flag as the international Buddhist flag to mark 2500 years of the Buddha’s Teaching.

5. Gosīṅga Sutta

The Mahā Gosīṅga Sutta (M 32) records a meeting of some important disciples of the Buddha, such as Mahā Kassapa, Anuruddha, Revata, and Ānanda, in the Gosīṅga Sal Grove on a beautiful full-moon night. Sāriputta asks each of them in turn to describe who they consider to be the ideal monk, **“one who could light up this forest”** (M 1:212-214). When it is Moggallāna’s turn to answer, he says:

Here, friend Sāriputta, two monks engage in a talk as regards the Dharma (*abhidhamma*)⁹, and they question each other, and each being questioned by the other answers without foundering, and their talk rolls on in accordance with the Dharma. That kind of monk could light up this Gosīṅga sal-grove. (M 1:214)

At the end of their Dharma talk, Sāriputta proposes that they go to see the Buddha, who then praises them, saying that each of them is a capable Dharma speaker, each in their own way. Then the Buddha himself gives his own answer:

Here, Sāriputta, when a monk has returned from his almsround, after his meal, he sits down, crosses his legs together, keeps his body erect, and establishing mindfulness before him, resolves: “I shall not break this position until, through not clinging, my mind is liberated from the defilements.” That kind of monk could illumine this Gosīṅga sal-grove. (M 1:219)

While the disciples, in their respective answers, hold up the spiritually accomplished monk as their ideal, the Buddha’s ideal monk is **one who is still striving for the goal**, hence underscoring the purpose of the holy life.

6. Ajātasattu’s inspiration

Now at that time—it being the observance day,¹⁰ **the full-moon night** of Komudī [the water-lily season],¹¹ the month of Kattikā [the 4th month]¹² of the rains—the rajah Ajātasattu¹³ of

⁹ *Abhidhamma*. The term here clearly does not refer to the Piṭaka of that name, which is a post-Nikāya product. It may well indicate “a systematic and analytical approach to the doctrine that served as the original nucleus of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka” (M:B 1224 n362). In his survey of the contexts of the term *Abhidhamma* in the Canon, the Japanese scholar Fumimaro Watanabe concludes that the Buddha’s own disciples formed the conception of Abhidhamma as an elementary philosophical study that attempted to define, analyse and classify *dharmas* and to explore their mutual relations (*Philosophy and Its Development in the Nikāyas and Abhidhamma*, 1983:34-36). On the etymology and usage of *abhidhamma*, see CPD, s.v. & Norman, “Pali Literature: Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of all Hīnayāna Schools of Buddhism.” 1983:97.

¹⁰ *uposatha* (Skt *upavasatha*): here denotes a Brahmin fast-day. On the suggestion of the rajah Bimbisāra, the Buddha introduced the *uposatha* as a fortnightly day of confession for Sangha members (V 1:101-104).

Magadha, the son of Queen Videha, was sitting on the roof terrace of his palace surrounded by his ministers.

Then he felt inspired to exclaim: “How wonderful is this moonlit night! How beautiful! How lovely! How inspiring! How auspicious! What brahmin or recluse should we visit tonight who might enlighten and bring peace to our mind?”¹⁴ (Sāmañña,phala Sutta, D 2.1/1:47)

7. The lighted finger

(a) Mahā Brahma’s finger

Now there was a certain mountain-cave not far from Jambuka’s abode; and the Teacher, pointing to it, asked him,

“Is there anyone living in that mountain-cave?”

“No one is living there, great monk.”

“Well then, allow me to lodge there.”

“As you please, great monk.”

So the Teacher prepared a bed in the mountain-cave and lay down. In the first watch the Four Great Kings came to wait upon the Teacher, lighting up the four quarters with one blaze of light. Jambuka saw the light and thought to himself,

“What light is that?”

In the second watch came Sakka, the king of the gods, Jambuka saw the light and thought to himself:

“Who is that?”

Mahā Brahmā, who with one finger can light up one world-system, with two fingers two world-systems, and with ten fingers ten, lit up the whole forest. Jambuka [2:60] saw him and thought to himself,

“Now who can that be?” (“Jambuka the Naked Ascetic” DhA 5.11/2:59 f, DhA:B 2:135)¹⁵

(b) Dabba’s finger

The story goes that one day they gave her [Puṇṇā, a female slave of the treasurer or Rāja-gaha] much rice to pound. She pounded away until late at night, lighting a lamp to work by; finally she became weary and in order to rest herself, stepped outside and stood in the wind with her body moist with sweat. Now at that time Dabba the Malla was steward of lodgings for the monks. [3:322] Having listened to the Law, that he might show the monks the way to their respective lodgings, **he lighted his finger**, and preceding the monks, **created by supernatural power a light for them**.

(“It is the giver that makes the gift” DhA 17.6/3:321 f, tr Burlingame, DhA:B 3:111)

¹¹ Called after the white water-lily (*kumuda*, cf Dh 285) which blooms at that time.

¹² *Kattikā* (Skt *Kṛtikā*, BHS *karthika*, the Pleiades): mid-October to mid-November, that is, just after the rains retreat.

¹³ Reigned ca. 491-459 BCE. On the instigation of Devadatta, he killed his father, Bimbisāra, to gain the throne. (See D:W 567 n365)

¹⁴ “Our mind” is royal plural. Ajātasattu is troubled by his conscience because of his parricide.

¹⁵ *Buddhist Legends* [Dhammapada Commentary] tr E W Burlingame, Harvard Oriental Series 28-30. Harvard University Press, 1921. Various reprints.

8. Modern visual symbols

(a) Imagery of seeing

The two most common visual symbols in modern Buddhism are **images** of the Buddha and his hypostases (concrete representations) and the use of **lights and colours**. We shall here only briefly examine the offering of lights.¹⁶ It is clear from our discussion so far that light and colours represent spiritual wisdom and the Buddha's enlightenment. In fact, the light symbolism is closely related to the imagery of **seeing** (*dassana*), which is a synonym for understanding, that is, enlightenment. This imagery is very common and is found in such stock passages as this:

Excellent, master Gotama, excellent! Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were **to reveal what was hidden**, or were to **show the way** to one who was lost, or were **to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms**, in the same way the Blessed One has, in numerous ways, made the Dharma clear.

We go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May the Blessed One remember us as lay followers who have gone to him for refuge from this day forth, for life. (Tevijja Sutta, D 13.82/1:252)

(b) Candles

This imagery of light is most commonly found today in **the offering of lights**, by way of oil-lamps, camphor, candles, electric lights, visual representations (paintings, etc) and other applications of light and colour. Of these the most common offering at the Buddha shrine are **candles**. Usually two candles are offered to represent the mind and body or name and form (*nāma,rūpa*).

The mind or “name” (feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness) is represented by the burning flame. “Name” here refers to our tendency to express everything in language (words, sounds, pictures, etc) in order to communicate: we “name” an event or a thing in order to talk about it.

The body is made up of the four elements—earth (solid), water (liquid), fire (heat), wind (air or motion)—and space, all of which are present in our body in different parts:

Earth: “Head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin;¹⁷ flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow; kidney, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs; mesentery, bowels, stomach contents, excrement.”

Water: “Bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat; fat, tears, tallow, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine.”

Fire: “That by which one is warmed, ages, and burns¹⁸, and that by which what is eaten, drunk, chewed and tasted¹⁹ gets completely digested.”

Wind: “Up-going winds [burping], down-going winds, winds in the belly [flatulence], winds that course through the limbs, in-breath and out-breath.”

Space: “The ear-canals, the nostrils, the mouth cavity, and that (opening) whereby what is eaten, drunk, taken, and tasted is swallowed, and where it collects, and whereby it is excreted from below.”

All this, whether internally and individually [belonging to oneself], are to be constantly regarded simply **the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the air element, and space element** respective-

¹⁶ We shall discuss the Buddha image (the aniconic and anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha) in Module 5.

¹⁷ The meditation on these five parts “with skin as the fifth” or “skin pentad” (*taca,pancake kamma-t,ṭhāna*) (Vism 242–8.50) forms the basic spiritual practice first taught to novices on their initiation.

¹⁸ Apparently, these preceding three terms—*santappati, jiriyati, pariḍayhati*—refer to the body metabolism. In fact, the whole section refers to the body metabolism.

¹⁹ *asita,pīta,khāyita,sāyitā*. These are the four modes of consuming food, namely: *eat* food; *drink* liquids; *chew* solid food, a toothstick, betel-nut, chewing gum; *taste* (or lick) sweets, ice-cream.

ly. And each that should be seen as it really is with right wisdom thus: “**This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.**”²⁰

(c) Reflection on impermanence

The offering of candles is a good way of reflecting on impermanence. The wax and wick represents the body, and the flame our mind. When the candle burns itself up completely, this represents the completion of one natural life-span.

Sometimes, the candle light is blown out by the wind. This represents an untimely death of a young person who karma has run out. Or, the wick could burn itself out representing death through dysfunction of the body.

On the highest level, the burning out of a candle or going out of its flame represents the attainment of Nirvana.

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²⁰ See eg **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62.8-12/1:422 f).