

3

(Bhikkhu) Visākha Sutta

The (Bhikkhu) Discourse on Visākha | S 21.7 = A 4.48
or, (Catukka) Visākhā Sutta The (Fours) Discourse on Visākha
Theme: On excellence in speaking the Buddha Dharma
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2021

1 Sutta summary and related sutta

1.1 This is perhaps the only canonical record we have of the elder arhat, **Visākha Pañcāla,putta** or Pañcāli,putta, who is praised by the Buddha for his excellent manner of teaching the Dharma before an assembly.¹ His elder's verses are at **Tha 209 f** [2.2].²

1.2 The (Vaṅḡisa) Sāriputta Sutta (S 8.6) closely parallels the (Bhikkhu) Visākha Sutta in structure. In fact, the elder Sāriputta's teaching at is described in the same way as that of the elder Visākha in §2. The main differences are as follows:

- (1) The *poriyā vācāya* pericope recurs in S 8.6, but without the last 2 words, “**inclusive, independent**” (*pariyāpannāya anissitāya*), which occurs only in this context [§2.2 n];
- (2) The protagonist in **S 8.6** is the elder **Vaṅḡisa**, renowned for his poetry, who praises Sāriputta to his face. (S 8.6/1:189 f)

2 Visākha Pañcāla,putta Thera,gāthā (Tha 209 f)

2.1 PAÑCĀLA,PUTTA OR PAÑCĀLI,PUTTA

2.1.1 Pañcāla,putta

2.1.1.1 Following the **Samyutta** (S 2:280,4), the elder Visākha's family name is **pañcāla,putta**. This is probably his toponym, that is, he is a “son of the Pañcālas.” **Pañcāla** is one of the 16 great states (*mahā-janapada*) located east of Kuru country (where modern Delhi stands); both are in the far west of the Middle Country.³ Law identifies Pañcāla with the country to the north and west of modern Delhi, from the foot of the Himalayas to the river Chambal.⁴

2.1.1.2 The kingdom of the Pañcālas was named after descendents of Purañjaya, an ancient Indian king, grandson of Ikṣvāku (cf P *okkāka*, from whom the Sakyas also claimed ancestry).⁵ In the Epic Period, it was divided by the Ganges into 2 parts: Northern Pañcāla, with its capital at Ahi-c,chatra, now a ruined rite of the same name near the village of Ramnagar in the Bareilly district; and Southern Pañcāla, with its

¹ [LIST those foremost in teaching Dharma.]

² In *Aṅguttara Comy*, Buddhaghosa (AA 5:83,1-4) qu his own *Visuddhi,magga*, which mentions an elder Visākha, a landowner of Pāṭaliputta, as being “beloved by non-humans” (*amanussānam pi piyo*), one of the 11 blessings of the cultivation of lovingkindness. He is said to have gone to Sri Lanka and renounced in the Mahāvihāra. (*Vism* 9.64-69/312 f). Historically, this is clearly not Visākha Pañcāla,putta who lived at least a couple of centuries earlier.

³ **SD 4.18** App; SD 9 (16): map (16.3); **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39) @ SD 10.13 (1; **(Tad-ah')** **Uposatha S** (A 3.70,18), SD 4.18 & App; SD 57.8 (3.2.2.1); SD 6.1 (1).

⁴ B C Law, *Geography of Early Buddhism*, 1932:19.

⁵ On *Okkāka*, see SD 9 (16.22); SD 21.3 (2.2.3.1).

capital at Kampilya, now in ruins, located at the village of Kampil in the Farrukhabad district. Both districts are in Uttar Pradesh, northern India.⁶

2.1.2 Pañcāli,putta

2.1.2.1 According to **the Aṅguttara** (A 2:51,14), the elder Visākha bears the matronymic, **pañcāli,putta**, “son of the brahminee Pañcāli” (AA 3:90,4).⁷ According to Dhammapāla, during the Buddha’s time, Visākha was born into the family of the rajah of a minor kingdom or chiefdom (*maṇḍalika,rāja,kule*), the son of the Pañcāli rajah’s daughter. Hence, his toponym, *pañcāli,putta*. (ThaA 2:75,8-11)

2.1.2.2 With his father’s death, Visākha became the rajah of his chiefdom, which we may assume is **Pañcāla** (the Commentaries do not exactly say this) [2.1.1]. The Buddha visits the neighbourhood of his village, and he goes to listen to the Buddha’s teaching. Having heard the Dharma, faith arises in him, and he renounces the world.

He follows the Buddha to Sāvattihī, where he is taught insight (*vipassanā*) practice (that is, practice centering on any of the 3 characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and nonself), which he masters. Before long, he gains the 6 knowledges (*cha-ḷ-abhiññā*),⁸ that is, becomes an arhat.

The Commentary then relates his past life as “the giver of *valli* fruit” (*valli,phala dāyaka*). **The valli,phala** is probably the Indian barberry or tree turmeric.⁹ This offering was said to have been made to the immediate past buddha Kassapa.¹⁰



Fig 2.1.2.2: Valliphala Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berberis_aristata. Credit: [Buddhika.im](https://www.buddhika.im). This photo was taken at Horton Plains National Park, Central Highlands, Sri Lanka, by Buddhika Mawella.

2.2 THE ELDER VISĀKHA PAÑCĀLA,PUTTA

Later, out of compassion for his own people, Visākha visits his homeland. The people keep coming to hear him teach. One day, he is asked: “How many qua-

⁶ Both capitals are named in the post-Buddha Mahābhārata (1.128.14-17). J Finnegan, *An Archaeological History of Religions of Indian Asia*, 1989:96.

⁷ In the compound, *pañcāli,putta*, *pañcāli* has a short -l ending (instead of the feminine -ī ending) because it is there as an adj. Another example is Karaṇīya,metta Sutta, where *mettā*, as an adj, has a short -a ending. Cf SD 38.3 (1.1.1) n.

⁸ *Cha-ḷ-abhiññā*: (1) psychic powers (*iddhi,vidha*); (2) the divine ear (*dibba,sota*); (3) mind-reading (*ceto,pariya,ñāṇa*); (4) retrocognition (*pubbe,nivāsānussati*); (5) karmic recollection (the divine eye) (*dibba,sota*); (6) knowledge of the destruction of influxes (*āsava-k,khaya,ñāṇa*): **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,89-99), SD 8.10; **Kevaddha S** (D 11,55-66), SD 1.7; SD 27.5a (5).

⁹ *Valli* (ts) means “earth,” and *phala*, “fruit.” C P Khare, *Indian Medicinal Plants*, gives *valliphala* as *Berberis aristata* DC, “the Indian barberry” (2007:88) or tree turmeric. The plant produces bunches of succulent, acidic, edible berries that are bright red in color and have medicinal properties. The fruits start ripening from the second week of May and continue to do so throughout June. The berries are approximately 7 mm (0.28 in) long, 4 mm (0.16 in) in diameter, and weigh about 227 mg (0.0080 oz). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berberis_aristata. It also gives the full list of plants bearing the name *valli*: Shrivalli, Kantvalli (*Acacia concinna*); Dineshavalli (*Alkanna tinctoria*); Karpuravalli (*Aniso chilus carnosus*), and so n: search “valli”.

¹⁰ Ap 1:296.

lities, bhante, should a man acquire to be a **Dharma-speaker**?” In reply, the elder teaches them the characteristics of a Dharma-speaker,¹¹ which are also his **Thera,gāthā** (elder’s verses), as follows:

Let one be not puffed up, nor belittle others,
nor put others down, nor proclaim having crossed over,
nor speak in praise of oneself in an assembly.
Be humble, of measured speech, true to the practice. (Tha 209)

*na ukkhipe no ca parikkhipe pare
na okkhipe, pāra,gataṃ na eraye
na c’atta,vaṇṇaṃ parisāsu vyāhare
anuddhato sammita,bhāṇi subbato*

Who expertly sees the good so subtle, of habits
free from (the worldly) winds through knowing the wholesome,
keeping to the moral life and true growth—
nirvana is not hard for him to reach. (Tha 210)

*susukhuma,nipuṇ’attha,dassinā
mati,kusalena nivāta,vuttinā
saṃsevita,vuddha,sīlinā
nibbānaṃ na hi tena dullabhan’ti*

(ThaA 2:75)

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(Bhikkhu) Visākha Sutta The (Bhikkhu) Discourse on Visākha

S 21.7 = A 4.48

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in the pinnacled hall¹² in the great forest (*mahā,vana*) near Vesālī [the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika’s park, in Jeta’s grove, outside Sāvattthī].¹³

2 At that time, the venerable **Visākha Pañcāla,putta** [Pañcālī,putta]¹⁴ was in the assembly hall¹⁵ instructing, inspiring, rousing and gladdening¹⁶ the monks with a Dharma talk,

2.2 with urbane [polished] speech, distinctly clear, not driveling [faultless in speech], clarifying the meaning (of the Dharma);¹⁷ inclusive, independent.¹⁸

¹¹ The Buddha is recorded as having declared the foremost of dharma-speakers (*dhamma,kathika*) to Puṇṇa Mantāṇi,putta among the monks (A 1.197/1:23), Dhamma,dinnā among the nuns (A 1.239/1:25), and Citta of Macchika,saṇḍa among laymen (A 1.250/1:26). Here, he highly praises the elder Visākha’s teaching (S 21.7 = A 4.48).

¹² *Kūṭ’āgāra,sālā*, lit, “hall of the pinnacled/gabled house.” **Kūṭa** refers to the top of a house, a pinnacle or gable. A gable is a triangle-shaped (or in India, horse-shoe-shaped) wall between the sloping sides of the roof. L S Cousins thinks that the *kūṭ’āgāra* was “[o]riginally, ... a “gabled house,” ie, one with a horseshoe-shaped gable—prob outside a village and used for ritual purposes. Later, the same type of design was used for (Buddhist) shrine halls and even for palanquins and elaborate biers and (in a secular context) for any chamber in a pāsāda with a gable of similar design.” (Review of M:ÑB, in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 14, 1997: 267 f). See Willem B Bollée, “The *kūṭāgāra* or From Men’s House to Mansion in Eastern India and South-East Asia,” in *Shastric Traditions in Indian Arts*, (edd) A L Dallapiccola, C Walter-Mendy & S Z-A Lallemand, vol 1, Texts; XXXVI-XLI Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, 1989:143-149.

¹³ This is the location given by A 4.48/2:51,12 f.

¹⁴ A: Ee so. Comy says that he is the “son of the brahminee Pañcālī” (AA 3:90,4) [2.1.2].

¹⁵ “Assembly hall,” *upaṭṭhāna,sālā*, def as “a hall (*sālā*) or pavilion (*maṇḍapa*) for the monks to assemble when the Tathagata comes to teach the Dharma; or where the monks assemble to determine the Vinaya or give a talk on the Dharma, as the occasion arises” (UA 102,19-25).

¹⁶ On the phrase, “instructing ... gladdening,” see **Cūḷa Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 27,4.3) SD 40a.5.

3 Then, in the evening, the Blessed One emerged from his retreat, went to the assembly hall, and sat down on the prepared seat.

4 So seated, the Blessed One addressed the monks:

“Now, who was that *in the assembly hall instructing, inspiring, rousing and gladdening the monks with a Dharma talk,*

with urbane [polished] speech, distinctly clear, not driveling [faultless in speech], clarifying the meaning (of the Dharma);¹⁹ inclusive, independent?”

5 “Bhante, it was the venerable Visākha Pañcala,putta that is *in the assembly hall instructing, inspiring, rousing and gladdening the monks with a Dharma talk,*

with urbane [polished] speech, distinctly clear, not driveling [faultless in speech], clarifying the meaning (of the Dharma); inclusive, independent.”

6 Then, the Blessed One addressed the venerable Visākha Pañcala,putta, saying:

“Good, good, Visākha! It is good that you instruct, inspire, rouse and gladden the monks with a Dharma talk,

with urbane [polished] speech, distinctly clear, not driveling [faultless in speech], clarifying the meaning (of the Dharma); inclusive, independent.”

7 The Blessed One said this. Having said this, the Well-farer, the teacher, further said this:²⁰

CLOSING VERSES²¹

8 The wise in the midst of the foolish: they know him not when he speaks not. But they know him when he speaks, teaching the deathless state.	<i>nābhāsamānaṃ jānanti²² missaṃ bālehi paṇḍitaṃ bhāsamānañ ca jananti desentaṃ amataṃ padaṃ</i>	<i>b a</i>
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¹⁷ *Poriyā vācāya vissatṭhāya anelagalāya atthassa viññāpaniyā*. This is stock (sometimes with *samannāgato* foll *poriyā vācāya*) (without *pariyāpannāya anissatāya*): **Soṇa,daṇḍa S** (D 4,5(6)+6(8)/1:115), SD 30.5; **Kūṭa,danta S** (D 5,6(6)/1:130, 132), SD 22.8; **Caṅkī S** (M 95,8(6)/2:166 + 9(7)/2:167), SD 21.15; (**Sa,gāthā**) **Sāriputta S** (S 8.6/1:190), SD 58.7 [1.2]; (**Bhikkhu**) **Visākha Sutta** (S 21.7/2:280x3) = (**Catukka**) **Visākha S** (A 4.48/2:51x3), SD 58.3; **Atta,hita S 2** (A 4.97/2:97x2, 98x2), SD 64.7; (**Pañcaka**) **Nirodha S** (A 5.166/3:195), SD 47.15; (**Pañcaka**) **Piya S** (A 5.232/3:262); (**Pañcaka**) **Sobhana S** (A 5.233/3:263). The closing phrase, “inclusive, independent,” *pariyāpannāya anissitāyāti*, occurs only here [foll n].

¹⁸ “Inclusive, independent,” *pariyāpannāya anissitāya*, ie, “inclusive” of the 4 noble truths, not omitting them; “independent” of samsara (the world), ie, he speaks not of what is connected with cyclic life (*vaṭṭa,nissitaṃ*)” (SA 2:239,3-5). This *extended* *poriyāya vācāya* pericope occurs only here (in these 2 Suttas), doing so 4 times each time.

¹⁹ *Poriyā ... viññāpaniyā, pariyāpannāya anissitāya* [prec n]. On account of this unique *extended* *poriyā vācāya* pericope, Buddhaghosa explains them as if they occurred here for the first time. This is stock (sometimes with *samannāgato* foll *poriyā vācāya*): **Soṇa,daṇḍa S** (D 4,5(6)+6(8)/1:115), SD 30.5; **Kūṭa,danta S** (D 5,6(6)/1:130, 132), SD 22.8; **Caṅkī S** (M 95,8(6)/2:166 + 9(7)/2:167), SD 21.15; (**Sa,gāthā**) **Sāriputta S** (S 8.6/1:190), SD 58.7; (**Bhikkhu**) **Visākha Sutta** (S 21.7/2:280x3) = (**Catukka**) **Visākha S** (A 4.48/2:51x3), SD 58.3; **Atta,hita S 2** (A 4.97/2:97x2, 98x2), SD 64.7; (**Pañcaka**) **Nirodha S** (A 5.166/3:195), SD 47.15; (**Pañcaka**) **Piya S** (A 5.232/3:262); (**Pañcaka**) **Sobhana S** (A 5.233/3:263). The closing phrase, “inclusive, independent,” *pariyāpannāya anissitāyāti*, apparently occurs (thrice) only in these 2 Suttas.

²⁰ This line is omitted from A 4.48.

²¹ Both these verses recur in **Mahā Suta,soma J** (J 537/5:509), related with the conversion of Aṅguli.māla.

²² Be Ee A 2:51,29 so; Ce *na bhāsmānaṃ jānanti* (wr). The context clearly demands the former, which is attested in external readings. The BHS parallel at **Uv 29.43 f** reads *nābhāsamānā jñāyante*. The Chinese parallel at SĀ 1069 (T2.277c12), too, concurs: 若不說法者 愚智難分 *ruò bù shuō fǎ zhě, yú zhì zá nán fēn*, “If he speaks not the Dharma, | it is difficult to know whether he is wise or foolish.”

- 9 He should speak, let the Dharma shine. *bhāsaye jotaye dhammaṃ*²³
 He should raise the banner of the seers. *paggaṇhe isinaṃ dhajāṃ*
 Well spoken words²⁴ are the seers' banner; *subhāsita,dhajā isayo*
 for, the seers' banner is the Dharma.²⁵ [281] *dhammo'hi isinaṃ dhajo'ti*

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²³ There is a play on the polysemy of both *bhāsatī*, 1. "to speak," 2. "to shine," and of *joteti*, "to cause to shine, illuminate, make clear, explain." On the Buddha as "the foremost of those that shine," see S *67/1.26/1:15 = S *261-/2.4/1:47.

²⁴ Cf "That which is well spoken, all that is the Buddha's word" (*yaṃ kiñci subhāsitaṃ, sabbaṃ taṃ tassa bhagavato vacanaṃ*), (**Aṭṭhaka**) **Uttara S** (A 8.8/4:164,8), SD 73.9.

²⁵ Cf **Dhamma,raja S** (A 5.133/3:150).