

Poṭṭhila-t,thera Vatthu

The Story of the Elder Poṭṭhila | DhA 20.7/3:417-421 on Dh 282

Theme: The power of faith in spiritual growth

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1 The elder Potthila

Poṭṭhila (also Poṭhila or Potthila), says the Dhammapada Commentary story, is a Tipiṭaka master (*te-piṭaka*), that is, one who has memorized the Tipiṭaka and knows the Dharma well, during the time of seven Buddhas.¹ In our own Buddha's time, he is Tipiṭaka master to 500 monks, teaching them in 18 groups [§§1-4]. Despite his great learning, perhaps because of it, he has not attained the path nor made any effort to do so [§2].

The Buddha, wishing to inspire Poṭṭhila to work out his own awakening, hints that he is “empty” (*tuccha*) [§§4-5]. The intelligent Poṭṭhila takes the hint, and travels some distance to a forest hermitage, seeking their tutelage [§6]. All the monks there, and a seven-year-old novice, are arhats. They know that Poṭṭhila has some conceit, and decides to test him before teaching him [§7].

Poṭṭhila humbly and fully submits himself to every instruction the arhat monks give, even to the point of uncharacteristically seeking tutelage from a seven-year-old novice (an arhat)! [§§8-9]. The novice then instructs Poṭṭhila with a teaching reminiscent of the Vammika Sutta (M 23)² [§10]. The intelligent Poṭṭhila at once grasps the teaching and begins his meditation. [§11]

The Buddha, although a great distance away, knows that Poṭṭhila is progressing well. To give him a boost in his meditation, the Buddha sends forth a holographic image of himself to instruct Poṭṭhila, who then becomes an arhat. [§§12-15].

2 Potthila's Dhammapada verse

In the Pali tradition, Poṭṭhila's story is found only in **the Dhammapada Commentary**, that is, in chapter 20, story 7, with regards to Dh 282:

<i>Yogā ve jāyatī bhūri</i>	From meditation truly is wisdom born;
<i>ayogā bhūri,saṅkhaya</i>	without meditation, there is a loss of wisdom.
<i>Etam dvedhā,pathamāṃ ṇatvā</i>	Knowing this two-fold paths
<i>bhavāya vibhavāya ca</i>	to gain and to loss [to growth and to decline],
<i>tathā'ttānam niveseyya</i>	one should conduct oneself
<i>yathā bhūri pavaḍḍhatī ti</i>	so that wisdom grows. (Dh 282)

Dh 282ab are quoted in **the Attha,sālinī** (the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī Commentary) (DhsA 76), which goes on to acknowledge that while *bhūri* is a word for “earth” (*bhūri ti paṭhaviyā nāman*), it also has the sense of “subtle [smooth] and extensive like the earth” (*ayam pi saṅh'aṭṭhena vitthaṭ'aṭṭhena ca bhūri viyā ti bhūri*) (DhsA 147).³ In the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī itself, the word is found in a list of words meaning “wisdom” (Dhs §53/16).

Similar explanation (in terms of wisdom) are found in **the Mahā Niddesa** (Nm 95), a canonical commentary on the Aṭṭhaka,vagga of the Sutta Nipāta, commenting on the line, “the one of broad wisdom goes neither to the high nor the low” (*na uccā,vacam gacchati bhūri,pañño*, **Sn 792d**).⁴ The Mahā Niddesa explains this line as meaning that “he (the wise of extensive wisdom) does not move from teacher to

¹ The 7 Buddhas are Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Konāgamaṇa, Kassapa and Gotama (V 2:110; D 14.1.10/2:5 f; S 12.4-10/2:5-10; cf Tha 490 f; J 203/2:147). See **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14) @ SD (2).

² M 23/1:142-145 = SD 28.13.

³ Cf J 546/6:415.

⁴ SnA 527 explaining the verse strangely does not mention *bhūri* at all. It is possible that the commentator was aware of the detailed explanation given in Mahā Niddesa.

teacher, from religious teaching to teaching, from group to group, from view to view, from method to method, from path to path” (Nm 95). *Bhūri* here refers broadly to the wisdom that is great (*mahā*), broad [numerous, various] (*puṭhu*), joyful (*hāsa*), quick (*javana*), sharp (*tikkha*), and that leads up to “disgust” (*nibbedhika, paññā*), ie, the seeing of the true nature of existence (id).⁵

The Dhammapada Commentary too defines *bhūri* here (as used in Dh 282) as meaning “wisdom” (DhA 3:421). *Bhūri* in this sense is also found the Sanskrit works, the Lalita Vistara (Lalv 444, 541) and the Mahāvastu (Mvst 3.332).

Poṭṭhila’s Dhammapada verse is not found in the Gāndhārī Dharmapada (ed John Brough 1962) nor the Chinese Dharmapada. It is however found in Sanskrit (the Yuga Vagga of the Udāna, varga) (but not in the Tibetan version translated by WW Rockhill, 1883) and in Prakrit (the Patna Dhammapada). The Sanskrit version and translation run as follows:

Sanskrit (Udana, varga)

*Yogād bhavaḥ prabhavati
viyogād bhava, samkṣayaḥ |
etad dvaidhā, patham jñātvā
bhavāya vibhavāya ca |
[tatra śikṣeta medhavī
yatra yogā’ natikrameti] ||*

From meditation arises success [growth].
without meditation, success is destroyed.
Knowing these two paths
success and failure,
[the wise therefore trains himself,
not neglecting meditation.] (Uv 29.40)

The Prakrit verse, in the Patna Dhammapada, runs as follows:

Prakrit (Patna Dhammapada)

*Yogā hi bhūri sambhavati
ayogā bhūri, samkhyo |
etam jetha, patham nāttā
bhavāya vibhavāya ca |
[tatha śikṣeta medhavī]
yathā bhūri pravaddhati ||*

From meditation arises wisdom;
without meditation, much is destroyed.
Knowing this is the better path:
that of success or of failure,
[the wise therefore train himself]
so that he grows in wisdom. (Dh: Patna 375)

What can we make from all this internal evidence? The line, “the one of broad wisdom goes neither to the high nor the low” (Sn 792d), mentioned above, and its commentary give us some useful clues. This line, I think, is better taken to mean that *the wise is not reborn anywhere, whether a high birth or a low birth*. The Mahā Niddesa (above) however explains it as that *the wise “does not shop around religion,”* which could throw more light on the Poṭṭhila story. It means that it is likely, too, that the story refers time when there was a growing emphasis on textual learning. This is perhaps to impress the laity so that they would support learned monastics who would then grow in wealth and fame.⁶ Such a story is to remind the monastics to keep up their spiritual practice leading to personal awakening.

3 Potthila’s Theragāthā

Poṭṭhila does not have his own Thera, gāthā, but there are two verses spoken in his connection (ThaA 3:170), embedded in Mahā Moggallāna’s Thera, gāthā (Tha 1174 f), thus:

N’eso passati saddhammaṃ

He sees not the true Dharma,

⁵ The NmA defs of these 6 words for wisdom (*paññā*), or their aspects, are quoted from **Paṭisambhidā, magga**, ie Pm 2:190-201 (NmA 230-232). These 6 words are taken more or less as being synonymous (meaning “wisdom”) with different, but each with a different emphasis, eg *hāsa, paññā* on joy.

⁶ For discourses that warn monastics against the dangers of such worldliness as wealth and fame, see esp the 43 suttas of **Lābha Sakkāra Saṃyutta** (the Connected Discourses on Gains and Honour) (S 17.1-43/2:225-243) and **Nāga S** (S 20.9/2:268-270).

samsārena purakkhato
adho,gamaṃ⁷ jīmha,pathaṃ
kummaggam anudhāvati preoccupied with cyclic life [samsara],
a downward-going [difficult], crooked path,
a bad road, he follows. (Tha 1174)

Kimīva mīḥa,sallitto
saṅkhāre⁸ adhimucchito
pagāḥo lābha,sakkāre
tuccho gacchati poṭṭhilo Like a worm soiled with dung,
he clings to formations [rubbish].
Infatuated with gains and honours,
empty goes Poṭṭhila. (Tha 1175)

The Therīgāthā Commentary (ThaA 3:170) says that these two verses are spoken to reprimand the monk named Poṭṭhila who has failed to practise what is right on account of wrong livelihood. “The true Dharma” here refers to the path, its fruits and nirvana. Poṭṭhila “sees not the true Dharma” because, on account of being preoccupied with knowledge and activities, etc, that binds him to samsara, he is one “downward-going,” on account of deceit and treachery. The “bad road” refers to a false path, that is, the “wrong livelihood” which he keeps to.

“Like a worm soiled with dung” refers to his being like a dung maggot surrounded in what is impure, that is, mental defilements, and stuck with them. “He clings to formations [rubbish],” that is, he is committed to (keep on committing) those unwholesome deeds, which are like rubbish” (*saṅkāra*). He is “infatuated with gains and honours” by way of being deeply sunk in craving. It is said, “empty goes Poṭṭhila,” because he has become a monk without any essence due to a lack of higher moral virtue.

4 A critique

Perhaps the first thing that would strike anyone familiar with the early Pali suttas is some quaint features, such as the language, of the Poṭṭhila story. Let me list the key points as follows:

4.1 A LATE STORY. “Tipiṭaka master” (*tepiṭaka*) [§2] is an anachronism as there were no “three baskets” of teachings during the Buddha’s time, only the Dharma-Vinaya. The term is commentarial, which hints at the lateness of the story.

The earliest Abhidhamma books were compiled around the third century BCE, that is, 100 to 200 years after the death of the Buddha.⁹ The Tipiṭaka was said to have been written down in Sri Lanka in the late 1st century BCE.¹⁰ The Dhammapada Commentary, I which this story is found, was compiled around the 5th-6th century CE.¹¹ In other words, the Poṭṭhila story is clearly post-Buddha.

It is interesting that Poṭṭhila addresses the seven-year-old novice as *sappurisa* [§8], which is usually translated as “true individual,” or simply “good man”; but it is never used as a vocative, a term of address in the Nikāyas. Traditionally, a novice (*sāmaṇera*) would be addressed as *sāmaṇera*.¹² It is possible here that Poṭṭhila knew that the monks and the novice were arhats.

⁷ So Be Se ThaA:E; Ee *acaṅkamaṃ* (“not good for walking”).

⁸ Be Ee ThaA:Be *saṅkhāre*; ThaA (Oldenberg 1883) *saṅkāre* (“to rubbish (pl)”).

⁹ See **Dhamma and Abhidhamma** = SD 26.1.

¹⁰ See Piya Tan, **History of Buddhism**, 2004: ch 2.7

¹¹ EW Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, 1946:6. Cf Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 1996:132-135.

¹² In Thailand, a novice is invariably addressed as *sa.ma.nen* or simply as *nen*. Those who are 20 years or older are expected to ordained as bhikkhus (*bhikkhu*). However, it is not uncommon to find “overaged” novices, usually those who feel they are not ready or unable to keep to the monastic code. In some cases, a bhikkhu who has broken some of the more heavy rules are demoted or demote themselves to *sāmaṇera* level, but this seems to be a modern innovation.

From the Poṭṭhila story, we only know that Poṭṭhila is an accomplished Dharma teacher, a position that is traditionally held in high regard in the Suttas.¹³ But from the Poṭṭhila story and the Thera, gāthā (Tha 1174 f), we are to surmise that he is probably arrogant about his learning, even benefitting materially and socially from it, to the extent of neglecting his spiritual cultivation.

Yet when the Buddha is presented as hinting at his short-coming, Poṭṭhila almost at once goes into retreat, as desirable: this shows him to be an amenable person, and his encounter with the arhat novice shows that he is actually humble and tractable. The best we can deduce from such internal evidence is that Poṭṭhila is not a willfully or habitually bad monk, but merely one who is so successful at teaching that he neglects his spiritual training (meditation), but at once responds to the Buddha's hint that he should go for the higher training.

In short, Poṭṭhila, other than being “empty,” is essentially a good monk. The other significant point is that for monastics, mastering the texts is only one aspect of spiritual training. More importantly, they should go on to cultivate themselves spiritually so as to attain the path in this life itself.¹⁴

4.2 WHY POṬṬHILA IS EMPTY? The Buddha calling Poṭṭhila “empty” (*tuccha*): why not directly tell him that he needs to take a break from his textual preoccupation to go into retreat. Very like, this story comes from, or reflects, a time when the monastics were more settled in urban or suburban monasteries, and scriptural learning was popular. To redress the over-inclination of monastic towards textual learning at the cost of meditation, some elders of the order composed this story.

A rivalry between those inclined toward meditation and those towards scripture study is openly hinted at in the **Mahā Cunda Sutta** (A 6.46). The teacher in this Sutta is not the Buddha, but Mahā Cunda, who admonishes the monastics, thus:

“Being those engaged in Dharma, we will speak well of the monks who are meditators.” Thus you should train yourselves.

And, avuso, what is the reason for this?

“Marvellous indeed, avuso, are these people, hard to find in the world, who dwell with the body in touch with the deathless element.”¹⁵

Therefore, avuso, you should train thus:

“Being meditators, we will speak well of the monks who are engaged in Dharma.” Thus you should train yourselves.

And, avuso, what is the reason for this?

“Marvellous indeed, avuso, are these people, hard to find in the world, who having penetrated a deep subject with wisdom, see it [rightly and beneficially].”¹⁶ (A 6.46.6-7/3:356 f) = SD 4.6

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¹³ That is, as a *dhamma, kathika*, see eg **Dhamma, kathika Ss** (S 12.16/2:18, 22.115-116/3:163 f, 35.115/4:141; A 4.139/2:138); **M 113.9/3:40** (*asappurisa* and *sappurisa*); **A 5.60/3:79**, **8.71/4:314 f**, **8.72/4:315 f**, **10.8/5:10 f**, **10.9/5:11 f**, **10.10/5:12-14**.

¹⁴ Cf the story of Upāli, the Vinaya expert, who is encouraged to stay on in the monastery than become a forest monk: (**Durabhisaṃbhava**) **Upāli S** (A 10.90/5:201-209) = SD 30.9.

¹⁵ “Who dwell with the body in touch with the deathless element,” *ye amataṃ dhātuṃ kāyena phusitvā viharanti*. Here “body” is *nāma, kāya*, “the mind group,” ie feeling, perception, formations, consciousness as opposed to *rūpa, kāya*, ie “the body group,” ie form (AA 3:379). Together they form the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k, khandha*).

¹⁶ “Subject... [rightly and beneficially],” *attha, pada*, “a right word or profitable word, often referring to the holy texts” (A 2:189, 3:356 = 4:362; Dh 100) (CPD).

The Story of the Elder Poṭṭhila

DhA 20.7/3:417-421 on Dh 282

1 *Yogā ve ti*, “From meditation truly....” This Dharma teaching was given by the Teacher while he is residing in Jeta’s grove in reference to the elder Poṭṭhila.

The Buddha calls Poṭṭhila “empty”

2 It is said that he was a Tipiṭaka master (*tepiṭaka*) during the dispensations of seven Buddhas. He taught the Dharma to 500 monks. [418] The Teacher thought, “It has never come to this monk’s mind to think of his own escape from suffering. I will rouse samvega [spiritual urgency] in him.”

3 The Teacher decided that from then on, when it is the monk’s turn to wait on him, he would say to him: “Come, empty [*tuccha*] Poṭṭhila! Salute, empty Poṭṭhila! Sit, empty Poṭṭhila! Go. Empty Poṭṭhila!” And when he rose to leave when it was time, he said, “Empty Poṭṭhila is gone!”

Poṭṭhila takes the hint

4 He thought, “I have memorized the Tipiṭaka and the Commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*); I recite the Dharma to 500 monks in eighteen large groups. Yet the Teacher always addresses me as ‘empty Poṭṭhila.’ Without doubt, it is because I have not cultivated the dhyanas and so on, that he speaks thus.”

5 Samvega having arisen in him, he thought, “I will right now go into the forest and take up the recluse’s practice!” That very evening itself, he prepared his bowl and robe, and when it was dawn, he set out, following the last of all the monks who were learning the Dharma. The monks sitting in their cells reciting the Dharma did not notice that it was their teacher.

Poṭṭhila is humbled

6 Having gone a distance of 120 yojanas,¹⁷ he came to a forest hermitage where 30 monks lived. Having approached them and saluted the sangha elder, he said to him, “Bhante, please give me refuge!”¹⁸ “Avuso, you are a Dharma speaker. It is we [419] who should take tutelage under you and learn something. What do you speak thus?”

“Bhante, please do not act thus. Give me refuge.”

7 Now all the monks were arhats. The great elder, thinking, “This one, on account of learning, has conceit,” sent him to the residence of a junior elder. Poṭṭhila said the same thing to him, too. All the other monks, too, treated him in this same manner, finally sending him to a seven-year-old novice, sitting his day-quarters doing needlework [stitching his robes]. Thus his conceit was humbled.

The novice’s test

8 With conceit gone, having saluted the novice, he [Poṭṭhila] said, “Give me refuge, O sappurisa [good sir].”¹⁹

“Oh, teacher! What’s this you are saying? You are senior in age and deeply learned. It is I who should be learning something from you!”²⁰

“Sappurisa, please do not act thus. Please give me refuge.”

¹⁷ *Yojana*, or league. A *yojana* is the yoke of an Indian plough (J 6:38, 42). As distance, it is as far as can be covered by a yoke of oxen, ie, about 11.25 km or 7 mi (DhA 1: 108, 2:13). Thus, “120 yojanas” is about 1350 km = 840 mi.

¹⁸ *Bhante, avassayo me hothā ti.*

¹⁹ *Avassayo me hohi sappurisā ti.* *Sappurisa* is usu tr as “true individual.” See **Sappurisa S** (M 113) @ SD 23.7 (3).

²⁰ *Aho, ācariya, kiṃ nāṃ’etaṃ kathetha, tumhe mahallakā bahussutā, tumhākāṃ santike mayā kiñci kāraṇaṃ jānitabbāṃ bhaveyyā ti.*

“Bhante, if you would patiently endure admonition, I will be your refuge.”

“I will, sappurisa! If you say to me, ‘Enter the fire,’ I will enter the fire.”

Then the novice pointed to a nearby pond, and said, “Bhante, go into that pool fully dressed.”

9 For, although he knew that he [Poṭṭhila] was fully clothed in a very expensive double robe, he said so to check if he would put up with admonition or not.²¹ Immediately, at the word, the elder went down into the water.

The novice’s instruction

10 When he saw that the edges of his robes were dripping wet, he said, “Come bhante.” At the word, he [Poṭṭhila] stood before him. He [the novice] then said,

“Bhante, there are six holes on an ant-hill. A lizard enters by one hole and exits but another. He who to catch the lizard would stop up five of these holes, leaving the sixth one open, and so catches the lizard at the whole by which it had entered.

Even so, as regards the six doors of the sense-objects: having closed all the five sense-doors, set to work on the mind-door.”²²

11 To the deeply learned monk, even just that much was to him like the lighting of a lamp. Saying, “Let it be just that, sappurisa!” he set down his physical body and began his recluse’s practice.

The Buddha’s instruction

12 The Teacher, even as he sat 120 yojanas away, looked upon the monk, thinking, “Just as this monk is of vast wisdom, even so he should be able to set himself up by this means,” sent forth a radiant image of himself that, as it were, spoke with him. He said this verse:

<p>13 <i>Yogā ve jāyatī bhūri</i> <i>ayogā bhūri,saṅkhaya</i> <i>Etam dvedhā,patham nātvā</i> <i>bhavāya vibhavāya ca</i> <i>tathā attānam niveseyya</i> <i>yathā bhūri pavaḍḍhati ti</i></p>	<p>From meditation truly arises wisdom; without meditation, there is a loss of wisdom. Knowing this two-fold path to gain and to loss [to growth and to decline], one should conduct oneself so that wisdom grows.</p>	<p>(Dh 282)</p>
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14 [COMMENTARY. Therein, *yoga* refers to wise consideration regarding the 38 meditation-objects (*aṭṭha,tiṃsa ārammaṇa*). *Bhūri* is a name for wisdom that is as wide as the earth. *Saṅkhaya* means destruction (*vināsa*). *Etam dvedhā,patha* refers to this meditation and not meditating [non-meditation]. *Bhavāya vibhavāya ca* means growth and lack of growth (*vuḍḍhiyā ca avuddhiyā ca*). *Tathā* means “Let one behave in such a way so that this wisdom that is regarded as growth increases” (*yathā ayaṃ bhūri,-saṅkhātā paññā pavaḍḍhati, evaṃ attānam niveseyyā ti attho*). DhA 3:420.]

[421]

15 At the end of the teaching, the elder Poṭṭhila attained arhathood.

100818; 100822; 100823

²¹ *Ovādakkhamo nu khō ti vīmamsanto evamāha*. That is, to see if he is tractable.

²² *Evaṃ tumhe pi cha,dvārikesu ārammaṇesu sesāni pañca,dvārāni pidhāya mano,dvāre kammaṃ paṭṭhapethā ti*.