

17

Mahā Sudassana Jātaka

The Birth Story of Mahā Sudassana | J 95/1:391-393

Theme: A mythology of impermanence

Translated by Piya Tan ©2011

Introduction

The Mahā Sudassana Jātaka (J 95) belongs to a set of texts closely related with **the Mahā Sudassana Sutta** (D 17),¹ where the full story of king Mahā Sudassana is found, and which is in turn an elaboration to a short statement in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16).² The list of texts related to the Mahā Sudassana Jātaka is here given:

Ukkacelā Sutta	S 47.14/5:163-165	The Buddha reminisces the deaths of the two chief disciples, Sāriputta and Mogallāna. [§2]
Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta	D 16.5.17-18/- 2:146 f	Ānanda beseeches the Buddha not to pass away in Kusi,nārā, a remote village. The Buddha explains that it was site of Mahā Sudassana's fabulous city, Kusā,vatī. [§§1, 4-8]
Mahā Sudassana Sutta	D 17/2:169-199	The empire, opulence and pleasures of the wheel-turner, Mahā Sudassana, and their <u>impermanence</u> . [§§9-11, 16]
Cakka,vatti Sutta	S 46.42/5:99	The wheel-turner has the 7 jewels, but the Buddha gives us the 7 awakening-factors.
Go,maya Sutta	S 22.96/3:144-147	Mahā Sudassana's story as a parable for reflecting on <u>impermanence</u> .
Mahā Sudassana Jātaka	J 95/1:391-393	A very brief account with other details, centering around <u>impermanence</u> .
Mahā Sudassana Cariya Culla Niddesa	C 1.4/28-36/3 f Nc:Be 164	A brief account detailing his charity. D 17 alluded by title only, as being taught by the Buddha. ³

It should be noted that at least *three* of these texts deals with the theme of impermanence. Most of the materials of the Mahā Sudassana Jātaka are found elsewhere (see above), but often with variations (see footnotes in the text). However, §§17-19, that is, the Jātaka's conclusion, are unique to J 95.

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¹ D 16/2:169-199) = SD 36.12.

² D 16.5.17-18/2:146 f = SD 9.

³ *Bhagavā...mahā,sudassaniya,suttantaṃ bhāsanto attano ca paresaṃ ca atītaṃ ādisati.*

The Birth Story of Mahā Sudassana

J 95/1:391-393

The introductory story

1 *Aniccā vata saṅkhārā'ti*, “Impermanent, alas, are all compounded things!” This was spoken to the elder Ānanda by the teacher while he was lying down on his bed of final nirvana, after he had said these words beginning with “Bhante, please do not pass into parinirvana in this little township...”⁴

2 When the Tathagata was dwelling in Jeta,vana, he thought:

“The elder Sāriputta was born in the village of Nāḷaka and passed finally away at Varaka⁵ on the full moon day of Kattika,⁶ while Mahā Moggallāna, too, died⁷ in the month of Kattika, on the new moon of the dark fortnight. Just as the two chief disciples have passed finally away, I too will pass finally away at Kusināra.”⁸

3 After travelling in stages, on arriving there, between the twin sal trees, he lay down on a bed with his head to the north, never to rise again.⁹

4 Then the venerable elder Ānanda said to him:

“Bhante, please do not pass into parinirvana in this little township, a barren little township, a jungle outpost.

5 There are, bhante, other great cities, such as Campā and Rājagaha.¹⁰ May the Blessed One pass into parinirvana in one of these cities,” he beseeched.

6 The teacher replied, “Say not so, Ānanda! Say not so, Ānanda, that Kusināra is a little township, a barren little township, a jungle outpost.

7 For, once upon a time, Ānanda, during the time of a wheel-turning king Sudassana, I dwelled in this town. Then, it was a great city surrounded by a jewelled wall [392] 12 yojanas¹¹ all around.”¹²

8 When the elder Ānanda beseeched him to recount the past, he related **the Mahā Sudassana Sutta**.¹³

The story of the past

9 Now, after king Mahā Sudassana had come down from the Sudhamma palace, not far from the palm grove made of seven jewels, he lay down on his right, on the bed laid out for the purpose, never to rise again.

10 Seeing this, queen Subhaddā said:

“Yours, your majesty, are these 84,000 cities, the foremost of which is the royal city of Kusā,vatī.

⁴ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16.5.17/2:146) = SD 9.

⁵ Sāriputta died some months before the Buddha. **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) only presents him as uttering his lion-roar (*sīha,nāda*), which is his confession of full faith in the Buddha (D 16.1.16-17/2:81-83), while Comys says that the lion-roar was made when he took leave of the Buddha to die (DA 538, 554). **Cunda S** (S 47.13) records that he died at Nāla,gāmaka (the place of his birth), and a posthumous eulogy to him by the Buddha (S 5:161-164).

⁶ *Kattika*, ie Oct-Nov, the full-moon day of which is “invitation” (*pavāraṇā*) day [allowing elders to admonish one], and the full dawn marks the end of the rain retreat. On the Indian calendar, see: SD 1.1(1) n.

⁷ Comys say that Moggallāna’s death resulted from a nirgrantha plot (J 5:125 ff; DhA 3:65 ff).

⁸ On the Buddha’s reminiscing the two chief disciples’ deaths, see **Ukkacelā S** (S 47.14/5:163-165).

⁹ *Anupubbena cārikaṃ caramāno tattha gantvā yamaka,sālānam antare uttara,sīsake mañcake anuṭṭhāna,seyyāya nipajji*.

¹⁰ In both **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) & **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17), Ānanda mentions Campā, Rājagaha, Sāvathī, Sāketa, Kosambi, and Benares (D 16.1.2/2:169) = SD 3; (D 17.1.2/2:169) = SD 36.12.

¹¹ About 135 km (84 mi) either way, ie 270 km (168 mi) long.

¹² *Tadā idaṃ dvādasa,yojanikena ratana,pākārena parikkhittam mahā,nagaram ahoṣi ti*. **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 9), however, says that “it was 12 yojanas [about 135 km (84 mi)] long from the east to the west, and 7 yojanas [79 km = 49 mi] wide from the north to the south” (D 9.5.18/2:146) = SD 9.

¹³ D 17.2.10-17/2:190-198 = SD 36.12, ie the closing section. **Mahā Sudassana J** only summarizes the episode on his passing away, but even then with some varying details.

Direct your desire here [Make a wish here]¹⁴

11 When queen Subhaddā said this, king Mahā Sudassana said:

“My queen, do not speak so. Instead, you should instruct me thus:

‘Let go of desire here! Have no longing!’”

12 “What is the reason for that, your majesty?”

“Today I will pass away.”

13 Then the queen, weeping, wiped her eye with difficulty and trouble; repeating those words, she wept and wailed.

The remaining 84,000 women, too, wept and wailed. Not even one of the courtiers, too, could bear it: they all wept, too.

14 The Bodhisattva, restraining everyone, thus:

“Enough now, sirs, do not make any sound!”

15 then addressed the queen:

“My queen, do not cry, do not weep! A formation, even the size of a sesamum seed,¹⁵ cannot be said to be permanent. For, surely, everything is impermanent, of the nature of breaking up!”

16 Having said that, advising the queen, he uttered this verse:¹⁶

*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā
uppāda,vaya,dhammino
uppajjivā nirujjhanti
tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho 'ti*

Impermanent, alas, are all compounded things!
It is their nature to rise and fall;
Having arisen, they pass away—
Happy it is when they are stilled! [393]

17 Thus Mahā Sudassana, having grasped the peak of the teaching. the death-free great nirvana, gave this advice to the rest of the multitude:¹⁷

“Give offerings! Keep the precepts! Keep to the precept-day observation!”¹⁸

18 and passed beyond to the deva-world.¹⁹

19 Having ended the Dharma teaching, the Teacher showed the connections in the Jātaka [the birth-story]:

“At that time, queen Subhaddā was Rāhula,mātā [Rāhula’s mother]; the commander jewel was Rāhula. The rest of the assembly was the Buddha-assembly. Mahā Sudassana was I myself.”

— 110531; 110602; 110724; 110818a; 110903a; 120306 —

¹⁴ *Ettha chandaṃ karohi*. In **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17), we the sentence reads fully as, “Direct your desire here, your majesty. Arouse your longing for life!” (*Ettha, deva, chandaṃ janehi jīvite apekkhaṃ karohi*) (D 17.2.10.2/-2:190) = SD 36.17. Ironically, it is common in the western tradition of a birthday celebration for the celebrant to “make a wish” as he blows out the candle. That is should be to live happily and have a beautiful mind, while the extinguished candles represent impermanence, on which we should reflect for the sake of wisdom as we move closer to awakening.

¹⁵ Cf **Go,maya S** (S 22.96), where the Buddha uses a small lump of cow-dung, declaring that there is not even that much personal existence that is permanent (S 22.96.14-16/1:1:144) = SD 36.16.

¹⁶ In **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16), it is Sakra, the king of the gods, who utters this popular ancient verse, said to be a remnant from the teaching of the previous Buddha that only he remembers (D 16.6.10a/2:157) = SD 9, and recurs at **D 16.6.10/2:157** = **D 17.2.17/2:199** = **S v21/1.11/1:6**, 609, **S v609/6.15/1:158**, **S v776/9.6/1:200** = **S 15.20/-2:193** (Buddha) = **J 95/1:392** = **Tha 1159** = **DhA 1.6/1:71**; DA 3:748; MA 1:235. This famous stanza concludes **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17.2.17.4/2:199) = SD 36.12.

¹⁷ From §17 onwards to the end is unique to J 95.

¹⁸ *Dānaṃ detha, sīlaṃ rakkhatha, uposatha,kammaṃ karothā*.

¹⁹ Accord to **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17), he passes away to the brahma world (D 17.2.13/2:195) = SD 36.12.