

BUDDHIST RENEWAL DAY

In 2008, we decided to earmark 25 December as “Buddhist Renewal Day.” As Buddhists, this is a day we should practise at least a moment of “personal solitude” (paṭisallāna) when we reflect as the year ends, how well (or not) we have lived the Dharma, and where we need to strengthen ourselves.

Turning around

[Source: “The Miraculous Life of Gotama Buddha,” SD 52.1 (9.2)]

During the great renunciation, once Siddhattha (on Kaṇṭhaka tailed by Channa) are outside the city-gate, he stopped and turned around to have a last look at the city of Kapilavatthu. A parallel to the gazing at a city is done by the Buddha during his last journey, as recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 9).

The Sutta’s 4th recital (*bhāṇavāra*) (or chapter 4) opens with the Buddha going on almsround in Vesālī with Ānanda. Then, they leave the city for the forested outskirt. The Buddha turns around and gazes at **Vesālī** “with the elephant look” (*nāgāpalokita*), declaring: “Ānanda, this is the last time the Tathāgata will be looking at Vesālī.”

The gesture here is the same as that of the Bodhisattva’s gazing at Kapilavatthu, where it is called “Kaṇṭhaka’s turning around” (the focus on the Bodhisattva’s horse). In the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha himself turns around like an elephant; hence, it is called “the elephant gaze” (*nāgāpalokita*), that is, he turns his whole body around. There is also a wordplay on *nāga* here, which also refers to an arhat.

GRATITUDE

Both as Bodhisattva and as Buddha, Gotama shows the gesture of **gratitude** (*kataññu kata,veditā*) to the city that has supported him and which has responded positively to the Dharma. The Pali expression for gratitude has two aspects: the first is a mental *acknowledgement* of the kindness shown; the second is our *appreciation* of it by joyfully reciprocating—in Gotama’s case, he lovingly gazes at Kapilavatthu on leaving the world behind, and at Vesālī on leaving this world totally behind for final nirvana.

ANOTHER KIND OF TURNING AROUND

There is another kind of “**turning around**” (*nivattana*) gestured by the Buddha, that is, the turning-around in compassion. This gesture is famously executed by the Buddha when he turns around to face the serial murderer, Aṅgulimāla, who, up to that point has been running after the Buddha, intending to kill him for just his finger to complete his garland of 1000 fingers. This story is recorded in **the Aṅguli,māla Sutta** (M 86).

Aṅgulimāla's foolish teacher demands that he offers him a garland of 1000 human fingers, one from each person, as a "teacher's honorarium" (*dakkhina*). The Buddha intervenes when Aṅgulimāla is seeking his last victim for the 1000th finger. Aṅgulimāla is even willing to kill his own mother who has gone into the forest, risking her own life, to warn him of the king who has come with his army to hunt him down.

SISYPHEAN RUN

The Buddha makes sure that Aṅgulimāla sees him as an easy target—so that he does not kill his own mother, and also to convert him, to stop him from his violent and murderous life. Aṅgulimāla runs after the Buddha from behind, but is not able to catch up with him. Every time he reaches within arm's length of the Buddha, the earth, it seems, turns around, and he finds the Buddha behind him again, and he has to keep on turning around to face the Buddha and running after him all over again.¹

This is Aṅgulimāla's Sisyphian run, a samsaric goose-chase, but this is a golden goose that is worth chasing. Unlike Sisyphus, however, who seems to enjoy his samsaric run downhill after the rolling rock, to the valley-bottom where it stops, and then pushing it uphill again with vigour, so that it will roll downhill again: the Greek gods delight and sport in human weakness, and often treat them like hamsters in cages with samsaric wheels.²

STANDING STILL

Aṅgulimāla, however, *does* tire, ironically, on account of the Buddha's standing still, whom he keeps running after with all his speed and strength. Completely tired out, he finally stops, and calls out to the Buddha to *stop*, too.

The Buddha replies that he has never been "running" all that while—meaning that he has stopped killing and given up violence—but Aṅgulimāla is still *running*, he has been violently killing. This is a classic example of the 2 levels of language—the spiritual and the worldly—which frees Aṅgulimāla of his false violent nature so that he regains *his natural non-violent and wholesome nature* that he is born with as Ahimsaka (the non-violent).

TURNING THE EARTH AROUND

Another occasion when the Buddha makes the earth "turn" thus is when **Ānanda** stands right in front of him to prevent the intoxicated elephant Nāḷāgiri (let loose by Devadatta) from trampling the Buddha. Ānanda remains where he is despite the

¹ On Sisyphus, see SD 23.3 (1); SD 48.3 (1.2.2.2); SD 49.2 (4.3.2.1); SD 50.8 (1.2.1.7; 2.3.2.6).

² M 86,4-6/2:99 f + SD 5.11 (2.2). There is also the similar case of Kisā Gotamī's Sisyphian walk: SD 43.2.

Buddha forbidding him thrice. The Buddha “makes the earth turn around” to get Ānanda out of the way.³

LOOKING BACK WITH GRATITUDE

Here again we see (looking back) nothing new in the miraculous life of the Bodhisattva. The key moments of his Bodhisattva’s life, his key actions before his awakening are, as a rule, signs or hints of greater spiritual things to come when he is Buddha: as the child, so the man; as the Bodhisattva, so the Buddha.

It is his nature (*dhammatā*) to do so, to be wholesome, and to be moved by compassion and wisdom, which he does best as the Buddha. It is his *nature* because he has been practising so for countless past lives:

This is that Blossom on our human tree
Which opens once in many myriad years—
But opened, fills the world with Wisdom’s scent
And Love’s dropped honey. (Edwin Arnold, “The Light of Asia,” Bk 1, 1879)

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³ J 533/5:335 f; DhA 1.12/1:140 f.