

# 2a

## Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1

### Paṭhama Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta

The First Discourse on the Wonderful and Marvellous | A 4.127

**Paṭhama Tathāgata Acchariya Sutta** The First Tathagata Discourse on the Wonderful

Theme: Boundless radiance attends the 4 key events of the Buddha's life

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2018

### 1 Overview

**1.1 The Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1** (A 4.127) is the first of a series of 4 suttas in **the Bhava Vagga** (the chapter on existence) in the Book of Threes (Tika Nipāta) of the Aṅguttara Nikāya. The 4 suttas are as follows:<sup>1</sup>

<b>Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1</b>	A 4.127/2:130 f	SD 52.2a	the Buddha's 4 key life-events and radiance
<b>Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 2</b>	A 4.128/2:131 f	SD 52.2b	attachment, conceit, non-stillness, ignorance
<b>Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 3</b>	A 4.129/2:132	SD 52.2c	Ānanda's fourfold charisma
<b>Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 4</b>	A 4.130/2:133	SD 52.2d	Ānanda's charisma is like that of a world-monarch's

**1.2 The Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1** (A 4.127) lists the 4 key events in the Buddha's life, and they are said to be attended by a boundless radiance throughout the world. Whether such a phenomenon is historical or mythical, they highlight these events as having key significance in the Buddha's life and teaching, that is, his conception, birth, awakening and teaching of the 1<sup>st</sup> discourse.

**1.3 The Eka,puggala Vagga** (A 1.13.6) of the Aṅguttara Nikāya states that "with the manifestation of the Tathagata, a great eye, a great light, and a great radiance occur" (*mahato cakkhussa ... mahato alokassa ... mahato obhasassa patubhavo hoti*, A 1.13.6/1:22,29). The "**great eye**" is clearly a figure referring to the effect of the Buddha's knowledge. The **great radiance** accompanies these 4 key events: the Bodhisattva's conception and nativity, and the Buddha's awakening and teaching Dharma. [2.5]

**1.4** It is possible that mentions of physical light accompanying the Bodhisattva's descent (conception) and his birth (for example, **the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta**, M 123, or **the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1**, A 4.127a), are based on this passage but taken *literally*. This radiance is probably a common religious tradition of the time. The Jain Ṭhāṇaṅga 4.324, too, lists 4 occasions of a great radiance, namely, when arhats (saints) are born, when they go forth, when they gain realization, and when they gain final nirvana (Jambuvijaya, 1985:141,4).

**1.5** The significance of these events is attested by the fact that they are described in some detail in a number of other suttas.

Both **the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta** (M 123)<sup>2</sup> and its Chinese parallel (MĀ 32) say that the Bodhisattva's **descent into his mother's womb** (the conception)<sup>3</sup> was accompanied by an appearance of a great and boundless radiance and earthquakes.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See SD 52.2 (4.1).

<sup>2</sup> M 123,7/3:120 (SD 52.2).

<sup>3</sup> On the Bodhisattva's conception, see SD 52.1 (2).

According to **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** and its Chinese and Sanskrit versions, the appearance of a great boundless radiance and earthquakes are the rule when a bodhisattva descends into his mother’s womb.<sup>5</sup>

## **2 The 4 great events**

### **2.1 THE CONCEPTION [§2]**

#### **2.1.1 The Bodhisattva’s conception**

The Bodhisattva’s conception is, according to **the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1** (A 4.127), the 1<sup>st</sup> key event in the Buddha’s life. There are 2 aspects to this first key event—the Bodhisattva passing away from Tusita and his descent into queen Māyā’s womb. Technically, these are the two sides of a single event, that is, the Bodhisattva’s conception.

Technically, the Bodhisattva’s passing away or “falling away” (*cuti*) from Tusita refers to his “death-consciousness” (*cuti,citta*). At the same moment, it is said, he is conceived in his mother’s womb—this moment is “rebirth-consciousness” (*paṭisandhi,citta*).<sup>6</sup>

#### **2.1.2 Significance of being human**

**2.1.2.1** What is so significant about the Bodhisattva’s descent from Tusita heaven that it is highlighted as the 1<sup>st</sup> key event by **the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta**? The descent immediately follows the death (*cuti*) or ending of the lifespan of the Bodhisattva in Tusita.<sup>7</sup> Basically, the Bodhisattva is giving up his divinity for humanity.

**2.1.2.2** Giving up the divine life, he **descends and conceives as a human** because this is the best form for learning and individuating; hence, for attaining buddhahood. To be human is to learn to master the body and speech, to train our mind, and to cultivate and refine wisdom—that is knowledge in the service of our evolving beyond both the human and the divine to be liberated spiritually by attaining nirvana, the unconditioned.

### **2.2 THE NATIVITY [§3]**

**The birth of the Bodhisattva** is, according to **the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1** (A 4.127), the 2<sup>nd</sup> key event in the Buddha’s life. Being born as a human being, the Bodhisattva, the Buddha-to-be, is “one of us.” This is not some playful trick that some divine agency plays on us, such as the idea that the Bodhi-

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<sup>4</sup> **M 123,7.2** (M 3:120,8) + **7.5** (M 3:120,15); **MĀ 32** (T1.470a15). According to **Mahāvastu**, the Bodhisattva’s descent (conception) with mindfulness and clear comprehension was accompanied by 6 earthquakes (Mvst 1:206, 2:10; Basak, 1963a:251,6; Senart, 1882a:206,16; and Basak, 1965:14,9; Senart, 1890:10,9). A number of earthquakes are also recorded in **Lalita,vistara** (Hokazono, 1994:376,4; Lefmann, 1902:51,19; Vaidya 1958b:39,10). **Saṅgha,bheda,vastu** only reports a single great earthquake accompanied by a radiance (Gnoli, 1977:41,7). For a study of earthquakes in Buddhist literature, see Ciurtin, 2009. Reynolds notes that “the Buddha’s birth is presented as a cosmic event in which his character as a *mahāpurisa* ... is evident to those who have the eyes to see” (1985:214).

<sup>5</sup> D 14/2:12,6; DĀ (T1.3c14); and Skt in fragment 420dR6 (Fukita 2003:53 (93.6); Waldschmidt 1953:45). Gokhale explains that “these events are explained as the result of *dharmatā* ... implying that they are not causally connected with the Buddha as such, but occur because it is the nature or order of things” (1994:98). See SD 52.1 (2.1.1).

<sup>6</sup> See SD 48.1 (9.2.1) & DEB: cuti,citta.

<sup>7</sup> For details, see SD 52.1 (2.1).

sattva or the Buddha is merely a phantom projected by some eternal divine agency.<sup>8</sup> The Buddha is human just as we are human; but, through knowing, taming and freeing his mind, the Buddha transcended both the human and the divine states for nirvana, the unconditioned state.

In doing so, the Buddha shows us that, even as **humans**, especially as humans, we are able—through knowing, taming and freeing the mind—to rise above all cyclic existence and attain the joy and freedom of the unconditioned, which is liberated joy far better than even the highest heaven.

## 2.3 THE AWAKENING [§4]

**2.3.1 The great awakening of Gotama as the Buddha** is, according to **the Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1** (A 4.127), the 3<sup>rd</sup> key event in the Buddha's life. The Buddha's awakening represents the apex of spiritual evolution, that is, the man can free himself from the fetters of the world (his senses) and beyond (the divine) to attain total freedom from cyclic life and all existence.

**2.3.2** All other major faiths are in some way theistic, believing in some kind of eternal essence above human frailty and worldly flux, and hoping for the succour and salvation from some external agency, especially a God-figure. Early Buddhism, however, frees us from views which make faith a fetter, and in doing so frees faith itself, giving boundless space for liberating wisdom.

**2.3.3** The only way we can free our faith is to make our own journey on the path of awakening. Just as we must ourselves journey to our destination, so, too, we have the potential for self-examination, self-training and self-liberation. The Buddha's awakening then declares that we have the power and the prerogative for self-effort and self-salvation. The Buddha is our exemplar of how man can and must save himself and help fellow beings in doing so.

**2.3.4 Awakening (*bodhi*)** works the same way for the Buddha as well as for the arhats. It is not something bestowed or certified by a guru, but which we empower ourselves with the liberation of awakening. Just as the ocean has but *one* taste—the taste of salt—so, too, the Dharma has only *one* taste: that of freedom—as stated in **the Paharāda Sutta** (A 8.19).<sup>9</sup> That freedom is the same for both the Buddha and the arhats; the only difference is that the Buddha is merely the first amongst equals.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.4 THE TEACHING [§5]

**2.4.1 The turning of the Dharma-wheel by the Buddha the Blessed One** is, according to **the Acchariya,-abbhuta Sutta 1** (A 4.127), the 4<sup>th</sup> key event in the Buddha's life. The Buddha's teaching is efficacious since it is based on his own practice and liberation. The Buddha does not merely teach the Dharma, the testament and techniques of his great awakening, but that even this Dharma is above the Buddha himself, as stated in **the Gāraḍa Sutta** (S 6.2).<sup>11</sup>

**2.4.2** In the outside systems, especially the theistic faiths, there is always some kind of social or religious hierarchy, like the brahminical caste system. There is always a distance that divides between God or goal

<sup>8</sup> This wrong view is known as doceticism: see SD 52.2 (2.4.1.2). The Buddha is neither a prophet of some "Dharma essence" nor an incarnation ("phantom" appearance) of some cosmic Buddha. Either of these suggests some kind of "eternalist" view (*sassata,ditṭhi*), which is rejected by the Buddha: see SD 1.1 (3.2.2(3)).

<sup>9</sup> A 8.19/4:197-204 (SD 45.18).

<sup>10</sup> **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58/3:65 f), SD 49.10.

<sup>11</sup> S 6.21:138-140 (SD 12.3).

of that faith and the common follower. That divide is bridged by some kind of intermediaries, such as priests, pastors, preachers or power-figure of some kind, who speak for their God (and so defines Him) and controls the herd, tribe or crowd of followers.

**2.4.3** The Buddha's teaching (*dhamma*) works to free us from the crowd and tribal priestcraft, and empowers us to individuate ourself, to become true individuals by overcoming self-identity view, doubt and attachment to ritual vows. In other words, we can change for the better, we are assured of awakening, and we can be free of cyclic life. In this life itself, we can work towards the path of awakening, even start walking on it—as declared in **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1) and the other suttas of the Okkanta Saṃyutta.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.5 COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

**2.5.1** All these 4 key events of the Buddha are said to be accompanied by “**a great boundless light, surpassing the glory of the devas**” that shines throughout the whole universe, even brightening the darkest corners of space. The beings therein, scattered all over the universe, it is said, become aware of one another: “**It appears, sirs, that there are other beings, too, that have arisen here!**”

**2.5.2** There are 2 key ideas here: (1) a great boundless light, and (2) beings perceive other beings that they have not known before.

**2.5.2.1** These ideas form a refrain for each of the statements on the 4 key events:

**(1) The great boundless light** means that we now have the opportunity to study the significance of each of these key events. Each of them has been briefly explained above [2]. We need to reflect on them, especially how they significantly differ from the God-religions and priestcraft. Briefly, we should reflect on each of the 4 key events as follows:

- heaven has nothing to do with spiritual development: good is something within us;
- being human is the best way we can and must work for our personal growth and spiritual development;
- we can either choose to become a buddha (long and difficult) or awaken as his follower (this life itself);
- as long as the Buddha's teaching is with us, we can progress by ourself on the path of awakening.

The radiance signifies that we are given the means and path of seeing things as they really are and to understand that everything is impermanent. When we understand that everything in this world and in heaven are subject to change—to exist is to change—then, we have a better and truer perspective of religion and reality. This is the foundation of liberating wisdom.<sup>13</sup>

**(2) The perception of other beings** means that we are not alone in our life here and in this universe. All beings love their life and have the right to life. They have the right to have the means of life, such as food, clothing, shelter and health. Hence, they should be shown respect as a person or being. Our mutual existence will be enhanced if we learn to communicate properly valuing truth as the basis for the best benefits of such a communication. Finally, we all need to understand and master the power of our own

<sup>12</sup> S 25.1/3:225 (SD 16.7) & S 25/3:225-228.

<sup>13</sup> Further, see the 3 characteristics: SD 1.2 (2).

minds for the sake of self-understanding and spiritual freedom. This is the spirit of **the 5 precepts** and their **5 values**.<sup>14</sup>

**2.5.2.2** On a mundane level, we must accept the possibility, indeed, reality, that there are other beings just like us and also those different from us, but sharing the space of our common universe. Hence, we are subject to the basic principles governing the whole universe—that there is no essence in any *thing* or in *anything*. We tend to perceive things depending on our sense-faculties and are often defined and dictated by our views. Hence, our task is to see beyond these self-generated views and see things as they really are. We need to understand the common and universal principle that characterize all existence—and so be free beings enjoying true happiness with the greatest number of beings.

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## Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1

### The First Discourse on the Wonderful and Marvellous

A 4.127

**1** Bhikshus, with the appearance of the Tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened, there also appears 4 wonderful and marvellous things. What are the four?<sup>15</sup>

#### (1) The conception

**2** Bhikshus, when the Bodhisattva, having passed away from the Tusita host,<sup>16</sup> he *mindfully and clearly comprehending*<sup>17</sup> **descends into his mother's womb**.

2.2 Then, a great boundless light, surpassing the glory of the devas, appeared in the world with its devas, its maras and its brahmas, this generation with its recluses and priests, its rulers and people.<sup>18</sup>

2.3 Even in the groundless abysmal dark, the blinding darkness of the spaces amongst the worlds,<sup>19</sup> where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot prevail,<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See SD 1.5 (2) Table; SD 51.11 (2.2.3.4).

<sup>15</sup> With the first 2 events, cp marvel 5 (M 123,7) and marvel 19 (M 123,19) respectively in **Acchariya,abbhuta S** (M 123) + SD 52.2 (2.1); also J 1:51. See nn on the text [§§ 2+3] below and also (2.1+2.2).

<sup>16</sup> During the Bodhisattva's sojourn in Tusita, he was called Seta, ketu. For details, see SD 52.1 (2.1).

<sup>17</sup> This phrase is omitted in **Acchariya,abbhuta S** (M 123,7.2), SD 52.2.

<sup>18</sup> *Yadā bhikkhave bodhisatto tusitā kāyā cavitvā sato sampajāno mātu, kucchiyaṃ [Be kucchimhi] okkamati, atha sa, devake loke sa, mārake sa, brahmake sa-s, samaṇa, brāhmaṇiṇiṃ pajāya sa, deva, manussāya appamāṇo uḷāro obhāso loke pātubhavati atikkamm'eva devānaṃ devānubhāvaṃ.*

<sup>19</sup> Comy ad **M 123**: Amongst every 3 world-systems, there is a space measuring 8,000 yojanas (56,000 mi = 90,123 km). It is like the space amongst three cart-wheels or almsbowls touching one another (MA 4:177; J 1:76; VbhA 4). The beings are reborn in this great interworld hell (*lok'antarika mahā, niraya*) on account of having done some very serious offences against their parents or righteous recluses and brahmins, or because of some habitual evil deed, such as destroying life, etc. The hell-beings there are like huge 3-*gāvuta* (5.25 mi = 8.45 km) high long-clawed bats clinging onto trees (MA 4:178; AA 3:127). On its parallel in **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14,1.18) &

a great boundless radiance appears, surpassing even the divine glory of the devas.

2.4 And those beings that have arisen there (in the abysmal dark),<sup>21</sup> too, on account of that light, perceive one another, saying:

“It appears, sirs, that there are other beings, too, that have arisen here!”<sup>22</sup> [131]

2.5 Bhikshus, with the appearance of the Tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened, this is the first wonderful and marvellous thing.

## (2) The nativity

**3** Furthermore, bhikshus, when the Bodhisattva *mindfully and clearly comprehending emerges from his mother’s womb*,

3.2 *a great boundless light, surpassing the glory of the devas, appeared in the world with its devas, its maras and its brahmas, this generation with its recluses and priests, its rulers and people.*

3.3 *Even in the groundless abysmal dark, the blinding darkness of the spaces amongst the worlds, where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot prevail, a great boundless radiance appears, surpassing even the divine glory of the devas.*

3.4 *And those beings that have arisen there (in the abysmal dark), too, on account of that light, perceive one another, saying:*

“It appears, sirs, that there are other beings, too, that have arisen here!”<sup>23</sup>

3.5 Bhikshus, with the appearance of the Tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened, this is the second wonderful and marvellous thing.

## (3) The awakening

**4** Furthermore, bhikshus, when the Tathagata **attains supreme self-awakening**,

4.2 *a great boundless light, surpassing the glory of the devas, appeared in the world with its devas, its maras and its brahmas, this generation with its recluses and priests, its rulers and people.*

4.3 *Even in the groundless abysmal dark, the blinding darkness of the spaces amongst the worlds, where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot prevail, a great boundless radiance appears, surpassing even the divine glory of the devas.*

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**Acchariya,abbhuta S 1** (A 4.127,2), SD 52.2a. Cf **Andha,kāra S** (S 56.46/5:454) SD 53.2, where suffering is compared to the interworld darkness; **Mahā,vastu** (Mvst 1:35; Mvst:J 1:35).

<sup>20</sup> *Yāpi tā lok’antarikā aghā asaṃvutā andha,kārā andha,kāra,timisā yattha’p’imesaṃ candima,sūriyānaṃ evaṃ mah’iddhikānaṃ evaṃ mah’ānubhāvānaṃ ābhā nānubhonti: D 14,1.18.2/2:12,11 (SD 49.8a) = M 123,7.3/3:120,9 (SD 52.2) = S 56.46/5:454,17 (53.2) = A 4.127/2:130,26 (SD 52.2a).* On *aghā*, cf Mvst index & R Morris, JPTS 3, 1889: 200. This dark intergalactic “void” or empty space (*aghā*) is described as being “always open” (*nicca,viva-ṭā*). It is “groundless, abysmal” (*asaṃvutā*) in the sense of being “unsupported from below” (*heṭṭhāpi appatiṭṭhā*) (MA 4:177); “the lights ... cannot prevail” (*abhā nānubhonti*), “unable to light up on their own” (*attanopabhāya na-p,pahonti*) (MA 4:178).

<sup>21</sup> In the great hell (*mahā,niraya*) (MA 4:178). On whether the hells are real places, see **Pātāla S** (S 36.4), SD 2.25; SD 2.23 (3); SD 89.10 (1).

<sup>22</sup> This whole passage [(1)] recurs in **Acchariya,abbhuta S** (M 123,7.2-7.4), SD 52.2, which adds “And this 10,000-world system quakes, trembles, shudders. And a great boundless radiance fills the world, surpassing even the divine splendour of the devas” (M 123,7.5), as also at **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14,1.32.5), SD 49.8a. For details, see M 123,-7.3 n ad loc (SD 52.2).

<sup>23</sup> On this whole section, cf **Acchariya.abbhuta S** (M 123,7), SD 52.2.

4.4 *And those beings that have arisen there (in the abysmal dark), too, on account of that light, perceive one another, saying:*

*“It appears, sirs, that there are other beings, too, that have arisen here!”*

4.5 Bhikshus, with the appearance of the Tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened, this is the third wonderful and marvellous thing.

#### (4) The wheel-turning

5 Furthermore, bhikshus, when the Tathagata **turns the Dharma-wheel,**

5.2 *a great boundless light, surpassing the glory of the devas, appeared in the world with its devas, its maras and its brahmas, this generation with its recluses and priests, its rulers and people.*

5.3 *Even in the groundless abysmal dark, the blinding darkness of the spaces amongst the worlds, where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot prevail, a great boundless radiance appears, surpassing even the divine glory of the devas.*

5.4 *And those beings that have arisen there (in the abysmal dark), too, on account of that light, perceive one another, saying:*

*“It appears, sirs, that there are other beings, too, that have arisen here!”*

5.5 Bhikshus, with the appearance of the Tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened, this is the fourth wonderful and marvellous thing.

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