

The noble eightfold path leads to awakening

Excerpt from *SD 60.8 Makhā,deva Sutta (M83)*, A good tradition that is worth perpetuating¹ by TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) © 2023.

1.1.1.1 The Makhā,deva Sutta is a mythical lesson in early Buddhism, or a lesson on mythical time [1.1.2] in spiritual life. This is *not* the kind of story to be taken on faith, but one that we should carefully read or listen to, and to reflect on its meaning or let the vision of truth underlying the story appear before us—like a good story does. If you have any difficulty accepting or understanding the story, just leave it aside for the moment, and examine those suttas and teachings that help you know yourself better, and also become more familiar with the story-telling style of Dharma-spirited literature.

The Sutta starts with an account of the life of **King Makhā,deva** who lives in Mithilā in prehistoric times, in an ancient, fabulous city of Indian legends and epics. Makhā,deva is the ideal king who rules his kingdom well and wisely, and is a model of a morally virtuous person who keeps the precepts, and in old age renounces the world to cultivate the divine abodes. He instructs his descendants to do the same.

1.1.1.2 Maghā,deva’s son and descendants keep to his instructions by ruling well and wisely, keeping the precepts, and renouncing in old age. Maghā,deva’s dynasty climaxes with King Nimi, whom even Sakra and the devas of Tāvātimsa admire so much so that they bring him to visit their heaven. On his way from earth to Tāvātimsa (the 2nd of the earth-bound heavens),² he has a “tourist view” of the hells and the earthbound heavens [§14.2 n].

Nimi, however, is the “last person” (*antima, purisa*) in Makhā,deva’s lineage, since his successor, King Kalāra, janaka does not keep to Makhā,deva’s instruction and does not renounce the world. Makhā,deva’s noble lineage thus ends with him.

Near the Sutta’s closing, the Buddha explains that even such a noble tradition that Makhā,deva has instituted—with its *precept-keeping, renunciation and cultivation of the divine abodes*—at best leads to rebirth in the brahma world. Only **the noble eightfold path**, as taught by the buddhas, properly practised, brings one to the path of awakening and to nirvana [§23].

The Sutta’s message then is that we should properly practise the noble eightfold path—whether we use the breath meditation or the divine abodes, whether it is *samatha, vipassanā* or *kammaṭṭhāna*³—we should do so for the cultivation of liberating wisdom. This entails the 3 trainings in moral virtue, mental concentration and insight wisdom.⁴

1.1.1.3 Another interesting point to note is that the Makhā,deva Sutta actually comprises 2 Jātaka stories [1.2.1], that is, **the Makhā,deva Jātaka** (J 9) [1.2.2] and **the Nimi**

¹ SD 60.8 Makhā,deva Sutta (M 83): <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/60.8-Makhadeva-S-m83-piya.pdf>

² See §14.2 n. On the earth-bound heavens, see SD 54.3a (3.5.1).

³ See SD 60.1b.

⁴ On the 3 trainings, see **(Ti) Sikkhā S** (A 3.88), SD 24.10c; **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6; SD 1.11 (5).

Jātaka (J 541) [1.2.3]. Makhā,deva, the first king of the Sutta, and Nimi, the last good king mentioned in the Sutta, are both past births of the Buddha himself.

In **the Makhā,deva Jātaka** (J 9), the Buddha actually states that “I was Makhā,deva at that time” [§22]. This statement highlights the ancient religious ways or the “good tradition”: the way of merit (*puñña*) (keeping the precepts or *uposatha*), renunciation and cultivation of the divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*): *lovingkindness, compassion, joy and equanimity*. However, such a practice at best brings one only rebirth in the brahma-world [§22].

The purpose of the Makhā,deva Sutta is to show just this: that the best religious practice even of those times, advanced in religious ways and wisdom, leads to the heavens of this world, and keeps us within samsara (the cycle of death and rebirth). Only the proper practice of **the noble eightfold path** frees us from cyclic life to gain nirvana [§23].

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