DN 20 — DN 20 The Great Meeting | Mahā Samaya Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

The Great Meeting

Mahā Samaya Sutta (DN 20)

Introduction

This discourse is an interesting example of the folklore of the Pali Canon. It shows that the tendency of Asian popular Buddhism to regard the Buddha as a protective figure, and not just as a teacher, has its roots in the earliest part of the tradition. Metrical analysis indicates that the long “tribute” section of this discourse is very old, while the verses in the introductory section—which is also found in the Saṁyutta Nikāya—are later. This fits with a more subjective judgment: that the tribute was an earlier composition, to which the introduction was added at a later date. This judgment is based on the fact that the two

sections do not quite fit each other. The introduction to the tribute indicates that the reciter of the tribute is the Buddha himself, whereas the narration in the tribute indicates otherwise. The style of the tribute—with its repeated stanzas and tropes—also falls into the ancient genre of verses celebrating a king's victory over his enemies

At any rate, this discourse is the closest thing in the Pali Canon to a "who's who" of the deva worlds, and should provide useful material for anyone interested in the cosmology of early Buddhism.

The Commentary reports the belief that devas still enjoy hearing this discourse chanted in Pali. Until recently it was part of many monks' standard memorized repertoire, to be chanted at weddings and the dedication of new buildings. Even today, as many of the traditions of memorization in Asia seem to be falling by the wayside, there are a few monks and laypeople who chant this discourse regularly.

* * *

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling among the Sakyans at Kapilavatthu in the Great Forest, together with a large Saṅgha of approximately five hundred monks, all of them arahants. And most of the devatās from ten world-systems had gathered in order to see the Blessed One & the Saṅgha of monks.

Then the thought occurred to four devatās of the ranks from the Pure Abodes: "The Blessed One is dwelling among the Sakyans at Kapilavatthu in the Great Forest, together with a large Saṅgha of about five hundred monks, all of them arahants. And most of the devatās from ten world-systems have gathered in order to see the Blessed One & the Saṅgha of monks. Let us also approach the Blessed One and, on arrival, let us each speak a verse in his presence."

Then, just as a strong man might extend his flexed arm or flex his extended arm, those devatās disappeared from among the Devas of the Pure Abodes and reappeared before the Blessed One. Having paid homage to him, they stood to one side. As they were standing there, one devatā recited this verse in the Blessed One's presence:

"A great meeting in the woods:

The deva hosts have assembled.

We have come to this Dhamma meeting

to see the unvanquished Saṅgha."

Then another devatā recited this verse in the Blessed One's presence:

"There the monks are concentrated,

have straightened their own minds.

Like a charioteer holding the reins,

the wise ones guard their faculties."

Then another devatā recited this verse in the Blessed One's presence:

"Having cut through barrenness, cut the cross-bar,

having uprooted Indra's pillar, unstirred,

they wander about pure, unstained,

young nāgas1 well tamed by the One with Eyes."

Then another devatā recited this verse in the Blessed One's presence:

"Those who have gone to the Buddha for refuge

will not go to the plane of woe.

On discarding the human body,

they will fill the hosts of the devas."

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks: "Monks, most of the devatās

from ten world-systems have gathered in order to see the Tathāgata & the Saṅgha of monks. Those who, in the past, were Worthy Ones, Rightly Self-

awakened, at most had their devatā-gathering like mine at the present. Those

who, in the future, will be Worthy Ones, Rightly Self-awakened, will at most have their devatā-gathering like mine at the present.

"I will tell you the names of the deva hosts. I will describe to you the names of the deva hosts. I will teach you the names of the deva hosts. Listen & pay close attention. I will speak."

"As you say, lord," the monks responded to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said:

I will recite a verse of tribute.

Those who live where spirits dwell,

who live in mountain caves, resolute, concentrated,

many, like hidden lions, who have overcome horripilation,

white-hearted, pure, serene, & undisturbed:

Knowing that more than 500 of them
had come to the forest of Kapilavatthu,
the Teacher then said to them,
disciples delighting in his instruction,
“The deva hosts have approached. Detect them, monks!”
Listening to the Awakened One’s instruction,
they made an ardent effort.
Knowledge appeared to them, vision of non-human beings.
Some saw 100, some 1,000, some 70,000,
some had vision of 100,000 non-human beings.
Some gained vision of innumerable devas
filling every direction.

Realizing all this,
the One-with-Vision felt moved to speak.
The Teacher then said to them,
disciples delighting in his instruction,
“The deva hosts have approached. Detect them, monks,
as I describe their glories, one by one.

7,000 yakkhas inhabiting the land of Kāpilavatthu,
powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks’ forest meeting.

6,000 yakkhas from the Himālayas, of varied hue,
powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks’ forest meeting.

From Mount Sāta 3,000 yakkhas of varied hue,
powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks’ forest meeting.

These 16,000 yakkhas of varied hue

powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks' forest meeting.

500 yakkhas from Vessāmitta, of varied hue,
powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks' forest meeting.

Kumbhīra from Rājagaha,
who dwells on Mount Vepulla,
attended to by more than 100,000 yakkhas—
Kumbhīra from Rājagaha:
He, too, has come to the forest meeting.

And Dhataraṭṭha, who rules as king of the Eastern Direction,
as lord of the gandhabbas: A glorious, great king is he,
and many are his sons named Indra, of great strength.
Powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, they have approached the monks' forest meeting.

And Virūḷha, who rules as king of the Southern Direction,
as lord of the kumbaṇḍas: A glorious, great king is he,
and many are his sons named Indra, of great strength.
Powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, they have approached the monks' forest meeting.

And Virūpakkha, who rules as king of the Western Direction,
as lord of the nāgas: A glorious, great king is he,
and many are his sons named Indra, of great strength.
Powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, they have approached the monks' forest meeting.

And Kuvera, who rules as king of the Northern Direction,
as lord of the yakkhas: A glorious, great king is he,
and many are his sons named Indra, of great strength.

Powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, they have approached the monks' forest meeting.

Dhataraṭṭha from the Eastern Direction,
Virūḷhaka from the South,
Virūpakkha from the West,
Kuvera from the Northern Direction:
These four Great Kings encompassing the four directions,
resplendent, stand in the Kāpilavatthu forest.

Their deceitful vassals have also come
—deceptive, treacherous—
Māyā, Kuṭeṇḍu, Veṭeṇḍu, Viṭu with Viṭuṭa,
Candana, the Chief of Sensuality,
Kinnughaṇḍu, Nighaṇḍu,
Panāda, the Mimic, Mātali, the deva's charioteer,
Cittasena the gandhabba, King Naḷa, the Bull of the People,
Pañcasikha has come
with Timbaru [and his daughter,] Suriyavacchasā [SunDazzle].2
These & other kings, gandhabbas with their kings,
rejoicing, have approached the monks' forest meeting.

Then there have also come nāgas
from Lake Nābhasa, Vesālī & Tacchaka.
Kambalas, Assataras, Pāyāgas, & their kin.
And from the River Yāmuna
comes the prestigious nāga, Dhataraṭṭha.
The great nāga Erāvaṇṇa:
He, too, has come to the forest meeting.

They who swoop down swiftly on nāga kings,
divine, twice-born, winged, their eyesight pure:

(Garuḍas) came from the sky to the midst of the forest.
Citra & Supaṇṇa are their names.
But the Buddha made the nāga kings safe,
made them secure from Supaṇṇa.
Addressing one another with affectionate words,
the nāgas & Supaṇṇas made the Buddha their refuge.

Defeated by Indra of the thunderbolt hand,
Asuras dwelling in the ocean,
Vāsava's brothers—powerful, prestigious—
Greatly terrifying Kālakañjas, the Dānaveghasa asuras,
Vepacitti & Sucitti, Pahārāda, with Namucī,
and Bali's hundred sons, all named Veroca,
arrayed with powerful armies
have approached their honored Rāhu
[and said]: "Now is the occasion, sir,
of the monk's forest meeting."

Devas of water, earth, fire, & wind have come here.
Varuṇas, Vāruṇas, Soma together with Yasa,
the prestigious devas of the hosts
of goodwill & compassion have come.
These ten ten-fold hosts, all of varied hue,
powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks' forest meeting.

Veṇḍu [Viṣṇu] & Sahalī,
Asama & the Yama twins,
the devas dependent on the moon
surrounding the moon have come.
The devas dependent on the sun
surrounding the sun have come.

Devas surrounding the zodiac stars
and the sprites of the clouds have come.
Sakka, chief of the Vasus, the ancient donor, has come.
These ten ten-fold hosts, all of varied hue,
powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks' forest meeting.

Then come the Sahabhu devas,
blazing like crests of fire-flame.
The Ariṭṭakas, Rojas, cornflower blue.
Varuṇas & Sahadhammas, Accutas & Anejakas,
Sūleyyas & Ruciras, and Vāsavanesis have come.
These ten ten-fold hosts, all of varied hue,
powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks' forest meeting.

Samānas, Great Samānas, Mānusas, Super Mānusas,
the devas corrupted by play have come,
as well as devas corrupted by mind.3
Then come green-gold devas and those wearing red.
Pāragas, Great Pāragas, prestigious devas have come.
These ten ten-fold hosts, all of varied hue,
powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks' forest meeting.

White devas, ruddy-green devas, dawn-devas
have come with the Veghanas
headed by devas totally in white.
The Vicakkhaṇas have come.
Sadāmatta, Hāragajas, & the prestigious multi-coloreds,
Pajunna, the thunderer, who brings rain to the lands:
These ten ten-fold hosts, all of varied hue,

powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks' forest meeting.

The Khemiyas, Tusitas, & Yāmas, the prestigious Kaṭṭhakas,
Lambitakas & Lāma chiefs, the Jotināmas & Āsavas,
the Nimmānaratis have come, as have the Paranimmitas.
These ten ten-fold hosts, all of varied hue,
powerful, effulgent, glamorous, prestigious,
rejoicing, have approached the monks' forest meeting.

These 60 deva groups, all of varied hue,
have come arranged in order,
together with others in like manner (thinking:)
"We'll see the one who has transcended birth,
who has no bounds, who has crossed over the flood,
effluent-free,
the Mighty One, crossing over the flood,
like the moon emerging from the dark fortnight."

Subrahmā and Paramatta Brahmā,
together with sons of the Powerful One,
Sanaṅkumāra and Tissa:
They too have come to the forest meeting.
Great Brahmā, who stands over 1,000 Brahmā worlds,
who arose there spontaneously, effulgent:
Prestigious is he, with a terrifying body.4
And ten Brahmā sovereigns, each the lord of his own realm—
and in their midst has come Hārita Brahmā
surrounded by his retinue."

When all these devas with Indras & Brahmās had come,
Māra's army came as well.

Now look at the Dark One's foolishness!

[He said:] "Come seize them! Bind them!

Tie them down with passion!

Surround them on every side!

Don't let anyone at all escape!"

Thus the great warlord urged on his dark army,

slapping the ground with his hand,

making a horrendous din, as when

a storm cloud bursts with thunder,

lightning, & torrents of rain.

But then he withdrew—enraged,

with none under his sway.

Realizing all this,

the One-with-Vision felt moved to speak.

The Teacher then said to them,

disciples delighting in his instruction,

"Māra's army has approached. Detect them, monks!"

Listening to the Awakened One's instruction,

they made an ardent effort.

The army retreated from those without passion,

without raising even a hair on their bodies.

Having all won the battle—prestigious, past fear—

they rejoice with all beings:

disciples outstanding among the human race.

Notes

1. Here nāga means "Great Being." It is frequently used in this sense as an epithet for arahants. The verse containing this line is set in one of the most complex meters found in the Pali Canon.

2. See DN 21.

3. DN 1 reports that devas corrupted by play and corrupted by mind, on falling to the human state and then remembering their previous lives, hold views of partial eternalism. Their accounts of why they hold these views incidentally show what "corrupted by play" and "corrupted by mind" mean:

"Those honorable devas who are not corrupted by play don't spend an excessive amount of time indulging in the delights of laughter & play. Because they don't spend an excessive amount of time indulging in the delights of laughter & play, their mindfulness doesn't become muddled. Because of unmuddled mindfulness, they don't fall from that company. They are constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change, and will stay just like that as long as eternity. But those of us who were corrupted by play spent an excessive amount of time indulging in the delights of laughter & play. Because we spent an excessive amount of time indulging in the delights of laughter & play, our mindfulness became muddled. Because of muddled mindfulness, we fell from that company and—inconstant, impermanent, short-lived, subject to falling—have come to this world.'" — DN 1

"Those honorable devas who are not corrupted in mind don't spend an excessive amount of time staring at one another. Because they don't spend an excessive amount of time staring at one another, their minds don't become corrupted toward one another. Because they are uncorrupted in mind toward one another, they don't grow exhausted in body or exhausted in mind. They don't fall from that company. They are constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change, and will stay just like that as long as eternity. But those of us who were corrupted in mind spent an excessive amount of time staring at one another. Because we spent an excessive amount of time staring at one another, our minds became corrupted toward one another. Because we were corrupted in mind toward one another, we grew exhausted in body & exhausted in mind. We fell from that company and—inconstant, impermanent, short-lived, subject to falling—have come to this world.'" — DN 1

4. DN 1 tells how the Great Brahmā appears spontaneously at the beginning of an eon, and how he and his retinue become deluded about his creative powers:

"There ultimately comes a time when, with the passing of a long stretch of time, this world devolves. When the world is devolving, beings for the most part head toward the Radiant (Brahmās). There they stay: mind-made, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, coursing through the air, established in beauty for a long stretch of time. Then there ultimately comes a time when, with the passing of a long stretch of time, this world evolves. When the world is evolving, an empty Brahmā palace appears. Then a certain being—from the exhaustion of his life span or the exhaustion of his merit—falls from the company of the Radiant and re-arises in the empty Brahmā palace. And there he still stays mind-made, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, coursing through the air, established in beauty for a long stretch of time.

"After dwelling there alone for a long time, he experiences displeasure & agitation: 'O, if only other beings would come to this world!'

“Then other beings, through the ending of their life span or the ending of their merit, fall from the company of the Radiant and reappear in the Brahmā palace, in the company of that being. And there they still stay mind-made, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, coursing through the air, established in beauty for a long stretch of time.

“Then the thought occurred to the being who reappeared first: ‘I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Sovereign Lord, the Maker, Creator, Chief, Appointer and Ruler, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. These beings were created by me. Why is that? First the thought occurred to me, “O, if only other beings would come to this world!” And thus my direction of will brought these beings to this world.’ As for the beings who reappear later, this thought occurred to them: ‘This is Brahmā… Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. We were created by this Brahmā. Why is that? We saw that he appeared here before, while we appeared after.’ The being who reappeared first was of longer life span, more beautiful, & more influential, while the beings who reappeared later were of shorter life span, less beautiful, & less influential.” — DN 1

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: DN 11; DN 21; SN 1:20; SN 4; SN 5; SN 6:1–2; SN 6:15; SN 9; SN 10:12; SN 11:3; SN 11:5; SN 55:25, SN 56:11