Thag 10.2 — Ekavihariya Thera: The Lonely Forest Dweller

English translation by Andrew Olendzki.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: UNKNOWN. Entire protected source unit, including notes and verses, preserved; canonical completeness has not been independently established.

Text

Translator's note

These lovely verses are attributed to Tissa Kumara, the youngest brother of King Ashoka, and if this is true it demonstrates how some of the poetry of the Theragatha entered into the Pali canon relatively late — at the time of the Third Council (c. 250 B.C.E.). Prince Tissa was made Vice Regent when Ashoka was first consecrated King. But within only a few years, inspired by the example of a forest-dwelling monk he encountered while hunting, he renounced worldly life to live as a simple Buddhist monk in the wilderness.

His monastic name translates as The Elder Who Lives Alone. The poem exudes the romantic yearning for the solitude of nature felt by someone who grew up, no doubt, in the court of the Maurya empire. The first five stanzas are said to have been uttered to Ashoka while expressing his wish to become a monk, and the last two verses were composed upon ordination. A final verse, not translated here, attests to his eventual awakening.

It was quite a family. Ashoka's son (Mahinda) and daughter (Sanghamitta) were the ones to formally bring the Dhamma to the island of Lanka, where Theravada Buddhism flourished for two and a half millennia. The mountains named in the last stanza actually refer to the ring of hills surrounding Vulture's Peak, but since the previous stanza specifies the peak of a mountain, I think it is appropriate to name the more well-known site.

If nobody is to be found, In front of one or behind one, That is exceedingly pleasant For the lonely forest dweller. So be it! I will go alone To the forest, praised by Buddha; For the self-resolute bhikkhu, Dwelling alone, it is pleasant. Pleasing, and joyful to sages, Haunted by rutting elephants, Seeking my goal alone, quickly Will I go to the wild forest. In the well-flowered Cool Garden, In a soothing mountain grotto, Having anointed all my limbs, I will walk back and forth, alone. When indeed shall I come to dwell All alone, without companion In the great forest, so pleasing! My task accomplished, without taint? While the gentle breezes flutter, Soothing and laden with fragrance, I'll burst asunder ignorance While seated on the mountain top. In a grove covered with flowers, Or maybe on a cool hillside, Gladdened by the joy of release, I'll be content on Vultures Peak.