Thag 15.2 — Udayin Thera: The Blooming Lotus

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: PARTIAL. Complete source excerpt preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure; source omits part of the canonical discourse.

Text

Translator's note

This poem by the Elder Udayin evokes one of the most famous of Buddhist images, and is laced with meaning on many levels. In one sense — emerging from the psychological ethos of early Buddhist teaching — it can be taken to describe the ability of the awakened person to thrive in the world of sensory experience without clinging or attachment. Though the human condition is rooted in the desires that give rise to all life and selfhood, one can learn to live in this world without being bound by the impulse to crave pleasure and avoid pain. One gets "drenched by the world" when one succumbs to to the range of grasping behaviors which inevitably bring about suffering — the mind clings to an object like water that permeates something and drenches it. Here we see a Buddha that does not transcend the world, but lives in it for forty-five years with a mind free of all attachments.

As the tradition evolved, the question of just what sort of being the Buddha was became of growing importance. The image of the lotus emerging from the mud and blooming above the world became a popular way of expressing the Buddha's transcendence. In the canonical passage upon which Udayin builds his verse (Samyutta Nikaya 22:94) the phrase

"having passed beyond the world" (lokam abhibhuyya) is added, and this becomes the basis for the Vetulyaka assertion that the Buddha was essentially a transcendent being. This interpretation had profound implications for later Buddhism, and set the stage for, among other ideas, the Three Bodies of the Buddha doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism. In this way of looking at things, Awakening (represented by the lotus blossom) is something that happens again and again in all different places and times, and is not limited to a single occurrence of it among the Sakya's of ancient India.

The tantric Buddhists of the Vajrayana were drawn to the contrast in this image between the ordinary, defiling mud in which the plant is rooted and the sublime loveliness of the blossom. Relentless in their non-attachment to dichotomies and their demolition of opposites, the tantric approach is to be capable of embracing both extremes without clinging to either. Though the emphasis changes, we can see that the essential teaching of non-attachment or non-clinging (nopalippati) — to the objects of sense-perception, to a particular mode of teaching, or to conventional dualities — remains carried through the ages by this simple image of a lotus growing out of the water.

As the flower of a lotus, Arisen in water, blossoms, Pure-scented and pleasing the mind, Yet is not drenched by the water, In the same way, born in the world, The Buddha abides in the world; And like the lotus by water, He does not get drenched by the world.