MN 27 — Cula-hatthipadopama Sutta: The Shorter Elephant Footprint Simile

English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

Source: https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.027.than.html

Source revision: sha256:7c411108530c04aafcca0ac43267ed12227cbb2653320e8ae0bb686e566bb783

License: CC-BY-NC-4.0 — https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

License URL: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

Copyright: ©2005 Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

License notice: The text of this page ("Cula-hatthipadopama Sutta: The Shorter Elephant Footprint Simile", by Thanissaro Bhikkhu) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of the license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/. Documents linked from this page may be subject to other restrictions.

Attribution: ©2005 Thanissaro Bhikkhu. The text of this page ("Cula-hatthipadopama Sutta: The Shorter Elephant Footprint Simile", by Thanissaro Bhikkhu) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of the license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/. Documents linked from this page may be subject to other restrictions. Transcribed from a file provided by the translator. Last revised for Access to Insight on 30 November 2013. How to cite this document (a suggested style): "Cula-hatthipadopama Sutta: The Shorter Elephant Footprint Simile" (MN 27), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 30 November 2013, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.027.than.html .

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

Completeness: ABBREVIATED. Every source-unit character is preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure. Thanissaro's collection-level note explicitly states that repetitions were cut: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/about.html. This is evidence about the translation method, not an assertion that every individual unit contains an omission; no repetitions reconstructed.

Text

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Savatthi in Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery. Now at that time, Janussonin the brahman was driving out of Savatthi in the middle of the day in a totally white roofed-chariot.[1] He saw Pilotika the wanderer coming from afar and, on seeing him, said to him, "Now where is Master Vacchayana[2] coming from in the middle of the day?"

"Sir, I have come here from the presence of Gotama the contemplative."

"And what does a wise person think about Gotama the contemplative's acuity of discernment?"

"Sir, who am I to know Gotama the contemplative's acuity of discernment? Wouldn't one have to be his equal to know his acuity of discernment?"

"Master Vacchayana praises Gotama the contemplative with lavish praise indeed!"

"Sir, who am I to praise Gotama the contemplative. He is praised by the praised as the best of beings, human & divine."

"Seeing what reasons does Master Vacchayana have such high confidence in Gotama the contemplative?"

"Sir, suppose an elephant hunter were to enter an elephant forest and were to see there a large elephant footprint, long in extent and broad in width. He would come to the conclusion, 'What a big bull elephant!' In the same way, when I saw four footprints in Gotama the contemplative, I came to the conclusion, 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened, the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One, the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.' Which four?

"There is the case where I see certain noble warriors who are pundits, subtle, skilled in debate, like hair-splitting marksmen. They prowl about, as it were, shooting philosophical positions to pieces with their dialectic. They hear, 'Gotama the contemplative, they say, will visit that village or town.' They formulate a question thus: 'Having gone to Gotama the contemplative, we will ask him this question of ours. If, having been asked like this, he answers like this, we will refute his teaching like this. And, if having been asked like this, he answers like that, we will refute his teaching like that.'

"They hear, 'Gotama the contemplative is visiting that village or town.' They go to him, and he instructs, urges, rouses, & encourages them with a talk on Dhamma. Having been instructed, urged, roused, & encouraged by him with a talk on Dhamma, they don't even ask him their question, so since when could they refute him? As it turns out, they become his disciples. When I saw this first footprint in Gotama the contemplative, I came to the conclusion, 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One; the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'

"Then there is the case where I see certain brahmans...

"Then there is the case where I see certain householders...

"Then there is the case where I see certain contemplatives who are pundits, subtle, skilled in debate, like hair-splitting marksmen. They prowl about, as it were, shooting philosophical positions to pieces with their dialectic. They hear, 'Gotama the contemplative, they say, will visit that village or town.' They formulate a question thus: 'Having gone to Gotama the contemplative, we will ask him this question of ours. If, having been asked like this, he answers like this, we will refute his teaching like this. And, if having been asked like this, he answers like that, we will refute his teaching like that.'

"They hear, 'Gotama the contemplative is visiting that village or town.' They go to him, and he instructs, urges, rouses, & encourages them with a talk on Dhamma. Having been instructed, urged, roused, & encouraged by him with a talk on Dhamma, they don't even ask him their question, so since when could they refute him? As it turns out, they ask him for the opportunity to go forth from the home life into homelessness. He gives them the

Going-forth. Having gone forth there — dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, & resolute — they in no long time reach & remain in the supreme goal of the holy life, for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing & realizing it for themselves in the here & now. They say, 'How near we were to being lost! How near we were to being lost! Before, though we weren't contemplatives, we claimed to be contemplatives. Though we weren't brahmans, we claimed to be brahmans. Though we weren't arahants, we claimed to be arahants. But now we are contemplatives, now we are brahmans, now we are arahants.'

When I saw this fourth footprint in Gotama the contemplative, I came to the conclusion, 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One; the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'

When this was said, Janussonin the brahman got down from his totally white roofed-chariot and — arranging his upper robe over one shoulder and extending his hands in reverent salutation in the direction of the Blessed One — exclaimed this exclamation three times:

"Homage to the Blessed One, worthy & rightly self-awakened!

"Homage to the Blessed One, worthy & rightly self-awakened!

"Homage to the Blessed One, worthy & rightly self-awakened!

"May I, at some time or another, meet with Master Gotama! May there be some conversation!"

Then Janussonin the brahman went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he told the Blessed One the entirety of his conversation with Pilotika the wanderer. When he was finished, the Blessed One said to him, "It's not to that extent, brahman, that the elephant footprint simile is complete in its details. As to how it is complete in its details, listen & pay close attention. I will speak."

"As you say, sir," Janussonin the brahman responded.

The Blessed One said: "Suppose an elephant hunter were to enter an elephant forest and were to see there a large elephant footprint, long in extent and broad in width. A skilled elephant hunter would not yet come to the conclusion, 'What a big bull elephant!' Why is that? Because in an elephant forest there are dwarf female elephants with big feet. The footprint might be one of theirs.

"So he follows along and sees in the elephant forest a large elephant footprint, long in extent and broad in width, and some scratch marks high up. A skilled elephant hunter would not yet come to the conclusion, 'What a big bull elephant!' Why is that? Because in an elephant forest there are tall female elephants with prominent teeth & big feet. The

footprint might be one of theirs.

"So he follows along and sees in the elephant forest a large elephant footprint, long in extent and broad in width, with some scratch marks and tusk slashes high up. A skilled elephant hunter would not yet come to the conclusion, 'What a big bull elephant!' Why is that? Because in an elephant forest there are tall female elephants with tusks & big feet. The footprint might be one of theirs.

"So he follows along and sees in the elephant forest a large elephant footprint, long in extent and broad in width, with some scratch marks and tusk slashes high up and some broken-off branches. And he sees that bull elephant at the foot of the tree or in an open clearing, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. He comes to the conclusion, 'That's the big bull elephant.'

"In the same way, brahman, there is the case where a Tathagata appears in the world, worthy and rightly self-awakened. He teaches the Dhamma admirable in its beginning, admirable in its middle, admirable in its end. He proclaims the holy life both in its particulars and in its essence, entirely perfect, surpassingly pure.

"A householder or householder's son, hearing the Dhamma, gains conviction in the Tathagata and reflects: 'Household life is confining, a dusty path. Life gone forth is the open air. It isn't easy, living at home, to practice the holy life totally perfect, totally pure, a polished shell. What if I, having shaved off my hair & beard and putting on the ochre robe, were to go forth from the household life into homelessness?'

"So after some time he abandons his mass of wealth, large or small; leaves his circle of relatives, large or small; shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the ochre robes, and goes forth from the household life into homelessness.

Virtue

"When he has thus gone forth, endowed with the monks' training & livelihood, then — abandoning the taking of life — he abstains from the taking of life. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings.

"Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given. He takes only what is given, accepts only what is given, lives not by stealth but by means of a self that has become pure. This, too, is part of his virtue.

"Abandoning uncelibacy, he lives a celibate life, aloof, refraining from the sexual act that is the villager's way.

"Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech. He speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world.

"Abandoning divisive speech he abstains from divisive speech. What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord.

"Abandoning abusive speech, he abstains from abusive speech. He speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing and pleasing to people at large.

"Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter. He speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, and the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.

"He abstains from damaging seed and plant life.

"He eats only once a day, refraining from the evening meal and from food at the wrong time of day.

"He abstains from dancing, singing, instrumental music, and from watching shows.

"He abstains from wearing garlands and from beautifying himself with scents and cosmetics.

"He abstains from high and luxurious beds and seats.

"He abstains from accepting gold and money.

"He abstains from accepting uncooked grain... raw meat... women and girls... male and female slaves... goats and sheep... fowl and pigs... elephants, cattle, steeds, and mares... fields and property.

"He abstains from running messages... from buying and selling... from dealing with false scales, false metals, and false measures... from bribery, deception, and fraud.

"He abstains from mutilating, executing, imprisoning, highway robbery, plunder, and violence.

"He is content with a set of robes to provide for his body and alms food to provide for his hunger. Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden; so too is he content with a set of robes to provide for his body and alms food to provide for his hunger. Wherever he goes, he takes only his barest necessities along.

"Endowed with this noble aggregate of virtue, he is inwardly sensitive to the pleasure of being blameless.

Sense Restraint

"On seeing a form with the eye, he does not grasp at any theme or details by which — if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye — evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. On hearing a sound with the ear... On smelling an odor with the nose... On tasting a flavor with the tongue... On touching a tactile sensation with the body... On cognizing an idea with the intellect, he does not grasp at any theme or details by which — if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the intellect — evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. Endowed with this noble restraint over the sense faculties, he is inwardly sensitive to the pleasure of being blameless.

Mindfulness & Alertness

"When going forward and returning, he acts with alertness. When looking toward and looking away... when bending and extending his limbs... when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe, and his bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting... when urinating and defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, he acts with alertness.

Abandoning the Hindrances

"Endowed with this noble aggregate of virtue, this noble restraint over the sense faculties, this noble mindfulness & alertness, he seeks out a secluded dwelling: a wilderness, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a forest grove, the open air, a heap of straw. After his meal, returning from his alms round, he sits down, crosses his legs, holds his body erect, and brings mindfulness to the fore.

"Abandoning covetousness with regard to the world, he dwells with an awareness devoid of covetousness. He cleanses his mind of covetousness. Abandoning ill will and anger, he dwells with an awareness devoid of ill will, sympathetic with the welfare of all living beings. He cleanses his mind of ill will and anger. Abandoning sloth and drowsiness, he dwells with an awareness devoid of sloth and drowsiness, mindful, alert, percipient of light. He cleanses his mind of sloth and drowsiness. Abandoning restlessness and anxiety, he dwells undisturbed, his mind inwardly stilled. He cleanses his mind of restlessness and anxiety. Abandoning uncertainty, he dwells having crossed over uncertainty, with no perplexity with regard to skillful mental qualities. He cleanses his mind of uncertainty.

The Four Jhanas

"Having abandoned these five hindrances — imperfections of awareness that weaken discernment — then, quite withdrawn from sensual pleasures, withdrawn from unskillful mental qualities, he enters and remains in the first jhana: rapture and pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation.

"This, brahman, is called a footprint of the Tathagata, a scratch mark of the Tathagata, a tusk slash of the Tathagata, but a disciple of the noble ones would not yet come to the conclusion, 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the

Blessed One; the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'

"Then, with the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters and remains in the second jhana: rapture and pleasure born of composure, one-pointedness of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation — internal assurance.

"This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathagata, a scratch mark of the Tathagata, a tusk slash of the Tathagata, but a disciple of the noble ones would not yet come to the conclusion, 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One; the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'

"Then, with the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhana, of which the Noble Ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.'

"This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathagata, a scratch mark of the Tathagata, a tusk slash of the Tathagata, but a disciple of the noble ones would not yet come to the conclusion, 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One; the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'

"Then, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain — as with the earlier disappearance of elation and distress — he enters and remains in the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither-pleasure-nor-pain.

"This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathagata, a scratch mark of the Tathagata, a tusk slash of the Tathagata, but a disciple of the noble ones would not yet come to the conclusion, 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One; the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'

The Three Knowledges

"With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs and inclines it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives.[3] He recollects his manifold past lives, i.e., one birth, two births, three births, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, one hundred, one thousand, one hundred thousand, many aeons of cosmic contraction, many aeons of cosmic expansion, many aeons of cosmic contraction and expansion, [recollecting,] 'There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.' Thus he recollects his manifold past lives in their modes and details.

"This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathagata, a scratch mark of the Tathagata, a tusk slash of the Tathagata, but a disciple of the noble ones would not yet come to the

conclusion, 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One; the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'

"With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs and inclines it to knowledge of the passing away and re-appearance of beings. He sees — by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the human — beings passing away and re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their kamma: 'These beings — who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, and mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views — with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell. But these beings — who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech, and mind, who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views — with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in the good destinations, in the heavenly world.' Thus — by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the human — he sees beings passing away and re-appearing, and he discerns how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their kamma.

"This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathagata, a scratch mark of the Tathagata, a tusk slash of the Tathagata, but a disciple of the noble ones would not yet come to the conclusion, 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One; the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'

"With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, the monk directs and inclines it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental fermentations. He discerns, as it has come to be, that 'This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress... These are mental fermentations... This is the origination of fermentations... This is the cessation of fermentations... This is the way leading to the cessation of fermentations.'

"This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathagata, a scratch mark of the Tathagata, a tusk slash of the Tathagata. A disciple of the noble ones has not yet come to conclusion, but he comes to the conclusion,[4] 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One; the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'[5]

"His heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, is released from the fermentation of sensuality, the fermentation of becoming, the fermentation of ignorance. With release, there is the knowledge, 'Released.' He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'

"This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathagata, a scratch mark of the Tathagata, a tusk slash of the Tathagata, and it is here that a disciple of the noble ones has come to

conclusion: 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One; the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'"

When this was said, Janussonin the brahman said to the Blessed One: "Magnificent, lord! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has the Blessed One — through many lines of reasoning — made the Dhamma clear. I go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Community of monks. May the Blessed One remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge, from this day forward, for life."

Notes

1.

The Thai version of the Canon here reads va.lavaabhirathena, which seems to be a mixture of two readings recognized in the PTS Dictionary: va.labhi-rathena, "in a roofed chariot"; and va.lavaa-rathena, "in a chariot drawn by mares."

2.

Vacchayana is Pilotika's clan name.

3.

Lit: previous homes.

4.

This is a pun. For an explanation, see the next note.

5.

This stage in the practice would seem to correspond to reaching stream-entry, inasmuch as one of the standard definitions of stream-entry is direct vision of the four noble truths. It is also the stage at which one reaches unwavering conviction in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.

The sentence stating that the stream-enterer has come to a conclusion without coming to conclusion is a play on words. The idiomatic expression for coming to a conclusion — ni.t.tha.m gacchati — can also mean coming to a finish, reaching completion, or coming to an end. To distinguish these two meanings, the text here uses the form ni.t.tha.ngato to mean having come to a finish, and ni.t.tha.m gacchati to mean coming to a conclusion.

This particular way of distinguishing the meanings, however, is not adhered to consistently across the Canon. On the one hand, Dhp 351 — like this sutta — uses the word ni.t.tha.ngato to describe an arahant. On the other, a series of suttas beginning at AN

6.131 (AN 6.124 in the Thai numbering), some lay disciples are each described as tathaagate ni.t.tha.ngato, which could either mean that they have come to a definite conclusion about the Tathagata or that they have finished their training under the Tathagata. Some of the disciples named in these suttas — such as Citta, Mahanama, Ugga, Anathapindika, and Jivaka Komarabhacca — are, in other parts of the Canon, described as stream-winners or non-returners. However, the description of their attainment here contains a mixture of terms, some normally associated with stream-entry, some with arahantship. The pattern of the suttas is this: "Endowed with six qualities, Tapussa the householder has come to conclusion in the Tathagata, seen the deathless, and goes about having realized the deathless. Which six? Verified confidence in the Buddha, verified confidence in the Dhamma, verified confidence in the Sangha, noble virtue, noble knowledge, noble release." Of these six qualities, the first four are normally associated with stream-entry, the last two with arahantship. It may be that the last two are meant here in a non-technical sense, which would mean that ni.t.tha.ngato here means simply coming to a definite conclusion about the Tathagata.

AN 10.63 plays with the two meanings of ni.t.tha in another way. The Buddha describes ten types of individuals, all of whom, he says, are "ni.t.tha.ngataa in me." In this case, ni.t.t.ha.ngato would simply mean having come to a definite conclusion. Of the ten types, he adds, the ni.t.thaa — or completion of the training — of five occurs (or will occur) here in the human realm, the ni.t.thaa of five occurs away from here. In the first five, he includes three types of stream-winners, once-returners (this item is omitted from the PTS translation), and those who attain arahantship in the present life. In the latter five, he includes five types of non-returners.

Thus, as with the suttas in AN VI, ni.t.tha.ngato here means simply coming to a definite conclusion about the Tathagata. And the lack of consistency surrounding this term in the suttas suggests that it is not a technical term. This would confirm the impression the two meanings of ni.t.tha are used more as an opportunity for word play, a game in which inconsistency is not a vice.

For more on word play in the Canon, see The Atthakavagga: An Introduction.

See also: MN 95