MN 27 — MN 27 The Shorter Elephant Footprint Simile | Cūḷa Hatthipadopama Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

Source: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN27.html

Source revision: sha256:06db98f11dbe5b66e3b290b0f8bcaa44ec5f2fe3d1e1b74062fcf0baea044036

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: Copyright 2014 Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, Revised edition 2017

License notice: Copyright 2014 Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, Revised edition 2017 This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported. To see a copy of this license visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/. “Commercial” shall mean any sale, whether for commercial or non-profit purposes or entities. Questions about this book may be addressed to Metta Forest Monastery Valley Center, CA 92082-1409 U.S.A. Additional resources More Dhamma talks, books and translations by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu are available to download in digital audio and various ebook formats at dhammatalks.org. Printed copy A paperback copy of this book is available free of charge. To request one, write to: Book Request, Metta Forest Monastery, PO Box 1409, Valley Center, CA 92082 USA.

Attribution: From Handful of Leaves, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu; https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/Writings/Ebooks/SuttaPitaka_251113.epub. Copyright 2014 Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, Revised edition 2017 This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported. To see a copy of this license visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/. “Commercial” shall mean any sale, whether for commercial or non-profit purposes or entities. Questions about this book may be addressed to Metta Forest Monastery Valley Center, CA 92082-1409 U.S.A. Additional resources More Dhamma talks, books and translations by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu are available to download in digital audio and various ebook formats at dhammatalks.org. Printed copy A paperback copy of this book is available free of charge. To request one, write to: Book Request, Metta Forest Monastery, PO Box 1409, Valley Center, CA 92082 USA.

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

The Shorter Elephant Footprint Simile

Cūḷa Hatthipadopama Sutta (MN 27)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. Now at that time, Jāṇussoṇin the brahman was driving out of Sāvatthī 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 Vacchāyana2 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 Vacchāyana 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 Vacchāyana 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 Saṅgha 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 Saṅgha 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 Saṅgha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'

When this was said, Jāṇussoṇin 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 Jāṇussoṇin 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," Jāṇussoṇin 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 Tathāgata appears in the world, worthy & 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 Tathāgata 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 & 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 & cosmetics.

“He abstains from high and luxurious beds & seats.

“He abstains from accepting gold & money.

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

“He abstains from running messages… from buying & selling… from dealing with false scales, false metals, & false measures… from bribery, deception, & 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 doesn’t 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 aroma 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 doesn’t 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 makes himself alert. 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 makes himself alert.

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 & 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 & anger. Abandoning sloth & drowsiness, he dwells with an awareness devoid of sloth & drowsiness, mindful, alert, percipient of light. He cleanses his mind of sloth & drowsiness. Abandoning restlessness & anxiety, he dwells undisturbed, his mind inwardly stilled. He cleanses his mind of restlessness & anxiety. Abandoning uncertainty, he dwells having crossed over uncertainty, with no perplexity with regard to skillful qualities. He cleanses his mind of uncertainty.

The Four Jhānas

“Having abandoned these five hindrances—imperfections of awareness that weaken discernment—then, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, he enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation.

“This, brahman, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata, a scratch mark of the Tathāgata, a tusk slash of the Tathāgata, 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 Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples has practiced rightly.’

“Then, with the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters and remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation—internal assurance.

“This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata, a scratch mark of the Tathāgata, a tusk slash of the Tathāgata, 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 Saṅgha 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 and remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’

“This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata, a scratch mark of the Tathāgata, a tusk slash of the Tathāgata, 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 Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples has practiced rightly.’

“Then, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joy & distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure-nor-pain.

“This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata, a scratch mark of the Tathāgata, a tusk slash of the Tathāgata, 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 Saṅgha 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 [lit: previous homes]. 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 eons of cosmic contraction, many eons of cosmic expansion, many eons 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 Tathāgata, a scratch mark of the Tathāgata, a tusk slash of the Tathāgata, 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 Saṅgha 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 a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, 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 a good destination, a 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 Tathāgata, a scratch mark of the Tathāgata, a tusk slash of the Tathāgata, 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 Saṅgha 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 effluents. 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 effluents… This is the origination of effluents… This is the cessation of effluents… This is the way leading to the cessation of effluents.'

"This, too, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata, a scratch mark of the Tathāgata, a tusk slash of the Tathāgata. A disciple of the noble ones has not yet come to conclusion, but he comes to the conclusion,3 'The Blessed One is rightly self-awakened; the Dhamma is well-taught by the Blessed One; the Saṅgha of the Blessed One's disciples has practiced rightly.'4

“His heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, is released from the effluent of sensuality, released from the effluent of becoming, released from the effluent 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 Tathāgata, a scratch mark of the Tathāgata, a tusk slash of the Tathāgata, 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 Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples has practiced rightly.’”

When this was said, Jāṇussoṇin 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 Saṅgha 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 vaḷavābhirathena, which seems to be a mixture of two readings recognized in the PTS Dictionary: vaḷabhi-rathena, “in a roofed chariot”; and vaḷavā-rathena, “in a chariot drawn by mares.”

2. Vacchāyana is Pilotika’s clan name.

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

4. 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 verified conviction in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha.

The sentence stating that the stream-enterer has come to a conclusion without coming to conclusion appears to be a pun. The idiomatic expression for coming to a conclusion—niṭṭhaṁ 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 niṭṭhaṅgato to mean having come to a finish, and niṭṭhaṁ 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 niṭṭhaṅgato to describe an arahant. On the other, in a series of suttas beginning at AN 6:131 (AN 6:124 in the Thai numbering), some lay disciples are each described as tathāgate niṭṭhaṅgato, which could either mean that they have come to a definite conclusion about the Tathāgata or that they have concluded their training under the Tathāgata. Some of the disciples

named in these suttas—such as Citta, Mahānāma, Ugga, Anāthapiṇḍika, and Jīvaka Komārabhacca—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 Tathāgata, 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 Saṅgha, 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 niṭṭhaṅgato here means simply coming to a definite conclusion about the Tathāgata.

AN 10:63 plays with the two meanings of niṭṭha in another way. The Buddha describes ten types of individuals, all of whom, he says, are "niṭṭhaṅgatā in me." In this case, niṭṭhaṅgato would simply mean having come to a definite conclusion. Of the ten types, he adds, the niṭṭhā—or conclusion of the training—of five occurs (or will occur) here in the human realm, the niṭṭhā 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 6, niṭṭhaṅgato here means simply coming to a definite conclusion about the Tathāgata. 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 niṭṭha 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 introduction to Sn 4.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: AN 3:65; MN 70; MN 95