SN 11.4 — Vepacitti Sutta: Calm in the Face of Anger

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 Introduction

This noble teaching on how to respond when faced with anger is placed in a mythical setting. The story is told by the Buddha of a great war between devas (gods) and asuras (demons) that took place in ancient times. The devas are ultimately victorious (as they are in the Greek and Norse versions of the same myth) and capture Vepacitti, the ruler of the asuras. Bound in chains, he is brought to Tavatimsa and into the presence of Sakka, ruler of the gods.

Being the demon that he his, Vepacitti hurls a torrent of abuse at his captor, calling him all sorts of insulting names (the catalog of which in the commentary is most interesting). Sakka, however, is unmoved, inspiring Matali, his charioteer, to begin the following poetic exchange:

The poem is in the prevalent vatta meter, with eight syllables per line, and contains much subtle word-play. For example, the words bala (fool) and bala (strong) dance with one another throughout the piece (appearing fully 17 times), nowhere more intimately than in

the frolicking alliteration of lines 31 and 32 (abalan-tam balam aahu yassa balaabalam balam). The linking of the word titikkhati (forbearance) with the similarly sounding tikicchati (healing) is also a poignant touch that is hardly accidental.

This exchange shows well how the Buddha adapted the heroic ideals of his warrior's heritage to the inner struggle for self-mastery. The strength of the victorious Sakka lies in his wisdom and forbearance. The weakness of the vanquished asura comes from his lack of understanding (hence the label 'fool'), which renders him helpless to resist the passions raging within.

Though these verses were penned 2,500 years ago, the truth behind them is timeless. It is the same that has helped many non-violent social and political reform movements achieve dramatic results in our own century. Conquest is only the apparent victory of the short-sighted, while transformation of oneself and others is the more lasting victory of the wise. Remaining unprovoked in the face of anger and hostility still offers the best hope for healing our troubled world.

[Matali:]

Could it be you're afraid, Sakka, Or weak, that you forbear like this, Though hearing such insulting words From the mouth of Vepacitti?

[Sakka:]

I am neither afraid nor weak, Yet I forbear Vepacitti. How is it one who knows, like me, Would get provoked by such a fool?

[Matali:]

More angry will a fool become If no one puts a stop to him. So let the wise restrain the fool By the use of a mighty stick.

[Sakka:]

This is the only thing, I deem, That will put a stop to the fool: Knowing well the other's anger, One is mindful and remains calm.

[Matali:]

This very forbearance of yours, Sakka, I see as a mistake. For when a fool reckons like this: "From fear of me he does forbear," The dolt will come on stronger still — Like a bull the more that one flees.

[Sakka:]

Let him think whatever he likes: "From fear of me he does forbear." Among ideals and highest goods None better than patience is found. For surely he who, being strong,

Forbears the ones who are more weak — Forever enduring the weak — That is called the highest patience. For whom strength is the strength of fools, It is said of the strong "He's weak!" For the strong, guarding the dhamma, Contentiousness is never found. It is indeed a fault for one Who returns anger for anger. Not giving anger for anger, One wins a double victory. He behaves for the good of both: Himself and the other person. Knowing well the other's anger, He is mindful and remains calm. In this way he is healing both: Himself and the other person. The people who think "He's a fool," Just don't understand the dhamma.