

A discourse of the Buddha:

Cūlahatthipadopama-sutta

‘The Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant’s Footprint’

From The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, translated from the Pali by Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, pp. 269 – 277), reprinted with permission.

Abstract

*Translation by
Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli
and Bhikkhu Bodhi*

*While this Sutta has its historical significance for the Sinhala of Sri Lanka - as the one that set the tone for the conversion of a whole people over some 2300 years ago, it is reproduced here, in this **paṭivedha** (Insight) section of the Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies for a different reason. It shows a structural approach to the Dhamma: *saddhā* ‘faith’ serving as a foundation for *sīla* [self-]discipline’, leading to *samādhi* ‘concentration’ and to eventual *paññā* ‘wisdom’ and liberation¹.*

*Canadian Journal of
Buddhist Studies,
Number Five, 2009*

*The Sutta begins with *saddhā* ‘faith’ (sections 1 – 7), when Master Vacchāyana explains to the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi how he came to the conclusion that ‘The Blessed One is fully enlightened, the Dhamma is well proclaimed, the Sangha is practicing the good way’, after seeing the ‘four footprints of the recluse Gotama’. The footprints he has seen are each of learned nobles, learned brahmins, learned householders and learned recluses who go to the Buddha with a view to*

© 2009
by Nalanda College
Buddhist studies

refuting his Teachings, but end up being his disciples.

When a convinced brahmin Jāṇussoṇi now approaches the Buddha, and reports his meeting with Master Vacchāyana, we see the Buddha adding even a greater objectivity when he says, “At this point, Brahmin, the simile of the elephant’s footprint has not yet been competed in detail” and then goes on elaborate. (#8 – 11). Next introducing us to a ‘householder’s son’ (or other) who has gone forth having heard the Dhamma, the Sutta outlines first the dimensions of sīla ‘[self-]discipline’, 26 in number (12 – 13), which lead to samādhi ‘concentration’, and jhānas (14 – 22), and finally to knowledges (of past lives). In the process, the concentrated mind comes to the insight of the Four Noble Truths, arriving at paññā ‘wisdom’ as well.

When the one who has gone forth “knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance” (# 26). And now the Buddha rounds it up by making the connection to the beginning: “It is at this point that a noble disciple has come to the conclusion: ‘The Blessed One is fully enlightened, the Dhamma is well proclaimed, the Sangha is practicing the good way’. And it is at this point, brahmin, that the simile of the elephant’s footprint has been completed in detail”.

- Editor

NOTES

¹ This is as perceived by this editor, and not as outlined in the text.

(M27) *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta* **The Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint**

(Please note that the footnote numbering in the original translation, as well as the references in the translation to the page numbers in the original Pali have been retained. - Editor)

1. **THUS HAVE I HEARD.**³¹⁹ On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvatti in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.

2. Now on that occasion the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi was driving out of Sāvatti in the middle of the day in an all-white chariot drawn by white mares. He saw the wanderer Pilotika coming in the distance and asked him: "Now where is Master Vacchāyana coming from in the middle of the day?"³²⁰

"Sir, I am coming from the presence of the recluse Gotama."

"What does Master Vacchāyana think of the recluse Gotama's lucidity of wisdom? He is wise, is he not?"

"Sir, who am I to know the recluse Gotama's lucidity of wisdom? One would surely have to be his equal to know the recluse Gotama's lucidity of wisdom."

"Master Vacchāyana praises the recluse Gotama with high praise indeed."

"Sir, who am I to praise the recluse Gotama? The recluse Gotama is praised by the praised as best among gods and humans."

"What reasons does Master Vacchāyana see that he has such firm confidence in the recluse Gotama?"

3. "Sir, suppose a wise elephant woodsman were to enter an elephant wood and were to see in the elephant wood [176] a big elephant's footprint, long in extent and broad across. He would come to the conclusion: 'Indeed, this is a big bull elephant.' So too, when I saw four footprints of the recluse Gotama, I came to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened, the Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One, the Sangha is practising the good way.' What are the four?"

4. "Sir, I have seen here certain learned nobles who were clever, knowledgeable about the doctrines of others, as sharp as hairsplitting marksmen; they wander about, as it were, demolishing the views of others

with their sharp wits. When they hear: 'The recluse Gotama will visit such and such a village or town,' they formulate a question thus: 'We will go to the recluse Gotama and ask him this question. If he is asked like this, he will answer like this, and so we will refute his doctrine in this way; and if he is asked like that, he will answer like that, and so we will refute his doctrine in that way.'

"They hear: 'The recluse Gotama has come to visit such and such a village or town.' They go to the recluse Gotama, and the recluse Gotama instructs, urges, rouses, and gladdens them with a talk on the Dhamma. After they have been instructed, urged, roused, and gladdened by the recluse Gotama with a talk on the Dhamma, they do not so much as ask him the question, so how should they refute his doctrine? In actual fact, they become his disciples. When I saw this first footprint of the recluse Gotama, I came to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened, the Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One, the Sangha is practising the good way.'

5. "Again, I have seen certain learned brahmins who were clever... In actual fact, they too become his disciples. When I saw this second footprint of the recluse Gotama, I came to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened...'

6. "Again, I have seen certain learned householders who were clever... [177]... In actual fact, they too become his disciples. When I saw this third footprint of the recluse Gotama, I came to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened...'

7. "Again, I have seen certain learned recluses who were clever... They do not so much as ask him the question, so how should they refute his doctrine? In actual fact, they ask the recluse Gotama to allow them to go forth from the home life into homelessness, and he gives them the going forth. Not long after they have gone forth, dwelling alone, withdrawn, diligent, ardent, and resolute, by realising for themselves with direct knowledge they here and now enter upon and abide in that supreme goal of the holy life for the sake of which clansmen rightly go forth from the home life into homelessness. They say thus: 'We were very nearly lost, we very nearly perished, for formerly we claimed that we were recluses though we were not really recluses; we claimed that we were brahmins though we were not really brahmins; we claimed that we were arahants though we were not really arahants. But now we are recluses, now we are brahmins, now we are arahants.' When I saw this fourth footprint of the recluse Gotama, I came to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened...'

"When I saw these four footprints of the recluse Gotama, I came to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened, the Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One, the Sangha is practising the good way.'"

8. When this was said, the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi got down from his all-white chariot drawn by white mares, and arranging his upper robe on one shoulder, he extended his hands in reverential salutation towards the Blessed One and uttered this exclamation three times: "Honour to the Blessed One, accomplished and fully enlightened! Honour to the Blessed One, accomplished and fully enlightened! Honour to the Blessed One, accomplished and fully enlightened! Perhaps some time or other [178] we might meet Master Gotama and have some conversation with him."

9. Then the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi went to the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and amiable talk was finished, he sat down at one side and related to the Blessed One his entire conversation with the wanderer Pilotika. Thereupon the Blessed One told him: "At this point, brahmin, the simile of the elephant's footprint has not yet been completed in detail. As to how it is completed in detail, listen and attend carefully to what I shall say."—"Yes, sir," the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi replied. The Blessed One said this:

10. "Brahmin, suppose an elephant woodsman were to enter an elephant wood and were to see in the elephant wood a big elephant's footprint, long in extent and broad across. A wise elephant woodsman would not yet come to the conclusion: 'Indeed, this is a big bull elephant.' Why is that? In an elephant wood there are small she-elephants that leave a big footprint, and this might be one of their footprints. He follows it and sees in the elephant wood a big elephant's footprint, long in extent and broad across, and some scrapings high up. A wise elephant woodsman would not yet come to the conclusion: 'Indeed, this is a big bull elephant.' Why is that? In an elephant wood there are tall she-elephants that have prominent teeth and leave a big footprint, and this might be one of their footprints. He follows it further and sees in the elephant wood a big elephant's footprint, long in extent and broad across, and some scrapings high up, and marks made by tusks. A wise elephant woodsman would not yet come to the conclusion: 'Indeed, this is a big bull elephant.' Why is that? In an elephant wood there are tall she-elephants that have tusks and leave a big footprint, and this might be one of their footprints. He follows it further and sees in the elephant wood a big elephant's footprint, long in extent and broad across, and some scrapings high up, and marks made by tusks, and broken-off branches. And he sees that bull elephant at the root of a tree or in the open, walking about, sitting, or lying down. He comes to the conclusion: 'This is that big bull elephant.'

11. "So too, [179] brahmin, here a Tathāgata appears in the world, accomplished, fully enlightened, perfect in true knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of worlds, incomparable leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of gods and humans, enlightened, blessed. He declares this world with its gods, its Maras, and its Brahmas, this generation with its recluses

and brahmins, its princes and its people, which he has himself realised with direct knowledge. He teaches the Dhamma good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, with the right meaning and phrasing, and he reveals a holy life that is utterly perfect and pure.

12. “A householder or householder’s son or one born in some other clan hears that Dhamma. On hearing the Dhamma he acquires faith in the Tathāgata. Possessing that faith, he considers thus: ‘Household life is crowded and dusty; life gone forth is wide open. It is not easy, while living in a home, to lead the holy life utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell. Suppose I shave off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and go forth from the home life into homelessness.’ On a later occasion, abandoning a small or a large fortune, abandoning a small or a large circle of relatives, he shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the yellow robe, and goes forth from the home life into homelessness.

13. “Having thus gone forth and possessing the bhikkhu’s training and way of life, abandoning the killing of living beings, he abstains from killing living beings; with rod and weapon laid aside, gentle and kindly, he abides compassionate to all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given; taking only what is given, expecting only what is given, by not stealing he abides in purity. Abandoning incelibacy, he observes celibacy, living apart, abstaining from the vulgar practice of sexual intercourse.

“Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech; he speaks truth, adheres to truth, is trustworthy and reliable, one who is no deceiver of the world. Abandoning malicious speech, he abstains from malicious speech; he does not repeat elsewhere what he has heard here in order to divide [those people] from these, nor does he repeat to these people what he has heard elsewhere in order to divide [these people] from those; thus he is one who reunites those who are divided, a promoter of friendships, who enjoys concord, rejoices in concord, delights in concord, a speaker of words that promote concord. Abandoning harsh speech, he abstains from harsh speech; he speaks such words as are gentle, pleasing to the ear, and loveable, as go to the heart, are courteous, desired by many [180] and agreeable to many. Abandoning gossip, he abstains from gossip; he speaks at the right time, speaks what is fact, speaks on what is good, speaks on the Dhamma and the Discipline; at the right time he speaks such words as are worth recording, reasonable, moderate, and beneficial.

“He abstains from injuring seeds and plants. He practises eating only one meal a day, abstaining from eating at night and outside the proper time.³²¹ He abstains from dancing, singing, music, and theatrical shows. He abstains from wearing garlands, smartening himself with scent, and embellishing himself with unguents. He abstains from high and large

couches. He abstains from accepting gold and silver. He abstains from accepting raw grain. He abstains from accepting raw meat. He abstains from accepting women and girls. He abstains from accepting men and women slaves. He abstains from accepting goats and sheep.

He abstains from accepting fowl and pigs. He abstains from accepting elephants, cattle, horses, and mares. He abstains from accepting fields and land. He abstains from going on errands and running messages. He abstains from buying and selling. He abstains from false weights, false metals, and false measures. He abstains from cheating, deceiving, defrauding, and trickery. He abstains from wounding, murdering, binding, brigandage, plunder, and violence.

14. "He becomes content with robes to protect his body and with almsfood to maintain his stomach, and wherever he goes, he sets out taking only these with him. Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden, so too the bhikkhu becomes content with robes to protect his body and with alms-food to maintain his stomach, and wherever he goes, he sets out taking only these with him. Possessing this aggregate of noble virtue, he experiences within himself a bliss that is blameless.

15. "On seeing a form with the eye, he does not grasp at its signs and features. Since, if he left the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and grief might invade him, he practises the way of its restraint, he guards the eye faculty, he undertakes the restraint of the eye faculty.³²² On hearing a sound with the ear... On smelling an odour with the nose... On tasting a flavour with the tongue... On touching a tangible with the body... On cognizing a mind-object with the mind, he does not grasp at its signs and features. Since, if he left the mind faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and grief might invade him, he practises the way of its restraint, [181] he guards the mind faculty, he undertakes the restraint of the mind faculty. Possessing this noble restraint of the faculties, he experiences within himself a bliss that is unsullied.

16. "He becomes one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning; who acts in full awareness when looking ahead and looking away; who acts in full awareness when flexing and extending his limbs; who acts in full awareness when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl; who acts in full awareness when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting; who acts in full awareness when defecating and urinating; who acts in full awareness when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

17. "Possessing this aggregate of noble virtue, and this noble restraint of the faculties, and possessing this noble mindfulness and full awareness, he resorts to a secluded resting place: the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain,

a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw.

18. “On returning from his almsround, after his meal he sits down, folding his legs crosswise, setting his body erect, and establishing mindfulness before him. Abandoning covetousness for the world, he abides with a mind free from covetousness; he purifies his mind from covetousness.³²³ Abandoning ill will and hatred, he abides with a mind free from ill will, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings; he purifies his mind from ill will and hatred. Abandoning sloth and torpor, he abides free from sloth and torpor, percipient of light, mindful and fully aware; he purifies his mind from sloth and torpor. Abandoning restlessness and remorse, he abides unagitated with a mind inwardly peaceful; he purifies his mind from restlessness and remorse. Abandoning doubt, he abides having gone beyond doubt, unperplexed about wholesome states; he purifies his mind from doubt.

19. “Having thus abandoned these five hindrances, imperfections of the mind that weaken wisdom, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, he enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. This, brahmin, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata, something scraped by the Tathāgata, something marked by the Tathāgata, but a noble disciple does not yet come to the conclusion: ‘The Blessed One is fully enlightened, the Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One, the Sangha is practising the good way.’³²⁴

20. “Again, with the stilling of applied and sustained thought, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the second jhāna, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of concentration. This too, brahmin, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata... but a noble [182] disciple does not yet come to the conclusion: ‘The Blessed One is fully enlightened...’

21. “Again, with the fading away as well of rapture, a bhikkhu abides in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third jhāna, on account of which noble ones announce: ‘He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.’ This too, brahmin, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata... but a noble disciple does not yet come to the conclusion: ‘The Blessed One is fully enlightened...’

22. “Again, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity. This too, brahmin, is called a footprint of

the Tathāgata... but a noble disciple does not yet come to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened. . .'

23. "When his concentrated mind is thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. He recollects his manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births, three births, four births, five births, ten births, twenty births, thirty births, forty births, fifty births, a hundred births, a thousand births, a hundred thousand births, many aeons of world-contraction, many aeons of world-expansion, many aeons of world-contraction and expansion: ... (as Sutta 4, §27)... Thus with their aspects and particulars he recollects his manifold past lives. This too, brahmin, is called a footprint of the Tathagata...but a noble disciple does not yet come to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened. . .' [183]

24. "When his concentrated mind is thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, he sees beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate. He understands how beings pass on according to their actions thus:... (as Sutta 4, §29)... Thus with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, he sees beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, and he understands how beings pass on according to their actions. This too, brahmin, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata ... but a noble disciple does not yet come to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened...'

25. "When his concentrated mind is thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. He understands as it actually is: 'This is suffering'; ...'This is the origin of suffering'; ...'This is the cessation of suffering'; ...'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering'; ...'These are the taints'; ...'This is the origin of the taints'; ...'This is the cessation of the taints'; ...'This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints.'

"This too, brahmin, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata, something scraped by the Tathāgata, something marked by the Tathāgata, but a noble disciple still has not yet come to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened, the Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One, the Sangha is practising the good way.' Rather, he is in the process of coming to this conclusion.³²⁵

26. "When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, [184] from the taint of being, and from the taint of

ignorance. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It is liberated.' He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.'

"This too, brahmin, is called a footprint of the Tathāgata, something scraped by the Tathāgata, something marked by the Tathāgata. It is at this point that a noble disciple has come to the conclusion: 'The Blessed One is fully enlightened, the Dhamma is well proclaimed by the Blessed One, the Sangha is practicing the good way.'³²⁶ And it is at this point, brahmin, that the simile of the elephant's footprint has been completed in detail."

27. When this was said, the brahmin Jāṇussoṇi said to the Blessed One: "Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent, Master Gotama! Master Gotama has made the Dhamma clear in many ways, as though he were turning upright what had been over-thrown, revealing what was hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, or holding up a lamp in the dark for those with eyesight to see forms. I go to Master Gotama for refuge and to the Dhamma and to the Sangha of bhikkhus. From today let Master Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge for life."

NOTES

³¹⁹ According to the chronicles of Sri Lanka, this was the first sutta preached by Mahinda Thera following his arrival in Sri Lanka.

³²⁰ Vacchāyana is Pilotika's clan name.

³²¹ Ñm had translated *ekabhaddika* as "eating only in one part of the day," following the commentary. According to the Vinaya the proper time for bhikkhus to eat is between dawn and noon. From noon until the next dawn only liquids are allowed.

³²² This formula is analysed at Vsm I, 53-59. Briefly, the signs (*nimitta*) are the most distinctive qualities of the object which, when grasped at unmindfully, can kindle defiled thoughts; the features (*anubyañjana*) are the details that may subsequently catch the attention when the first perceptual contact has not been followed up by restraint. "States of covetousness and grief" signifies the alternative reactions of desire and aversion, attraction and repulsion, towards sense objects.

³²³ Covetousness (*abhiññā*) here is synonymous with sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*), the first of the five hindrances.

³²⁴ MA: He does not come to this conclusion about the Triple Gem because the *jhānas* and the (mundane) direct knowledges are held in common with those outside the Buddha's Dispensation.

³²⁵ This, according to MA, shows the moment of the path, and since at this point the noble disciple has still not completed his task, he has not yet come to a conclusion (*na tveva nīṭṭhaṃ gato hoti*) about the Triple Gem; rather, he is in the process of coming to a conclusion (*nīṭṭhaṃ gacchati*). The sutta employs a pun on the meaning of the expression "coming to a conclusion" that is as viable in English as in Pali.

³²⁶ This shows the occasion when the disciple has attained the fruit of arahantship, and having completed all his tasks in every way, has come to the conclusion about the Triple Gem.