

# THE MAHĀVASTU

VOLUME I

*Translated from the Buddhist Sanskrit*

*By*

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## ABBREVIATIONS IN FOOTNOTES\*

- A. = Anguttara Nikāya  
Avś. = Avadāna-śataka  
Bu. (Budv.) = Buddhavaṃsa  
Cpd. = Compendium of Philosophy  
D. = Dīgha-Nikāya  
Dial. = Dialogues of the Buddha  
Divy. = Divyāvadāna  
Dh. = Dhammapada  
DhA. = Commentary on Dh.  
Dhs. trsl. = Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics  
D.P.N. = Dictionary of Pali Proper Names (G. P. Malalasekera)  
Grad. Sayings = Gradual Sayings  
J. = Jātaka  
J.P.T.S. = Journal of Pali Text Society  
Khp. = Khuddakapāṭha  
KhpA. = Commentary on Khp.  
KS. = Kindred Sayings  
Kvu. = Kathāvatthu  
Lal. Vist. = Lalita Vistara  
M. = Majjhima-Nikāya  
Mhvu. = Mahāvastu  
Miln. = Milindapañha  
Nd. = Niddesa  
Pali Dict. = Pali-English Dictionary (T. W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede)  
Pv. = Petavatthu  
PvA. = Commentary on Pv.  
S. = Saṃyutta-Nikāya  
Sn. = Suttanipāṭa  
S.B.E. = Sacred Books of the East  
ThigA. = Commentary on Therīgāthā  
V. = Vinaya  
VA. = Commentary on V.

\* For particulars of the editions of these works see the preliminary pages of the *Pali-English Dictionary*, by T. W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede.

May I set free from the round of rebirths those who are in the hells of Sanjīva, Kālasūtra, Sanghāta, Raurava and Avīci, or are scattered in the six realms of existence.<sup>1</sup> May I set free from the round of rebirths those who have fully or partially expiated<sup>2</sup> their sins in hell, who are tormented in the states of desolation, who are subject to death, whose bliss is little and misery great. May I live for the welfare of the world, and teach dharma to devas and men. Thus may I convert men as this Light of the world now does”.

*When that auspicious kalpa comes, you will be a Buddha, a guide of the world, in Rīṣivadana, a Śākya of the city named Kapila. Then will your vow be realised.*

After living a flawless, faultless, unspotted, unblemished, perfect holy life Jyotipāla died and was reborn in the deva world called Tuṣita as a deva named Śvetaketu, who was of great power and might. He excelled the other devas in the ten heavenly attributes, namely, heavenly length of life, heavenly complexion, heavenly bliss, heavenly majesty, heavenly fame, heavenly form, heavenly voice, and the heavenly senses of smell, taste, and touch. [And the other devas asked him for orders in all cases where an order was necessary.<sup>3</sup>]

This deva named Śvetaketu was learned, accomplished, confident, skilled, and intelligent, and he pursued the religious life under eighty-four thousand Buddhas, not to speak of ninety-six koṭis of Pratyekabuddhas and illustrious disciples.

(338) *Forty thousand Buddhas, guides of the world, passed away, what time the Conqueror lived the holy life in his quest to end existence.*

*Fifty thousand Buddhas, guides of the world, passed away, and under them the Conqueror fulfilled his time in his quest to end existence.*

<sup>1</sup> *Gatis*, see p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Pakvipakva*, see p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Senart is undoubtedly right in enclosing this passage in brackets, as it is obviously a gloss meant to explain *praṣṭavya* (*praṣṭavyehi*), which, however, the glossator mistook for the future participle passive of *prach*, “to ask,” whereas it is really a Buddhist Sanskrit form for *sparsa*, and corresponding to Pali *phoṭṭhabba*, “touch.” The form *praṣṭavya* occurs also above p. 31 (text).

*Ninety-six koṭis of independent Pratyekabuddhas passed away, and under them the Conqueror fulfilled his time in his quest to end existence.*

*Countless koṭis of Arhans of great learning passed away, and under them the Conqueror fulfilled his time in his quest to end existence.*

The association of the Master, the Daśabala, with these in his former lives has thus been related. A few Buddhas have been mentioned, many more are unmentioned of those under whom the Conqueror fulfilled his time in his quest to make existence cease.

Here ends the proclamation made concerning Jyotipāla in the *Mahāvastu-Avadāna*.

#### GENESIS OF THE WORLD

Here begins the Rājavaṃśa.<sup>1</sup>

Monks, there comes a time, there comes an occasion when this universe after a long stretch of time begins to dissolve.<sup>2</sup> And while it is in the course of dissolution beings are for the most part reborn in the world of the Ābhāsvara<sup>3</sup> devas.

There comes a time, monks, there comes an occasion, when this universe after a long stretch of time begins to re-evolve<sup>4</sup> once more, and while it is re-evolving certain beings, in order to achieve the extinction of existence and karma, leave Ābhāsvara and are born in this world. These beings are self-luminous, move through space, are made of mind, feed on joy, abide in a state of bliss, and go wherever they wish. That, monks, is the appropriate condition of these beings who are self-luminous, move through space, are made of mind, feed on joy, (339) abide in a state of bliss, and go wherever they wish. The moon and sun were not yet known in the world. Hence the forms of the stars were not known, nor the paths of the constellations, nor day and night, nor months

<sup>1</sup> I.e. The lineage or history of kings. For a parallel account of this Buddhist “Genesis” see D. 3. 84 ff. Cf. D. 1. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Samvartati*. See note p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> See note p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> *Vivartati*. See p. 43.

and fortnights, nor seasons and years. That, monks, is the appropriate condition of those beings who are self-luminous, move through space, are made of mind, feed on joy, abide in a state of bliss, and go wherever they wish.

Then this great earth came into being like a lake of water, goodly in colour and taste. It was sweet even as the pure<sup>1</sup> honey of the bee. In appearance it was like an expanse of milk or butter.

Then, monks, some being who was wanton and of greedy disposition tasted this essence of earth<sup>2</sup> with his finger. It pleased him by its colour, smell and taste. Now other beings, when they saw what he had done, began to follow his example, and they too tasted this essence of earth with their fingers. They also were pleased, *and so on to* "taste."

On another occasion, monks, that being ate a whole mouthful of this essence of earth as ordinary food.<sup>3</sup> Other beings, also, when they saw him, began to follow his example, and ate whole mouthfuls of this essence of earth as ordinary food. Now, monks, from the time that these beings began to eat whole mouthfuls of this essence of earth as food, their bodies became heavy, rough and hard, and they lost the qualities of being self-luminous, of moving through space, of being made of mind, of feeding on joy, of being in a state of bliss and of going wherever they wished.<sup>(340)</sup> When these qualities<sup>4</sup> disappeared the moon and sun became known, and consequently the forms of the stars, the paths of the constellations, night and day, months and fortnights, and these seasons and years.

These beings, monks, lived on a very long time feeding on this essence of earth, it being the source of their appearance, nourishment and sustenance. Those who took much of it for food became ugly; those who ate little became comely. And those who were comely scoffed at the ugly saying, "We

<sup>1</sup> *Aneḍaka*, see note p. 211.

<sup>2</sup> *Pyithivirasa*. The parallel Pali version (*D.* 3. 85) has *rasapaṭhavi* which is translated (*Dial.* 3. 82) as "savoury earth." In *S.* i. 134 *paṭhaviṛasa* is used of the earth's surface or humus which receives and nourishes the fallen seed. The *Pali Dictionary* rendering of "essence of earth" suits the *Mahāvastu* context very well, as it expresses the inchoate state of the earth at the time.

<sup>3</sup> *Kāraṁamāhāram*. For this sense of *kāraṁa* Senart compares *sannidhi-kāram* (p. 345), "en provision," "par provision."

<sup>4</sup> The text repeats their enumeration.

are comely; they are ugly." But while they thus lived on, proud of their beauty, vain and conceited, this essence of earth vanished.

Then there appeared on the surface of the earth an excrescence,<sup>1</sup> like honey<sup>2</sup> in appearance. This was goodly of colour and smell, and it was sweet like the pure honey of the bee.

And, monks, when the essence of earth had vanished those beings exclaimed, "Ah! What flavour it had! Ah! What flavour it had!" Even as men now do, when they are satisfied after eating good food, and exclaim "Ah! What flavour it had! Ah! What flavour it had!" Thus does that ancient primeval<sup>3</sup> expression become current once more, although men do not understand the significance of it.

And so, monks,<sup>(341)</sup> those beings lived on a very long time feeding on this excrescence on the surface of the earth, it being the source of their appearance, nourishment and sustenance. Those who ate much of it became ugly; those who ate little, comely. And those who were comely scoffed at those who were ugly, saying, "We are comely, they are ugly."

While they thus lived on, proud of their beauty, vain and conceited, the excrescence on the surface of the earth vanished, and in its place a creeping-plant appeared, like the bamboo in appearance. It was goodly of colour, smell and taste. It was sweet as the pure honey of the bee.

When the excrescence on the surface of the earth had disappeared those beings groaned, "Alas! Oh! Alas! Oh!" Just as now, when men are afflicted by any calamity, they groan, "Alas! Oh! Alas! Oh!" In this way does that ancient primeval expression become current once more, although men do not understand the significance of it. Thus, then, did those beings, when the excrescence on the surface of the earth had disappeared, groan, "Alas! Oh! Alas! Oh!"

Now, monks, when the excrescence on the surface of the earth had disappeared, those beings went on living for a very

<sup>1</sup> *Parpaṭaka*, a reading which Senart, without being aware of the Pali *pappapaṭaka* (*D.* 3. 87), established for the *paryapaṭaka* of the MSS., basing his conjecture on Sanskrit *parpaṭa*, which the lexicographers give as meaning not only "a medicinal plant" but also "fragrant substance" and "perfumed earth."

<sup>2</sup> *Chātraka* = *chātra*, "eine Art Honig" (Böhtlingk and Roth).

<sup>3</sup> Making the obvious emendation of *agninyam* into *agrajñam* Pali *aggajñā*, "recognised as primitive," "primeval." (*Pali Dictionary*).

long time on the creeping-plant, which became the source of their appearance, nourishment and sustenance. Those who ate much of it became ugly; those who ate little, comely. And those who were comely scoffed at those who were ugly, saying, "We are comely, they are ugly." While they thus became proud of their beauty, vain and conceited, the creeping-plant vanished.

In its place there appeared rice(342) which was without powder or husk, being just fragrant grain. If it was cropped at evening, by the morning it had sprouted, ripened and fully grown, without any signs of its having been cut. If it was cropped in the morning, by the evening it had sprouted, ripened and fully grown, without any signs of its having been cut.

Now, monks, at the disappearance of the creeping-plant, those beings groaned, "Alas! Oh! Alas! Oh!" Even as men now do when they are afflicted by any calamity. In this way does an ancient primeval expression become current once more, although men do not understand the significance of it.

Then, monks, after the disappearance of the creeping-plant, those beings lived on a very long time feeding on the rice which was without powder or husk, but was just fragrant grain. And from the time that they did so,<sup>1</sup> the distinguishing characteristics of female and male appeared among them. They looked on one another with inordinate passion in their hearts. Looking on one another with passion in their hearts they became inflamed with passion for one another. Becoming inflamed with passion they violated one another.

And, monks, those who witnessed them violating one another, threw sticks at them, and clods of earth and mud. For, my friends, wrong and sin appear in the world when one being violates another. Just as now, monks, when the young bride is being carried away, people throw sticks and clods. In this way does an ancient primeval custom<sup>2</sup> become current once more, although men do not understand the significance of it. Then, indeed, this was considered immoral, irreligious and irregular, but now it is considered moral, religious, and regular.

<sup>1</sup> Text repeats the preceding sentence.

<sup>2</sup> *Akṣara*, translated above in its usual sense of "expression." But "custom" is not wholly unconnected with its primary sense of "non-transitory," "durable," "lasting."

Now, monks, those beings,(343) because of their immorality, got into trouble, and they were shunned by their fellows. So they left their homes for one day, for two days, for three, four or five, for a fortnight or for a month, in order to conceal their immorality, and during this time had their housework done by others.

Then, monks, this thought occurred to some being who had gone to gather rice, "Why should I tire myself, as I have hitherto been doing, by gathering rice at evening for supper, and again in the morning for breakfast? What if I were to gather once daily enough rice for both the evening and morning meals?" So, monks, this being gathered once a day enough rice for evening and morning. Then some other being said to him, "Come, good being, let us go and gather rice." When this had been said, that other being replied, "You go, good being. As for me, I have fetched at one and the same time enough rice for both evening and morning."

Then, monks, it occurred to that other being also, "This is surely a splendid practice. What if I in my turn were to gather at one and the same time enough rice for two or three days?" And he went and gathered enough rice at one time for two or three days.

Then yet another being said to him, "Come, good being, let us go and gather rice." When this had been said, that being replied, "Do you go, good being, for I have gathered at one time enough rice for two or three days."

Then, monks, it occurred to that being also, "Surely this is a splendid practice. What if I in my turn were to gather at one time enough rice for four or five days?" And he went and gathered enough rice for four or five days at one time.

From the time, monks, that these beings began to live by hoarding the rice that was without powder or husk, but was just fragrant grain, powder and husk began to appear on it. And when it was cropped at evening it did no longer sprout, ripen and fully grow by the morning, while the signs of its having been cut were clearly seen.

(344) Then, monks, those beings hurriedly gathered together and took counsel. "Friends," said they, "in the past we were self-luminous, moved through space, were made of mind, fed on joy, lived in bliss, and went wherever we wished. And

while we were thus self-luminous, moved through space, were made of mind, fed on joy, lived in bliss, and went wherever we wished, the moon and sun were not known in the world, nor the forms of the stars, nor the paths of the constellations, nor day and night, months and fortnights, nor seasons and years.

"Then this great earth appeared, like a lake of water. In appearance it was like an expanse of butter or milk, and had a goodly colour, smell and taste. It was as sweet as the pure honey of the bee. But, friends, some being who was wanton and of greedy disposition tasted this essence of earth with his finger, and it delighted him with its colour, smell and taste. Then that being on another occasion ate a whole mouthful of this essence of earth as ordinary food. And we, seeing him, followed his example and ate whole mouthfuls of this essence of earth as ordinary food.

"Now, friends, from the time that we began to eat whole mouthfuls of this essence of earth as ordinary food, our bodies acquired weight, roughness and hardness, while the attributes we had before of being self-luminous, of moving through space, of being made of mind, of feeding on joy, of living in a state of bliss, and of going wherever we wished, were lost. And with the loss of these attributes,<sup>1</sup> moon and sun became known in the world(345), and the forms of the stars, the paths of the constellations, days and nights, months and fortnights, and seasons and years.

"Friends, we lived on for a very long time feeding on that essence of earth, which was the source of our appearance, our nourishment and our sustenance. But when wrong and sinful states came to be known among men,<sup>2</sup> when wrong and sinful states came to be known among us, then this essence of earth disappeared. And in its place there appeared an excrescence on the surface of the earth, like honey in appearance and of goodly colour and smell. It was as sweet as the pure honey of the bee.

"For a very long time, friends, we lived on that excrescence, which was the source of our appearance, nourishment and

<sup>1</sup> Text repeats in full.

<sup>2</sup> Literally "among them," *sānam*. Not necessarily a use of the 3rd person for the 1st. Apparently the whole phrase has been inadvertently repeated from its first occurrence when it had an objective application, in which case its further repetition here with *mo*, "among us," is an explanatory interpolation. *Mo* is frequently 1st pers. plural in the *Mahāvastu*.

sustenance. But when wrong and sinful states came to be known among men, then the excrescence on the earth disappeared. And in its place there appeared a creeping-plant, like the bamboo in appearance, goodly of colour, smell and taste. It was as sweet as the pure honey of the bee.

"And for a very long time, friends, we lived on that creeping-plant, which was the source of our appearance, nourishment and sustenance. But when wrong and sinful states came to be known among men, when wrong and sinful states came to be known among us, then did this creeping-plant disappear. In its place rice appeared, which was without powder or husk, being just fragrant grain. If this was cropped at evening, by the morning it had sprouted, ripened and fully grown, without any signs of its having been cut.

"For a very long time, friends, we lived on this rice, which was without powder or husk, but was just fragrant grain, and it was the source of our appearance, nourishment(346) and sustenance. But when wrong and sinful states came to be known among men, powder and husk began to envelop the rice. And now when cropped at evening it did not sprout, ripen and fully grow by the morning, while the signs of its having been cut were clearly seen. Nor when cropped in the morning did it sprout, ripen and fully grow by the evening, while the signs of its having been cut were clearly seen.

"What if we were now to divide the rice-fields and set boundaries to them? Let us allot this field to you, and this to ourselves." And so, monks, they set boundaries to the rice-fields, saying, "This field is yours, this is ours."

Then, monks, this thought occurred to some being who had gone to gather rice: "What will become of me? How shall I get a living, if my plot of rice fails? What if now I were to steal and take another's?"<sup>1</sup> And so, monks, while he was watching over his own plot of rice, he stole and took another's.

<sup>1</sup> *Anyātaka*. Etymologically, this can only be a Buddhist Sanskrit equivalent of Pali *aññātaka*, "he who is not a kinsman" (*DhA* 1. 222), which in classical Sanskrit would be *ajñātaka*, from *a-jñāti*. But the word is here obviously used in the sense of "another," *anya*, and the sense may have influenced the orthography. At the same time, if the word were written *ajñātaka* it would be possible to render "(steal and take the rice of one) who is not a kinsman," which at a later stage of tribal development would be an apposite way of expressing "another," and might imply justification of a theft from him as being an "alien" without rights.

Another being saw him steal and take another's rice, and when he had seen him, he went to him and said, "Indeed, good being, you have stolen and taken another's rice." And he replied, "Yes, good being, but it will not happen again."

But, monks, the thought occurred to him a second time when he had gone to gather rice: "What will become of me? How shall I get a living, if my plot of rice fails? What if now I were to steal and take another's rice?" And a second time did that being, while watching over his own plot, steal and take another's rice.

That other being saw him thus a second time steal and take another's rice, and when he had seen him, he went to him and said, "Good being, it is the second time(347) that you have stolen and taken another's rice." And a second time, monks, did he reply, "Yes, but it will not happen again."

But a third time, monks, did the thought occur to that being when he had gone to gather rice: "What will become of me? How shall I get a living if my plot of rice fails? What if now I were to steal and take another's rice?" And so a third time did that being while watching over his own plot steal and take another's rice.

The other being saw him thus a third time steal and take another's rice, and when he had seen him he went to him and beat him with a stick, saying, "Good being, this is the third time you have stolen and taken another's rice." Then, monks, he stretched out his arms, wailed, and cried, "Sir, wrong and injustice have made their appearance in the world, now that violence is known." But, monks, the other being, throwing his stick on the ground, stretched out his arms, wailed and cried out, "Sir, it is when theft and falsehood make their appearance in the world that wrong and injustice are known."

And so, monks, the three wrong and sinful states of theft, falsehood, and violence made their first appearance in the world.

Then, monks, those beings hurriedly gathered together and took counsel. "Friends," said they, "what if we were to select him who is most kind-hearted among us, and most authoritative, to reprove whoever among us deserves reproof, and to approve whoever deserves approval? And we will

assign<sup>1</sup> to him a portion of the rice in the fields of each of us."

And so, monks, those beings selected him(348) who was the most kind-hearted and authoritative among them, and said to him, "Let your majesty reprove whosoever among us deserves reproof, and approve whosoever deserves approval. We elect you to sovereignty over us all, and we give you a sixth part of the rice in the fields of each of us."

So originated the idea that Mahā-Sammata<sup>2</sup> means "elected by the great body of the people." So originated the idea that *rājan* means he who is worthy<sup>3</sup> of the rice-portions from the rice-fields. So originated the idea that an anointed [noble]<sup>4</sup> means he who is a perfect guardian and protector. So originated the idea that he who achieves security for his country<sup>5</sup> is as a parent to towns and provinces. That is how a king can say, "I am king, an anointed noble, and one who has achieved security for my people."

The son of King Sammata was Kalyāṇa, whose son was Rava. Rava's son was Upoṣadha, and Upoṣadha's son was King Māndhātara.<sup>6</sup>

King Māndhātara had many thousand sons, grandsons, and grandsons' grandsons, all of them kings. The last of these was Ikṣvāku,<sup>7</sup> styled Sujāta, king in the great city of Śāketa.

<sup>1</sup> The text has *deṣaye cāyam*, "and he shall designate," which is not satisfactory in view of what is explicitly said later that the rice portions were assigned by the owners themselves. Senart, therefore, proposes *deṣey-yema vāyam* or *ḍādyāma vāyam*, and this has been followed in the translation.

<sup>2</sup> The first king of the present age, and the progenitor of the Śākyan clan, his name being here explained from his having been thus "elected" or "selected" (*sammata*).

<sup>3</sup> I.e., *arahati*, "he deserves or merits" is here taken to be etymologically connected with *rājan*, "king."

<sup>4</sup> There is a lacuna in the text, but Senart makes the obvious conjecture and supplies *kṣatriyati*, for this seems just the word the fanciful etymology requires to connect with *raṁṣati*, "to protect."

<sup>5</sup> Senart prints the form *janapadasthāmaṁvīryaprapta*, which, however, as he says in his note, is inexplicable in this context. He cites the form *janapadasthāmaṁvīryaprapta* given in some other MSS, and interprets this as "qui exerce sur le pays l'autorité de l'âge." That the latter form is the correct one is proved by the Pali *janapadasthāmaṁvīrya*, literally "security of a country," i.e. an appeased country as one of the blessings of the reign of a Cakkavattin (see *Pali Dictionary* for references). It seems better to give *sthāmaṁvīrya* here its primary sense of "fixity," "security," etc. (*√ sthā*), rather than the derivative one of "age." (Cf. Pali *thera* and *thāvāra*.)

<sup>6</sup> The genealogy in most Pali texts is, Mahāsammatā, Roja, Vararoja, Kalyāṇa, Varakalyāṇa, Upoṣadha and Māndhātā. (D.P.N.)

<sup>7</sup> Pali *Okkāka*, "although it is unlikely that the latter is identical with the Ikṣvāku of the Purāṇas, the immediate son of Manu." (D.P.N.) The story here given, with some differences in nomenclature, follows pretty closely that in the Pali texts.