

THOSE BORN INTO THIS WORLD MUST ACQUIRE MUCH MERIT

4 (8) The Story of Visākhā (Verse 53)

While residing at the Pubbārāma Monastery in Sāvatti, the Buddha spoke this verse, with reference to Visākhā, the famous donor of the Pubbārāma Monastery. Visākhā was the daughter of a rich man of Bhaddiya, named Dhananjaya, and his wife Sumanādēvi, and the granddaughter of Meṇḍaka, one of the five extremely wealthy men of King Bimbisāra's dominions. When Visākhā was seven years old, the Buddha came to Bhaddiya. On that occasion, the rich man Meṇḍaka took Visākhā and her five hundred companions with him to pay homage to the Buddha. After hearing the discourse given by the Buddha, Visākhā, her grandfather and all her five hundred companions attained sōtāpatti fruition. When Visākhā came of age, she married Puṇṇavaḍḍhana, son of Migāra, a fairly rich man from Sāvatti. One day, while Migāra was having his meal, a monk stopped for alms at his house; but Migāra completely ignored the monk. Visākhā, seeing this, said to the monk, "I am sorry, your reverence, my father-in-law only eats left-overs." On hearing this, Migāra flew into a rage and told her to leave his house. But Visākhā said she was not going away, and that she would send for the eight elderly rich men who were sent by her father to accompany her and to advise her. It was for them to decide whether she was guilty or not. When the elders came, Migāra told them the story. The elders decided that Visākhā was not guilty. Visākhā then said that she was one who had absolute and unshakable faith in the Teaching of the Buddha and so could not stay where the monks were not welcome; and also, that if she was not given permission to invite the monks to the house to offer alms-food and make other offerings, she would leave the house. So permission was granted her to invite the Buddha and his monks to the house.

The next day, the Buddha and his disciples were invited to the house of Visākhā. When alms-food was about to be offered, she sent word to her father-in-law to join her in offering food; but he did not come. When the meal was over, again, she sent a message, this time requesting her father-in-law to join her in hearing the discourse that would soon be given by the Buddha. Her father-in-law felt that he should not refuse for a second time. But his ascetic teachers, the Nigaṇṭhas, would not let him go; however, they conceded that he could listen from behind a curtain. After hearing the Buddha's discourse Migāra attained sōtāpatti fruition. He felt very thankful to the Buddha and also to his daughter-in-law. Being so thankful, he declared that henceforth Visākhā would be like a mother to him, and Visākhā came to be known as Migāramātā. Visākhā gave birth to ten sons

and ten daughters, and ten sons and ten daughters each were born to everyone of her children and grandchildren. Visākhā possessed an immensely valuable gem-encrusted ornament given by her father as a wedding present. One day, Visākhā went to the Jētavana Monastery with her entourage. On arrival at the Monastery, she found that her bejewelled ornament too heavy. So, she took it off, wrapped it up in her shawl, and gave it to the maid to hold. The maid absent-mindedly left it at the Monastery. It was the custom for the Venerable Ānanda to look after the things left by any one of the lay disciples. Visākhā sent the maid back to the Monastery saying, "Go and look for the bejewelled ornament, but if the Venerable Ānanda had already found it and kept it in a place do not bring it back; I donate the bejewelled ornament to the Venerable Ānanda." But the Venerable Ānanda did not accept her donation. So Visākhā decided to sell it and donate the sale proceeds. But there was no one who could afford to buy that ornament. So Visākhā bought it back for nine billion and one lakh. With this money, she built a monastery on the eastern side of the city; this monastery came to be known as Pubbārāma.

Explanatory Translation (Verse 53)

*yathā api puppharāsimhā bahū mālāguṇṇē kayirā,
ēvaṃ jātēna maccēna bahum kusalam kattabam*

yathā api: just as; *puppharāsimhā:* out of many flowers; *bahū:* many; *mālāguṇṇē:* garlands; *kayirā:* creates; *ēvaṃ:* similarly; *jātēna maccēna:* by a man born into this world; *bahum:* many; *kusalam:* virtuous deeds; *kattabam:* should be performed

The deft maker of garlands takes a variety of flowers. Out of these he creates garlands of different strands and variegated arrangements. In the same way, those who are born into this world should, out of their lives, create good, wholesome, meritorious actions of a vast variety.

Commentary

In this Verse, the craftsmanship of the garland-maker is compared to those who lead a virtuous life. One's life activity is compared to a mass of flowers. It is the duty of every person to arrange these flowers into garlands of wholesome actions. This verse reminds us that life is not a bed of roses to sleep on, but a flower bed that grows beautiful flowers. The purpose of life is to make beautiful garlands out of these flowers that beautify the world. The best use of our temporal, mortal life is to do good deeds that bring happiness to everyone. This verse makes it clear that Buddhists are not pessimists who constantly lament about the thorns in the roses. They make the best use of what is good in the world, to make it even better.