

## **Dīgha Nikāya - The Long Discourses**

About Janavasabha Brahmā Addresses the Gods (Janavasabha Sutta)

### **1. THUS HAVE I HEARD.**

Once the Lord was staying at Nādikā at the Brick House [497]. And at that time the Lord was explaining the rebirths of various devotees up and down the country who had died and passed away: Kāsis and Kosalans, Vajjians and Mallas, Cetis and Vamsas, Kurus and Pañcālas, Macchas and Sūrasenas, saying: ‘This one was reborn there, and that one there.’<sup>498</sup> More than fifty Nādikan devotees, having abandoned the five lower fetters, were reborn spontaneously and would attain Nibbāna without returning to this world; over ninety of them, having abandoned three fetters and weakened greed, hatred and delusion, were Once-Returners, who would return to this world once more and then make an end of suffering; and more than five hundred, having abandoned three fetters, were Stream-Winners, incapable of falling into states of woe, certain of Nibbāna. [201]

2. This news reached the ears of the devotees in Nādikā, and they were pleased, delighted and filled with joy to hear the Lord’s replies.

3. And the Venerable Ananda heard of the Lord’s report<sup>499</sup> and the Nādikans’ delight.

4. And he thought: [202] ‘There were also Magadhan disciples of long standing who have died and passed away. One would think Anga and Magadha contained no Magadhan disciples who had died. Yet they too were devoted to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, and they observed the discipline perfectly. The Lord has not stated their destiny. It would be good to have a declaration about this: it would make the multitude have faith and so attain a good rebirth.

‘Now King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha was a righteous and lawful king, a friend of Brahmins, householders, town and country-dwellers, so that his fame is spread abroad: “That righteous king of ours is dear<sup>500</sup> who gave us so much happiness. Life was easy for us who dwelt under his righteous

rule.”<sup>501</sup> And he was devoted to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, and observed the discipline perfectly. Thus people say: “King Bimbisāra, who praised the Lord to his dying day, is dead!” The Lord has not declared his destiny, and it would be good to have a declaration... Besides, it was in Magadha that the Lord gained his enlightenment. Since the Lord gained his enlightenment in Magadha, why does he not declare the destinies of those who have died there? For the Lord not to make such a declaration would cause unhappiness to the Magadhans. [203] Such being the case, why does not the Lord make such a declaration?’

5. And after thus reflecting in solitude on behalf of the Magadhan devotees, the Venerable Ananda rose at the crack of dawn, went to the Lord and saluted him. Then, sitting down to one side, he said: ‘Lord, I have heard what has been declared concerning the inhabitants of Nādikā.’ (as verse 1-2)

6. ‘These were all devoted to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, and they observed the discipline perfectly. The Lord has not stated their destiny... (as verse 4). [204] Why does not the Lord make such a declaration?’ Then, having thus spoken to the Lord on behalf of the Magadhan devotees, he rose from his seat, saluted the Lord, passed him by to the right, and departed.

7. As soon as Ananda had gone, the Lord took his robe and bowl and went into Nādikā for alms. Later, on his return, after his meal, he went to the Brick House and, having washed his feet, he went in and, having thought over, considered and given his whole mind to the question of the Magadhan devotees, he sat down on the prepared seat, saying: ‘I shall know their destiny and future lot, whatever it is.’<sup>502</sup> And then he perceived the destiny and fate of [205] each one of them. And in the evening, emerging from meditative seclusion, the Lord came out of the Brick House and sat down on the prepared seat in the shade of his lodging.

8. Then the Venerable Ananda came to the Lord, saluted him, sat down to one side and said: ‘Lord, the Lord’s countenance looks bright and shining, showing that the Lord’s mind is at ease. Has the Lord been satisfied with today’s lodging?’

9. ‘Ananda, after you spoke to me about the devotees of Magadha, I took my robe and bowl and went into Nādikā for alms. Later on ... I went to the Brick House and considered the question of the Magadhan devotees... And I perceived the destiny and fate of each one of them. Then the voice of a yakkha 503 who had passed over cried out: “I am Janavasabha, Lord! I am Janavasabha, Well-Farer!” Well, Ananda, do you know anyone who formerly bore the name of Janavasabha?’ ‘I must admit, Lord, that I have never heard such a name; and yet, on hearing the name “Janavasabha”<sup>504</sup> my hairs stood on end, and I thought: “He [206] whose name is Janavasabha will not be such a low-ranking yakkha!”’

10. ‘Ananda, immediately after I heard this voice, the yakkha appeared before me as a noble vision, and uttered a second cry: “I am Bimbisara, Lord! I am Bimbisāra, Well-Farer! I have now for the seventh time been reborn into the entourage of the Lord Vessavana.<sup>505</sup> Thus having passed away as a king of humans, I have now become among the devas a king of non-human beings.

Seven states here and seven there, fourteen births,

That’s the tally of lives I can recall.

For a long time, Lord, I have known myself to be exempt from states of woe, <sup>506</sup> and now the desire arises in me to become a Once-Returner.” I said: “It is amazing, it is astonishing that the reverend yakkha Janavasabha should say this. On what grounds can he know of such an august specific attainment?”

11. ““Not otherwise, Lord, not otherwise, Well-Farer, than through your teaching! From the time when I became fully committed and gained complete faith, from then on, Lord, for a long time [207] I have known myself to be exempt from states of woe, and the desire has arisen in me to become a Once-Returner. And here, Lord, having been sent by King Vessavana on some business to King Virūlhaka,<sup>507</sup> I saw the Lord entering the Brick House and sitting down and considering the

question of the Magadhan devotees ... And since I had only just heard King Vessavana announce to his assembly what those folk's fates were, it is no wonder that I thought: 'I will go and see the Lord and report this to him.' And these, Lord, are the two reasons<sup>508</sup> why I came to see the Lord." (Janavasabha continued:)

12. "“Lord, in earlier days, long ago, on the fast-day of the fifteenth at the beginning of the Rains,<sup>509</sup> in the full-moon night all the Thirty-Three Gods were seated in the Sudhamma Hall<sup>510</sup> - a great congregation of divine beings, and the Four Great Kings from the four quarters were there. There was the Great King Dhatarattha<sup>511</sup> from the east at the head of his followers, facing west; the Great King Virūlhaka from the south... facing north; the Great King Virupakkha from the west...facing east; and the Great King Vessavana from the north... facing south. [208]

“On such occasions that is the order in which they are seated, and after that came our seats. And those devas who, having lived the holy life under the Lord, had recently appeared in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, outshone the other devas in brightness and glory. And for that reason the Thirty-Three Gods were pleased, happy, filled with delight and joy, saying: 'The devas' hosts are growing, the asuras' hosts are declining!'<sup>512</sup>

13. "“Then, Lord, Sakka, ruler of the gods, seeing the satisfaction of the Thirty-Three, uttered these verses of rejoicing:

‘The gods of Thirty-Three rejoice, their leader too,

Praising the Tathagata, and Dhamma's truth,

Seeing new-come devas, fair and glorious

Who've lived the holy life, now well reborn.

Outshining all the rest in fame and splendour,

The mighty Sage's pupils singled out.

Seeing this, the Thirty-Three rejoice, their leader too,

Praising the Tathagata, and Dhamma's truth.' [209]

At this the Thirty-Three Gods rejoiced still more, saying: 'The devas' hosts are growing, the asuras' hosts are declining!'

14. "“And then they consulted and deliberated together about the matter concerning which they had assembled in the Sudhammā Hall, and the Four Great Kings were advised and admonished on this matter as they stood by their seats unmoving. 513

The Kings, instructed, marked the words they spoke,

Standing calm, serene, beside their seats.

15. "“And then, Lord, a glorious radiance shone forth from the north, and a splendour was seen greater than the sheen of the devas. And Sakka said to the Thirty-Three Gods: 'Gentlemen, when such signs are seen, such light is seen and such radiance shines forth, Brahmā will appear.<sup>514</sup> The appearance of such radiance is the first sign of Brahmā's approaching manifestation.'

When they see these signs, Brahmā will soon appear:

This is Brahmā sign, radiance vast and great.

16. "“Then the Thirty-Three Gods sat down each in his proper place, saying: 'Let us find out what comes<sup>515</sup> of this radiance, and having found the truth of it, we will go towards it.' The Four Great Kings, sitting down in their places, said [210] the same. Thus they were all agreed.

17. “‘Lord, whenever Brahmā Sanankumāra<sup>516</sup> appears to the Thirty-Three Gods, he appears having assumed a grosser form, because his natural appearance is not such as to be perceptible to their eyes.<sup>517</sup> When he appears to the Thirty-Three Gods, he outshines other devas in radiance and glory, just as a figure made of gold outshines the human figure. And, Lord, when Brahmā Sanankumāra appears to the Thirty-Three Gods, not one of them salutes him, or rises, or offers him a seat. They all sit silently with palms together,<sup>518</sup> cross-legged, <sup>519</sup> thinking he will sit down on the couch<sup>520</sup> of that god from whom he wants something. And the one on whose couch he sits down is as thrilled and delighted as a duly-anointed Khattiya king on assuming his royal office. [211]

18. “‘Then, Lord, Brahmā Sanankumāra, having assumed a grosser form, appeared to the Thirty-Three Gods in the shape of the youth Pañcasikha.<sup>521</sup> Rising up in the air, he appeared floating cross-legged, just as a strong man might sit down on a properly-spread couch or on the ground. And seeing the delight of the Thirty-Three Gods, he uttered these verses of rejoicing:

‘The gods of Thirty-Three rejoice, their leader too,

Praising the Tathāgata, and Dhamma’s truth,

Seeing new-come devas, fair and glorious

Who’ve lived the holy life, now well reborn.

Outshining all the rest in fame and splendour,

The mighty Sage’s pupils singled out.

Seeing this, the Thirty-Three rejoice, their leader too,

Praising the Tathāgata, and Dhamma’s truth.’

19. ““Now to the matter of Brahmā Sanankumāra’s speech, and as for the manner of his speech, his voice had eight qualities: it was distinct, intelligible, pleasant, attractive, compact, concise, deep and resonant. And when he spoke in that voice to the assembly, its sound did not carry outside. Whoever has such a voice as that is said to have the voice of Brahmā.

20. ““And Brahmā Sanankumāra, multiplying his shape by thirty-three, [212] sat down cross-legged on each individual couch of the Thirty-Three, and said: ‘What do my lords the Thirty-Three think? Since the Lord, out of compassion for the world and for the benefit and happiness of the many, has acted to the advantage of devas and mankind, those, whoever they may be, who have taken refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha and have observed the moral precepts<sup>522</sup> have, at death and the breaking-up of the body, arisen in the company of the Parinimmita-Vasavatti devas,<sup>523</sup> or the Nimmanaratti devas, or the Tusita devas, or the Yāma devas, or in the retinue of the Thirty-Three Gods, or of the Four Great Kings — or at the very least in the company of the gandhabbas .’<sup>524</sup>

21. ““This was the burden of Brahmā Sanankumāra’s speech. And every one of the gods he spoke to thought: ‘He is sitting on my couch, he is speaking to me alone.’

All the forms assumed with one voice speak,

And having spoken, all at once are silent.

And so the Thirty-Three, their leader too,

Each thinks: ‘He speaks to me alone.’

22. ““Then Brahma Sanankumara assumed a single form;<sup>525</sup> then he sat down on [213] the couch of Sakka and said: ‘What do my lords the Thirty-Three think? This Lord, the Arahant supreme Buddha has known and seen the four roads to power,<sup>526</sup> and how to develop, perfect and practise them. What four? Here a monk develops concentration of intention accompanied by effort of will, concentration of energy..., concentration of consciousness..., and concentration of investigation accompanied by effort of will. These are the four roads to power... And whatever ascetics or

Brahmins have in the past realised such powers in different ways, they have all developed and strongly practised these four ways, and the same applies to all who may in the future, or who do now realise such powers. Do my lords the Thirty-Three observe such powers in me?’ ‘Yes, Brahmā.’ ‘Well, I too have developed and strongly practised [214] these four ways.’

23. ““This was the burden of Brahma Sanankumāra’s speech. He went on: ‘What do my lords of the Thirty-Three think? There are three gateways to the bliss proclaimed by the Lord who knows and sees. What are they? In the first place someone dwells in association with sense-desires, with unwholesome conditions. At some time he hears the Ariyan Dhamma, he pays close attention and practises in conformity with it. By so doing he comes to live dissociated from such sense-desires and unwholesome conditions. As a result of this dissociation, pleasant feeling<sup>527</sup> arises, and what is more, gladness.<sup>528</sup> Just as pleasure might give birth to rejoicing, so from pleasant feeling he experiences gladness.

24. ““In the second place there is someone in whom the gross tendencies<sup>529</sup> of body, speech and thought are not allayed. At some time he hears the Ariyan Dhamma, ... and his gross tendencies of body, speech and [215] thought are allayed. As a result of this allaying, pleasant feeling arises, and what is more, gladness...

25. ““In the third place there is someone who really does not know what is right and what is wrong, what is blameworthy and what is not, what is to be practised and what is not, what is base and what is noble, and what is foul, fair or mixed in quality. At some time he hears the Ariyan Dhamma, he pays close attention and practises in conformity with it. As a result, he comes to know in reality what is right and wrong, what is blameworthy and what is not, what is to be practised and what is not, what is base and what is noble, and what is foul, fair or mixed in quality. In him who knows and sees thus, ignorance is dispelled and knowledge arises. With the waning of ignorance and the arising of knowledge, pleasant feeling arises, and what is more, gladness. Just as pleasure might give birth to rejoicing, so from pleasant feeling he experiences gladness. [216] These are the three gateways to the bliss proclaimed by the Lord who knows and sees.’



26. ““This was the burden of Brahmā Sanankumāra’s speech. He went on: ‘What do my lords of the Thirty-Three think? How well has the Lord Buddha who knows and sees pointed out the four foundations of mindfulness<sup>530</sup> for the attainment of that which is good! What are they? Here a monk abides contemplating the body as body, earnestly, clearly aware, mindful and having put away all hankering and fretting for the world. As he thus dwells contemplating his own body as body, he becomes perfectly concentrated and perfectly serene. Being thus calm and serene, he gains knowledge and vision externally of the bodies of others.<sup>531</sup> He abides contemplating his own feelings as feelings,... he abides contemplating his own mind as mind, ... he abides contemplating his own mind-objects as mind-objects, earnestly, clearly aware, mindful and having put away all hankering and fretting for the world. As he thus dwells contemplating his own mind-objects as mind-objects, he becomes perfectly concentrated and perfectly serene. Being thus calm and serene, he gains knowledge and vision externally of the mind-objects of others. These are the four foundations of mindfulness well pointed out by the Lord Buddha who knows and sees, for the attainment of that which is good.’

27. ““This was the burden of Brahmā Sanankumāra’s speech. He went on: ‘What do my lords of the Thirty-Three think? How well has the Lord Buddha who knows and sees pointed out the seven requisites of concentration, for the development of perfect concentration and the perfection of concentration! What are they? They are right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right [217] livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness. <sup>532</sup> That one-pointedness of mind that is produced by these seven factors is called the Ariyan right concentration with its bases and requisites. From right view arises right thought, from right thought arises right speech, from right speech arises right action, from right action arises right livelihood, from right livelihood arises right effort, from right effort arises right mindfulness, from right mindfulness arises right concentration, from right concentration arises right knowledge, <sup>533</sup> from right knowledge arises right liberation.<sup>534</sup> If anyone truthfully declaring: “Well-proclaimed by the Lord is the Dhamma, visible here and now, timeless, inviting inspection, leading onward, to be comprehended by the wise each one for himself”, were to say: “Open are the doors of the Deathless!” <sup>535</sup> he would be speaking in accordance with the highest truth. For indeed, my lords, the Dhamma is well-proclaimed by the Lord, visible here and now,

timeless, inviting inspection, leading onward, to be comprehended by the wise, each one for him or herself, and, too, the doors to the Deathless are open!

““Those who have unshakeable faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, and are endowed with the virtues pleasing to the Noble Ones, [218] those beings who have arisen here on account of their Dhamma-training, amounting to more than twenty-four hundred Magadhan followers who have passed over, have by the destruction of three fetters become Stream-Winners, incapable of falling into states of woe and certain of enlightenment, and indeed there are Once-Returners here too.

But of that other race indeed

Of greater merit still, my mind

Can make no reckoning at all,

For fear that I should speak untruth.’<sup>536</sup>

28. ““This was the burden of Brahma Sanankumāra’s speech. And in connection with this the Great King Vessavana reflected in his mind: ‘It is marvellous, it is wonderful, that such a glorious Teacher should arise, that there should be such a glorious proclamation of Dhamma, and that such glorious paths to the sublime should be made known!’ Then Brahmā Sanankumāra, reading King Vessavana’s mind, said to him: ‘What do you think, King Vessavana? There has been such a glorious Teacher in the past, and such a proclamation, and such paths made known, and there will be again in the future.’”

29. Such was the burden of what Brahmā Sanankumāra proclaimed to the Thirty-Three Gods. And the Great King Vessavana, [219] having heard and received it in person, related it to his followers. And the yakkha Janavasabha, having heard it himself, related it to the Lord. And the Lord, having heard it himself and also come to know it by his own super-knowledge, related it to the Venerable Ananda, who in turn related it to the monks and nuns, the male and female lay-followers.

And so the holy life waxed mighty and prospered and spread widely as it was proclaimed among mankind.

497 Cf. DN 16.2.5ff and n.373.

498 Cf. DN 16.2.7. RD considers, probably rightly, that the DN 16 passage is the older. There, no mention was made of Magadhan devotees, and one purpose of this Sutta is to remedy that omission.

499 A curious remark, considering that Ananda had been present at the Lord's 'report'.

500 Killed, of course, by his son Ajātasattu.

501 This rings true as a veiled criticism of Ajātasattu.

502 The Buddha did not, of course, claim the immediate kind (or indeed any kind) of omniscience, as other teachers did. But in view of his immediate response at DN 16.2.7, he seems to be making rather heavy weather of this.

503 Yakkhas are generally thought of as unpleasant creatures like demons or ogres. In fact they are curiously ambivalent (as Mrs Rhys Davids' term for them, 'fairy' suggests). The matter is largely explained by King Vessavana, who (as we know from this sutta too) is their ruler, at DN 32.2. But see also DN 23.23, and article Yakkha in DPPN.

504 Lit. 'Bull (i.e. hero) of the People'.

505 The ‘Great King’ of the North.

506 A Stream-Winner. The seven human births indicate the maximum number of births a Stream-Winner can take. Hence the ‘desire’ arising in him to go on to the next stage. But why should the Buddha be so surprised at his awareness of having gained such a ‘specific attainment’? His answer seems to be entirely in keeping with the ‘Mirror of Dhamma’ test mentioned by the Buddha at DN 16.2.8.

507 The ‘Great King’ of the South. It is curious that a king should be sent as a messenger in this way.

508 The two reasons, as RD points out, are (1) the fact that Vessavana had made a statement on this very subject, and (2) that he had been aware that the Buddha (whose mind he could read!) was pondering the same subject. This also conforms to the Buddha’s statement at various places (e.g. DN 14.1.15) that he knows certain things both by his own knowledge and because devas have told him.

509 Vassa: the annual three-monthly retreat during the rainy season.

510 ‘Hall of Good Counsel’ (RD).

511 For a fuller account of him and the other ‘Great Kings’ (who actually preside over the lowest of the heavens, only just above the human realm), see DN 32.

512 The asuras suffered a decline in India, compared with the Persian ahura. They are at war with the devas, and hence are sometimes termed by Western scholars ‘titans’. Since humans can be reborn

in either camp (see DN 24.1.7 for an example of one born among the asuras), it is natural that the devas should rejoice at the accession to their ranks through the Buddha's disciples.

513 They seem, as RD notes (to a later passage, DN 19.14) to have been the recorders of the proceedings at assemblies of the Thirty-Three Gods. They had to memorise what was decided. RD draws the inference that this was also done at real assemblies in the India of the time.

514 Cf. DN 11.80.

515 Vipāka: not here, as usually, in the technical sense of 'result of kamma', but (a rare usage) 'outcome in general'.

516 'Ever virgin' (or 'ever young'). One of the five sons of Brahma according to legend.

517 An indirect way of exalting the Buddha: Brahma is so vastly superior to the Thirty-Three Gods, and yet he is inferior to the Buddha, and knows it.

518 The añjali gesture of veneration or greeting, still used in India and Buddhist countries — frequently mistaken by Westerners for a gesture of prayer (which, for Theravāda Buddhism at least, is inappropriate).

519 Pallankena: instrumental case of pallanka 'in a cross-legged position'.

520 Pallanka is also the couch on which one sits cross-legged. Cf. n.32.

521 Cf. DN 21.2 (and DN 19.1). DA says Brahma adopted this form because all the devas loved Pañcasikha.

522 Phrase omitted by RD- though it is an important qualification!

523 For all of these groups, see Introduction, p. 38f.

524 Celestial musicians (cf. n.26). As attendants on the devas of the Realm of the Four Great Kings, they were the lowest grade of beings in the heavenly worlds. For a monk to be reborn among them was shameful: cf. DN 21.1iff. It should be noted that the gandhabba mentioned in MN 38 as being present at the time of conception is not the same. The term there means ‘one about to be born’: see I.B. Homer’s note, MLS i, p. 321, n.6.

525 RD mistranslates: ‘betook himself to one end [of the Hall]’.

526 Defined at Sutta 26.28. For further details see BDic.

527 Sukha: ‘pleasant feeling (physical or mental)’.

528 Somanassa: ‘pleasant mental feeling’. Here, a higher degree of sukha, not to be equated with pīti (see n.81).

529 Sankhārā: a multi-valent term (see n.293), for which see the excellent article in BDic. In his note to this passage, RD wrestles with its meaning, and coins the unfortunate rendering ‘Confections’, which, still more unfortunately, was later taken up by Suzuki, on whom it is usually fathered.

530 See DN 22 for these.

531 Or ‘physical forms external to himself’ (RD).

532 A rare formulation of the factors of the Eightfold Path (see DN 33.2.3 (3)). Elsewhere, such a progressive explanation is denied: this points to a late formulation. See BDic under Magga, and EB under Aṭṭhaṅgika-magga.

533 Sammā-ñāṇaṃ.

534 Sammā-vimutti. These additional two steps are part of the supramundane path (MN 117).

535 DN 14.3.7.

536 These are the Non-Returners, who are presumably so far above Brahmā Sanankumāra that he cannot speak of them with knowledge!

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