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MAHĀMAUDGALYĀYANA VISITS ANOTHER PLANET

A Selection from the *Scripture Which Is a Repository of Great Jewels*[1]

translated by Ron Epstein

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Translator's Introduction

The following story is about the Venerable Mahā-maudgalyāyana,[2] an enlightened disciple of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. Mahā-maudgalyāyana travels to a distant solar system, to a planet which is inhabited by giant people, and on which there is also a Buddha with disciples practicing under his guidance. The story, which brings to mind Swift's Gulliver in the land of the giants, is remarkable in many respects. The Buddha and Mahā-maudgalyāyana both probably lived during the fifth and sixth centuries BCE. In the European West, until the time of Galileo (1564-1642), most educated people thought the whole cosmos rotated around the earth and consisted of the sun and seven planets. They did not realize that the stars were other suns. This story here related shows that 2,500 years ago, Buddhists were aware of a vast cosmos filled with suns and planets and sentient life. Contemporary, scientifically oriented people often have a tendency to dismiss non-Western cosmologies as limited, primitive, and distorted myths, in the negative sense of that word. In this story we are presented with a cosmology that seems much closer than the Western pre-Galilean view to the contemporary scientific view of the physical universe. Of course the assertions about the spiritual powers of the Buddha and Mahā-maudgalyāyana and the size of the people on the distant planet do not merge so easily with contemporary scientific, materialist mindsets.

In the story, Mahā-maudgalyāyana tries to find the spatial limit of the voice of the Buddha as he proclaims the Dharma[3]. Mahā-maudgalyāyana is not talking about At issue is not othe physical voice that travels in sound waves through air. Mahā-maudgalyāyana's interest is in the reach of what we might today call a telepathic voice – a voice which, if we have the proper training, we hear directly in our minds.

This is also a cautionary tale. On the one hand, it warns us of the danger of arrogance about our own abilities and understandings. In the course of events, Mahā-maudgalyāyana comes to realize both his own limitations and the extent of the Buddha's compassion, wisdom and power. On the other hand, the Buddha of that other world teaches his disciples that, although Mahā-maudgalyāyana seems ridiculously tiny and inconsequential to them, there is much to him that does not immediately meet their eyes; he is really worthy of their great respect. Thus

the story also decries superficial prejudice and ridicule of those who appear to be different than ourselves. Here we have a lesson, thousands of years old, that people of other cultures and ethnic groups deserve our respect, and not only them, but even aliens from other worlds! I am emphasizing those themes not because they constitute the core message of the story, which is about the inconceivable range of the voice of the Buddha, but because they might easily be overlooked while considering the ramifications of the main topic.

The translation below is of a small section of the *Scripture Which Is a Repository of Great Jewels*, a collection of diverse Mahayana Buddhist teachings which was first translated into Chinese in CE 280 and which was also later translated into Tibetan. The Indian language versions are no longer extant. The selection translated here is part of a section entitled "The Assembly [Taught by] Vajrapāṇi," which also circulated as a separate scripture.[4] The main theme of the section is the inconceivable hidden qualities of the bodies, the voices, and the minds of the Buddhas.

Text

Vajrapāṇi[5] again spoke to the Bodhisattva Quiet Resolve: "I am now observing everywhere: all the celestial demons[6] and *brahma*-gods in the worlds of the heavens, the Buddhist monks[7] and Brahmins, and all the other gods and humans. None is able to find any limit to how far away the words proclaimed by the Thus Come One[8] can be heard. Why? I myself recall an incident that took place when the World-Honored One[9] was on Vulture Peak[10], surrounded by a retinue of all the Bodhisattvas, and was promulgating for the sake of vast numbers of living beings a scripture of Dharma called 'The Range of the Pure Voice'.

"At that time, after the Bodhisattva Maitreya had made an assertion about that range, the worthy Mahā-maudgalyāyana had this thought, 'I wish to test how far the voice of the Thus Come One carries.' Then Mahā-maudgalyāyana suddenly disappeared from his seat. Reappearing on the summit of Mount Sumeru, he heard the voice of the Buddha as if he were right in front of him. He then used his spiritual power of unimpeded functioning of the body[11] to journey to the very edge of this Great World-System of a Billion Worlds. He passed through myriads of worlds, each with its Mount Sumeru, four continents, and all the rings of Iron Mountain Ranges. On the summit of the very farthest ring of Iron Mountains, he still heard the voice of the Buddha. It was just as before, without any difference, as if it were near and not far away.

“The Buddha thought to himself, ‘Since Maudgalyāyana wishes to test the range of pure voice of the Thus Come One, I should now allow him to do so’. Then the World-Honored One generated spiritual power. At that time Maudgalyāyana acknowledged the noble purpose of the Buddha in doing so, and Maudgalyāyana accepted that spiritual power from him, so that he was able to go to a location in a westerly direction that was even farther away. In doing so, he passed through Buddhalands as numerous as the grains of sand in ninety-nine Ganges Rivers to a world-system called Banner of Light in which a Buddha resided. In that Buddhaland, a Buddha named King of Light, a Thus Come One, an Arhat[12], a *Samyaksambuddha*[13], was right then speaking the Dharma. Maudgalyāyana went there and, in that Buddhaland as before, heard the Buddha's voice just as a person standing before him would hear his words.

“In the Buddhaland Banner of Light, the light is very bright. The body of the Buddha of that land is eight miles (?)[14] tall, and the bodies of all the Bodhisattvas are four miles tall. The bowls from which the Bodhisattvas eat are a fifth of a mile high.

“After Maudgalyāyana alighted atop the rim of a bowl, all the Bodhisattvas asked that World-Honored One, ‘Great Sage, please tell us where this bug, who is wearing the clothes of a Buddhist monk[15] and has alighted on the rim of this bowl, came from.'”

“Then that Buddha said, ‘All of you sons of good families, be careful not to be purposely disrespectful towards this worthy one. Why? This elder's name is Mahā-maudgalyāyana. Among all the great disciples of the Buddha Śākyamuni who were enlightened directly from hearing his teachings,[16] he is foremost in spiritual powers.’

“Then the Buddha King of Light said to Mahā-maudgalyāyana, ‘The Bodhisattvas and all the Enlightened Hearers in my land saw that your esteemed body is small and all became disrespectful. If you have received the noble permission of the Buddha Śākyamuni, whose virtue is awe-inspiring, you, humane one, should display your spiritual powers.’

“At that time Mahā-maudgalyāyana went to where the Buddha King of Light was and bowed at his feet. Then, after circumambulating that Buddha in a clockwise direction seven times, he stood in front of him and said, ‘With this very body I wish to sit in full lotus position. Will this place be large enough to for my body to

fit in?'

'That Buddha said, 'Whatever will please you.'

"Then Mahā-maudgalyāyana leapt eighty million feet up into the sky. There, in that treasured realm, he then created a couch and sat in full lotus position upon it. From that location, sitting upon the couch, he suspended ten billion *nayutas*[17] of precious pearl necklaces all variously named. Each pearl of each necklace emitted a hundred thousand rays of light. In each ray of light was a lotus flower. And a body of the Buddha Śākyamuni appeared sitting atop each one of those lotus flowers. Their voices sounded like that of Śākyamuni. With clarity and purity they proclaimed the Sutras, in just the same way as he proclaims them, without any difference.

"Then the Mahā-maudgalyāyana, having finished displaying his spiritual powers, returned to his place in front of that Buddha. At that time all those Bodhisattvas obtained what they never had before. They wondered about it, and so they said to that Buddha, 'Why has Mahā-maudgalyāyana come to this world?'

"That World-Honored One said to them, 'He came to this land because he wished to test how far the voice of the Buddha Śākyamuni travels.'

"Then the Buddha King of Light said to the worthy Mahā-maudgalyāyana, "'umane one, it is not fitting to test how far the voice of the Thus Come One, the Arhats, travels; it has no limit, no far or near. How could you wish to know its limits? You, eminent one, are making an extremely great error. Maudgalyāyana, if you, humane one, were to use your spiritual powers to pass through eons[18] as numerous as the grains of sands in the river and travel in a westerly direction without resting, you would still not get to know all the places where the voice of the Thus Come One is heard. The vast range of the voices of the Buddhas, the Thus Come Ones, absolutely transcends any limits. Their voices are majestic and infinite, and cannot be understood even by means of analogy.'

"At that time Mahā-maudgalyāyana prostrated himself at the feet of that World-Honored One and repented of his transgressions: 'Yes, World-Honored One, because I myself was not intelligent enough to understand that the voice of the Buddhas has no limit, I unfortunately wished to know what was the farthest distance at which it could still be heard.'

“The Buddha King of Light then said to Maudgalyāyana, ‘Even so, you came from far away and passed through Buddha-worlds as numerous as the sands in ninety-nine rivers to get to this Buddha-land.’

“Maudgalyāyana again spoke to that Buddha: ‘O God among gods, I have come extremely far, extremely far indeed. My body is so extremely fatigued that I cannot return to my homeland.’

“That World-Honored One said to him, ‘Maudgalyāyana, what is your opinion? Did you use your own spiritual power to get to this world? Do not take that view. You are here in this world because of the awesome virtuous power of the World-Honored One Śākyamuni. From afar you should take refuge with the Buddha Śākyamuni and bow your head in worship of him. Then that Buddha can, by activating his noble intent, return you, humane one, to your homeland. Esteemed one, if you wished to use your own spiritual power to return to your homeland, even after an eon you would still not have arrived there. Esteemed one, since you would not have arrived, you would not be there in time to see the Buddha Śākyamuni[19] enter Nirvana. Maudgalyāyana, what is your opinion? What region am I in: east, south, west, or north?’”

“Maudgalyāyana answered, ‘I do not know what region. Because I am now disoriented, I don't know where my homeland is or in what direction it is.’

“That World-Honored One said to Maudgalyāyana, ‘The Buddha Śākyamuni is east of here.’

“Then the Mahā-maudgalyāyana put his right knee on the ground and placed his palms together, taking refuge towards the east, where the Buddha Śākyamuni was. At that time he spoke these verses:

‘The One who alone is honored by both gods and humans,
Who is seen to bestow his strength and thoughts of compassion,
Whose awesome power of virtue reaches great and majestic heights;

’The One whom both gods and humans revere,
Whose voice travels infinitely,
And whose wisdom is without bound;

‘His is the land in which I wish to reappear,
And so I now desire to return there’.”

Vajrapāṇi said, “So it is, Quiet Resolve, that the voice of all Buddhas, World-Honored Ones, is without boundary or limit.

“As the Buddha Śākyamuni was strolling atop Vulture Peak, Śāriputra heard that loud voice transmitted by the worthy Mahā-maudgalyāyana and wondered about the reason for it, but it was the worthy Ānanda who first asked the Buddha, ‘Who is it who is now asking for refuge in such a loud voice, so that he can return from so far away?’

“The Buddha said to Ānanda, ‘Mahā-maudgalyāyana has been in the Western regions for many years. He traveled through Buddha-lands as numerous as the grains of sand in ninety-nine rivers and reached a world called Banner of Light. The Buddha of that land is called King of Light Thus Come One, an Arhat, who is right now speaking the Dharma there. It has been many years since the Mahā-maudgalyāyana reached that Buddha-land, and because he now desires to return to this land, he has transmitted his strong and clear voice from that far away place.’

“Ānanda asked further, ‘Why did he go to that Buddha-land?’

“The Buddha told Ānanda, ‘When Mahā-maudgalyāyana arrives, you can ask him what his intentions were.’

“Then everyone in the great assembly said to the Buddha, ’We would be pleased if we could get to see the Banner of Light world and the Buddha King of Light, a Thus Come One, an Arhat, an Equally and Properly Enlightened One, and to observe what the Mahā-maudgalyāyana is doing in his land.’

“At that time the World-Honored One, seeing that all in the assembly were exhorting him to aid them in fulfilling their wish, emitted from the Buddha-Hallmark between the eyebrows[20] a great light called ‘Perceived by All’. It illuminated all the Buddha-worlds as numerous as the grains of sand in ninety-nine rivers and reached all the way to the Buddha-land Banner of Light. What that great light illuminated was seen by all those in the assembly, so that everyone observed King of Light, the Buddha of that land, a Thus Come One, an Arhat. When the Mahā-maudgalyāyana saw the light, he bowed to the ground and called out in a loud voice.

“At that time the World-Honored One, the Buddha Śākyamuni told the worthy Mahā-maudgalyāyana to ride that light back to his own land. Then, relying on the Buddha-light, Maudgalyāyana, in the space of a thought,

returned to this land. He bowed at the Buddha's feet and circumambulated him seven times in a clockwise direction. Afterwards he stood before the Buddha, repented, and took refuge. He reproached himself once again, saying, 'I was extremely confused. The voice of the Thus Come One has no limits, yet I wanted to test its range. The most distant point I reached was exceedingly far away, yet the voice that I heard there was the same as it is now; I perceived it as if it were near and not far away. The voice of the Thus Come One is majestic and its range is boundless.'

"The Buddha said, 'So it is, Maudgalyāyana, just as you say. The voice of the Thus Come One extends far, even beyond what can be understood by analogy. Wishing to know the range of the voice of the Thus Come One is like wanting to make boundaries by placing limits on space. Why? Like space, which pervades everywhere and is boundless, the range of the words proclaimed by the Thus Come One is boundless in its extent'."

Ron Epstein recently retired from the Philosophy faculty of San Francisco State University, where for over thirty years he taught courses on Buddhism and on Asian and comparative philosophy and religion. He holds a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies (interdisciplinary) from the University of California at Berkeley and an M.A. in Chinese Language and Literature from University of Washington. His many publications and translations include Buddhist Text Translation Society's Buddhism A to Z; The Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra with the No-Stand Gatha Explanation and Prose Commentary of Gold Mountain Tripitaka Master, Sramana Hsüan Hua; and the concluding volume of the "Entering the Dharma Realm" chapter of the Buddhist Text Translations Society's translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra. He is a regular contributor to the journal Vajra Bodhi Sea, and his educational websites include 'Resources for the Study of Buddhism,' and 'Resources for the Study of Religion.'

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[1] *Da Bao Ji Jing*大寶積經 or *Mahāratnakuṭa-sūtra* (*Taisho Tripiṭaka* #310, roll 10, 56c05-57c07). Other selections from the sutra have been published in *A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras: Selections from the Maharatnakuta Sutra*, Garma C.C. Chang (Editor), University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983. The original translation into Chinese was made by Tripiṭaka Master Dharmarakṣa in 280 CE. I would like to thank Dharma Master Heng Shun and Dharma Master Heng Sure for reviewing an early version of my English translation.

[2] The 'Mahā' in his name means 'great;' he is the Great Maudgalyāyana to distinguish him from others of the same name and to honor his level of enlightenment and the spiritual powers he possessed as a byproduct of that enlightenment.

[3] Dharma consists of the methods taught for becoming enlightened.

[4] *Tathāgatācintyaguhyanirdeśa*.

[5] Vajrapāṇi is a Bodhisattva protector of the Dharma, who is often identified with the Bodhisattva Mahāsthamaprāpta (Ch.

Dashizhi 大勢至).

[6] *Māra*.

[7] ***Ś**rāmaṇas*

[8] *Tathāgata* can be interpreted as meaning both ‘thus come’ and ‘thus gone.’ It is an epithet of the Buddhas.

[9] World-Honored One is also an epithet of the Buddha.

[10] *Gṛdhrakuta*

[11] *Ṛddhi-prātihārya*.

[12] Here Arhat is used as an epithet of the Buddhas.

[13] Lit., ‘Equally and Rightly Enlightened One,’ another epithet of the Buddhas.

[14] The length of the measure used here is uncertain. The Chinese text literally says ‘forty *li* 里.’ A *li* is usually considered to be somewhere between 1/5 and 1/3 of a mile. In ancient China a *li* 里was defined as 360 paces (bu步). A pace was about six ancient Chinese feet (*chi* 尺). However, we do not know for sure what Sanskrit term of measure it is a translation for. Fortunately, knowing the exact heights is not essential to the meaning of the story.

[15] *Śrāmaṇa*.

[16] *Śrāvaka*. Lit. 'Hearer', i.e., Arhat, in the sense of those enlightened disciples of the Buddha who have transcended rebirth and no longer have any outflows of psychic energy related to attachment to the objects of the senses.

[17] A *nayuta* is a very large number, the exact size of which is not clearly fixed.

[18] *Kalpas*.

[19] The text literally says *neng ren*能仁, "Mighty in lovingkindness, an incorrect interpretation of Śākyamuni, but probably indicating his character." (Soothill and Hoodus, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhism*, quoted by Charles Muller, Digital Dictionary of Buddhism <http://www.acmuller.net/ddb/>).

[20] All Buddhas have 32 distinctive physical attributes, of which one is a tuft of white hair, that emits light and is located between the eyebrows.