**The Background to the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta**

Before the Enlightenment

[The Bodhisatta’s Awakening]

"Monks, I was delicately nurtured, most delicately nurtured, extremely delicately nurtured. At my father's residence lotus ponds were made just for my enjoyment: in one of them blue lotuses bloomed, in another red lotuses, and in a third white lotuses. I used only sandal unguent from Kāsī and my head dress, jacket, lower garment, and upper garment were made of Kāsī cloth. By day and by night a white canopy was held over me so that cold and heat, dust, grass, and dew would not settle on me.

"I had three mansions: one for the winter, one for the summer, and one for the rainy season. I spent the four months of the rains in the rainy-season mansion, being entertained by musicians, none of whom were male, and I did not leave the mansion.

(1) "Amidst such splendor and a luxurious life, it occurred to me: ‘A foolish worldling, though himself subject to old age, feels repelled and disgusted when he sees another who is old, overlooking his own situation. Now I too am subject to old age and am not exempt from old age.’ When I reflected thus, my intoxication with youth was completely abandoned.

(2) "[Again, it occurred to me:] ‘A foolish worldling, though himself subject to illness, feels repelled and disgusted when he sees another who is ill, overlooking his own situation. Now I too am subject to illness and am not exempt from illness.' When I reflected thus, my intoxication with health was completely abandoned.

(3) "[Again, it occurred to me:] ‘A foolish worldling, though himself subject to death, feels repelled and disgusted when he sees another who has died, overlooking his own situation. Now I too am subject to death and am not exempt from death. ' When I reflected thus, my intoxication with life was completely abandoned.”

(AN 3:39)

[The Renunciation]

5. “Monks, there are these two kinds of search: the noble search and the ignoble search. And what is the ignoble search? Here someone being himself subject to birth seeks what is also subject to birth; being himself subject to old age … sickness … death, he seeks what is also subject to old age, sickness, and death; being himself subject to sorrow, he seeks what is also subject to sorrow; being himself subject to defilement, he seeks what is also subject to defilement.

6–11. “And what may be said to be subject to birth, old age, sickness, and death; to sorrow and defilement? Wife and children, men and women slaves, goats and sheep, fowl and pigs, elephants, cattle, horses, and mares, gold and silver: these possessions are subject to birth, old age, sickness, and death; to sorrow and defilement.

12. “And what is the noble search? Here someone being himself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, seeks the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna; being himself subject to old age, sickness, and death, having understood the danger in what is subject to old age, sickness, and death, he seeks the unaging, unailing, deathless supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna … the sorrowless supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna … the undefiled supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna. This is the noble search.

13. “Monks, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisatta, I too, sought what was also subject to birth, old age, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement. Then I considered thus: ‘Let me seek the unborn, unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, and undefiled supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna.’

14. “Later, while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the ochre robe, and went forth from the home life into homelessness.

[Apprenticeship under Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta:]

*Under Āḷāra he learns and masters the base of nothingness (third arūpa attainment):*

“Thus Āḷāra Kālāma, my teacher, placed me, his pupil, *on an equal footing with himself* and awarded me the highest honor. But it occurred to me: ‘This Dhamma does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna, but only to rebirth in the base of nothingness.’ Not being satisfied with that Dhamma, disappointed with it, I left….

*Under Uddaka Rāmaputta he learns and masters the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (fourth arūpa attainment):*

“Thus Uddaka Rāmaputta, my spiritual companion, placed me *in the position of a teacher* and accorded me the highest honor. But it occurred to me: ‘This Dhamma does not lead to disenchantment … to enlightenment, to Nibbāna, but only to rebirth in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.’ Not being satisfied with that Dhamma, disappointed with it, I left.” …

[The ascetic practices]

“Such was my asceticism that I went naked … I took food once a day, once every two days … once every seven days; thus even up to once every fortnight, I dwelt pursuing the practice of taking food at stated intervals … I pulled out hair and beard, stood continuously, rejecting seats, squatted continuously. I used a mattress of spikes for my bed. I bathed three times daily including the evening. Thus in such a variety of ways I dwelt pursuing the practice of tormenting and mortifying the body.”

(MN 12: Mahāsīhanāda Sutta)

28. “I thought: ‘Suppose I take very little food, a handful each time.’ I did so and my body reached a state of extreme emaciation. Because of eating little my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems, my backside became like a camel’s hoof, my ribs jutted out like the rafters of an old barn. Because of eating little my scalp shrivelled and withered like a green bitter gourd. Because of eating so little my belly skin adhered to my backbone; thus if I wanted to touch my belly skin I felt my backbone, and if I wanted to touch my backbone I felt my belly skin….

[The discovery of the path:]

30. “I thought: ‘Whatever ascetics or brahmins in the past have experienced painful feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost; there is none beyond this. And whatever ascetics and brahmins in the future will experience painful feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost; there is none beyond this. And whatever ascetics and brahmins at present experience painful feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost; there is none beyond this. But by this painful practice of austerities I have not attained any superhuman knowledge and vision. Could there be another path to enlightenment?’

31. “I remembered that when my father was busy, while I sat in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, I entered and dwelt in the first jhāna (*secluded from sensual pleasures*, secluded from unwholesome qualities, accompanied by thought and examination, [having] *rapture and pleasure born of seclusion*). Could this be the path to enlightenment? Then came the realization: ‘This is indeed the path to enlightenment.’ …

32. “I thought: ‘Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?’ I thought: ‘I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states.’

33. “I considered: ‘It is not easy to attain that pleasure with a body so excessively emaciated. Suppose I ate some solid food.’ And I ate some solid food. Now at that time five bhikkhus were waiting upon me, thinking: ‘If our recluse Gotama achieves some higher state, he will inform us.’ But when I ate the solid food, the five bhikkhus were disgusted and left me, thinking: ‘The recluse Gotama now lives luxuriously; he has given up his striving and reverted to luxury.’

The Enlightenment

34–37. “Now when I had eaten solid food and regained my strength, then secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered and dwelt in the first jhāna … the second jhāna … the third jhāna … the fourth jhāna.

38. “When my mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives. This was the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night.

40. “When my mind was thus concentrated, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and being reborn, and I understood how beings fare on according to their kamma..This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the middle watch of the night.

42. “When my mind was thus concentrated, I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew: ‘This is suffering (*dukkha*). This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’ I directly knew as it actually is: ‘These are the taints (*āsava*). 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.’

43. “When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of existence, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ I directly knew: ‘Birth is finished, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming back to any state of being.’ This was the third true knowledge attained by me in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose.”

(from MN 36: *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*; see too MN 4, MN 19, etc.)

[A different account of the enlightenment]

[After leaving Ālāra and Uddaka], still in search of the good, seeking the supreme state of sublime peace, I wandered by stages through the Magadhan country until I arrived at Uruvelā near Senānigama. There I saw an agreeable piece of ground, a delightful grove. And I sat down there thinking: ‘This will serve for striving.’

18. “Then, monks, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, seeking the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna, I attained the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna—the ageless, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled. The knowledge and vision arose in me: ‘My liberation is unshakable. This is my last birth. Now there is no more renewed existence.’”

(from MN 26: *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*)

[Still another account]

“Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisatta, not yet fully enlightened, it occurred to me: ‘Alas, this world has fallen into trouble, in that it is born, ages, and dies, it passes away and is reborn, yet it does not understand the escape from this suffering [headed by] aging-and-death. When now will an escape be discerned from this suffering [headed by] aging-and-death?’

“Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: ‘When what exists does aging-and-death come to be? By what is aging-and-death conditioned?’ Then, bhikkhus, through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: ‘When there is birth, aging-and-death comes to be; aging-and-death has birth as its condition.’

“Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: ‘When what exists does birth come to be?… name-and-form? By what is name-and-form conditioned?’ Then, bhikkhus, through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: ‘When there is consciousness, name-and-form comes to be; name-and-form has consciousness as its condition.’

“Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: ‘When what exists does consciousness come to be? By what is consciousness conditioned?’ Then, bhikkhus, through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: ‘When there is name-and-form, consciousness comes to be; consciousness has name-and-form as its condition.’

“Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: ‘This consciousness turns back; it does not go further than name-and-form. It is to this extent that one may be born and age and die, pass away and be reborn, that is, when there is consciousness with name-and-form as its condition, and name-and-form with consciousness as its condition. With name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as condition, contact…. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.’

“‘Origination, origination’—thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

“Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: ‘When what does not exist does aging-and-death not come to be? With the cessation of what does the cessation of aging-and-death come about?’ Then, bhikkhus, through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: ‘When there is no birth, aging-and-death does not come to be; with the cessation of birth comes cessation of aging-and-death.’

“It occurred to me: ‘When what does not exist does birth not come to be?… name-and-form? With the cessation of what does the cessation of name-and-form come about?’ Then, bhikkhus, through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: ‘When there is no consciousness, name-and-form does not come to be; with the cessation of consciousness comes cessation of name-and-form.’

“It occurred to me: ‘When what does not exist does consciousness not come to be? With the cessation of what does the cessation of consciousness come about?’ Then, bhikkhus, through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom: ‘When there is no name-and-form, consciousness does not come to be; with the cessation of name-and-form comes cessation of consciousness.’

“Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: ‘*I have discovered this path to enlightenment, that is, with the cessation of name-and-form comes cessation of consciousness; with the cessation of consciousness comes cessation of name-and-form*; with the cessation of name-and-form, cessation of the six sense bases; with the cessation of the six sense bases, cessation of contact…. With the cessation of birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair cease. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.’

“‘Cessation, cessation’—thus, bhikkhus, in regard to things unheard before there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light.

After the Enlightenment

[At the foot of the Bodhi Tree]

**1.1 The Bodhi Tree (1)** *(Paṭhamabodhi Sutta)*

Thus have I heard. At one time the Blessed One was staying at Uruvelā, beside the river Nerañjarā at the foot of the Bodhi Tree, having just realized full enlightenment. At that time the Blessed One sat crosslegged for seven days experiencing the bliss of liberation. Then, at the end of those seven days, the Blessed One emerged from that concentration and gave well-reasoned attention during the first watch of the night *to dependent arising in forward order*, thus: “This being, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises. That is: with ignorance as condition, volitional activities come to be; with volitional activities as condition, consciousness comes to be; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form comes to be; with name-and-form as condition, the sixfold base comes to be; with the sixfold base as condition, contact comes to be; with contact as condition, feeling comes to be; with feeling as condition, craving comes to be; with craving as condition, grasping comes to be; with grasping as condition, being comes to be; with being as condition, birth comes to be; with birth as condition, ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. This is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.”

Then, on realizing its significance, the Blessed One uttered on that occasion this inspired utterance:

*When things* *become manifest*  (*yadā* *have pātubhavanti dhammā*) *to the ardent meditating brahmin,* (*ātāpino jhāyato brāhmaṇassa*)  
*all his doubts then vanish since he understands  
each thing along with its cause.*

**1.2 The Bodhi Tree (2)** *(Dutiyabodhi Sutta)*

Thus have I heard. At one time the Blessed One was staying at Uruvelā … for seven days experiencing the bliss of liberation. Then, at the end of those seven days, the Blessed One emerged from that concentration and gave well-reasoned attention during the middle watch of the night *to dependent arising in reverse order*, thus: “This not being, that does not come to be; from the cessation of this, that ceases. That is: from the cessation of ignorance, volitional activities cease; from the cessation of volitional activities, consciousness ceases; from the cessation of consciousness, name-andform ceases; from the cessation of name-and-form, the sixfold base ceases; from the cessation of the sixfold base, contact ceases; from the cessation of contact, feeling ceases; from the cessation of feeling, craving ceases; from the cessation of craving, grasping ceases; from the cessation of grasping, being ceases; from the cessation of being, birth ceases; from the cessation of birth, ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair cease. This is the ceasing of this whole mass of suffering.”

Then, on realizing its significance, the Blessed One uttered on that occasion this inspired utterance:

*When things become manifest   
to the ardent meditating brahmin,   
all his doubts then vanish since he has known   
the utter destruction of the conditions.*

**1.3 The Bodhi Tree (3)** *(Tatiyabodhi Sutta)*

Thus have I heard. At one time the Blessed One was staying at Uruvelā … for seven days experiencing the bliss of liberation. Then, at the end of those seven days, the Blessed One … gave well-reasoned attention during the last watch of the night *to dependent arising in both forward and reverse order*, thus: “This being, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that does not come to be; from the cessation of this, that ceases. That is: with ignorance as condition, volitional activities come to be; … with birth as condition, ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. This is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

“But from the complete disappearance and cessation of ignorance, volitional activities cease; … from the cessation of birth, ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair cease. This is the ceasing of this whole mass of suffering.”

Then, on realizing its significance, the Blessed One uttered on that occasion this inspired utterance:

*When things become manifest   
to the ardent meditating brahmin,   
he abides scattering Māra’s host   
like the sun illumining the sky.*

[ The Decision to Teach]

19. At the foot of the Goatherd’s Banyan Tree. “I considered: ‘This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But people of the world delight in the objects of sensual pleasure. *It is hard for them to see this principle, namely, dependent origination. And it is hard to see this principle, namely, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna.* If I were to teach the Dhamma, others would not understand me, and that would be troublesome for me.’ Considering thus, my mind inclined to inaction rather than to teaching the Dhamma.

20. “Then, monks, the Brahmā Sahampati appeared before me and said: ‘Bhante, please teach the Dhamma. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are perishing through not hearing the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand the Dhamma.’

Just as one who stands on a mountain peak

Can see below the people all around,

So, O wise one, all-seeing sage,

Ascend the palace of the Dhamma.

Let the sorrowless one survey humankind,

Engulfed in sorrow, overcome by birth and old age.

Arise, victorious hero, caravan leader,

Debtless one, and wander in the world.

Let the Blessed One teach the Dhamma,

There will be those who will understand.’

21. “Then out of compassion for beings I surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha. Surveying the world with the eye of a Buddha, I saw beings with little dust in their eyes, who dwelt seeing fear and blame in the world. Then I replied to the Brahmā Sahampati in stanzas:

‘Open for them are the doors to the Deathless,

Let those with ears now show their faith.

Thinking it would be troublesome, O Brahmā,

I did not speak the Dhamma subtle and sublime.’

22. “I considered thus: ‘To whom should I first teach the Dhamma? Who will understand this Dhamma quickly?’ … It then occurred to me: ‘The five monks who attended upon me while I was engaged in my striving were very helpful. Suppose I taught the Dhamma first to them.’ Then I thought: ‘Where are those monks now living?’ And with the divine eye, I saw that they were living at Bārāṇasī in the Deer Park at Isipatana….

[The encounter with Upaka]

25. “Then, monks, when I had stayed at Uruvelā as long as I chose, I set out to wander by stages to Bārāṇasī. Along the way, the Ājīvaka Upaka saw me and said: ‘Friend, your faculties are clear, the colour of your skin is pure and bright. Under whom have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Whose Dhamma do you profess?’ I replied to the Ājīvaka Upaka in stanzas:

I am one who has transcended all, a knower of all,

Unsullied among all things, renouncing all,

By craving’s ceasing freed. Having known this all

For myself, to whom should I point as teacher?

I have no teacher, and one like me

Exists nowhere in all the world

With all its gods, because I have

No person for my counterpart.

I am the Accomplished One in the world,

I am the Teacher Supreme.

I alone am a Fully Enlightened One

Whose fires are quenched and extinguished.

[Meeting the five monks]

“I eventually came to Bārāṇasī, to the Deer Park at Isipatana, and I approached the group of five monks. The monks saw me coming in the distance, and they agreed among themselves thus: ‘Friends, here comes the ascetic Gotama who lives luxuriously, who gave up his striving, and reverted to luxury. We should not pay homage to him or rise up for him or receive his bowl and outer robe. But a seat may be prepared for him. If he likes, he may sit down.’ However, as I approached, those monks found themselves unable to keep their pact. One came to meet me and took my bowl and outer robe, another prepared a seat, and another set out water for my feet; however, they addressed me by name and as ‘friend.’

27. “Thereupon I told them: ‘Monks, do not address the Tathāgata by name and as “friend.” The Tathāgata is an Arahant, a Perfectly Enlightened One. Listen, monks, the Deathless has been attained. I shall instruct you, I shall teach you the Dhamma. Practicing as you are instructed, you will soon enter and dwell in that supreme goal of the holy life for the sake of which you went into homelessness.’

“When this was said, the monks of the group of five answered me thus: ‘Friend Gotama, by the conduct, the practice, and the performance of austerities that you undertook, you did not achieve any superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision. Since you now live luxuriously, how could you have achieved any superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision?’ When this was said, I told them: ‘The Tathāgata does not live luxuriously, nor has he given up his striving and reverted to luxury. The Tathāgata is an Arahant, a Perfectly Enlightened One. Listen, monks, the Deathless has been attained … into homelessness.’

“A second time … and a third time the monks rejected my appeal.

28. “Then I asked them: ‘Monks, have you ever known me to speak like this before?’—‘No, Bhante.’ In this way, I was able to convince the five monks. Then I sometimes instructed two monks while the other three went for alms, and the six of us lived on what those three monks brought back from their almsround. Sometimes I instructed three monks while the other two went for alms, and the six of us lived on what those two monks brought back from their almsround.

30. “Then the monks of the group of five, taught and instructed by me, being themselves subject to birth, old age, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, attained the birthless, unaging, illness-free, deathless, sorrowless, and undefiled supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna. The knowledge and vision arose in them: ‘Our liberation is unshakable; this is our last birth; now there is no more renewed existence.’”

(from MN 26: *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*)