

The First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, Ásvajit and Śāriputra

Ásvajit was one of the five ascetics (pañcavargika) who practiced with the Bodhisattva Siddhārtha before his enlightenment:

1. Kaunḍinya (Pāli: Koṇḍañña)
2. Ásvajit (Pāli: Assaji)
3. Vāṣpa (Pāli: Vappa)
4. Mahānāman (Pāli: Mahānāma)
5. Bhadrīka (Pāli: Bhaddiya)

These five accompanied Siddhārtha during his six years of severe austerities in the forest near Uruvelā. When Siddhārtha accepted milk-rice from Sujātā and abandoned extreme asceticism, they believed he had given up the quest and left him. They relocated to the Deer Park at Sarnath.

After enlightenment, the Buddha sought them out there and taught The Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma - The Dharmacakrapravartana Sūtra. They became the first members of the Buddhist Saṅgha.

According to the Lalitavistara, Mahāvastu, and later biographies, Ásvajit was one of the eight eminent Brahmins invited by King Śuddhodana to examine the infant Prince Siddhārtha shortly after his birth. Those eight Brahmins were experts in interpreting the thirty-two marks (dvātriṃśad mahāpuruṣa-lakṣaṇa) of a Great Person. They predicted that the prince would either become: a universal monarch (cakravartin), or a fully awakened Buddha.

In these accounts, Ásvajit himself is one of those Brahmins, making him already an elderly man when he later became one of Siddhārtha's companions.

However, according to the Pāli commentaries, the eight Brahmins make the prediction, but it is their sons who later become four of the five ascetics. Under that version:

- * Koṇḍañña is the youngest of the original eight Brahmins and personally makes the prediction.
- * Assaji, Vappa, Mahānāma, and Bhaddiya are sons of the other Brahmins.

If all five ascetics had themselves been mature court Brahmins at Siddhārtha's birth, they would have been considerably older than the Bodhisattva. The Pāli tradition instead has most of them belong to the next generation.

Ironically, Ásvajit is remembered less for his role among the first five disciples than for a single brief encounter. Some time after the first rainy season, Śāriputra encountered Ásvajit on alms round. Struck by his serene demeanor, he asked: "Who is your teacher, and what does he teach?"

Ásvajit replied that he was new to the teaching and could only give a brief summary. He then recited the famous stanza:

Ye dharmā hetuprabhavā
hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgato hy avadat
teṣāṃ ca yo nirodhaḥ
evaṃvādī mahāśramaṇaḥ

Upon hearing just this verse, Śāriputra attained the Dharma-eye (dharmacakṣus) — the stage of stream enterer (from the early Buddhist perspective) — and then repeated it to his friend Maudgalyāyana, who attained the same realization. Those two would become the Buddha's foremost disciples in wisdom and supernatural abilities, respectively.