Thig 16.1 — Verses of the Elder Sumedhā

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Text

Verses of the Elder Bhikkhunīs

The Great Chapter

Verses of the Elder Sumedhā

In the city of Mantāvatī,

of king Koñca and his main queen-consort,

she was the daughter Sumedhā,

confident in those complying with the Teaching.

Virtuous, eloquent,

very learned, and disciplined in the teaching of the Buddha.

She approached her mother and father and said:

“Both of you, listen!

I seek the joy of Nirvana,

as all states of existence - even divine - are temporary.

Sensual pleasures are worthless without fail:

they bring little satisfaction, and much distress.

Fools become infatuated with sensual pleasures

that are bitter like snake-poison.

They are consigned to hell for long periods of time,

where they experience injury and pain.

Those who have done evil deeds feel sorrow

in their state of downfall, where they constantly do even more evil.

Unrestrained with body, speech,

and mind,
lacking wisdom,
not intending to stop the arising of suffering,
and not knowing the teachings,
such fools do not recognize the Noble Truths.
Mother, most people do not understand
the truths superbly taught by the Buddha.
They are delighted with states of existence,
they long for rebirth as Devas.
But rebirth as a Deva
is a finite and temporary state of existence.
Fools are not frightened
of being born again and again.
From the four places of downfall,
it is hard to obtain the two higher destinations.
For one gone to a place of downfall,
there is no going forth in the hell realms.
The two of you should allow me
to go forth in the doctrine of the one who has ten powers.
Living at ease, I would be able to strive
for the abandoning of birth and death.
How can there be delight in a state of existence
with a worthless body devoid of substance?
Allow me to go forth,
so that I may bring an end to the craving for existence.
One who is distant from the arising of the Buddhas
has no opportunity.
I will not spoil the virtues of the spiritual life,
for the rest of my life."

Then Sumedhā said to her parents:

“I will not take food

from a householder,

I will be overtaken by death.”

Distressed, her mother and father cry,

completely overpowered.

Together they try to convince her,

while she is lying on the floor of the palace.

“Rise up little child, what is this sadness?

You are engaged to be married in Vāraṇavatī.

King Anīkaratta is handsome

and you have been given to him.

You will become chief queen-consort,

the wife of king Anīkaratta.

Holding precepts, keeping celibacy,

life as an outcast— these are difficult to do, little child.

As a queen you will have authority, wealth, sovereignty,

fortune, and pleasure.

You are a young lady, enjoy sensual pleasures!

Get married, child!”

Then Sumedhā replied:

“Who would want such a worthless state of existence?

Either I will go forth,

or I will die, but I will not marry.

What is this impure putrid body,

a dreadful corpse with a tainted smell?

Who would want to enter

this oozing skin-bag full of impurities?

What do they know about this

disgusting thing plastered in flesh and blood,
a corpse which will be given as food
to worms and birds?
Before long it will be taken to the cemetery,
a body deprived of consciousness,
left there like a discarded log,
by disgusted relatives.
Thrown away in the cemetery,
it becomes food for others.
Even one's own mother and father are disgusted and go bathe themselves—
what can be expected from everyone else?
Hanging on to this worthless corpse,
bones bound together by tendons
in this putrid body
full of excrement and saliva.
One who dismembered it,
bringing the internal parts out,
would not be able to endure its smell—
even their own mother would be disgusted.
The khandhas, elements, and sense domains,
are conditioned, rooted in birth, suffering.
Pondering wisely,
why would I wish to marry?
If, day after day three hundred spears
would constantly attack the body,
a hundred years of this torment
would be good if then there was the end of suffering.
I would consent to this torment,
as would anyone who has heard the Teacher’s words:

‘Long is the cycle of birth and death
for those who are slain again and again.’
Among Devas and among humans,
among animals and among asuras,
among petas and in the hell realms,
no limit to torment is seen.
There is much torment in the hell realms,
for those who are oppressed in the lower realms.
Even among the Devas there is no safety,
and no happiness higher than Nirvana.
Those who have attained Nirvana,
committed to the words of the one who has ten powers;
Living at ease, they strive
to abandon birth and death.
Today, father, I will leave behind
this worthless wealth.
I am disenchanted with sensual pleasures,
I am at peace because I have renounced sensuality; it has been made like a palm-stump.”
As she said this to her father,
Anīkaratta, to whom she had been engaged to be married,
approached Vāraṇavatī
at the time arranged for the wedding.
Then Sumedhā cut off her thick, soft, dark hair
with a sword,
closed the palace,
and entered the first Jhāna.
She had already entered it,
when Anīkaratta came to the town.
Then in the palace, Sumedhā

cultivated well the perception of impermanence.
As she fixed the mind intently on this,
Anīkaratta quickly ascended.
With limbs adorned with gold and gems,
in añjali, he implored Sumedhā:
“As a queen there is authority, wealth, sovereignty,
fortune, and pleasure.
You are a young lady, enjoy sensual pleasures!
Sensual pleasures are difficult to obtain in this world!
Royalty has been handed over to you:
enjoy wealth, give gifts!
Do not be down-hearted,
your mother and father are suffering.”
Sumedhā, who had no need for sensual pleasures
and was free of delusion, said to him:
“Do not delight in sensual pleasures!
Look at the drawbacks of sensual pleasures!
Mandhātā, king of four islands,
embraced the path of enjoying sensuality.
He died unsatisfied,
not with desires fulfilled.
Even if the seven kinds of gems were to pour down from the sky
like rain in all ten directions,
not even then would there be satisfaction in sensual pleasures:
human beings die unsatisfied.
Sensual pleasures are like a knife on a butcher’s block,
sensual pleasures are like a snake’s head.
They burn like a torch,
they resemble a skeleton.

Sensual pleasures are impermanent, unstable,
much suffering, highly poisonous;
A heated iron ball,
the root of calamity, resulting in suffering.
Sensual pleasures are like tree-fruit,
like a piece of meat, they are suffering;
Sensual pleasures are deceitful as a dream,
like borrowed goods.
Sensual pleasures are like the stake of a spear,
a disease, an abscess, a calamity, an affliction.
Like a fire pit,
the root of calamity, fear, and distruction.
In this way sensual pleasures have been declared to bring much suffering,
and to be obstructive.
Go, not to me, but to the Buddha!
My own confidence is in him.
What can another do for me,
when their own head is on fire?
When one is bound by birth and death,
one should strive for its end."
After she opened the door,
and saw mother, father, and Anīkaratta
sitting down on the ground crying,
she said:
"Long is the cycle of birth and death for fools,
they cry again and again,
without beginning or end for the death of the father,
the death of the brother, and one's own death.
Tears, mother's milk, blood,

you move along in the cycle of birth and death without beginning or end.
Bear in mind the pile of bones
of all these sentient beings going through one life after the other.
Bear in mind that all the tears, mother milk, and blood
could fill the four oceans.
Bear in mind the pile of bones of one world cycle,
would be just as abundant.
Saṃsaric existence is without beginning or end,
as vast as the land of Jampudīpa.
Even if the earth was made into little balls the size of a jujube seed,
it still would not add up to all the mothers among mothers.
Bear in mind all the grass, wood, branches, and foliage,
carried along since beginningless time.
Even if they were made into twigs each only the size of four fingers,
they would still not add up to all of fathers among fathers.
Bear in mind the one-eyed turtle in the eastern sea,
and, far away, a block of wood with a hole in it;
the chance of gaining a human rebirth
is like the chance of putting one’s head through that hole.
Bear in mind the form of this miserable body,
without any substance, like a lump of foam.
See the khandhas as impermanent,
bear in mind that there is much agony in hell.
Bear in mind those filling up the cemetery,
again and again, in all those lives.
Bear in mind the danger of crocodiles,
and bear in mind the four truths.
Knowing about the deathless,
why would you indulge in the five bitter drinks?

For all delight in sensual pleasures,
is more bitter than the five bitter drinks.
Knowing about the deathless,
why would you set yourself on fire with sensual pleasures?
For all delight in sensual pleasures
is burning, boiling, trembling, aglow.
When one can be without enmity,
why would you want the many enemies that come with sensual pleasures?
Like rulers, fires, thieves, and other unpleasant things,
sensual pleasures are common and bring many enemies.
Knowing freedom,
why would you want the imprisonment of sensual pleasures?
For sensual pleasures are undesirable
and result in the suffering of imprisonment.
As a blazing grass torch
burns one who holds it and does not let it go,
sensual pleasures are like a torch:
they burn the one who does not let go of them.
Do not renounce abundant happiness
for the sake of the minute happiness of sensual pleasure.
Do not be like the fish who swallows the hook,
and is then slain.
One should willingly train oneself in regards to sensual pleasures.
You are like a dog bound by a chain:
sensual pleasures will attack you
like hungry savages would a dog.
Yoked to sensual pleasure,
you will experience unlimited suffering,
and much mental distress.

Give up these unstable sensual pleasures!
When there is the undecaying,
why would you want sensual pleasures, which are subject to decay?
All rebirths in all places are
seized by death and sickness.
This is non-decay, this is non-death,
this is non-decay and non-death, the path of sorrowlessness.
Without enmity, unobstructed,
unfaltering, fearless, not afflicted.
Attained by many,
the deathless state even today can be obtained in this way:
it is possible by whomever wisely commits themselves,
but not without striving."
Thus spoke Sumedhā,
without desire for any conditioned things.
Teaching Anīkaratta in this way,
Sumedhā threw her hair on the ground.
Anīkaratta stood up and,
with hands in añjali, implored her father:
"Set free Sumedhā,
to go forth for liberation and seeking truth."
Released by mother and father,
she went forth, leaving behind fear and sorrow.
She realized the six special knowledges,
the highest fruit for one who is training.
Wonderful and extraordinary
was the Nirvana of the princess.
This is a story of some of her past lives
that was explained near the end of her life:

“In the Buddha Koṇāgamana’s time,
in a new settlement in the Saṅgha’s park,
myself and three friends,
gave the gift of a monastic dwelling.
Ten times, a hundred times,
hundred and hundreds of times,
I was born as a Deva,
not to mention among humans.
When we were amongst the devas we had great psychic power,
not to mention among humans.
I was a queen of seven jewels,
a woman like a jewel.
This is the cause, the origin,
and root of my acceptance of the teachings.
That was my first contact,
enjoying the Dhamma and Nirvana.
This is how they act, those who have faith
in the words of superior wisdom.
They are disenchanted with states of existence,
and after becoming disenchanted, they become dispassionate.”
Thus Sumedhā the Elder spoke these verses.
The Great Chapter is finished.
Complete is the Therīgathā.
The Verses of the Elder Bhikkhunīs are finished.