Thig 16.1 — Sumedhā

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Text

Verses of the Senior Nuns 16.1

The Great Book

Sumedhā

In Mantāvatī city, Sumedhā,

the daughter of King Koñca's chief queen,

was converted by those

who practice the Buddha's teaching.

She was virtuous, a brilliant speaker,

learned, and trained in the Buddha's instructions.

She went up to her mother and father and said:

"Pay heed, both of you!

I delight in extinguishment!

No state of life is eternal, not even that of the gods;

what then of sensual pleasures, so hollow,

offering little gratification and much distress.

Sensual pleasures are bitter as the venom of a snake,

yet fools are infatuated by them.

Sent to hell for a very long time,

they are beaten and tortured.

Those who grow in wickedness

ever lament in the underworld due to their own bad deeds.

They're fools, unrestrained in body,

mind, and speech.

Those witless, senseless fools,
trapped by the origin of suffering,
are ignorant, not understanding the noble truths
when they are being taught.
Most people, mum, ignorant of the truths
taught by the excellent Buddha,
look forward to a state of life,
longing for rebirth among the gods.
Yet even rebirth among the gods
in an impermanent state of life is not eternal.
But fools are not scared
of being reborn time and again.
Four lower realms and two other realms
may be gained somehow or other.
But for those who end up in a lower realm,
there is no way to go forth in the hells.
May you both grant me permission to go forth
in the dispensation of him of the ten powers.
Living at ease, I shall apply myself
to giving up rebirth and death.
Why look forward to a new state of life
in this useless, insubstantial body?
Grant me permission, I shall go forth
to make an end of craving for a new life.
A Buddha has arisen, the time has come,
the unlucky moment has passed.
As long as I live I'll never betray
my ethical precepts or my chaste path."
Then Sumedhā said to her parents:

“So long as I remain a layperson,
I’ll refuse to eat any food,
until I’ve fallen under the sway of death.”
Upset, her mother burst into tears,
while her father, though grieved,
tried his best to persuade her
as she lay collapsed upstairs in the longhouse.
“Get up child, why do you grieve so?
You’re already betrothed to be married!
King Anīkaratta the handsome
is in Vāraṇavatī: he is your betrothed.
You shall be the chief queen,
wife of King Anīkaratta.
Ethical precepts, the chaste path—
going forth is hard to do, my child.
As a royal there is command, wealth, authority,
and the happiness of possessions.
Enjoy sensual pleasures while you’re still young!
Let your wedding take place, my child!”
Then Sumedhā said to him:
“Let this not come to pass! Existence is hollow!
I shall either go forth or die,
but I shall never marry.
Why cling to this rotting body so foul,
stinking of fluids,
a horrifying water-bag carcass,
always oozing, full of filth?
Knowing it like I do, what’s the point?
A carcass is vile, smeared with flesh and blood,

food for birds and swarms of worms—
why have we been given it?
Before long the body, bereft of consciousness,
is carried out to the charnel ground,
to be discarded like an old log
by relatives in disgust.
When they've discarded it in the charnel ground,
to be eaten by others, your own parents
bathe themselves, disgusted;
what then of people at large?
They're attached to this hollow carcass,
this mass of sinews and bone;
this rotting body
full of saliva, tears, feces, and pus.
If anyone were to dissect it,
turning it inside out,
the unbearable stench
would disgust even their own mother.
Rationally examining
the aggregates, elements, and sense fields
as conditioned, rooted in birth, suffering—
why would I wish for marriage?
Let three hundred sharp swords
fall on my body everyday!
Even if the slaughter lasted a hundred years
it'd be worth it if it led to the end of suffering.
One who understands the Teacher's words
would put up with this slaughter:
'Long for you is transmigration

being killed time and time again.’

Among gods and humans,

in the realm of animals or that of titans,

among the ghosts or in the hells,

endless killings are seen.

The hells are full of killing,

for the corrupt who have fallen to the underworld.

Even among the gods there is no shelter,

for no happiness excels extinguishment.

Those who are committed to the dispensation

of him of the ten powers attain extinguishment.

Living at ease, they apply themselves

to giving up rebirth and death.

On this very day, dad, I shall renounce:

what’s to enjoy in hollow riches?

I’m disillusioned with sensual pleasures,

they’re like vomit, made like a palm stump.”

As she spoke thus to her father,

Anīkaratta, to whom she was betrothed,

approached from Vāraṇavatī

at the time appointed for the marriage.

Then Sumedhā took up a knife,

and cut off her hair, so black, thick, and soft.

Shutting herself in the longhouse,

she entered the first absorption.

And as she entered it there,

Anīkaratta arrived at the city.

Then in the longhouse, Sumedhā

well developed the perception of impermanence.

As she investigated in meditation,
Anīkaratta quickly climbed the stairs.
His limbs adorned with gems and honey-yellow gold,
he begged Sumedhā with cupped palms:
“As a royal there is command, wealth, authority,
and the happiness of possessions.
Enjoy sensual pleasures while you’re still young!
Sensual pleasures are hard to find in the world!
I’ve handed royalty to you—
enjoy riches, give gifts!
Don’t be sad;
your parents are upset.”
Sumedhā, having no use for sensual pleasures,
and having done away with delusion, spoke right back:
“Do not take pleasure in sensuality!
See the danger in sensual pleasures!
Mandhātā, king of four continents,
foremost in enjoying sensual pleasures,
died unsated,
his desires unfulfilled.
Were the seven jewels to rain from the sky
all over the ten directions,
there would be no sating of sensual pleasures:
people die insatiable.
Like a butcher’s knife and chopping board,
sensual pleasures are like a cobra’s head.
They burn like a fire-brand,
they resemble a skeleton.
Sensual pleasures are impermanent and unstable,

they’re full of suffering, a terrible poison;
like a hot iron ball,
the root of gloom, their fruit is pain.
Sensual pleasures are like fruits of a tree,
like scraps of meat, painful,
they trick you like a dream;
sensual pleasures are like borrowed goods.
Sensual pleasures are like swords and spears;
a disease, a boil, gloom and trouble.
Like a pit of glowing coals,
the root of gloom, fear and slaughter.
Thus sensual pleasures have been explained
to be obstructions, so full of suffering.
Please leave! As for me,
I have no trust in any state of life.
What can someone else do for me
when their own head is burning?
When stalked by old age and death,
you should strive to destroy them.”
She opened the door
and saw her parents with Anīkaratta,
sitting crying on the floor.
And so she said this:
“Transmigration is long for fools,
crying again and again at that with no known beginning—
the death of a father,
the killing of a brother or of themselves.
Remember the ocean of tears, of milk, of blood—
transmigration with no known beginning.

Remember the bones piled up
by beings transmigrating.
Remember the four oceans
compared with tears, milk, and blood.
Remember bones piled up high as Mount Vepulla
in the course of a single eon.
Transmigration with no known beginning
is compared to this broad Black Plum Tree Land;
if divided into lumps the size of jujube seeds,
they'd still be fewer than his mother's mothers.
Remember the grass, sticks, and leaves,
compare that with no known beginning:
if split into chips four inches in size,
they'd still be fewer than his father's fathers.
Remember the one-eyed turtle and the yoke with a hole
blown in the ocean from east to west—
sticking the head in the hole
is a metaphor for gaining a human birth.
Remember the form of this unlucky body,
insubstantial as a lump of foam.
See the aggregates as impermanent,
remember the hells so full of distress.
Remember those swelling the charnel grounds
again and again in life after life.
Remember the danger of gharials!
Remember the four truths!
When freedom from death is there to be found,
why would you drink the five bitter poisons?
For all erotic delights

are so much more bitter than them.
When freedom from death is there to be found,
why would you burn for sensual pleasures?
For all erotic delights
are burning, boiling, bubbling, seething.
When there is freedom from enmity,
why would you want your enemy, sensual pleasures?
Many enemies take a share of your sensual pleasures:
kings, fire, robbers, flood, and unloved heirs.
When liberation is there to be found,
what good are sensual pleasures that kill and bind?
For though unwilling, when sensual pleasures are there,
they are subject to the pain of killing and binding.
As a blazing grass torch
burns one who grasps it without letting go,
sensual pleasures are like a grass torch,
burning those who do not let go.
Don’t give up abundant happiness
for the trivial joys of sensual pleasure.
Don’t fret later,
like a catfish on a hook.
Deliberately control yourself among sensual pleasures!
You’re like a hound fixed to a chain:
sensual pleasures will surely devour you
as hungry corpse-workers would a hound.
Harnessed to sensual pleasure,
you undergo endless pain,
along with much mental anguish:
relinquish sensual pleasures, they don’t last!

When the unaging is there to be found,
what good are sensual pleasures in which is old age?
All rebirths everywhere
are bonded to death and sickness.
This is freedom from old age, freedom from death!
This is freedom from old age and death, the sorrowless state!
Free of enmity, unconstricted,
faultless, fearless, without tribulations.
This freedom from death has been realized by many;
even today it can be obtained
by those who rationally apply themselves;
but it's impossible if you don't try."
So said Sumedhā,
lacking delight in conditioned things.
Soothing Anīkaratta,
Sumedhā cast her hair on the ground.
Standing up, Anīkaratta
raised his cupped palms to her father and begged:
"Let go of Sumedhā, so that she may go forth!
She will see the truth of liberation."
Released by her mother and father,
she went forth, afraid of grief and fear.
While still a trainee nun she realized the six direct knowledges,
along with the highest fruit.
The extinguishment of the princess
was incredible and amazing;
on her deathbed, she declared
her several past lives.
"In the time of the Buddha Koṇāgamana,

we three friends gave the gift
of a newly-built dwelling
in the Saṅgha's monastery.
Ten times, a hundred times,
a thousand times, ten thousand times,
we were reborn among the gods,
let alone among humans.
We were mighty among the gods,
let alone among humans!
I was queen to a king with the seven treasures—
I was the treasure of a wife.
That was the cause, that the origin, that the root,
that was the acceptance of the dispensation;
that first meeting culminated in extinguishment
for one delighting in the teaching.
So say those who have faith in the words
of the one unrivaled in wisdom.
They're disillusioned with any state of life,
and being disillusioned they become dispassionate."
That is how these verses were recited by the senior nun Sumedhā.
The Verses of the Senior Nuns are finished.