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Buddhism

Therīgāthā — Verses of the Senior Nuns

✦ ✦ ✦

Buddhist tradition (attributed to the Buddha and his disciples)

Translation by Bhikkhu Sujato

Credits

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About:

Poems by 73 nuns of early Buddhism — one of the oldest collections of literature by women. They speak of the loss of children and husbands, of life before ordination, of courtesans and queens who renounced the world, and of the freedom found on the path.

It belongs to the Khuddaka Nikāya, the "minor collection" of the Pali canon, and is the companion of the Theragāthā, the poems of the monks.

Among its authors are Mahāpajāpatī, the Buddha's aunt and foster mother and the first nun; Kisāgotamī, who sought a cure for her dead child; and Ambapālī, the courtesan who meditates on the ageing of her own body.

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1.1 — AN UNNAMED NUN (1ST)

✦

1 Homage to him, the blessed one, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha!

2 Sleep softly, little nun,
wrapped in the cloth you sewed yourself;
for your desire has been quelled,
like vegetables boiled dry in a pot.

3 That is how this verse was recited by a certain unnamed nun.

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1.2 — MUTTĀ (1ST)

✦

1 Muttā, be released from your yokes,
like the moon released from the eclipse.
When your mind is released,
enjoy your alms free of debt.

2 That is how the Buddha regularly advised the trainee nun Muttā with these verses.

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1.3 — PUṆṆĀ

✦

1 Puṇṇā, be filled with good qualities,
like the moon on the fifteenth day.
When your wisdom is full,
shatter the mass of darkness.

2 That is how this verse was recited by the senior nun Puṇṇā.

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1.4 — TISSĀ

✦

1 Tissā, train in the trainings—
don't let your yokes overcome you.
Unyoked from all yokes,
live in the world free of defilements.

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1.5 — ANOTHER TISSĀ

✦

1 Tissā, apply yourself to good qualities—
don't let the moment pass you by.
For if you miss your moment,
you'll grieve when sent to hell.

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1.6 — DHĪRĀ

✦

1 Dhīrā, touch cessation,
the blissful settling of perception.
Win extinguishment,
the supreme sanctuary from the yoke.

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1.7 — VĪRĀ

✦

1 She's known as Vīrā because of her heroic qualities,
a nun with faculties developed.
She bears her final body,
having vanquished Māra with his legions.

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1.8 — MITTĀ (1ST)

✦

1 Having gone forth in faith,
appreciate your spiritual friends, Mittā.
Develop skillful qualities
for the sake of sanctuary from the yoke.

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1.9 — BHADRĀ

✦

1 Having gone forth in faith,
appreciate your blessings, Bhadrā.
Develop skillful qualities
for the sake of the supreme sanctuary from the yoke.

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1.10 — UPASAMĀ

✦

[1] Upasamā, cross the flood,
Death's dominion so hard to pass.
When you have vanquished Māra and his legions,
bear your final body.

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1.11 — MUTTĀ (2ND)

✦

[1] I'm well freed, so very well freed,
freed from the three things that humped me:
the mortar, the pestle,
and my humpbacked husband.
I'm freed from birth and death;
the leash to existence is eradicated.

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1.12 — DHAMMADINNĀ

✦

1 One who is eager and determined
would be filled with awareness.
Their mind not bound to pleasures of sense,
they're said to be heading upstream.

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1.13 — VISĀKHĀ

✦

1 Do the Buddha's bidding,
you won't regret it.
Having quickly washed your feet,
sit in a discreet place to meditate.

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1.14 — SUMANĀ

✦

[1] Having seen the elements as suffering,
don't get reborn again.
When you've discarded desire for rebirth,
you will live at peace.

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1.15 — UTTARĀ (1ST)

✦

1 I was restrained
in body, speech, and mind.
Having plucked out craving, root and all,
I'm cooled and quenched.

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1.16 — SUMANĀ, WHO WENT FORTH LATE IN LIFE

✦

1 Sleep softly, old lady,
wrapped in the cloth you sewed yourself;
for your desire has been quelled,
you're cooled and quenched.

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1.17 — DHAMMĀ

✦

1 I wandered for alms
though feeble, leaning on a staff.
My limbs wobbled
and I fell to the ground right there.
Seeing the danger of the body,
my mind was freed.

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1.18 — SAṄGHĀ

✦

1 I gave up my home, my child, my cattle,
and all that I love, and went forth.
And now that I've given up desire and hate,
dispelled ignorance,
and plucked out craving, root and all,
I'm at peace, I'm quenched.

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2.1 — ABHIRŪPANANDĀ

✦

1 Nandā, see this bag of bones as
diseased, filthy, and rotten.
With mind unified and serene,
meditate on the ugly aspects of the body.

2 Meditate on the signless,
give up the tendency to conceit;
and when you comprehend conceit,
you will live at peace.

3 That is how the Buddha regularly advised the trainee nun Nandā with these verses.

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2.2 — JENTĀ

✦

1 Of the seven awakening factors,
the path for attaining extinguishment,
I have developed them all,
just as the Buddha taught.

2 For I have seen the Blessed One,
and this bag of bones is my last.
Transmigration through births is finished,
now there'll be no more future lives.

3 That is how these verses were recited by the senior nun Jentā.

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2.3 — SUMAṄGALA'S MOTHER

✦

1 I'm well freed, well freed,
so very well freed from the pestle!
My shameless husband was most certainly a mushroom,
my mortar wafted like an eel.

2 Greed and hate sizzle and hiss
as I squelch them.
Having gone to the root of a tree,
I meditate happily, thinking, "Oh, what bliss!"

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2.4 — AḌḌHAKĀSI

✦

1 The price for my services
amounted to the nation of Kāsi.
By setting that price,
the townsfolk made me priceless.

2 Then, growing disillusioned with my form,
I became dispassionate.
Don't journey on and on,
transmigrating through rebirths!
I've realized the three knowledges,
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

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2.5 — CITTĀ

✦

1 Even though I'm skinny,
sick, and very feeble,
I climb the mountain,
leaning on a staff.

2 Having laid down my outer robe,
and overturned my bowl,
propping myself against a rock,
I shattered the mass of darkness.

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2.6 — METTIKĀ

✦

1 Though in pain,
feeble, my youth long gone,
I climb the mountain,
leaning on a staff.

2 Having laid down my outer robe
and overturned my bowl,
sitting on a rock,
my mind was freed.
I've attained the three knowledges,
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

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2.7 — MITTĀ (2ND)

✦

1 I rejoiced in the host of gods,
having observed the sabbath
complete in all eight factors,
on the fourteenth and the fifteenth days,

2 and the eighth day of the fortnight,
as well as on the fortnightly special displays.
Today I eat just once a day,
my head is shaven, I wear the outer robe.
I don't long for the heavenly host,
for stress has been removed from my heart.

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2.8 — TO ABHAYĀ'S MOTHER FROM HER DAUGHTER

✦

1 My dear mother, examine this body,
up from the soles of the feet,
and down from the tips of the hairs,
so impure and foul-smelling.

2 Meditating like this,
all my lust is eradicated.
The fever of passion is cut off,
I'm cooled and quenched.

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2.9 — ABHAYĀ

✦

1 Abhayā, the body is fragile,
yet ordinary people are attached to it.
I'll lay down the body,
aware and mindful.

2 Though subject to so many painful things,
I have, through my love of diligence,
reached the ending of craving,
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

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2.10 — SĀMĀ

✦

1 Four or five times
I left my dwelling.
I had failed to find peace of heart,
or any control over my mind.
Now it is the eighth night
since craving was eradicated.

2 Though subject to so many painful things,
I have, through my love of diligence,
reached the ending of craving,
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

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3.1 — ANOTHER SĀMĀ

✦

1 In the twenty-five years
since I went forth,
I don't know that I had ever found
serenity in my mind.

2 I had failed to find peace of heart,
or any control over my mind.
When I remembered the victor's instructions,
I was struck with a sense of urgency.

3 Though subject to so many painful things,
I have, through my love of diligence,
reached the ending of craving,
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.
This is the seventh day
since my craving dried up.

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3.2 — UTTAMĀ

✦

1 Four or five times
I left my dwelling.
I had failed to find peace of heart,
or any control over my mind.

2 I approached a nun
in whom I had faith.
She taught me the Dhamma:
the aggregates, sense fields, and elements.

3 When I had heard her teaching,
in accordance with her instructions,
I sat cross-legged for seven days without moving,
given over to rapture and bliss.
On the eighth day I stretched out my feet,
having shattered the mass of darkness.

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3.3 — ANOTHER UTTAMĀ

✦

1 Of the seven awakening factors,
the path for attaining extinguishment,
I have developed them all,
just as the Buddha taught.

2 I attain the meditations on emptiness
and signlessness whenever I want.
I am the Buddha's bosom daughter,
always delighting in extinguishment.

3 All sensual pleasures are cut off,
whether human or heavenly.
Transmigration through births is finished,
now there'll be no more future lives.

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3.4 — DANTIKĀ

✦

1 Leaving my day's meditation
on Vulture's Peak Mountain,
I saw an elephant on the riverbank
having just come up from his bath.

2 A man, taking a pole with a hook,
asked the elephant, "Give me your foot."
The elephant presented his foot,
and the man mounted him.

3 Seeing a wild beast so tamed,
submitting to human control,
my mind became serene:
that is why I've gone to the forest!

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3.5 — UBBIRĪ

✦

1 “You cry ‘Live, my dear mother!’ in the forest.
Ubbirī, get a hold of yourself!
Eighty-four thousand people,
all named ‘Live’,
have been burnt in this funeral ground:
which one do you grieve for?”

2 “Oh! For you have plucked the arrow from me,
so hard to see, stuck in the heart.
You’ve swept away the grief for my daughter
in which I once was mired.

3 Today I’ve plucked the arrow,
I’m hungerless, quenched.
I go for refuge to that sage, the Buddha,
to his teaching, and to the Saṅgha.”

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3.6 — SUKKĀ

✦

1 “What’s up with these people in Rājagaha?
They sprawl like they’ve been drinking mead!
They don’t attend on Sukkā
as she teaches the Buddha’s instructions.

2 But the wise—
it’s as if they drink it up,
so irresistible, delectable, and nutritious,
like travelers enjoying a cool cloud.”

3 “She’s known as Sukkā because of her bright qualities,
free of greed, serene.
She bears her final body,
having vanquished Māra with his legions.”

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3.7 — SELĀ

✦

1 “There’s no escape in the world,
so what will seclusion do for you?
Enjoy erotic delights;
don’t regret it later.”

2 “Sensual pleasures are like swords and spears
the aggregates are their chopping block.
What you call erotic delight
is now no delight for me.

3 Relishing is banished in every respect,
and the mass of darkness is shattered.
So know this, Wicked One:
you’re beaten, terminator!”

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3.8 — SOMĀ

✦

1 “That state’s very challenging;
it’s for the sages to attain.
With her two-inch wisdom,
it’s not possible for a woman.”

2 “What difference does womanhood make
when the mind is serene,
and knowledge is present
as you rightly discern the Dhamma.

3 Relishing is banished in every respect,
and the mass of darkness is shattered.
So know this, Wicked One:
you’re beaten, terminator!”

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4.1 — BHADDĀ DAUGHTER OF KAPILA

✦

1 Kassapa is the son and heir of the Buddha,
whose mind is immersed in samādhi.
He who knows his past lives,
sees heaven and places of loss,

2 and has attained the end of rebirth:
is a sage of perfect insight.
It's because of these three knowledges
that the brahmin is a master of the three knowledges.

3 In exactly the same way, Bhaddā daughter of Kapila
is master of the three knowledges, <j>conqueror of death.
She bears her final body,
having vanquished Māra with his legions.

4 Seeing the danger of the world,
both of us went forth.
Now we are tamed, our defilements have ended;
we've become cooled and quenched.

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5.1 — AN UNNAMED NUN (2ND)

✦

1 In the twenty-five years
since I went forth,
I have not found peace of mind,
even as long as a finger-snap.

2 Failing to find peace of heart,
festering with sensual desire,
I cried with flailing arms
as I entered a dwelling.

3 I approached a nun
in whom I had faith.
She taught me the Dhamma:
the aggregates, sense fields, and elements.

4 When I heard her teaching,
I retired to a discreet place.
I know my past lives;
my clairvoyance is purified;

5 I encompass the minds of others;
my clairaudience is purified;
I've realized the psychic powers,

and attained the ending of defilements.
I have realized the six kinds of direct knowledge,
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

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5.2 — VIMALĀ, THE FORMER COURTESAN

✦

1 Intoxicated by my appearance,
my figure, my beauty, my fame,
and owing to my youth,
I looked down on others.

2 I adorned this body
all pretty, lamented by fools,
and stood at the brothel door,
like a hunter setting a snare.

3 I stripped for them,
revealing my many hidden treasures.
Creating an intricate illusion,
I laughed, teasing those men.

4 Today, having wandered for alms,
my head shaven, wearing the outer robe,
I sat at the root of a tree to meditate;
I've gained freedom from thought.

5 All yokes are severed,
both human and heavenly.
Having wiped out all defilements,
I have become cooled and quenched.

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5.3 — SĪHĀ

✦

1 Due to irrational application of mind,
I was racked by desire for pleasures of the senses.
I was restless in the past,
lacking control over my mind.

2 Overcome by corruptions,
pursuing perceptions of the beautiful,
I gained no peace of mind.
Under the sway of lustful thoughts,

3 thin, pale, and wan,
for seven years I wandered,
full of pain,
finding no happiness by day or night.

4 Taking a rope
I entered deep into the forest, thinking:
"It's better that I hang myself
than I return to a lesser life."

5 I made a strong noose
and tied it to the branch of a tree.
Casting it round my neck,
my mind was freed.

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5.4 — SUNDARĪNANDĀ

✦

1 “Nandā, see this bag of bones as
diseased, filthy, and rotten.
With mind unified and serene,
meditate on the ugly aspects of the body:

2 as this is, so is that,
as that is, so is this.
A foul stink wafts from it,
it is the fools’ delight.”

3 Reflecting in such a way,
tireless all day and night,
having broken through
with my own wisdom, I saw.

4 Being diligent,
rationally investigating,
I truly saw this body
both inside and out.

5 Then, growing disillusioned with the body,
I became dispassionate within.
Diligent, detached,
I’m quenched and at peace.

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5.5 — NANDUTTARĀ

✦

1 In the past I worshiped the sacred flame,
the moon, the sun, and the gods.
Having gone to a river ford,
I plunged into the water.

2 Undertaking many vows,
I shaved half my head.
Preparing a bed on the ground,
I ate no food at night.

3 I loved my ornaments and decorations;
and with baths and oil-massages,
I pandered to this body,
racked by desire for pleasures of the senses.

4 But then I gained faith,
and went forth to homelessness.
Truly seeing the body,
desire for sensual pleasure is eradicated.

5 All rebirths are cut off,
wishes and aspirations too.
Unyoked from all yokes,
I've found peace of mind.

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5.6 — MITTĀKĀḶĪ

✦

1 Having gone forth in faith
from the lay life to homelessness,
I wandered here and there,
jealous of possessions and honors.

2 Neglecting the highest goal,
I pursued the lowest.
Under the sway of corruptions,
I never knew the goal of the ascetic life.

3 I was struck with a sense of urgency
as I was sitting in my hut:
“I’m walking the wrong path,
under the sway of craving.

4 My life is short,
trampled by old age and sickness.
Before this body breaks apart,
there is no time for me to be careless.”

5 I examined in line with the truth
the rise and fall of the aggregates.
I stood up with mind liberated,
having fulfilled the Buddha’s instructions.

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5.7 — SAKULĀ

✦

1 While staying at home
I heard the teaching from a monk.
I saw the stainless Dhamma,
extinguishment, the state that does not pass.

2 Leaving behind my son and my daughter,
my riches and my grain,
I had my hair cut off,
and went forth to homelessness.

3 As a trainee nun,
I developed the direct path.
I gave up greed and hate,
along with associated defilements.

4 When I was fully ordained as a nun,
I recollected my past lives,
and purified my clairvoyance,
immaculate and fully developed.

5 Conditions are born of causes, crumbling;
having seen them as other,
I gave up all defilements,
I'm cooled and quenched.

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5.8 — SOṆĀ

✦

1 I gave birth to ten sons
in this form, this bag of bones.
Then, when feeble and old,
I approached a nun.

2 She taught me the Dhamma:
the aggregates, sense fields, and elements.
When I heard her teaching,
I shaved off my hair and went forth.

3 When I was a trainee nun,
my clairvoyance was clarified,
and I knew my past lives,
the places I used to live.

4 I meditate on the signless,
my mind unified and serene.
I achieved the immediate liberation,
quenched by not grasping.

5 The five aggregates are fully understood;
they remain, but their root is cut.
Curse you, wretched old age!
now there'll be no more future lives.

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5.9 — BHADDĀ OF THE CURLY HAIR

✦

1 My hair plucked out, covered in mud,
I used to wander wearing just one robe.
I saw fault where there was none,
and was blind to the actual fault.

2 Leaving my day's meditation
on Vulture's Peak Mountain,
I saw the stainless Buddha
at the fore of the mendicant Saṅgha.

3 I bent my knee and bowed,
and in his presence raised my cupped palms.
"Come Bhaddā," he said;
that was my ordination.

4 "I've wandered among the Aṅgans and Magadhans,
the Vajjis, Kāsis, and Kosalans.
I have eaten the almsfood of the nations
free of debt for fifty years."

5 “O! He has made so much merit!
That lay follower is so very wise.
He gave a robe to Bhaddā,
who is released from all ties.”

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5.10 — PAṬĀCĀRĀ

✦

1 Plowing the fields,
sowing seeds in the ground,
providing for partners and children,
young men acquire wealth.

2 I am accomplished in ethics,
and I do the Teacher's bidding,
being neither lazy nor restless—
why then do I not achieve quenching?

3 Having washed my feet,
I took note of the water,
seeing the foot-washing water
flowing from high ground to low.

4 My mind became serene,
like a fine thoroughbred steed.
Then, taking a lamp,
I entered my dwelling,
inspected the bed,
and sat on my cot.

5 Then, grabbing the pin,
I drew out the wick.
The liberation of my heart
was like the quenching of the lamp.

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5.11 — THIRTY NUNS

✦

1 "Taking a pestle,
young men pound grain.
Providing for partners and children,
young men acquire wealth.

2 Do the Buddha's bidding,
you won't regret it.
Having quickly washed your feet,
sit in a discreet place to meditate.
Devoted to serenity of heart,
do the Buddha's bidding."

3 After hearing her words,
the instructions of Paṭācārā,
they washed their feet
and retired to a discreet place.
Devoted to serenity of heart,
they did the Buddha's bidding.

4 In the first watch of the night,
they recollected their past lives.
In the middle watch of the night,
they purified their clairvoyance.
In the last watch of the night,
they shattered the mass of darkness.

5 They rose and paid homage at her feet:
“We have done your bidding;
we shall abide honoring you,
as the Thirty gods honor Indra,
undefeated in battle.
Masters of the three knowledges, <j>we are free of defilements.”

6 That is how thirty senior nuns declared their enlightenment in the presence of Paṭācārā.

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5.12 — CANDĀ

✦

1 I used to be in a sorry state.
As a childless widow,
bereft of friends or relatives,
I got neither food nor clothes.

2 I took a bowl and a staff
and went begging from family to family.
For seven years I wandered,
burned by heat and cold.

3 Then I saw a nun
receiving food and drink.
Approaching her, I said:
“Send me forth to homelessness.”

4 Out of sympathy for me,
Paṭācārā gave me the going forth.
Then, having advised me,
she urged me on to the ultimate goal.

5 After hearing her words,
I did her bidding.
The lady’s advice was not in vain:
master of the three knowledges, <j>I am free of defilements.

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6.1 — FIVE HUNDRED STUDENTS OF PAṬĀCĀRĀ

✦

1 “One whose path you do not know,
not whence they came nor where they went;
though they came from who knows where,
you mourn that being, crying, ‘Oh my son!’

2 But one whose path you do know,
whence they came or where they went;
that one you do not lament—
such is the nature of living creatures.

3 Unasked he came,
he left without leave.
He must have come from somewhere,
and stayed who knows how many days.
He left from here by one road,
he will go from there by another.

4 Departing with the form of a human,
he will go on transmigrating.
As he came, so he went:
why weep over that?”

5 “Oh! For you have plucked the arrow from me,
so hard to see, stuck in the heart.
You’ve swept away the grief for my son,

in which I once was mired.

6 Today I've plucked the arrow,
I'm hungerless, quenched.
I go for refuge to that sage, the Buddha,
to his teaching, and to the Saṅgha."

7 That is how five hundred nuns declared their enlightenment.

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6.2 — VĀSEṬṬHĪ

✦

1 Struck down with grief for my son,
deranged, out of my mind,
nude, my hair flying,
I wandered here and there.

2 I lived on rubbish heaps,
in cemeteries and highways.
For three years I wandered,
stricken by hunger and thirst.

3 Then I saw the Holy One
back at the city of Mithilā.
Tamer of the untamed,
the Awakened One fears nothing from any quarter.

4 Regaining my mind,
I paid homage and sat down.
Out of compassion
Gotama taught me the Dhamma.

5 After hearing his teaching,
I went forth to homelessness.
Applying myself to the Teacher's words,
I realized the state of grace.

6 All sorrows are cut off,
given up, they end here.
I've fully understood the basis
from which grief comes to be.

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6.3 — KHEMĀ

✦

1 “You’re so young and beautiful!
I too am young, just a youth.
Come, Khemā, let us enjoy
the music of a five-piece band.”

2 “This body is rotting,
ailing and frail,
I’m horrified and repelled by it,
and I’ve eradicated sensual craving.

3 Sensual pleasures are like swords and spears;
the aggregates are their chopping block.
What you call erotic delight
is now no delight for me.

4 Relishing is banished in every respect,
and the mass of darkness is shattered.
So know this, Wicked One:
you’re beaten, terminator!”

5 “Worshiping the stars,
serving the sacred flame in a grove;
failing to grasp the true nature of things,
foolish me, I thought this was purity.

6 But now I worship the Awakened One,
supreme among men.
Doing the Teacher's bidding,
I am released from all suffering."

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6.4 — SUJĀTĀ

✦

1 I was adorned with jewelry and all dressed up,
with garlands, and sandalwood makeup piled on,
all covered over with decorations,
and surrounded by my maids.

2 Taking food and drink,
staples and dainties in no small amount,
I left my house
and took myself to the park.

3 I enjoyed myself there and played about,
and then, returning to my own house,
I saw a monastic dwelling,
and so I entered the Añjana wood at Sāketa.

4 Seeing the light of the world,
I paid homage and sat down.
Out of compassion
the Clear-eyed One taught me the Dhamma.

5 When I heard the great seer,
I penetrated the truth.
Right there I found the stainless Dhamma,
the state free of death.

6 Then, having understood the true teaching,
I went forth to homelessness.
I've attained the three knowledges;
the Buddha's bidding was not in vain.

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6.5 — ANOPAMĀ

✦

1 I was born into an eminent family,
affluent and wealthy,
endowed with a beautiful complexion and figure;
Majjha's true-born daughter.

2 I was sought by princes,
coveted by sons of the wealthy.
One sent a messenger to my father:
"Give me Anopamā!

3 However much your daughter
Anopamā weighs,
I'll give you eight times that
in gold coin and gems."

4 When I saw the Awakened One,
the world's Elder, unsurpassed,
I paid homage at his feet,
and withdrew to one side.

5 Out of compassion,
Gotama taught me the Dhamma.
While sitting in that seat,
I realized the third fruit.

6 Then, having shaved off my hair,
I went forth to homelessness.
This is the seventh day
since my craving dried up.

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6.6 — MAHĀPAJĀPATI GOTAMĪ

✦

1 Oh Buddha, my hero: homage to you!
Supreme among all beings,
who released me from suffering,
and many other beings as well.

2 All suffering is fully understood;
craving—its cause—is dried up;
the eightfold path has been developed;
and cessation has been realized by me.

3 Previously I was a mother, a son,
a father, a brother, and a grandmother.
Failing to grasp the true nature of things,
I transmigrated without reward.

4 Since I have seen the Blessed One,
this bag of bones is my last.
Transmigration through births is finished,
now there'll be no more future lives.

5 I see the disciples in harmony,
energetic and resolute,
always staunchly vigorous—
this is homage to the Buddhas!

6 It was truly for the benefit of many
that Māyā gave birth to Gotama.
He swept away the mass of suffering
for those stricken by sickness and death.

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6.7 — GUTTĀ

✦

1 Guttā, you have given up your child,
your wealth, and all that you love.
Foster the goal for which you went forth;
do not fall under the mind's control.

2 Beings deceived by the mind,
playing in Māra's domain,
ignorant, they journey on,
transmigrating through countless rebirths.

3 Sensual desire and ill will,
and substantialist view;
misapprehension of precepts and observances,
and doubt as the fifth.

4 O nun, when you have given up
these lower fetters,
you won't come back
to this world again.

5 And when you're rid of desire,
conceit, ignorance, and restlessness,
having cut the fetters,
you'll make an end to suffering.

6 Having wiped out transmigration,
and fully understood rebirth,
hungerless in this very life,
you will live at peace.

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6.8 — VIJAYĀ

✦

1 Four or five times
I left my dwelling;
I had failed to find peace of heart,
or any control over my mind.

2 I approached a nun
and politely questioned her.
She taught me the Dhamma:
the elements and sense fields,

3 the four noble truths,
the faculties and the powers,
the awakening factors, and the eightfold path
for the attainment of the highest goal.

4 After hearing her words,
I did her bidding.
In the first watch of the night,
I recollected my past lives.

5 In the middle watch of the night,
I purified my clairvoyance.
In the last watch of the night,
I shattered the mass of darkness.

6 I then meditated pervading my body
with rapture and bliss.
On the seventh day I stretched out my feet,
having shattered the mass of darkness.

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7.1 — UTTARĀ (2ND)

✦

1 “Taking a pestle,
young men pound grain.
Providing for partners and children,
young men acquire wealth.

2 Work at the Buddha’s bidding,
you won’t regret it.
Having quickly washed your feet,
sit in a discreet place to meditate.

3 Establish the mind,
unified and serene.
Examine conditions
as alien, not as self.”

4 “After hearing her words,
the instructions of Paṭācārā,
I washed my feet
and retired to a discreet place.

5 In the first watch of the night,
I recollected my past lives.
In the middle watch of the night,
I purified my clairvoyance.

6 In the last watch of the night,
I shattered the mass of darkness.
I rose up master of the three knowledges:
your bidding has been done.

7 I shall abide honoring you
as the Thirty gods honor Sakka,
undefeated in battle.
Master of the three knowledges, <j>I am free of defilements.”

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7.2 — CĀLĀ

✦

1 “As a nun with developed faculties,
having established mindfulness,
I penetrated that peaceful state,
the blissful stilling of conditions.”

2 “In whose name did you shave your head?
You look like an ascetic,
but you don’t approve any creed.
Why do you wander as if lost?”

3 “Followers of other creeds
rely on their views.
They don’t understand the Dhamma,
for they’re no experts in the Dhamma.

4 But there is one born in the Sakyan clan,
the unrivaled Buddha;
he taught me the Dhamma
for going beyond views.

5 Suffering, suffering’s origin,
suffering’s transcendence,
and the noble eightfold path
that leads to the stilling of suffering.

6 After hearing his words,
I happily did his bidding.
I've attained the three knowledges
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

7 Relishing is banished in every respect,
and the mass of darkness is shattered.
So know this, Wicked One:
you're beaten, terminator!"

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7.3 — UPACĀLĀ

✦

1 “A nun with faculties developed,
mindful, seeing clearly,
I penetrated that peaceful state,
which reprobates do not cultivate.”

2 “Why don’t you approve of rebirth?
When you’re born, you get to enjoy sensual pleasures.
Enjoy erotic delights;
don’t regret it later.”

3 “Death comes to those who are born;
and when born they fall into suffering:
the chopping off of hands and feet,
killing, caging, misery.

4 But there is one born in the Sakyan clan,
awakened and undefeated.
He taught me the Dhamma
for transcending rebirth:

5 suffering, suffering’s origin,
suffering’s transcendence,
and the noble eightfold path
that leads to the stilling of suffering.

6 After hearing his words,
I happily did his bidding.
I've attained the three knowledges
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

7 Relishing is banished in every respect,
and the mass of darkness is shattered.
So know this, Wicked One:
you're beaten, terminator!"

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8.1 — SĪSŪPACĀLĀ

✦

1 “A nun accomplished in ethics,
her sense faculties well-restrained,
would realize the peaceful state,
so delectable and nutritious.”

2 “There are the gods of the thirty-three, <j>and those of Yama;
also the Joyful Deities,
the gods who love to create,
and the gods who control what is created by others.
Set your heart on such places,
where you used to live.”

3 “The gods of the thirty-three, <j>and those of Yama;
also the Joyful Deities,
the gods who love to create,
and the gods who control what is created by others—

4 time after time, life after life,
are governed by substantial reality.
They haven’t passed beyond substantial reality,
those who transmigrate through birth and death.

5 All the world is on fire,
all the world is alight,
all the world is ablaze,
all the world is rocking.

6 The Buddha taught me the Dhamma,
unshakable, incomparable,
not frequented by ordinary people;
my mind adores that place.

7 After hearing his words,
I happily did his bidding.
I've attained the three knowledges,
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

8 Relishing is banished in every respect,
and the mass of darkness is shattered.
So know this, Wicked One:
you're beaten, terminator!"

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9.1 — VAḌḌHA'S MOTHER

✦

1 "Vaḍḍha, please never ever
get snarled in the world.
My child, do not partake
in suffering again and again.

2 For happy dwell the sages, Vaḍḍha,
unstirred, their doubts cut off,
cooled and tamed,
and free of defilements.

3 Vaḍḍha, foster the path
that the seers have walked,
for the attainment of vision,
and for making an end of suffering."

4 "Mother, you speak with such assurance
to me on this matter.
My dear mom, I can't help thinking
that no snarls are found in you."

5 "Vaḍḍha, not a jot or a skerrick
of snarl is found in me
for any conditions at all,
whether low, high, or middling.

6 All defilements are ended for me,
meditating and diligent.
I've attained the three knowledges
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions."

7 "Oh so excellent was the goad
my mother spurred me with!
Owing to her compassion, she spoke
verses on the ultimate goal.

8 On hearing her words,
advised by my mother,
I was struck with righteous urgency
for the sake of sanctuary from the yoke.

9 Striving, resolute,
tireless all day and night,
urged on by my mother,
I realized supreme peace.

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10.1 — KISĀGOTAMĪ

✦

1 “Pointing out how the world works,
the sages have praised good friendship.
Associating with good friends,
even a fool becomes astute.

2 Associate with true persons,
for that is how wisdom grows.
Should you associate with true persons,
you would be freed from all suffering.

3 And you would understand suffering,
its origin and cessation,
the eightfold path,
and so the four noble truths.”

4 “‘A woman’s life is painful,’
explained the Buddha, <j>guide for those fit to train,
‘and for a co-wife it’s especially so.
After giving birth just once,

5 some women even cut their own throat,
while delicate ladies take poison.
Being guilty of killing a person,
they both undergo ruin.’”

6 “I was on the road, near to giving birth,
when I saw my husband dead.
I gave birth there on the road
before I’d reached my own house.

7 My two children have died,
and on the road my husband lies dead—<j>oh woe is me!
Mother, father, and brother
all burning up on the same pyre.”

8 “Oh woe is you whose family is lost,
the suffering you have undergone has no measure;
you have been shedding tears
for many thousands of lives.”

9 “While staying in the charnel ground,
I saw my son’s flesh being eaten.
With my family destroyed, condemned by all,
and my husband dead, I realized freedom from death.

10 I’ve developed the noble eightfold path
leading to freedom from death.
I’ve realized extinguishment,
as seen in the mirror of the Dhamma.

11 I’ve plucked out the dart,
laid down the burden, <j>and done what needed to be done.”
The senior nun Kisāgotamī,
her mind released, said this.

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11.1 — UPPALAVAṆṆĀ

✦

1 “The two of us were co-wives,
though we were mother and daughter.
I was struck with a sense of urgency,
so astonishing and hair-raising!

2 Curse those filthy sensual pleasures,
so nasty and thorny,
where we, both mother and daughter,
had to be co-wives together.

3 Seeing the danger in sensual pleasures,
seeing renunciation as sanctuary,
I went forth in Rājagaha
from the lay life to homelessness.

4 I know my past lives;
my clairvoyance is clarified;
I encompass the minds of others;
my clairaudience is purified;

5 I’ve realized the psychic powers,
and attained the ending of defilements.
I’ve realized the six kinds of direct knowledge,
and fulfilled the Buddha’s instructions.

6 I created a four-horsed chariot
using my psychic powers.
Then I bowed at the feet of the Buddha,
the glorious protector of the world."

7 "You've come to this sal tree all crowned with flowers,
and stand at its root all alone.
But you have no male companion with you—
silly girl, aren't you afraid of rascals?"

8 "Even if 100,000 rascals like this
were to gang up,
I'd stir not a hair nor tremble.
What could you do to me all alone, Māra?

9 I'll vanish,
or I'll enter your belly;
I could stand between your eyebrows
and you still wouldn't see me.

10 I'm the master of my own mind,
I've developed the bases of psychic power well.
I've realized the six kinds of direct knowledge,
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

11 Sensual pleasures are like swords and spears;
the aggregates are their chopping block.
What you call erotic delight
is now no delight for me.

12 Relishing is banished in every respect,
and the mass of darkness is shattered.
So know this, Wicked One:
you're beaten, terminator!"

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12.1 — PUṆṆIKĀ

✦

1 “I used to be a water-carrier. Even when it was cold,
I would always plunge into the water,
afraid of my masters’ beatings,
harassed by fear of abuse and anger.

2 Brahmin, what are you afraid of,
that you always plunge into the water,
your limbs trembling
in the freezing cold?”

3 “Oh, but you already know,
Madam Puṇṇikā, when you ask me:
I am doing good deeds,
to ward off the wickedness I have done.

4 Whosoever young or old
performs a wicked deed,
by ablution in water they are
released from their wicked deed.”

5 “Who on earth told you this,
one ignoramus to another:
‘Actually, by ablution in water one is
released from a wicked deed.’

6 Would not they all go to heaven, then:
all the frogs and the turtles,
dragons, dolphins,
and other water-dwellers too?

7 Butchers of sheep and pigs,
fishermen, animal trappers,
bandits, executioners,
and others of evil deeds:
by ablution in water they too would be
released from their wicked deeds.

8 If these rivers had carried away
your bad deeds in the past,
they would also carry away your good deeds,
from which you'd be prevented.

9 Brahmin, the thing that you are afraid of,
when you always plunge into the water,
do not do that very thing,
don't let the cold harm your skin."

10 "I have been on the wrong path,
and you've guided me to the noble path.
Madam, I give to you
this ablution cloth."

11 "Keep the cloth for yourself,
I do not want it.
If you fear suffering,

if you don't like suffering,

12 then don't do bad deeds
either openly or in secret.
If you should do a bad deed,
or you're doing one now,

13 you won't be freed from suffering,
though you fly away and flee.
If you fear suffering,
if you don't like suffering,

14 go for refuge to the Buddha, the unaffected,
to his teaching and to the Saṅgha.
Undertake the precepts,
that will be good for you."

15 "I go for refuge to the Buddha, the unaffected,
to his teaching and to the Saṅgha.
I undertake the precepts,
that will be good for me.

16 I used to be brahmin only by kin,
today I truly am a brahmin!
Master of the three knowledges, <j>accomplished in wisdom,
I'm a scholar, a bathed initiate."

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13.1 — AMBAPĀLĪ

✦

1 My hair was as black as bees,
graced with curly tips;
now old, it has become like hemp bark—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

2 Crowned with flowers,
my head was as fragrant as a perfume box;
now old, it smells like dog fur—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

3 My hair was as thick as a well-planted forest,
it shone, parted with brush and pins;
now old, it's patchy and sparse—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

4 With plaits of black and ribbons of gold,
it was so pretty, graced with braids;
now old, my head's gone bald—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

5 My eyebrows used to look so nice,
like crescents painted by an artist;
now old, they droop with wrinkles—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

6 My eyes shone brilliant as gems,
wide and indigo;
ruined by age, they shine no more—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

7 My nose was like a perfect peak,
lovely in my bloom of youth;
now old, it's shriveled like a pepper;
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

8 My ear-lobes were so pretty,
like lovingly crafted bracelets;
now old, they droop with wrinkles—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

9 My teeth used to be so pretty,
bright as a jasmine flower;
now old, they're broken and yellow—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

10 My singing was sweet as a cuckoo
wandering in the forest groves;
now old, it's patchy and croaking—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

11 My neck used to be so pretty,
like a polished shell of conch;
now old, it's bowed and bent—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

12 My arms used to be so pretty,
like rounded cross-bars;
with age, they wrinkle and sag as a patala tree—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

13 My hands used to be so pretty,
graced with lovely golden rings;
now old, they're like red radishes—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

14 My breasts were both once so pretty,
swelling, round, close-set, and perky;
now they droop like water bags—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

15 My body used to be so pretty,
like a polished slab of lustrous gold;
now it's covered with delicate wrinkles—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

16 Both my thighs used to be so pretty,
like an elephant's trunk;
now old, they're like bamboo—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

17 My calves used to be so pretty,
graced with cute golden anklets;
now old, they're like sesame sticks—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

18 Both my feet used to be so pretty,
plump as if with cotton-wool;
now old, they're cracked and wrinkly—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

19 This bag of bones once was such,
but now it's withered, home to so much pain;
like a house in decay with plaster crumbling—
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

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13.2 — ROHINĪ

✦

1 “You fell asleep saying ‘ascetics’;
you woke up saying ‘ascetics’;
you only praise ascetics, madam—
surely you’ll become an ascetic.

2 You provide ascetics
with abundant food and drink.
I ask you now, Rohiṇī:
why do you like ascetics?

3 They don’t like to work, they’re lazy,
they live on charity;
always on the lookout, greedy for sweets—
so why do you like ascetics?”

4 “Dad, for a long time now
you’ve questioned me about ascetics.
I shall extol for you
their wisdom, ethics, and vigor.

5 They like to work, they’re not lazy;
by giving up greed and hate,
they do the best kind of work—
that’s why I like ascetics.

6 As for the three roots of evil,
by pure deeds they shake them off.
They have given up all wickedness—
that's why I like ascetics.

7 Their bodily actions are pure;
their actions of speech likewise;
their actions of mind are pure—
that's why I like ascetics.

8 Immaculate as a conch-shell,
they're pure inside and out,
full of bright qualities—
that's why I like ascetics.

9 They're learned and memorize the teaching,
noble, living righteously,
teaching the text and its meaning:
that's why I like ascetics.

10 They're learned and memorize the teaching,
noble, living righteously,
unified in mind, and mindful—
that's why I like ascetics.

11 Traveling afar, and mindful,
thoughtful in counsel, not restless,
they understand the end of suffering—
that's why I like ascetics.

12 When they leave a village,
they don't look back with longing,
but proceed without concern—
that's why I like ascetics.

13 They hoard no goods in storerooms,
nor in pots or baskets.
They seek food prepared by others—
that's why I like ascetics.

14 They don't receive gold coins,
or gold or silver;
feeding on whatever comes that day,
that's why I like ascetics.

15 They have gone forth from different families,
even different countries,
and yet they all love one another—
that's why I like ascetics."

16 "Dear Rohinī, it was truly for our benefit
that you were born in our family!
You have faith and such keen respect
for the Buddha, his teaching, and the Saṅgha.

17 For you understand this
supreme field of merit.
These ascetics will henceforth
receive our religious donation, too.

18 For there we will place our sacrifice,
and it shall be abundant.”
“If you fear suffering,
if you don’t like suffering,

19 go for refuge to the Buddha, the unaffected,
to his teaching and to the Saṅgha.
Undertake the precepts,
that will be good for you.”

20 “I go for refuge to the Buddha, the unaffected,
to his teaching and to the Saṅgha.
I undertake the precepts,
that will be good for me.

21 I used to be brahmin only by kin,
now I genuinely am a brahmin.
Master of the three knowledges, I’m a scholar,
a knowledge master, a bathed initiate.”

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13.3 — CĀPĀ

✦

1 “Once I carried a hermit’s staff,
but these days I hunt deer.
My desires have made me unable to cross
from the awful marsh to the far shore.

2 Thinking me so in love with her,
Cāpā kept our son happy.
Having cut Cāpā’s bond,
I’ll go forth once again.”

3 “Don’t be mad at me, great hero!
Don’t be mad at me, great sage!
If you’re mired in anger you can’t stay pure,
let alone be fervent.”

4 “I’m going to leave Nālā!
For who’d stay here at Nālā!
With their figures, the women trap
ascetics who live righteously.”

5 “Please, Kāḷa, come back to me.
Enjoy pleasures like you did before.
I’ll be under your control,
along with any relatives I have.”

6 “Cāpā, if even a quarter
of what you say were true,
it would be a splendid thing
for a man in love with you!”

7 “Kāḷa, I am like a sprouting iris
flowering on a mountain top,
like a blossoming pomegranate,
like a patala tree on an isle;

8 my limbs are anointed with yellow sandalwood,
and I wear the finest Kāsi cloth:
when I am so very beautiful,
how can you abandon me and leave?”

9 “You’re like a fowler
who wants to catch a bird;
but you won’t trap me
with your costumed form.”

10 “But this child, my fruit,
was begotten by you, Kāḷa.
When I have this child,
how can you abandon me and leave?”

11 “The wise give up
children, family, and wealth.
Great heroes go forth
like elephants breaking their bonds.”

12 “Now, this son of yours:
I’ll strike him to the ground right here,
with a stick or with a knife!
Grieving your son, you will not leave.”

13 “Even if you feed our son
to jackals and dogs,
I’d never return again, you bitch,
not even for the child’s sake.”

14 “Well then, sir, tell me,
where will you go, Kāḷa?
To what village or town,
city or capital?”

15 “Last time we had followers,
we weren’t ascetics, we just thought we were.
We wandered from village to village,
to cities and capitals.

16 But now the Blessed One, the Buddha,
back on the bank of the Nerañjara River,
teaches the Dhamma so that living creatures
may abandon all suffering.
I shall go to his presence,
he shall be my Teacher.”

17 “Now please convey my respects
to the supreme protector of the world.
Circling him to your right,

dedicate my religious donation.”

18 “This is the proper thing to do,
just as you have said to me.
I’ll convey your respects
to the supreme protector of the world.
Circling him to my right,
I’ll dedicate your religious donation.”

19 Then Kāḷa set out
back to the bank of the Nerañjara River.
He saw the Awakened One
teaching the state free of death:

20 suffering, suffering’s origin,
suffering’s transcendence,
and the noble eightfold path
that leads to the stilling of suffering.

21 He paid homage at his feet,
circling him to his right,
and conveyed Cāpā’s dedication;
then he went forth to homelessness.
He attained the three knowledges,
and fulfilled the Buddha’s instructions.

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13.4 — SUNDARĪ

✦

1 “Before, worthy lady, when feeding
your departed children,
you’d be racked with despair
all day and all night.

2 Today, brahmin lady, you have fed
all seven children.
Vāseṭṭhī, how do you explain why
you’re not so filled with despair?”

3 “Many hundreds of children,
hundreds of family circles,
both mine and yours, brahmin,
have been fed in the past.

4 Having known the escape
from rebirth and death
I neither grieve nor lament,
nor do I despair.”

5 “Wow, Vaseṭṭhī, the words you speak
really are amazing!
Whose teaching did you understand
that you say these things?”

6 “Brahmin, the Awakened One
back at the city of Mithilā,
teaches the Dhamma so that living creatures
may abandon all suffering.

7 After hearing the perfected one’s teaching,
brahmin, which is free of all attachments,
having understood the true teaching there,
I’ve cast aside grief for children.”

8 “I too shall go
to the city of Mithilā.
Hopefully the Buddha may release me
from all suffering.”

9 The brahmin saw the Buddha,
liberated, free of attachments.
He taught him the Dhamma,
the sage gone beyond suffering:

10 suffering, suffering’s origin,
suffering’s transcendence,
and the noble eightfold path
that leads to the stilling of suffering.

11 Having understood the true teaching there,
he chose to go forth.
Three days later
Sujāta realized the three knowledges.

12 “Please, charioteer, go;
take back this carriage.
Bidding my brahmin lady good health, say:
‘The brahmin has now gone forth.
After three days,
Sujāta realized the three knowledges.’”

13 Then taking the carriage,
along with a thousand coins, the charioteer
bade the brahmin lady good health, and said:
“The brahmin has now gone forth.
After three days,
Sujāta realized the three knowledges.”

14 Hearing that the brahmin had the three knowledges, <j>the lady replied:
“I present to you this horse and carriage,
O charioteer, along with 1000 coins,
and a full bowl as a gift.”

15 “Keep the horse and carriage, lady,
along with the thousand coins.
I too shall go forth in his presence,
the one of such outstanding wisdom.”

16 “Elephants, cattle, jeweled earrings,
such opulent domestic worth:
having given it up, your father went forth,

enjoy these riches Sundarī,
you are the family heir."

17 "Elephants, cattle, jeweled earrings,
such delightful domestic worth:
having given it up, my father went forth,
racked by grief for his son.
I too shall go forth,
racked by grief for my brother."

18 "Sundarī, may the wish you desire
come true.
Leftovers as gleanings,
and cast-off rags as robes—
make do with these,
free of defilements regarding the next life."

19 "Ma'am, while I am still a trainee nun,
my clairvoyance is clarified;
I know my past lives,
the places I used to live.

20 Relying on a fine lady like you,
a senior nun who graces the Saṅgha,
I've attained the three knowledges,
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

21 Give me permission ma'am,
I wish to go to Sāvatthī,
where I shall roar my lion's roar

before the best of Buddhas.”

22 “Sundarī, see the Teacher!
Snow gold in tint, <j>with sun-golden skin;
tamer of the untamed,
the Awakened One who fears nothing <j>from any quarter.”

23 “See Sundarī coming,
liberated, free of attachments.
desireless, detached,
her task completed, without defilements.”

24 “Having set forth from Varanasi
and come to your presence, great hero,
your disciple Sundarī
bows at your feet.

25 You are the Buddha, you are the Teacher,
I am your bosom daughter, brahmin,
born of your mouth.
I’ve completed the task <j>and am free of defilements.”

26 “Then welcome, good lady,
you’re by no means unwelcome.
For this is how the tamed come
bowing at the Teacher’s feet;
desireless, detached,
the task completed, without defilements.”

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13.5 — SUBHĀ, THE SMITH'S DAUGHTER

✦

1 "I was so young, my clothes so fresh,
at that time I heard the teaching.
Being diligent,
I comprehended the truth;

2 and then I became profoundly dispassionate
toward all sensual pleasures.
Seeing fear in substantial reality,
I longed for renunciation.

3 Giving up my family circle,
bonded servants and workers,
and my flourishing village fields,
so delightful and pleasant,

4 I went forth;
all that is no small wealth.
Now that I've renounced in faith like this,
in the true teaching so well proclaimed,

5 since I desire to have nothing,
it would not be appropriate
to take back gold and currency,
having already got rid of them.

6 Currency or gold
doesn't lead to peace and awakening.
It doesn't befit an ascetic;
it's not the wealth of the noble ones;

7 it's greed and vanity,
confusion and growing decadence,
dubious and troublesome—
there is nothing lasting there.

8 Depraved and heedless,
unenlightened folk, their hearts corrupt,
fight each other,
creating conflict.

9 Killing, caging, misery,
loss, grief, and lamentation;
those sunk in sensual pleasures
see many disastrous things.

10 My family, why do you urge me on
to pleasures, as if you were my enemies?
You know I've gone forth,
seeing fear in sensual pleasures.

11 It's not due to gold, coined or uncoined,
that defilements come to an end.
Sensual pleasures are enemies and killers,
hostile forces that bind you to thorns.

12 My family, why do you urge me on
to pleasures, as if you were my enemies?
You know I've gone forth,
shaven, wrapped in my outer robe.

13 Leftovers as gleanings,
and cast-off rags as robes—
that's what's fitting for me,
the essentials of the homeless life.

14 Great seers expel sensual pleasures,
both human and heavenly.
Safe in their sanctuary, they are freed,
having found unshakable happiness.

15 May I not encounter sensual pleasures,
for no shelter is found in them.
Sensual pleasures are enemies and killers,
as painful as a mass of fire.

16 This is a roadblock, a threat,
full of distress and thorns;
it is a blind spot, uneven,
a great gateway to confusion.

17 Hazardous and terrifying,
sensual pleasures are like a cobra's head,
where fools delight,
the blind ordinary folk.

18 Stuck in the swamp of sensuality,
there are so many ignorant in the world.
They know nothing of the end
of rebirth and death.

19 Because of sensual pleasures,
people jump right on to the path <j>that goes to a bad place.
So many walk the path
that brings disease onto themselves.

20 That's how sensual pleasures create enemies;
they are so tormenting, so corrupting,
trapping beings with worldly pleasures of the flesh,
they are nothing less than the bonds of death.

21 Maddening, enticing,
sensual pleasures derange the mind.
For the corruption of beings,
swiftly ensnared by Māra.

22 Sensual pleasures are infinitely dangerous,
they're full of suffering, a terrible poison;
offering little gratification, they're makers of strife,
withering bright qualities away.

23 Since I've created so much ruination
because of sensual pleasures,
I will not relapse to them again,
but will always delight in extinguishment.

24 Having once made strife <j>for the sake of sensual pleasures,
now I am longing for that cool state.
I shall meditate diligently
for the ending of all fetters.

25 Sorrowless, stainless, secure—
I follow that path,
the straight noble eightfold way
by which the seers have crossed over.”

26 “Look at this: Subhā the smith’s daughter,
standing firm in the teaching.
She has entered the imperturbable state,
meditating at the root of a tree.

27 It’s just eight days since she went forth,
the faithful one, grace of the true teaching.
Guided by Uppalavaṇṇā,
she is master of the three knowledges, <j>conqueror of death.

28 This one is freed from slavery and debt,
a nun with faculties developed.
Unyoked from all yokes,
she has completed the task <j>and is free of defilements.”

29 Thus did Sakka, lord of all creatures,
along with a host of gods,
having come by their psychic powers,
honor Subhā, the smith's daughter.

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14.1 — SUBHĀ OF JĪVAKA'S MANGO GROVE

✦

1 Going to the lovely mango grove
of Jīvaka, the nun Subhā
was held up by a rascal.
Subhā said this to him:

2 "What harm have I done to you,
that you stand in my way?
Respectable sir, it's not proper that a man
should touch a woman gone forth.

3 This training was taught by the Holy One,
it is a serious matter in my teacher's instructions.
I am pure and rid of blemishes,
so why do you stand in my way?

4 One whose mind is clouded against one unclouded;
one who is lustful against one free of lust;
unblemished, my heart is freed in every respect,
so why do you stand in my way?"

5 "You're young and flawless—
what will going-forth do for you?
Throw away the ocher robe,
come and play in the blossom grove.

6 Everywhere, the scent of pollen wafts sweet,
born of the flowering woods.
The start of spring is a happy time—
come and play in the blossom grove.

7 And trees crested with flowers
cry out, as it were, in the gale.
But what kind of fun will you have
if you plunge into the woods all alone?

8 Frequented by packs of predators,
and cow elephants aroused by rutting bulls;
you wish to go without a friend
to the deserted, awe-inspiring forest.

9 Like a doll made of glittering gold,
like a nymph wandering the park of bright vines,
your matchless beauty will shine
in graceful clothes of delicate Kāsian cloth.

10 I'll be under your sway,
if we are to stay in the forest.
I love no creature more than you,
O pixie with such captivating eyes.

11 Were you to take up my invitation—
'Come, be happy, and live in a house'—
you'll stay in a longhouse sheltered from wind;
let the ladies look to your needs.

12 Dressed in delicate Kāsian cloth,
put on your garlands and your cosmetics.
I'll make all sorts of adornments for you,
of lustrous gold and gems and pearls.

13 Climb onto a costly bed,
its coverlet so clean and nice,
with a new woolen mattress,
so fragrant, sprinkled with sandalwood.

14 As a blue lily risen from the water
remains untouched by men,
so too, O chaste and holy lady,
your limbs grow old unshared."

15 "This carcass is full of putrefaction, it swells
the charnel ground, for its nature is to fall apart.
What do you think is so essential in it
that you stare at me so crazily?"

16 "Your eyes are like those of a doe,
or a pixie in the mountains;
seeing them, erotic delight
swells in me all the more.

17 Your eyes are like a blue lily's bud
in your flawless face <j>shining like coruscant gold.
Seeing them, sensual excitement
swells in me all the more.

18 Though you may wander far, I'll still think of you,
with lashes so long and eyes so bright.
I love no eyes more than yours,
O pixie with such bashful eyes."

19 "You're setting out on the wrong road!
You're looking to take the moon for your toy!
You're trying to leap over Mount Meru!
You, who are hunting a child of the Buddha!

20 For in this world with all its gods,
there will be no more lust anywhere in me.
I don't even know what kind it could be,
it's been smashed root and all by the path.

21 Cast out like sparks from fiery coals,
it's worth no more than a bowl of poison.
I don't even see what kind it could be,
it's been smashed root and all by the path.

22 Well may you try to seduce the type of lady
who has not reflected on these things,
or who has never attended the Teacher:
but this is a lady who knows—now you're in trouble!

23 No matter if I am reviled or praised,
or feel pleasure or pain: I stay mindful.
Knowing that conditions are ugly,
my mind clings to nothing.

24 I am a disciple of the Holy One,
riding in the carriage of the eightfold path.
The dart pulled out, free of defilements,
I'm happy to have reached an empty place.

25 I've seen brightly painted
dolls and wooden puppets,
tied to sticks and strings,
and made to dance in many ways.

26 But when the sticks and strings are taken off—
loosed, disassembled, dismantled,
irrecoverable, stripped to parts—
on what could the mind be fixed?

27 That's what my body is really like,
without those things it can't go on.
This being so,
on what could the mind be fixed?

28 It's like when you saw a mural made
by painting yellow orpiment on a wall,
and your vision was deceived by that—
the perception 'human' is pointless.

29 Like an illusion cast before you,
or a golden tree in a dream,
you chase what is hollow, blind one,
like a painted doll among the people.

30 Like a ball in a socket,
with a pupil in the middle, and tears,
and mucus comes from there as well,
different eye-parts are lumped together.”

31 Having plucked it out, the fair-eyed lady
was undismayed, unchained in mind.
“Come now, take this eye,”
she said, and gave it to the man right then.

32 And right then he lost his lust,
and asked for her forgiveness:
“May you be well, O chaste and holy lady;
such a thing will not happen again.

33 Attacking a person such as this
is like holding on to a blazing fire,
or grabbing a deadly viper!
May you be well, please forgive me.”

34 When that nun was released
she went to the presence of the excellent Buddha.
Seeing the one with excellent marks of merit,
her eye became just as it was before.

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15.1 — ISIDĀSĪ

✦

1 In Pāṭaliputta, the cream of the world,
the city named for a flower,
there were two nuns from the Sakyan clan,
both of them ladies of quality.

2 One was named Isidāsī, the second Bodhī.
They both were accomplished in ethics,
lovers of meditation and chanting,
learned, crushing corruptions.

3 They wandered for alms and had their meal.
When they had washed their bowls,
they sat happily in a private place
and started a conversation.

4 “You’re so lovely, Mistress Isidāsī,
your youth has not yet faded.
What problem did you see that made you
dedicate your life to renunciation?”

5 Being pressed like this in private,
Isidāsī, skilled in teaching Dhamma,
voiced the following words.
“Bodhī, hear how I went forth.

6 In the fine town of Ujjenī,
my father was a financier, a good and moral man.
I was his only daughter,
dear, beloved, and cherished.

7 Then some suitors came for me
from the top family of Sāketa.
They were sent by a financier abounding in wealth,
to whom my father then gave me as daughter-in-law.

8 Come morning and come evening,
I bowed with my head to the feet
of my father and mother-in-law,
just as I had been told.

9 Whenever I saw my husband's sisters,
his brothers, his servants,
or even he, my one and only,
I nervously gave them a seat.

10 Whatever they wanted—food and drink,
treats, or whatever was in the cupboard—
I brought out and offered to them,
ensuring each got what was fitting.

11 Having risen bright and early,
I approached the main house,
washed my hands and feet,
and went to my husband with cupped palms.

12 Taking a comb, adornments,
eyeshadow, and a mirror,
I myself did the makeup for my husband,
as if I were his beautician.

13 I myself cooked the rice;
I myself washed the pots.
I looked after my husband
like a mother her only child.

14 Thus I showed my devotion to him,
a loyal, virtuous, and humble servant,
getting up early, and working tirelessly:
yet still my husband did me wrong.

15 He said to his mother and father:
'I'll take my leave and go,
I can't stand to live together with Isidāsī
staying in the same house.'

16 'Son, don't speak like this!
Isidāsī is astute and competent,
she gets up early and works tirelessly,
son, why doesn't she please you?'

17 'She hasn't done anything to hurt me,
but I just can't stand to live with her.
As far as I'm concerned, she's just detestable.
I've had enough, I'll take my leave and go.'

18 When they heard his words,
my father-in-law and mother-in-law asked me:
‘What did you do wrong?
Boldly tell how it occurred.’

19 ‘I’ve done nothing wrong,
I haven’t hurt him, or said anything bad.
What can I possibly do,
when my husband finds me so hateful?’

20 They led me back to my father’s home,
distraught, overcome with suffering, and said:
‘By caring for our son,
we’ve lost her, so lovely and lucky!’

21 Next my dad gave me to the household
of a second wealthy family-man.
For this he got half the bride-price
of that which the financier paid.

22 In his house I also lived a month,
before he too wanted me gone;
though I served him like a slave,
virtuous and doing no wrong.

23 My father then spoke to a beggar for alms,
a tamer of others and of himself:
‘Be my son-in-law;
set aside your tonsure-cloth and pot.’

24 He stayed a fortnight before he said to my dad:
‘Give me back my tonsure-cloth,
my pot and my mug—
I’ll wander begging again.’

25 So then my mum and my dad
and my whole group of relatives said:
‘What has not been done for you here?
Quickly, tell us what we can do for you!’

26 When they spoke to him like this he said,
‘If I can make do for myself, that is enough.
I can’t stand to live together with Isidāsī
staying in the same house.’

27 Released, he left.
But I sat all alone contemplating:
‘Having taken my leave, I’ll go,
either to die or to go forth.’

28 But then Mistress Jinadattā,
learned and virtuous,
who had memorized the monastic law,
came resorting to my dad’s house for alms.

29 When I saw her,
I rose from my seat and prepared it for her.
When she had taken her seat,
I honored her feet and offered her a meal,

30 satiating her with food and drink,
treats, or whatever was in the cupboard.
Then I said:
‘Ma’am, I wish to go forth!’

31 But my dad said to me:
‘Child, practice Dhamma right here then!
With food and drink
satisfy ascetics and the twice-born.’

32 Then I said to my dad,
crying, my cupped palms raised to him:
‘I’ve done bad things in the past;
I shall wear that bad deed away.’

33 And my dad said to me:
‘May you attain awakening, the highest state,
and may you find the extinguishment
that was realized by the best of men!’

34 I bowed down to my mother and father,
and my whole group of relatives;
and then, seven days after going forth,
I realized the three knowledges.

35 I know my last seven lives;
I shall relate to you the deeds
of which this life is the fruit and result:
focus your whole mind on that.

36 In the city of Erakacca
I was a goldsmith with lots of money.
Drunk on the pride of youth,
I had sex with someone else's wife.

37 Having passed away from there,
I burned in hell for a long time.
Rising up from there
I was conceived in a monkey's womb.

38 When I was only seven days old,
I was castrated by the monkey chief.
This was the fruit of that deed,
because of adultery with another's wife.

39 Having passed away from there,
passing away in Sindhava grove,
I was conceived in the womb
of a lame, one-eyed she-goat.

40 I carried children on my back for twelve years,
and all the while I was castrated,
worm-eaten, and tail-less,
because of adultery with another's wife.

41 Having passed away from there,
I was reborn in a cow
owned by a cattle merchant.
A red calf, castrated, for twelve months

42 I drew a big plow.
I shouldered a cart,
blind, tail-less, feeble,
because of adultery with another's wife.

43 Having passed away from there,
I was born of a slave in the street,
with neither male nor female parts,
because of adultery with another's wife.

44 I died at thirty years of age,
and was reborn as a girl in a carter's family.
We were poor, of little wealth,
greatly oppressed by creditors.

45 Because of the massive interest we owed,
I was dragged away screaming,
taken by force from the family home
by a caravan leader.

46 When I was sixteen years old,
seeing I was a girl of marriageable age,
his son confined me as his wife—
Giridāsa was his name.

47 He also had another wife,
a virtuous and well-known lady of quality,
loyal to her husband;
yet I stirred up resentment in her.

48 As the fruit of that deed,
they abandoned me and left,
though I served them like a slave.
Now I've made an end to this as well."

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16.1 — SUMEDHĀ

✦

1 In Mantāvatī city, Sumedhā,
the daughter of King Koñca's chief queen,
was converted by those
who practice the Buddha's teaching.

2 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!

3 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.

4 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.

5 Those who grow in wickedness
ever lament in the underworld <j>due to their own bad deeds.
They're fools, unrestrained in body,
mind, and speech.

6 Those witless, senseless fools,
trapped by the origin of suffering,
are ignorant, not understanding the noble truths
when they are being taught.

7 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.

8 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.

9 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.

10 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.

11 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.

12 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."

13 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."

14 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.

15 "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.

16 You shall be the chief queen,
wife of King Anīkaratta.
Ethical precepts, the chaste path—
going forth is hard to do, my child.

17 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!"

18 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.

19 Why cling to this rotting body so foul,
stinking of fluids,
a horrifying water-bag carcass,
always oozing, full of filth?

20 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?

21 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.

22 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?

23 They’re attached to this hollow carcass,
this mass of sinews and bone;
this rotting body
full of saliva, tears, feces, and pus.

24 If anyone were to dissect it,
turning it inside out,
the unbearable stench
would disgust even their own mother.

25 Rationally examining
the aggregates, elements, and sense fields
as conditioned, rooted in birth, suffering—
why would I wish for marriage?

26 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.

27 One who understands the Teacher's words
would put up with this slaughter:
'Long for you is transmigration
being killed time and time again.'

28 Among gods and humans,
in the realm of animals or that of titans,
among the ghosts or in the hells,
endless killings are seen.

29 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.

30 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.

31 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."

32 As she spoke thus to her father,
Anīkaratta, to whom she was betrothed,
approached from Vāraṇavatī
at the time appointed for the marriage.

33 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.

34 And as she entered it there,
Anīkaratta arrived at the city.
Then in the longhouse, Sumedhā
well developed the perception of impermanence.

35 As she investigated in meditation,
Anīkaratta quickly climbed the stairs.
His limbs adorned with gems <j>and honey-yellow gold,
he begged Sumedhā with cupped palms:

36 “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!

37 I’ve handed royalty to you—
enjoy riches, give gifts!
Don’t be sad;
your parents are upset.”

38 Sumedhā, having no use for sensual pleasures,
and having done away with delusion, <j>spoke right back:
“Do not take pleasure in sensuality!
See the danger in sensual pleasures!

39 Mandhātā, king of four continents,
foremost in enjoying sensual pleasures,
died unsated,
his desires unfulfilled.

40 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.

41 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.

42 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.

43 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.

44 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.

45 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.

46 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."

47 She opened the door
and saw her parents with Anīkaratta,
sitting crying on the floor.
And so she said this:

48 “Transmigration is long for fools,
crying again and again <j>at that with no known beginning—
the death of a father,
the killing of a brother or of themselves.

49 Remember the ocean of tears, of milk, of blood—
transmigration with no known beginning.
Remember the bones piled up
by beings transmigrating.

50 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.

51 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.

52 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.

53 Remember the one-eyed turtle <j>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.

54 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.

55 Remember those swelling the charnel grounds
again and again in life after life.
Remember the danger of gharials!
Remember the four truths!

56 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.

57 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.

58 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.

59 When liberation is there to be found,
what good are sensual pleasures that kill and bind?
For though unwilling, <j>when sensual pleasures are there,
they are subject to the pain of killing and binding.

60 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.

61 Don't give up abundant happiness
for the trivial joys of sensual pleasure.
Don't fret later,
like a catfish on a hook.

62 Deliberately control yourself <j>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.

63 Harnessed to sensual pleasure,
you undergo endless pain,
along with much mental anguish:
relinquish sensual pleasures, they don't last!

64 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.

65 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.

66 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."

67 So said Sumedhā,
lacking delight in conditioned things.
Soothing Anīkaratta,
Sumedhā cast her hair on the ground.

68 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."

69 Released by her mother and father,
she went forth, afraid of grief and fear.
While still a trainee nun <j>she realized the six direct knowledges,
along with the highest fruit.

70 The extinguishment of the princess
was incredible and amazing;
on her deathbed, she declared
her several past lives.

71 "In the time of the Buddha Koṇāgamana,
we three friends gave the gift
of a newly-built dwelling
in the Saṅgha's monastery.

72 Ten times, a hundred times,
a thousand times, ten thousand times,
we were reborn among the gods,
let alone among humans.

73 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.

74 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.

75 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."

76 That is how these verses were recited by the senior nun Sumedhā.

80 The Verses of the Senior Nuns are finished.

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