

THE PALIVERSE PROJECT

The Universe of Buddha's Wisdom

Commentaries (Aṭṭhakathā)

The Canon of Discourses - Commentaries (Sutta
Piṭaka - Aṭṭhakathā)

5. The Collection of Minor Texts (5. Khuddaka Nikāya -
Aṭṭhakathā)

09. Commentary on the Verses of the Elder Nuns (09. Therīgāthā-
aṭṭhakathā)

12. The Book of the Sixteens (12. Soḷasanipāto)



PaliVerse

5. The Collection of Minor Texts

09. Commentary on the Verses of the Elder Nuns

12. The Book of the Sixteens

1. Commentary on the Verses of the Elder Nun Puṇṇā

236-251. In the Book of Sixteens, the verses of the Elder Nun Puṇṇā beginning with "A water-carrier I was in the cold" and so on. This one too, having formed aspirations under former Buddhas, accumulating wholesome action as a decisive support for the end of the round of rebirths in this and that existence, in the time of the Blessed One Vipassī, having been reborn in a family home, having attained discretion, because of being accomplished in the supporting conditions, with religious emotion arisen, having gone to the presence of nuns, having heard the Teaching, having gained confidence, having gone forth, of pure morality, having learnt the three Canons, she was very learned, a bearer of the Teaching, and a speaker of the Teaching. And just as in the Dispensation of the Blessed One Vipassī, so too having gone forth in the Dispensation of the Blessed One Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, and Kassapa, she was accomplished in morality, very learned, a bearer of the Teaching, and a speaker of the Teaching. But because of having the nature of conceit, she was not able to utterly destroy the mental defilements. Because of action done by the force of conceit as decisive support, in this arising of a Buddha, she was reborn in the womb of a household slave girl of the millionaire Anāthapiṇḍika; her name was Puṇṇātissā. She, having become a stream-enterer through the teaching of the Sīhanāda Discourse, afterwards having tamed a brahmin who practised water cleansing, having been esteemed by the millionaire, having been brought by him to the state of freedom, having obtained his permission for the going forth, having gone forth, doing the work of insight, before long attained arahantship together with the analytical knowledges. Therefore it was said in the Apadāna -

"Of the Blessed One Vipassī, of Sikhī and of Vessabhū;
Of the sage Kakusandha, of Koṇāgamana and such ones.

"And of the Buddha Kassapa, having gone forth in the Dispensation;
A nun accomplished in morality, prudent, with controlled faculties.

"Very learned, bearers of the Teaching, questioners about the meaning of the Teaching;
Learners of the teachings, listeners, those who attend.

"Teaching in the midst of people, I was in the Conqueror's Dispensation;
Because of that great learning, I despised the well-behaved.

"And in this final existence now, in Sāvattthī, the best of cities;
In the house of Anāthapiṇḍika, I was born as a water-carrying slave girl.

"Having gone to fetch water, I saw a twice-born in distress;
Afflicted by cold in the midst of the water, having seen that, I spoke this.

"A water-carrier I was in the cold, always going down into the water;
Frightened by fear of punishment from my masters, afflicted by fear of verbal
blame.

"Frightened of whom, brahmin, do you always descend into the water;
With trembling limbs, you feel the cold intensely.

"Knowing me indeed, dear lady, Puṇṇikā, you inquire;
Doing wholesome action, preventing evil that has been done.

"Whether one is old or young, whoever commits an evil deed;
By sprinkling with water, even he is freed from evil deeds.

"I declared to Uttara the passage connected with the Teaching and welfare;
And having heard that, he, agitated, having gone forth, became a Worthy One.

"Completing the deficient hundred, since I was born in a slave family;
Therefore my name is Puṇṇā, they made me a free woman.

"Having taken leave of the millionaire, I went forth into homelessness;
Not long after, I attained arahantship.

"And I am a master in supernormal powers, in the divine ear element;
In the knowledge of others' mental states, I am a master, O great sage.

"I know past lives, the divine eye has been purified;
With all mental corruptions eliminated, there is now no more rebirth.

"In meaning, teaching, and language, and likewise in discernment;
My knowledge is spotless, pure, owing to the Buddha, the foremost.

"Of great wisdom through meditation, learned indeed through learning;
Born of low family through conceit, for action does not perish.

"Mental defilements have been burnt by me, etc. the Buddha's teaching has
been fulfilled."

But having attained arahantship, having reviewed her own practice, by way of an
inspired utterance -

236. "A water-carrier I was in the cold, always going down into the water;
Frightened by fear of punishment from my masters, afflicted by fear of verbal
blame.

237. "Frightened of whom, brahmin, do you always descend into the water;
With trembling limbs, you feel the cold intensely.

238. "Knowing me indeed, dear lady, Puṇṇikā, you inquire;

Doing wholesome action, preventing evil that has been done.

239. "Whether one is old or young, whoever commits an evil deed;
By sprinkling with water, even he is freed from evil deeds.
240. "Who then told you this, one not knowing to one not knowing;
'By sprinkling with water, one is freed from evil deeds.'
241. "Surely they will go to heaven, all the frogs and turtles;
Serpents and crocodiles too, and whatever others dwell in water.
242. "Sheep-butchers, pig-butchers, fishermen, deer-hunters;
Thieves and executioners too, and whatever others are evil-doers;
By sprinkling with water, even they would be freed from evil deeds.
243. "If these rivers would carry away for you the much evil done before;
They would also carry away your merit, thereby you would be an outsider.
244. "That of which, brahmin, you are frightened, always descending into the
water;
That very thing, brahmin, do not do, let not the cold harm your skin.
245. "Me, who had entered the wrong path, you brought to the noble path;
By sprinkling with water, dear lady, I give you this cloth.
246. "Let the cloth be yours alone, I do not wish for a cloth;
If you fear suffering, if suffering is unpleasant to you.
247. "Do not do evil action, whether openly or in secret;
If you will do or are doing evil action.
248. There is no freedom from suffering for you, even if you approach and flee;
If you fear suffering, if suffering is unpleasant to you.
249. "Go to the Buddha, the Teaching, and such a Community for refuge;
Take upon yourself the moralities, that will be for your benefit.
250. "I go to the Buddha, the Teaching, and such a Community for refuge;
I take upon myself the moralities, that will be for my benefit."
251. "Formerly I was a kinsman of Brahma, today I am a true brahmin;
I am a possessor of the threefold true knowledge, accomplished in the Vedas,
a learned one, and I am one who has bathed."

He spoke these verses.

Therein, "a water-carrier" means one who carries water with a pot. "In the cold, always going down into the water" means even in the cold season, always, night and day, I descended into the water. Whenever the masters had need of water, then I entered the water; the intention is: having descended into the water, I brought the water. "Frightened by fear of punishment from my masters" means frightened by fear

of punishment from the masters. "Afflicted by fear of verbal blame" means afflicted and oppressed by fear of verbal punishment and by fear of anger; the explanation is: even in the cold I descended into the water.

Then one day the slave Puṇṇā went to the water landing place to bring water with a pot. There she saw a certain brahmin who practised water cleansing, at the time of snowfall, while great cold was prevailing, right early having descended into the water, having dived in up to the head, having mumbled sacred texts, having risen from the water, with wet clothes, with wet hair, trembling, playing a tooth-lute. Having seen him, with a mind urged by compassion, wishing to dissuade him from that wrong view, she spoke the verse "Frightened of whom, brahmin, are you?" Therein, "frightened of whom, brahmin, are you" means from what cause of fear indeed are you frightened, that you always descend into the water, at all times, evening and morning, you descend into the water. And having descended, with trembling, shaking limbs, with bodily parts, you feel the cold intensely; you experience, you undergo the suffering of cold, exceedingly unbearable.

"Knowing me indeed, dear lady" means: dear lady Puṇṇikā, you, knowing me who am doing wholesome action by this going down into the water, which is capable of preventing the accumulated evil deed, indeed inquire.

Is not this matter well-known in the world? Showing "how then shall we tell you," he spoke the verse "whether one is old." Its meaning is - Whether old or young or middle-aged, whoever commits evil deed of the type of harming and so on, does it exceedingly, even he, greatly devoted to evil deeds, by sprinkling with water, by bathing, is freed from that evil deed, is absolutely liberated.

Having heard that, Puṇṇikā, giving him a reply, said beginning with "who then told you." Therein, "who then told you this, one not knowing to one not knowing" means: to you who do not know the result of action, one not knowing, a fool, an ignorant person, who does not know the result of action in every way whatsoever, told this matter that one is freed from evil deed by reason of sprinkling with water - who indeed declared this? He is not one whose word is trustworthy, nor is this fitting - this is the intention.

Now, making clear that very absence of fitness, she said beginning with "surely they will go to heaven." Therein, "serpents" means water-serpents. "Crocodiles" means crocodiles. "And whatever others dwell in water" means whatever others too are water-dwellers - fish, sea-monsters, nandiyāvatta and so on - they too will surely go to heaven, will be reborn in the heavenly world, methinks; the meaning is: if there is freedom from evil deed by sprinkling with water.

"Sheep-butchers" means slaughterers of rams. "Pig-butchers" means slaughterers of pigs. "Fishermen" means fishermen. "Deer-hunters" means huntsmen. "Executioners" means those engaged in the work of executing those condemned to death.

"They would also carry away your merit" means these rivers beginning with the Aciravatī, just as if they were to carry away much evil done by you before through sprinkling with water there, likewise these rivers would carry away, would wash away, even the merit done by you. Thereby you would be an outsider - that being so, by that meritorious action you would be deprived, would become an outsider - and this is

not fitting. This is the intention. Or just as by water there is no washing away of merit for one who immerses in water, so too there is no washing away of evil either. Why? Because bathing is not the opponent of the causes of evil. Whatever destroys whatever, that is its opponent. Just as light is of darkness, and true knowledge is of ignorance, bathing is not thus of evil. Therefore the conclusion should be reached here: "there is no release from evil by sprinkling with water." Therefore the Blessed One said -

"Not by water is one pure, though many people bathe here;
In whom there is truth and the Teaching, he is pure, he is a brahmin."

Now, in order to show "if you wish to wash away evil, do not do evil entirely in every way," she spoke the verse beginning with "of whom, brahmin." Therein, "that very thing, brahmin, do not do" means since you are frightened of evil, that very evil, brahmin, brahmin, you should not do. But descending into water in such a cold season merely afflicts the body alone. Therefore he said - "Let not the cold harm your skin" means in such a cold season, the cold produced by sprinkling with water should not strike, should not afflict your bodily skin. This is the meaning.

"Me, who had entered the wrong path" means me who had entered upon, having taken up and stood firm in, this wrong path, this wrong grasp that "by sprinkling with water there is purification." "You brought to the noble path" means you brought me to this path traversed by the noble ones such as the Buddha and others, namely "the non-performance of all evil, the acquisition of the wholesome," you led me properly. Therefore, dear lady, I give you this cloth as a gift of gratitude, as the teacher's share; accept it. This is the meaning.

She, having rejected that, having expounded the Teaching, in order to establish him in the refuges and in the precepts, having said "Let the cloth be yours alone, I do not wish for a cloth," said beginning with "if you fear suffering." Its meaning is - If you fear the suffering of the varieties such as discomfort, destruction of prosperity, and so on, pertaining to the entire realm of misery and also to the fortunate worlds. If that is unpleasant to you, not desirable. Whether openly, by making it unconcealed by way of being manifest to others, through body or through speech, by way of killing living beings and so on, or whether in secret, by making it concealed by way of being not manifest, at the mind-door alone, by way of covetousness and so on - do not do, do not perform, even the slightest evil, inferior action. But if you will do that evil action in the future, or are doing it at present, with the intention "The suffering that is the fruit of that in the four realms of misery beginning with hell and among human beings will not follow me fleeing from here or from there" - even for you who flee intentionally, having approached, there is no freedom, no release from that evil. The meaning is that when there is a conjunction of other conditions such as destination, time, and so on, it will indeed ripen. Or the reading is "uppaccā," meaning having flown up. Having thus shown the absence of suffering through the non-performance of evil, now in order to show that also through the performance of merit, "if you fear" and so on was stated. Therein, "such" means one who has attained the state of such-likeness with regard to the seen and so on. Or just as the former Perfectly Enlightened Ones are to be seen, because he is to be seen in that way, he is such - go to that Buddha for refuge. This is the explanation. In the case of the Teaching and the Community too,

the same method applies. The Teaching of such excellent Buddhas, the Community as the assembly of the eight noble persons. This is the explanation. "That" refers to the going for refuge and the undertaking of the precepts. "Hehiti" means it will be.

That brahmin, having established himself in the refuges and in the precepts, at a later time, having heard the Teaching in the presence of the Teacher, having gained faith, having gone forth, striving and endeavouring, before long, having become a possessor of the threefold true knowledge, having reviewed his own practice, uttering an inspired utterance, spoke the verse "kinsman of Brahma."

Its meaning is - Formerly I was called a kinsman of Brahma merely by birth in a brahmin family. Likewise, merely by recitation and so on of the Iruveda and so on, I was called a possessor of the threefold true knowledge, accomplished in the Vedas, a learned one, and one who has bathed. Now, through having warded off evil in every respect, I am a true brahmin, a brahmin in the ultimate sense; through the achievement of the triad of true knowledges, a possessor of the threefold true knowledge; through being endowed with inspiration reckoned as path knowledge, accomplished in the Vedas; and through having crossed over all evil, one who has bathed. And here, both the verses spoken by the brahmin and the verses spoken by herself were afterwards spoken individually by the elder nun; thus all became the elder nun's verses.

The commentary on the verses of the elder nun Puṇṇā is completed.

The commentary on the Chapter of Sixteens is concluded.



ABOUT THIS TRANSLATION

This translation is part of the PaliVerse Project - the first complete, unified English translation of the Pāli Canon together with its Commentaries (Aṭṭhakathā) and Subcommentaries (Tīkā), accompanied by interactive study tools. PaliVerse is an ongoing project. The AI translations are continuously improved through experts' revisions and feedback. This text is the latest translation as of the date of download.

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