

The Rags of Previous Karma

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[387. {390.} The Rags of Previous Karma¹]

Near the lake called Anotatta,
on the lovely level rock ground,
where sparkled gems of different sorts
and varied perfumes [filled] the woods, (1) [3341]

surrounded by the Assembly²
of monks, the Leader of the World,
while seated there, did [then] explain
the former deeds done³ by himself: (2) [3342]

Hear from me, O monks, the karma
[which formerly was] done by me,
[and how] those karma rags' [effects]
ripen in the Buddha himself.⁴ (3) [3343]

Among [my] other, former births
I was a jerk named Munāli.
I told lies about Sarabhu,⁵
an innocent Lonely Buddha. (4) [3344]

As a result of that karma,
a long time I circled through hell.⁶
I experienced suffering⁷
for numerous thousands of years. (5) [3345]

As [its] final karmic effect,
here in [my] final existence,
I received [some nasty] slander
connected with Sundarīkā.⁸ (6) [3346]

¹*Pubbakammāpiloti*. Though included in *Thera-apadāna*, #387 is actually in the voice of the Buddha. It has been controversial throughout Theravāda Buddhist history and that may be the reason that it is quietly tucked away here among the monks. On this text and the controversy surrounding it, see my "The Buddha's Bad Karma: A Problem in the History of Theravāda Buddhism," *Numen* 37,1 (June, 1990):70-95

²lit., "the great assembly (°saṅghena) of monks (*bhikkhu*°)

³*pubbakammāni*

⁴I follow BJTS in reading *pilotikassa* for PTS *pilotiyassa*, and likewise BJTS *buddhatte pi* for PTS *buddhatthe pi*.

⁵I follow BJTS on the name; PTS (only) gives Surabhi

⁶lit., I experienced *saṃsāra* in hell

⁷lit., I experienced feelings which were *dukkha*

⁸she was an associate of "the heretics" (*titthiya*, "ford-worshippers"), jealous rivals who repeatedly tried to undermine the Buddha's reputation. She frequented the Jetavana monastery and garden in Savatthi/Sravasti where he spent much of his career as Buddha, then meeting townsfolk on the road claimed to be sleeping with him in his perfumed cell there. Once the rumor had spread, the heretics murdered her and placed her corpse inside the Jetavana, then informed the police who

I was Nanda, a follower
of the Buddha Sabbābhibhu.
My transmigration was in hell
for long after I slandered him. (7) [3347]

My long transmigration in hell
[continued for] ten thousand years.
When I [again] got human birth,
I [also] got lots of slander. (8) [3348]

Through what remained of that karma,
Lady Ciñca did slander me
in front of a group of people
without any grounding in fact.⁹ (9) [3349]

I was an erudite brahmin,
attended on, given worship.
In a large wood, I was teaching
mantras to five hundred young men. (10) [3350]

To that place had come Sage Gīma,¹⁰
who possessed vast superpowers.¹¹
After having seen him coming,
I slandered that blameless [person]. (11) [3351]

I said [this] to my students then:
“this sage delights in the pleasures!”
The young men [there] took [that] to heart
when I made that declaration. (12) [3352]

Then all the young men, [my students],
begging for alms from clan to clan,
repeated to a lot of folks,¹²
“this sage delights in the pleasures!” (13) [3353]

upon searching the place, of course, discovered it.

⁹*abhūtena*, lit., “through [what was] not produced/actual/become.” Like Sundarīkā, Ciñca was employed by “the heretics” to discredit the Buddha. She placed padding beneath her garment and proceeded to tell people that the Buddha, having fathered her child, was now neglecting his paternal obligations. The gods, enraged at the unrighteousness of the accusation, contrived her literal undoing: a mouse gnawed the strings holding the padding in place and it fell out for all to see, exposing her lie.

¹⁰I follow the BJTS spelling of this name, cf. the alt reading in PTS *isiṅgīmo*; PTS gives *Isigaṇo*

¹¹lit., who had the five special knowledges (*abhiññā*) and extensive *iddhi* powers”. The five special knowledges are various magical powers (*iddhi*), divine ear (clairaudience), reading others’ minds, recollection of rebirths, and divine eye (clairvoyance), Note that this (non-Buddhist) sage possesses only five of the special knowledges; the sixth — awareness and assurance that one has extinguished all *āsāsa*s — is only achievable by Buddhists.

¹²lit., “said to the great people” *mahājanassa ahaṃsu*

As a result of that karma,
 these five hundred monks [now with me]
 all received [some nasty] slander
 connected with Sundarīkā. (14) [3354]

One time eying wealth I murdered
 brothers by a second mother.¹³
 I put [them] on a mountain road
 [and] crushed [them] in an avalanche.¹⁴ (15) [3355]

As a result of that karma,
 Devadatta threw a boulder
 [and] a splinter [off that boulder]
 [then] crushed the big toe on my foot.¹⁵ (16) [3356]

One time I was a little boy,
 playing by the great thoroughfare.
 Having seen a Lonely Buddha,
 I threw a clod of dirt [at him]. (17) [3357]

As a result of that karma,
 here in [my] final existence,
 Devadatta hired [some] killers
 for the sake of murdering me.¹⁶ (18) [3358]

Once, while I was on [my] tusker,
 I saw a supreme Lonely Sage,
 wandering about for alms food —
 with elephant I attacked him. (19) [3359]

As a result of that karma,
 the elephant Nāḷāgiri,
 agitated, cruel, approached me

¹³ or: “brothers by another mother:” *dvemātubhātaraṇ*

¹⁴ lit., “with a boulder”

¹⁵ Devadatta was the Buddha’s cousin, on his father’s side, who transmigrated with him in various relationships throughout the *jātakas*. In the final birth he became a monk and had great prowess with the Dharma, likely capable of attaining arahantship, but the enmity from ancient times (which tracked with him through rebirths with the bodhisattva) bore its fruit and, when the Buddha declined Devadatta’s request to become leader of the Sangha, Devadatta ended up his bitter rival, who tried in this instance and several others (see below) to kill him. He failed, of course, and for the sin of having drawn blood from the Buddha’s big toe in the event described here, the earth opened up and sucked him directly into hell.

¹⁶ Devadatta hired an assassin, then two to kill him, and four to kill them, up to sixteen. The first went to do the deed, but overwhelmed by the Buddha’s presence was unable, laid down his weapon and converted. The two came to find him and the same thing happened, then the four and eight and finally sixteen all had converted to the dismay of Devadatta, who like the human counterpart to Māra in these stories storms off dejected to plot again.

in the fine town at Vulture’s Peak.¹⁷ (20) [3360]

I was the king, [named] Patthiva;
I killed a man with a dagger.
As a result of that karma,
I roasted in hell a long time. (21) [3361]

Through what remained of that karma,
the skin on my foot got all cracked
and caused me a lot of trouble —
karma sure doesn’t just vanish! (22) [3362]

I [once] lived as a fisher-boy,
in a village of fishermen.
Having seen the fish getting killed,
pleasurable thoughts filled my mind.¹⁸ (23) [3363]

As a result of that karma,
I suffered a headache [one time];
all of the Śākyaans were murdered,¹⁹
when Viḍuḍabha murdered [them].²⁰ (24) [3364]

I reviled the holy words [and]
followers of Phussa [Buddha],
“chomp [and] eat [inferior] grain
you all, and don’t eat [any] rice.” (25) [3365]

As a result of that karma,
I [had to] eat grain for three months
when, invited by a brahmin,
I lived in various kingdoms. (26) [3366]

In the midst of a wrestling match,
a wrestler’s son, I blocked [the fight];²¹
as a result of that karma,
[one time] I suffered a backache. (27) [3367]

I was a [practicing] doctor

¹⁷that is, Rajgir or Rājagaha, home of King Bimbisāra. Vulture’s Peak was the site from which Devadatta threw his boulder, too. This time, he had sent the angered (and drunk) elephant on a killing spree through the city, aiming at killing the Buddha. As it charged at him he calmly lifted its hand and it stopped, fell to the ground, and worshipped him.

¹⁸lit., “I produced mental pleasure”

¹⁹reading *sabbe sakkā ca haññiṃsu* with BJTS over PTS *Sakkesu haññamānesu*, but in either event the text is suspect. In this BJTS reading, presumably, the Śākyaans were the fishermen in the village.

²⁰the slaying of the Buddha’s whole clan was the result, according to the *Jātaka*, of enmity that developed over many lifetimes due to their group evil deeds.

²¹cty explains that he broke the back of the opponent.

and purged the son of a rich man;²²
 as a result of that karma,
 I contracted dysentery. (28) [3368]

One time I, Jotipāla, said
 to Kassapa, the Well-Gone-One,
 “Whence then this baldy’s Waking Up,²³
 Awakening so hard to reach?” (29) [3369]

As a result of that karma,
 I practiced great austerities
 in Uruvela, six [long] years,
 and then achieved Awakening. (30) [3370]

“Along that path I did not reach
 supreme Awakening,” [I thought],
 “along which path then should I search,
 hindered by previous karma?
 Exhausting good and bad [karma]
 [and] avoiding every torment
 free of grief, troubles [and] outflows,
 I shall realize nirvana.” (31-32) [3371-72]

Thus did he explain, the Victor,
 Endowed with All Superpowers,²⁴
 in front of the monks’ Assembly,
 at the great Lake Anotatta. (33) [3373]

Thus indeed the Blessed One spoke this short discourse on dharma [revealing] his
 own previous conduct, the Buddha-*apadāna* named “The Rags of Previous Karma”.

The Buddha-*apadāna* named “The Rags of Previous Karma” is finished.

The Summary:

Avaṅṭa and Labuja too,
 Udumbara and Pilakkhu,
 Phāru, Valli and Kadali,
 Panasa, Koṭivīsaka
 and the Rags of Former Karma,
 the legend of the Sage so Great:
 verses [numbering] ninety-one
 are counted by those who are wise.

²²thereby killing the amoebas causing his diarrhoea

²³*bodhi*, Enlightenment. At its root the term means more precisely, as here, Awakening. It is, needless to say, the same root that gives us Buddha, Awakened One (Enlightened One).

²⁴*sabbābhiññabalatto*, “lit. endowed with all the powers of the special knowledges”

The Avaṅṭaphala Chapter, the Thirty-Ninth