

Sumanā Rāja,kumārī Sutta

The Discourse to Princess Sumanā

[The levels of benefits for the giver]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 5.31/3:32-34)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2007

1 Princess Sumanā

1.1 PAST LIVES. Sumanā, or more fully, **Sumanā Rāja,kumārī**, “the royal princess Sumanā,” is the daughter of the rajah of Kosala and sister of Pasenadi. She is listed amongst the eminent laywomen followers. (A 3:348)

According to the Commentaries on the Mahā’pādāna Sutta (D 14) and the Sumana Sutta (A 5.31), in the time of Vipassī Buddha, she belongs to a seth family, and that her father has died. When the people, almost at the point of the sword, obtains the king’s permission to entertain the Buddha and his monks, it is the general’s (*senā,pati*) privilege to invite the Buddha to his house on the first day.

When Sumanā returns from playing, she finds her mother in tears, and when asks the reason, her mother replies, “If your father had been alive, it would have been our privilege to entertain the Buddha today.” Sumanā comforts her by saying that the honour shall yet be theirs. She fills a golden bowl with richly flavoured milk rice, covering it with another bowl. She then wraps both vessels all round with garlands of jasmine, and leaves the house with her slaves.

On the way to the general’s house she is stopped by the general’s men, but persuades them to let her pass. As the Buddha approaches, saying that she wishes to offer him jasmine, she puts the two vessels into his alms bowl. She then resolves that in every subsequent birth she shall be named Sumanā and that her body shall be fragrant like a garland of jasmine. When the Buddha arrives in the general’s house and is served first with soup, he covers his bowl, saying that he has already been given his food.

At the end of the meal, the general, on discovering Sumanā’s courage, is full of admiration for her, invites her to his house and makes her his chief consort. Thereafter she is known as Sumanā, and, wherever she is born, a shower of jasmine flowers falls knee-deep on the day of her birth. (DA 2:476-478; AA 2:238-241)

1.2 HER LAST LIFE. The Sumanā Sutta (A 5.31) records her visit to the Buddha with five hundred ladies-in-waiting in five hundred royal chariots, and her questions regarding the efficacy of giving. The Aṅguttara Commentary explains that these five hundred companions are born on the same day as herself.

When she is seven, the Buddha pays his first visit to Sāvattihī. At the dedication of the Jeta,vana by Anātha,piṇḍika, she and her five hundred companions are present, carrying vases, flowers, etc, as offering to the Buddha. After the Buddha’s discourse she becomes a streamwinner. (AA 3:241-243)

She is also present when the Buddha admonishes Pasenadi on the teaching of **the Dahara Sutta** (S 3.1),¹ and Pasenadi is established in the refuges and the precepts. Sumanā wishes to leave the world, but postpones it so that she may look after her grandmother as long as she lives. After her grandmother’s death, Sumanā goes with Pasenadi to the monastery, taking such things as rugs and carpets, which she presents to the Order. The Buddha admonishes her and Pasenadi, and she becomes a non-returner.

According to the Commentary on **the Vuḍḍha,pabbajita Sumanā Therī,gāthā**, which contains only one stanza, she then asks for ordination. At the conclusion of the stanza (Thī 16) spoken to her by the Buddha, she attains arhathood. According to the Commentary, Sumanā joins the order in her old age (ThīA 22 f).

¹ The teaching begins with the statement, “There are four young things, maharajah, who should not be despised or disparaged as ‘young’” (S 3.1/1:68-70).

2 The prose section

The teaching of the prose section of **the Sumanā Sutta** is quite straightforward. Princess Sumanā asks the Buddha whether two disciples equal in faith, moral virtue and wisdom, but one is a giver while other is not, would have any difference between them

as heavenly beings [§2],
 as humans [§4],
 as recluses, [§6], and
 as arhats [§8].

The Buddha replies that in the case of the first three, the giver would enjoy the benefits of their giving, but the non-giver would enjoy none [§§3, 5, 7]. In the case of the arhats, however, whether they were givers before or not, their arhathood is always the same [§9].

The Sumanā Sutta should be studied with **the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇī Sutta** (A 10.177), where it is stated that a person who is immoral but is a generous giver would still enjoy the benefit of his giving. However, there is a twist. Since they do not wholesome course of conduct, they are reborn as domesticated animals, such as elephants, horses, cows, and chickens (and we might assume as cats, dogs and other pets) that are well treated and well cared for!²

3 The verses

The Sumanā Sutta contains five stanzas, most of which are found elsewhere, and probably belong to a popular floating tradition of gnomic sayings.³ These verses presented here have been rearranged into idiomatic English (while in the text, they are given in interlinear translation). The first stanza [§11], for example, is found in **the Sāri,putta Therāpadāna** (Ap 3.1.180) and **the Sambhava Jātaka** (J 515):

Just as the spotless moon, going across space [the sky],
 amongst all the constellations of stars, shines as a light in the sky over the world. [§11]
 (Also at Ap 3.1.180/1:27 = ThīA 3:95 = J 515/63)

In **the Sāri,putta Therāpadāna** (Ap 80), this verse is part of Sāriputta's recollection of the Buddha, extolling the Buddha's qualities. The whole Apadāna is repeated in the Therī, gāthā Commentary (ThīA 3:95). In **the Sambhava Jātaka** (J 515), this stanza praises the 7-year-old Sambhava (the Bodhisattva), who is wise beyond his tender years. Here, in the Sumanā Sutta, the stanza correlates with its following stanza [§12]:

Even so, the one endowed with moral virtue, the individual, full of faith,
 with charity, outshines all those stingy in the world. [§12]

Here, in three verses, the Buddha praises the princess Sumanā's faith and generosity:

Just as a thundering rain-cloud, hundred-crested, garlanded in lighting,
 raining down upon the earth, filling high plains and low valleys, [§13]

even so, the one endowed with vision, the fully self-awakened one's disciple,
 wise, excels the stingy in five ways: [§14]

in long life, fame, beauty, and happiness.
 Indeed, after death, he rejoices in heaven, surrounded by wealth. [§15]

Stanza 13 is a beautiful nature imagery: the ancient Indian apparently see the dark cloudy sky with thunder and lightning as a welcome sight, as it portends rain and a good crop. In **the Issatta Sutta** (S

² A 10.177/5:271 f = SD 2.6.

³ On gnomes, see **Sādhu S** (S 1.33) = SD 22.10c Intro 1.1.

3.24), the Buddha, in answer to rajah Pasenadi’s question on to whom to give for the benefit of great fruit, uses this same stanza to illustrate the promise and fertility of giving.⁴

Stanzas 15ab is also found in **the Aṅkura Peta,vatthu** (Pv 2.9), but in a different context. According to Peta,vatthu, Indaka gave a few ladles full of food to the arhat Anuruddha, and after passing away Indaka was reborn in Tāvatiṃsa, and that

59 *Dasahi t̄hānehi aṅkuraṃ
indako atirocati
rūpe sadde rase gandhe
phoṭṭhabbe ca manorame*

In ten points, Aṅkura
(thus) Indaka excels:
form [appearance], sound [voice], taste, smell,
and mentally pleasing touch,

60 *Āyunā yasaṣā ve ca
yannena ca sukhena ca
ādhipaccena Aṅkuraṃ
Indako atirocati*

in long life, in fame, and
in beauty [complexion], and happiness, and
by way of lordship, Aṅkura
(thus) Indaka excels.

(Aṅkura Peta,vatthu, Pv 2.9.59 f/27; PvA 136 f)

Line 60c mentions *ādhipacca* (mfn) (from *adhipati*, “overlord”), which is the same as *ādhipateyya* (“lordship”) (n, mfn), also mentioned in the Sumanā Sutta (A 5.31.3+5). Hence, both the line 60c and the Sumanā Sutta refer to the same five benefits of the giver, and also rebirth in heaven.

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⁴ S 438/3.24/1:100 (**the Issatta Sutta**), SA 1:166; qu in **Sadda,nīti** (Dhātu,mālā) CSCD:Be 321.

The Discourse to Princess Sumanā

(A 5.31/3:32-34)

Giving distinguishes the giver

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika's park, in Jeta,vana, near Sāvattihī. Then, princess Sumanā, with a retinue of five hundred princesses each in their own chariot, approached the Blessed One. Having approached the Blessed One, they saluted him, and then sat down as one side.

Seated thus at one side, princess Sumanā said this to the Blessed One:

2 “Here, bhante, suppose there were two disciples of the Blessed One who are equal in faith, equal in moral virtue, equal in wisdom, but one is a giver and one is not. After their death, [33] when the body had broken up, and they are reborn in a happy state, a heavenly world. Having gained deva nature, bhante, would there be any distinction or any difference between them?”

“There would be, Sumanā,” said the Blessed One.

Divine benefits of giving

3 “Sumanā, although they are equal in their deva nature, whoever is the giver surpasses the non-giver in five ways:

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|-------------------------------|--|
| (1) in divine life | (<i>dibbena āyunā</i>); |
| (2) in divine beauty | (<i>dibbena vaṇṇena</i>); |
| (3) in divine happiness [joy] | (<i>dibbena sukkena</i>); |
| (4) in divine glory | (<i>dibbena yasena</i>) and |
| (5) in divine supremacy | (<i>dibbena ādhipateyyena</i>). ⁵ |

Sumanā, although they are equal in their deva nature, whoever is the giver surpasses the non-giver in these five ways.”

4 “But, bhante, if they are to fall [die] from there and return here, being equal as humans, would there, bhante, be any distinction or any difference between them?”

“There would be, Sumanā,” said the Blessed One.

Human benefits of giving

5 “Sumanā, although they are equal in their human nature, whoever is the giver surpasses the non-giver in five ways:

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (1) in human life | (<i>mānusakena āyunā</i>); |
| (2) in human beauty | (<i>mānusakena vaṇṇena</i>); |
| (3) in human happiness [joy] | (<i>mānusakena sukkena</i>); |
| (4) in human glory | (<i>mānusakena yasena</i>) and |
| (5) in human supremacy | (<i>mānusakena ādhipateyyena</i>). |

Sumanā, although they are equal in their human nature, whoever is the giver surpasses the non-giver in these five ways.”

6 “But, bhante, if they both are to go forth from the household life into homelessness, would there, bhante, be any distinction or any difference between their going-forth?”

“There would be, Sumanā,” said the Blessed One.

The giver outshines the giver

7 “Sumanā, they are equal as recluses who have gone forth, but whoever is the giver surpasses the non-giver in five ways:

- (1) he is often asked to enjoy the use of the robe, not rarely asked;

⁵ On the 3 kinds of *ādhipateyya* (lordship), see **Pakkanta S** (S 17.35/2:241) = SD 22.6a(1.4).

- (2) he is often asked to enjoy the use of almsfood, not rarely asked;
- (3) he is often asked to enjoy the use of a lodging, not rarely asked;
- (4) he is often asked to enjoy the use of medicine and medical support for the sick, not rarely asked;
- (5) Furthermore, the co-brahmacharis [colleagues in the holy life] he lives with often conduct themselves pleasantly towards him through bodily action, rarely unpleasantly, often conduct themselves pleasantly towards him through speech, rarely unpleasantly, often conduct themselves pleasantly towards him through thought, rarely unpleasantly. The reverence [service] they show to him,⁶ too, is pleasant, rarely [34] unpleasant.

Sumanā, although being equal as recluses who have gone forth, but whoever is the giver surpasses the non-giver in these five ways.”

Spiritual benefits of giving

8 “But, bhante, if they both are to attain arhathood, would there, bhante, be any distinction or any difference between their attaining of arhathood?”

9 “In this case, Sumanā, there would *not* be any difference between one liberation or the other, I say!”

10 “It is wonderful, bhante! It is marvellous, bhante! This, bhante, is indeed reason enough to give alms, reason enough to make merit, that is, if they would be of help to being a deva; of help to being a human, too; of help to being a renunciant [one gone forth], too.”

The Blessed One said this; having said this, the Well-gone [Sugata], the Teacher, further said this:

11 *Yathā’pi cando vimalo
gacchaṃ ākāsa,dhātuyā
sabbe tārā gaṇe
loke ābhāya atirocati*

Just as the spotless moon
going across space [the sky],
amongst all the constellations of stars,
shines as a light in the sky over the world:

12 *Tath’eva sīla,sampanno
saddho purisa,puggalo
sabbe maccharino loke
cāgena atirocati*

even so, the one endowed with moral virtue,
the individual, full of faith,
all those stingy in the world
he outshines with charity.

13 *Yathā’pi meghe thanayāṃ
vijju,mālī sata-k,kaku
thalam ninnam ca pūreti
abhivassam vasun,dharam*

Just as a rain-cloud thundering,
hundred-crested, garlanded in lightning,
filling high plains and low valleys,
raining down upon the earth:

14 *Evam dassana,sampanno
sammā sambuddha,sāvako
maccharim adhiganhāti
pañca,thānehi paṇḍito:*

even so, the one endowed with vision,
the fully self-awakened one’s disciple,
excels the stingy—
he is wise, in five ways, thus:

15 *Āyunā yasasā ve ca
vaṇṇena ca sukkena ca
sa ve bhoga,paribbūlho
pecca sagge pamodatī ti⁷*

in long life, in fame, and
in beauty, and happiness, and
indeed, surrounded by wealth
after death, he rejoices in heaven.

⁶ *Upahāraṃ upaharanti*, which Comy of **Cattāro Samaṇā S** (A 4.87) glosses as: “~ means giving or showing reverence mentally and physically,” or “~ means providing or offering mental and physical services” (*upahāraṃ upaharantī ti kāyika,cetasika,upahāraṃ upaharanti upanīyanti*, AA 3:114)

⁷ *Ce sagge ca modati.*

— evaṃ —

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