

The Chapter on Impermanence – the Virtues of Taking the Three Refuges

In the *Chapter on Impermanence* in Volume 1 of the *Dharmapada Sutra*, the Buddha taught a historical fact about how Shakra Devanam Indra eliminated karmic wrongdoings and restored his position as the king of heaven before the moment of his death due to the virtues of his wholeheartedly taking the three refuges on his own.

The first level of the heavens of the desire realm is located at the mountainside of Mount Sumeru. There are four heavens located in the directions of east, south, west, and north, which are commanded by four heaven kings, so the first level of the heavens is also called the Heaven of the Four Kings. The second level of the heavens of the desire realm is called the Trayastrimsa Heaven; it is located on top of Mount Sumeru with eight heavens in each of the four directions of east, south, west, and north. In the center, there is another heaven where the king of heaven, Shakra, also called the Sovereign Śakra or Shakra Devaam Indra, dwells. One day and night in these heavenly realms equals to 100 years on earth. Although the life span of Shakra Devanam Indra has been very long relative to that of a human being, he still would die at some point because any realm in the three realms is a dharma of impermanence after all.

When the heavenly beings of the desire realm are approaching death, five signs will show, which are also called the “five



signs of decay.” What are the five signs? They are as follows:

1. The vanishing of their body radiance: All heavenly beings have body radiance as their karmic reward. The levels of their body radiance differ according to the differences of their karma of virtues and merits. At the time of approaching death, their body radiance will gradually vanish.
2. The withering of their hair flower-garland: All heavenly beings naturally have different hair flower-garland on their heads. As their life span is nearly over, their hair flower-garland will start to wither.
3. Being unhappy about what they originally have: They no longer enjoy the environment, palace, and so on of the desire realm in which they live.
4. The sweating smell of their armpits: The bodies and armpits of heavenly beings start to emit filthy smell.
5. Their bodies becoming dirty because of dust: Their physical bodies and heavenly robes are naturally clean without dust. Now they start to be contaminated by dust.

Therefore, as a heavenly being observes himself or others having the five signs of decay, he would know that the moment of death is approaching for him or others.

At that time, Shakra Devanam Indra noticed himself having the five signs of decay. He knew that he was dying and he would be reborn as a donkey, so he was very worried. Shakra Devanam Indra thought that in the three realms only the World-Honored One could save sentient beings; therefore, he immediately rushed to see the Buddha. At that moment, the World-Honored One was in a benefit-all- samadhi. Shakra Devanam Indra saw the Buddha, prostrated himself before the Buddha, and wholeheartedly

swore to take refuges in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and sangha on his own. While he prostrated himself, his consciousness suddenly left his body and entered the womb of a donkey kept by potters. The mother donkey was kept in an area where all the pottery was stored. Possibly due to its pregnancy, the donkey felt uncomfortable, so it released itself by breaking the rope that tied it with its teeth. Because it was freely walking around in the pottery area, it damaged a lot of pottery. Its master then beat up the donkey, which injured the donkey's fetus, so the little donkey died inside the womb of its mother. At that moment, the consciousness of Shakra Devanam Indra returned to his body, which was still prostrating to the Buddha. The five signs of decay also vanished at once, and he resumed his position as the king of heaven, Shakra.

After the World-Honored One exited from the samadhi, he praised Shakra Devanam Indra for his being able to take refuge in the Three Jewels during the moment before death and his



virtues of taking refuge in the Three Jewels with a sincere and pure mind, which transformed the bad retribution of falling into a donkey's womb as a fetus due to the evil karma he had committed in the past lives.

“Taking the three refuges” means to rely on the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and sangha. The of Buddha, Dharma, and sangha actually are three parts of a single unit because the Dharma is taught by the Buddha and the sangha are those who personally realize the Dharma taught by the Buddha, that is, it also relies on the Buddha to exist.

We say that there are three parts according to the manifestations of worldly dharma. First, the Buddha came to be when Prince Siddhartha manifested himself as the Buddha. Then there was the Dharma when the Buddha preached the Dharma to help liberate the five persons including Ajnata-Kondanna. After the five persons including Ajnata-Kondanna heard the Dharma taught by the Buddha, they attained the fruition of arhats. Hence, there were five Buddhist monks. Therefore, the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and sangha were complete. Since they are worthy to be relied on, they are called the three refuges.

The World-Honored One knew that Shakra Devanam Indra was able to receive such a great dharma at that time, so He taught him the dharma of impermanence of the Path to Liberation. For example, the pottery made by potters is easily damaged, and so is human life. Shakra Devanam Indra heard the Buddha teach the Dharma, realized the dharma essence of impermanence, had a thorough understanding of the transformation between karmic punishment and reward, was happy to obey and carry out the teachings, and attained the fruition of srotaapanna [stream-enterer]. This teaching indicates that taking the three refuges with a pure mind is the cause of seeing the Way, including the Path to Liberation and the Path to Buddhahood, and even the original cause of attaining Buddhahood. Without taking the three refuges with a pure mind, one cannot have firm certitude about the Four Great Vows he makes. In other words, he cannot have firm certitude about his “vow to attain the unsurpassable Buddhahood.” Hence, he cannot enter the stage of First Stay. Certainly, he would not be able to start the cultivation process for three great incalculable

eons. Therefore, the virtues of taking the three refuges with a pure mind are extremely wondrous. On the other hand, we should be very careful because the karmic retribution of destroying one's taking the three refuges or other people's taking the three refuges is relatively speaking very serious.

