

On Measuring the Lifespan
Of The One Who Has Descended Into This World
Chapter Sixteen

S. Tathāgata Āyus Pramāṇa Parivartaḥ,
C. Rúlái Shòuliáng Pīn, J. Nyorai Juryō Hon, 如來壽量品

An English translation of Kumārajīva's version of this sixteenth chapter

On Measuring the Lifespan of The One Who Has Descended Into This World

Chapter Sixteen

At this time the Buddha addressed the bodhisattvas as well as all of the others in the great assembly.

“Good sons, for you with proper faith and understanding there are the genuine and true words of The One Who Has Descended Into This World.”

Again the Buddha addressed the great assembly:

“For you with proper faith and understanding there are the genuine and true words of The One Who Has Descended Into This World.”

Once again, the Buddha addressed all of the great assembly:

“For you with proper faith and understanding there are the genuine and true words of The One Who Has Descended Into This World.”

Then those in great assembly of Bodhisattvas, led by Maitreya, joined their palms together and spoke to the Buddha, saying:

“Blessed One, we only pray that you teach us - those of us with proper faith will accept the Buddha’s words.”

Having spoken like this three times, again they said

“We only pray that you teach us - those of us with proper faith will accept the Buddha’s words.”

The Blessed One then spoke these words, recognizing that the Bodhisattvas would not stop after making three requests:

“You should now carefully listen to this teaching about the secret mystery of The One Who Has Descended Into This World and the pervading power of its grace. Those in the heavens, those in the human realm and those driven by pride all now reason that the Buddha Śākyamuni only recently left the palace of the Śākya clan, went to Gayā and, not far, sat where he cultivated the noble path and attained the supreme universal enlightenment. In fact, good sons, I have already attained enlightenment and descended into this world for countless hundreds, thousands, millions and billions of ages. Suppose that there were five hundred, a thousand, a million, a billion, a countless number of three billion-fold realms. Suppose then that a person ground all of these realms up into particles of dust and then traveled eastward through five hundred, a thousand, a million, a billion, a countless number of nations and then dropped a single particle of dust. Then further suppose that this person continued eastward until all of these particles of dust were used up. Good sons, what do you think? Would it be possible to know, estimate or even imagine this number of realms or not?

Maitreya and the other bodhisattvas then spoke to the Buddha together, saying:

“Blessed One, all these worlds are without measure and without bounds. Their number is incalculable and beyond the power of the mind. Even with their knowledge that is beyond any affliction, all of the students of life’s purpose and beings awakened to the nature of sentient existence in their own lives are incapable of knowing or conceiving of such a number. Even bodhisattvas who are at the stage of never turning back are unable to grasp this. Blessed One - all of these worlds are without measure and without bounds.”

The Buddha then addressed the great multitude of bodhisattvas:

“Good sons, now there is a part that I must clarify in telling you this. All of these worlds - whether they hold a particle of dust or not - grind all of them into particles of dust, and then imagine each particle of dust being the age of a universe. I have already attained enlightenment and descended into this world for longer than this by hundreds, thousands, millions, billions and countless numbers of such ages.

“Since I have descended into this world, I have always been teaching and spiritually transforming sentient beings in this world that all must endure together as well as in other places in hundreds, thousands, millions, billions and countless nations, guiding and benefiting them.”

“Good sons, in the meantime I have spoken about the Buddha named ‘Steadily Shining Beacon’ and others, and then said that they entered into nirvāṇa. All of this was said by distinguishing different ways & means of teaching about my life.”

“Good sons, when sentient beings have come and reached me here, with my enlightened eye I have observed their faith and other spiritual capacities, and whether they are sharp or dull. Adapting to these conditions I have responded to deliver them.”

“Here and there I have taught of myself with different names and terms for various periods of time, great and small, and then again presented the words ‘I must enter into nirvāṇa’.”

“And with various ways and means I have taught about life’s most sublime purpose and have been able to make sentient beings inspire a joyful mind.”

“Good sons, The One Who Has Descended Into This World sees sentient beings finding contentment in lesser purposes, heavily tainted with afflictions and weak in virtue.”

“For these people I have taught that I left home when young and then attained the supreme universal enlightenment.”

“In reality I have already attained enlightenment and descended into this world for all of eternity, if anything. However, through using ways and means I have instructed and spiritually transformed sentient beings, making them enter into the path of enlightenment. I have done these things in order to teach them.”

“Good sons, The One Who Has Descended Into This World has propagated the teachings of the scriptures to spiritually deliver and emancipate sentient beings:

Some teaching through my own life, some teaching through the life of another.

Some revealing my own life, some revealing the life of another.

Some revealing my own work, some revealing the work of another.”

“All of this has been said to teach, all of it is true and without any falsehood.”

“This is because The One Who Has Descended Into This World has knowledge and vision of the transcendental meaning found in the mutually dependent aspects of the three-fold sphere of sentient existence.

It goes beyond the existence of life and death,

Whether retreating from it or approaching it.

And, in being neither of this world nor of an extinction that goes beyond it,

It is neither a real existence nor an empty falsehood, and

It is neither the same as this three-fold sphere nor different from it.

Unlike the vision of sentient beings living within this three-fold sphere, The One Who Has Descended Into This World clearly sees everything in it without mistake.”

“Because sentient beings have different kinds of natures and aspirations, exhibit different kinds of conduct, and make different kinds of mental distinctions and associations, all of these are distinguished so that their aspirations can be directed towards the producing of virtuous spiritual capacities. Through various different explanations of the causes and conditions of awakening to life’s purpose, illustrations of them that serve as metaphors and the skillful use of words and terms, there are the various teachings about it. This is the Buddha’s work that has never ceased.”

“Like this I have already realized enlightenment and descended into this world for a very great eternal lifespan of limitless and countless ages, forever abiding without perishing.”

“Goods sons, I originally practiced the bodhisattva path. This has become a livelihood that still will not be completed for more than twice the number of ages described before.”

“Although I am really without death, as a device I declare that I must perish.”

“By such ways & means, The One Who Has Descended Into This World instructs and spiritually transforms sentient beings. Why is this? When the Buddha remains too long in this world, people who are weak in virtue will be without seeds for the development of virtuous spiritual capacities. Being poor in merit, they will become greedily attached to the five kinds of sensory desire and enter into a network of mental distinctions and associations that are based on false beliefs. If they saw The One Who Has Descended Into This World always being here in this world and never perishing, it would be the means for the arising of arrogance, complacency, feelings of laziness and disinterest, and an inability to bear the thought of one who is difficult to meet with a mind of reverence.”

“And so The One Who Has Descended Into This World uses skillful ways & means to teach monks about how difficult it is to encounter a Buddha in this world. There have been so many people in this world who have been weak in virtue over so many countless hundreds, thousands, millions and billions of ages. Some of them have had a chance to encounter a Buddha but many have not. Because of this, I have always reminded them:

‘Monks (Bhikṣus), you should never forget that it is very difficult to get to see an enlightened being who has descended into this world.’”

“Sentient beings who hear these words will certainly bear in mind the idea that it is difficult to encounter such an enlightened being, and their hearts will long and thirst with reverence to see one. This is a device used for cultivating the seeds of virtuous spiritual capacities in them. Because of this, although The Ones Who Have Descended Into This World never really perish, they are said to perish from this world.”

“And good sons, all of the purposes of the Enlightened Beings Who Have Descended Into This World are like this. Designed to deliver sentient beings, they are all true and without any falsehood.”

“This can be compared to a good doctor with penetrating knowledge and discernment who was brilliantly trained in the ways of medicine and skilled in healing all diseases. This person had many children; ten, twenty, up to a hundred in number. Because of conditions related to his work, he went far away to another nation.”

“Later on, his children swallowed someone else’s poisonous medicine, which brought on agony, disorder and writhing on the ground.”

“By the time the father returned back home, all of his children had eaten the poison. Some had forgotten the purpose for their own lives while others had not. From far away they saw their father coming and they all greatly rejoiced. Bowing and kneeling, they made a request, saying:

‘How good it is that you have safely returned. We have foolishly eaten poisonous medicine. We pray that you will see us, save us and restore our lives.’

“The father saw his children in suffering and distress like this. Relying on the directions of the scriptures, he sought out the most effective medicinal herbs that were endowed with a beautiful color, a fine fragrance, a pleasing taste and were perfect in every way. Upon pounding, sifting and blending them, he gave this medicine to his children and directed them to take it, making these words:

‘This very effective medicine with a beautiful color, a fine fragrance and a pleasing taste is perfect in every way. You who are willing to take it will quickly eliminate all suffering and distress and there will be no more sickness.’”

“Those children who had not forgotten the purpose for their own lives saw this good medicine with its beautiful color and fine fragrance and, upon taking it, their sickness was completely cured.”

“Others who had forgotten their own purpose also saw their father come. Although they rejoiced and sought help in the healing of their sickness and were even given the medicine, they were unwilling to take it. This was because the poison’s vapors had deeply entered into their minds and they had lost their way. Because of this, they reasoned that this medicine of beautiful color and fine fragrance did not taste good. Their father then made this thought:

‘I must pity these children. Their minds are all upset and confused because of this poison. Although they see me, rejoice and seek help in being cured, they are not willing to take a good medicine such as this. I must now establish a means to make them take this medicine.’”

“He then made these words:

‘You should know that I am now old and weak and the time of my death is approaching. I will now leave this good and pleasing medicine here in this world. You may keep it and take it, and you need not fear that you will not be cured.’”

“Having made these instructions, he again went away to another nation.

He then dispatched a messenger who came back to announce:

‘Your father is already dead.’”

“When the children heard that they have lost their father, their minds were filled with grief and distress. They then made this thought:

‘If our father were here, he would have mercy and compassion for us. He would be able to see us, save us and protect us. He has now abandoned us, and we have lost him to another nation far away.’”

“Considering themselves to be orphans, no longer having anyone to depend upon and harboring constant feelings of grief, their minds awakened. Recognizing this medicine with its beautiful color, fine fragrance and pleasing taste, they held onto it and took it, and they were completely cured of this toxic disease.”

“Their father, hearing that his children had been completely cured, searched for a means to come back to them. His messengers saw to this.”

“Good sons, what do you think? Can anyone really say that the good doctor had been dishonest about this?”

“No, Blessed One!”

The Buddha then said:

“And like this I have already attained enlightenment and descended into this world for hundreds, thousands, millions, a countless number of ages. For sentient beings I have spoken of the need to perish from this world, using the power of ways and means. And there is no one who can honestly say that I have committed an error or falsehood.”

Then the Blessed One, desiring to reiterate the meaning of this, spoke in verse, saying:

“Since I have attained enlightenment and descended into this world
Many ages have passed,
Limitless hundreds thousands and millions,
A myriad, a countless number. //1

Ever teaching about life’s purpose and spiritually transforming
Countless billions of sentient beings,
I have made them enter into the path of enlightenment.
Since this, there have been ages without measure. //2

In order to deliver sentient beings
There have been the ways & means of teaching about nirvāṇa,
Yet I have never really perished from this world.
Always remaining here to teach of life’s true purpose, //3

I have forever abided in this world.
Through the pervading power of grace
I have made it so that sentient beings who were upset and confused
Did not see me, even though I was near." //4

"Many see me pass from this world,
Spreading offerings to my relics.
Everywhere having feelings of yearning and longing,
They bear a thirsting and reverent mind. // 5

These sentient beings are faithful and disciplined,
Their minds are straight and honest, obedient and gentle.
With singleness of mind they aspire to see the Buddha (the enlightened being)
Without being stingy with their lives or their livelihood. //6

At this time the whole community of believers is with me
Appearing together on Vulture's Peak.
I then speak to these sentient beings, saying:
"I am forever abiding in this world without perishing, //7

But through the power of skillful ways & means
I appear to pass from this world, yet never really do so."
Other nations have sentient beings
Who are reverent, faithful and content. //8

I return among them
To teach about life's supreme purpose.
You who do not hear this
Only understand that I have passed away." //9

"I will see many sentient beings
Sinking into the ocean of suffering,
But I will not reveal my life to them.
Making them bear thirst and reverence, //10

Causing their minds to yearn and long,
I will appear to teach of life's purpose.
The pervading power of grace will be like this
For countless ages //11

Always here on Vulture's Peak
As well as many other places.
Sentient beings will see the ends of ages,
Times when great fires rage. //12

My land will be a sanctuary of peace
Where those of heaven and humanity are always fulfilled.
The gardens and forests will have temples and monuments
Adorned with various kinds of treasures. //13

There will be precious trees with blossoms and fruits, and
Sentient beings will always be content.
Those in heaven will beat divine drums
Ever making beautiful music. //14

Mandārava blossoms will rain down
Scattering on the Buddha and all the assembly.
My pure land will be not defiled
Yet many will see burning and destruction, //15

Grieving, fearful and suffering distress.
Like this, they will be completely fulfilled.
Sentient beings who are immoral
Through conditioning from evil actions //16

For countless ages
Will not hear about the Three Treasures.
Many will cultivate merits and virtues
They will be obedient and gentle, straight and honest. //17

It follows that they will see my life
Here in this world, teaching of life's purpose.
Sometimes for sentient beings
I will teach that the Buddha's life is without measure. //18

Having seen the Buddha for too long
I will teach that the Buddha is difficult to encounter.
With the power of my transcendental knowledge being like this
The light of its discernment will shine on without measure //19

For a lifespan of countless ages
Forever being attained through the cultivation of karma.
You who have wisdom
Must not bear uncertainty about this. //20

You must resolve your doubts and banish them forever
The Buddha's words are all true and without any falsehood.
Like the doctor's skillful ways & means
For healing his sick children. //21

Although really here in this world, he speaks of dying.
One cannot say that he has spoken falsely.
I am also the father of this world
Saving all those who are suffering from sickness. //22

“For ordinary people who are upset and confused
I speak of perishing, yet I am really here.
Because they always see me,
They produce thoughts that are arrogant and complacent. //23

Idle and attached to the five sensory desires
They fall into the path of evil.
I always understand sentient beings, and
Whether or not they are on the path to enlightenment //24

Adapting accordingly, I respond to deliver them
Teaching of life’s various purposes.
Always making this thought to myself:
 ‘How will I make sentient beings //25
 Attain entry into the supreme path, and
 Quickly realize the life of enlightenment?’” //25½