

IRRESISTIBLE FORCE

Samyutta Nikāya 3.3.5

yathā pi selā vipulā
nabham āhacca pabbatā
samantānupariyeyyum
nipphoṭento catuddisā

evam jarā ca maccu ca
adhivattanti pānino

khattiye brāhmane vesse
sudde caṇḍāla-pukkuse
na kiñci parivajjeti
sabbam evābhimaddati

na tattha hatthīnam bhūmi
na rathānam na pattiyā
na cāpi manta-yuddhena
sakkā jetum dhanena vā

tasmā hi paṇḍito poso
samppassam attham attano
buddhe dhamme ca saṅghe ca
dhiro saddham nivesaye

yo dhammacāri kāyena
vācāya uda cetasā
idh-eva nam pasamsanti
pacca sagge pamodatīti

Just as a mighty mountain range,
scraping the sky with rocky crags,
Might advance from four directions,
crushing everything before it—

So also do old age and death
roll over all living beings.

Nobles, brahmins and working folk,
peasants, outcastes and garbage men—
None of them can escape [this end]:
everybody surely gets crushed.

Nothing on earth can defeat them:
not elephants, chariots or troops;
Nor the use of a magic spell;
nor [can you buy safety] with gold.

So the person who's firm and wise,
seeing what is best for themselves,
Will place their faith in the Buddha,
the Dhamma and the Sangha too.

One who practices the teaching,
with body and speech and with mind—
That one is praised here in this world,
and after enjoys the pure realms.

This verse emerges from a discussion between the Buddha and the Kosala king Pasenadi, who generally feels secure behind his four-fold army (elephant, chariot, cavalry and infantry divisions), his conjurers and his treasury. The Buddha asks him to imagine a situation—the fantastic closing-in of four mountain ranges—where all his royal resources will not help him meet the foe.

Such is the situation in which we actually all find ourselves—rich or poor, aristocrat or laborer—though we are reluctant to face it. How do we respond to the inevitable onslaught of aging and death? The answer given in the body of the sutta is “What else is there to do, save to live righteously and justly and to work good and meritorious deeds?” The verse summarizes this phrase by saying one should have confidence (another way of translating the word saddham) in the triple gem and practice the Buddha's teaching.

Ever practical, the Buddha often points out that in this way we are covering our bets: there are immediate benefits in this life, and in the next our chances are better of emerging well-off.

--A. Olendzki