

GREAT ARMY GENERAL SANTATI

Liberation in the Midst of the World



**No shaven head, no robe, no ordination -
yet an arahant**

THE BUDDHA'S WORDS
*Yaṃ pubbe taṃ virosehi,
pacchā te māhu kiñcanaṃ;
majjhe ce no gahessasi,
upasanto carissasi.*

Bhikkhu Visuddhamma

Great Army General Santati

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The Story · The Analysis · Everyday Practice

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Part 1. The Story of Great Army General Santati (Dhammapada Commentary, Verse 142)

Santati, a great army general of King Pasenadi of Kosala, attained arahantship while still dressed as a courtier, after hearing a single four-line verse, and passed into final Nibbāna the same day. The story is recorded in the *Santatimahā mattavattu* (Dhp-a X.9) and is the occasion for Dhammapada verse 142.

The setting

The Buddha was staying at the Jetavana monastery near Sāvathī. Santati was a great army general and chief officer (*mahāmatta*) of King Pasenadi. When a rebellion broke out on the frontier, the king sent Santati to put it down. He did so quickly and returned victorious. The king was so pleased that he handed over the royal power to Santati for seven days and gave him a woman skilled in singing and dancing.

Seven days of pleasure

Santati lived as a king for seven days, and spent all seven of them drinking. On the seventh day he adorned himself in all his ornaments, mounted the state elephant and rode out of the city gate toward the bathing place. On the way he met the Buddha entering the city for alms. Santati did not dismount;

still seated on the elephant, he merely inclined his head in greeting and rode on.

The Buddha's smile

The Buddha smiled. The Venerable Ānanda, walking behind, asked why. The Buddha said: look at Santati. This very day, still wearing all those ornaments, he will come into my presence, hear a verse of four lines and attain arahantship; then he will sit cross-legged in the air at the height of seven palm trees and pass into final Nibbāna there.

People overheard. Those hostile to the Buddha mocked him: how could that drunkard on the elephant do any such thing? Tonight they would catch the ascetic Gotama in a lie. Those with faith looked forward to witnessing both the power of the Buddha and the merit of Santati.

The death of the dancer

Santati sported in the water for a while, then went to the royal garden and sat in his usual place in the drinking hall. The dancer came out to perform. For the previous seven days she had eaten nothing, so that her body would look slender and graceful on the last day of the festivities. As she danced and sang, violent pains tore through her belly; she collapsed and died on the spot, her eyes and mouth still open.

Santati called for someone to see to her. "My lord, she is dead," the attendant replied. At those words a crushing grief

fell upon him. The commentary says the week's liquor evaporated in an instant, like a drop of water on a red-hot shard of pottery. He thought: apart from the Teacher, who could possibly extinguish this grief?

Going to the Buddha

That evening, with his retinue, Santati went to Jetavana, paid homage to the Buddha, told him what had happened, and asked the Buddha to be his refuge and put out his sorrow.

The Buddha replied that he had come to the one person who could do that, and that this was not the first time: in the beginningless round of rebirths this same woman had died in just this way countless times, and the tears Santati had shed over her were more than the water of the four great oceans. Then he spoke the four-line verse he had foretold (see Part 2).

At the end of the verse Santati attained arahantship together with the four analytical knowledges (*paṭisambhidā*), still in the robes and jewels of a courtier.

The request to pass away

Reviewing his lifespan, Santati saw that he had very little time left and asked the Buddha's permission to attain final Nibbāna. The Buddha, who already knew Santati's merit from a past life, reasoned that the doubters would be silenced and the faithful would gain greater respect for meritorious deeds if they heard Santati's past. He told Santati to recount the

good deed of his former life – not on the ground, but seated in the air at the height of seven palm trees.

Santati bowed, rose to the height of one palm tree, descended, bowed again, then rose gradually to seven palm trees' height, sat cross-legged in the air and addressed the assembly.

Santati's past life

Ninety-one aeons ago, in the time of the Buddha Vipassī, he was born into a family in the city of Bandhumatī. Wondering what work would best relieve the suffering of others, he observed those who went about preaching the Dhamma and took up that task himself: urging people to do good, keeping the Observance days, giving alms, listening to the teaching, and going through the streets proclaiming that there are no jewels equal to the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha.

King Bandhumā, father of the Buddha Vipassī, heard him and summoned him three times. The first time, learning that he went about on foot, the king gave him a garland like a string of pearls and a horse. The second time, judging a horse insufficient, the king gave him a chariot drawn by four Sindh horses. The third time the king gave him great wealth, a set of fine jewels and an elephant. From then on, adorned in those jewels and seated on the elephant, he went about preaching the Dhamma for eighty thousand years; throughout that time the scent of sandalwood came from his body and the scent of

lotus from his mouth. That was the merit which ripened in this life – and it also explains why his attainment and his passing came to him adorned and mounted, exactly as he had once taught.

Nibbāna and the relics

When he had finished, still seated in the air, Santati entered the meditation on the fire element (*tejo-kasiṇa*) and passed into final Nibbāna. Flames burst from his body and consumed the flesh and blood; the relics drifted down like jasmine flowers. The Buddha spread out a pure white cloth to receive them, had a shrine built over them at a crossroads, and said that those who paid reverence there would gain much merit.

The monks' question and Dhammapada 142

Later, in the Dhamma Hall, the monks discussed the case: Santati had become an arahant at the end of a verse and had passed away in royal dress, seated in mid-air – should he be called an ascetic or a brahmin? The Buddha came in, heard the question, and said that his son could rightly be called either. Then he spoke verse 142 (analysed in Part 6). At the end of the teaching many in the assembly attained stream-entry and the higher fruits.

Part 2. The Complete Teaching: the Four-Line Verse to Santati

The whole teaching that brought Santati to liberation is four lines long, and it is about letting go of craving in all three times: past, future and present. The same verse appears in the Sutta Nipāta (Attadaṇḍa Sutta, verse 949).

The Pāli text

*Yaṃ pubbe taṃ visosehi,
pacchā te māhu kiñcanaṃ;
majjhe ce no gahessasi,
upasanto carissasi.*

Translation

*Let what belongs to the past dry up;
let there be nothing of yours in the future;
if you do not grasp at what lies in between,
you will go about fully at peace.*

Line by line

Pāli line	Literal sense	Meaning in the commentarial tradition
<i>Yaṃ pubbe taṃ visosehi</i>	What was before, make it wither	Craving, longing and defilement bound to the aggregates of the past – here, the whole memory of and attachment to the dancer – must no longer be watered; let them dry up.

Pāli line	Literal sense	Meaning in the commentarial tradition
<i>Pacchā te māhu kiñcanaṃ</i>	Afterwards, let nothing be "yours"	Do not project craving, longing or clinging into the future; hold no plans for enjoyment and no fear of what has not yet come.
<i>Majjhe ce no gahessasi</i>	If you do not grasp in the middle	"The middle" is the present: the five aggregates arising right now. Do not cling to them as "I", "mine" or "my self".
<i>Upasanto carissasi</i>	You will walk in stillness	One who has let go of all three times lives (<i>carati</i>) with a mind fully at peace (<i>upasanta</i>): this is Nibbāna in this very life.

Why this verse fitted Santati

Santati's suffering was entirely clinging to what had just been lost. The Buddha did not console him by replacing the object; he pointed straight at the root. The pain was not in the dancer's death but in the mind's grasping. When the mind releases the past (she was here), the future (she will not be here) and the present (this tearing sense of loss is "me"), suffering has nowhere left to cling.

The Buddha's opening words – that Santati had wept for this woman through countless lives, shedding more tears than the four oceans – placed a private grief within the vast context of rebirth, making it at once understood and small. That was the opening of the mind before the verse closed the circle of suffering.

Part 3. A Short Story: "The Last Night of the Celebration"

A modern retelling of the Santati story, for people who live between work, family and sudden loss.

1. The reward

The Tan Phu overpass contract was signed at four o'clock on a Friday afternoon. Dennis Tran, forty-seven, project director at the Dai Long construction company, had spent fourteen months bringing it home. The managing director called him upstairs, shook his hand hard, and said the sentence he would always remember: "You don't need to come in next week. Take the company card. Do whatever you like. You've earned it."

That evening, in a restaurant on the thirty-second floor, friends, partners and half the sales department filled three long tables. Dennis drank more than usual. By the fourth bottle someone introduced Linh, a lounge singer a partner knew, with a husky voice and a bright smile. She sang two songs and sat down beside him. Dennis could not remember what he said, only that he had been very happy.

The next seven days passed like a film on fast-forward: the golf course at Long Thanh, a yacht in Vung Tau, karaoke until three in the morning, new cars taken for test drives, and

Linh somewhere in almost every frame. His wife Tram's calls he had set to silent since the second day.

2. A smile on the pavement

On the morning of the seventh day Dennis drove a partner's borrowed car past Ba Chieu market, his head still ringing. At the crossroads he saw the old monk Visuddhamma – the one his mother used to go to for Dhamma talks when she was alive – walking barefoot on his alms round, slowly, through the traffic. Dennis managed only a nod through the window, coffee still in his hand. The monk looked up, smiled, and walked on.

The novice behind him asked quietly, "Why are you smiling, venerable sir?"

The monk said, "That man will come to the temple tonight. He is suffering, and does not yet know it."

3. The seventh night

The farewell party for the week was held at a partner's villa in Thao Dien. Linh sang the last song. She had not eaten properly for a week – coffee, juice, a few diet pills to "look good on camera" through the dense run of parties. At the second chorus she stopped, put a hand to her chest, smiled as if apologising, and fell.

The ambulance arrived twelve minutes later. The doctor said it was a heart-rhythm disturbance brought on by exhaustion and electrolyte loss. She was twenty-nine.

Dennis stood in the villa courtyard, his white shirt stained with wine, his phone showing forty-three missed calls from Tram. He was suddenly, completely sober – sober to the point of pain. He saw the whole week as if from outside: a middle-aged man running from himself on other people's money, and a young woman dead from trying to please men like him.

He did not go home. He drove to the temple.

4. The conversation in the shrine hall

Nine o'clock at night; the temple gate was not yet locked. The old monk Visuddhamma sat alone under a yellow lamp, as if waiting. Dennis knelt and could say nothing; he only wept. After a long while he told everything: the contract, the seven days, Linh, the forty-three missed calls.

"You have come to the right place," the monk said. "But I have no way to bring her back, and no way to make the last seven days not have happened. You understand that?"

Dennis nodded.

"Then let me ask you: right now, what is hurting you?"

"She... she died. Because of me."

"That has happened. It is behind you. But the thing that is hurting you now – where is it? In your chest, in your head, or in Thao Dien?"

Dennis was silent.

"You are holding three things at once," the monk said slowly. "The first is the past: seven days, the girl, the music, the fall. You go back to it, replay it, water it every time. The second is the future: what Tram will say, what the company will think, how many years you will carry this shame. The third is the present: the feeling that is crushing your chest – and you call it *me*. 'I am a terrible person.' I ask only one thing of you. Let go of the third one first."

"How?"

"Stop calling it *me*. Call it *what is here*. There is pain. There is remorse. There is breath. There is cold tile under your knees. Look at it the way you look at rain in the yard. Rain does not have to belong to anyone."

They sat together for nearly an hour. The monk taught nothing more. Now and then he simply reminded him: "The past – let it dry up. The future – put nothing there. The thing in the middle – don't grasp it."

At some point Dennis noticed that his chest was no longer tight. The sadness was still there, but it was no longer a wall; it was water, flowing in and flowing out. He was astonished

at how simple it was, and more astonished that in forty-seven years he had never tried it.

5. The days after

Dennis did not become a saint. He still went to work, still had hard days, still flinched when he heard a husky voice. But a few things changed and did not change back.

He went home that night and told Tram everything, hiding no detail, not asking to be forgiven at once. She cried, raged, and then asked, "So what are you going to do now?" He said, "I'm going to stop running."

He went to Linh's funeral, stood at the back, sent her mother enough money that she would not have to worry about it for two years, and left no name.

He returned the company card. The cash bonus he proposed be shared among the crew who had slept on the site for fourteen months. The managing director looked at him for a long time and signed.

And every morning, before opening his phone, he sat for ten minutes on the plastic chair on the balcony and reminded himself of the three lines he had heard in the shrine hall. When something unpleasant came – a lost contract, a harsh word, a flash of anger – he would feel his hand reaching to grasp, and then open it.

Once Tram asked, "How are you different from before?"

He thought for a while and said, "I used to think happiness was having more. Now I think peace is holding less."

Afterword

Santati heard four lines and never returned. People today hear the same four lines and still have to go back to their desks on Monday morning. But the distance between the two is not wisdom or merit; it is the willingness to open the hand. Every time we do not grasp the thing in the middle, we travel a little way along the road the general walked to its end in a single afternoon.

Part 4. The Process of Transformation and the Obstacles People Face Today

Santati passed through six steps in one day; people today are often stuck at step two or three for years. The table below sets each step of the story beside its modern-life obstacle and one concrete thing to do about it.

Step in the story	What happened to Santati	Obstacle for people today	What you can do now
1. Success and reward	Won the war, given royal power for seven days	Success is treated as the finish line; we reward ourselves by consuming (shopping, drinking, lavish travel) and believe "I deserve it"	When rewarded, share part of it with those who worked alongside you; ask "what does this feed in me?" before spending
2. Intoxication	Seven days of liquor, music and dancing girls	Intoxication is not only alcohol: screens, social media, online gambling, endless work; numbness is called "de-stressing"	Set measurable limits: a fixed bedtime, no phone at meals, one alcohol-free day a week
3. Meeting a wise friend and not recognising him	Nodded to the Buddha from the elephant's back	Good people, sound advice and good books are all there, but we "have no time"; the pride of someone on the rise	Each week, meet or read someone who makes you smaller; hear people out before you answer

Step in the story	What happened to Santati	Obstacle for people today	What you can do now
4. Sudden loss	The dancer died before his eyes	Illness, accident, bankruptcy, divorce, a parent's death: the shock arrives exactly when we have no inner strength left	Practise facing impermanence while things are calm: visit the sick, attend funerals, talk about death with family
5. Sobering up and seeking	The liquor evaporated; he knew only the Buddha could put out this suffering	Fleeing pain into another intoxication, blaming others, or seeking "therapies" that soothe only the surface; not knowing where to turn	Have a refuge ready before you need it: a teacher, a practice group, a method you already know
6. Hearing the verse and letting go	Released past, future and present; awakened	Hearing the teaching but understanding it only with the head; the mind still replays the past, worries about the future and identifies with present feeling	Practise the three short reminders daily (see Part 10) until the "grasp" reflex becomes an "open hand" reflex

The six steps, explained for every reader

Each picture below sets a scene from the story (left) beside its equivalent in life today (right). Under each picture are four short parts: what happened to Santati, what it looks like in our lives, the sign that you are at this step, and one small thing you can do.

Step 1. Success and reward



In the story: Santati did his job well – he pacified the frontier – and was rewarded lavishly: seven days as king and a dancing girl. There is nothing wrong with the reward; the problem is that it arrived at the very moment he had nothing to hold himself steady.

In everyday life: A raise, a signed contract, a child's exam passed, a house sold. We tell ourselves, "I deserve this." That sentence opens the door to everything that follows.

The sign you are here: You have just achieved something and feel entitled to "let go" in a way you normally would not.

A small thing to do: Before spending the reward, share a portion with the people who worked with you. That act keeps success from turning into conceit.

Step 2. Intoxication



In the story: Seven days of unbroken drinking. Santati did nothing cruel; he simply stopped seeing himself.

In everyday life: Today's "drunkenness" is rarely alcohol. It is the phone at three in the morning, the endless work that keeps us from thinking, shopping, online gambling, the long-running series. We call it "de-stressing", but what it shares with liquor is this: while it lasts, we are not present in our own lives.

The sign you are here: You cannot clearly remember how the past week went; you avoid silence; family members call and you leave the phone on silent.

A small thing to do: Choose one measurable limit and keep it: a fixed bedtime, meals without a phone, one day a week without any intoxicant. You do not have to fix everything; you need only one sober corner.

Step 3. Meeting a wise friend and not recognising him



In the story: The Buddha walked right in front of him. Santati saw him, but he was up high – literally and

figuratively – so he only nodded. Notably, the Buddha did not rebuke him; he smiled, knowing the afternoon would be different.

In everyday life: Good people, sound advice, a fine book, a Dhamma talk – they cross our path more often than we think. But when we are succeeding we hear without hearing: "Later, I'm busy now."

The sign you are here: You cut people off before they finish; you find advice irritating; you think you already know.

A small thing to do: Each week, meet or read someone who makes you feel smaller. When given feedback, listen to the end before replying.

Step 4. Sudden loss



In the story: The dancer died in the middle of her dance, right before his eyes, without warning. Death did not wait for Santati to be ready.

In everyday life: A test result, a phone call at midnight, the company going under, a spouse saying "I'm leaving." Crisis always comes exactly when we have no inner strength – because we spent it all at step two.

The sign you are here: You have just lost something you thought was certain, and you do not know what to do next.

A small thing to do (before the crisis comes): Practise looking at impermanence while things are calm – visit the sick, attend a funeral, talk about death with your family. Those who have practised panic less when the blow lands.

Step 5. Sobering up and seeking a refuge



In the story: Seven days of liquor vanished in a moment. The lesson is not that he sobered up, but that he knew where to go: "Apart from the Teacher, who can put out this suffering?" He had that answer ready before he needed it.

In everyday life: After the shock, most of us turn into another intoxication – drink, work, a new relationship, blame. Or we look for something that soothes only the surface. Very few know at once where they should go, because they never prepared.

The sign you are here: You are in pain, you are sober, and the only question in your head is: "Who can really help me?"

A small thing to do: Have a refuge ready before you need it: a teacher you trust, a practice community, a method already in your hands (breathing, recollection, chanting). Like knowing the emergency number before the accident happens.

Step 6. Hearing the verse and letting go



In the story: Four lines: let the past dry up, put nothing in the future, do not grasp the middle. Santati released all three at once and awakened on the spot, still in his courtier's dress.

In everyday life: We hear the teaching and understand it with the head, but the mind still replays the old story, worries about what has not come, and identifies with the present feeling: "I am a failure." The difference between us and Santati is not wisdom but readiness to open the hand.

The sign you are here: You begin to notice the moment you are grasping – the chest tightening, the head repeating one sentence – and for the first time you see that you could choose not to.

A small thing to do: Several times a day, ask: "What am I holding – the past, the future, or this feeling?" and open the hand. At first you manage only a few seconds. Repeat long enough and the "grasp" reflex becomes an "open" reflex. Santati did it completely in one afternoon; we do it a little at a time, on the same road.

In short, for the hurried reader: Everyone goes through steps 1 and 2; most people stay a long time at step 3; everyone will be pushed to step 4. What decides the outcome is step 5 – whether a refuge is ready – and step 6 – whether one is willing to open the hand. Both can be prepared starting today.

Three root obstacles

The first obstacle: speed. Santati had a quiet afternoon in which to travel from the drinking hall to Jetavana. People today have phone notifications pushing in between the pain and the awakening. The silence needed for suffering to turn into a question is filled at once with new content. Without that silence there is no step five.

The second obstacle: the diluted teaching. The four-line verse is a concentrated medicine. Today "letting go" is sold as a slogan, a wallpaper, a weekend course; people have heard it so often they no longer hear it. The right medicine, diluted too far, has no effect. One must meet the teaching in its concentrated form and let it work on a real pain.

The third obstacle: no seeds. Santati attained quickly because eighty thousand years of seeds had been sown in a previous life. People today often want Santati's result without doing the work of the Dhamma preacher of Bandhumatī: keeping precepts, giving, listening to the teaching regularly while nothing is happening. Where no seeds are sown, rain brings nothing up.

What the story affirms

Liberation does not require first giving up one's clothes, position or profession. It requires a mind ready to let go the moment it is shown the way. This is good news for lay people: Santati's starting point – drunk, proud, sunk in

pleasure – was lower than most of ours, and he still reached the goal in a single day.

Part 5. The Poem "Letting Go in Mid-Air" (suitable for setting to music)

The poem has three verses, a repeated chorus and a coda, each line of seven to eight syllables in the Vietnamese original, rhymed in couplets. Suggested setting: a slow tempo in 4/4, minor key for the verses moving to major for the chorus. The English below is a line-for-line rendering of the Vietnamese lyric.

Verse 1

*Seven days a king, the wine in hand,
On the royal elephant through the land.
I met the Buddha, nodded, passed him by –
Who knew what that smile had seen?*

Verse 2

*The song broke off before its end,
She fell; the lanterns meant nothing then.
The wine burned off like water on hot clay,
And in my heart one word remained: "Because."*

Chorus

*Let the past run dry and still,
Put nothing in the future's till.
This middle – let the hand not hold,
And walk within the silence, whole.*

Verse 3

*My tears for her outweigh the sea,
One person mourned through lives, through me.
Four lines the Teacher spoke – the heart grew bright;
The brocade stayed. Where did the sorrow go?*

Chorus (repeat)

*Let the past run dry and still,
Put nothing in the future's till.
This middle – let the hand not hold,
And walk within the silence, whole.*

Coda

*Seated in the air, I told the tale of old,
Sandalwood on the wind, the fire like rain.
The relics fell as soft as jasmine flowers –
Who says the one in jewels is not a monk?*

Notes for the composer

- The chorus is the Buddha's four-line verse turned into song; give it the simplest melody so listeners remember it and sing along.
- The last line of the coda alludes to Dhammapada 142; the final word "monk" can be held to close the piece.
- It can be sung solo with guitar or piano, and also works for a choir at Dhamma gatherings.

Part 6. An Analysis of Dhammapada Verse 142

Verse 142 defines the true renunciant by five inner qualities, not by outward form; therefore a man dressed in brocade, like Santati, is still called a brahmin, an ascetic and a bhikkhu. The verse belongs to the chapter on Punishment (*Daṇḍavagga*, chapter 10).

The Pāli text

*Alaṅkato ce pi samaṃ careyya,
santo danto niyato brahmacārī,
sabbesu bhūtesu nidhāya daṇḍaṃ,
so brāhmaṇo so samaṇo sa bhikkhu.*

Translation

*Though adorned, if he lives in calm,
Peaceful, tamed, assured, living the holy life,
Having laid down the rod toward all beings –
He is a brahmin, he is an ascetic, he is a bhikkhu.*

Word by word

Pāli word	Grammar	Meaning	Note
<i>alaṅkato</i>	past participle, nominative singular	adorned, decorated	Refers to clothing, jewels, worldly appearance; placed first to stress the contrast

Pāli word	Grammar	Meaning	Note
<i>ce pi</i>	conjunction + particle	even if, although	Opens a concessive clause: "even when"
<i>samaṃ</i>	adverb	evenly, calmly, rightly	The commentary reads it as living "with body, speech and mind at peace"; it can also mean living justly
<i>careyya</i>	verb, optative, third person singular	if he were to live, go about, conduct himself	From <i>carati</i> : a way of life, not a single act
<i>santo</i>	adjective	peaceful, calm	The mind stilled because greed, hatred and delusion have cooled
<i>danto</i>	past participle	tamed, trained	The image of a tamed elephant or horse; the senses under control
<i>niyato</i>	past participle	fixed, assured	By the commentary: firmly established on the four noble paths, incapable of falling back
<i>brahmacārī</i>	noun	one who lives the holy life	Pure conduct, free of sensuality; more broadly, living by the noble path
<i>sabbesu bhūtesu</i>	locative plural	toward all beings	Without limit: humans, animals, the smallest creatures
<i>nidhāya</i>	gerund	having laid down, having set aside	A completed act, not an ongoing effort

Pāli word	Grammar	Meaning	Note
<i>daṇḍaṃ</i>	accusative singular	the rod, the stick; figuratively violence, punishment	The name of the whole chapter; includes bodily force, harmful speech and the intention to harm
<i>so</i>	demonstrative pronoun	he, that one	Repeated three times for emphatic affirmation
<i>brāhmaṇo</i>	noun	brahmin	In the Buddhist sense: one who has removed evil (<i>bāhita-pāpa</i>), not one born to a caste
<i>samaṇo</i>	noun	ascetic, recluse	One who has stilled (<i>samita</i>) evil states
<i>bhikkhu</i>	noun	bhikkhu, monk	One who has broken (<i>bhinna</i>) the defilements; not merely one who has taken ordination

The structure of the argument

1. **Concession** (line 1): even though worldly appearance remains untouched.
2. **Condition** (lines 2 and 3): five qualities must be present – peace, self-mastery, steadiness, purity of life, harmlessness.
3. **Conclusion** (line 4): the three highest titles of Indian spiritual life all belong to such a person.

The key word is *ce* ("if"): outward form is neither denied nor exalted; it is simply not the criterion. The criterion lies wholly in the mind and in how one treats living beings.

Three titles redefined

In Indian society of the Buddha's time, a brahmin was a caste one was born into, an ascetic was one who left home for the religious life, and a bhikkhu was a mendicant living on the alms bowl. The Buddha kept all three words but emptied them of their old meaning and refilled them with an ethical one: a brahmin because evil has been removed, an ascetic because it has been stilled, a bhikkhu because the defilements have been broken. Santati belonged to none of the three in the old sense, and was all three in the new.

Misreadings to avoid

- The verse does not say that formal renunciation is useless. The Buddha himself founded the Saṅgha and laid down the rules. The verse says only that form is not proof.
- The verse does not license lay people to call themselves arahants because "my mind is pure." The five qualities in lines 2 and 3 are real states, verifiable in the way one lives, above all in complete harmlessness toward every being.
- "Laying down the rod" is not only refraining from striking people; it includes sharp speech, the wish to retaliate, and indifference to the suffering of other beings.

What it means for readers today

Verse 142 puts a direct question to each of us, whatever we wear: is my mind at peace, are my senses under control, am I steady on the path, is my life clean, and have I laid down the rod toward everyone? Those five questions are the measure the verse offers, and none of them asks about clothing.

Part 7. Illustration



The final moment of the story: Santati seated in mid-air at the height of seven palm trees, still wearing all his ornaments, his body giving off fire and the scent of sandalwood; the relics falling like jasmine flowers onto the white cloth the Buddha has spread out. On the left, lay people kneel and watch; on the right, bhikkhus with palms joined – the two groups who will ask the question that leads to verse 142.

Part 8. Ten Questions and Answers Summarising the Teaching

1. Who was Santati and why did the king reward him? He was a great army general of King Pasenadi of Kosala. After he pacified a rebellion on the frontier, the king gave him royal power for seven days and a dancing girl.

2. How did Santati use those seven days? He drank heavily for all seven days, immersed in song, dance and pleasure; on the seventh day he dressed in all his ornaments and rode the state elephant to bathe.

3. What did Santati do when he met the Buddha on the road, and how did the Buddha respond? He merely nodded from the elephant's back. The Buddha smiled and foretold to Ānanda that Santati would attain arahantship that very day after a four-line verse and pass into Nibbāna in mid-air.

4. What event woke Santati up? The dancer, who had fasted for seven days to keep her figure, collapsed and died while performing in front of him. The grief burned off the liquor at once, and he knew that only the Buddha could put out this suffering.

5. What did the Buddha say to Santati before the verse? That in the round of rebirths Santati had wept for this woman countless times, shedding more tears than the four great oceans. The words set a private grief within the vast context of birth and death.

6. What does the four-line verse teach? Letting go of craving in the three times: let the past dry up, keep nothing for the future, do not grasp the present; whoever does this lives in complete peace.

7. Why did Santati awaken so quickly? Because the seeds had long been sown: ninety-one aeons earlier, in the time of the Buddha Vipassī, he had preached the Dhamma and encouraged merit for eighty thousand years. Extreme pain combined with ripened good kamma made four lines enough to open the door.

8. How did Santati pass away? With the Buddha's permission he rose to the height of seven palm trees, recounted his past life, then entered the fire-element meditation and attained Nibbāna; his body burst into flame, the relics fell like jasmine and were enshrined in a stupa at a crossroads.

9. What did the monks wonder, and what did the Buddha reply? They asked whether someone who attained and died in royal dress should be called an ascetic or a brahmin. The Buddha said either name is correct, and spoke verse 142: one who is peaceful, tamed, assured, pure in conduct and harmless to all beings is a brahmin, an ascetic and a bhikkhu, however adorned.

10. What is the core lesson of the story for lay people? Liberation is not measured by outward form but by the mind's ability to let go. A low starting point holds no one back; what

is needed is readiness to let go the moment the way is shown,
and good seeds sown regularly before the crisis comes.

Part 9. Five Open Questions for the Reader

These questions have no right or wrong answers; they are for personal reflection or group discussion.

1. In your own life, what have been your "seven royal days" – the time you rewarded yourself by losing yourself? During that time, to whom or to what did you "nod from the elephant's back" when you should have stopped?
2. Recall a loss that sobered you instantly. After the shock, where did you look for refuge? Did that refuge help you let go, or only help you forget?
3. Of the three things the Buddha told Santati to release – past, future, present – which do you grip most tightly? What signs in body and mind tell you so?
4. Verse 142 says that someone "adorned" can still be a true practitioner. When have you misjudged a person by appearance – or been misjudged yourself? What did it teach you about how to see people?
5. Santati had eighty thousand years of sowing before he reaped in one afternoon. If a major crisis came to you next week, what seeds have you already sown that would hold you steady? Which seed would you like to begin sowing today?

Part 10. Points to Reflect On and Remember

Three daily reminders (from the verse to Santati)

The past – let it dry up.

The future – put nothing there.

The thing in the middle – don't grasp it.

Say these three lines silently on waking, when a strong emotion rises, and before sleep. When trouble comes, ask: "What am I holding – the past, the future, or this feeling?" – then open the hand.

The five measures of verse 142 (weekly self-check)

Quality	Question to ask yourself
Peaceful (<i>santo</i>)	This week, when my mind was stirred up, could it settle again?
Tamed (<i>danto</i>)	Did I keep control of my eyes, ears, mouth and hands in the face of temptation?
Assured (<i>niyato</i>)	Did I hold my direction when praised and when criticised?
Pure in conduct (<i>brahmacārī</i>)	Was my life clean in body, speech and mind?
Rod laid down (<i>nidhāya daṇḍam</i>)	Did I harm anyone – even by a word or by indifference?

Seven things to remember from the story

1. Success is the moment we are most likely to fall; a great reward needs greater mindfulness.

2. Intoxication is not only liquor; anything that stops us from seeing ourselves is intoxication.
3. Wise friends usually cross our path when we are up high and unwilling to come down.
4. Suffering lies not in the event but in the mind's grasping.
5. The shortest teaching may be the strongest, if the ground of the mind is ready.
6. Outward form is neither proof of the path nor an obstacle to it.
7. Sow seeds while the sun still shines; do not wait for the rain to go looking for them.

An image to remember

A drop of liquor falling on a red-hot shard and vanishing at once – that is how real suffering can sweep away delusion, if we do not hurry to pour in more liquor. And a man seated in mid-air, still in brocade, fire burning from within – that is the image of one who has released all three times without needing to change his clothes.

Sources

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- Dhammapada 142: text and commentary



WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

A great general, drunk for seven days, rides past the Buddha with barely a nod. That afternoon the dancer he loved drops dead before his eyes. He goes to Jetavana, hears four lines, and – still in royal dress – awakens and passes away in mid-air.

FIVE KEY POINTS

- 1** Suffering lies not in the event, but in the mind's grasping.
- 2** Let go of all three times: let the past dry up, keep nothing for the future, do not grasp the middle.
- 3** Outward form is neither proof of the path nor an obstacle.
- 4** Success is when we are most likely to fall;
the greater the reward, the more mindfulness it needs.
- 5** Sow seeds while the sun shines – build strength before the storm.

*Though adorned, if he lives in calm,
peaceful, tamed, assured, living the holy life,
having laid down the rod toward all beings –
he is a brahmin, an ascetic, a bhikkhu.*

DHAMMAPADA 142

TO THE READER

You need not change your clothes, your job or your life to begin.
Santati started lower than most of us,
and still reached the goal in a single afternoon.

Each time you notice you are grasping – and open your hand –
you have travelled a little way along that same road.

**Today is a good day to begin.
Are you ready?**

Bhikkhu Visuddhamma