

Poems of the Nuns (1 of 5) Puñña and Ethics

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Gil Fronsdal

Hello on this Monday. One of the activities I've been involved in this month of August is continuing with an ongoing project of translating and then writing commentary or introduction to the ancient verses of the nuns. In Pali it's called the *Terigata*. People say it might be the earliest religious poetry by women. It's purported to be the verses of the direct disciples of the Buddha. Though I think some of the verses were written later, maybe by nuns in the centuries after the Buddha as well.

It is a remarkable collection of Buddhist poems for many reasons. One reason is the tremendous confidence of these women who describe great difficulties that they go through. Life difficulties such as the death of their children, the death of their family, abusive marriages – all kinds of challenges that they have. And somehow they make their way through them. The women practice, become nuns, and confidently live in the world. They live recognizing and proclaiming their full awakening. They demonstrate that full awakening is possible. This text is a celebration of people who are celebrating not only their potential for awakening, but their actual attainment of it. It has even greater value in contrast to the very difficult lives some of them lived before they became nuns.

I translated their writings some years ago. They have been sitting on the shelf for some time. Now I'm writing introductions to it. I hope at some point to be able to publish it as a book. I delight in some of these poems. I want to share them with you and talk about some of them.

The poem that I'll read now has a connection to the guided meditation we just did. There is nothing in the poem that the woman is a nun. It is a story from earlier in her life. Probably she became a nun later. It is also not clear that she's the one who wrote it. It's a dialogue involving a young woman named Puñña. Puñña is a servant of a mistress who is perhaps quite abusive or seemingly ready to punish her for not doing her job well.

As a servant, Puñña is a water carrier. Because there was no running water, there was need for a household – especially a wealthy household, Puñña's maybe – to have a lot of water. It was someone's job to go down to the river, pick up the water, and carry it back. Perhaps that had to happen many times during the day. It's not clear how far the person had to carry it.

In this poem, Puñña is going down to the river at a time of year when the water was quite cold. She had to step into the cold water, scoop it up, and carry it back. She ran into a Brahmin who was there. A Brahmin is like a priest of the Brahmanical religion. One of the central

rituals of Brahmin priests is to go down to the sacred rivers and bathe. This ritual was understood to be a purification rite. After all the bad karma that a person had built up, if the person goes into a sacred river and bathes in it, they are purifying themselves of that bad karma. That is the background for this poem.

So Puñña is speaking to this Brahmin. She says, “I am a water carrier. When it is cold, I always have to go down to get water. I am terrified of punishment from my mistress. I am terrified of angry words. But Brahmin, what do you fear – that you always go down to the water with limbs trembling, experiencing sharp cold?”

The Brahmin replies to her somewhat politely, “Certainly, Lady Puñña, you know the answer to what you’re asking. I am doing wholesome karma and preventing the consequences of evil deeds. Whether young or old, whoever does evil karma is freed of it through purification by water.”

So then Puñña replies to the Brahmin. This is where the poem becomes, for me, quite delightful. It is an expression of a woman of confidence speaking to a Brahmin. She’s a servant woman. In ancient India, there was quite a status differentiation. Even more than just status, servants were often considered almost impure by their very nature of being servants. They shouldn’t interact with Brahmins who are trying to be pure. But Puñña speaks confidently, clearly, and directly to this Brahmin.

These are her words. He has just told her what he’s doing, going to the river to purify his evil karma, his evil actions. She says, “What know-nothing told a know-nothing that one is freed of evil karma through purification in water? Frogs and turtles, water snakes, crocodiles, and other water dwellers – will they go to heaven? Those who butcher sheep and pigs, those who fish and hunt, thieves, executioners, and others who do evil, would they also be freed of evil karma through purification in water? If this river carries away the evil you have done, it would also carry away your good merit, and you would then be out of both. What you do that brings you fear, that brings you down to the water for purification, Brahmin: Just don’t do it. Then cold water won’t shock your skin.”

I love this verse: “Just don’t do it.” Whatever you need to be purified from so that you feel you have to be purified because of doing this evil thing, don’t do it. Then you don’t have to purify yourself in the river.” And the Brahmin replied – because now he’s seen the light – “I entered a bad path. You’ve led me to the noble path. Dear lady, I offer you my purification cloak.”

Puñña says, “Keep it for yourself. I do not want the cloak. If you fear suffering, if you dislike suffering, don’t do evil actions, either openly or secretly. If you’ve done or will do an evil action, there will be no liberation even if you run away. If you fear suffering, if you dislike suffering, go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. And keep the ethical precepts. This will be for your benefit.”

The Brahmin said, “I go for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. I will keep the ethical precepts. This will be for my benefit. Formerly, I was a descendant of the god Brahma.” [This

is a belief of Brahmins, that they are direct descendants of the highest god in heaven.] “But today, I have become a true Brahmin. I am now a person of wisdom, learning, and the three knowledges. Now I have truly bathed.”

He is saying he didn't become a real Brahmin by learning the three Brahmanical knowledges and a lot of Brahmanical learning. And he didn't become a true Brahmin by bathing in the river physically, but by going for refuge and living ethically. That was the message of Puñña to the Brahmin – living ethically and not giving cause to needing to do purification. This is the way. And this is the way to be bathed. He understands that. He takes his bathing in the river that he does and metaphorically applies this idea to bathing in ethics.

It's a wonderful little story, maybe a little fable. I just love this directness in which Puñña talks to him. “Just don't do it.” May that inspire all of you to bathe in the good ethics of “Don't do it.” Don't be involved in breaking the precepts. And nourish yourself, feed yourself, bathe yourself in your ethical behavior.

Partly because we live in a Western culture that is so deeply affected by Freud, Jung, and psychotherapy – where we keep looking at, studying, and analyzing ourselves so much internally – it's almost second nature for people in the West to sometimes apply the precepts to their minds – to what they're thinking – and find that they're unethical there, too. I think that isn't the orientation of Buddhism. Ethics has to do with behavior in the world, the way we act and speak. There's not looking at ourselves and our mind in this unethical way. Rather we look at it through the lens of wisdom. We sometimes recognize that maybe we're a bit foolish in the mind. There's not enough wisdom there sometimes.

The important issue is to become wise about our thoughts and beliefs, how we see ourselves – rather than undermining or criticizing ourselves or feeling that we're a bad person just because of the thoughts we have. They might be foolish thoughts, but let's become wise. And then we can also bathe in wisdom.

This is the first poem and commentary about it for this week. I hope that you enjoy and appreciate these poems that I have given myself over to for a good number of years. I've been living in these poems, thinking about them, and translating them.

Thank you very much.