

Poems of the Nuns (2 of 5) Kisagotami

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Gil Fronsdal

Welcome to the second talk from my translations of the poems of the ancient Buddhist nuns, the first disciples of the Buddha. In Pali, the collection of poems is called a Terigata. The poem of Kisagotami is very touching. It involves a conversation between Kisagotami and Patacara.

I think that in the modern West a fair number of people know about Kisagotami. Not so many know about Patacara. We have a beautiful statue of Patacara here at the Insight Retreat Center. And one of the photographs that cycle through on the Insight Meditation Center homepage is of a beautiful wooden statue of Patacara that was made for us.

These are two famous early Buddhist nuns, Kisagotami and Patacara. Kisa means frail, so her name means a frail person in the Gotami clan. Maybe she's not that well, maybe weak or sick; she's certainly poor. She has the circumstance of being married into a family, probably in an arranged marriage. Her status was very low. In ancient India, a bride didn't just join a husband, she often joined the husband's family. Her status was quite low and difficult. Often she was expected to be almost a servant. We don't know exactly what Kisagotami's circumstances were. She had a son and that changed her status. She had a place in the family. Back then male prodigy was really important. The mother probably loved her son, and he also put her in a secure place in the family and society. But then Kisagotami's son died as a baby. She was distraught. She refused to believe the son had died. She went around carrying the dead baby, asking everyone for help for medicine. Someone finally said to her: "There's someone who has medicine, and that's the Buddha."

With great hope, Kisagotami went to the Buddha. And the Buddha said, "Yes. Go around and gather mustard seeds from all the households that have not experienced death." In ancient India mustard was a very common spice that people had in the kitchen. Everyone had mustard seeds that they would grind up for cooking. Kisagotami started going around. She discovered that every household she came to had experienced death – of children, parents, or siblings. Somehow death had been part of everyone's life. At some point she realized the universality of death. Then she could accept the death of her baby. She went back to tell the Buddha, who taught her. She ordained and attained awakening.

Patacara, the second person in this conversation, also had a tragic death of family members. It was a massive death all at once. She was expecting her second child and she wanted to go back to be with her parents in her family home. But she started giving birth during that walk. Her husband went out to try to find some grass or something to create a cushioning or bed for her to make her comfortable. He came across a snake that bit him and he died. Distraught, Patacara then gave birth.

She continued on her way to her family's house. She first crossed over a river with her baby and put him on the other shore. On the way back to get her other child, a big bird of prey came in and grabbed the baby and flew off with it. While she was trying to yell and do something about that, the younger one ventured into the river and drowned.

Patacara made it back to her home village only to discover that her mother, father, and brother had all died and were currently on the funeral pyres being cremated. So she had a tremendous amount of suffering all at once.

Whether this story is a fable or actually happened back in ancient India, we don't know. I can imagine it could have happened. So these two women had huge tragedies. Both of them became nuns. Both became enlightened, and they were friends. This poem is a conversation between them. As you hear this poem it's important to understand that both women were enlightened and free. They talked about their experience not to emphasize the burden of their suffering. Instead, they saw it clearly, knew it clearly, and knew that they had a degree of enlightenment or freedom.

The poem begins with three introductory verses. In the ancient world, it was probably chanted. There were probably three voices that chanted it. It was a little bit of a performance meant to highlight something. The first three verses were probably chanted by a chant leader. They set the stage for the conversation between these two nuns.

The first two verses are quite lovely, expressing their sentiment about spiritual friendship. "In this world, the sage has taught and praised spiritual friendship. By associating with a spiritual friend, even a fool can become wise. One who associates with good people will grow in wisdom. By associating with good people, one will be freed from all suffering." The first two verses promote the value of spiritual friendship, being around good people. "Good people" is understood here in the context of the ancient tradition, meaning people who are ethical and know about the spiritual life.

The beginning of the poem can support the listener to understand, address, and learn about the core Buddhist teaching, which is presented in the third verse. "One should know suffering, the arising of suffering and its cessation, and the Noble Eightfold Path." These points are usually called the Four Noble Truths. This is the task of our spiritual friendship, receiving spiritual support from wise people. The teaching is to really know suffering, including knowing the arising of it, the cessation of it, and also to know the Noble Eightfold Path.

Now we begin to hear the conversation between the two nuns. It starts with Kisagotami. The story may be hard to hear in that it speaks of the tremendous difficulty of ancient life in the Bronze Age. It was before medicine, hospitals, and doctors. Women giving birth had to do so alone, without any help or with just local support.

Kisagotami and Patacara demonstrate that they know the core Buddhist teachings. They know suffering. They know the arising and cessation of suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Path. The conversation is a demonstration of the spiritual friendship of these two women. Both of them really understand the whole point of what the Buddha was teaching.

Kisagotami says, "Womanhood is suffering. Womanhood is suffering declared the trainer of people to be tamed. Being a co-wife is suffering. And for some, so is giving birth even once. Some women cut their throats. Those who are discreet eat poison. Some fetuses within are killers, with misery for both mother and fetus." So for some, in the ancient world, being a woman was very difficult for both biological reasons and social reasons.

Then Patacara responds (and now she's talking about herself): "Walking around, about to give birth, I found my husband dead. Before I reached my house, I gave birth on the road. For miserable me, two children died; a husband dead on the road; mother, father, and brother burning on one funeral pyre."

Then Kisagotami, speaking about Patacara, responding to her friend said, "Miserable, with family destroyed, your suffering was immeasurable. You have shed such tears for many thousands of births." Patacara answers, continuing to talk about her suffering after the death of her family: "I lived in the middle of the charnel ground where my children's flesh was eaten. With family killed, I was despised by all. But then, with husband dead, I attained the absence of death."

Kisagotami then speaks and replies similarly, that she also has attained. "I cultivated the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the absence of death. I have realized release. I have realized Nibbana and have looked into the mirror of the Dhamma. I have removed the arrow, laid down the burden, and have done what had to be done."

So these two women had – maybe for some of us unimaginable suffering – great difficulty, but they experienced and knew suffering, that's for sure. They show that this is something they know. They knew the arising of it, they've seen it, they've experienced it appear. And they experienced the end of it, the cessation of it. They were not stuck in the suffering. There was a way out. There was a possibility of freedom. They knew the Noble Eightfold Path that sometimes is understood as being the path to that freedom. Sometimes it's understood as the path one lives after experiencing freedom, Nibbana, the absence of death, the attainment of freedom from clinging, the absence of clinging. They explained it very confidently. They have attained. They pulled out the arrow, laid down the burden, and did what had to be done.

In this conversation between two friends, they're sharing with each other: "Yes, we understand the Dharma, and we've seen it to the end, both of us." They are spiritual friends for each other having this Dharma conversation. And they speak about their attainment with confidence. And with that, they're able to look back and talk about the horrendous suffering they had – talk with freedom, clarity, and matter-of-factness – without suffering anymore though they had once suffered so badly. They were free.

I find this poem very touching. It's meant to demonstrate the spiritual friendship of these two good people having a conversation about the Dharma – a conversation about what's possible as an alternative to living a life that is so difficult. We can lay down the burden, pull out the arrow, and we can experience the absence of death. This is a very strong expression of the absence of suffering and the absence of clinging.

May you see this path to the end of your suffering. May you be able to stand there and be present and talk about the suffering you have had with the same clarity, honesty, and directness that is untroubled by it. Just, "This is how it was, and now I'm free."

Thank you.