

Poems of the Nuns (5 of 5) Practicing with Friendship

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Gil Fronsdal

In this fifth talk, I'm finishing the series on the poems of the elder nuns – the poems that are preserved and are attributed to the first generations. I say “generations” in plural because it's often said to be the first generation of disciples of the Buddha, the female disciples. Rather, I think the poems are probably composed over a longer period of time, maybe several hundred years. So those first “generations.”

I want to begin today by reading a little bit more from the introductory words I've written about these poems that I've translated. And then I'll read some of the poems that, for me, touch the warmth, friendliness, and support which the ancient nuns provided to one another and that allowed them to do their practice.

The enlightened women who are featured in the *Therigatha* represent the first generations of female Buddhists who contributed to establishing the spiritual foundation for succeeding generations of Buddhists of all genders. With few other surviving records of the first Buddhist women, the *Therigatha* provides an invaluable window into the lives and religious experience of these pioneers. Prior to becoming nuns, many had been wives and mothers; some were widows; some the mothers of dead children; and one – *Patacara* – was a widow who had lost both her children.

A few of the nuns had been prostitutes and courtesans. Some had been poor; others had been wealthy daughters of royalty in high-ranking families. Some were old and weak; others were young in the prime of their lives. Two had already been contemplative renunciants before encountering the Buddha's teachings. No matter what their background, most of these women attained the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path. In fact, the attainment of full spiritual liberation is the predominant theme of the *Therigatha*.

The importance of this experience, popularly known in English as enlightenment, is evidenced by the forty different synonyms and descriptive words used to describe it. The most frequently used are words having to do with freedom. That is, words that can be translated into English as being “freed, well-freed, released, liberated, fully released, emancipated, set free, attaining liberation, and being untied or unfettered.” This whole text is remarkable.

And then, for many of the women in the *Therigatha*, being a nun included valued connections with other nuns. They had more senior nuns as their teachers. To receive teachings, Venerable *Uttama* and an unnamed nun approached a nun they trusted. Venerable *Vijaya*, when she had no control of her mind, respectfully asked a fellow nun for teachings. Venerable *Chanda* refers to the kindness of Venerable *Patacara* allowing her to go forth as a nun. Thirty nuns who seemed to be a group practicing together expressed their lifelong honor and respect to Venerable *Patacara* for her liberating teachings. Venerable *Sundari* referred to her monastic teacher as the light of the *Sangha* and stated that she had attained awakening with dependence on her teacher. Having left domestic and family life behind, these nuns had community with each other.

This idea of the warmth, kindness, and mutual respect of practicing together is one of the characteristics that I notice when I read these texts. This stands out most prominently in the first chapter. The book is organized into chapters with increasingly longer verses or poems. The first chapter consists of poems that are of one verse.

One of the characteristics of some of these poems is that in the meaning of the name of the nun, there is a wordplay in the verse itself that plays with that characteristic invokes—it brings it forth again and again.

Literally in the poem, the woman is addressed directly in the second person. But the question is, who is addressing the nun? The most common theory is that she's speaking to herself in the second person. Another theory is that it's actually the Buddha speaking to her. And the third theory is that it's a fellow nun who's teaching her, encouraging her in some way. Whoever the speaker is, to me there's a feeling of warmth, care, and kindness that comes through.

The first verse is an example. The speaker is an elder nun who says she “has attained peace from all passion, from all lust.” And then she's told, “Sleep at ease, dear elder, wrapped in the robe you made.” This encourages her to sleep well now. “You've done your work. You've become free. So now sleep at ease.” Very simple and ordinary, these words are an expression of warmth and kindness.

The second poem addresses *Muta*. Her name means “freed.” “*Muta*, be freed from bondage as the moon from an eclipse. With your mind set free, enjoy your food debt-free.” For a monastic, the idea of eating or enjoying her food debt-free is that because they receive alms, they eat only what's given to them by the laity. And so they're a little bit in debt. They would have nothing to return to the giver. So what they give in return is their practice. They practice to the point of enlightenment, in which case they can enjoy it debt-free.

And then there's *Punna*, which means “full.” “*Punna*, be full of good states. Like the moon on a full moon night. Full with insight. Shatter the mass of darkness. So practice. Please practice.” For me there is warmth in playing with her name. “Your name is ‘freed.’ Be freed, please.”

There is another nun whose name is *Mitha*. “*Mitha*” means “friend.” “*Mitha*, having gone forth out of faith, delight in friends. By cultivating skillful states, attain peace from bondage and attachments.” So again the idea is explicit. “Delight in friends, the spiritual friendships that we have, and that you can have.”

There is a woman whose name is *Bhadra*, which means “blessing.” “*Bhadra*, having gone forth out of faith, delight in blessings. By cultivating skillful states, attain unsurpassed peace from bondage.”

Another nun's name is *Amutha*, meaning “freed.” She's speaking directly for herself. “Well freed, very well freed. I am freed from three crooked things: from mortar, pestle, and crooked husband. And I am freed from birth and death. What leads to becoming has been pulled out.” Marriage and family life – being a wife and mother – was not necessarily a good thing in the ancient world. It was a lot of work. Sometimes it was a kind of servitude. It was very different from our understanding of marriage in the modern world. And so *Amutha* is celebrating being freed from a very difficult husband.

There is a nun who does not necessarily have a direct word play with her name. She is *Uttara*, meaning “supreme.” She described herself in this way: “controlled in body, speech, and mind, having pulled out craving at its root, I've become calm, released, quenched.”

There was a nun whose name is *Dhamma*, meaning “dharma.” She was “weak, leaning on a stick, wandering for alms, limbs trembling.” At that time there was no medicine that we have today, or social security, or retirement homes. People who were monastics maybe had a monastery to live in, but they still had to go out and get food every day. So “weak, leaning on a stick, wandering for alms, limbs trembling. I fell to the ground right here. In seeing the drawbacks of the body, my mind was liberated.” So here she was: old, with challenges, weak, and not strong enough to stand up for herself. When she fell to the ground, she could let go. Maybe she could find an alternative to depending on her body, even in her old age. Then something in her mind got liberated.

In Chapter Two there is another woman who experienced some of the same. There are two verses. It's a little bit like the earlier one. Her name is *Citta*. In this context *Citta* means “shining, bright, or beautiful.” The story has the idea that she's a monastic turning over her bowl. It seems to refer to the idea that a monastic can go out with their bowl for food, but if they turn over their bowl, they can't receive any offerings. It's like refusing something. No more of that.

The background is that in 2007, in one of the times that the monastics in Burma stood up against the government, they walked through the streets with their bowls turned over so that the government officials and

the military could not make merit by making offerings to the monks. It was the monastics' protest. *Citta* refers to this in her poem, perhaps as a metaphor. A number of things might be metaphor in this poem. She also talks about ascending the mountain. I don't know about in the ancient world, but in some later Buddhism, ascending the mountain means going up on the path of practice to the top. *Citta* wrote, "Though quite emaciated, sick, and weak, I, walking, leaning on a stick, have ascended the mountain. Having laid down my upper robe, turning over my bowl, and resting on a rock, the mass of darkness shattered." So here, I think turning over the bowl is a metaphor for no longer taking in the bait and temptations of the world. Maybe no longer taking in or receiving her own attachments, clinging, or delusions. Something inside of her turned over.

Some people experience enlightenment with a feeling like something flips in the mind. Something switches and turns over very quickly. Life is different from then on. Or something turns over the bowl, and the mind turns over and all the attachments drain out.

There's one more nun to mention here. Her name is *Samma*, meaning "peaceful," however, not attaining mental peace. She wrote, "With no control of my mind, four or five times I left my hut. But then, eight nights ago, craving was abolished. By being devoted to vigilance in regard to all suffering states, and by being mindful of all suffering states, I reached the destruction of craving and accomplished the Buddha's teachings."

These poems over and over again show that these women in the ancient world could accomplish what the Buddha taught. You can also. You also can practice. And you have the warmth of community, even people you don't know. The nuns of the ancient world practiced for you as well. And they're here. The ancient nun teachers are still here with their momentum and their memories through these ancient texts, through what survives of them through these verses. They are saying, "You can do it. Practice. Come and rest at ease. Find your peace. Find your freedom."

Thank you very much.