

# Poems of the Nuns (3 of 5) Patacara

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So hello and welcome to this third of five talks focusing on the poems of the earliest female disciples of the Buddha, the ones that became fully awakened, the early nuns. Yesterday, the poem that I read involved a conversation between Kisagotami and Patacara. Patacara, the Ayya Patacara, the Venerable Patacara, was probably one of the most important women teachers in the time of the Buddha. There are more references to her being a teacher, especially to other nuns, other women, than there are to any other woman at the time of the Buddha in these early texts. In these poems, there are a number of poems that refer to her, including one which is her own enlightenment poem. And so I'd like to read that.

Yesterday I told a little bit about her story, where she had phenomenal degrees of suffering with the death of her whole family in the course of one day, or learning about it over the course of one day. Two young children, her husband, her parents, her brother. So she became a nun. But maybe it wasn't so easy for her, even though she practiced diligently. This is her story that she tells in a poem. She's talking about herself. This is what she was thinking:

*"Young men gain wealth by plowing fields, sowing seeds in the ground, caring for children and wife. But why is it that I, thorough in virtuous conduct, doing the Buddha's instruction, not lazy or proud, have not attained release, have not attained Nibbana. With feet washed, I watched the water, the foot washing water, flowing from high ground to low."*

So she's sitting outside and she's doing what was as common in the ancient world as washing our hands through the day is for us. People walked around barefoot, so they cleaned their feet often.

*"With feet washed, I watched the water, the foot-washing water, flowing from high ground to low. With this, the mind concentrated like a thoroughbred horse. Taking an oil lamp, I entered my hut. Looking over the bed, I sat down on the bed. Taking a needle, I pulled out the wick. As the flame went out, the mind was freed."*

So this is a story of a person who practiced diligently, sincerely, but perhaps there was a way in which she was trying a little bit too hard and was maybe too diligent. Sitting down to wash her feet, she probably poured the water over her feet. Then watching the water flowing down the hill, she became concentrated.

She kind of lost her self-consciousness. It was something about the movement of the water that pulled her into the world of the water flowing, like being absorbed and watching the water flow by in a river. Doing something completely unselfconsciously – a simple, ordinary thing – and putting down the effort to practice, because she had this momentum of a strong practice mind, when she put something to rest and just got absorbed in the water flowing down, her mind became concentrated.

Then she entered into her hut. There were no windows back then, so the hut was particularly dark in the evening. There is simplicity, the radical simplicity of just looking at her bed. People who get concentrated, they can see things and everything stands out sharply, clearly, for itself. You see a flower, wow, just a flower. You see an ordinary device, the cup you drink water out of. It's just that, the pristine perfection of a cup, or a flower, or anything at all.

When you're concentrated, you see in a different way. Here she's just seeing something ordinary, her bed. Then she sat down on that bed. Because it was dark, she had an oil lamp. And the oil lamp is oil with a little wick that comes out of the oil. In order to turn off the light, she didn't flick a switch; she pulled the wick out of the oil. Then the flame went out. And in a concentrated mind, she was just right there for the flame, just like she had been for the bed. Maybe the whole world was just that flame, that light. When the light went out, something in

her mind let go, and she was freed. There was a peaceful focus on the flame. Maybe as the flame went out, even that focus evaporated or dissolved, and there was a deeper letting go. Then she was free.

So that's Patacara's story. And I love that it has to do with these very ordinary moments that are liberating. There's a long history in Buddhism of recognizing that liberation doesn't necessarily happen as we're practicing. But as we practice, we're creating the conditions, the concentration, the stillness, the peace, the sense of safety, so that when we're least expecting it, there is something that can let go deeply. We're right here and we let go.

Then there are two poems, or maybe more, where she is a teacher for a woman or for a nun. She refers back to her first poem, the way she's thinking, and the experience of washing the feet. This makes sense — teachers often will teach from their own experience, from how they were thinking about things and what worked for them, and they're kind of offering that to others.

And so she starts by referring back to her own reflection about young men who work hard and can then support their families to represent, or as a metaphor, for a practitioner who can also engage fully and hard in order to become free. So she writes, or she says, and this poem is supposed to be a teaching to 30-some, approximately 30 nuns. She says,

*"Taking a pestle, young men pound grain. Caring for their children and wife, they gain wealth. Young men gain wealth. Do what the Buddha teaches. Having done it, you won't regret it. Quick, wash your feet. Sit to one side and settle on a tranquil mind. Do what the Buddha teaches."*

And then as a narrator for the rest of the next two verses, the narrator says,

*"Hearing these words of Patacara's teaching, the nuns washed their feet, sat to one side, settled on a tranquil mind. They did what the Buddha teaches. During the first watch of the night, they recollected their past lives. During the middle watch of the night, they purified the divine eye. During the last watch of the night, they shattered the mass of darkness."*

And then the thirty nuns said to Patacara —well, the narrator goes on— standing up, the thirty nuns bowed down to her feet and said,

*"We have accomplished your instruction. We will live honoring you as the 30 gods honor the great god Indra, who is unconquered in battle. Free of taints, we have the three knowledges."*

So in the simple poem where Patacara encourages them to practice, they do. And not only do they attain liberation, but this is a remarkable thing about these poems: the confidence, the clarity, the possibility of spiritual maturation that is championed here. They attain the same level of liberation as the Buddha.

These three knowledges of the night — the first two knowledges are something the Buddha is supposed to have attained the night of his awakening. The recollection of past lives, the divine eye, which is seeing how people are born and die according to their karma. And then here is the shattering, the mass of darkness, liberation. The first two knowledges, those are not required to be awake, to be liberated. But to be a Buddha, full potential, like a Buddha, this is what one attains. They are called the three knowledges. And so here, this is also possible. And the women are pointing this out; they too have this.

And so then there's one more that Bhattacharya is teaching to a woman named Uttara.

*"Taking a pestle, young men pound grain. Caring for children and wives, they gain wealth. Apply yourself to what the Buddha teaches. You will have no regrets. Quick, wash your feet and sit to one side. Having established the mind unified and well settled, consider mental constructs as not self, as something other than self. "*

Then Uttara says,

*"I heard her words, Patacara's advice. I washed my feet and sat to the side. During the first watch of the night, I recollected my past lives. During the middle watch of the night, I purified the divine eye."*

*During the last watch of the night, I shattered the mass of darkness. I then emerged endowed with the three knowledges."*

Then Uttara addressing Patacara,

*"I have accomplished what you instructed. I will live honoring you. Free of taints, I have the three knowledges."*

So I love these poems, that of Patacara becoming awake, and then her teaching the other nuns, and then in their appreciation of what they were taught, that they will honor her, they revere her, respect her for her gift. Here we get a sense of ancient nuns, we get a sense of one of the most important teachers of the time of the Buddha, and how she was engaged with teaching.

It's one thing to say in Buddhist traditions that a woman can be enlightened. It turns out it's another thing to say that it's okay for them to be a teacher. There are traditions where they say women can be enlightened, but there's still discrimination against women stepping up into the teacher role. But here we have these wonderful stories of not only a nun, a woman who is a teacher, but an effective teacher. A teacher who can guide people, support people in their own awakening.

So, Patacara, thank you. Thank all of you. Thank Bhattacharya. Thank all the lineage of nuns and women teachers down through the ages upon whose shoulders we stand as well.

So thank you very much.