

Dharmette: Nun's Poems (1) Sama and Uttama's Poems

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So hello and good morning. This is a new week for YouTube's *Sanḡha*. Having finished the series on love last week, I find myself somewhat happily content and empty of topics and things to teach.

I think that that long series on love was wonderful to teach, and the immersion in that topic left me, now that it's over, kind of content and happy. Nothing really engaged me for a series for this week exactly. So, what I'd like to do this week is read some poems from the verses and poetry of the ancient Buddhist nuns.

I've been involved on and off for the last 10 years with translating, thinking about, and studying these poems. I thought it might be nice, since I've been involved in it and have been doing some of it through the summer. It's kind of fresh on my mind, and it's a nice way to maybe do something simple here for this week.

It's called the *Therīgāthā*. *Gāthā* means verse, and *therī* means elder nun. So, it's the *gāthās* of the elder nuns. Some people translate this word *gāthā* as song. Some people even have, in some places, "ballad," as opposed to a poem or a verse.

Okay. It's possible that we don't know how it was chanted or how it was presented, but I suspect, as I read these poems, that they were partly performative, at least some of the longer ones. They had a whole kind of oral way of presentation that is lost in the written word. Sometimes the written word comes out a little bit flat.

On the surface, these poems are meant to be understood as poems composed by different early Buddhist nuns. Sometimes I think it was some narrator who composed it, someone else wrote it about the nun, and sometimes it's someone speaking to the nun or recording a conversation between the nun and someone else. But the remarkable thing, over and over

again in these texts, is that I see them as a celebration of women's potential for awakening, and also their potential for independence, though the word is not used.

Becoming a nun, and especially becoming an enlightened nun in ancient India, was a step out of what was most often a very oppressive social system, where women were oppressed. Women were not just wives, but as wives they were probably closer to slaves, with a very dramatic subservience to the man. They worked more like servants in the household than as equals, for sure.

I think life was quite hard back then, and medicine was very different then than now. Yeah, many women died in childbirth. Many children died when they were children, and babies died. A lot of verses talk about the grief that women had in losing not just one child, but some of them lost multiple children, lost a husband, and took care of everything.

These poems touch a lot of what it was like to have been a woman in challenging social times and in the challenging condition of being a woman. They address that in a way that is comparable to verses of the monks, who don't really talk much about their social conditions and the kind of deep personal challenges they might have had themselves. Maybe that is because they had a very different place in society, and they didn't have the same degree of existential challenges that women had back then, and maybe now.

So I want to just read a few of these poems today and go through this week. Maybe you'll get a sense of some of them. Often, in a good number of the poems, the name of the nun has a meaning, and sometimes the verses are playing with that.

For example, there's a short poem by the nun named *Muttā*. *Muttā* means to be awake, to be free, and liberated, and *mokṣa*. The poem begins using her name as an instruction: "Free yourself, Muttā. Free yourself, Muttā. Muttā." So there's a lot of kind of wordplay going on with the names.

It's not obvious that this one, the poem, is playing with this woman's name. But her name is *Sāmā*, and here *Sāmā* means peaceful. So she writes in the first person, or composed this.

In the 25 years since I have gone forth, she's been a nun for a long time. For 25 years, she's been living that lifestyle, a life of kind of radical simplicity and meant to be devoted to practice and devoted to her liberation.

In the 25 years since I have gone forth, I do not know if I ever attained peace of mind. I have never known attaining any peace of mind. I gained no peace or control of my mind whatsoever. Then, remembering the conqueror's instruction, a sense of urgency arose

in me.

The conqueror is the Buddha, and what he conquers is himself. He conquers his own inner challenges, attachments, and fears. There's a word, *saṃvega*, which I translate as urgency. It has to do with a sense of urgency, feeling a little bit the preciousness of life, the dangers of life, the need. If you want to be awakened, this is the time to do it. It is really feeling motivated, a strong motivation to practice now.

Then, remembering the conqueror's instruction, a sense of urgency arose in me. Being devoted to attention, vigilance regarding all suffering states, I reached the destruction of craving and accomplished the Buddha's instructions. Today is the seventh night since craving dried up.

So she'd been a nun for 25 years, but maybe she hadn't really given herself completely over to being devoted, to being vigilant, to being attentive, to all suffering states. Whatever suffering was arising for her, she was not going to be complacent about it. She wasn't going to ignore it. She wasn't going to deny it. She wasn't going to distract herself. She was really going to be right there to pay attention to it.

So she's writing this seven nights after her awakening. After 25 years of practice, something happened to her where she said, "Okay, I have to get serious here. I have to really give myself to the practice." She did, and she reached the end of practice. The end being reached was her own liberation.

What's radical here is that she uses the expression "drying up." Not the abandoning, not the throwing away or letting go, or destroying something. Right? But somehow, through the vigilant attention to suffering, something about attachments, here called craving, is no longer fed, is no longer supported or reinforced. It begins to dry out, it begins to fade away, until she's free.

So I'll read it again.

In the 25 years since I have gone forth, I do not know if I ever attained peace of mind. I had gained no peace or control of my mind. Then, remembering the conqueror's instruction, a sense of urgency arose in me. Being devoted to vigilance regarding all suffering states, I reached the destruction of craving and accomplished the Buddha's instruction. Today is the seventh night since craving dried up.

So it's a remarkable thing to say that craving has dried up, that she accomplished what the Buddha had to teach. I see this song, this poem, as a celebration of that. After 25 years, what

a relief, what a joy, how wonderful. Twenty-five years devoted to something, and then finally getting serious enough to see it through to the end and accomplishing the end of craving.

Not only is it celebrating women's capacity for liberation through these poems, but it's also a clear kind of testimonial that this is possible. It's possible to become free. Here's one more that follows this one, and is similar, having not found peace, this woman not attaining mental peace and with no control of her mind.

Four, five times I left my meditation hut. I approached a nun who was trustworthy. She taught me the *Dharma*. I listened to the *Dharma*, and as she instructed me, for one week, I sat cross-legged in one spot, filled with joy and happiness. On the eighth day, I straightened out my legs and shattered the mass of darkness.

So she's living in a certain kind of darkness, a certain kind of ignorance, suffering, having no mental peace. She found another nun who could teach her. She listened. She listened to the instructions, and then she went and enacted, or followed, the instructions for one week. She too became liberated.

Here, it's described as shattering the mass of darkness, the mass of ignorance. So, very confident poems, very wonderful testimonials, and even more so that this happened in an ancient world that was difficult for women. We come to our world, and we too can shatter the mass of darkness.

So thank you, and I look forward to continuing this. Hopefully, you'll enjoy these delightful little poems. Thank you.