

Dharmette: Nuns' Poems (3 of 5) Canda and Vasetthi

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So, to continue this week's reading of the verses of the elder nuns, the senior nuns from the ancient life, ancient world, it's a remarkable text called the *Therīgāthā*. *Therī* means female elder. In monastic circles, you become a *therī* if you've been a monastic for 10 years. So, someone who's been a monastic for some time, but it's often considered to be someone who also has some seniority in terms of teaching.

And it's possible, it's likely, that this is the most ancient, earliest human record that survives of spiritual, religious poetry by women. And I call it liberation poetry. So, it's a kind of remarkable testament. Some of the verses are quite inspiring; some, to our ears, to our sensibilities, maybe not. But I think in the ancient world, it might have been much more meaningful. They had a very different context for all the poetry than we have.

So, this poem is called Moon. Well, it's not called Moon. The name of the nun is *Candā*, and *Candā* means moon. And I love that last night there was a full moon, so the radiance of the full moon. But here is the story of the poem that she has:

I was poor, widowed without children, without friends or relatives. I obtained neither food nor clothes. Taking a bowl and staff, I went from family to family, begging for alms. Tormented by cold and heat, I wandered for seven years.

But then I saw a nun receiving food and drink. Approaching her, I said, "Let me go forth into homelessness." Maybe for her, it was a matter of survival. If she was a nun, maybe she'd be supported with kindness.

She, *Paṭācārā*, allowed me to go forth. Then she advised me, urging me toward the ultimate goal. Hearing her words, I did what she advised. The lady's words were not in vain.

I am free of taints and a knower of liberating knowledge, the three knowledges.

Remember, ancient India did not have a welfare system, a social service system. There was not a local shelter, homeless shelter, or soup kitchen. And if you had no food, family, if you had no children to take care of you in your old age, then things were hard. You had to go, maybe, begging. So here she was for seven years. She wandered, tormented by cold and heat.

So, it's quite a life to live in poverty, live alone, wander around for so many years, seemingly with no one really stepping in to help her, give her a hand up. And then she meets *Paṭācārā*, who was the nun whose poem I read yesterday, her liberation poem. And you saw the foot-washing water washing across the hill. And *Paṭācārā*, a very important early Buddhist teacher, invited her to be a nun.

And to me, it's touching. "With kindness for me, she allowed me to go forth." Her motivation to go forth might have been just to get food. She saw that the nun was being offered food and clothes, and she needed it, and so maybe that was the way. And *Paṭācārā* accepted her, brought her in anyway, whatever her reason was. And then she taught her, and her words were not in vain. She became free.

I was poor, widowed, without children, without friends or relatives. I obtained neither food nor clothes. Taking a bowl and staff, I went from family to family, begging for alms. Tormented by cold and heat, I wandered for seven years.

But then I saw a nun receiving food and drink. Approaching her, I said, "Let me go forth into homelessness." She was already homeless, but that's what it meant to be a Buddhist monastic. You leave home.

With kindness for me, she, *Paṭācārā*, allowed me to go forth. Then she advised me, urging me toward the ultimate goal. Hearing her words, I did what she advised. The lady's words were not in vain. I am free of taints, a knower of the three knowledges.

So here's another story of a nun who was quite challenged and troubled and suffering a lot. And it's really touching how many of these nuns had difficult, came out of very difficult circumstances, and had a lot of suffering. And their stories are that the way they found their way out of it was through Buddhist practice, being a nun.

And this woman's name is *Vāseṭṭhī*. And we're not sure what *Vāseṭṭhī* might mean. It might just be a clan name, family name. But the way that the ancient etymology of words works, it

could also mean something like wanting clothes. Wanting clothes. Sometimes, when people were in extreme poverty in India, they didn't even have clothes.

So here she says:

Tormented by grief for my son, my mind was deranged, demented. Naked, hair unkempt, I wandered here and there, through streets, garbage heaps, and cemeteries. I wandered for three years, plagued by hunger and thirst.

Then I saw the Buddha walking toward town, the tamer of the untamed, fully awake, fearing nothing. Regaining my mind, I bowed and sat down. Out of kindness, he, *Gautama*, taught me the *Dhamma*. Hearing the *Dhamma*, I went forth into homelessness.

Practicing what the teacher said, I realized the auspicious state. All grief was cut off, abandoned, terminated. Now I understand the ground from where grief comes.

The ground from where grief comes. She understood when she became free. And in ancient India, having a son die, if it's the only son, makes it socially very difficult for a woman. Back then, maybe status, place in society, place in family even, was tied to having sons. And so, her grief was not simply a grief of losing someone she loved, but was also maybe the grief of losing a whole way of life, losing support, losing her place in society.

Tormented by grief for my son, my mind was deranged, demented, unwell. Naked, hair unkempt, I wandered here and there. Through streets, garbage heaps, and cemeteries, I wandered for three years, plagued with hunger and thirst.

Then I saw the Well-Gone One, the Buddha, walking toward town, the tamer of the untamed, fully awake, fearing nothing. Regaining my mind, I bowed and sat down. Out of kindness, he, *Gautama*, taught me the *Dhamma*. Hearing the *Dhamma*, I went forth into homelessness.

Practicing what the teacher said, I realized the auspicious state. I realized the wondrous state of freedom. All grief was cut off, abandoned, terminated. Now I understand the ground from where grief comes.

And I like this poem a lot because she's reciting it; she's composed it after she became free. So you get a feeling, a sense of these poems and, you know, the life of these women, the challenges they're with, that they have. And this is a time when there were no therapists, no antidepressant medication, no social services. You know, people were really on their own with their suffering, their challenges, their torments.

And in that context, these people like *Paṭācārā*, like the Buddha, would walk through society, through the world, having attained peace, living a life of radical simplicity, renunciation, and modeling a whole different way of being that maybe others hadn't seen before. That could touch something very deep inside of them. It spoke to them. It spoke to something that was ready to be born, or come forth, or to be realized.

And here she says, "Regaining my mind." And she heard the *Dhamma*, and she practiced, and she became free. So this is a possibility for all of us. And one of the things to consider in these poems: these women made a big choice to practice. They gave a big choice. They became nuns. They turned their whole life upside down to really give themselves over to this alternative that was being offered, an alternative to their challenge.

Right. It's quite an example, quite a testament to something very powerful that can move and be born and arise and gestate and germinate and grow in a human being. So may these ancient nuns live on in our inspiration, in our practice. Thank you.