

Dharmette: Nuns' Poems (4 of 5) Punna

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Hello and welcome to this fourth talk, where I'm reading from the ancient Buddhist nuns, reading their poems. And today's poem has to do with *Puṇṇā*.

And *Puṇṇā* also means full. And there's an earlier one-verse poem in the *Therīgāthā* that maybe it's the same *Puṇṇā*, maybe it's a different one. But there, there's the wordplay with her name, where she's given the instructions: be full of wholesome states, be full of good qualities.

And in this one, *Puṇṇā* is a servant, maybe almost like a slave, who has been sent down by her mistress, or the person who's in charge of her and who she works for, to get water from the river. So there was no running water back then, so going to the river to get water and bringing it back was a regular daily event. And I guess, to get water from rivers, you would go into the river in order to get deep enough where the water was clear, fill up her water jugs, and then carry them back.

And in this one, she encounters a Brahmin who is going down to the river to bathe in a ritual purification. And it seems that, still to this day in India, but in ancient India, there was this idea that by bathing in the river, you can purify yourself. If you bathe in sacred rivers, you can purify yourself of all your evil *karma*, all the bad you've done.

And it's probably one of the reasons even today, in the Ganges River, people will put in the bodies of their loved ones who have died. And if you go outside Varanasi in a boat, sometimes you see these bodies floating by. And it's the last purification, I suppose.

So she comes down to the river to get water, and she sees a Brahmin, and she engages him in conversation. And it's quite an engaging conversation because of the hierarchy, the status

distinction between the two of them. He's a high-class Brahmin, supposedly the elite, religious elite of the times. And she is a lowly servant. And she engages him in questioning what he's doing there. And she's very direct with him.

So she begins: "I am a water carrier. When it is cold, I always have to go down to the water. I am terrified of punishment from my mistress. I am frightened of angry words. But Brahmin, what do you fear, that you always go down to the water too, with limbs trembling, experiencing piercing cold?"

The Brahmin says, "Indeed, Lady *Puṇṇā*, I know what you ask. I am doing wholesome *karma* and preventing the consequence of the evil I have done." So he's treating her with respect: Lady *Puṇṇā*. And he provides a very clear, succinct reason why he's doing it. He's done evil. He's done bad things. And this is how he cleanses himself.

He continues, "Whether young or old, whoever does evil *karma* is freed of evil *karma* through purification in water." So he replies in a straightforward, simple way to her question, and she answers in a way that's probably riveting for an ancient audience listening to this poem being recited.

"What know-nothing told a know-nothing that one is freed of evil *karma* through purification in water?" So, to call a Brahmin who's educated, highly learned, knows the rituals, knows the ancient texts—kind of the most educated people in the society—to say that he is a know-nothing, that's quite a statement.

She goes on and says, to begin arguing about their discussion, or making the point that maybe water doesn't purify: "Frogs and turtles, water snakes, crocodiles, and other water dwellers, will they go to heaven?" Because they live in the water, are they constantly being pure and they're going to get a good rebirth? "Those who butcher sheep and pigs, those who fish and hunt, thieves, executioners, and others who do evil, would they also be freed of evil *karma* through purification in water?"

So it's probably ridiculous, this idea that water creatures would be purified. But if the water purifies, then it must be the case. And then some of the people that, in the ancient world, at least the Buddhist world, are considered the most evil—they'd almost start, you know, just going to water is not enough to deal with their *karma*. Would they be purified too?

And she goes on: "If the river carries away the evil you have done, then it would also carry away your merit. You would then be out of both." So if the river has the power to take away evil *karma*, then certainly it would take away your merit too. So what would you do?

Well, see, excuse me. "What you do that brings you fear, that brings you down to the water,

Brahmin, don't do it. Then cold water won't shock your skin.” Don't do it is her message. Rather than keep getting purified by the river and continuing with your evil actions, simply don't do it.

The Brahmin says—I imagine this poem was like a play, and the two different people speaking the parts. And so at this point, he would just be kind of waking up, and you'd see him kind of delighted, and like something, the light bulbs went off. He says, “I entered a bad path. You've led me to the noble path. Dear lady, I offer you my purification cloak,” the robe he wears into the river.

And *Puṇṇā* says, “If you fear suffering, if you dislike suffering, go to refuge in Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Saṅgha*, and maintain virtuous conduct. This will be your benefit.” So she doesn't accept the cloak. She continues, and this is what you should really be doing. Go for refuge and maintain virtuous conduct. Don't do anything evil.

And the Brahmin's second light bulb goes off in him, and he says, “I go for refuge to the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Saṅgha*. I will maintain virtuous conduct. This will be for my benefit. Formerly I was a descendant of Brahṁā. Today I become a true Brahmin. I am now a person of wisdom, learning, and the three knowledges. Now I have truly bathed.”

So he's kind of saying all the things that he was supposed to have acquired through his brahmanical training—the wisdom, the learning, and the three knowledges. This was a brahmanical idea, that somehow he's attained it in this simple teaching from *Puṇṇā*, that you're purified by your own actions, not by the river. And maybe the three knowledges here are knowledge of the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and the *Saṅgha*, because he's not fully enlightened yet.

So a low-class, maybe an outcast woman, goes down to the river every day. The Brahmin also maybe goes down to the river every day. They're getting to know each other or see each other, and she finally asks him this question.

“I am a water carrier. When it is cold, I always have to go down to the water anyway. I am terrified of punishment from my masters. I am frightened of angry words. Brahmin, what do you fear, that you always go down to the water with limbs trembling, experiencing piercing cold?

“Indeed, Lady *Puṇṇā*, I know what you ask. I am doing wholesome *karma* and preventing the consequence of evil I have done. Whether young or old, whoever does evil *karma* is freed of evil *karma* through purification in water.”

Puṇṇā: “What know-nothing told a know-nothing that one is freed of evil *karma* through

purification in water? Frogs and turtles, water snakes and crocodiles, and other water dwellers, will they go to heaven too? Those who butcher sheep and pigs, those who fish and hunt, thieves, executioners, and others who do evil, would they also be freed from evil *karma* through purification in water?

“If this river carries away evil you have done, then it would also carry away your merit. You would then be out of both. What you do that brings you fear, that brings you down to the water, Brahmin, don't do it. Then cold water won't shock your skin.”

Brahmin: “I entered a bad path. You led me to the noble path. Dear lady, I offer you my purification cloak.”

Puṇṇā: “If you fear suffering, if you dislike suffering, go for refuge to Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Saṅgha*, and maintain virtuous conduct. Then this will be for your benefit.”

Brahmin: “I go for refuge in Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Saṅgha*. I will maintain virtuous conduct. This will be for my benefit. Formerly I was a descendant of Brahmā. Today I've become a true Brahmin. I'm now a person of wisdom, learning, and the three knowledges. Now I have truly bathed.”

So this is one of the specialties of Buddhism, is to—but it isn't just Buddhism; other Indian religions do this too—emphasize that what's really important is your conduct, how you live. And for the Buddha elsewhere, he said that this is where you bathe. You bathe in your conduct. Do good conduct and you get good results. Do bad conduct, bad results. Bathe in the right river, the river of your conduct.

So thank you. And I hope you enjoy these poems in the ancient world, and one more day of doing it. And for those of you who live locally here close to Redwood City, I'm going to do again what I did last week. At 4 o'clock, we're going to have a sitting and then some tea discussion, a tea discussion sitting around in a circle. And that's at 4 o'clock today, from 4:00 to 5:15. Thank you all.