

Dharmette: Nuns' Poems (5 of 5) Vaddha and Kisogotam

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So good morning, everyone, and a good day. So I'll have one more day now to read you the poems from the earliest Buddhist nuns. These great, wonderful practitioners from a long time ago were a record of them. A record of those somehow captures the spirit, captures the practice, of these ancient women survives, called the *Therīgāthā*, the verses, the poems of the elder nuns, the *Therīs*.

And this is a translation that I've done, and I'm going to, eventually, maybe it'll be published. And I'll do a class on my translation of these verses, I think in October, through the Sati Center. I think it's Thursday afternoons at 4 o'clock or so, 3:30 California time. And if you would like to hear some of these again, and more of a discussion and teachings around them, that's an opportunity to do more.

And also, before I start, I just want to mention that, because it might interest some of you, I have a number of programs online that start, one at the end of August and one in the beginning of October, that are kind of year-long or, you know, eight-, nine-, ten-month-long programs to delve into certain areas of this practice. And the one coming up in August is called *Anukampā*. That's, I think, a 10-, 11-month program borrowing from the chaplaincy program that I teach, to look at chaplaincy and Buddhist teachings and chaplaincies in order to help individuals in their own practice, in their own growth. And it's been a wonderful program.

And you find that on the Sati Center website, sati.org, S-A-T-I. And then the other is at IMC. You'll find information about that on IMC's website, and it's called *Deepening Meditation Practice*. And it'll be a 10-month, 8-month, I think, program to go through the 16 steps of mindfulness of breathing, not so much to really do those steps, perhaps, but to use that as a way of exploring the different dimensions of meditation that come alive as meditation deepens. And that'll be—yeah, so I think that starts maybe October 2nd.

So, the verses of the nuns. So this one here, we don't know who composed it, but it's a conversation between a mother and a son. And the mother is a nun, and the son is— It's possible there's a poem by him in the comparable set of poetry called *The Poems of the Elder Monks*. And so he probably was a monk at this point, so he was visiting his mother. But maybe he was, maybe not yet.

But so his name is *Vāḍḍha*. And so the mother is called *Vāḍḍha's* mom, *Vāḍḍhamātā*. And so she begins the poem by saying some things to him. And *vāḍḍha* means prosperity. So there's a wordplay that goes on in the poem. In many of these poems, there are wordplays around the names.

And so the first begins with this idea of a thicket. A thicket is a thicket of shrubs, of bushes that you can't get through in the jungle, in the forest. And it's used in Buddhism as a metaphor for craving.

Vāḍḍha, never enter the thicket of craving for this world. My son, do not partake in suffering again and again. *Vāḍḍha*, sages live happily. Indeed, unagitated and with doubt severed, they have become calm, they are tamed, they are free of stains.

You should practice the path of the seers for attaining insight, and make an end to suffering. You should be devoted to your prosperity.

So, you know, I imagine a very heartfelt teaching, advice, encouragement from a mother to a son, kind of encouraging him to get on with it, to work for his own freedom and liberation, to bring his own suffering to an end. And *Vāḍḍha* then says:

Mother, mother, you speak to me with confidence about the goal. I surely imagine no thicket of craving is found in you, *Vāḍḍha's* mother. For whatever created phenomena exist, whether lowly, exalted, or in between, not the slightest, tiniest thicket of craving is found in me. All my taints are destroyed.

Vigilantly, I meditate. I attain the three knowledges, and accomplish the Buddha's teachings.

So the son suspects that his mother knows what she's talking about, encouraging him to go for the highest goal. And she confirms that she does. And *Vāḍḍha* says:

Truly excellent is the goal. My—the little, you know, stick to poke you onward. Truly excellent is the goad my mother, out of kindness, used on me. That is, these verses about

the ultimate goal.

Hearing these words, my mother's instruction, I acquired urgency in the *Dhamma* for attaining peace from bondage, being resolute in effort, not sluggish day or night. Urged on by my mother, I touched the highest peace.

So you get a sense in this poem of a lovely kind of touching mother-daughter relationship, mother-son relationship, and that amazingly the mother is fully enlightened, and the son comes to visit, and she encourages him to move forward, to go on, do it herself. And he is maybe inspired when he discovers in the process of this teaching that his mother is enlightened. And so it's possible, imagine, my own mother. And so maybe he could do it. So he got a sense of urgency, like this is the time. And then he attained it as well.

So a lot of the poems have to do with people's attainment, celebrating over and over again that first attainment of this profound peace, freedom from bondage. Shattering the darkness is possible. And in the ancient context, this *Therīgāthā* is celebrating that women could do this too. Not only could they be enlightened, but they can also teach.

So one more poem, and this is also very touching. The poem begins by a narrator—we don't know who it is—kind of setting up the poem with two verses, three verses, I think, that champion spiritual friendship, *kalyāṇamitta*. And so it's kind of setting the context for what's going to follow. People, scholars of this poem, say the poetry is disjointed, and it kind of jumps around. And so we don't know how to interpret it and how it was made.

But rather than interpreting it as being disjointed, which is an interpretation, my interpretation is that there's a narrator and there's two people in conversation. And this is in the verses themselves, that these two women are present. And one of them is *Paṭācārā*, who we read before, and the other is *Kisāgotamī*. *Kisāgotamī* is fairly famous, maybe one of the more famous of the early Buddhist nuns, because the story of her losing her son is quite prominent. And she's the one who goes around to the houses to have to get mustard seeds.

And so here's the poem. And so it's kind of dramatic, kind of powerful, I think. But we have to remember, as you hear this, the words of these nuns, that they are enlightened, that they've come to peace. There's a confidence, a steadiness that they hold forever, and a friendship.

To this world, the sage has taught and praised spiritual friendship. By associating with a spiritual friend, even a fool can become wise. Associate with good people, and one's wisdom will grow. By associating with good people, one will be freed from all suffering.

One should know suffering, the arising of suffering, and its cessation, the *Noble Eightfold Path*, and also the *Four Noble Truths*.

Womanhood is suffering, declared the trainer of people to be tamed. Being a co-wife is suffering, and for some so is giving birth even once. Some women cut their throats. Those who are discreet eat some fetuses within, are killers of their mother. And both mother and fetus share the misery.

Walking around, about to give birth, I found my husband dead. Before I reached my house, I gave birth on the road. For poor, miserable me, two children died, a husband dead on the road, and mother, father, and brother burning on one funeral pyre.

Miserable, with family destroyed, the suffering you've had was immeasurable. You have shed such tears for many thousands of births.

I lived in the middle of a charnel ground where my children's flesh were eaten by the animals. With family killed, I was despised by all. But then, with husband dead, I attained what is without death.

And for me, I cultivate the *Noble Eightfold Path* leading to the absence of death. I have realized release, and I've looked into the mirror of the *Dhamma*. I have removed the arrow, laid down the burden, and done what had to be done.

In the ancient world before modern medicine, *Paṭācārā* says she's talking about her own suffering, maybe a testament to what was just said. She lost her whole family within a day. Then *Kisāgotamī* says, "Miserable, with family destroyed, the suffering you've had was immeasurable. You have shed such tears for many thousands of births."

And *Paṭācārā* says, "I lived in the middle of a charnel ground where my children's flesh were eaten by the animals. With family killed, I was despised by all. But then, with husband dead, I attained what is without death." She became enlightened. And *Kisāgotamī* says, "And for me, I cultivate the *Noble Eightfold Path* leading to the absence of death. I have realized release, and I've looked into the mirror of the *Dhamma*. I have removed the arrow, laid down the burden, and done what had to be done."

So at the beginning, the poem talks about spiritual friendship, and that one of the key things that you can do for a spiritual friend is teach them the *Four Noble Truths*, which is here: one should know suffering, the arising of suffering, its cessation, and the *Noble Eightfold Path*. And so you should know suffering. And so the poem then demonstrates this. These two women, they know suffering. They've experienced it, no question about it.

They somehow, through the practice, saw how it arose, saw the arising of it, the birth of it moment by moment. And they saw an ending. And with that, they understood that and lived the *Noble Eightfold Path*. They'd lived the life of freedom. They discovered how to be free.

And so it takes an ancient teaching that's very present today, the *Four Noble Truths*, and kind of demonstrates it in the lives of these two women who had a phenomenal degree of suffering, could talk about it with clarity and calmness because they knew it and they knew the end of it. And they're celebrating. They too became free. So this is called *Kisāgotamī's Poem*, even though I think it's a conversation going back and forth.

So I hope these poems have been nice for you. I hope that they inspired you to have a realistic view about the difficult life we live even today, and that it is possible to find a deep, abiding sense of peace. It is possible to come to the end of craving, end of clinging, and the end of suffering.

So, thank you very, very much. And I'll be away teaching retreat the next couple of weeks. Next week, the wonderful teacher of Inside Santa Cruz, Don Yill, will be teaching. And the next week, the wonderful teacher up from Portland, David Lurie, will teach. He's both people trained here at IMC, and he'll be in good hands with them. Thank you.