

Therīgāthā: The Poetry of the Enlightened Nuns (2 of 4)

Gil Fronsdal

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So, it is time to start. We can maybe start kind of slowly. Maybe a few of you can say some very brief comments, maybe just a few words, one word, or a phrase, about what it was like to read the poems assigned for today, just to get a general sense. Maybe there is a range of responses. Then you can just maybe unmute yourself.

I would say delightful.

Delightful, nice.

Inspiring.

Inspiring.

Lucid, sorry.

Lucid, nice.

Very inspiring.

Very inspiring.

Very inspiring.

Yes, Beth. You're muted.

Complicated.

Oh, marvelous! Marvelous! Absolutely marvelous!

Yeah. Kindred.

What's that?

Kindred.

Kindred. Wow, nice.

Strong voices.

Strong voices.

Intimacy.

Wow, intimacy.

Instructive.

Instructive.

It's very nice for me to hear this. You know, these are all very inspiring or important words to hear—that that's what's here in the room as we gather.

Clarifying.

Clarifying.

Rewarding.

Rewarding.

Fierce.

Fierce, fantastic. I felt they were fierce and simple at the same time.

Fierce and simple, nice.

So, yeah, I appreciate all these things you said. I appreciate also these poems. One of the things I appreciate, that I wrote in the introduction, was the varied background of each of them. So, you get a little bit of sense of it, and such a very different background of experience.

Then they all kind of come together as kindred nuns in their awakening, which is one of the primary themes of these poems: awakening, the possibility of awakening. And not just awakening, but that some of these nuns are teachers. It's perhaps one thing to say that women can be enlightened; it's another to say they can be teachers. That's a second step that sometimes hasn't been acknowledged very well in the Buddhist tradition.

Here, you know, and I don't know if this is the reason, but one of my favorite poems in the whole collection is Paṭācārā's poem, number ten. I thought maybe we'll start there today. And I'm going to screen share. Let's see. That's not what we want to see.

That—hmm. Let's see. There's so much stuff here in my way here.

We're reading all your emails.

I know, I know. You know my secrets.

Yeah, I've been having trouble just even getting connected in. I couldn't do it on my computer. Now I'm on my phone. It was all set to go. I don't know why.

Yeah, I can't see the rest of you.

Yeah. Let me see what I can do to try to get out of here.

Oh, very strange.

Plowing fields with plows,
sowing seeds in the ground,
caring for children and wife,
young men gain wealth.

Why is it that I,
thorough in virtuous conduct,
doing the Buddha's instruction,
not lazy or proud,
have not attained release?

With feet washed, I watched the water,
the foot-washing water,
flow 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, doesn't it start with plowing fields with plows, sowing seeds in the ground? Is that a different poem? Because it looks like it's all one poem.

I think that was mark number nine, at least I thought. I looked at that. I tried to memorize this, so I didn't want it to get any longer. So I might be wrong, but I love this poem.

Why is it?

Yeah, that was my favorite too, by far. And I would say meaningful. I had trouble getting on, so I was frustrated. I didn't get to give my word, but meaningful, really resonant for me. The water means a lot to me these days.

Actually, it does begin with the plowing fields with plows. Those two stanzas. It's so interesting because it's almost like they're two poems, because those stanzas are so different from the "with feet washed," right? There are these two stanzas that begin it that are about attainment, and then this enlightenment experience that's not about craving for attainment. So, yeah, they have a very different flavor, the two beginning stanzas.

I really liked having the two beginning stanzas because it reminds me of how I feel sometimes. Then, to go into the more enlightenment-happening part, it gave me hope.

I'm having trouble getting screen share. I was going to screen share it, but it acts really funny. I don't know.

Well, we probably all have it. You probably all have it.

Yes, there it is.

Oh, we see it. We see it.

Yes, you see it. I see—I don't see it there. There, now I see it.

Yes.

Okay. So, got it. And you guys are right. It definitely starts with plowing fields. I must have just—I know someone read it before. Maybe you did, Barbara. But maybe someone else could read it again, maybe the whole thing.

Yeah, someone would volunteer to read it.

I will.

Plowing fields with plows,
sowing seeds in the ground,
caring for children and wife,
young men gain wealth.

Why is it that I,

thorough in virtuous conduct,
doing the Buddha's instruction,
not lazy or proud,
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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.

Taking it—I don't—I'm trying to imagine taking a needle. "I pulled out the wick." So the candle is burning, and she pulls the wick out because it's an oil lamp.

It's an oil lamp.

Oil.

Yeah, right. So the oil, the wick is burning, and she pulls it out, and the flame dies.

Yes, because there's no more oil. It burns out. The oil that's left in the wick will burn out.

So, imagine that she's absorbed, she's concentrated, and she's still concentrated, peaceful, and in this very special state of mind that was unselfconscious. As she takes a certain kind of focus with the needle to pull out the wick, she's focused even more. And as she's looking at the flame, the flame disappears. No longer having an object for attention, for awareness, something lets go in her mind.

Rather than opening up to the next object, something lets go deeply in her mind. And this is what she had been practicing for years. She attained her release.

Yes, Beth.

Okay, one of the small details I loved is that “the mind was freed,” that it's no longer my mind.

Yes, very nice. Yeah, it was like that little shift was the whole story in a nutshell, anyway. Yeah, very nice.

And let's see. Apologize for pronunciation. Shokuchi?

Yeah, that's right. Shokuchi.

Well, I have to say that this particular set of poems I found depressing, and this poem brings it up a little more clearly. I mean, I was depressed by the negative state of women's lives that they painted before their enlightenment. But I wonder about these first four lines. What is the purpose?

It sounds absolutely beautiful: plowing fields and sowing seeds and caring for children and gaining wealth. There's this beautiful life that clearly is male.

Yes.

And then the second paragraph, I guess, is this sense of frustration almost. It's all very gentle, but why? You know, I'm not lazy. I'm not proud. I have virtuous conduct. Why don't I attain release?

To me, that's kind of a contrast of pain.

Yes, and then, of course, there is the fulfillment at the end. But I kind of wonder about that first line, what those first four lines are, and why they're there exactly. So, that's what I'm questioning.

Okay. Does someone else want to offer an explanation?

Recording.

Oh, thank you. I saw the first two—too much feedback. I got my computer going.

Yeah, so someone has to see everyone, but the phone is still too many—too many mics are on.

Yes, and too many devices. But it's probably too many devices in one room.

But let's see. So, Jane, I think you were trying to speak.

Yeah, I mean, I really like the contrast between those first two stanzas and the rest of them. The opening stanza seems to talk about attainment, right? You know, getting things in the

world. And then the second stanza is sort of a spiritual version of that, right? “I'm doing all the right things. Why haven't I attained? Why haven't I gotten anything?”

So, craving for attainment. Then it kind of transitions into those other stanzas where the enlightenment happens, with foot-washing water and wicks. So, leaving that kind of craving for attainment and sort of being able to, by letting go of that, attain. I guess that's kind of how I read the whole poem, with those two stanzas beginning it.

She's purposely setting up the contrast, because the contrast for her contributes to her frustration, despair over having a goal, a purpose in her life as a nun, to become awakened. She seems to have put her good effort into it. And someone, a young person, a young man, puts good effort into worldly activities and is successful. So, why hasn't she been successful with her efforts?

That's how I read it. Like, I think that's just repeating what you said, Michael.

You're muted. You're still muted.

Do I need—I can maybe help you there.

Okay. There were a couple of puzzling places to me. I just wanted to get some feedback. I'm assuming something, or what came to me, in the line of washing your feet and then the foot-washing water flowing from high ground to low, I'm taking that almost metaphorically.

Because, as the next line says, “With this, the mind concentrated,” I had to ask myself, how does the flow of the water affect her to concentrate her mind so precisely, so deeply? What came to me was the washing away of the *kilesas* in some way that was both different and more profound. Yeah, does that consonant with your thoughts?

I hadn't thought about it that way, but I appreciate that way of thinking. And what I'm going to say could relate. It's the end of the day. She needed the candle to go into her hut because it was getting dark.

It's the end of the day, and, as was probably a custom back then, one of the last things you do before going into your hut and to bed, because you're walking around barefoot or with sandals, is you wash your feet. So the day is done. Her activities are done. Her practice is finished for the day. She's sitting down. She's resting.

It's a simple, ordinary activity that she does unselfconsciously. Maybe putting down the efforts of the day, the self-conscious efforts for practice, she's unselfconscious and she's just simple. At the end of the day, she's lowered her expectations. Her thoughts are quiet. She dumps out the foot-washing water from the basin and watches its flow.

I imagine it not only flows from high to low, downhill, but also probably, as it flows, it absorbs into the ground. Human beings often have a great capacity to watch flowing water. It's very captivating, concentrating, absorbing. So she gets absorbed in a very simple, innocent, unselfconscious way in the flow of the water. And that's enough.

All this work she's done, all this practice she's done, has prepared her for this. Yeah, that unselfconsciousness. So, she's let go of a lot of *kilesas*, and maybe even more than usual because of this unselfconscious kind of simple, ordinary activity in watching the water flow.

Thank you. I mean, that's resonant with me. Then, with “the mind concentrated, like a thoroughbred horse,” I couldn't make a relationship to a thoroughbred horse. That just is escaping me.

I think a thoroughbred horse is a very strong, noble, upright, capable horse. It's trained. It's strong. So, she is kind of praising her mind. Her mind is not just concentrated, but her mind has now become powerful.

I imagine a thoroughbred horse was an easy reference point in that culture for a kind of powerful creature.

Yes, and not only that, but also one that's tamed. I mean, a tamed horse. There is, in some *suttas*, the word *nibbāna* can also mean tamed or calmed. So, sometimes horses are said to have been *nibbānized*, meaning that they had been tamed or calmed in a deep way.

So, yes. Okay, that's understandable.

The last one is, I don't understand why she took the trouble to say, “I entered my hut.” She took the trouble to say, “Looking over my bed, I sat down on the bed.” I don't know why that's there.

Yeah, that's a good question. I like to think it's just a very ordinary activity and perception. She's absorbed in the moment with nothing else going on.

Yes.

And so, looking over the bed, she's absorbed in that, and then completely just sitting down—that's all that's going on.

Thank you. That's very clarifying. Thank you, Gil.

Should we go through the—I think Francisco is next.

Hi, Gil. I love this poem too, a lot. One thing I liked about the first stanza was that I felt that it put worldly life and family, work, and men kind of equivalent to Buddhist practice, which

was an astonishing thing for women because women were in such an unequal position back then. So I saw them kind of being raised up to the level of worldly things, and even young men, which I think was the privileged state to be in in that society. So, that's how I read the contrast.

And then that second stanza about not attaining release—it's an expression of, if we see *vedanā* as sensations, as superficial sensations and profound sensations, then this is someone who truly exemplifies profound sadness for the practice, which is wonderful to see. We don't use—the second part of *vedanā* is usually not so common to see, because it's kind of really rare to have this level of deep practice and then have a profound sadness, usually.

So, I have a question about superficial unpleasant things and deep unpleasant *vedanā*. Is this an example of the profound sensations? Is that correct?

Yeah. And just for people who don't know, in the discourse on the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, when it talks about *vedanā*, feeling tones, it mentions those feeling tones that are—it literally says—of the flesh and not of the flesh. Some people say worldly and unworldly, worldly and spiritual. This “not of the flesh” is meant to be something deeper than skin deep.

“Of the flesh” means that the sense experience in the world touches you for pleasure or for pain. But then there is something deeper in our system, a deeper kind of pleasure, a deeper kind of pain that we can experience. Some of it is emotional pain. And usually, as Francisco says, the reference point for that is something that's not so good. It's very painful.

But there are occasionally spiritual discomforts, spiritual pain. One of them, the classic one, is a frustration at not being able to practice, or a kind of sadness at not being able to make any progress. So that's what Francisco is referring to, using my kind of language from another place, calling it deep mind and shallow mind, or surface mind. But go ahead, Francisco.

Oh, no, I don't have anything else to say. Sorry, I was just enjoying what you were saying.

Yeah, yeah. So, it's not that often we see that appreciation of a spiritual sorrow.

Nancy.

So, what speaks to me is the contrast, as others have mentioned. I see it like plowing fields with plows, sowing seeds, caring for children. This is a predictable way to advance in worldly terms. If you plant the seeds and plow, then you're going to get wealth.

Whereas the spiritual path, you cannot predict, no matter the thoroughness of your virtuous conduct. It's not as predictable as planting a seed in the ground.

Exactly. It's not so mechanical. The cause and effect isn't something you build and make and engineer.

Right, right, right. It's not your effort alone. There's something more to it than just pure effort, like plowing.

But then, with the feet washed, washing the water, I guess I thought of the times when the sequence of water flowing down from a mountain, a trickle into a stream, into a river, into the ocean, is a kind of natural law. So, with trust in the natural law, virtue will have fruit. The mind, when you surrender to natural law, concentrates. And the horse, to me, is not only powerful but goes far, far from the field, far from worldly things.

And then, looking at the bed, sitting down on the bed, being, as you said, like the bee instruction, like eating is eating, or the bed is a place to sit, just very, very simple. Then, letting go of what can be seen and all the thoughts, the flame goes out. It kind of reminded me of the other poem, and several of the poems, I think, describe a suddenness. When all—like the woman who put a noose around her neck—when the light goes out or the noose is around the neck, then boom.

Yeah, that was very striking to me. A little bit, again, this unpredictability. You don't know when it's going to be.

Yeah. There's a quip that sometimes in the Western Dharma world they talk about. Sometimes it's said that enlightenment is an accident, but you can make yourself accident-prone. You probably have heard something like that.

Yeah.

Well, yes. Yes. So anyway, very, very intriguing.

Great, thank you. Susan.

Yeah, people have been adding comments that may be similar to what I was going to say, but I was curious about that second stanza and what the tone of it was. People have said—and I read it first as frustration—somebody said sadness. And I thought, well, maybe it's just quizzical, like, “Why is it?” It could just kind of not have an edge to it, which is how I was reading it.

But then, whatever the tone is, I guess if it's more like irritation or frustration, what I really enjoyed in this poem is then the shift and how she gets very ritually focused on what she's doing. Maybe this is what the previous speaker was saying too: that shift is unpredictable. She could have hung on to the frustration or the quizzicalness, but it just was released when

she became very focused on these mundane activities. So, I like the mundane details of this poem in the context of this larger query as well.

Yeah, I very much like your interpretation, the way you read it, because of all the simple, ordinary kinds of reference points. So it doesn't have to be sad. It doesn't have to be frustrated. It could be simply asking a good question. A good question is sometimes one that just opens you to possibility, opens you, makes you receptive to something.

So, it could be that that contributes to the whole movement. She's asking, as you said, "Why is this?" She's just curious and interested to know, open to know. But she's not trying to figure it out. It prepares her to then get absorbed in the water.

And the rest of the poem, that kind of attitude—frustration and sadness—might not prepare you for what's coming, the way that what you're suggesting does.

Yeah, it was sort of a reminder that it's not like you can't set up the conditions, and it can come out of the blue, like the transition to something else too.

Very nice, thank you. Jerome.

Thank you. What if we take the point of view that taking a needle means I become one-pointed? I pull out the wick, I pull out my *kilesas*, and then the flame went out and the mind was free.

Very nice. I think symbolically it works very well, what you're saying. And literally it also works, that you can get very concentrated taking a point of a needle to find the wick and to really attach it. When I did a long retreat, my teacher once told me, to help me get more concentration, "Imagine taking a deep breath, and on the exhale, imagine you're threading a needle, and just follow the thread through the hole."

I was supposed to use that imagination to try to get really focused. So, I can imagine just even in the semi-dark, taking the needle, trying to find the wick. It's enough to get concentrated, one-pointedly.

No, I have a Zen outlook, so that's why taking a needle and the one-pointed aim is very pleasing to me to see, that point of view.

Thank you. Thank you for bringing that up.

Thank you, Dana.

Hi, Gil. I appreciate what others have said. One point that maybe adds and that resonated with me is that the first two stanzas, it sounds to me like comparing mind, that she's caught in

this *dukkha*. Perhaps she's been coming back to this question over and over again for some time. Somehow, then washing her feet, she enters a meditative state and sees that this has been created by her mind, that it's functional and it's causing her suffering.

She lets it go and then maintains it by staying concentrated. And then, when she pulls out the wick and the flame goes out, the mind has been freed from this particular source of *dukkha*, not to be returned to again.

Nice, very nice. Thank you.

Thank you, Lauren. You're muted, Lauren.

Hi. At the beginning of her life, she's living in the physical realm, plowing the fields, taking care—she's a home person, a layperson. And then she starts a practice. I thought that when she's starting to, let's say, meditate, it's like when people expect something from their meditation. “Well, I've been meditating twenty minutes, an hour, three hours, and nothing's coming of it.”

And so then, at some point, she enters the stream. She sees the water flowing, and that's when one really is beginning to attain some knowledge, really internalizing it. Then, at some point, she can let it go. In a moment of grace, all the work that came beforehand does matter. Back at the second stanza: “Why am I even doing this? It isn't making a difference.” And yet, in our sustained practice, at some point there may be a moment of grace.

I also thought about it this way: this is if one is still in their physical body, but it also could mean that as the flame went out, as I leave my body, because I had a lifetime of practice, my mind is freed, and maybe there's this possibility that I will not be returning. Right?

Well, that's not there literally, but we have that in other poems, that kind of idea. So, it's fair enough to want to read it that way. Yep. Thanks.

Thank you, Jane.

Hi. Well, my comment was kind of back from when we were talking about the second stanza with the “Why is it that I?” I agreed with—I think it was Susan—that I read it as neutral as well. But I actually almost read it as, because this is a teaching, she had realized part of why, of reaching so much for attainment, as I think someone else mentioned, and then realizing the need to just be present, be mindful.

Something you said in a talk a couple weeks ago that really stuck with me was, to get from point A to point B, sometimes you just really need to be at point A. So, I kind of read it like

that. She just suddenly became very, very present and focused and mindful, and then was freed. So, I read that line as a realization, transition, and teaching, I guess.

Great, great. I appreciate these comments about how these are not necessarily depicting frustration or sorrow. It's a whole other orientation. So, thank you.

And then Doreen, are you next? Have you—

Yeah, I really appreciate everything that's been said and just the general exploration. When you think of her as teacher, here she is teaching now. But I wanted to say, I know the poem fairly well. I've worked with it. What happened for me early on, as people were talking, was a shift.

I don't know that it's meaningful for others, but I've always read it as if it were happening in real time. You know, that we were going from the beginning, and we were there, and then this was happening, and that was happening. But somebody said something that led me to kind of flip that around, as if she were talking not to us but to herself, trying to remember, “How did I get here?”

It certainly happened. I mean, I can remember being really kind of—it was not a good thing that I was doing that—but in a retreat, having reached a really deep state, and then suddenly thinking, “Wow, how did I get here?” And going back and repeating what had happened: this had happened, that had happened. But I don't get that feeling with her here. That sense of almost like a roadmap: “This is what happened. Ah, then this happened. Can I remember this?”

Yeah. It is. She is—the poem is remembering the experience, what happened. She's not composing it in the middle of the experience, right?

Right. And seeing it as a roadmap, seeing it as a guide for the rest of us to maybe have a way of understanding our own practice, right?

And a guide for her to understand her own practice.

Yeah. Yeah, right. Thank you.

Yeah, thank you. Robert.

Thank you. I'm really loving all of the interpretations. It's very cinematic to me. I'm a filmmaker, so it's like looking through a lens. Every paragraph is like a different shot of a film.

What strikes me is that the first two paragraphs appear to be in the present tense, and the others are all in the past tense. So, it's a little perplexing to me because the first two are

before her enlightenment, which is the present. Maybe I'm taking it too seriously, but those are all present tense.

I also appreciate where she says, "Why is it that I, thorough and virtuous?" She's really kind of still caught in herself here. She is very self-conscious about her expectations, and she's comparing it to the young man. So, when she does, she's looking at cause and effect.

There seems to be cause and effect in every paragraph, expecting something, being added on. She's almost wanting something to be added. Then, in the final paragraph, it's really a subtraction. The fuel is released. So, really, the release, the transition, is to the subtraction.

Very nice. I appreciate this, Robert. I appreciate all of these. It's fascinating to hear all the different perspectives. And I guess we'll take maybe the rest of here.

I thought we would look at some other poems too. So, maybe let's hear what Michael—

Coming off of what Robert just said, focusing on paragraph two and three, it occurred to me: I remember reading that the last challenge before an *arahant* is conceit, and it seems that paragraph two is about conceit. But it also has that "Why haven't I attained release?" It reminds me of the other poem of the nun who puts the noose around her neck because they've reached that final place: "I've tried so hard."

Then, the third paragraph, the concentration on the water. I'm struck with—I can't relate to what you said before about the water going into the ground. It just doesn't click with me. But what does relate to me is the flow from high to low, from the high ground of conceit to the low ground of renunciation, or complete renunciation. "I give up. I just give up."

Nice. So, that's what I wanted to add. Thank you.

And Barbara.

I think that I just wanted to add my own experience with this poem. You said to memorize something, and the first stanza I wanted to memorize, and did maybe for a while, was the one about watching the water. That's what drew me to the poem, because I watch water a lot right now. Water is very meaningful to me every time I do it: Lake Temescal, the bay. I haven't tried it in a bathtub yet, but maybe I should, because this is more like that.

I saw the foot-washing water in a container, from high to low, and the beauty of water and the fact that everywhere it is, it's mysterious. It has all sorts of sizes of waves. It's constantly changing. Even Lake Temescal is a man-made, person-made lake that's full of poisonous algae, and it's fabulously beautiful. So, it drew me in that way.

Now that we've gone back to the first two stanzas, I'm still in the world, I guess, because I understand exactly her reaction to the young men gaining wealth that way. Not even raising the kids, by the way, because they're men, and she's excluded from that. She can't. She's worked very hard, and she still hasn't gotten where they got with wealth.

She then understands that wealth isn't even the point, and something else happens to her that's much deeper and more meaningful. But I'm not sure she lets go of her consciousness of all the stuff in the beginning. I've always been mystified in Buddhism about what we're supposed to do when we supposedly have attained *nirvāṇa*, or any version of it. You know, we're still here, at least in this lifetime.

So, I'm interested in all that, but what I'm really drawn by is water. So, that's most about the poem.

Thank you, Barbara. And Leslie.

What I like about the poem is that it's very similar to what practicing is like. You have some thoughts, a little bit of comparing mind, a little bit of evaluating your practice and where you're at. Then some mindfulness of activity. Through the relaxation maybe that comes with the mindfulness of activity, then her mind gets even more concentrated.

Then there's a little bit more mindfulness of activity, and then she gets one-pointed. You know, just that fluctuation, that our mind state is shifting, and we do have thoughts when we're practicing. So, that was what I noticed.

Nice, thank you. And then Cindy.

Okay, great. Hi, Gil. This is wonderful, and I appreciate everything that's been shared. Really interesting. I read the first paragraph coming out of reading your background about the patriarchal world all of these nuns left. So, that first paragraph, as others have said, is the world that young men are living in through which they gain wealth.

I thought it was interesting: caring for children and wife, which I assume means that they earn the resources to do that. I don't remember what you said about Paṭācārā's background, but my sense from reading your materials is that they all came from very difficult circumstances and took a great risk. Many of them were homeless for years and years and years, literally homeless, not even attached to the other nuns. So, I thought it was sort of a contextual stanza: "That's the world I left."

Yeah, and the frustration—I didn't find it depressing at all. If there is some frustration, maybe, but also, just, "This is what I'm doing. I took this great risk. I left everything I knew because it

was untenable. And when am I going to have the release?" So, that's just what I was saying.

I was so struck by what you wrote about the context. There are some similarities in the modern world, but not many. I was talking with my husband right before, saying, well, women were property in the United States in the 1700s and 1800s, and well into the 1900s, of their husbands. So anyway, that's what I was thinking.

Thank you, Cindy. And you evoked Paṭācārā's suffering that brought her to becoming a nun. We're going to read this for next week, but I'll read you the verses where she describes her story. She has a very, very tragic story. Here it is in verse.

Walking around about to give birth,
I found my husband dead.
Before I reached my house,
I gave birth on the road.

For miserable, miserable me,
two children died;
a husband dead on the road;
mother, father, and brother
burning on one funeral pyre.

In the course of a day or so, she lost two children, a husband, a brother, and her parents in tragic circumstances. So, that's a little bit of her background that brought her to the Dharma. With that kind of contrast, it also puts a little different flavor on her poem for me. Maybe she's frustrated or sad about the lack of attainment, but the matter-of-factness, the simplicity of it, is not describing someone who is still burdened—or maybe that's not the right word—but still grieving these horrible losses.

Rather, she's kind of come out, in some way, to the other side. Maybe. Okay.

Well, that was nice. So, I thought I'd maybe read one more. The next two poems refer to Paṭācārā, and the last poem of the chapter is Chanda. Who would volunteer to read Chanda?

I can't see. Let's see.

Hello, my name is Carolina.

Yeah. So, go ahead, please.

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.”

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
and a knower of the three knowledges.

So, one of the reasons I like this poem is Paṭācārā is a teacher. This idea, “With kindness for me, she allowed me to go forth,” is just seeing that as an act of kindness for someone who seemingly did not experience a lot of kindness. She wandered around begging, without any friends or family, poor. It was a hard life for seven years for her.

Then she receives this little act of kindness, and then receives the teachings and the encouragement to practice. And then she practiced well. She practiced all the way. The idea of being free of taints and a knower of the three knowledges: the three knowledges are the three knowledges that the Buddha had on the night of his awakening.

He knew his past lives, he knew the rising and passing of living beings, and he knew the *Four Noble Truths* that liberated him. What's remarkable to me in looking at this idea of the three knowledges is that it is somewhat rare in the *suttas*. It is applied to the Buddha, but I think

virtually to no one else in the *suttas*. But once we get to the *Therīgāthā*, a lot of nuns are claiming that they also have attained the three knowledges.

That is not an inconsequential claim. It's placing their enlightenment at the same level as that of the Buddha. So, not only are women able to be enlightened, not only can they be teachers, but they can attain the full liberation of a Buddha, which is not really needed to be an *arahant*. But they're claiming something quite significant in this tradition, their place in it.

So, any comments about this poem? And Dana.

Hey, I just have a question. I thought I read somewhere recently, maybe as part of this course or another one, that the three knowledges could also be ethics, wisdom, and meditation. Is that so?

I have never heard that. I mean, it's a group of three, so it's possible it could be that.

Okay, thank you.

Kramer.

Somewhere along the way, I remember being told, and could not tell you who taught me this, that the three knowledges were what distinguished a Buddha from an *arahant*, and that really only a Buddha could have them. So, with the nuns claiming them, that's pretty big. But also, is that incorrect, what I had been taught?

It is correct for certain streams, certain eras of Buddhist teachings, certain texts. So, that idea exists in Buddhism. But what we see is that there are historical layers to this tradition. The fact that it's in a Buddhist text doesn't mean that that's Buddhist truth. It just means that it was true for certain people at a certain era.

What we see here, perhaps, is before the three knowledges became the sole domain of a Buddha.

That's really amazing. That's really beautiful. Thank you.

Natalie.

Hi. Yeah, and just, Gil, this poem, I feel like—and the reading of it was really beautiful—it just reminded me of the depth of Paṭācārā's heart. Hearing more of you speaking about her story and her depth of loss, that she can be this beacon for others, to bring people who are at a really difficult point in their life, and she can be a teacher for these other nuns. I mean, it just speaks to the depth of her practice. It's just incredible to me in this poem.

Great. I love hearing that. Thank you.

Jane, and then Michelle, and then we'll end that puzzle, and then we'll stop with—

I have a kind of, I guess, more technical question about the poetry and the stanzas. I saw one footnote about how mostly a stanza was four lines, sometimes six, and that one of the poems had kind of mixed things up or put things in a different kind of order. Could you say a little bit more about how the poetry is in the Pāli? Is it metrical? Or are they like prose poems, but just organized in four stanzas? Is it syllabic? How does the poetry work, and how do you work with that as a translator?

So, there's a meter to the poems, and there are different kinds of poems that have different meters. I remember when I translated the *Dhammapada*, there was one Buddhist scholar who insisted that I had to translate it maintaining the meter, which requires a lot of twisting the English language. It's really hard to do that. So, I ignored the meter when I made my translations because I thought I just didn't have the skill, the ability, to manage that.

It's a pity because the meter has a music to it. It has a flow. It has a rhythm we get pulled along with and pull into. The closest principle that I've tried to do with mine, that's not metrical, but maybe tries to honor it in some way, is to try to have my lines be short. If I had to err in some direction, it was always to try to make it as short as possible.

So, with the idea that that created a kind of beat or rhythm that somehow respected the meter. Is that okay?

Okay.

So then, Michelle.

I think a couple things jumped out at me in this poem. Having Chanda be urged toward the ultimate goal by her teacher Paṭācārā actually made me think of what you talked about in your Dharma talk this morning: how U Paṇḍita was urging you also toward this ultimate goal. So, this idea of having a teacher who urges you on in this way just seems sort of resonant to me.

So, I thought that was sort of a sweet connection. But also, this idea of being free of the taints. I've gone down a bit of a rabbit hole about what the Pāli word is and what the translations and the meanings are. But this idea that once you are free, there is a freedom from which something is ended. It's run its course. It's over.

It's not just a stilling of something. Something is over. It's ended. So, yeah, I've just been exploring that in my practice a bit over the last few weeks.

Great, very nice. Yeah, the idea that something has ended is very important.

And then Fazal.

Hi. Oh, I just wanted to add—

Oops! You somehow got muted while you were speaking.

Oh, sorry. So, yeah, sometimes the story of the Buddha just seems not so relatable because his life was so perfect.

Yeah.

Now we have someone, obviously, whose life was way harder than I can imagine. It is inspiring to see somebody with so many challenges who woke up and became such an important teacher in the tradition.

Great, thank you. Yeah. So, we'll see a little bit of this in the reading for next time. The poems are longer now as we go through the book. I think we're doing a seven- or eight-verse poem, and then a ten-verse poem.

The shorter one is the poem of Mahāpajāpatī, who is the foster mother of the Buddha. She was a queen, so she had a different kind of life. But then the next poem, the longer poem, is a conversation between Paṭācārā and Kisāgotamī. Kisāgotamī is very famous. Most probably, most of you have heard the story of the mustard seed.

Her child died, but she refused to believe the child was dead. So she went around all these households and people saying, “Who can cure my son, my child? Who can cure him?” And so people said, “Well, go away.” Finally, someone said, “Well, you should go see the Buddha. He knows what to do.”

So she goes to the Buddha, and the Buddha says, “Okay, you have to go collect mustard seeds from families who have not been visited by death.” She is very happy that she now knows what the medicine is. But she goes around and knocks on people's doors, and no household has been free of death. Somehow that changes her.

Somehow that allows her to accept the death of her child. It allows her to release. It allows something profound to happen. She goes back to the Buddha and becomes ordained and becomes a nun. So, these two women who lost their children are having a conversation in one of these ten-verse poems we're going to read for next time.

Then the final week, there are the two longest poems in the *Therīgāthā*, and I don't think we can do both. But because of your comment, one is the story of someone who has a

horrendous—not just one life, but seven lifetimes. The seven lifetimes are depicted in kind of detail, how terrible they were for her. The other one is someone who had a wonderful lifetime and was a princess, the daughter of a king and queen.

She seems to have a relatively—it's the longest poem of the whole book—and she has her challenges, big challenges. She has to stand up for herself and fight off her parents' wishes. So, I was leaning in the direction of the woman who seemed to have an easy time. So, anyway, these are some things that are coming.

So, thank you very much for coming. I appreciated very much that we could have this kind of conversation about the poems. I'm sorry we didn't have time for all of them. I hope those of you who didn't share, I hope it was interesting to listen and participate, even though it made it a little bit passive for you, maybe.

We could perhaps next time do a breakout group so that everyone has a chance to speak a little bit and participate in that kind of way, which is helpful. But for now, thank you very much. And we'll send out—we'll be sending out—the next reading within the next twenty-four hours.

Great! Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Thank you.

Yeah. Thanks, everyone.

Thank you very much, everyone.