Therīgāthā: The Poetry of the Enlightened Nuns (3 of 4)

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November 05, 2026

Keywords: *Therīgāthā*, Kisāgotamī, Paṭācārā, *kalyāṇamitta*, *anukampā*, *brahmavihāras*, Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path, *arahant*, deathless

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I was looking forward to meeting with all of you again and continuing with our reflections, thoughts, explorations of these poems, these ancient poems. Maybe, as a nice way to begin, I wonder just to get a kind of a feel for what it was like to read these last two poems. Can you give just a word or a phrase, or maybe a short sentence, for what it was like to do this reading this time? As we kind of gather ourselves and understand what's coming together as we meet in terms of doing this reading, would some of you offer some words?

"Easy to understand with this translation." Easy to understand. Thank you.

"Resolve." Resolve. No, you don't have to say more, but I would love to hear what's behind that word for you. Thank you.

"Gratitude for the teachings." Nice, thank you.

And someone in the chat put, "See, oh, it looks like dignifying graphic, deeply and increasingly wonderful compassion acceptance interactive." Very nice.

And Eileen.

Hi, everyone! I was really struck by how powerful and strong these women were, to be *arahants* and to go through what they did. Just very inspiring.

Fantastic! I'm delighted to hear that. I mean, I think maybe that's one of the purposes of these poems: to inspire us.

Beth.

For me, I really felt a sense of sobriety.

Say more. I'm curious. Could you say a couple of more words?

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Yeah, the capacity to hold the beauty of the freedom that comes from the *Dharma*, and the reality of life as it is, especially for women. That there's not really much difference now. So it feels really sober for me to receive it. I felt really there with them.

Yeah, not so different now. This last few days, someone read to me an account from the newspaper. I think maybe it was Nigeria, where some 10 percent of pregnancies end up in death because the women's bleeding is not stopped in time. Ten percent—that's pretty high.

Yeah, Lorraine.

I would say a sense of—I was thinking of *anukampā*, the thread of caring, and also a solidarity.

Fantastic. Care and solidarity going together. Nice.

Well, it was very nice to hear, and I think that my vote is to start with the Kisāgotamī poem, the one that I'm interpreting as being a dialogue poem. I want to defend—not the interpretation exactly—but I'd like to defend the interpreting. If I left it without the kind of interpretation I provided, we would inevitably read it by some other interpretation.

What people don't realize is that many times, even with the Pāli *suttas*, we're reading them through a thick interpretation of the received teachings that makes it look like it's the truth, like this is how it really is. This is how it is. We don't realize that so much of how we read these texts is an interpretation to begin with. So, given that, I think there's a little bit of room to honestly—meaning explicitly—offer an interpretation of how to read it that maybe gives it a new look, allows us to appreciate it in a different way, in a new way.

Maybe it is one that is more meaningful for us, or conceivably it might be more accurate in the ancient tradition. So I think that, to some degree, I'm allowed to offer an interpretive reading, especially if I admit that's what I'm doing. That's what I did. We can take it or leave it. You don't have to take the interpretation as being the true way the poem is supposed to be read.

There's a whole wing of Buddhist studies that studies the *suttas* and Buddhist literature as performative art, as performative literature, as opposed to philosophical treatise. There's been a very strong orientation among many people in the West for over a hundred years to be looking for doctrine and looking for very clear explanations of doctrine. It's very easy to understand that. Luckily, the tradition provides lots of lists of doctrines. So people who want doctrine get the wonderful lists: one, two, three, four—what it's all about.

But probably that's not how Buddhism was transmitted from generation to generation, or

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from teacher to student, from one person to another. It was probably transmitted in a much more humanistic way, much more with stories, much more with performance. Sometimes what's important is not what is taught, but how it's taught. That might have been quite different in the ancient oral tradition than one can understand if you read it like a textbook, or even read it like a novel or something.

This wasn't meant to be read. It was meant to be recited, spoken orally. It was meant to be performative in some way, and so much more gets transmitted. So much so that some scholars have called some of these poems ballads, almost as if they were sung rather than poems. The word poem is pretty rich in some ways, but when you compare it side by side with ballads, the word ballad suggests something that maybe has many more dimensions to it than a poem would have.

So the performance of it—how it's emphasized, the rhythm, and all these things—is an important part of it. In this performative style, then, I present it as a performance. There's a narrator who starts it off. In the introduction, I call it a teacher. Then it's these two nuns in the ancient tradition who probably are among the most well-known in the modern world: Kisāgotamī and Paṭācārā.

Maybe the way we can begin this day, if you're willing to go along with me, is to have three of you volunteer: one to be the teacher, one to be Kisāgotamī, and one to be Paṭācārā, and to read the parts. It is particularly nice—I mean, anybody can do it—but I kind of lean in the direction of hoping some of you have a theatrical background, so that maybe you could kind of get into it in a different way than just reading it like it's words on a page.

So, anybody willing to be the teacher? This is your chance.

Yes, thank you, Shokuchi. And then, Jane, will you be Kisāgotamī?

Yes.

And then Paṭācārā. It'll be a long evening if no one volunteers.

Thank you, Carol. Thank you.

Would you like me to post a screen share of the document so you see it in front of you on your screen?

Yeah. So hang on a minute, and I'll do that. Oh, so I had it up. Oh, things change when I'm not looking on here. I had it all set up. There it is. So, let's see if I can get it again.

No, it keeps changing every time I click on Zoom. It goes away. So, let's see if it stays in place now.

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Gil, we have access to it through our email.

Yes, I know, but some people might like to see it in front of them. So here, I think I found it now. I think I—okay. So you can see my screen now?

Yes.

So, yes. Please, teacher, can you begin?

> 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 poison. Some fetuses within are killers, 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 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 had was immeasurable. You have shed such tears for many thousands of births."
>
> "I lived in the middle of charnel ground, where my children's flesh was eaten. With family killed, I was despised by all. But then, with husband dead, I attained what is without death. I cultivated the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the absence of death. I have realized release and have looked into the mirror of the *Dhamma*. I have removed the arrow, laid down the burden, and done what had to be done."
>
> Elder Kisāgotamī, with mind liberated, said this.

Very nice. Thank you very much for doing that reading, the three of you. So now the floor is open. What would you like to ask? Would you like to say, share, discuss?

Shokuchi.

Well, I found it really kind of revelatory, your offering this performative aspect. It brought up several things for me. One: as I have studied Greek tragedy—not so much in content, but in

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form—it struck me as very similar. They probably were around the same time. I'm not really sure of my dates anymore on the Greek tragedies.

So I thought of that, and it gave me kind of a visualization: the chorus and the locutors and so forth, especially the earliest tragedies. And then—oh, there was something else, but I've forgotten it. But that's what it brought up for me.

Finally, I thought of the *brahmavihāras*. Because the beginning of it starts with a *kalyāṇamitta*, and I recently read—I think Gregory Kramer translates *mettā* as "true friendship." I thought, "Oh, it starts with a really true friend," and then goes to compassion, beautifully expressed. Then there's the recitation of the joy of this spiritual accomplishment of Kisāgotamī. So, yeah, it gave me something to think about there.

Love that! Thank you. That was really lovely to bring into the poem. Thank you.

And then Beth.

It's wonderful that these nuns are the ones who speak first. Well, this is a relatively tiny point, but it's a point that, for me, was like a starburst. It was around your question of Kisāgotamī's mirror. I've always loved Kisāgotamī. I've just always loved her, and loved the way in which she needed to go through the experience of going house to house to house, to find out the universality of experience, to become released from the trap of selfing, to use your word about it.

But the sense that she was so unique. Anyway, the mirroring brought me to Dōgen. You know: "To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things." It's probably a bad translation, but boy, it was a—you know—in my own group here, we've been working on not-self a bunch.

The deconstruction of the attachment to self is such an amazing, amazing process. I come to it very late in life, but I'm tremendously grateful for all the help along the way. So thank everybody.

Thank you, Beth. And Leslie.

I really liked the idea of hearing this in Pāli. Or is it Pāli or Sanskrit that it would be?

In Pāli.

Pāli. Are there any websites or places where we could hear the voices either singing or speaking?

Yeah, there are websites for some of the *suttas* in Pāli, but I don't know of any place where this is chanted. I know that in Sri Lanka they do a lot of chanting. They even sell—you know,

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they used to sell CDs of chanting, and there were bestsellers. It was a big deal in Sri Lanka, like the top ten chanting monks' CDs.

So it's possible, if you go onto YouTube and look up the *Therīgāthā*, you might find it. Oh, someone found it. And those are in Pāli. Māloka Vihāra—or are they doing it in English?

But someone put in the chat, both in Pāli and in English.

Fantastic! I'll listen to it now. Thank you.

Yeah, thank you. So, yes, Dana.

So I have a question about this line. Where is it? Oh, let's see. Which verse number? This is from Kisāgotamī. She says, "Womanhood is suffering," declared the trainer of people to be tamed. When I read that, I wondered if it meant, as a mother, she was the trainer of her children. I'm not sure if that was how it was intended to be interpreted.

But it reminded me of the challenges that I had when my twin sons were little. They were very active, and I struggled a lot with hindrances and difficulties with them in school and whatnot. It reminded me, actually, of way back in 2010, when I was struggling so much. My family—my husband—brought me and my sons to the family retreat at Spirit Rock in 2010, and you were the *Dharma* teacher.

The experience of being there, coming in with this burden—I remember sitting in the *Dharma* Hall, and they were just running around. I felt like I had to keep getting them, making them sit. I was just a mess. And Betsy Rose took me aside and said, "Please stop doing that."

This is personal. I probably shouldn't be sharing all this. But I said, "I can't. They're going to bother people." She said, "No, you're the one who's bothering people." I said, "I can't. I can't, because there was this history of them bothering people, and that was in my mind."

She said, "Just try," and I did. At that retreat, I looked around and I saw all these happy, relaxed families just enjoying each other. It was a new vision for me of how I could be, how my family could be. I just was so tied up in everything, and everything fell.

It was a huge turning point for my family, for me, for my marriage, for my kids. I'm just so grateful. I wanted to tell you about it. I've been wanting to say that for a long time. So thank you.

Well, thank you. It's very, very touching for me to hear this. The family retreat at Spirit Rock was so special for me and my family, my kids as well. So I wasn't just a teacher for it; I was also a parent in it. It was really special, what I got to experience with my kids there.

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So I'm glad that we shared all that together. Thank you. The first year I did the family retreat, I wasn't a teacher yet. I can say that that was one of the hardest retreats I've ever been on: to be a single dad for a six-year-old with a lot of energy. I tried, because I thought you're supposed to do this, to go to everything in between taking care of him, all the free time, and everything.

Oh, I was a wreck by the end. So I learned not to do it that way. Anyway, thank you. So fatherhood is suffering sometimes too.

And so, "Womanhood is suffering," declared the trainer of people to be tamed. The word "tamed" probably has different connotations in English than in Pāli. I think to tame people might not seem like a good thing sometimes, or it might suggest restricting people, narrowing people down, or getting them to behave properly. "Tamed" might not be the best English word.

It's what you do with a horse who's well tamed. But a well-tamed stallion has a lot of dignity and strength and power, and it's also able to be present in a calm, assured way. So I think we have to somehow take the word and assume the best from it. Sometimes the word can also just mean calm, I think.

So, Anis? Hey.

Thanks. Yeah, no, I just wanted to speak on everything throughout. I mean, specifically these poems, but also in general all of these poems of the elder nuns. I would say I'm still fairly new to learning many of the teachings in Buddhism, but I have noticed spiritual friendship come up a few times. I just want to say I absolutely love that.

That seems to be so central, and it was the opening to these two that we read. I wanted to say that not only with these poems, but all of the other ones we've read in this class, and even the ones that you, Gil, have recited in some of your talks before this class too, I've just been so struck. I think this relates also to what Diana and others have shared: the rawness of the suffering of these women, the way that their lives are depicted and the things they have to depict. We've said that a lot.

But I think what I really love, and what resonates with me, is that putting the rawness of suffering in the poem is juxtaposed with friendship. These two forces are colliding. To me, that resonates so much personally, but also in these poems and from my experience of what I'm learning with Buddhism. I think it's powerful and important.

That's what I get from this: spiritual friendship, or just friendship in its purest form, I guess—love, loving-kindness, love. That kind of love, the way it can live amidst suffering and be so

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bold and so energetic and so beautiful. I love that. I feel that maybe I'm projecting that, but that's what I'm seeing and hearing in these images, these stories of suffering, but then right next to it, beautiful wisdom and power. That's in the friendship part.

I think it resonates on a personal level too, because I'm sure lots of people have been in really painful situations. I feel like in my life, that's where I've felt the strength of friendship. I've been in situations where I had almost nothing for long stretches of time, and those are some of the happiest times of my life, actually. The things that were strongest were my connections with other people.

That has resonated a lot with me as I'm learning more about the teachings in Buddhism. I hope that I'm on track with understanding what spiritual friendship means. But it really resonated, especially as this is about women, and these experiences of mothers and women and their various roles that, of course, I still connect with as a woman and a mother, and many of us do. So I just wanted to say that.

I really love that. I love everything you said. For you to pick this up and articulate so well about spiritual friendship and loving spiritual friendship in connection to suffering, you're in good hands now with yourself. You've picked up something very important.

Thank you. I'm glad to hear that.

Yes, Leslie.

What stands out for me is a historical change that feminism brought: that the misery of being a woman is perhaps a lot less than in those times, given modern obstetrical care and choices. So I feel for the ancient women, for modern women as well. But I really feel sometimes—I was born in 1957, so it was women's liberation when I was a preteen, and on from there. The changes have been vast.

My mother couldn't open a bank account without her husband's signature, and that goes on from there. So I just wanted to pay tribute to the women who have helped us move forward in history to a better existence for most women.

Well, for us in our culture, yeah. It's definitely an acknowledgment and a thanks that's very appropriate. I hope that this kind of acknowledgment and thanks is a way of continuing this, to keep growing and developing. It's still needed; more of this is needed in our world. So, thank you.

So, yeah, any questions about the poem? Any of the lines? Any things that are confusing about it?

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Yes, Robert.

I do have a question. Knowing that I'm speaking to the translator, let me just—it's a line that I see whenever someone has become liberated, and I'm a little curious. "Laid down the burden," but it's the last line, "and done what had to be done." I just find that so simple and profound, but I'm curious. It's also so simple that I wonder why it's put that way, because it's something I've seen quite a bit the last time.

Yeah, "done what had to be done." It's used to describe someone who's become an *arahant*, who did what had to be done in order to become completely free of suffering. So the path has come to completion. The idea that there's an end, that there's a completion of it, that there's a full possibility of ending suffering, is kind of the promise of this tradition, or the teaching of this tradition.

It's a phenomenal thing that this is what they emphasize, and it's emphasized over and over again. This expression is part of that, part of the many ways in which they say that there's a completion to the path: done what had to be done in order to be free. It's all in order for what? In order to be free of suffering. Is my explanation, Robert, to the point for you?

Yes, very, very much. I appreciate how this is just put the way it's put. I've always been a bit curious about it. So thank you.

Yeah. "Remove the arrow" is the idea that there's a poem in the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, the *Book of Eights*, where the Buddha discusses his own dismay at the suffering of the world. Then he says, "I saw the arrow in the heart, and I pulled it out and was freed of suffering." That's one way he represented his core experience of liberation: that he was able to pull out the arrow of clinging. It's an odd arrow, because it's the one that we've shot at ourselves.

That's a very powerful metaphor that's used. The other one, "lay down the burden," is also used. I know it as mostly associated with one of the core descriptions of suffering, the human suffering that the Buddha is addressing. Sometimes, like in the Four Noble Truths, an explanation of it is defined as the four aggregates, or burdens of clinging. In some places, it's called a burden.

So you're putting down that burden. You're putting down the bundle of clinging that we have. There are many other ways in which the tradition talks about the end of the path. These are three ways. Yeah, thank you, Robert. I'm glad you raised that.

What I say to myself is, "What's done is what had to be done," when even little things happen in life and I'm trying to behave myself maybe a little better. I just say, "What's done had to be

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done," which is like a tiny version, or an everyday version, of the bigger sitting on the cushion or maybe dedicating more of life to the *Dharma*.

I have a question about "looked into the mirror of the *Dhamma*."

Yeah.

So when I think about looking into the mirror of the *Dhamma*, it's either like a moment—these moments in meditation that just sort of land and the self dissolves. There's a feeling of beauty and connection with things, or nothing, but a beautiful nothing. Or the teachings themselves sort of feel like they're there, right there, and nothing has to be thought about. It just doesn't have to be thought about anymore.

There's this sense of looking in the mirror, but without seeing a self. Self is such a curious expression. Looking in the mirror, because in a mirror you see yourself, but this is like a mirror where you look in the mirror, but it's the mirror of the *Dhamma*, and you don't see the selfing. You don't make a self out of what you see in the mirror.

Right, right. Yeah, yeah. There's no creation, no making anything up there. There's no making of a self out of that. I think that's the idea. But you see something very profound in yourself.

In this path, in this tradition, I believe the goal is for people actually to know for themselves that they are free, that they're liberated, and to be kind of self-authenticated in their liberation. Rather than waiting for some teacher to say, "Oh, look at that! You did pretty well in your liberation. Here's a certificate. Here's your certificate in Buddhist liberation, and now you can go and retire and play golf or something." You're waiting for the teacher to tell you.

Some teachers will never tell you the level of your attainment, the level of your practice. In some ways, you have to be self-authenticated. You have to be so confident and clear at what you've experienced, what's happened to you, that you know for yourself regardless of what anybody else says.

So, to have the experience of letting go in such a profound way that when you look within, you see yourself in the absence of clinging. What kind of self is that? There's no focus on self in that kind of seeing, but there is a clear recognition that in you something has shifted, something has been transformed in a full way. The goal in the practice is to really know this for yourself.

In the twelvefold transcendent dependent origination, I don't know if you know this teaching, the last one is to know for yourself that the taints, the attachments, have been destroyed. So, "done what had to be done." There's a very clear idea: I see what's been done, I know it for

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myself, and there's no doubt about it. I have no doubts.

Those are, for me, fleeting moments. When the other moments come back, there's this absolutely excruciating sense of a tangle. Like now I feel, rather than thinking, "Oh, I'm right," like if I get a little tiff with my husband, "Oh, I'm right, he's wrong." But it's a feeling of tangle, like stuckness and glue, you know?

Yeah. Well, that's part of the value of these moments of liberation, moments of freedom being experienced. We see more clearly how we get attached afterward, where the tangle is. We get to know it better. We can practice with it better because we see it better, recognize it.

But I think what they're talking about here, in the mirror, is that it's not just momentary. I mean, just imagine that you go a month without any tangle and you say, "Wow, for a month! I mean, I think it's gone. Maybe I'll wait another month, or maybe a year, before I really say." But wow, I've been through all kinds of challenging situations, and my husband's been the most creative he ever could have been, and still I'm not tangled.

You know, it looks like—look, I've looked at myself deeply, and it's stable, it's continuous, it doesn't seem to be coming back. This is really significant, that I've been transformed in an enduring way, not just for a moment. So that's the possibility this tradition offers us.

Yeah, it's a very motivating possibility. Thank you so much.

Thank you. Great. Thank you.

And Eileen.

Good afternoon, everyone, again. I guess I'll follow up on the motivating, because that is my experience of reading these poems too. I'm glad I'm not a wife or a mother, but I relate to these women and what they went through. I relate to them also in their independence and their strength, so I feel like they're kind of like my *Dharma* sisters too, even though they're way beyond me in terms of their accomplishment.

What this triggered for me was—I'll share. I read the poems last night and then woke up this morning thinking about the Four Noble Truths, which seemed almost like a catechism—you could recite them. But the first noble truth, I thought, "Oh my gosh, I've never really understood it." I understand it very differently now, because just to say there's suffering in life—yeah, okay, we know that.

Then, going beyond that, realizing that a lot of the suffering is not caused by my neighbors or the noisy construction guys. It's in here. Then, going beyond that, I suddenly saw this

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morning when I woke up the many ways I have done my best to pretend that suffering doesn't exist or make it go away. Make it go away. Run away from it, shut it out, deny it, cover it up.

Because it wasn't supposed to be there, right? Life's supposed to be fun, right? So it wasn't supposed to be there. I must be doing something wrong, and I had to run away and watch TV and do all these things. I never realized before how much of my life I've spent running away from the first noble truth, not wanting to see truth.

Is this the gift that Kisāgotamī and Paṭācārā have offered you?

Yes.

Fantastic. I'm very grateful to you and to them. Congratulations.

Thank you.

Thank you. My blessings.

Dana.

Right. So I just wanted to go back for a second to that retreat, because I felt like that was the—I know that was the first time that I really looked into the mirror of the *Dharma*. When I arrived at the retreat, I didn't even want to go. I was so stressed out. I felt like I was spinning a thousand plates, and if I stopped for even a few minutes, my whole world would come crashing down.

I was exhausted. Being there and being able to put that down, and to be light, and to see that I had put all of that suffering onto myself and how it was hurting me, my kids, and everyone. To trust and just be there in that environment—I never forgot that. I never forgot how I went, over the course of two or three days, from being so blind to what I was doing to seeing that I could put it down.

There was another way, and that felt like freedom. I felt like sunshine. At that retreat, people were singing and jumping rope, and all of a sudden I was participating in all of this stuff with my family. It was so beautiful. To me, that was pulling out that arrow.

Wow! It did help. So thank you.

Thank you. So then that was a turning point for you in your life?

Yes, a very big turning point.

Wow. Thank you, Dana, very much.

Thank you.

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Carol.

And looking at it, it has two, two, one beside it, and it's Paṭācārā, and it says, "I lived in the middle of charnel ground." Why was she living in the middle of the charnel ground? And also, why was she so despised?

That's a good question. I can only offer an interpretation. Maybe it's a bit more useful to ask some of the rest of you to interpret rather than for me. If I say it first, then it carries a little bit too much weight sometimes, and then other possibilities won't come out.

So, Linda, I see your hand going up. So please.

Well, that was the line I was going to say resonated very deeply with me. It was maybe a bit like what some other people have commented on. That line struck me because it's in that moment of extreme suffering—and I can only speak for myself—that I was able to see a different way. Much like what I think Dana has just shared.

It was so easy to avoid suffering—or not easy, but it was the patterned behavior. That line really struck me because that, for me, was a big turning point of recognizing that you could just face it. Then it goes on into, "I attained what is without death." Then it goes into the Eightfold Path. That's the process that, for me, was incredibly valuable during a time of suffering.

So let me make sure I understand you. You're saying in reading that verse, that impacted you, so now you're willing to look at your suffering in a way you hadn't before?

It reminded me of the process. The process of that. It's a process that's good. You're willing to do it.

Yes.

Well, so metaphorically, you have Kisāgotamī and Paṭācārā right behind you, supporting you.

Yeah. The whole work resonated because having that validation between the two of the suffering—it didn't matter what the suffering was—it was universal. So it is just incredibly moving. The piece was incredibly moving.

Right. So, I'm sorry, who was it who asked the question about it? The question is still up about the charnel grounds. Maybe Michelle, you can answer the question too about the charnel grounds.

Yeah. I guess that was one of the things that really jumped out at me. Her husband was dead, mother, father, and brother burning on a funeral pyre, and sleeping in a charnel ground.

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Those are shocking kinds of images. But the thing that came up for me—and I would imagine any of us who maybe have been to Asia or India or gone to Varanasi—probably for me, one of the most impactful experiences of my whole life was going to Varanasi.

Being feet away from bodies burning on the funeral pyre—this still happens today. This is not from thousands of years ago. This is something that is still going on today. There are funeral pyres, there are still charnel grounds. To see that, and to live in a culture which even still has the omnipresence of death, where it's right in your face—you can't avoid it, you can't escape it.

I think in the West, it's so easy to just be like, "Oh, I'll think about that later," kind of thing. Or it's so sanitized. It's not as ubiquitous. Also, just thinking about how, in monastic practice, even still in the present day, the contemplation of dead corpses and going and seeing bodies chopped up—that's actually still sort of a common aspect of monastic practice.

So just the shock of that, I think, for many of us, is juxtaposed with what I think the payoff is at the end, which is this promise, if you will, that the ultimate end of the path is the deathless. The juxtaposition of the horror of the death, the funeral pyres, and the charnel grounds, but then finally achieving the deathless. I had mentioned, I think in the very beginning, that the word that came up for me from reading these was the word "resolve."

If death is all around you, you're going to have the resolve to do what it takes to escape suffering, or to escape death even, right? To me, that is just profound. I've always had—I guess my imagination has been captured by this idea of the deathless or the unconditioned. I know maybe there's some debate about whether that is a later addition, whether that was ever really something the Buddha pointed to. But for me, the promise, if you will, that the deathless is part of the ultimate goal is very inspiring and motivating.

Great, very nice. Thank you, Michelle.

And Nancy. Maybe we don't have many new people raising their hands because we're getting close to that time. So, Nancy.

Thank you, Gil. So, one of the things that really interests—can you hear me?

Oh yes, yes.

But I kind of—I was going to ask you how you are, but maybe this is not the time for that. Maybe later.

I'm coming along. I'm getting slowly better. It's a process. But thank you for asking.

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Okay. Maybe later, maybe at the end. So one of the things that interests me greatly in connection with your interpretation of the setting, the performative setting of this—the presence of a teacher and the two women—if it's a performative setting, presumably there's also an audience. So there's a whole bunch of other people as well who are experiencing what these wonderful women are saying.

Here we are, 2,600 years later, performing, so to speak, that function as audience to the suffering that's being expressed. In a way, we're sort of replicating the structure that you're proposing, which I find tremendously interesting. But also, it's very moving in terms of *kalyāṇamitta*, in terms of connection. In this case, connection across the centuries and the universality of suffering.

So I wanted to say that. Then, in terms of the mirror, I feel like I need to think about this mirror thing more. But it's really interesting. I feel like if, in that mirror, what's being reflected back is that this, however dormant it may have been prior to her awakening or their awakening, the potential, the seed of awakening, was already there. That's kind of what's in the mirror.

Then finally—and all of this may sound a little addled, I'm not sure—but finally, the fact that at one point it's not clear who the speaker is, which of the women is speaking, I also find really interesting. Because that too points to the universality of suffering. We can't quite even distinguish who's who in this dyad.

Uh-huh. Fantastic. That's very nice to hear, all this, Nancy. Thank you.

My pleasure. This was lovely, to read these and to be reading them together.

And Beth, the first Beth, the nun Beth.

This is going to come out confused, but having spent a lot of the last 50 years in charnel grounds of various sorts, once—or when—it's not personal, when you're not expecting, wanting, feeling inadequate because you're not in some more considered fortunate place, charnel grounds can be literal and they can be metaphorical. They are tremendous teachers because they strip away so many assumptions about who we are and what we are in the world.

That can be—and, as you know, for me has been—sometimes a terribly painful process. But my gratitude toward it is endless because in that stripping away, this space for compassion begins. Real compassion, not pity, not, "Here I am, ah, this, that, the next thing, going to fix you," kind of stuff. All that gets stripped away.

My teacher in my first ten years of working with AIDS, along with you, was a Marian father. In my first years, as you know, he used to say, "If it's not life-affirming for you, it's not life-

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affirming for the patients." I used to say, "Jim, just because it's hard doesn't mean it's not life-affirming." And he'd say, "Okay."

In about three years, there was a sea change. That sea change was one of the most profoundly wonderful things that has ever happened in my life. So when I read the charnel ground—and of course we all think that's Kisāgotamī; it can't be Paṭācārā—they are very, very, very powerful places. We can have deep gratitude to them without affirming that they are a great place to be.

Yes. I think that the charnel ground passage being in there is tremendously grounding in this dialogue. Without it, it would be sort of floating in the grounds of assumed privilege in a way that it absolutely can't be. Anyway, I've talked for too long, but there we are.

Right. Well, you've talked perfectly to bring us to the end. The other hands are now down. So I think this is wonderful, to have this conversation and to explore the text this way.

I translated this poem to be a performance this way. This is actually the first time that I've had three people read it and heard it myself this way. That was very meaningful for me. I thank you.

There's one more class next week, and we're leaping forward to the last poem of the collection. The way that the collection is organized, each chapter moves along for more verses. For a while, they just go one, two, three, four, five, and then it starts skipping some numbers. Some chapters only have one poem, like this Kisāgotamī poem.

Then we get to chapter 16, and that is the longest poem and the only poem in the chapter. I forget how many verses there are, but there are a lot of verses. This, I believe, is also to be read as a performative piece. I see it as operatic.

Maybe now, because of what Shokuchi said earlier about Greek tragedies, it belongs on the stage in Athens. I propose that you probably get into it more, understand it more, and appreciate it more if you really see it as a dramatic, operatic dramatization. Kind of participate when you read it. Participate in the reading.

Don't just read it when you have a little bit of free time, plop it down, and expect to be entertained. Read it at a time when you can almost treat it as meditation, a meditation time, a time where you can really be present for it and participate in it. Imagine you're in it. Imagine you're participating in it and being carried by the words and the drama.

You can maybe identify with the main character, and she's speaking for you or something. But it's performative. To really honor the way it was composed, remember that it's not composed

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to be a text that's read. It's too long for us to read all of it together when we meet again next week, but maybe we can read a section of it and see what it feels like that way.

There's a lot to be said about that poem. But one of the things to also maybe consider as you read this last poem of the whole collection: How does it compare with the first chapter? How does it compare with what you've read so far? I think the biggest contrast is with the first chapter, with all those one-verse poems.

Wow! It's like a different universe you're coming into. What do you make of this difference? How do you understand it? How do you best shift how you participate in the poem when it's so different than the first poems that we read?

Okay. So thank you very much, and I look forward to next week. Probably tomorrow, Rob will send out the next reading.

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