Therīgāthā-The Poetry of the Enlightened Nuns (4 of 4)

Gil Fronsdal

November 12, 2026

Keywords: *Therīgāthā*, Sumedhā, *dharma*, *nibbāna*, *nirvāṇa*, *samādhi*, *karma*, rebirth, *anukampā*, Four Noble Truths

---

Okay, so I've offered you a question. Those of you who are here, the question is: What observations do you have about how these poems change, or the overall kind of arc of this set of poems you read? The first chapter, the last chapter, and in between. Any overarching observations, reactions?

I just think—oh, I don't know. I got off that. Hmm. How to get on that again? Hmm. So I'm having a terrible time just using a computer. Okay. Can you hear me?

Yeah, I hear you.

Yes.

Okay. Well, I think you summed it up so beautifully, talking about it being an opera. I can just see it and hear it. And I thought I wasn't going to be able to get on the site this afternoon, and then I wouldn't hear it read.

Oh, I'm here. Welcome, welcome. Ready with, uh, yeah, my bells and cymbal.

Oh, and your Kleenex.

Oh, it takes a lot to make me cry.

Yes, Karen.

Well, I thought the earlier poems, the shorter ones, were like *koans* a little bit. They were very punchy, and they were sometimes a little bit mysterious. You had to imagine quickly: someone's suicidal, or someone's, you know, lost their children. It was very punchy and a little quizzic, you know—quizzic made me quizzical about it, like a *koan* would.

But this is really like story, you know, that just starts spelling it out. And beautifully, you know, the second half of it is sort of beautiful, how we all can step into the *dharma*. So I really liked

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

your way of structuring this and ending with that one, because I thought they were all like the first ones, you know, from my cursory reading of the *Therīgāthā*.

Thank you. Thank you, thank you.

And Dana. Hi, thank you.

So, what's coming up for me is the idea that all of the poems have really been about people wanting to save themselves. That comes into clarity especially with reading this last one, which is so dramatic. There's a lot of emotion in it, and a lot of detail that wasn't present in the earlier poems. But that sheds light on probably what was there in those as well, just not spelled out in as much detail.

Thank you. Great, thank you. Nice.

Any other observations about the journey we've been on in reading these different poems? Yes, Anna.

The resolve was so moving to me. I found, with all the poems, that the resolve—it was more articulated in the last one—but it was so inspiring. And I was reflecting: Okay, what is it that creates the conditions so that you have that resolve?

I remember as a young person having the resolve when I went off to India, and my parents tried to send people after me. I said, “Well, we can't communicate if that's what's going to happen.” And I cut off. There was just such resolve, and I don't know what enables someone as a seeker to access that.

And then, like, what are the conditions? When you have it, there's such clarity, but it's not always accessible. So I was just reflecting on that.

Great, thank you. It's nice to hear. Yeah, there's resolve in these ancient women. Any other comments?

Um, what you just mentioned, or a person before mentioned, was about saving oneself. And I wondered where the saving all sentient beings comes in.

Ah, okay. The dedication to live for the benefit of others.

Yeah.

Yeah. Very nice. Okay. Thank you. A nice question.

And then Ten Mori. Yes.

Hi. You know, I think this whole journey has been so inspirational and exhilarating, because to hear these women's voices challenge and come into their own spiritual sovereignty is just

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

a profound thing to witness, even across centuries. You know, I think we can just feel how palpably courageous and incredible it is.

And it's really interesting for me. This last poem is very fascinating because I, you know, I need to look back on the time, but this pattern of that poem, of the princess Sumedhā, is actually echoed in multiple later Buddhist texts in the state of Tamil Nadu, where I'm from. It always features a woman who challenges her family in some sort of royal context.

And it becomes like the latter parts of the story become, you know, this very mythic retelling of why people should commit to the *dharma* and all of that, and ways to kind of teach the bigger philosophical teachings. But it must have been a successful enough pattern to see it copied regionally in that way. So I just love the fact that, for this moment of time, women were protagonists of freedom. That just feels so beautiful to me. And I loved it, and I love this class, Gil. So thank you.

Good, good. Thank you. Yeah, that was interesting, what you said about your state in India. But the poetry, the stories there, are kind of following the same pattern. I wouldn't be surprised if, at least in terms of the surviving records, this story here might be the earliest we have. Maybe it was a prototype for what other people then developed later.

Izzy?

Hi. Yeah. No, I just wanted to say, because I was trying to think of the connection between the older poems and everything leading up to here. I'm not sure if I'm remembering it correctly, but it seemed like even though there were some parts with nuns that maybe came from wealth, I don't think there were any princesses. I'm not sure. But this one—I mean, she's obviously called a princess.

So I just thought it was interesting, looking from that point of view, like the way the purpose of seeking *nibbāna* as being the ultimate sense of purpose was really put on a pedestal. I guess, you know, because all these other women also sort of did that. We could see how they sought refuge in talking to—hold on a minute, class. They sought refuge through the *dharma* and finding the Buddha, and then through, you know, spiritual friendship and all these aspects.

Some of them had wealth, and some of them had nothing, and they were able to feel that gold—that's how I say it, metaphorically—of *dharma*, right? Like, they're finding salvation. But this one is interesting to me because I kept thinking after I read it. I was reflecting.

I understand what she's saying about sensual desires. She was calling them evil, which my understanding is, in Buddhism, it's not exactly that they're evil. Like, if you're a—I could be

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

wrong—a householder, you might not think of it that strictly. You need to function in the world.

But I get what she's saying. It's like the craving and the aversion—that's the problem, right? That's what creates suffering. So I think that was the dramatic kind of way of really explaining that, and that makes sense.

But I think it's interesting that she's someone who's a princess, and she can, I guess for all intents and purposes, kind of do whatever she wants, you know, within the limits of being, I guess, a woman. The one little limit is that, if she was marrying someone, I'm sure she'd have limits in that way. But she's in this high position. So I just think it's really cool to see that it's an extra layer.

It's not just like she had wealth. It's not just that she rose above suffering. It's that she could do whatever she wanted, and yet, because of her insight, you know, the genre and everything, just like you said in the intro, I think, that you wrote, the purpose she chooses is to seek *nirvāṇa*. Like, that's the purpose. I don't know if that makes sense, but I just think it's cool because it's like another level than the other ones. So I don't know. Yeah, I'm curious if anybody else thinks that makes sense.

Yeah, I think also, to kind of strengthen what you're saying and how it highlights—what it highlights—is that what you didn't see was the poem before this, which is also fairly long. That is kind of the opposite: a person who goes through lifetimes of tremendous poverty and suffering and destitution and disability, lifetime after lifetime, until she becomes fully awakened.

Yeah. Well, and I just want to say one more thing. It is just very amazing to me, too, that she got to this point where she was kind of disillusioned, right? Once she witnessed sensual desires, because of her practice, she saw it for what it was.

So it's like all those things that would bring others pleasure, because she saw their impermanence, she saw them completely differently. And that's, like, what makes it so wrong. Anyways, yeah. Thank you.

How old would—thank you. I'm sorry. Quick question: How old would she have been?

I think you're as good a guess at that as I am.

Okay. So we don't know?

The poem doesn't say. We do know that in the ancient world all over, but especially in—I don't know—especially in India, it was common to be married as a teenager.

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

That's what I was thinking. She sounds like a teenager to me.

Okay. Is it Peter this time?

Yeah. I was struck by, first, even this conversation. What Izzy was talking about, how contemporary feminism, the sort of progression of different feminist thought, is reflected in these ancient poems. In many ways, some of the same exact things are still happening today. Not just in the developing world, but also in the United States, and the role of feminism, the Me Too movement, all these kinds of things were all happening within these poems. You can sense them happening.

And when Izzy mentioned the notion of—I thought a lot about the socioeconomic aspect. The first poems did appear maybe from women who were desperate, in desperate poverty. This last one was this woman who was a princess. So there are all those elements happening.

What struck me about the poem was the graphic description of how bad the body is: the horrible mucus and the membranes, turning the body inside out, and how awful it was. It was a more classical Hindu approach, where rejecting—it seemed to contradict the Buddhism that you've been teaching, Gil. In a way, that teaching is about honoring the body and being amazed and awed by the body and what it does.

In more classical Hindu things, it's like, you know, where you lie on a bed of nails. You call that asceticism. The asceticism that she was expressing was a different kind of way of looking at the body.

Great, thank you. And Barbara.

Yeah, to me she did not sound young, and she did not sound like a teenager. This woman was totally determined, totally certain of her point of view, totally willing to undergo any danger that it entailed to reject both her parents and the suitor, who had some sort of bad stuff in his background or something. She wasn't looking for Prince Charming to replace him.

Okay, well, you know: “Sensual desires are a mass of suffering, declared to be obstacles. They're like the point of a sword. I'm skipping around. Like a disease, a boil, a misfortune, a disturbance, a charcoal pit with evil as their root. They're like a piece of meat, like a fruit tree, like deceptive dreams.”

I mean, I don't go that far, saying sensual desires are all that bad. And she just thought they were all bad and all terrible, and she would rather die than have any of them. That was—I don't know. So, teenager? She didn't strike me as a teenager. I was impressed and somewhat appalled simultaneously, actually, by the extremeness of all this.

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

Yeah. You know, I think I've said this maybe before, during the writing, maybe in the introduction to the whole book, that I think it's almost fair to say that women who went into these arranged marriages back in ancient life were kind of close to being slaves. I do. The chances are that they had to struggle and work and please, and get up early and please the men.

There might have been sensual pleasure around them for the men, but in terms of sex, I could easily imagine sex was not nice for the women. So I could easily imagine a woman who was basically married but felt raped day after day would have these kinds of strong feelings.

No, I agree with all that. It's just that she was promised gold and luxury, and I didn't see where she knew that, except this guy had a bad reputation. In that sense, she was young. I agree with all that about the way the actual marriages were given.

Thank you. So, Eileen.

Hello, everyone. Hi, Gil. Thank you for the writings you've been doing. What keeps coming up in my mind is that it seems like, unless I'm mistaken, many of these women talked about their past lives and their rebirths.

I know there are Buddhists who don't believe in past lives and rebirths. But this is talking about it as if it were factual and something that everybody believes. I think I saw that in some of the earlier poems. I'm just kind of struck by the fact that some people believe in rebirth and talk about it as if it were fact, and some people just think it's probably a metaphor or something like that. Do you have any thoughts about that? I'd appreciate it.

Yeah, it is true. I've noticed that in some circles, the rebirth thing is not talked about much or believed in much. But most Buddhists down through the ages, and even currently in the world, I would say the great majority, rebirth is an obvious truth and not questioned at all. They live accordingly, with that in mind.

Sorry, that was related to *karma*? Your *karma* determining what kind of a rebirth you have?

Well, that's secondary, or the belief that follows from the belief in rebirth. The idea of rebirth is that how you get reborn is dependent on how you lived your life and your actions. So that's very motivating for many Buddhists, to somehow clean up their actions and clean up their bad deeds.

Some people go practice. Some people go and become monastics. There are a lot of laypeople who feel like it's not their place to practice, and what they can do is make a lot of offerings to earn merit, to do better, to somehow balance out their bad *karma*, make more good *karma*, and have a good rebirth. So you find a very strong merit-based Buddhism in many areas of

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

Buddhism.

So, Nancy.

Sorry, I see a contrast between, you know, “Do not delight in sensual pleasures. See the dangers of these pleasures. They would not be satisfied. People die unsatisfied. They can't be satisfied,” versus, “They are evil.” Is the evil that they create attachment, you know, if you enjoy it too much? I know for myself, I try to be more—not thinking of pleasure as evil, but dangerous.

Yeah, that's a very, very good and important distinction. People do make mistakes with pleasures, sensual pleasures, that maybe they never recover from. So they have their dangers, for sure. But I think the idea of evil is pretty strong.

Sometimes you see a very careful movement in early Buddhism that there is no thing that is necessarily the problem. It is our relationship to the thing that's the problem. So, in the early layers, as far as I can read, the Buddha never talks about letting go of things. The idea is to let go of the attachment to things, the clinging to things.

Someone put in the chat, “Sensual desires are impermanent, unstable.” And I mean, this is a hot ball of iron. One of the interesting ways of looking at these kinds of statements is to try to consider the context in which they're spoken, where it does make sense maybe to have such a strong feeling.

For better or worse, I've sometimes used the example of having gone on a long retreat. Maybe it's a month-long retreat. Your mind's been busy and full of vendettas and filled with hindrances and desires, and you hardly can get a moment's freedom because of the mind spinning so much for days and weeks on the retreat.

And finally, the mind starts to quiet down. Finally, the mind sits concentrated. Finally, there's a feeling of deep peace and tranquility, contentment in the body. Finally, the thinking mind gets so quiet, it hardly thinks anything at all.

And then it's just like, so cool, so nice. There is a sense of being connected to oneself, being connected to something that's true, finally free of all this stuff. So then the teacher of the retreat thinks that everyone needs a good lesson, and he orders a big, big tour bus to come and pick everyone up.

They're all going to go down to the boardwalk in Santa Cruz and do the roller coasters, have cotton candy, dance with the music, enjoy ice cream all day, pizza, and—you know. I mean, then you look at the teacher and say, “What? This doesn't make any sense.” I mean, you're

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

inviting me to a world of pain, a world of suffering.

I'm sitting here so peaceful. It took me weeks to get to this place. It feels like a hot iron ball to go down to the boardwalk. And, you know, it's a lot of suffering. Whether it's evil or not, I don't know.

But, you know, probably that teacher should be fired for, you know, when the person is kind of on the brink of awakening and it's gotten so quiet, taking them down to the movies and to have sex and do all kinds of wonderful things on the boardwalk. What a disaster!

Did this happen to you, Gil?

No, luckily.

Or you know about it? You sound very—

I know, but I'm just trying to imagine a context where some of these attitudes make sense.

Give me a break.

No. In a different context, it might be lots of fun. When I had young kids at home, we did go to the boardwalk, and it was fine. It was nice to take them. In that context, it was good.

But I hadn't been sitting on retreat for two weeks. Then I think I probably would get a headache going down there.

And a husband forcing sex upon you qualifies as a hot iron ball.

So, in case they thought that was going to happen. But I guess the hot—the word in that quote that was provided—is the word “evil.” And evil is a really loaded word in a Western Christian culture. It's very questionable whether we should ever translate any Indian word with the word evil.

Coincidentally, I don't know, it's a little bit amusing to me that the word that's translated as evil often is the word *pāpa*. So, for an anti-patriarchal text, it's kind of interesting—the English word, I mean, the pronunciation. But there are others. I prefer to translate it differently, in a way that doesn't carry all the connotations that evil has in English.

Sometimes I've tried “wicked” or “vile.” One Pāli scholar has tried calling it “deadening.” So, you know, we don't really know how to translate it well. But in my translations, I avoid translating it with the word evil, except I did it here.

So they should do a whole bunch of others. I don't remember why I did. Maybe because I wanted the impact of it. But sometimes people say wholesome or unwholesome.

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

You know, sensual—

Yeah, but that's a very different word in Pāli.

Well, I guess so. But I mean, *pāpa* is a powerful word, of something that's really undesirable, really painful, really wicked or vile or malicious. I've tried the word malicious to translate it. So it's a big open question for me how it's best to be translated, and whether it stays “evil” by the time it gets to the publisher of this book. That's a big question.

But for now, I went along with the customary translation in English.

Thank you.

Sure. Kuchi.

Thank you. Well, this week's reading brought up a lot of questions for me. One of the questions was: Who wrote this? It did not sound like a female voice to me. It sounded more like a monk, a male monk, who was creating a form, a format for offering teachings.

The first part, the horrors of the body and so forth, seemed pretty—I’ve read that before in some of the Pāli texts. And then the second part, the teachings. I didn't really believe in the desperation of the princess. I felt like it was kind of, I don't know.

Anyway, I did not feel like this was a woman's. It had a very different feel from the other poems, which talked about their real-life suffering. This all seemed to be kind of made up. So it made me wonder if this is attributed to anybody. If so, who?

And also, since it comes toward the end, it sounds like it would be a nice way to kind of put a period at the end of a sentence. Like, there's all these poems, and now here is the summation of what the *dharma* is. So I wonder what you think about that.

Well, you know, many of the poems—some of them, especially the beginning of the poems, the first poems, the one-verse poems—there's a question: How many of those were written by the nun herself, and how much was someone talking to her? And then, which of these nuns were composed by the woman who's speaking them in the text or referred to? Were they written by women or written by men?

There's been a big controversy about the origins of some of these poems, just like you said now. The deepest study I've seen is this—I think it's Catherine Blackburn, who wrote a book, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, I think. I think that's what it is.

Yes, I bought it at your recommendation.

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

Yeah, yeah. And she did this in-depth study comparing the verses of the nuns with verses of the monks, looking at what the themes were. She came to the conclusion, when she did a statistical study of it, that the themes could only have been written by women.

But I think her strategy didn't differentiate the different poems from each other. She took them all as a group. So your idea that this last one was written by a monk, maybe a man, might have been lost in the statistics because it just didn't stand out by itself.

But if she redid the whole statistical study, and within the *Therīgāthā* itself, maybe this one would come out very differently, and maybe there would be a different conclusion. So this is all, you know. In terms of what we know about it, I think it's fairly clear to me that this was written probably centuries after the Buddha.

It belongs to a whole different literary time and genre. It belongs to a time when they were writing long stories, long hagiographic stories about the nuns, about the Buddhas, about all kinds of things. And this one seems so clearly a piece of fiction that was written for a particular purpose. So I think what you're saying is fair as a possibility.

I also thought of what you said last week about the enactment, because this is a drama. This is a great, gripping drama that would also give teachings.

Yeah, I could see it as that pageant.

Yeah. And so, before we take Robert, I would like, before we lose track of it, for us to read just very short pieces right at the beginning: Sumedhā's first kind of real words and her last words, just to put the bookends of the whole thing. For this, I was hoping one of you would read. Someone who is theatrical, someone who could really get into the high drama, the high passion, resolve.

The reason why this one line has an exclamation point after it. So, the very first words, there's 4.51. It's two lines, with the second line being the one that needs the really clear, passionate articulation. Would anybody read those first two lines in 4.51?

Which lines?

I will, but I'm not—

The first two lines of what she speaks. The first line begins, “Listen.”

And you just want two lines?

The first two, but up to the exclamation mark.

Okay.

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

Right now. So, yeah. Well, yeah, take a deep breath and really, you know, embody what you think—both of you.

I delight in release. How much more for so hollow sensual desires, which provide little enjoyment and much distress!

Wow. Okay. Now, if some of you—if someone could go to the very end. Someone else, 5.14, and maybe it's enough to do 5.15. If someone can read 5.15 with the same enthusiasm.

I don't have the poems in front of me on my screen, so we'll wait for someone else who has it nearby.

Okay. Margot, is that you volunteering?

Yeah.

Wonderful. We have to unmute so we really hear you. Otherwise, you have to be really loud.

Attained by many, deathlessness can be gained today by those who apply themselves wisely. Without exertion, it is not possible.

So, that someone invoked earlier—you know, this is the last poem in the whole collection. This is the last verse. This is what people are left with. And putting together the first and the last, sometimes the first words, when they're given passionately, can be memorable for years.

I met an old man in Norway many years ago who had heard Rudolf Steiner give a talk in Oslo in, like, 1917 or something. He enacted for me the first lines that Rudolf Steiner said, standing on the stage. He stood up and enacted it. He showed the gesture he did.

I could do that for you. I could give you the Rudolf Steiner transmission, in a sense. The first line can give tremendous impact. So I would propose that whoever composed this chose those first words of hers very carefully, or choicefully, to have an impact.

Then I would say the last two lines, verses, also are meant to really be something that you're left with. Almost like: What's the important thing to be left with in the whole poem? And that's the bookends. Any comments?

So now, thank you for that. So now, Robert.

Yeah. When I read this, I just want to say thank you for the translation and everyone's comments. I feel like it's a bit of a sales pitch, in a sense, to convince me, you know, to let go. To

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

me, I know it's their story, but it's speaking to me as a way to teach me and convince me to even follow her example.

There are all these classic teachings, but it also leads me to a strange feeling that, with their teaching, if everyone were to follow this, we would be basically practicing human extinction.

Yes, that's a common view people have. The chances of that are probably nil, and so maybe we shouldn't use that as the criteria for all this. Maybe it's similar to saying, you know, it was kind of okay, it was kind of good that Shakespeare wrote his plays, but if everyone—that's what they did, all they did was write plays—we'd have human extinction too. So, you know, I think we should a little bit—

Dana. Hi, thank you. Let me click over.

A couple of comments I wanted to make at the beginning. The very beginning, sorry, going back. It starts out saying, “Daughter of King Kañca's chief wife, gladdened by observing the teachings.” Then the narrator: “She was virtuous, an excellent speaker, learned and trained in the Buddhist teachings. Going to her father and mother, she said.”

For me, it starts out calm: “Listen, both of you. I delight in release. Whatever comes into existence is not eternal, even the gods.” But then, as it continues on, what I see here is that she's been living a fairly peaceful life in the palace with her parents, with access to study and to the teachings.

And here it is, her wedding day, when she has been given by her parents in an arranged marriage to a suitor, Lust Army, from the land of conflict. So her peaceful life is now being taken from her. There's fear that I read that mounts in all of the first section, and she's making her case. There's agitation behind it. There's a lot of strong energy.

Then later in the poem, after she goes into the room, it reaches a crescendo. Then she goes into the room, she cuts her hair, and she enters *samādhi*. She sees impermanence. For me, at that point, she takes control of her mind, and she becomes equanimous.

So when she comes out, even though her parents and her suitor are now on the floor crying because, first of all, they've witnessed and been subjected to this whole thing with her on the wedding day, she is composed. In some ways, she's sort of steeled and a little bit hardened to what's going on with them. She sees them suffering, caught up in their own suffering. So she's somewhat removed from it.

I don't think she's histrionic at the end. I think she's very composed, partly because she's

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

been meditating, that she goes into this now long teaching. And a question I have is: Now, you know, she's made her decision. She's cut her hair. She's basically said, “I'm not marrying you. I'm marrying the *dharma*.”

She then acts from that place with these teachings. It's like, “I'm done. There's no more opening here. This is it. You have to accept this.” So she's made her choice, and it's almost like she's distancing herself. She's going to walk away. She's not—I don't know what happens next.

I have a question. Your note says that her suitor convinces her parents to let her ordain based on how she's taught. He really has no choice at this point. I don't think he wants to marry this person any longer, given what she's expressed. And so that's done.

I don't know what happens in the future with her family. Can they even hear the teachings? They're here on the floor crying, and then she goes into a monologue. She's just expressing the *dharma*. I don't know where the relational connection is with these people any longer, or if that's even important to her. She's severed, and she's doing, and she's going. I think she's very calm at the end. So, I had just a different take on it.

Well, some people say that good art, good poetry, is evocative for all kinds of interpretations and all kinds of reflections. I think you just offered your reflections, what it evoked in you. I thought it was invaluable to hear what you had to say, and what others have said.

There's so much. The purpose of good poetry maybe is not to give a definitive answer to everything, but to leave it open to our imagination. And so we don't know what happens here. The poem doesn't say.

But I am touched that the first act that she makes after her awakening is to go, in a sense, into the world and offer teachings to try to help others, so they also can maybe have the same experience. So she hasn't left them behind. She just left them behind in terms of the status, her lifestyle. But she might still live as a nun, even in the palace, and be ready to teach.

Yeah, I agree with that. I think she's hoping. She's saying, “Here are the teachings. These are here for you. Start today. Follow the path. Awaken. I can't do it for you. You can only do this for yourself.”

So I think what I read into it is sort of personal. The first time I read it, I kind of laughed because I've myself been in the position where I've been trying to communicate something to a family member, either in a very agitated state or just going on a monologue about what I think about things without pausing and asking questions or listening. It's not always that effective.

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

So the first time I read it, that came up for me. But then I put that aside, and I didn't see it as humorous any longer. It's actually really sad, and then it's hopeful. But I mean, I hope they heard her. I hope.

Maybe that's why the length was there, to go over it and over it and over it. So they did. I want to know what the next chapter says. I hope it says, “And then they woke up, and they followed her, and they did the same.”

Yes, yeah. So as I said before, poetry evokes us with all kinds of ideas, interpretations. It becomes a mirror for ourselves. And for you to have this hope for the next chapter to be this way—that's a wonderful mirror on what's important for you. I appreciate it. Thank you.

Thank you.

So we have just a few minutes left. Maybe the comments can be a little bit shorter. But Izzy?

Yes, be short. I really liked what you said, Dana. But I was just looking at the first line and the last, like we read again, trying to think of what it meant. I was wondering if it could mean, like, it's almost kind of like a diss to royalty and stuff.

Because at first it's saying, “I delight in release. How much more for so hollow sensual desires, which provide little enjoyment and much distress,” which, yeah, makes sense with the rest. But then I was thinking again about the very last line in particular. It sounds like, “Attained by many, deathlessness can be gained today by those who apply themselves wisely. Without exertion, it is not possible.”

That's what stuck out to me: “without exertion.” To me, that seems like a really big contrast. Because it's like, if you're royalty, maybe you're not having as much effort or something. So it reminds me of, I don't know, it just made me think: Oh yeah, this is maybe having some message that you need to work to have attainments on this path, and that is valuable, and that is admirable. Being wealthy and royal is not, you know. So that was cool.

Doesn't sound like she had to work for very long, but she did have to do hard work.

Yeah. On her wedding day.

Well, she didn't have social media to distract her and everything, so she still got her fair dose of suffering.

Yeah. I think the line at the beginning of that last verse, “Attained by many, deathlessness can be attained today,” is a very positive message of what's possible. It's not saying it's going to be in a future lifetime. It says it can be done. So I thought it ended on a very hopeful, positive note about what's possible for everybody.

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

Michelle?

Yeah, actually, when Margot read that last passage, it sort of evoked for me what was reported to be the Buddha's final exhortation to his monks, which I pulled up, which I can read. He said—and again, these were his last words before his death—"Now then, monks, I exhort you: all conditioned things are subject to ending; they're impermanent. Reach consummation through heedfulness."

So to me, that sounds very similar to what is being said here, I think, in this last paragraph. It sounded rather familiar to me. And I think also, to sort of pick up on what Shokuchi, I think, was saying earlier, there's—I mean, like everything but the kitchen sink is kind of in this poem, right?

There are so many teachings that we're so familiar with: the aggregates, the sense bases, the elements, conditioned phenomena, the Four Noble Truths. There's a lot of stuff being kind of thrown in here. And in many ways, I think the story of Sumedhā echoes the story or the biography of the Buddha as well. He was born into royalty, rejected all the sensual pleasures, and, of course, attained awakening.

And then I guess I have one question for you. There was that one part that you pointed out where it says, "In the palace, Sumedhā cultivated the perception of impermanence." In your comments, or in your write-up, you said this is the insight that catalyzes liberation. So I wonder if you could just speak briefly to that little bit.

Well, if you go back to the ancient *suttas*, over and over again, you see that what is being presented as the catalyst is a deep seeing into things arising—the experiences, our perceptions, our experiences arising and passing in awareness. There's something about that deep experience of arising and passing, which even down through the ages in the Vipassanā movement is considered to be essential for the liberating experience.

It's something about a shift in our perception, seeing things in a new way, that allows something to really let go deeply in the mind. Occasionally, it is simply described as seeing impermanence, not just arising and passing. So that's why I'm saying it's the catalyst.

And then the next time, it's described by the narrator: She's free of all sensual pleasure and delusion. I take that to mean that she attained it. It makes sense. She's done what had to be done, and now she can turn around and direct her focus to teaching.

So, Barbara.

In line 4.94: "What can others do for me when their own heads are on fire? As old age and

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

death pursue you, you must see. You must strive to destroy them." And your note says "pursued by" means "follows" or "keeps close to you." I don't know. I always thought Buddhism involved old age and death as being one of the three heavenly messengers that are inevitable.

I'm always saying to all my elder friends and companions and people who are, you know, it's inevitable. Just let's look at it closely and admit that to each other. This seems different.

Yeah, I think—I don't know why you tell your friends to look at sickness, old age, and death, the reason for it. But the classic reason is not to just accept it and just be relaxed about it. It is the catalyst to do the personal work that it takes to become awakened.

And what you just read there highlights the personal nature of that work, as does this last verse of the whole text. You really have to exert yourself. You have to apply yourself. No one does this practice for you.

So you do because, well, I agree with that. It happens to your body. You have no choice. You've got to do something. But what does it mean to destroy them? To destroy what? Old age and death, since you must see?

Oh, yeah. So that's a good issue of interpretation. There are two general meanings that I understand around this in the tradition. The more common one that's heard is that you'll no longer be reborn. You'll never come back to age, get sick, and die, because you're done with rebirth.

When you die, that's your last death, your last body you'll have. And that, I think, has been very meaningful and important down through the ages for a lot of Buddhists. So that's what it means. Another way of understanding it, which is more of a minor tradition in the tradition, is that there's still sickness, old age, and death as we get older and sick and die. But it has no impact on the mind.

The awareness is unflustered, unconcerned. It's not an issue for the mind or for the heart. So in that sense, the mind is free of it. It's been destroyed as something that's going to—as an idea or concepts that are going to be challenging for the heart.

Yeah. So those are the two meanings that I've come across.

I have a thank-you note from Ram Dass where he says one of the things that comforts him after his stroke is he's learned to separate awareness from his body, and I get a lot of attention. Thank you.

So, Dana, maybe the last one.

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

I just wanted to say that I went back and looked at it again, and I like seeing this as, rather than she's detached and separated, she's teaching from *anukampā* and faith. So she's not histrionic. She's just right there.

Yeah, fantastic. Yeah, I think that she's now turned her attention toward teaching. It's still dramatic language, so it can still be how she presented it, but it can certainly be not with desperation, not with great grief or sadness. It may be with a great sense of joy, even delight, liberation.

And her parents already know these teachings, presumably.

Presumably. So she's just reminding them with some drama.

So, I thank you for coming to this class, and coming along, and being interested enough to come and engage and read all this. I hope that it's been meaningful for you to be along. And I hope that the way that the format I set it up, which was not for me to give more lectures about this—you know, my teachings came from the introductions to the poems that I did—but to just hear from you and how it was for you, I hope that was meaningful for you and nice.

And at some point, hopefully, this will be published, and some of you then can read the rest of it, at least my translation. So, thank you very much, and—

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International