

# THERIGATHA

## POEMS OF THE FIRST BUDDHIST WOMEN

### *Introduction*

The *Therigatha* is an anthology of poems by and about the first Buddhist women. These women were *theris*, “senior ones,” among ordained Buddhist women and they bore that epithet because of their religious achievements. The *theris* in the *Therigatha* are enlightened women and most of the poems (*gatha*) in the anthology are the songs of their experiences. Dhammapala, the sixth-century Buddhist commentator on the *Therigatha*, calls the *theris*’ poems *udana*, “inspired utterances,” and by doing so, he associated the *Therigatha* with a venerable Buddhist speech genre. For Dhammapala, the characteristic mark of an *udana* was that “the utterance” would be “one or more verses consisting of knowledge about some situation accompanied by the euphoria that is felt there, for an *udana* is proclaimed by way of a composition of verses and caused to rise up through joy and euphoria....”

As salt just seems to go with food, the adjective “first” and the *Therigatha* seem to go together. It is easy to see why. The *Therigatha* is an anthology of poems composed by some of the *first* Buddhists; while the poems of the *Therigatha* are clearly nowhere near as old as the poetry of the *Rig Veda*, for example, they are still some of the *first* poetry of India; the *Therigatha*’s poems are some of the *first* poems by women in India; as a collection, the *Therigatha* is the first anthology of women’s literature in the world. As such statements suggest, to use the adjective “first” is to point to something key to the value that these poems have for us. We often try to draw out that value by turning our attention to the religious, literary, and social contexts in which the poems were composed and then try to see the *Therigatha* as expressions of those contexts. It is important, however, to ask when we think of the poems as “first” in these different ways, whether valuing the *Therigatha* in such a manner may be predetermining how we approach the work. In other words, while reading and appreciating the *Therigatha* for being the first of so

many things is no doubt appropriate, we also want to ask ourselves if seeing the *Therigatha* in this way also predisposes us to read the poems mainly for their historical information, and whether this might come at the expense of their expressive, imaginative, and emotional content, as well as their aesthetic achievements.

### *Reading the Therigatha as Poetry*

The *Therigatha* is not merely a collection of historical documents to be used as evidence of the needs, aspirations, and achievements of some of the first Buddhist women. It is an anthology of poems. The poems vary in quality as poetry, to be sure, but some of them deserve not only the adjective “first” in a historical sense; they also deserve to be called “great” because some of them are great literature.

They are literature in the way that Ezra Pound meant when he said “Literature is news that STAYS news.” Some of the *Therigatha* do seem to be news that has stayed news, and that is part of why they are able to delight us today and why sometimes they are also able to change how we see ourselves. The *Therigatha*, like literature generally, can enable us to see things that we have not seen before and to imagine things that we have not dreamed of before. When reading the poems of the *Therigatha*, we can experience a surprising pleasure from the clarity and truth of the epiphanies they can trigger, but perhaps more important, when we experience such epiphanies, the poems give us a chance to be free from ourselves and from our usual places in the world—at least free imaginatively—and to glimpse a different potential for ourselves in the light of that epiphany. In our day-to-day lives, we may tend to assume all too often—and dread all too often—that tomorrow will be just like today, but in the pleasures that literature affords us, we may see immediately that tomorrow does not have to be like today. Such immediacy makes free. The poems in the *Therigatha* are about that freedom, they are *udanas*, inspired utterances about the joy of being free, but as poetry, they hold out the promise, in the pleasure that they give, of being the occasion for us making free too.

This should encourage us to try to read the poems of the *Therigatha* for pleasure just as much as for any sociological or historical information they may contain. How a literary text from more

than two millennia ago can have the capacity to give us pleasure, to speak to us about ourselves and about our world in astonishingly fresh and insightful ways, is not easy to explain, but there is no doubt that the poems of the *Therigatha* have proved capable of doing so. Moreover, there is no doubt that the poems are capable of giving pleasure in translation.

This was probably the case throughout the long reception history of the *Therigatha*. The imprint of linguistic difference and translation seems intrinsic to the poems as we receive them, especially in the textual difficulties and linguistic peculiarities that many of the verses present. Individual poems were composed over the course of a considerable period of time, perhaps centuries; according to Buddhist tradition, they date from the time of the Buddha himself, while according to modern historical methods, some date as late as the end of the third century B.C.E.

The poems as we receive them are in the Pali language, the scholarly and religious language distinctive to the Theravadin Buddhist traditions that are now found in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia; in the first millennium, however, Theravada Buddhism was quite prominent in south India as well. It is sometimes said that originally Pali was the vernacular of a particular region of ancient India, but this seems unlikely in any simple way. Rather the Pali language was something of a “perfected language,” changed in ways analogous to how Sanskrit was refined as a language. Although the Pali language may have been based on some vernacular, it was reworked and standardized quite significantly between the third century B.C.E when the last of the poems in the *Therigatha* were composed and the sixth century C.E., when Dhammapala wrote his commentary on the *Therigatha* as a work in a scriptural canon. It seems very likely that these poems of the first Buddhist women have been “translated” into Pali from whatever their original versions may have been in any number of ancient Indian vernaculars, and then reworked as the Pali language evolved. Pali, as the language of Theravada Buddhism, is a translocal language and the “translation” of the poems in the *Therigatha* into Pali was key to their wide circulation as part of the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism.

## *The Therigatha and the Pali Canon*

The *Therigatha* is a Buddhist scripture. It is included in the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism, in a section known as the *Khuddakanikaya* (Minor Collection), one of five parts of the *Sutta* division of the Pali canon. The Pali canon has three divisions (and thus it is called the *tipitaka*, “three baskets”): monastic discipline or *Vinaya*, teachings and sermons of the Buddha or *Sutta*, and abstract doctrine or *Abhidhamma*. The *Khuddakanikaya* is more heterogeneous than the other five sections of the *Suttapitaka*, a mix of sermons, doctrinal works, and poetry. Among the works of poetry are a separate work of *Udana*; the *Theragatha*, an anthology of poems by and about the first Buddhist men, which is generally paired with the *Therigatha*; verses about the Buddha’s previous lives known as the *Jataka*; and other important anthologies of verse like the *Dhammapada* and the *Suttanipata*. The *Khuddakanikaya*, as a division of a Buddhist canon, seems distinctive to the Theravada and, moreover, it contains texts that are unique to that tradition. The *Therigatha* is one of these texts.

The broad inclusion of poetry in the *Khuddakanikaya* indicates that the poems of the *Therigatha* were valued as religious poetry by those who made the Pali canon, and this is a reminder to us that we should not overlook considering the ways in which the poems of the *Therigatha* could serve religious purposes. Comments made by John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana about the *Dhammapada*, an anthology of verses attributed to the Buddha, seem just as apt for the *Therigatha* when considering it as part of the Pali canon: “It is a religious work, meant to inculcate a certain set of religious and ethical values and a certain manner of perception of life and its problems and their solutions.”

Given the certain antiquity of some of the *Therigatha*, it is surprising that none of the individual poems has been found in what remains of the scriptural canons of the other ancient Indian Buddhist schools; nor do those canons seem to have included a textual section analogous to the *Therigatha*. At the same time, it is likely that some verses of the first *theris* were not included in the *Therigatha* when the Theravadin canonical anthology was put together, just as some verses of the first Buddhist men were not included in the *Theragatha*. There are a number of verses attributed to *theras*, senior male monastics, that one might have expected to be included in the *Theragatha*, but are not found there. They are included however in two extra-canonical

works, the *Milindapanha* and the *Nettipakarana*—both works associated with the Gandhari Buddhist traditions of northwest India—and in Theravadin commentaries on the Pali canon. Scattered in the same works are some verses attributed to a laywoman, Chula Subhadda, parts of which bear a striking similarity to the verses attributed to Rohini in the *Therigatha*. Referring to what she called the “unsolved puzzle of these extra-canonical verses,” I.B. Horner asks whether we are “looking in the wrong place” for the sources of these verses not included in the *Theragatha* or the *Therigatha*. “Perhaps, for example, we should be looking not in the Pali Canon but in the Sarvastivada Canon,” that is, the canon of another school of early Indian Buddhism.

Identifying particular *theris* as the authors of particular poems in the *Therigatha* was done in the intellectual context of the still inchoate biographical traditions that were developing in various Buddhist communities in the centuries before the Common Era. Just how inchoate these traditions were can be seen from the fact that some of the verses found in the *Therigatha* are also found in the *Samyuttanikaya* of the Pali canon. The *Samyuttanikaya* is itself an anthology, and in one section it collects together verses and stories about nuns. The same verses are sometimes attributed to different *theris* in the *Therigatha* than in the *Samyuttanikaya*. It seems likely that the *Therigatha*, like the *Theragatha* and the other anthologies of verses in the Pali canon, evolved over a long period of time, absorbing new poems as a collection and changing identifications of the authors of individual poems. But as the *Bhikkhunisamyutta* and the verses of Chula Subhadda make clear, not all of the known poems of the first Buddhist women were included in the *Therigatha*.

### *The Therigatha and Early Indian Buddhism*

Although the *Therigatha* is in Pali, a language generally restricted to Theravada Buddhist traditions, and the text is included in the Pali canon of that school of Buddhism, there is little in the *Therigatha's* comments, whether in doctrines or practices or institutions, that makes it distinctively *Theravadin*. To the contrary, the poems seem better viewed as relatively generic expressions of early Indian Buddhism. In this respect, the *Therigatha* is like the *Dhammapada*,

although, in striking contrast to the *Therigatha*, other early Indian Buddhist schools seem to have their own versions of that text.

Basic Buddhist ideas common to all schools of early Buddhism are obvious in the poems of the *Therigatha*. These include ideas about the nature of the world that early Buddhism shared with other Indian religions, such as the ideas of rebirth and karma (the law of moral cause and effect) that structure the conditions of experience and action for beings as they are reborn in samsara; in this general cosmology, when one does good actions then good conditions follow in this life and in future lives, including lives of pleasure in various heavens; when one does bad actions, then conditions defined by suffering and oppression inevitably follow, including lives of unspeakable misery in hells. Like other renunciant movements that were contemporary with the Buddha's, early Buddhism affirmed that a complete liberation from samsara was possible. This liberation is nirvana, and many of the *udanas* of the first Buddhist women in the *Therigatha* express the joy of the *theris* at the achievement of this state of "unsurpassed safety from all that holds you back" and their happiness in the knowledge that they would not be reborn again. As Isidasi says, "There is nothing better than the happiness of nibbana." The poems of the *Therigatha* celebrate the experience of nirvana, however, rather than go into doctrinal discussions of what nirvana is.

Ideas distinctive to early Indian Buddhism are also obvious in the poems of the *Therigatha*. These include the Four Noble Truths that the Buddha is remembered as teaching in his first sermon, "Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth": all this is suffering; suffering has a cause; suffering can be ended; and there is a path to that end, the noble eightfold path. Also everywhere assumed in the poems of the *Therigatha* is the standard Buddhist redescription of a person in impersonal terms, "the dhamma about what make a person." Instead of seeing a person in terms of a soul (*atman*) or an enduring self or some other form of stable personal identity, early Buddhist teaching redescribed what makes a person as a concatenation of things and events: physical things, as in the body; feelings; perceptions; innate dispositions and consciousness. These things, bundled together (*khandha*), constitute a person, each *khandha* co-dependent with the others, the parts and whole of a person constantly changing. To perceive oneself in such

terms is conducive to freedom from the mental constructions that one has of oneself, and many of the meditative practices alluded to in the *Therigatha* are meant to cultivate such perceptions of oneself. The result of learning how to see oneself in this impersonal way is expressed Sakula's verse:

I saw my experiences as if they were not my own,  
Born from a cause, destined to disappear.  
I got rid of all that fouls the heart,  
I am cool, free.

As Sakula's reference to "all that fouls the heart" indicates, the human psychology assumed in the *Therigatha* is Buddhist. It is alert to how human desires, habitual mental projections, and deep unsavory dispositions are all causal factors in the ways that we construct and experience the world around us and prompts to action that bring about our own ruin and suffering. In the poetry of the *Therigatha*, various features of our psychology fetter us to patterns of disappointment and suffering. Most visible in the *Therigatha* is the awareness of features of our psychology that ooze out from within to contaminate all experiences we have of the world; these include preeminently ignorance, anger, and passion. As *udana*, the individual verses of the *Therigatha* often celebrate the necessity of uprooting these dark features from human psychology, as can be seen in the following verse spoken to Tissa by the Buddha:

Tissa, train yourself strictly, don't let  
what can hold you back overwhelm you.  
When you are free from everything that holds you back  
you can live in the world  
without the depravities that ooze out from within.

In general, the poems of the *Therigatha* wear their Buddhist doctrine quite lightly, and they equally avoid most specifics of Buddhist practice, whether it be the disciplinary practices of monastics or the mental training of meditators. The poems celebrate individual transformation that ends in liberation, but they give little specific instruction about how someone who wants to

imitate the *theris* might begin to undertake practices that can transform a person into what the poems celebrate. The poems obviously “inculcate a certain set of religious and ethical values and a certain manner of perception of life and its problems and their solutions,” but, for the most part, they leave the specifics of doctrine and practice to other Buddhist texts.

The moral acuity of the poems of the *Therigatha* and their keen perception of social realities are key to appreciating the *Therigatha* as expressions of early Indian Buddhist life, and in this respect, the poems display religious and ethical values that are less visible in most other early Buddhist texts. While it is often the case that Buddhist sources give more information about a generic “folk region” of early India than do Vedic and Brahmanical texts, an indication that Buddhists may have been more closely in touch with popular strata of Indian society than other religious movements, this is not especially visible in the *Therigatha*. We discern the distinctive moral acuity of the *Therigatha* and its sense of social realities elsewhere.

A good place to start, albeit a surprising one, is with the anthology’s arrangement itself. The surface arrangement of poems in the *Therigatha* looks arbitrary, with poems grouped together into sections (*nipata*) according to the number of verses in each poem. Other rationales for the placing of poems in the anthology seem to be at work, however, including themes based on commonality of experience and actual personal relationships between *theris*. One of the most poignant examples of thematic links between poems that suggest a moral perception of social realities in the *Therigatha* are the poems of mothers who have had their own children die. We also see poems grouped together that suggest the moral importance of social relationships between women, such as friendships that endure the transition between lay life and ordained life and the enduring relationships between female teachers and their female students.

The community of women depicted in the *Therigatha* is less a single monastic order governed by a single rule (*vinaya*), than a collocation of smaller groups of women bound together by shared experiences and relationships of care and intimacy with each other, as is expressed in a verse of Rohini’s poem:

Those who have gone forth  
are from various families and from various regions  
and still they are friendly with each other—  
that is the reason why  
ascetics are so dear to me.

This valuing of relationships may explain the placement of Therika's verse as the first poem insofar as Therika's name itself suggests the significance of women living together in mutual care and intimacy. The importance of female charismatic teachers is also obvious throughout the *Therigatha*, while the monastic codes found in the canonical *Vinaya* are not highlighted at all. This is clearly an idealized perception of social realities, but it is no less keen. The world of the ordained women in the *Therigatha* is one of sexual equality, in stark contrast to the social inequalities between men and woman in lay life. It is a keen insistence on the possibility of freedom for women as well as for men.

This is especially obvious in the celebration of attainment with the declaration of “knowing the three things that most don't know.” This is *tevijja* in Pali, the ability to know one's past lives, the ability to know where and why other beings are reborn, and the ability to know that one's own moral corruptions—“all that holds one back”—have been eliminated. To know the three things that most do not know is to know that one is enlightened and that one will not be reborn. The notion of *tevijja* in early Buddhism explicitly triggers association with ideas in Brahmanical Hinduism about *trayivdya*, knowledge of the three Vedas. When the *theris* declare that they know the three things that most do not know, they are not only making a joyful affirmation of the attainment, they are rejecting Brahmanical assumptions that no woman of any caste was capable of attaining “the three knowledges.”

The moral acuity of the poems of the *Therigatha* and their keen perception of social realities may be one factor for the wide appeal that the *Therigatha* has had for modern readers around the world. As noted earlier, the *Therigatha* is one of only a few Pali works that have entered the canons of modern world literature in numerous translations. The attention given to social realities in the *Therigatha* always includes the endless varieties of social suffering endured by women, of course, but also those endured by the poor, as in the following poem by Chanda in

which it is clear that she decides to ordain as a Buddhist nun not out of any spiritual aspiration but as a way of getting food:

In the past, I was poor, a widow, without children,  
without friends or relatives, I did not get food or clothing.

Taking a bowl and stick, I went begging from family to family,  
I wandered for seven years, tormented by cold and heat.

Then I saw a nun as she was receiving food and drink.  
Approaching her, I said, "Make me go forth to homelessness."

And she was sympathetic to me and Patachara made me go forth,  
she gave me advice and pointed me toward the highest goal.

I listened to her words and I put into action her advice.  
That excellent woman's advice was not empty,  
I know the three things that most don't know,  
nothing fouls by heart.

We can see in poems like Chanda's not only individual displays of compassion in worlds of injustice, such as how Patachara treats Chanda in her hunger, but also the sensibility about evident wrongness that the world is this way. Apart from the later and more doctrinal-inflected poem of Isidasi, we generally do not see in the *Therigatha* any explanations of the social suffering that befalls women and the poor as due to the karmic fruits of previous actions on their part. On the contrary, the poems of the *Therigatha* often make us sympathize with the undeserved suffering of women and this quality was surely part of why the *Therigatha* had the appeal that it did for modern Indian social reformers, like Rahul Sankrityayan, and for Dalits (formerly, "untouchables") in the twentieth century who were drawn to Buddhism as an alternative vision of society and as well as offering the possibility of individual self-determination despite the oppressive social contexts.

The modern reception of the poems in the *Therīgāthā* encourages us to read these poems not only to learn about the distant past but also because they can speak to us about the present and about the future, sharing with us their news that has stayed new.

## THE POEMS

### *Dhammadinna*

She who has given rise to the wish for freedom  
and is set on it, shall be clear in mind.  
One whose heart is not caught in the pleasures of the senses,  
one who is bound upstream,<sup>11</sup> will be freed.

*(11) Dhammapala interprets “who has gone upstream” in a general sense of “up the stream of continued existence: (samsarosoto) and as one who has gone “up the stream of the path,” and indicates that Dhammadinna is so spiritually advanced that she will not be reborn (Pruitt, 1999: 31).*

*Uttara*

Self-controlled with the body,  
with speech, and with the mind,  
having pulled out craving down to the root,  
I have become cool, free.

*Mitta*

Usually people do all eight lay precepts  
only on an Uposatha day,  
but I did them on the fourteenth, fifteenth, eighth,  
and even on other days of every fortnight,  
happy that a god's body would be mine one day.

Today I eat just one meal a day,  
my head is shaved,  
and wear the outer robe of a nun.  
My heart's fear and its sorrow are gone:  
I don't want a god's body either.

*Uttama*

Four times, five times, I went out from the monastery,  
heart without peace, heart out of control.

I approached the nun,  
she seemed like someone I could trust.  
She taught me the dhamma  
about what makes a person  
about the senses and their objects  
and about the basic elements that make up everything.

I listened to what she taught,  
did exactly as she said,  
for seven days I sat in one position, legs crossed,  
given over to joy and happiness.  
On the eight day I stretched out my feet,  
after splitting open the mass of mental darkness.

*Soma*

*Spoken by Mara to her*

It is hard to get to the place that sages want to reach,  
it's not possible for a woman,  
especially not one with only two fingers' worth of wisdom.

*Soma replied*

What does being a woman have to do with it?  
What counts is that the heart is settled  
and that one sees what really is.

What you take as pleasures are not for me,  
the mass of mental darkness is split open.  
Know this, evil one, you are defeated, you are finished.

*Mittakali*

I went forth in confidence from home to homelessness,  
I wandered about, looking for gain and recognition.

I ignored the highest goal, taking to any low goal instead,  
ruled by defiling compulsions, I never knew what an ascetic's goal was.

Then while I was seated in my hut I began to fear the inevitable,  
I knew I was on the wrong road, under the rule of craving.

Life is short,  
old age and illness already crush me,  
there's no time to waste  
before this body is broken by old age.

Looking at a person and  
seeing that a person is made only of impersonal parts,  
seeing those as they changed over time,  
waxing and waning,  
I stood up, my mind freed,  
the Buddha's teaching done.

*Bhadda Kundalakesa*

Once<sup>15</sup> I wandered with hair cut off,  
covered with dirt, wearing only one cloth,<sup>16</sup>  
I thought there was a fault where there was none,  
and I saw no fault where there were.

I went out from the day-shelter up Gijjhakuta mountain  
where I saw the spotless Buddha honored by his monks.

I bent my knees and worshiped,  
facing him I joined my hands in honor.  
He said to me, “Come, Bhadda.”  
That was my ordination.

Chinna, Anga, Magadha, Vajji, Kasi, and Kosala—  
for fifty years I enjoyed the alms of these places,  
never incurring a debt.

The name I was called means good fortune,  
it now becomes me.

That wise lay Buddhist made a lot of merit<sup>17</sup>  
when he gave a robe to me,  
this Bhadda, who is quite free from all ties.

*(15) Bhadda Kundalakesa was the daughter of a wealthy merchant. She was given all that she could have wanted, but it was not enough. One day from her grilled window, she saw a convicted thief named Sattuka being led to his execution. She fell in love with him and told her father that she could not live without him. Her father was able to get the thief released through bribery and he came to live with Bhadda, who waited on him devotedly. After living with Bhadda a short while, Sattuka wanted her ornaments for himself and devised a plot to rob her. She saw through his scheme and used her wits to kill him. She*

*knew that she could not go home after murdering her husband, so she ordained as a Jain nun. Her hair grew back quickly after it was removed in the ordination ritual, and when it grew back it was curly. As a result Bhadda became known as “Bhadda Kundalakesi” “Curly-locks Bhadda”). She wandered India looking for people to debate with. At one point, she had a debate with Sariputta, one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha, in front of a large crowd. She was defeated in the debate and converted to Buddhism. Sariputta sent her to the Buddha to take refuge before him and the Buddha spoke a verse of the Dhammapada (v.101) to her:*

Though a thousand be the verses  
With words of no avail,  
Better is a single line of verse,  
Having heard which, one is pacified.  
(Carter and Palihawadana 2000: 20)

*Bhadda Kundalakesa attained enlightenment when she heard this verse and she immediately asked the Buddha for ordination. She spoke the first five of her verses at a later time when she recollected her attainments. The final verse she spoke when a lay follower gave her his own robe.*

*(16) Dhammpala interprets these practices in the context of Bhadda’s experience among Jains earlier (pubbe niganthihutva), and he then interprets the ascetic practices named more narrowly: plucking out the hair, not cleaning the teeth, and wearing only one robe.*

*(17) Punna the merit produced by intentional good actions, such as being generous to Buddhist monks and nuns. This merit improves one’s general store of good karma, and it can also be dedicated or transferred to someone else.*

*Patachara*

Furrowing fields with plows, sowing seeds in the ground,  
taking care of wives and children, young men find wealth.

So why have I not experienced freedom,  
when I am virtuous and I do what the Teacher taught,  
when I am not lazy and I am calm?

While washing my feet I made the water useful in another way,  
by concentrating on it move from the higher ground down.

Then I held back my mind,  
as one would do with a thoroughbred horse,  
and I took a lamp and I went into the hut.

First I looked at the bed, then I sat on the couch,  
I used a needle to pull out the lamp's wick.  
Just as the lamp went out, my mind was free.

*Mahapajapati Gotami*

Praise to you, hero among Buddhas, best of all beings,  
you freed me from suffering, just as you did so many other people.

All suffering is known,  
the craving that is suffering's cause has been destroyed,  
the eightfold path of the noble ones has been traveled  
and cessation reached:

the four noble truths  
each one done  
all done by me.

I had already been a mother, a son,  
a father, a brother, and a grandmother,  
but not knowing things as they really are,  
I was reborn and reborn,  
never having enough.

As soon as I saw Bhagavan, I knew that this is my last body,  
that the realm of births is finished, that now there is no rebirth for me.

When I look at the disciples assembled together,  
energetic, resolute, always making an effort,  
I see that this is how Buddhas are rightly worshiped.

Mahamaya gave birth to Gotama for the sake of many,  
to drive away the mass of suffering  
of all those struck down by sickness and death.

*Punna*

If you fear suffering, if you dislike suffering,  
don't do action that is evil, whether openly or in secret.

If you will do action that is evil,  
or already did it,  
you won't be freed from the suffering that comes to you,  
even if you jump up and run away.

If you fear suffering, if you dislike suffering,  
take refuge in the Buddhas, the dhamma that he taught,  
and the sangha that has qualities like his,  
develop your moral virtues, that will be for your benefit.

## *Sumedha*

When I was Sumedha,  
the daughter of King Konca of Mantavati and his chief queen,  
I was converted by those who live what the Buddha taught.

Through them, I became virtuous, eloquent, learned,  
disciplined in the teaching of the Buddha,  
and I came to my parents and said,  
“May you both listen carefully.

“I delight in nibbana,  
everything about life is uncertain  
even if it is the life of a god,  
why would I delight in things not worth desiring,  
things with so little pleasure and so much annoyance.

“Everything that the senses desire is bitter,  
but fools swoon over such poisonous things  
only to end up in hell for a long time,  
there they suffer and in the end they are destroyed.

“Such fools cannot control what they do  
with their body, speech, or mind,  
weeping wherever they are punished  
for their own evil actions,  
always increasing evil for themselves.

“They are fools, unwise, heedless,  
locked up in their own suffering as it arises,  
even when someone tries to teach them,  
they are oblivious, not realizing  
that they are living out the noble truths.

“Mother, most people cannot understand  
these truths taught by the Buddha,  
they take please in everything about life  
and they long to be born among gods.

“Even birth among gods is uncertain,  
it is only birth in another place just as impermanent,  
but somehow fools are not terrified  
of being born again and again.

“There are four places of punishment  
and two other ones where we are somehow reborn.  
There is no going forth from hell  
once you are there to be punished.

“Give me permission, both of you, to go forth now  
in the teaching of the Buddha, the one with ten powers,  
I do not have other responsibilities and I will exert myself  
to make an end of birth and death.

“I am finished with delighting in just being alive,  
I am finished too with the misfortune of having a body,  
Give me permission and I will go forth  
for the sake of ending the craving for existence.

“When Buddhas appear  
bad luck can be avoided and good luck can be had;  
for as long as I live, I will keep my moral precepts,  
I will not defame the hold life.

Then Sumedha said to her mother and father,  
“I will not eat any more food as a householder,  
if I do not receive permission to go forth,  
I will be in your house, but I might as well be dead.”

Her mother suffered and cried  
and her father’s face was covered with tears,  
they tried to reason with Sumedha  
who had fallen to the palace floor.

“Get up, child, what are these tears for?  
You are already promised in marriage,  
you have been given to handsome King Anikadatta  
who is in Varanavati.

“You will be the wife of King Anikadatta,  
his chief queen, and remember, child,  
keeping moral precepts, living the holy life,  
going forth, all that is hard to do.

“In kingship, there is authority, wealth, power,  
things to enjoy and happiness.  
You are a young girl, enjoy the pleasures of the body  
and enjoy wealth. Let your wedding take place, child.”

Sumedha answered them,  
“It’s not like that at all, existence is worthless,  
I will either go forth or I will die,  
but I won’t get married.

“Why should I cling, like a worm,  
to a body that will only turn into a corpse,  
a sack always oozing, frightening, stinking  
foul and putrid, filled with foul things?”

“I certainly know what the body is like.  
It is repulsive, a corpse, food for birds and worms,  
covered with flesh and blood,  
so why is it to be given in marriage?

“This body will soon be carried,  
without consciousness, to the cemetery,  
it will be discarded like a log  
by disgusted relatives.

“After they have thrown it away as food for others,  
even one’s own mother and father, disgusted, wash themselves,  
and it has to be even more disgusting for everyone.

“People cling to this body,  
even though it has no essence,  
and is only a tangle of bones and sinews,  
a foul body filled with spit, tears, feces, and urine.

“If one’s own mother were to open it up  
and pull what is inside of it outside,  
even she would not be able to stand the stench  
and would be disgusted by it.

“If I consider carefully what makes a person  
the senses and their objects, the basic elements  
that make up everything, I see that all of it is constructed,

it is all rooted in birth and is the condition for suffering,  
so why would I want to get married?

“Even if three hundred new swords were to cut my body  
day after day for a hundred years,  
it would be worth it  
if it brought an end to suffering.

“Anyone would put this carnage on themselves  
once they understood the instruction of the teacher,  
samsara is long for those  
who are reborn again and again  
only to be killed again and again.

“There is no end  
to the carnage that occurs in samsara,  
among gods and humans,  
among animals, asuras, and hungry ghosts, and also in hells.

“There is so much carnage  
for those who are in hells for punishment,  
but even for gods there is no sage place.  
there is nothing better than the happiness of nibbana.

“Those who have reached nibbana  
are the ones who are disciplined  
by the teaching of the one with ten powers,  
living at ease, they strive to end birth and death.

“Today, Father, I will go renounce,  
what good are insubstantial pleasures?  
I am fed up with what pleases the senses,  
all of it is like vomit,  
like a palm-tree with its top cut off.”

While she was speaking in this way to her father,  
Anikadatta, to whom she was promised in marriage,  
arrived in the city of Varanavati at the time set for the wedding.

Right at that moment, Sumedha cut her hair,  
black, thick, and soft, with a knife,  
she went inside the palace and closed herself inside it  
and closed herself inside herself into the first *jhana*.

Anikadatta had reached the city  
at the same time that she went into that happy state,  
inside the palace, Sumedha developed  
her perceptions for impermanence.

While she was focusing her attention in meditation,  
Anikadatta entered the palace in a hurry,  
his body even more beautiful with jewels and gold,  
and he entreated Sumedha respectfully.

“In kingship, there is authority, wealth, power,  
things to enjoy and happiness.  
You are a young girl,  
enjoy the pleasures of the body,  
happiness for the body is rare in this world.

“The kingdom is bestowed on you,  
enjoy what is meant to be enjoyed, and be generous,  
do not be sad yourself, you are making your parents suffer.”

But Sumedha knew that the urges of the senses lead nowhere.  
and her delusions about the world were gone.  
She began to speak, “You should not delight  
in the pleasures of the senses, look at the dangers in them.

“Mandhata was a king of the known world,  
no one had more wealth or pleasure than him,  
but even he died unsatisfied,  
his wants unfulfilled.

“Even if it were to rain every kind of jewel,  
enough to fill the ten directions,  
still there would be no satisfying the desires of the senses.  
Humans always die unsatisfied.

“The pleasures of the senses are like a slaughterhouse,  
they are like a snake’s head, they burn like a torch,  
they give as much pleasure as a skeleton.

“The pleasures of the senses are impermanent  
inconstant, they come with sufferings,  
they are strong poisons, a hot iron ball down the throat,  
they are the root of pain, and suffering is their fruit.

“The pleasures of the sense are like the fruits of a tree,  
like pieces of meat, pain is what they are,  
the pleasures of the senses deceive like a dream,  
they are like borrowed goods.

“The pleasures of the senses are like swords and stakes,  
like disease, like an abscess, painful and hurtful,  
they are like a pit of burning coals,  
the root of pain, fearful and fatal.

“The pleasures of the senses bring many sufferings,  
those who know call them hindrances,  
you should go,  
I myself don’t trust existence.

“What can another do for me  
when his own head is on fire?  
When old age and death are right behind one,  
one must try to end them.”

At that point, Sumedha opened the door  
and saw her mother and father, and also Anikadatta  
all seated on the floor, crying,  
and she said this to them:

“Samsara is long for fools and for those who cry over and over  
over the death of a father  
or the killing of a brother of their own death.

“When you remember samsara  
as it really is for beings,  
remember the tears, the mothers’ milk, the blood,  
the mountains and bones of those born again and again.

“Think of the oceans when remembering the tears,  
the mothers’ milk, and the blood,  
think of Mt. Vipula  
when counting the bones that just one being has had.

“If the whole continent of Jambudvipa  
were broken up into little balls  
the size of small fruits,  
the number of them would still be less  
than the number of mothers and grandmothers you have had.

“Think about all the grass, sticks and leaves there are,  
even if they were broken into smaller pieces  
they would still be less than the fathers and the grandfathers you have had.

“Remember the blind turtle in the eastern sea  
and the hole in the yoke floating in another ocean,  
remember how the turtle put his head through the yoke,  
that is our chances of having a human birth.

“Remember the body, it has no essence inside,  
a misfortune in itself, no more than a ball of foam,  
look at what makes a person, it is all impermanent,  
think of the hells filled with carnage.

“Remember all those who keep on filling cemeteries,  
remember to fear becoming a ‘crocodile,’  
remember the four noble truths.

“When you could taste sweet ambrosia,  
why would you want to taste the five bitter things?  
And the pleasures of the senses  
are actually more bitter than the five bitter things.

“When the sweet ambrosia of the deathless exists,  
why would you want the pleasures of the senses that are painful?  
All the delights of the senses burn, are rotten,  
troubled, and are seething.

“When friends exist,  
why would you want the pleasures of the senses  
that are only so many enemies?  
they are like kings, thieves, floods, and disliked people  
in how harmful they are to you.

“When freedom exists, why would anyone want  
imprisonment and execution?  
In the pleasures of the senses, people experience  
the sufferings of bondage and beatings against their will.

“A bundle of grass, when set on fire,  
burns the one who holds it and does not let go.  
the pleasures of the sense are like torches  
that will not let go of anyone who held them.

“Why abandon a big happiness  
because of the little happiness that the urges of the sense promise?  
Do not suffer later like the *puthuloma* fish  
who swallows the hook just to eat the bait.

“When among those things that pleases the senses,  
control what the senses urge, just as a dog is held by a chain,  
otherwise the urges of the sense will kick you about  
like a low-caste person does to a dog.

“If you get yoked to the pleasures of the senses,  
you will experience no end of suffering,  
so many sadnesses of the mind,  
so give up such unreliable pleasures.

“When there can be no aging,  
why would anyone want the pleasures of the senses,  
since aging itself is in their midst,  
just as sickness and death always come together with birth?

“This is something that has no old age, it has no death,  
this is the sorrowless state,  
without old age and death.  
without enmity, without crowding,  
without failure, without fear, without trouble.

“This state without death has been attained by many,  
it should be attained today by us,  
the one who applies himself easily can,  
but it is not possible for one who does not strive.”

As Sumedha spoke, she took no delight  
in the constructed appearances of the world,  
but finally to convince Anikadatta,  
she threw the hair she had cut off on the floor.

Anikadatta stood up and joined his hands respectfully,  
he asked her father to allow Sumedha to go forth  
so she could see nibbana and the four noble truths.

Allowed to go by her mother and father,  
she went forth, frightened as she was by the sorrows that otherwise had to come,  
and she realized the six higher powers and the highest fruit  
while she was still being trained.

The attainment of nibbana for that king's daughter  
was marvelous and unusual,  
but equally so was what she said about her previous existences:

“When the Lord Buddha Konagamana was  
in a new residence in a monastery,  
I was one of three woman friends  
who gave a *vihara* to him

“As a result of that, we were born among gods  
ten times, one hundred times,  
one thousand times, then thousand times,  
who can say how many times  
we were born among humans just from that gift.

“When we were born among gods, we had great powers,  
and it was the same when we were born among humans,  
I was even the chief queen, the gem of a woman,  
for a king who was a lord of the whole world.

“That gift was the root cause for my sense of peace  
in the teaching of the Buddha,  
that first encounter with that previous Buddha  
led to nibbana for me who delighted in his dhamma.

“Those who trust the teaching  
of the one who has perfect wisdom  
and do what he teaches,  
they become disgusted with existence,  
and turning away from it,  
they set themselves free.”