

Voices of freedom: friendship, trust and liberation
in the poems of early Buddhist nuns
— Buddhism in the Twenty-first Century —

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IF one were to ask any reasonably well educated person the date of the earliest anthology of female spiritual poems in the world, I doubt if many would cite those of the early Buddhist tradition. The poems of the *Therīgāthā*, however, deserve to be recognised as important pieces of world literature, and as evidence that female poetic composition, slightly later than Sappho, but still two to three centuries before the birth of Christ, was, in this tradition, rich, eloquent and highly personal and differentiated.¹ The 521 *gāthā*, sometimes translated as ‘songs’, companions to the 1276 verses of the monks, are a mix of autobiographical, dialogue-based, narrative, prescriptive and sometimes simply appreciative utterances concerning awakening: how it was found, perceived and described by some of the Buddha’s earliest practitioners. While this paper will address one or two issues connected to authorship, which is necessarily debated elsewhere for complex reasons, this will only be as an adjunct to a discussion about the literary preoccupations of what appears to be the earliest multi-authored collection of female poetry, of highly heterogenous texts, all unified by the simple Pali *gāthā* form used in the parallel collection, the poems of the monks.² I would like to demonstrate, through just a few examples, that the stamp of a female *saṅgha*, with its own emergent identity, informs these verses, and that the sometimes lyrical, though more often terse and even epigrammatic, outpourings on the achievement of awakening, provide us with a glimpse into a sense of how a female community, dedicated to practice and teaching, worked in practice and coped with the apparent dangers and risks of their chosen way of life.

As Charles Hallisey points out (Hallisey 2015: viii), perhaps the main

interest of these poems lies in their ‘news’ as poetry: they really feel as if they were composed today. That they also show us so much about the way women worked as a community, and found liberation in the Buddha’s dispensation, is a polyphonous pleasure at the heart of a collection that deserves to be more widely recognised. As we shall see, key elements to this success are the immediacy and personal engagement of the language, a sense of friendship and trust in the teaching and teachers, and the craft with which the basic form of Pāli formal verse is linked to the expression of feeling and relief the nuns experience in their new found life and in awakening itself. The overriding feature of the poems, however, is the way they suggest a sense of belonging: that the nuns belong where they are, and that the order offers them the security and peace of mind to live amongst one another, and in the world, in friendship, without fear of harm. For those unfamiliar with the subject matter, the poems are eloquently and sensitively explored in Hallisey’s introduction, essential reading for anyone interested in this field, to be read alongside K.R. Norman’s comprehensive philological study, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*. I am also taking the canonical, rather than the commentarial, supposition that the poems are, as the titles suggest, authored by the nuns themselves, with the possible exception of verses assigned in an early rubric to others (Muttā, Thī 2 and Nandā, Thī 19–20), an anomalous feature that reinforces our taking the authorship of the others as genuinely that of the early nuns.³

The first poem

A sense of belonging: a personal name, the second person, and happiness

Let us start with the first text in this collection. As I have argued elsewhere, the first text in Pāli canonical literature is crucial in establishing the tone, pace and feeling quality of the collection as a whole, and this seems the case here too, in ways that are unusual and mark out some features of the collection that inform the particular nature of the nuns’ verses.⁴

Sleep happily, little therī, clad in the garment which you have made;
for your desire is stilled, like dried-up vegetables in a pot.

(Norman 2007 II:1)

1. *Sukhaṃ supāhi, therīke katvā coḷena pārutā*
Upasanto hi te rāgo sukkaḍākaṃ va kumbhiyaṃ

It is short, but in one verse reveals a great deal about a collection compiled in the Ṛg Vedic manner of ‘ones’, ‘twos’, ‘threes’ and so on. It is in the standard *śloka* form, found in many monks’ poems too, so is clearly placed and validated within the same genre and type of inspired utterance as theirs. While the style and metres used by the nuns suggest more a consonance with, rather than a difference from, the monks’ verses of the companion volume, the fact that the *therī* is personally addressed, a feature of several of the poems of the nuns, where nuns are often named in the second person. It is not, however, a characteristic of those of the monks, and lends immediately a personal and human touch to the whole collection. Her cloth is ‘made’ by herself (*katvā coḷena pārutā*), as all monks’ and nuns’ robes were then; this suggests that her enterprise in freeing herself from defilements was a crafted undertaking, undertaken by the authoress herself, a small but important detail at a time when female liberation was not thought possible by some. A look at the Pāli also brings out some more features: that ‘dried up’ in ‘*sukkha*’ is a word play with *sukham*, happy/happily, in the first word, so communicating liberation as a very positive process, produced by the ‘cooking’, literally here, the ‘stilling’ or ‘made peaceful’ (*upasanto*), with which the meditative process is described.

But it is the fact that the first word in the whole anthology should indeed be ‘happy/happily’ which seems so crucial to the success of the poem as setting the tone of the nuns’ verses. The word *sukha*, specifically associated in the *Abhidhamma* with the *khandha* of feeling (DhS 984), has associations with comfort in Sanskrit and Pāli, and ease; it is applied at all stages of the Buddhist path, from the happiness of keeping *śīla* and practising generosity, to the *jhāna* factors, where it predominates in the third *jhāna* (fourth in the *Abhidhamma* system), the state of living in loving-kindness, and the heaven realms (A I 96; A II 69; D I 70–76; A V 342; It 67).

It is frequently applied also to the monastic life (eg. Dh 379). So blessings at each stage of the nuns’ life are suggested and evoked by one simple word. This was a time when itinerant nuns would clearly have been a novelty, though Jainism does appear to have introduced a nuns’ order that predates the Buddhist; the *Vinaya* records the dangers of attacks, difficulties and problems for women travelling and sleeping out on their own (eg. Vin IV 228, 229, 316; Sanghādisesa rule no. 3). An appeal to a sense that this is a happy and indeed a safe life within the order would have seemed essential. Indeed the verb which *sukham* qualifies is a surprising one. A follower of the Buddha, the awakened one, would, one assumes, be associated with ‘waking up’ rather than

‘sleeping’. The surprise of the ‘sleep happily’, as an opener to the collection, with its almost *Upaniṣadic* emphasis on the night rather than the day as significant (BU 4.3.8ff; Olivelle 1996: 59–63), gives however, for a collection of female poems, a powerful and economic means of communicating a sense of the real safety of the order of the nuns: it is a way of life where, for women, even sleep itself, when she is at her most exposed, is without fear.

A comparison with the magnificent first poem of the monks’ verses, by Subhūti, emphasises the complementarity of tone that characterises the two collections:

My hut is roofed, pleasant (*sukhā*), draught-free; rain, sky[-deva], as you please;
my mind is well concentrated, released; I remain zealous; rain, sky [-deva].

(Norman 2007: I 1)

1. *Channā me kuṭikā sukhā nivātā, vassa deva yathāsukhaṃ
cittaṃ me susamāhitaṃ vimuttaṃ ātāpī viharāmi, vassa devā’ti.*

Here too, being happy is a feature, though the word is less emphatically placed. But the *śloka*, unusually in *opacchandāsaka* metre, is in mixed first person and the imperative: the rain god is commanded to do just as he pleases too (*yathāsukhaṃ*). The tone is triumphant, with the monk a heroic figure, defiant in the face of rain and any adversities life may bring him; his hut is his own and the rain deva is addressed with courage: he too can be as happy as he likes! So this verse, of comparable style, and even some of the same language, is nicely quite different in tone from the ‘crafting’ and peaceful ‘cooking’ associated with the freedom of the nun.

Although the complex subject of authorship is not the subject of this paper, of particular interest in the evocation of feeling in the nuns’ verses is the frequent use not only of the first person, more prevalent in these poems than in the *Theragāthā*, but also of the second person, used frequently in Thī by means of a vocative address to the titular name of the poem. This usage is rarely found in the Th and is peculiar to this collection (Hallisey xl and von Hinüber 1996: 52).⁵ There are many such differences of emphasis in the collections that cannot be considered here; for instance, the use of a formal ‘should’ in the third person, found often in the monks’ verses, is not found at all in the nuns’.⁶ Should we take this as evidence that the nuns did not compose these first poems

themselves? The self-addressed second person should be seen, however, as a deliberate poetic style. All the ‘voices’ used in both the collections, which include a plural first person, a single first person, a second person imperative to an imagined hearer, the third person and the ‘should’ form used as an enjoiner, have literary counterparts throughout the history of world poetry. So in this collection, the second-person self-address, a feature of so many verses (eg. Thī 1–10, 16, 19, 35), acts as a crucial element in deepening the sense of warm personal engagement and intimacy found in several of these first, single verses, setting the tone of the individual and idiosyncratic paths these women follow. We simply do not have comparables from that time to the monks’ and nuns’ poems, to find out if this was unusual then, a lack that is itself perhaps a measure of some innovatory style in the poems.

Counterparts to this style, however, in world literary forms suggest that in these poems too it is employed with the clear poetic intent that characterise its usage elsewhere. James H. Hirsh (2003) and Ulrich Busse (2002) demonstrate that the device of address in the second person to oneself is embedded in European early modern lyric poetry and theatrical speech-making, where the speaker is alone, and where feeling is strong. In Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece* (eg. ll 191–204), an extended soliloquy by the victim on her plight, the distress of Lucrece’s threnody is voiced by her use of the first person for her public, ‘speaking self’ and the second for her more personal, innermost thoughts (Hirsh 190–193).

While I am not aware of any research on this subject in Indic literatures, the usage is of course also frequent in some of Shakespeare’s most famous soliloquies, by male and female characters, where the more intimate form ‘thou’ and ‘thee’ acts also as an emotional intensifier, to a lone character, at a time of great feeling: ‘Awake thou coward majesty! Thou sleepest!’ (Richard II, Act III, 2: 83–4). As Hirsh points out, citing further examples (Henry VI, Part 3, III 1:13–17, Richard III Act V, 3:13–17), highly affective connotations are associated in each case with the device. The use of a vocative self-address is also frequent in classical Greek and Latin literature (Blundell 1980: 65–82), again often associated with an ‘emotive force’ that strengthens the immediacy and power of the sentiments expressed (Blundell 1980: 74). Simple experience can perhaps be cited here as validation of the use of the self-addressed second person and vocative, as something some of us employ at times of heightened feeling, in both negative and positive senses; many people would say on completing something tricky: ‘Well done x, you’ve done it!’ It is a measure of the literary craft of this collection, which so clearly

captures the natural voice of the women involved within the stable conventions of Pāli formal verse-making, that the profundity of the exalted state is communicated by such a sense of the ‘now-ness’ of great joy and feeling of release the women describe. All of the first verses of this collection, addressed to single named females, do have a sense of the idiosyncratic, the personal, and the particular, so crucial in establishing the immediacy of the individual and her own struggle within the collection.

Friendship and Trust

The next poem I would like to explore is a simple one, but demonstrates a great deal about the way the female community must have helped and supported one another at that time. The woman Candā, in measured *ślokas*, tells in the first person the experiences of a woman who, like others in the collection, was forced into penury by the death of her husband (Thī 122–6).

Formerly I fared ill, a widow, without children. Without friends and relations I did not obtain food or clothing.

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

But then I saw a bhikkhunī who had obtained food and drink, and approaching her I said, “Send me forth into the houseless state.”

And Paṭācārā, in pity, sent me forth; then she exhorted me and urged me towards the highest goal.

I heard her utterance and took her advice. The noble lady’s exhortation was not in vain; I have the triple knowledge; I am without āsavas [corruptions].

(Norman 2007: 15–16)

122. *Duggatāhaṃ pure āsiṃ vidhavā ca aputtikā
Vinā mittehi nātīhi bhattacoḷassa nādhigaṃ.*
123. *Pattaṃ daṇḍaṅ ca gaṇhītvā bhikkhamānā kulā kulaṃ
Sītuṅhena ca ḍayhantā satta vassāni cāri ’haṃ*
124. *Bhikkhuniṃ puna disvāna annapānassa lābhini_
Upasaṅkamma avocaṃ pabbajīṃ anagāriyaṃ.*
125. *Sā ca maṃ anukampāya pabbājesi Paṭācārā
Tato maṃ ovaditvāna paramatthe niyojayi.*
126. *Tassāhaṃ vacanaṃ sutvā akāsiṃ anusāsaniṃ
Amogho ayyāya ovādo tevijjā ’mhi anāsavā ti.*

It does not take much imagination to sense that Candā is probably motivated largely by hunger, loneliness and weariness with exposure to the elements in her taking of the monastic vows. She sees a nun receiving food, when perhaps she has none. Drawn by the fact that the woman is sympathetic, and acts 'in pity' (*anukampāya*), a word associated with compassion for the sufferings of others, she asks Paṭācārā, a nun who has also known grief and the loss of children, to ordain her (Thī 112–116); she also gives her teaching. And now, awakened, the nun simply says that she is now free of the corruptions; all she has done is taken the kindly nun's advice, and has found the 'the triple knowledge' (*tevijjā*), the Buddhist version of the three knowledges of the Brahmins: the ability to recollect one's past lives, the ability to discern where and for what reason other beings are reborn in different states, and the knowledge of the corruptions. Here she is openly stating a freedom that the Brahmins thought impossible for women, deemed incapable of understanding their three knowledges (Hallisey 2015: xxx; Wijayaratna 2010: 140–1; Gombrich 2006: 62–64). The word to describe the teacher's compassion is elsewhere used more commonly for the Buddha (Thī 148, 155, Yamazaki and Ousaka 1998: 4). Here it is another woman who befriends and helps the lady: this closeness and description of simple friendliness as having such crucial, life-changing importance is central to the *Therīgāthā*.

Indeed a sense of interaction, friendship and dialogue suffuses the verses of the nuns. Many of the nuns' verses address, involve dialogue with, or reference to, other people; an implied listener, perhaps a close family member is also often suggested. These presences, whom we feel behind the verses and the speakers, may be the prompt for their going forth, their encourager when they have joined the order, or even a challenger and adversary. So this is sometimes a negative presence, when Subhā, for instance, recounts her story of repelling a seducer (369–402) or Isidāsī recounts a sad history of an unhappy marriage (Thī 402–450). More commonly when the nuns speak to or about others, it is those to whom they are grateful, or feel familial ties, and from whom they have had some help, as Vaddhā, for instance, has received from her kindly mother, who teaches her and encourages her in her going forth (Thī 204–212). Another poem, associated with an unknown nun, describes the nun going to another, who 'inspired trust' or was 'fit to be trusted by me' (*saddhāyikā*: Thī 69; Norman 2007 II: 130); the nun then teaches her so that she finds liberation.

Ambapālī

Smile-producing wisdom and liberation

Finally, I would like to deal with the way liberation is presented in the poems. There are some distinctive features of the nuns' verses in this regard as opposed to those of the monks: that the nuns display less interest in natural imagery, for instance and that the nuns choose to see impermanence and decay in their own, rather than in another's body (Blackstone 2013: 83–9; Murcott 1991). Where monks often find awakening from viewing corpses of others, the nuns tend to do so by viewing the very imperfect state of their own. So the poem I would like to focus on is one that also does this, but in a highly creative way. It is Ambapālī's famous lines on her own liberation (Thī 252–270), in the first person, composed by an author who, perhaps as a result of her background as a courtesan, appears to have mastered the conventions both of poetic expression and of liberation, and found an extraordinarily ingenious and powerful means of expressing this in a way that perhaps only a woman practitioner could achieve. Her chosen metre is *rathodhatā*, a style that later becomes associated with courtly poetry, and, given her theme and her profession, perhaps, as Hallisey notes, had this link too (Hallisey 2015: xvi). Working her way teasingly down her own body, from her once beautiful hair to her toes, she contrasts its great lustrous beauty in the past with its present decided lack of appeal:

My hair was black, like the colour of bees, with curly ends;
because of old age it is like bark fibres of hemp; not false is the utterance of the speaker of truth.

Covered with flowers my head was fragrant
like a perfumed box: now because of old age it smells like dog's fur.
not false is the utterance of the speaker of truth.

(Norman 2007: II 32)

252. *Kālakā bhamaravaṇṇasādisā vellitaggā mama muddhajā ahuṃ
Te jarāya sāṇavākasadisā saccavādivacanaṃ anaññathā.*

253. *Vāsītō va suribhikaraṇḍako pupphapūraṃ mama uttamaṅgabhu
Taṃ jarāya sasalomagandhikaṃ saccavādivacanaṃ anaññathā.*

Working playfully through her eyebrows, eyes, her teeth, her breast, hands, body, thighs and calves in this way, she ends up at her feet, wrinkled and full of calluses where once they were soft like cotton (Thī 269).

Finally, she sums it up:

Such was this body; now it is decrepit, the abode of many pains; an old house, with its plaster fallen off; not false is the utterance of the speaker of truth.

(Norman 2007: II 33)

270. *ediso ahu ayam samussayo jajjaro bahudukkhānaṃ ālayo
so 'palepapatito jarāgharo saccavādivacanaṃ anaññathā.*

As Hallisey notes, it is a highly skilled artistic achievement (Hallisey 2015: xiv–xix). I cannot add much to Hallisey’s analysis in his introduction, but there seem to me to be two points that could usefully be made that show us its poetic craft. The first is a sense of the middle way, arising from the moving point of equipoise between the description of the beauties of the earlier state, and the appalling condition of the present one. Neither is rejected; both have validity in their own worlds. It is the stance that can view the paradox of both the young and the old with equanimity that is the result. Closely connected to this—a point which I am not aware others have noted about any poems in this collection—is that, said in the right circumstances, it is just very funny. I found this out by accident when reading it to an adult education class composed mostly of often glamorous elderly women, with little background knowledge of Buddhism. To my shock, as I was trying to be serious, they all started smiling or laughing in recognition. As they said afterwards, it was just like the conversations one would have when changing at a spa or swimming pool with friends. Clearly one cannot with confidence attribute humour to an ancient poem, but it did make me think. The poem works so well precisely because its sense of the middle way derives from that knife edge between beauty and ugliness, attraction and disgust: it captures, in highly skilled verse-making, not only the conventions of courtly eulogy, but also the rhythms and stresses of women’s laughing chat amongst themselves, at any time. That it is so poised and controlled in its expression of the finely tuned balance between desire and repulsion seems to me an extraordinary achievement, and one which makes this, and other poems in the collection, in different ways, so full of life now.

This cannot be a full study of the relationship between these poems and those of the nuns, but it is worthy of note that poems in the *Theragāthā* do not explore poverty, the loss of one’s looks or the way one’s own body deteriorates, in quite this way, nor is the sense of interaction, friendship and trust so evident between members of the order. The poems of the monks do contain far more in the way of observation of the natural world and doctrinal explanation, where the nuns tend to-

wards the autobiographical and the personal. This seems to me to arise from a kind of complementarity: as I hope to have shown, we can genuinely ‘hear’ these early women speaking, and can feel their sense of having found their place, and their happiness, in the order of nuns. I also have not examined the issue of authorship of the poems, which has been contested by some. But it seems important to say that while there are certainly literary productions composed by men that give voice to a female sensibility that will accord with all women—the characters of Noh drama for instance, or those in Shakespeare’s plays spring to mind—it is a stretch of our credulity to think that men would have felt it necessary to compose them, however warmly our opinion of early monks may be fostered by such a supposition. Certainly women would not have had a Vedic education, but nor would the low-caste barber Upāli, for instance, whose verses in the *Majjhimanikāya* are never challenged on those grounds (M I 385–7). In China and Japan, it appears that in some, if by no means all, historical periods the education and community provided by the monastic orders prompted literacy and hence verse-writing in probably otherwise illiterate nuns (Gross 2001; Kaminishi 2006: 117ff; Meeks 2010: 250 ff; Schuster 1985: 98). In an early Indian, non-literate culture, where oral transmission then, as now, probably featured as central to female culture, and where contact with chant, careful transmission of text and recitation would have been essential in monastic life in the centuries immediately after the Buddha’s death, the notion that nuns could have composed their own verses, just as low-caste men in the *Theragāthā* would have composed theirs, seems reasonable to me. More research is needed on this subject; but as it is, whatever the authorship of these poems, they provide moving, expressive and, occasionally, idiosyncratic evidence of female struggle and fulfilment.

At the beginning of this paper I cited the first word ‘happy’ as the key to the collection as a whole, and in communicating a sense that the nuns, as one of the four assemblies said to be followers of all Buddhas, belonged where they were and doing what they were doing. It is also frequently used to describe awakening and the eradication of suffering (A III 354–5; Thī 479), the ‘happy ground’ found throughout the path and at its attainment (*sukhabhūmiyaṃ*: DhS 984). The Buddha could not offer protection from all the risks of the monastic life for nuns, though the *Vinaya* rules suggest he offered many safeguards to their security and freedom, but he could offer his happy path and this, his final goal. It is the stamp of this, and that the nuns have found a taste of all three elements of the Triple Gem, that the collection as a whole leaves us. It is, apparently, important to feel an indefinable sense that one belongs to

give one the confidence to work for awakening: the Buddha was challenged by Māra on this very point on the night of the enlightenment, as his last great attack. When Māra says he has no right to sit in that place and strive for the goal, Gotama calls the earth to witness to prove that that indeed is where he should be sitting, doing what he is (Ja I 77–9). It is his last routing of his great opponent before the awakening. A sense that despite all opposition, there is a welcome and a sense of belonging, so musically and beautifully expressed in these poems, is also what the collection has to offer for the community-building and re-establishment of an accepted order of nuns. This must be surely be a necessity for all Buddhist schools in the twenty-first century if they are to remain truly Buddhist.

Abbreviations (Pali Text Society texts)

A = *Aṅguttaranikāya*

D = *Dīghanikāya*

Dh = *Dhammapada*

DhS = *Dhammasaṅgani*

It = *Itivuttaka*

Ja = *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*

M = *Majjhimanikāya*

Th = *Theragāthā*

Thī = *Therīgāthā*

Vin = *Vinaya*

Notes

¹ The verses are attributed by K.R.Norman to the period from the mid-sixth to the mid-second century BCE. It may be surprising to some that the range includes the pre-Buddhist period; some of the verses are suggested to be of earlier date originally. The authors, of course, may have still used them. Professor Jon Stallworthy of Oxford University, once noted the frequency with which he would write poems he thought were original, only to find that someone else had written almost identical lines that he had read and forgotten (in ‘Memory, Mother of the Muses’, 28th October, 2013, President’s Seminar, Wolfson College, Oxford).

² See, for instance, Norman 2007 II: xix–xxxi; von Hinüber 2008, Hallisey 2015: xx–xiv.

³ This is particularly interesting in the light of the fact that Muttā’s poem is amongst ten addressed in the second person, suggesting that the others are indeed self-authored. Norman notes that there do seem to be some later levels of the text (Norman 2007 II: 34–41).

⁴ See Shaw 2004.

⁵ Dhammapāla’s commentary, adopting a more literal reading, attributes most such verses to the Buddha, addressing, in these cases, each woman concerned.

⁶ See, for instance, Th 794–817, where the third person is used to describe the doctrine and practice of awakening in general terms, a tone rarely found in Thī.

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