

# Verses of the Senior Nuns

Bhikkhu Sujato



# VERSES OF THE SENIOR NUNS

A friendly translation of the Therīgāthā



*translated and introduced by*

BHIKKHU SUJATO

Thig

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Sleep softly, little nun,  
wrapped in the cloth you sewed yourself;  
for your desire has been quelled,  
like vegetables boiled dry in a pot.

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VERSE FOR AN UNNAMED NUN

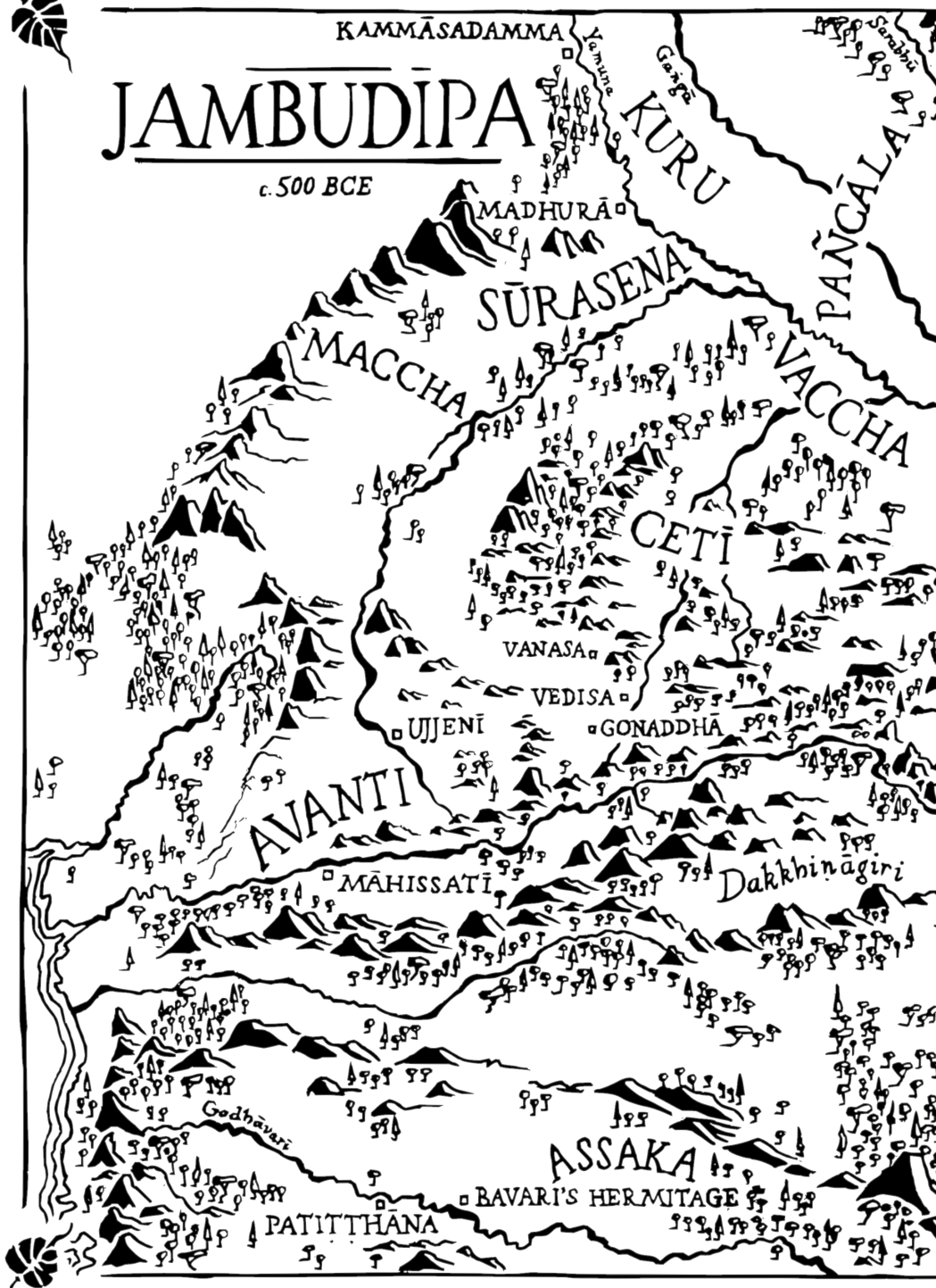
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KAMMĀSADAMMA

# JAMBUDĪPA

c. 500 BCE









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# Preface to the Therīgāthā

While writing the introduction for this book, I found myself reflecting on my approach to the analysis of texts. I find myself increasingly put off by heavily theoretical approaches, or by analyses that invent a scheme of categorization into which the texts must fall. When teaching the Suttas, my approach is pretty much the same as it is when reading them: open the book and start reading. Listen to what it is actually saying.

The key is empathy and critical discernment. I never assume that I am in a position of moral authority from which to judge people of another time and place. I'm here to learn, not to condemn. And the further people are away from me, the more I have to learn from them.

To me, a genuine inquiry begins with the willingness to question my values and assumptions. But over the years, I have picked up one or two things that might be useful for others. So if, as a writer and a teacher, I can clarify some facts, smooth the path, and set an example of an honest inquiry, I'll be happy.

When teaching Suttas, I've noticed two biases that obscure vision. For some folks, the process of reading is an entirely passive venture, in which their only concern is to find the single, correct, and authoritative meaning. For others, their subjective feelings or theories about the text are paramount, and they feel good when they succeed in squeezing an ancient sacred text into their preconceptions.

Both approaches are lazy and far from wisdom. Understanding arises when you see the hidden connections between distant things. It's not about passing a test or proving your ideological purity. It's about that moment when you *see*. You can't control it or predict it.

Getting your facts straight is important. It takes discipline and years of hard work to learn how to sift out one's views and to listen with clarity and empathy. It's crucial to do the work to ground opinions on the facts, for uninformed opinions are worth less than nothing.

But this is just the beginning. The meaning of those facts is something else entirely. And in a sacred text, meaning is never exhausted. May it deepen and grow with you on your journey.

# Verses of the Senior Nuns: a reflective life

*Bhikkhu Sujato, 2022*

The Therīgāthā or “Verses of the Senior Nuns” is the ninth book in the Khuddhaka Nikāya of the Pali Canon or Tipiṭaka. It is a collection of 522 verses associated with seventy-three senior nuns, most of whom were alive in the Buddha’s time.

These verses celebrate the bliss of freedom and the life of meditation, full of proud and joyous proclamations of their spiritual attainments and their gratitude to other nuns as guides and teachers. The verses express the Dhamma through images that are immediate and personal. They speak of the fading of the hair’s luster rather than of impermanence; of the trembling of failing limbs rather than of old age; of “searing and sizzling” greed and hate rather than abandoning them.

The Therīgāthā is one of the oldest spiritual texts that record primarily women’s voices. It stems from the same general period as the Hebraic Books of Ruth and Esther, and like those books, it is a natural touchstone for those who wish to reflect on women’s roles in ancient religion.

It is a pair with the Theragāthā, the “Verses of the Senior Monks”. Together these collections constitute one of the oldest and largest records of the voices of contemplatives.

The verses mostly stem from the time of the Buddha or a little later. Some have tried to argue that these collections were generally



somewhat late. But it should be noted that in the Introduction to his 1971 translation, K.R. Norman, with his unparalleled historical and linguistic expertise, dismissed most of the arguments for lateness. He accepted that most of the nuns were alive during or soon after the Buddha's time, and identified archaic Magadhī features in some verses. He concluded that the text was probably composed over a three-hundred-year period from the late 6th century to the late 3rd century.

However, this appears to rely on the so-called "long chronology" of the Buddha's life, which puts his death around 480 BCE. Under the "median chronology" which is accepted by many scholars currently, the Buddha's death was closer to 400 BCE. Adjusting for this, and noting that Norman rejects the argument that any of the texts must be post-Ashokan, we should probably round the period of composition closer to two centuries, from the mid-5th century to the mid-3rd century. Most of the verses stem from the early period, with only a few, readily identifiable, texts being added in the later stages.

In my introduction to the *Theragāthā*, I gave a general background. Most of those remarks apply equally here, so in this essay, I will focus on those things that are specific to the *Therīgāthā* and refer you to the *Theragāthā* for the basics.

## The Complex Question of Authorship

It's unfortunate that, even within the limited scope of the *Therīgāthā*, one of the shorter verse collections in the canon, many of the verses are not, in fact, by the nuns themselves. It's difficult to count the number exactly, as attribution is not always clear, but roughly 100 of the 524 verses are not actually by the *bhikkhunīs*. Rather, they were spoken to them by the Buddha or another interlocutor, or about them by a third party or narrator. In a few cases (noted below) the commentary says verses were added by the redactors at the Council.

In other cases, even where the bhikkhunīs are speaking, the verses echo or paraphrase teachings from elsewhere in the canon. There is also some confusion about to whom certain verses belong. Some of the nuns share the same name; in other cases the name is unknown. Certain verses are sometimes said to be spoken by certain bhikkhunīs—in the Therīgāthā, the Bhikkhunī Saṃyutta, the Apadāna, or the commentary—yet they do not appear under those names in the Therīgāthā itself.

Some of the bhikkhunīs appear both in the Therīgāthā and the Bhikkhunī Saṃyutta (SN 5). The selected verses there are framed as a series of encounters between ten of the nuns and Māra in the Dark Forest near Sāvattihī. The verses are mostly similar to the corresponding portions of the Therīgāthā. But some of them appear in a slightly different form, while in other cases, especially the “Cālā” sisters (Cālā, Upacālā, and Sīsūpacālā), the verses are assigned to different nuns.

There was no copyright in the Buddha’s day, and everyone, including the Buddha, freely repeated the sayings of others. The nuns were no different. What are we to draw from this? On the one hand, we would love to hear more about the lives and personal experiences of the nuns, making the few cases where they do speak of these things even more precious. On the other hand, it shows that for the nuns, what mattered was the Dhamma, not their own lives. If we over-personalize and over-dramatize their lives, making that the centerpiece, we are not listening to what they are trying to tell us.

In most cases, we know little about the nuns apart from the verses themselves. In some cases, the nuns are known from elsewhere in the Suttas or Vinaya, and in addition, some information, albeit legendary, is added by the commentary. All this must be handled with care.

## The Therīgāthā as a Women's Text

The Therīgāthā is feminist in the sense of foregrounding women's voices and experiences, and on occasion pointing to the specific ways that the suffering of women is due to gendered discrimination. The overall tenor of the Therīgāthā is vibrant, proud, and celebratory. At the same time, though, these are the voices of women in a very different time and place whose words do not exist to serve our agendas. There's nothing feminist about eliding, paraphrasing, or interpreting away the voices of women because they're not saying what we want them to say.

The Therīgāthā remains our primary source of information about ancient nuns, along with the Vinaya, the code of monastic discipline. The Therīgāthā presents women generally in a positive light and in their own voices, whereas the Vinaya is by its nature concerned with bad behavior. In addition, the Vinaya has been passed down through the monks' community and bears the signs of their editorial hand, but this is not the case in the Therīgāthā.

Let's look at an example of how the monks' editorial hand reveals itself in the Vinaya. The Vinaya retains a terminology around women's ordination that is quite distinct from that of the monks. Where the monks call their preceptor an *upajjhāya*, the nuns have *pavattinī*. Where the monks' student is a *saddhivihārī*, for the nuns it is *sahajivinī*. And while the monks call ordination *upasampadā*, the nuns call it *vuṭṭhāpana*.

How are these terms related? To understand this we need to know that the Vinaya texts are historically layered. The most clear-cut example of this is the distinction between the monastic rules (*pātimokkha*) and the analysis of those rules (*vibhaṅga*), which evolved after the rules were laid down. This was established by scholars in the 19th century, and the evidence that has come to light since then—such as comparative studies of different Vinayas—has confirmed the validity of the original insight. It is based on multiple independent grounds and is one of the firmest and most widely accepted consensus opinions in Buddhist studies.

Now, what we find when we look at these different layers is that in the portions that are earlier, such as the list of rules (*pātimokkha*), the nuns' special terms are used. In the portions we know are later, such as the analysis of the rules (*vibhaṅga*), the nuns' special terms are explained as being equivalent to the monks' terms. In other words, the monk editors explained the unfamiliar bhikkhunī vocabulary in terms that they understood. What they didn't do, however, was go back and change the *pātimokkha* itself, even though it would have been a simple and perhaps justifiable standardization. In some schools, this may have happened, but in the Pali, it didn't: the Theravāda school was particularly scrupulous about such things.

It is the term for ordination that is most significant here. What matters is not the meaning of the word, but its contextual usage. When the nuns' word *vuṭṭhāpana* is used, only nuns are mentioned as performing ordination. When the monks' word *upasampadā* is used, nuns' ordination must be performed by both nuns and monks. In other words, a procedure that was originally done by nuns for themselves was usurped by the monks, who made themselves the gatekeepers for the ordination of nuns, and hence controlled who can be a nun and who cannot. Since ordination is the only way that a celibate community can "reproduce", this is a vital issue of reproductive rights for the nuns' community.

So when the monks made changes to the bhikkhunī Vinaya texts, they left traces. We have reasonably firm grounds for identifying such changes, and when we do, they pertain to the later layers of the text. And we have no similar grounds for saying that the editorial hand of the monks is visible in the Therīgāthā; for example, there is no mention of monks ordaining nuns. For this reason, if we want to understand the life of the bhikkhunīs, the Therīgāthā must be our primary source, not the Vinaya.

The Therīgāthā offers a clear and inspiring call to the spiritual life, one that belongs firmly to women. In modern times, it has become a key text in developing feminist perspectives on early Buddhism

as history, and on modern Buddhism as potential. These voices have foregrounded the Therīgāthā in new ways, opening a new chapter in Buddhism, one that better represents the full spectrum of Buddhist practitioners both in ancient times and the present. Yet academic feminist studies are hampered by a lack of familiarity with the source material, which leaves them riddled with factual errors and mistaken assumptions. On such shaky ground, they read theory into the text, all too often eliding the voices of the women instead of hearing them. These theory-laden readings become rapidly outdated as the preoccupations of gender studies shift, with the only constant factor being that the lives, voices, and beliefs of the ancient bhikkhunīs are subject to judgment and scrutiny by modern theorists, while modern theory is never subject to scrutiny in light of the words of the ancient bhikkhunīs.

One systematic problem that dogs studies of gender in the Therīgāthā is credulous reliance on the commentary by Dhammapāla. The commentary stems from a millennium later, in a different country thousands of kilometers away. Yet it is too often treated as a reliable record of information about the nuns' lives. It isn't. Unless a story has independent corroboration in other sources—and few of them do—the stories depicted in the commentary should be regarded only as the stories told about the bhikkhunīs in the Theravāda community. They tell us not about the bhikkhunīs, but about how the commentators, who of course were male, responded to the lives and teachings of the ancient nuns of legend.

The very first verse of the Therīgāthā illustrates this well (Thig 1.1. A similar verse at Thig 1.16 is spoken to an elder nun.) The text attributes it only to a certain unnamed nun, identifying neither the speaker nor the nun spoken to.

Sleep softly, little nun,  
 wrapped in the cloth you sewed yourself;  
 for your desire has been quelled,  
 like vegetables boiled dry in a pot.

The words record a tender and personal moment between two women with a rare warmth and intimacy. The kitchen metaphor speaks to a shared experience, an assumed closeness. The speaker is a woman who is drawing from her life and who does not need a man's authority to express words of gentle comfort. Her friend is lying down to sleep; perhaps the sleepy nun is unwell, or perhaps she is weary after a long journey or hard work. The verse has a tenderness that belies the confidence of what she is saying. She addresses the sleepy nun with the unique diminutive *therike* ("little nun"), but she employs this familiar form to affirm her friend's enlightenment. It is at once bold and quiet, understated and momentous.

We know so little about these women that even to know that her name was unknown is a significant detail. But the commentary, relentlessly backfilling the spaces in the text, says she was actually *named* Therikā even before ordaining, due to her sturdy body (the root can carry the sense of either seniority or solidity). The commentary is not consistent on this point, as it sometimes also refers to her as an unnamed nun. This indicates that there were multiple commentarial sources whose viewpoints are not fully resolved in Dhammapāla's edition.

The commentary goes on to identify her with the so-called "Maṇḍapadāyikā" of the Therīpadāna (Thi Ap 3). But the name Maṇḍapadāyikā is artificial: it just means "giver of a pavilion". Late texts like the Apadānas often invent names to frame a pious story of making merit. Since there never was anyone called Maṇḍapadāyikā, the name is conveniently available for identification with our unknown nun of the Therīgāthā. Once that is done, the commentary can trace her spiritual path to an act of merit in a far distant age of a past Buddha: a woman's journey must begin with an act of service to a man.

The commentary then tells us that in this, her final life, she was married to a husband who would not agree to her desire to go forth, until a conflagration in the kitchen caused her to deepen

her insight into Dhamma and reject sensual desires. After this, seeing that normal home life was now impossible, her husband allowed her to go forth. She cannot decide for herself but must rely on a man's choice. Now, of course, there is a long history of women being subject to the choices of their husbands. But there is an equally long history of men compiling texts that frame women's compliance as a sacred duty. The verse itself says nothing of a husband, so the commentary must reframe her story to fit the moralizing expectations of the male commentators.

Remember, this is the first text in the *Therīgāthā*. The commentary is not just explaining this verse: it is setting expectations for the whole collection and by implication, the whole *bhikkhuni* order. The permission of the husband is one of the criteria for women's ordination that was added to the Vinaya at some point, just as the requirement that ordination is certified by monks was added. The commentator is deliberately importing this despite its irrelevance to the text, making us read the *Therīgāthā* through the lens of the Vinaya, reminding students that compliance with male authority is required before a woman may take ordination and seek freedom. It has to do this because nowhere in the *Therīgāthā* is there anything about getting permission from a husband.

Indeed, husbands make an appearance in only a few poems: as a loved one tragically lost (Thig 10.1), as a lazy ingrate (Thig 15.1), or as an object of disgust (Thig 1.11, Thig 2.3). Sometimes a husband is not mentioned even when we might expect it, as in the verses of the nuns *Saṅghā* (Thig 1.18), *Sakulā* (Thig 5.7), and *Guttā* (Thig 6.7), which speak of leaving behind all that they find dear—home, children, and wealth. Or else take the poem of *Bhaddā Kāpilānī*, where she begins by praising the spectacular attainments of her former husband, *Kassapa*, only to boldly claim to have realized the same attainments (Thig 4.1). She's not speaking of her need to get his permission, but of the fact of her spiritual equality. In other poems, it is the husband who is set on his path by the wife (Thig 13.4).

Returning to the commentarial account of our sleepy nun, it says that after her ordination, she was brought to the Buddha, who spoke the verse. This is highly incongruous: why is the Buddha talking to her about sleeping? There's nothing in the backstory to justify it. The verse sounds like the voice of a friend to a friend, not like the address of a teacher to a student. But for the commentary, the verse belongs to a man.

To sum up: the verse records the fond words of one woman to another. The commentary, ignoring this, claims that she started her path with an offering to a man, invents a husband whose permission she needed to go forth, and attributes her verse to a man.

This doesn't mean that we have nothing to learn from the commentary. But it does mean that the voices of the bhikkhunīs in the Therīgāthā and the voices of the commentators are two quite different things. The commentary should be critically assessed as a male response to the Therīgāthā, not as an essential framing for it.

When the bhikkhunī Vimalā recalled her former days as a sex worker, she positioned herself, not as the victim of a man, but as the agent of her life (Thig 5.2:3). She had a toxic relationship with other women, despising those less beautiful and famous. And she used her beauty to entice men, laughing at them as she manipulated them to get what she wanted.

*akāsim vividham māyam*

I created an intricate illusion

It was through her work, her agency, that she did her job of enticing men. This is no mere sophistic detail, as it speaks to the heart of Buddhism, that we are agents who form our own world, and do not merely passively occupy it. She was the one who choose to create a world of illusion that ensnares, and she was the one who decided to use her wisdom to find the truth that frees.

In the case of the bhikkhunī Khemā, the sensual temptation by a “man” came after she was ordained. The young man—who turned out to be none other than Māra—harassed her, as he did so many



of the nuns, playing the nice guy who wants to take her to see a band (Thig 6.3). Khemā objects, pointing out that her body is “rotting, ailing, and frail” and saying that she is “repelled” by it and has given up sensual desires. Māra the “terminator” (*antakāra*) is summarily vanquished by Khemā’s power. What Khemā sees and Māra does not is that, even while she is still young and beautiful, the body already has the nature of impermanence and decay. She’s not seeing it with the physical eye, but with the eye of insight, while Māra is still trapped in the realm of the senses.

Māra features as the fall guy in several other poems that serve to illustrate the fearlessness of the nuns. They always see through his disguise but rarely does he get taken down as hard as when he tried to gaslight Somā with his sexist putdowns. He tells her that women are too weak to attain the state realized by the sages. Many men have tried this one since, but it doesn’t work when you’re speaking to a woman who has already attained that goal herself.

What difference does womanhood make  
when the mind is serene,  
and knowledge is present  
as you rightly discern the Dhamma.

The theme of leaving behind womanhood also features in the verses of Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, the Buddha’s aunt and stepmother (Thig 6.6). Later generations have seen her as either an icon of womanhood, the founding leader of the female Saṅgha or else as a morality fable for why women should not be ordained. In the Vinaya, she features at the very start of the bhikkhunī community. And she re-appears throughout the Vinaya as an active force of leadership, a crucial mediator between the nuns and the Buddha.

It is a curious thing, then, that not a single one of the bhikkhunīs mentions her at all. They speak with gratitude and love of the women who have taught them the Dhamma, yet Mahāpajāpati somehow never comes up. I believe that this is because she was not, in fact, the founder of the bhikkhunī Saṅgha. I think that

she joined the Saṅgha when she was already elderly; that she was conceited about her status as the Buddha's mother; and that, as was the case for several of the Buddha's relatives, special rules were laid down to ensure she fitted in properly.

And I think she was raised as an icon following the Buddha's death—specifically, around the time of the Second Council—as interest in the Buddha's teachings waned and interest in his life grew. Her story became the lens through which the story of all the bhikkhunīs was seen, as it still is today. Some monks at the time, seeking greater control over the bhikkhunī community, took the rules imposed on her for good reasons, extended them, and applied them to all bhikkhunīs for no good reason. These rules dominate patriarchal discourse about bhikkhunīs to this day, yet once again, no bhikkhunī in the Therīgāthā sees fit to mention them. The bitter pill was wrapped in a human interest story of drama and pathos. And a spectacular story of Mahāpajāpati's death was invented for the Apadāna in the hope that people would be distracted by shiny things.

The entire Therīgāthā, including the verses of Mahāpajāpati herself, stands completely outside this discourse. Mahāpajāpati says nothing of her role in founding the bhikkhunī Saṅgha, nor does she acknowledge any of her supposed bhikkhunī students. She doesn't position herself as a female leader or role model. Instead, her own words send a rather different message.

Previously I was a mother, a son,  
a father, a brother, and a grandmother.  
Failing to grasp the true nature of things,  
I transmigrated without reward.

Since I have seen the Blessed One,  
this bag of bones is my last.  
Transmigration through births is finished,  
now there'll be no more future lives.

She echoes the famous lines of her son immediately after his awakening when he recalled his long “journey without reward”. It is in not the state of womanhood or any other that freedom is to be found, but only when all such limitations have been left behind.

## A Celebration of Freedom

The Therīgāthā is a proud celebration of free women, unembarrassed and unashamed. We have already discussed at some length the first verse of the collection. Here I’d like to highlight some further verses.

The second verse (Thig 1.2) shifts register but keeps the focus on freedom. Here the nun is being addressed and exhorted to find freedom. It’s a simple verse, which doesn’t aim to convey doctrine but to encourage. The rubric (a special tag in prose that follows the verses) identifies the speaker as the Buddha and the nun as a “trainee” (*sikkhamānā*). This was special ordination status established primarily for girls of eighteen, rather than the usual twenty years for bhikkhunī ordination. Older women are sometimes said to have also undertaken this stage (Thig 5.8). This is to be expected. As Buddhist ordination procedures evolved, requirements introduced for a limited purpose rapidly became applied universally. And I think that is the case here. Certainly not all did, for Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā was called to full ordination directly by the Buddha (Thig 5.9).

Only this verse and Thig 2.1 explicitly say that the nun was not the speaker, and in both cases they were trainees. It suggests that the Buddha himself took the time to give heart to these women who were new on the path, to assure them without hesitation or qualification that they could attain the same freedom that he had found.

The nature of the speaker also affects the reading of the third verse (Thig 1.3). Here, a nun called Puṇṇā is addressed with a similarly bold and encouraging call to destroy ignorance. The tagline

that identifies the speaker, however, says that “Puṇṇā” spoke these verses. The commentary, contradicting the rubric, says it was the Buddha speaking. The next series of verses, up to Thig 1.10, are also addressed to the nuns, and according to the commentary, the speaker in all cases was the Buddha. These verses all lack the intimate touch of the opening verse; they rely on standard imagery, and where they are personalized, they merely pun on the women’s names. This is just the kind of thing a teacher would do to personalize teaching if they knew little about them but their name. I do it all the time.

Thig 1.11 brings us the first poem in first person, and a return to the personal voice; a poem, it seems, by a nun for nuns. Rather than the tender comfort of the opening verse, however, here we have what seems to be a winking adaptation of a verse by the monk Sumaṅgala at Thag 1.43. Sumaṅgala celebrates his release from three crooked things—sickles, plows, and hoes. It’s pretty straightforward, which is why I think Muttā adapted her verse from there, rather than the other way around. She similarly celebrates her release from three crooked things, one of them being her husband. But that’s only the start of the innuendo. The other “crooked” things are the mortar and pestle. On the surface, it’s an allusion to kitchen drudgery; but inescapably, it’s also about sex. It’s a mortar and pestle.

The line is constructed knowingly, with sly humor; the reader is led to expect a threefold listing of kitchen appliances, then along comes the husband, suddenly recontextualizing what came before. It’s the classic rule of three employed so often when telling jokes.

An odd problem with the line opens up a further layer of innuendo. When the monk describes three crooked things, the tools he mentions are, in fact, crooked. But a mortar and pestle are not crooked; the PTS edition of Rhys Davids’ translation even includes a photo of a distinctly uncrooked mortar and pestle (plate facing page 14). The commentary seems to be aware of this, and it allows that *khujja* can mean something that *is* crooked or something that

*makes you crooked.* (Commentary to Thag 1.43: *khujjasabhāvehi khujjakērehi vā*; commentary to Thig 1.11: *khujjakaraṇahetutāya tadubhayam “khujja”nti vuttam.*) The commentary explains that the husband was a hunchback and hence *is* crooked, whereas the kitchen tools *make you* crooked due to long hours bent over them. If the dual sense proposed by the commentary is to be accepted—and I believe the context demands it—then it’s problematic to translate it as “three crooked things” per Norman and most other translators, for it leaves us with a line that doesn’t quite make sense.

Now, given that the three items in the line work as a whole, and that they aim to set up a punchline about the husband, it makes more sense to me if all three items are things that *make you* crooked, rather than assuming that the third item, the husband, *is* crooked. It rather sours the verse if she ends up just making a dig at a disabled husband. I think the point of the verse is more sly: the drudgery of the kitchen bends you over no less than the drudgery in the bedroom.

Most of the poems are much more straightforward. Jentā announces that she has developed all the factors of awakening and will not be reborn (Thig 2.2). An Uttamā makes the same claim, and in addition, claims to be the rightful daughter of the Buddha. Dhammā (Thig 1.17), Cittā (Thig 2.5), and Mettikā (Thig 2.6) speak of the triumph of their insight despite the failing of their bodies. Selā (Thig 3.7) is just one of many nuns who proclaims her triumph over delusion.

Some nuns found peace only after traveling through the depths of despair (Thig 2.10, Thig 3.1, Thig 3.1, Thig 5.1, Thig 5.3, Thig 6.8). Ubbirī is distraught in lamenting her daughter (Thig 3.5), Paṭācārā and Vāsetṭhī in lamenting a son (Thig 6.1, Thig 6.2), while Sundarī has overcome the grief even at losing many children (Thig 13.4). Candā was a homeless widow who endured seven years of hardship on the streets before meeting a nun to inspire her (Thig 5.12).

This should not be over-interpreted. The women speak of these things to show how they triumphed over them, not to romanticize them or encourage others to follow such a path. Most of the nuns do not have such dramatic stories to tell. For Dantikā, insight came when seeing an elephant at a ford (Thig 3.4); for Paṭācārā, when she saw a lamp going out (Thig 5.10). The experience of suffering as a woman is something that the early Buddhist texts acknowledge with compassion, since it is the reality of those women's lives. It acted as a spur to practice, or simply to contrast the freedom that they now experience. It doesn't mean that anyone, especially a woman, *has* to undergo such extremes of suffering.

The long poem of Subhā does not speak of any existential despair. Rather, as a young woman she immediately understood the Dhamma as soon as she heard it (Thig 13.5). Sometimes all it takes is a single teaching. Coming from a wealthy family, she speaks eloquently of the trap of money and how it breeds conflict and corruption. She declares that she will cross over on the same path traveled by the great sages. The poem finishes with verses in her praise. The final verse, which according to the commentary was added by redactors at the Council, attributes the verses of praise to no less a figure than Sakka, the lord of gods.

Not all the verses focus on the personal journey of the women. The verses of Sikkā, for example, record an unnamed third party complaining that too many of the folk of Rājagaha are as if drunk on mead, not paying attention properly to her teaching, which is like nectar of cool water (Thig 3.6). The verses of Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā include praise for a layperson who made much merit by offering a robe to one as holy as her (Thig 5.9).

Puṇṇikā's poem is not about her path, but about how she gave a lesson to a deluded brahmin (Thig 12.1). The framing of the verses is not quite clear. According to the commentary, the opening verses—where Puṇṇikā tells the brahmin how as a water carrier she feared her mistresses and proceeds to ask him what he's afraid of—were spoken by Puṇṇikā before she was ordained as a nun. But

the only clear indication of tense is the use of the aorist in the past tense, which suggests, rather, that she is already a nun and is telling an anecdote of her past. This would explain why she speaks with such boldness, and also why the brahmin addresses her with the respectful *bhoti*. Even though the very basis of his religious beliefs is being challenged, the brahmin listens and responds well. Puṇṇikā's verses include the classic rebuttal to the efficacy of bathing for purity:

Would not they all go to heaven, then:  
all the frogs and the turtles,  
gharials, crocodiles,  
and other water-dwellers too?

Closely related to this is the poem of Rohinī (Thig 13.2). In this case, the recalcitrant brahmin is her father, who objects to his daughter's devotion to the "ascetics", arguing that they are lazy good-for-nothings. In this case, Rohinī must not yet be ordained, because her father observes that she says "ascetics" even when falling asleep and waking up. The assumption is that she would later go on to ordain; and while the text itself does not confirm this, her father hints at it when he says she "will become an ascetic". She responds, not as an obsequious and obedient daughter, but by extolling the virtues of ascetics at length.

The verses of Cāpā give a unique twist to this scenario (Thig 13.3). Here we are thrown in the middle of an argument between a man and his wife, who are torn between their desire for each other and their aspirations for a spiritual life. The fight gets so vicious they even threaten their child. Yet ultimately Kāḷa, the husband, is set on his path and Cāpā conveys her blessings. The poem doesn't say that she ordained.

In yet another case of a man being redeemed through his encounter with a woman, the brahmin Sujāta marvels at how Sundarī can respond with such equanimity even when she has lost seven children. She attributes her calm to the teaching of the Buddha,

upon which the brahmin went forth, and she later followed suit (Thig 13.4).

Sometimes the path of the nuns has not been from domestic or emotional travail, but from one religious practice to another. Such was the case of Nanduttarā, who recalls both her devotion to meaningless worship and mortification, as well as her infatuation with her appearance: the two extremes (Thig 5.5; see also Mittā at Thig 2.7). Khemā also reports a fruitless former practice of worshipping stars and serving the sacred flame (Thig 6.3). For Mittākālī, genuine insight only came long after ordaining for the wrong reasons (Thig 5.6).

In addition to the notable scarcity of husbands, there are few references to monks. When acknowledging teachers, the nuns mention either the Buddha or another nun: Paṭācārā (Thig 5.11, Thig 5.12, Thig 7.1), Uppalavaṇṇā (Thig 13.5), Jinadattā (Thig 15.1), or else an unnamed nun (Thig 3.2, Thig 5.1, Thig 5.8, Thig 6.8, Thig 13.4). Typically these nuns are said to have conveyed the central teachings of Buddhism such as the four noble truths, the aggregates, elements, and so on. These are the central topics of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, and we can therefore conclude that this, or its ancestor, was carefully studied by the nuns.

Only Sakulā reports learning the Dhamma from a monk, and that was when she was still a laywoman (Thig 5.7). This is especially noteworthy given that, according to the Vinaya, the monks were supposed to be teaching the nuns every fortnight. Yet somehow these regular sessions are never mentioned by the nuns, just as the procedure of ordination by monks is never mentioned.

## The Dramatic Verses

Since the poems of the Therīgāthā are arranged from short to long, and since there is a general tendency for texts in Buddhism to grow over time, it's fair to assume that the final poems of the collection are somewhat later than most. This applies especially to the final



three poems, each of which develops a complex dramatic scenario. These dramatic elements appear in earlier poems also, but not to the same extent.

These literary compositions distinguish the Therīgāthā from the Theragāthā. There, most of the long poems are produced by simply compiling several shorter passages of verse, which often have no relation to each other. The Therīgāthā has only one, rather modest, poem in this style, that of Uppalavaṇṇā (Thig 11.1).

Of course, in describing these verses as “dramatic” I am not suggesting that they were used for actual stage performances. There’s no evidence for theatrical presentations in the Saṅgha at such an early date. Nor is it historically meaningful to analyze how such texts were shaped by “Indian aesthetic theories” since there is no evidence of any such thing until at least half a millennium later, and even then, no evidence that the theories ever influenced Buddhist literature. Nonetheless, anyone who has ever given a Dhamma talk has, in some sense, made a dramatic presentation of the Dhamma, and knows how important it is to hold an audience’s attention through the narrative fundamentals of emotion, engagement, conflict, and humor.

The most dramatic confrontation of all is that between a rogue and the young nun Subhā (Thig 14.1; this is not the same Subhā we have met before at Thig 13.5). The lateness of the poem is suggested by the setting verse, an unusual feature for poetry, which was ascribed by the commentary to the redactors. The rogue blocks her path, and despite her strong objections tries to seduce her. But she is having none of it, even with his lengthy and admittedly eloquent evocation of the sensual joys they will find together. He lavishes special praise on the beauty of her eyes, probably thinking he is being romantic. But he is not prepared for what she does next.

The long poem by Isidāsi sets the scene with a private conversation between two nuns. The conversation is rather unusually given a location, which is in Pāṭaliputta. This immediately sets the dialogue at a date considerably after the death of the Buddha, as

in his time Pāṭaliputta was just a small village. In confirmation, the commentary states that the narrative verses were added by the redactors at a Council. It doesn't say which one, but it must be the Second or Third. As Norman points out, this only tells us when the narrative frame was added to the poem, which must have been composed earlier.

The poem builds an extended narrative, which is unusual in the early texts, discussing the specific results of past kamma over many lifetimes, which again is something we don't see often. It mentions three nuns—Isidāsī, Bodhī, and Jinadattā—none of whom are met elsewhere in the canon. All this means that while we can safely say that this poem is later than most in the collection, we cannot fix the date with any confidence.

The poem has Isidāsī pleading her case to go forth with her father. She uses a rather specific phrasing (Thig 15.1:32.4):

*Kammaṃ taṃ nijjaressāmi*

I shall wear that bad deed away.

Rhys Davids says her aspirations are “Jainistic” (*Psalm of the Sisters*, xxii) and Norman concurs (*Elders' Verses II*, 176). And it is indeed true that the wearing away of past kamma is regarded as a core teaching of the Jains. But what makes a practice truly Jain is that this wearing away is done by self-mortification, of which there is no hint here. In fact, in a dialogue with a Jain, the Buddha, always apt to adapt and respond to the language used by other religions, reframed the idea of “wearing away kamma”. Instead of wearing away by self-mortification, it can be done by letting go of the defilements that underlie the creation of kamma (AN 4.195:6.3). Such passages don't show any hidden influence of Jainism. Rather, they show how the Buddhists were very conscious and deliberate in how they responded to the language and ideas of others.

Nonetheless, it remains the case that such language is more characteristic of Jainism. It's an unusual choice of words. Since it was

put in the mouth of the young Isidāsī before she went forth, maybe she was just using words she had picked up about kamma without a clear understanding of the differences between the schools. After all, modern Buddhists do this all the time. Perhaps; but it seems like an unnecessarily complex linguistic conceit.

Isidāsī's long take of woe recounts how before ordaining as a nun, she had been married, but despite being the perfect wife, her husband just couldn't stand her. She was kicked out and handed from husband to husband, each one a less appealing catch than the last. Finally, they were reduced to tempting a homeless ascetic into discarding his vows for her, but even after that he still couldn't stand to be with her. She swore to her father that she had done nothing to deserve such treatment. It's as if there is something wrong with her inside, something that she cannot see, and that no amount of effort on her part can overcome. But then the nun Jinadattā came to her house for alms. She was so inspired she took ordination herself.

She became enlightened and could recollect the seven lives that had led her to this point, including the one that started it all. Long ago, she had been born as a man and had sex with another man's wife. This was the root bad kamma that drove her to a series of distressing rebirths. Repeatedly she was born as a male animal who suffered castration, then as a slave who had neither male nor female genitals. Eventually, she was born as a girl subject to violence and abandonment.

The depiction of kamma and its effects here is subtly different from the normal presentation in the early texts. Normally the idea is that if you do a bad deed, you will experience bad results because of that. For example, you might be born in a lower realm, or if you are born in the human realm—which is *always* the result of good kamma—you might still have the bad kamma to be born suffering a chronic illness.

There are two fallacies to be wary of here.

First, the fact that kamma creates some results does not mean that all results were created by kamma. In other words, if A then B does not imply if B then A. The Buddha listed multiple causes for illness, for example, only one of which was kamma. Unless we are like Isidāsī and have the psychic ability to recollect past lives, we do not know. What we do know, however, is that transmigration is long. And in that long journey, all of us have done many good things and many bad things.

This is important in the current case because it is one of the few examples in the early texts that might be used to argue that being born as a woman is a result of bad kamma, a belief that is commonly held in Buddhist cultures today. This might also be held to apply to intersex people since in one birth she is biologically neither male nor female. But in such delicate cases, it is crucial to not overinterpret the text. Looking at the lives described in the text, in each case it is not the *mere fact* of biological sex that is painful. She was reborn in a life of suffering, and in her case, sex characteristics were part of that.

The very next poem, discussed below, appears as a counterpoint, perhaps deliberately, to this fallacy. Sumedhā is repeatedly reborn into a happy life as a woman because of her good kamma as a woman. The entire framing of Isidāsī's text shows how as a woman she triumphed over her circumstances and found freedom from all this. She must have performed good kamma in the past to be born as a human with the capacity to understand and practice the Dhamma. And so have we. The real question facing us is, what are we choosing to do about it?

The second fallacy is to think that kamma determines the choices of others. No: kamma determines what you experience, not what others do. Yet in Isidāsī's telling, her bad deed in the past determines how others treat her in her many past lives. When she was born as a monkey, she did not have any unusual sex characteristics. It was the monkey chief who castrated her at seven days of age. How is that *her* kamma forced the monkey chief to do that? Is he

not responsible for his own deeds? The same pattern plays out in life after life. She is badly mistreated, mostly at the hands of males. Yet in each case, their kamma is *their* kamma and is not forced upon them by *her* misdeeds.

This misunderstanding of kamma is very prevalent in the Buddhist community today. We hear, for example, that Moggallāna died being set upon by bandits due to his past kamma which he could not escape. But this story from the commentaries never addresses the problem: how did Moggallāna's misdeeds cause others to commit murder?

So we can add doctrinal evolution to the list of reasons for concluding that this text is late. Of course, this does not mean it is worthless. It means it is a record of a teaching by women from the period *after* the Buddha, which is even rarer than teachings from the Buddha's life. The question of authorship is a complex one: is the teaching by Isidāsī? Or is it related by her friend Bodhī with whom she shared her story? Who was it that cast the story in verse? My intuition is that the text was composed within the women's community to reconcile women's circumstances and struggles with the more deterministic understanding of kamma that was already evolving a century or two after the Buddha.

In this light, the casual reference to the "wearing away" of kamma, while not formally contradicting Buddhist doctrine, takes on a new light. A deterministic reading of kamma is not present in the early texts, yet it became common in schools such as Theravāda. Why? Was it purely a result of internal doctrinal developments? Or was it influenced by encounters with followers of other religions, such as the Jains? The distinctions made by the Buddha in the early texts are often subtle and debated even among scholars, not to speak of regular Buddhists. By itself, this one passage cannot be decisive, but it does belong in a broader discussion of such issues.

The final poem, attributed to Sumedhā, is also late, but as with the poem of Isidāsī, it is not possible to date with any precision. The poem quotes liberally from the prose Suttas, including not

just general doctrines such as we find commonly in the Therīgāthā, but multiple detailed specific references to particular passages. She urges her folks to “remember” these, implying that they were commonly known teachings. But this doesn’t tell us much, as such teachings may have been well known even in the Buddha’s life; the Suttas are full of such cross-references.

The nations and the kings don’t help with dating, as they seem to be otherwise unattested. Certainly, they are not part of the normal roster of places and people familiar from the early texts. Sumedhā is the daughter of King Koṇca of the city of Mantāvati, about which I can find no information. Her betrothed is King Anīkaratta of Vāraṇavatī. A Vāraṇavatī is mentioned in the Atharvaveda, but it is unclear what it is; perhaps a river. The Mahābhārata mentions a Vāraṇavata, but this does not help us much. If it is the same city, we only know that, according to the Monier-Williams dictionary, it is about an eight-day journey from Hastināpura. Hastināpura is located on the Ganges in modern Uttar Pradesh, about 100km northeast of Delhi. Eight days journey is around 300km, so even if this identification were correct, it would only tell us that we are in northwest India, not far from the scope of the early Buddhist region. So the most we can say is that this story may have been set in a region into which Buddhism had expanded a century or two after the Buddha’s death. Such tales often serve as the “conversion story” for a country.

The story is a variation on the universal folk tale of the young woman betrothed against her will. It is constructed with melodramatic flair: the hapless parents, the brilliant and wilful daughter, the handsome king, and the mysterious kingdom. She is probably a teenager at this point, and while the sympathies of the story lie with her, I can’t help feeling sorry for the poor parents, subject to relentless haranguing by a girl convinced that she knows it all.

The climax of the story builds tension by splitting into two narrative frames: the relentless approach of the royal suitor and Sumedhā’s equally relentless ascent to jhāna and insight. It’s a brilliant

narrative device. The king begs for her hand through the door, but she just delivers another scathing takedown of the futility of the world's delights. She opens the door, only to see the lot of them sitting on the floor and weeping in despair. But she's still not done. She tells them that this is nothing; they've cried much more than that in the long journey of rebirth. She gathers up the hardest of the hard-core teachings from the Suttas and launches them in salvo after salvo at her dear and beloved as they huddle on the floor in tears.

It worked: the handsome king got up and begged the parents on Sumedhā's behalf to let her go forth. She did so and rapidly attained Nibbāna.

Years later, on her deathbed, she revealed her past lives. She and Isidāsī are the only two to speak of details of their past lives in the *Therīgāthā*, although many nuns say they can recollect them. Unlike Isidāsī, here she is not speaking of any bad kamma. On the contrary, she tells of how in the far distant age of the Buddha Koṇāgamana she made merit together with two female friends. They offered no less than a new monastery, regarded as the greatest of material offerings. As women, they had access to considerable wealth, which they used to benefit others. As a result, they all experienced many good rebirths before realizing enlightenment in this final life. This kind of narrative appears very rarely in early texts but became the standard template for the *Apadānas*, so it is yet another sign that this is a late poem.

In the story of Isidāsī, she committed bad kamma as a man, and consequently experienced suffering in many lives as a woman subject to the brutality of men. Here, Sumedhā does good kamma as a woman, together with her female friends, and consequently experiences happiness in many good lives as a woman. There is no single, simple narrative around kamma, sex, and gender, and early Buddhist texts do not try to construct one. The only narrative they are concerned with is that doing good leads to good results. In this way, the *Therīgāthā* finishes on a high note, a lavish and ex-

ultant celebration of the determination, intelligence, and spiritual capacity of an extraordinary human being who happens to have been a woman.

## A Brief Textual History

The Therīgāthā was published in 1883 by the Pali Text Society, as edited by Richard Pischel, one of the greats of 19th century German Indology. He made use of four manuscripts, two in Burmese script and two in Sinhala, as well as a manuscript of the commentary, which embeds the full text within it.

He notes that all these sources share serious blunders and that they must all stem from a single source. This is not unexpected, as we know that the Sri Lankan texts were re-introduced back from Burma. He found that one of the manuscripts, part of the Phayre collection in London, is in all respects superior to the rest. The textual corruption goes back a long way, as he notes there are several places where even the commentator of 500 CE had before him a corrupt text. As a result, his footnotes contain a profusion of variant readings, even though he Germanically avers that he only included those that seemed “really important”. So difficult was the task that he said, “without the commentary, I should hardly have ventured to publish this text at all.”

The second edition of this text was published in 1966 (reprinted 1990) with two new Appendices: additional variant readings supplied by K.R. Norman, and metrical analysis by L. Alsdorf.

The Therīgāthā has since attracted a substantial body of translation and study. The first English translation was by C.A.F. Rhys Davids as *Psalm of the Early Buddhists, I: Psalm of the Sisters* in 1909 with the Pali Text Society. Her translation was enthusiastic and informed by a serious study of Pali. Much of her commentary, however, is inevitably dated, and her flowery translation style was deliberately archaic even when it was made. And her decision to embed the translations within what she described as the “legends



of legends” of the commentarial stories was, I think, unfortunate. Better to let the verses stand for themselves, and keep the commentary for a separate work.

In 1971 K.R. Norman published his translation *Elders' Verses II: Therīgāthā* with the PTS. This was part of his extraordinary series of editions of Pali verses. It included a detailed analysis of metrical, textual, and linguistic issues to accompany his admittedly dry translation style. His analysis brings together a huge amount of relevant data which is an invaluable point of reference. His analysis of composition, dating, attribution, and the role of the commentary are essential backgrounds for any serious study.

In his preface he acknowledges the advances in understanding the Therīgāthā since Pischel's text, especially noting the improvements from “oriental editions” which appeared in the last “sixty years” (i.e. between 1910 and 1970). Most of these are the various editions that emerged from the Sixth Council, in Burmese (3rd edition, 1961), Cambodian (1958), and Devanāgarī (1959), as well as the Thai edition of 1926–8 and the Hemaviratne edition of the commentary in Sinhalese characters (1918). While acknowledging the “many excellences” of the Burmese Sixth Council edition, he cautions that it “gives the impression of having been subjected to a considerable amount of normalization, which naturally greatly reduces its value”. My translation is based on the Mahāsaṅgīti edition, which is a digital version of this text.

The balance between readability and accuracy that is sorely lacking in the PTS editions was finally realized in 2015, with Charles Hallisey's *Therīgāthā: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, published by the Harvard University Press as part of the Murty Classical Library of India series. This is an elegant and mature translation, which includes a useful introduction as well as the Pali text.

A further full translation by Anāgārika Mahendra under the title *Therīgāthāpāli: Book of Verses of Elder Bhikkhunīs* was published in 2017 through Dhamma Publishers. This edition includes Pali text with translation and notes.

Readers should beware of a literary fraud masquerading as a translation. *The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns* by Matty Weingast was published by Shambhala Publications in 2020. It is a work of original poetry, apparently made in the belief that channeling inspiration from the ancient bhikkhunīs was a valid translation approach. The resulting work was ecstatically received by many Buddhist teachers who praised the uplifting of an ancient scripture of distinctively female voices, unaware or uncaring that it was composed in 2019 by a man in California. The publisher revised their fraudulent marketing somewhat after public pressure, but as of May 2022, their webpage for the book is still full of claims that it is a translation.

There have also been some partial translations. The best known is Susan Murcott's *First Buddhist Women: Poems and Stories of Awakening*, published through Parallax Press in 1991. She translated most of the poems and presented them together with her reflections as well as paraphrases of the Pali commentary. As a feminist reading, it highlights the problematic status of women in ancient India as reflected in the Therīgāthā. But its analysis is inevitably blunted by its closeness to the commentary, which frames the lens through which the texts are seen. For example, the first verse draws from the commentary for its title "An Unknown Wife", whereas the verse itself says nothing about her being married.

Thirty-two of the poems were translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu in his *Poems of the Elders, An Anthology from the Theragatha and Therigatha* of 2005.

A 2009 translation of fourteen poems by Francis Booth, *Songs of the Elder Sisters*, offers some of the most delightful passages in a refreshingly simple and unburdened form.

# Acknowledgements

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VERSES OF THE SENIOR  
NUNS

# The Book of the Ones

Thig 1.1

## An Unnamed Nun (1st)

*Aññatarātherīgāthā*

*Homage to that Blessed One, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha!*

- 1.1 Sleep softly, little nun,  
wrapped in the cloth you sewed yourself;  
for your desire has been quelled,  
like vegetables boiled dry in a pot.

*That is how this verse was recited by a certain unnamed nun.*

Thig 1.2

## Muttā (1st)

*Muttātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Muttā, be released from your yokes,  
like the moon released from the eclipse.  
When your mind is released,  
enjoy your alms free of debt.

*That is how the Buddha regularly advised  
the trainee nun Muttā with these verses.*

Thig 1.3

Puṇṇā

*Puṇṇātherīgāthā*

Puṇṇā, be filled with good qualities, 1.1  
like the moon on the fifteenth day.  
When your wisdom is full,  
shatter the mass of darkness.

*That is how this verse was recited by the senior nun Puṇṇā.*

Thig 1.4

Tissā

*Tissātherīgāthā*

Tissā, train in the trainings— 1.1  
don't let your yokes overcome you.  
Unyoked from all yokes,  
live in the world free of defilements.

Thig 1.5

Another Tissā

*Aññatarātissātherīgāthā*

Tissā, apply yourself to good qualities— 1.1  
don't let the moment pass you by.  
For if you miss your moment,  
you'll grieve when sent to hell.

Thig 1.6

Dhīrā

*Dhīrātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Dhīrā, touch cessation,  
the blissful stilling of perception.  
Win extinguishment,  
the supreme sanctuary from the yoke.

Thig 1.7

Vīrā

*Vīrātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 She's known as Vīrā because of her heroic qualities,  
a nun with faculties developed.  
She bears her final body,  
having vanquished Māra and his mount.

Thig 1.8

Mittā (1st)

*Mittātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Having gone forth in faith,  
appreciate your spiritual friends, Mittā.  
Develop skillful qualities  
for the sake of sanctuary from the yoke.

Thig 1.9

Bhadrā

*Bhadrātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Having gone forth in faith,



appreciate your blessings, Bhadrā.  
 Develop skillful qualities  
 for the sake of the supreme sanctuary from the yoke.

Thig 1.10

## Upasamā

*Upasamātherīgāthā*

Upasamā, cross the flood, 1.1  
 Death's dominion so hard to pass.  
 When you have vanquished Māra and his mount,  
 bear your final body.

Thig 1.11

## Muttā (2nd)

*Muttātherīgāthā*

I'm well freed, so very well freed,<sup>1</sup> 1.1  
 freed from the three things that humped me:<sup>2</sup>  
 the mortar, the pestle,<sup>3</sup>  
 and my humpbacked husband.  
 I'm freed from birth and death;  
 the conduit to rebirth is eradicated.

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1. Compare with Thig 2.3 and Thag 1.43.

2. The commentary explains that the first two things make you crooked: (*khujjakaraṇahetutāya tadubhayam* “*khujja*”*nti vuttam*), while the husband is crooked (a hunchback). This may be so, but I think it is a double entendre.

3. The mortar and pestle feature prominently in the sexual imagery of Rig Veda 1.29, where the kitchen implements are analogized with the pressing of soma on the altar. Both *musala* and “pestle” derive from roots “to pound”.

Thig 1.12

## Dhammadinnā

*Dhammadinnātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 One who is eager and determined  
would be filled with awareness.  
Their mind not bound to pleasures of sense,  
they're said to be heading upstream.

Thig 1.13

## Visākhā

*Visākhātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Do the Buddha's bidding,  
you won't regret it.  
Having quickly washed your feet,  
sit in a discreet place to meditate.

Thig 1.14

## Sumanā

*Sumanātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Having seen the elements as suffering,  
don't get reborn again.  
When you've discarded desire for rebirth,  
you will live at peace.

Thig 1.15

## Uttarā (1st)

*Uttarātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 I was restrained

in body, speech, and mind.  
Having plucked out craving, root and all,  
I'm cooled and quenched.

Thig 1.16

## Sumanā, Who Went Forth Late in Life

*Vuḍḍhapabbajitasumanātherīgāthā*

Sleep softly, old lady, 1.1  
wrapped in the cloth you sewed yourself;  
for your desire has been quelled,  
you're cooled and quenched.

Thig 1.17

## Dhammā

*Dhammātherīgāthā*

I wandered for alms 1.1  
though feeble, leaning on a staff.  
My limbs wobbled  
and I fell to the ground right there.  
Seeing the danger of the body,  
my mind was freed.

Thig 1.18

## Saṅghā

*Samghātherīgāthā*

I gave up my home, my child, my cattle, 1.1  
and all that I love, and went forth.  
And now that I've given up desire and hate,  
dispelled ignorance,

and plucked out craving, root and all,  
I'm at peace, I'm quenched.

# The Book of the Twos

Thig 2.1

Abhirūpanandā

*Abhirūpanandātherīgāthā*

Nandā, see this bag of bones as  
diseased, filthy, and rotten.  
With mind unified and serene,  
meditate on the ugly aspects of the body. 1.1

Meditate on the signless,  
give up the underlying tendency to conceit;  
and when you comprehend conceit,  
you will live at peace. 2.1

*That is how the Buddha regularly advised  
the trainee nun Nandā with these verses.<sup>4</sup>*

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4. The MS edition is apparently alone in taking the nun as a bhikkhunī and as the speaker of the verses. It's odd that no variants are recorded, especially given that even the parent edition (VRI) says she is a *sikkhamānā*. Perhaps this is a rare instance of a simple oversight in MS.

Thig 2.2

Jentā

*Jentātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Of the seven awakening factors,  
the path for attaining extinguishment,  
I have developed them all,  
just as the Buddha taught.
- 2.1 For I have seen the Blessed One,  
and this bag of bones is my last.  
Transmigration through births is finished,  
now there'll be no more future lives.

*That is how these verses were recited by the senior nun Jentā.*

Thig 2.3

Sumaṅgala's Mother

*Sumaṅgalamātātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 I'm well freed, well freed,<sup>5</sup>  
so very well freed from the pestle!  
My shameless husband popped up like a mushroom,  
my mortar wafted like eels.
- 2.1 Greed and hate sizzle and hiss  
as I squelch them.  
Having gone to the root of a tree,  
I meditate happily, thinking, "Oh, what bliss!"

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5. This verse is problematic and any translation is conjectural. I think that, like Thig 1.11, it hinges on double entendres of kitchen drudgery and sex. The nun here is presumably the mother of the Sumaṅgala at Thag 1.43, whose verses are similar.

## Thig 2.4

## Aḍḍhakāsi

*Aḍḍhakāsitherīgāthā*

The price for my services 1.1  
 amounted to the nation of Kāsi.  
 By setting that price,  
 the townsfolk made me priceless.

Then, growing disillusioned with my form, 2.1  
 I became dispassionate.  
 Don't journey on and on,  
 transmigrating through rebirths!  
 I've realized the three knowledges,  
 and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

## Thig 2.5

## Cittā

*Cittātherīgāthā*

Though I'm skinny, 1.1  
 sick, and very feeble,  
 I climb the mountain,  
 leaning on a staff.

Having laid down my outer robe, 2.1  
 and overturned my bowl,  
 propping myself against a rock,  
 I shattered the mass of darkness.

Thig 2.6

Mettikā

*Mettikātherīgāthā*

- 1.1      Though in pain,  
            feeble, my youth long gone,  
            I climb the mountain,  
            leaning on a staff.
- 2.1      Having laid down my outer robe  
            and overturned my bowl,  
            sitting on a rock,  
            my mind was freed.  
            I've attained the three knowledges,  
            and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

Thig 2.7

Mittā (2nd)

*Mittātherīgāthā*

- 1.1      I rejoiced in the host of gods,  
            having observed the sabbath  
            complete in all eight factors,  
            on the fourteenth and the fifteenth days,
- 2.1      and the eighth day of the fortnight,  
            as well as on the fortnightly special displays.  
            Today I eat just once a day,  
            my head is shaven, I wear the outer robe.  
            I don't long for the host of gods,  
            for stress has been removed from my heart.



Thig 2.8

To Abhayā's Mother From Her Daughter

*Abhayamātutherīgāthā*

My dear mother, examine this body,<sup>6</sup> 1.1  
up from the soles of the feet,  
and down from the tips of the hairs,  
so impure and foul-smelling.

Meditating like this,<sup>7</sup> 2.1  
all my lust is eradicated.  
The fever of passion is cut off,  
I'm cooled and quenched.<sup>8</sup>

Thig 2.9

Abhayā

*Abhayātherīgāthā*

Abhayā, the body is fragile,<sup>9</sup> 1.1  
yet ordinary people are attached to it.  
I'll lay down the body,  
aware and mindful.

Though subject to so many painful things, 2.1  
I have, through my love of diligence,  
reached the ending of craving,

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6. Authorship is unclear in these verses. The first verse is addressed to the mother. The commentary says it was by her son Abhaya, but I think it is more likely by her daughter Abhayā who features in the next poem.

7. The feminine declension of the last words show that this verse is spoken by a woman. The commentary says it was by the mother, who has quoted her son's words and adds her own. I read both verses as spoken by the daughter.

8. It is only from the feminine declension of the last words that we can be sure it is the daughter Abhayā speaking.

9. The commentary says that Abhayā is exhorting herself here.

and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

Thig 2.10

Sāmā

*Sāmātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Four or five times  
I left my dwelling.  
I had failed to find peace of heart,  
or any control over my mind.  
Now it is the eighth night  
since craving was eradicated.
- 2.1 Though subject to so many painful things,  
I have, through my love of diligence,  
reached the ending of craving,  
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

# The Book of the Threes

Thig 3.1

Another Sāmā

*Aparāsāmātherīgāthā*

In the twenty-five years 1.1  
since I went forth,  
I don't know that I had ever found  
serenity in my mind.

I had failed to find peace of heart, 2.1  
or any control over my mind.  
When I remembered the victor's instructions,  
I was struck with a sense of urgency.

Though subject to so many painful things, 3.1  
I have, through my love of diligence,  
reached the ending of craving,  
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.  
This is the seventh day  
since my craving dried up.

Thig 3.2

Uttamā

*Uttamātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Four or five times  
I left my dwelling.  
I had failed to find peace of heart,  
or any control over my mind.
- 2.1 I approached a nun  
in whom I had faith.  
She taught me the Dhamma:  
the aggregates, sense fields, and elements.
- 3.1 When I had heard her teaching,  
in accordance with her instructions,  
I sat cross-legged for seven days without moving,  
given over to rapture and bliss.  
On the eighth day I stretched out my feet,  
having shattered the mass of darkness.

Thig 3.3

Another Uttamā

*Aparāuttamātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Of the seven awakening factors,  
the path for attaining extinguishment,  
I have developed them all,  
just as the Buddha taught.
- 2.1 I attain the meditations on emptiness  
and signlessness whenever I want.  
I am the Buddha's rightful daughter,  
always delighting in extinguishment.

All sensual pleasures are cut off, 3.1  
 whether human or heavenly.  
 Transmigration through births is finished,  
 now there'll be no more future lives.

Thig 3.4

## Dantikā

*Dantikātherīgāthā*

Leaving my day's meditation 1.1  
 on Vulture's Peak Mountain,  
 I saw an elephant on the riverbank  
 having just come up from his bath.

A man, taking a pole with a hook, 2.1  
 asked the elephant, "Give me your foot."  
 The elephant presented his foot,  
 and the man mounted him.

Seeing a wild beast so tamed, 3.1  
 submitting to human control,  
 my mind became serene:  
*that* is why I've gone to the forest!

Thig 3.5

## Ubbirī

*Ubbirītherīgāthā*

"You cry 'Live, my dear mother!' in the forest."<sup>10</sup> 1.1  
 Ubbirī, get a hold of yourself!

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10. In her distress, Ubbirī addresses her daughter as "mother". The speaker of this verse, who is trying to help the distressed Ubbirī, is not named in the text, but the commentary identifies it as the Buddha.

Eighty-four thousand people,  
all named ‘Live’,  
have been burnt in this funeral ground:  
which one do you grieve for?”

2.1 “Oh! For you have plucked the arrow from me,  
so hard to see, stuck in the heart.  
You’ve swept away the grief for my daughter  
in which I once was mired.

3.1 Today I’ve plucked the arrow,  
I’m hungerless, quenched.  
I go for refuge to that sage, the Buddha,  
to his teaching, and to the Sangha.”

Thig 3.6

Sukkā

*Sukkātherīgāthā*

1.1 “What’s up with these people in Rājagaha?  
They sprawl like they’ve been drinking mead!  
They don’t attend on Sukkā  
as she teaches the Buddha’s instructions.

2.1 But the wise—  
it’s as if they drink it up,  
so irresistible, delicious, and nutritious,  
like travelers enjoying a cool cloud.”

3.1 “She’s known as Sukkā because of her bright qualities,  
free of greed, serene.  
She bears her final body,  
having vanquished Māra and his mount.”

## Thig 3.7

## Selā

*Selātherīgāthā*

“There’s no escape in the world, 1.1  
 so what will seclusion do for you?  
 Enjoy erotic delights;  
 don’t regret it later.”

“Sensual pleasures are like swords and spears 2.1  
 the aggregates are their chopping block.  
 What you call erotic delight  
 is now no delight for me.

Relishing is destroyed in every respect, 3.1  
 and the mass of darkness is shattered.  
 So know this, Wicked One:  
 you’re beaten, terminator!”

## Thig 3.8

## Somā

*Somātherīgāthā*

“That state’s very challenging; 1.1  
 it’s for the sages to attain.  
 It’s not possible for a woman,  
 with her two-fingered wisdom.”

“What difference does womanhood make 2.1  
 when the mind is serene,  
 and knowledge is present  
 as you rightly discern the Dhamma.

Relishing is destroyed in every respect, 3.1

and the mass of darkness is shattered.  
So know this, Wicked One:  
you're beaten, terminator!"



# The Book of the Fours

Thig 4.1

## Bhaddā Daughter of Kapila

*Bhaddākāpilānītherīgāthā*

Kassapa is the son and heir of the Buddha, 1.1  
whose mind is immersed in samādhi.

He who knows his past lives,  
sees heaven and places of loss,

and has attained the end of rebirth: 2.1  
is a sage of perfect insight.

It's because of these three knowledges  
that the brahmin is a master of the three knowledges.

In exactly the same way, Bhaddā daughter of Kapila 3.1  
is master of the three knowledges,  
conqueror of death.<sup>11</sup>

She bears her final body,  
having vanquished Māra and his mount.

Seeing the danger of the world, 4.1  
both of us went forth.

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11. *Maccuhāyi* is glossed by the commentaries as either “abandoner” (*Maccuhāyīnantī maraṇapariccāgināṃ*) or “conqueror” (*marañābhibhū maccuhāyī*). The phrase seems to be used in martial contexts where it carries a similar force to *jetvā māraṃ* just below.

Now we are tamed, our defilements have ended;  
we've become cooled and quenched.

# The Book of the Fives

Thig 5.1

## An Unnamed Nun (2nd)

*Aññataratherīgāthā*

In the twenty-five years 1.1  
since I went forth  
I have not found peace of mind,  
even for as long as a finger-snap.

Failing to find peace of heart, 2.1  
festering with sensual desire,  
I cried with flailing arms  
as I entered a dwelling.

I approached a nun 3.1  
in whom I had faith.  
She taught me the Dhamma:  
the aggregates, sense fields, and elements.

When I heard her teaching, 4.1  
I retired to a discreet place.  
I know my past lives;  
my clairvoyance is purified;

I comprehend the minds of others; 5.1  
my clairaudience is purified;

I've realized the psychic powers,  
 and attained the ending of defilements.  
 I have realized the six kinds of direct knowledge,  
 and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

Thig 5.2

## Vimalā, the Former Courtesan

*Vimalātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Intoxicated by my appearance,  
 my figure, my beauty, my fame,  
 and owing to my youth,  
 I looked down on others.
- 2.1 I adorned this body  
 all pretty, lamented by fools,  
 and stood at the brothel door,  
 like a hunter laying a snare.
- 3.1 I stripped for them,  
 revealing my many hidden treasures.  
 Creating an intricate illusion,  
 I laughed, teasing those men.
- 4.1 Today, having wandered for alms,  
 my head shaven, wearing the outer robe,  
 I sat at the root of a tree to meditate;  
 I've gained freedom from thought.
- 5.1 All yokes are severed,  
 both human and heavenly.  
 Having wiped out all defilements,  
 I have become cooled and quenched.

## Thig 5.3

## Sīhā

*Sihātherīgāthā*

Due to irrational application of mind, 1.1  
 I was racked by desire for pleasures of the senses.  
 I was restless in the past,  
 lacking control over my mind.

Overcome by corruptions, 2.1  
 pursuing perceptions of the beautiful,  
 I gained no peace of mind.  
 Under the sway of lustful thoughts,

thin, pale, and wan, 3.1  
 for seven years I wandered,  
 full of pain,  
 finding no happiness by day or night.

Taking a rope 4.1  
 I entered deep into the forest, thinking:  
 “It’s better that I hang myself  
 than I return to a lesser life.”

I made a strong noose 5.1  
 and tied it to the branch of a tree.  
 Casting it round my neck,  
 my mind was freed.

## Thig 5.4

## Sundarīnandā

*Sundarīnandātherīgāthā*

“Nandā, see this bag of bones as 1.1

diseased, filthy, and rotten.  
With mind unified and serene,  
meditate on the ugly aspects of the body:

- 2.1 as this is, so is that,  
as that is, so is this.  
A foul stink wafts from it,  
it is the fools' delight.”
- 3.1 Reflecting in such a way,  
tireless all day and night,  
having broken through  
with my own wisdom, I saw.
- 4.1 Being diligent,  
rationally investigating,  
I truly saw this body  
both inside and out.
- 5.1 Then, growing disillusioned with the body,  
I became dispassionate within.  
Diligent, detached,  
I'm quenched and at peace.

Thig 5.5

## Nanduttarā

*Nanduttarātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 In the past I worshiped the sacred flame,  
the moon, the sun, and the gods.  
Having gone to a river ford,  
I plunged into the water.
- 2.1 Undertaking many vows,  
I shaved half my head.

Preparing a bed on the ground,  
I ate no food at night.

I loved my ornaments and decorations; 3.1  
and with baths and oil-massages,  
I pandered to this body,  
racked by desire for pleasures of the senses.

But then I gained faith, 4.1  
and went forth to homelessness.  
Truly seeing the body,  
desire for sensual pleasure is eradicated.

All rebirths are cut off, 5.1  
wishes and aspirations too.  
Unyoked from all yokes,  
I've found peace of mind.

### Thig 5.6

## Mittākālī

### *Mittākālītherīgāthā*

Having gone forth in faith 1.1  
from the lay life to homelessness,  
I wandered here and there,  
jealous of possessions and honors.

Neglecting the highest goal, 2.1  
I pursued the lowest.  
Under the sway of corruptions,  
I never knew the goal of the ascetic life.

I was struck with a sense of urgency 3.1  
as I was sitting in my hut:  
“I'm walking the wrong path,

under the sway of craving.

4.1 My life is short,  
trampled by old age and sickness.  
Before this body breaks apart,  
there is no time for me to be careless.”

5.1 I examined in line with the truth  
the rise and fall of the aggregates.  
I stood up with mind liberated,  
having fulfilled the Buddha’s instructions.

Thig 5.7

Sakulā

*Sakulātherīgāthā*

1.1 While staying at home  
I heard the teaching from a monk.  
I saw the stainless Dhamma,  
extinguishment, the state that does not pass.

2.1 Leaving behind my son and my daughter,  
my riches and my grain,  
I had my hair cut off,  
and went forth to homelessness.

3.1 As a trainee nun,  
I developed the direct path.  
I gave up greed and hate,  
along with associated defilements.

4.1 When I was fully ordained as a nun,  
I recollected my past lives,  
and purified my clairvoyance,  
immaculate and fully developed.



Conditions are born of causes, crumbling; 5.1  
 having seen them as other,  
 I gave up all defilements,  
 I'm cooled and quenched.

Thig 5.8

Soṇā

*Soṇātherīgāthā*

I gave birth to ten sons 1.1  
 in this form, this bag of bones.  
 Then, when feeble and old,  
 I approached a nun.

She taught me the Dhamma: 2.1  
 the aggregates, sense fields, and elements.  
 When I heard her teaching,  
 I shaved off my hair and went forth.

When I was a trainee nun, 3.1  
 my clairvoyance was clarified,  
 and I knew my past lives,  
 the places I used to live.

I meditate on the signless, 4.1  
 my mind unified and serene.  
 I achieved the immediate liberation,  
 quenched by not grasping.

The five aggregates are fully understood; 5.1  
 they remain, but their root is cut.  
 Curse you, wretched old age!  
 now there'll be no more future lives.

Thig 5.9

## Bhaddā of the Curly Hair

*Bhaddākuṇḍalakesātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 My hair mown off, covered in mud,  
I used to wander wearing just one robe.  
I saw fault where there was none,  
and was blind to the actual fault.
- 2.1 Leaving my day's meditation  
on Vulture's Peak Mountain,  
I saw the stainless Buddha  
at the fore of the mendicant Saṅgha.
- 3.1 I bent my knee and bowed,  
and in his presence raised my joined palms.  
“Come Bhaddā,” he said;<sup>12</sup>  
that was my ordination.
- 4.1 “I’ve wandered among the Aṅgans and Magadhans,  
the Vajjis, Kāsis, and Kosalans.  
I have eaten the almsfood of the nations  
free of debt for fifty years.”
- 5.1 “O! He has made so much merit!  
That lay follower is so very wise.  
He gave a robe to Bhaddā,  
who is released from all ties.”

12. This echoes the very first ordinations, where the Buddha merely said, “Come monk” (Kd 1:6.32.3). The use of *ehi* for “come” is a sign of respect (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 1.1.4.12).

Thig 5.10

## Paṭācārā

*Paṭācārātherīgāthā*

Plowing the fields, 1.1  
 sowing seeds in the ground,  
 providing for partners and children,  
 young men acquire wealth.

I am accomplished in ethics, 2.1  
 and I do the Teacher's bidding,  
 being neither lazy nor restless—  
 why then do I not achieve quenching?

Having washed my feet, 3.1  
 I took note of the water,  
 seeing the foot-washing water  
 flowing from high ground to low.

My mind became serene, 4.1  
 like a fine thoroughbred steed.  
 Then, taking a lamp,  
 I entered my dwelling,  
 inspected the bed,  
 and sat on my cot.

Then, grabbing the pin, 5.1  
 I drew out the wick.  
 The liberation of my heart  
 was like the quenching of the lamp.

## Thig 5.11

## Thirty Nuns

*Tīmsamattātherīgāthā*

- 1.1      “Taking a pestle,  
              young men pound grain.  
              Providing for partners and children,  
              young men acquire wealth.
- 2.1      Do the Buddha’s bidding,  
              you won’t regret it.  
              Having quickly washed your feet,  
              sit in a discreet place to meditate.  
              Devoted to serenity of heart,  
              do the Buddha’s bidding.”
- 3.1      After hearing her words,  
              the instructions of Paṭācārā,  
              they washed their feet  
              and retired to a discreet place.  
              Devoted to serenity of heart,  
              they did the Buddha’s bidding.
- 4.1      In the first watch of the night,  
              they recollected their past lives.  
              In the middle watch of the night,  
              they purified their clairvoyance.  
              In the last watch of the night,  
              they shattered the mass of darkness.
- 5.1      They rose and paid homage at her feet:  
              “We have done your bidding;  
              we shall abide honoring you,  
              as the thirty gods honor Indra,  
              undefeated in battle.

Masters of the three knowledges,  
we are free of defilements.”

*That is how thirty senior nuns declared their  
enlightenment in the presence of Paṭācārā.*

Thig 5.12

Candā

*Candātherīgāthā*

- I used to be in a sorry state. 1.1  
As a childless widow,  
bereft of friends or relatives,  
I got neither food nor clothes.
- I took a bowl and a staff 2.1  
and went begging from family to family.  
For seven years I wandered,  
burned by heat and cold.
- Then I saw a nun 3.1  
receiving food and drink.  
Approaching her, I said:  
“Send me forth to homelessness.”
- Out of sympathy for me, 4.1  
Paṭācārā gave me the going forth.  
Then, having advised me,  
she urged me on to the ultimate goal.
- After hearing her words, 5.1  
I did her bidding.  
The lady’s advice was not in vain:  
master of the three knowledges,  
I am free of defilements.

# The Book of the Sixes

Thig 6.1

## Paṭācārā, Who Had a Following of Five Hundred

*Pañcasatamattātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 “One whose path you do not know,  
not whence they came nor where they went;  
though they came from who knows where,  
you mourn that being, crying, ‘Oh my son!’
- 2.1 But one whose path you do know,  
whence they came or where they went;  
that one you do not lament—  
such is the nature of living creatures.
- 3.1 Unasked he came,  
he left without leave.  
He must have come from somewhere,  
and stayed who knows how many days.  
He left from here by one road,  
he will go from there by another.
- 4.1 Departing with the form of a human,  
he will go on transmigrating.  
As he came, so he went:

why cry over that?”

“Oh! For you have plucked the arrow from me, 5.1  
so hard to see, stuck in the heart.  
You’ve swept away the grief for my son,  
in which I once was mired.

Today I’ve plucked the arrow, 6.1  
I’m hungerless, quenched.  
I go for refuge to that sage, the Buddha,  
to his teaching, and to the Sangha.”

*That is how Paṭācārā, who had a following  
of five hundred, declared her enlightenment.*

Thig 6.2

## Vāseṭṭhī

*Vāseṭṭhītherīgāthā*

Struck down with grief for my son, 1.1  
deranged, out of my mind,  
naked, my hair flying,  
I wandered here and there.

I lived on rubbish heaps, 2.1  
in cemeteries and highways.  
For three years I wandered,  
stricken by hunger and thirst.

Then I saw the Holy One 3.1  
back at the city of Mithilā.  
Tamer of the untamed,  
the Awakened One fears nothing from any quarter.

Regaining my mind, 4.1  
I paid homage and sat down.

Out of compassion  
Gotama taught me the Dhamma.

5.1 After hearing his teaching,  
I went forth to homelessness.  
Applying myself to the Teacher's words,  
I realized the state of grace.

6.1 All sorrows are cut off,  
given up, they end here.  
I've fully understood the basis  
from which grief comes to be.

Thig 6.3

**Khemā**

*Khemātherīgāthā*

1.1 "You're so young and beautiful!  
I too am young, just a youth.  
Come, Khemā, let us enjoy  
the music of a five-piece band."

2.1 "This body is rotting,  
ailing and frail,  
I'm horrified and repelled by it,  
and I've eradicated sensual craving.

3.1 Sensual pleasures are like swords and spears;  
the aggregates are their chopping block.  
What you call erotic delight  
is now no delight for me.

4.1 Relishing is destroyed in every respect,  
and the mass of darkness is shattered.  
So know this, Wicked One:



you're beaten, terminator!"

“Worshipping the stars, 5.1  
 serving the sacred flame in a grove;  
 failing to grasp the true nature of things,  
 foolish me, I thought this was purity.

But now I worship the Awakened One, 6.1  
 supreme among men.  
 Doing the teacher's bidding,  
 I am released from all suffering.”

Thig 6.4

Sujātā

*Sujātātherīgāthā*

I was adorned with jewelry and all dressed up, 1.1  
 with garlands, and sandalwood makeup piled on,  
 all covered over with decorations,  
 and surrounded by my maids.

Taking food and drink, 2.1  
 staples and dainties in no small amount,  
 I left my house  
 and took myself to the park.

I enjoyed myself there and played about, 3.1  
 and then, returning to my own house,  
 I saw a monastic dwelling,  
 and so I entered the Añjana grove at Sāketa.

Seeing the light of the world, 4.1  
 I paid homage and sat down.  
 Out of compassion  
 the Clear-eyed One taught me the Dhamma.

- 5.1 When I heard the great seer,  
I penetrated the truth.  
Right there I found the stainless Dhamma,  
the state free of death.
- 6.1 Then, having understood the true teaching,  
I went forth to homelessness.  
I've attained the three knowledges;  
the Buddha's bidding was not in vain.

Thig 6.5

## Anopamā

*Anopamātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 I was born into an eminent family,  
affluent and wealthy,  
endowed with a beautiful complexion and figure;  
Majjha's true-born daughter.
- 2.1 I was sought by princes,  
coveted by sons of the wealthy.  
One sent a messenger to my father:  
"Give me Anopamā!"
- 3.1 However much your daughter  
Anopamā weighs,  
I'll give you eight times that  
in gold coin and gems."
- 4.1 When I saw the Awakened One,  
the world's Elder, unsurpassed,  
I paid homage at his feet,  
and withdrew to one side.
- 5.1 Out of compassion,

Gotama taught me the Dhamma.  
While sitting in that seat,  
I realized the third fruit.

Then, having shaved off my hair, 6.1  
I went forth to homelessness.  
This is the seventh day  
since my craving dried up.

Thig 6.6

## Mahāpajāpati Gotamī

*Mahāpajāpatigotamītherīgāthā*

Oh Buddha, my hero: homage to you! 1.1  
Supreme among all beings,  
who released me from suffering,  
and many other beings as well.

All suffering is fully understood; 2.1  
craving—its cause—is dried up;  
the eightfold path has been developed;  
and cessation has been realized by me.

Previously I was a mother, a son, 3.1  
a father, a brother, and a grandmother.  
Failing to grasp the true nature of things,  
I transmigrated without reward.

Since I have seen the Blessed One, 4.1  
this bag of bones is my last.  
Transmigration through births is finished,  
now there'll be no more future lives.

I see the disciples in harmony, 5.1  
energetic and resolute,

always staunchly vigorous—  
this is homage to the Buddhas!

- 6.1 It was truly for the benefit of many  
that Māyā gave birth to Gotama.  
He swept away the mass of suffering  
for those stricken by sickness and death.

Thig 6.7

## Guttā

*Guttātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 Guttā, you have given up your child,  
your wealth, and all that you love.  
Foster the goal for which you went forth;  
do not fall under the mind's control.
- 2.1 Beings deceived by the mind,  
playing in Māra's domain,  
ignorant, they journey on,  
transmigrating through countless rebirths.
- 3.1 Sensual desire and ill will,  
and substantialist view;  
misapprehension of precepts and observances,  
and doubt as the fifth.
- 4.1 O nun, when you have given up  
these lower fetters,  
you won't come back  
to this world again.
- 5.1 And when you're rid of desire,<sup>13</sup>

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13. This is an allusion to *rūparāgaṃ arūparāgaṃ*, "Desire for rebirth in the realm of luminous form, desire for rebirth in the formless realm".

conceit, ignorance, and restlessness,  
 having cut the fetters,  
 you'll make an end to suffering.

Having wiped out transmigration, 6.1  
 and fully understood rebirth,  
 hungerless in this very life,  
 you will live at peace.

Thig 6.8

Vijayā

*Vijayātherīgāthā*

Four or five times 1.1  
 I left my dwelling;  
 I had failed to find peace of heart,  
 or any control over my mind.

I approached a nun 2.1  
 and politely questioned her.  
 She taught me the Dhamma:  
 the elements and sense fields,

the four noble truths, 3.1  
 the faculties and the powers,  
 the awakening factors, and the eightfold path  
 for the attainment of the highest goal.

After hearing her words, 4.1  
 I did her bidding.  
 In the first watch of the night,  
 I recollected my past lives.

In the middle watch of the night, 5.1  
 I purified my clairvoyance.

In the last watch of the night,  
I shattered the mass of darkness.

- 6.1 I then meditated pervading my body  
with rapture and bliss.  
On the seventh day I stretched out my feet,  
having shattered the mass of darkness.

# The Book of the Sevens

Thig 7.1

Uttarā (2nd)

*Uttarātherīgāthā*

- “Taking a pestle,  
young men pound grain.  
Providing for partners and children,  
young men acquire wealth. 1.1
- Work at the Buddha’s bidding,  
you won’t regret it. 2.1  
Having quickly washed your feet,  
sit in a discreet place to meditate.
- Establish the mind,  
unified and serene. 3.1  
Examine conditions  
as other, not as self.”
- “After hearing her words,  
the instructions of Paṭācārā,  
I washed my feet  
and retired to a discreet place. 4.1
- In the first watch of the night,  
I recollected my past lives. 5.1

In the middle watch of the night,  
I purified my clairvoyance.

6.1 In the last watch of the night,  
I shattered the mass of darkness.  
I rose up master of the three knowledges:  
your bidding has been done.

7.1 I shall abide honoring you  
as the thirty gods honor Sakka,  
undefeated in battle.  
Master of the three knowledges,  
I am free of defilements.”

Thig 7.2

Cālā

*Cālātherīgāthā*

1.1 “As a nun with developed faculties,  
having established mindfulness,  
I penetrated that peaceful state,  
the blissful stilling of conditions.”

2.1 “In whose name did you shave your head?  
You look like an ascetic,  
but you don’t believe in any creed.  
Why do you live as if lost?”

3.1 “Followers of other creeds  
rely on their views.  
They don’t understand the Dhamma,  
for they’re no experts in the Dhamma.

4.1 But there is one born in the Sakyan clan,  
the unrivaled Buddha;



he taught me the Dhamma  
for going beyond views.

Suffering, suffering's origin, 5.1  
suffering's transcendence,  
and the noble eightfold path  
that leads to the stilling of suffering.

After hearing his words, 6.1  
I happily did his bidding.  
I've attained the three knowledges  
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

Relishing is destroyed in every respect, 7.1  
and the mass of darkness is shattered.  
So know this, Wicked One:  
you're beaten, terminator!"

### Thig 7.3

## Upacālā

### *Upacālātherīgāthā*

"A nun with faculties developed, 1.1  
mindful, seeing clearly,  
I penetrated that peaceful state,  
which sinners do not cultivate."

"Why don't you approve of rebirth? 2.1  
When you're born, you get to enjoy sensual pleasures.  
Enjoy erotic delights;  
don't regret it later."

"Death comes to those who are born; 3.1  
and when born they fall into suffering:  
the chopping off of hands and feet,

killing, caging, misery.

- 4.1 But there is one born in the Sakyan clan,  
an awakened champion.  
He taught me the Dhamma  
for passing beyond rebirth:
- 5.1 suffering, suffering's origin,  
suffering's transcendence,  
and the noble eightfold path  
that leads to the stilling of suffering.
- 6.1 After hearing his words,  
I happily did his bidding.  
I've attained the three knowledges  
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.
- 7.1 Relishing is destroyed in every respect,  
and the mass of darkness is shattered.  
So know this, Wicked One:  
you're beaten, terminator!"

# The Book of the Eights

Thig 8.1

Sīsūpacālā

*Sīsūpacālātherīgāthā*

“A nun accomplished in ethics,  
her sense faculties well-restrained,  
would realize the peaceful state,  
so delicious and nutritious.” 1.1

“There are the gods of the thirty-three,  
and those of Yama;  
also the Joyful Deities,  
the gods who love to imagine,  
and the gods who control what is imagined by others.  
Set your heart on such places,  
where you used to live.” 2.1

“The gods of the thirty-three,  
and those of Yama;  
also the Joyful Deities,  
the gods who love to imagine,  
and the gods who control what is imagined by others— 3.1

time after time, life after life,  
are governed by substantial reality. 4.1

They haven't transcended substantial reality,  
those who transmigrate through birth and death.

- 5.1 All the world is on fire,  
all the world is alight,  
all the world is ablaze,  
all the world is rocking.
- 6.1 The Buddha taught me the Dhamma,  
unshakable, incomparable,  
not frequented by ordinary people;  
my mind adores that place.
- 7.1 After hearing his words,  
I happily did his bidding.  
I've attained the three knowledges,  
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.
- 8.1 Relishing is destroyed in every respect,  
and the mass of darkness is shattered.  
So know this, Wicked One:  
you're beaten, terminator!"

# The Book of the Nines

Thig 9.1

## Vaḍḍha's Mother

*Vaḍḍhamātuttherīgāthā*

- “Vaḍḍha, please never ever  
get entangled in the world.  
My child, do not partake  
in suffering again and again. 1.1
- For happy dwell the sages, Vaḍḍha,  
unstirred, their doubts cut off,  
cooled and tamed,  
and free of defilements. 2.1
- Vaḍḍha, foster the path  
that the seers have walked,  
for the attainment of vision,  
and for making an end of suffering.” 3.1
- “Mother, you speak with such assurance  
to me on this matter. 4.1  
My dear mom, I can't help thinking  
that no entanglements are found in you.”
- “Vaḍḍha, not a jot or a skerrick 5.1  
of entanglement is found in me

for any conditions at all,  
whether low, high, or middling.

6.1 All defilements are ended for me,  
meditating and diligent.  
I've attained the three knowledges  
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions."

7.1 "Oh so excellent was the goad  
my mother spurred me with!  
Owing to her compassion, she spoke  
verses on the ultimate goal.

8.1 On hearing her words,  
advised by my mother,  
I was struck with righteous urgency  
for the sake of sanctuary from the yoke.

9.1 Striving, resolute,  
tireless all day and night,  
urged on by my mother,  
I realized supreme peace.<sup>14</sup>

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14. These verses continue in Thag 5.5, so I leave off the close quote.

# The Book of the Elevens

Thig 10.1

Kisāgotamī

*Kisāgotamītherīgāthā*

“Pointing out how the world works, 1.1  
the sages have praised good friendship.  
Associating with good friends,  
even a fool becomes astute.

Associate with true persons, 2.1  
for that is how wisdom grows.  
Should you associate with true persons,  
you would be freed from all suffering.

And you would understand suffering, 3.1  
its origin and cessation,  
the eightfold path,  
and so the four noble truths.”

“‘A woman’s life is painful,’ 4.1  
explained the Buddha,  
guide for those who wish to train,<sup>15</sup>  
‘and for a co-wife it’s especially so.  
After giving birth just once,

---

15. Here, it seems, Kisāgotamī is quoting or paraphrasing the Buddha.

- 5.1           some women even cut their own throat,  
              while refined ladies take poison.  
              Being guilty of killing a person,<sup>16</sup>  
              they both undergo ruin.”<sup>17</sup>
- 6.1           “I was on the road and about to give birth,  
              when I saw my husband dead.  
              I gave birth there on the road  
              before I’d reached my own house.
- 7.1           My two children have died,  
              and on the road my husband lies dead—  
                      oh woe is me!  
              Mother, father, and brother  
              all burning up on the same pyre.”
- 8.1           “Oh woe is you whose family is lost,  
              the suffering you have undergone has no measure;  
              you have been shedding tears  
              for many thousands of lives.”
- 9.1           “While staying in the charnel ground,  
              I saw my son’s flesh being eaten.  
              With my family destroyed, condemned by all,  
              and my husband dead, I realized freedom from death.
- 10.1          I’ve developed the noble eightfold path  
              leading to freedom from death.  
              I’ve realized extinguishment,  
              as seen in the mirror of the Dhamma.
- 11.1          I’ve plucked out the dart,

16. Read *janamāraka'm'ajjhagatā*.

17. *Ubho* here refers to “both” kinds of women who kill themselves. It seems the verse is about post-partum depression.



laid down the burden,  
and done what needed to be done.”  
The senior nun Kisāgotamī,  
her mind released, said this.

# The Book of the Twelves

Thig 11.1

Uppalavaṇṇā

*Uppalavaṇṇātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 “The two of us were co-wives,  
though we were mother and daughter.  
I was struck with a sense of urgency,  
so astonishing and hair-raising!
- 2.1 Curse those filthy sensual pleasures,  
so nasty and thorny,  
where we, both mother and daughter,  
had to be co-wives together.
- 3.1 Seeing the danger in sensual pleasures,  
seeing renunciation as sanctuary,  
I went forth in Rājagaha  
from the lay life to homelessness.
- 4.1 I know my past lives;  
my clairvoyance is clarified;  
I comprehend the minds of others;  
my clairaudience is purified;
- 5.1 I’ve realized the psychic powers,  
and attained the ending of defilements.

I've realized the six kinds of direct knowledge,  
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

I created a four-horsed chariot 6.1  
using my psychic powers.  
Then I bowed at the feet of the Buddha,  
the glorious protector of the world."

"You've come to this sal tree all crowned with flowers, 7.1  
and stand at its root all alone.  
But you have no companion with you,  
silly girl, aren't you afraid of rascals?"

"Even if 100,000 rascals like this 8.1  
were to gang up,  
I'd stir not a hair nor tremble.  
What could you do to me all alone, Māra?

I'll vanish, 9.1  
or I'll enter your belly;  
I could stand between your eyebrows  
and you still wouldn't see me.

I'm the master of my own mind, 10.1  
I've developed the bases of psychic power well.  
I've realized the six kinds of direct knowledge,  
and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

Sensual pleasures are like swords and spears; 11.1  
the aggregates are their chopping block.  
What you call erotic delight  
is now no delight for me.

Relishing is destroyed in every respect, 12.1  
and the mass of darkness is shattered.  
So know this, Wicked One:

you're beaten, terminator!”

# The Book of the Sixteens

Thig 12.1

Puṇṇikā

*Puṇṇātherīgāthā*

“I used to be a water-carrier. Even when it was cold, 1.1  
I would always plunge into the water,<sup>18</sup>  
afraid of my masters’ beatings,<sup>19</sup>  
harassed by fear of abuse and anger.

Brahmin, what are you afraid of, 2.1  
that you always plunge into the water,  
your limbs trembling  
in the freezing cold?”

“Oh, but you already know, 3.1  
Madam Puṇṇikā, when you ask me:  
I am doing good deeds,  
to ward off the wickedness I have done.

Whosoever young or old 4.1

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18. Norman and Ṭhānissaro, evidently under the influence of the commentary, translate in present tense, but *udakamotarim* is an aorist in past tense, as is rendered by Mahendra. If the commentary is correct, she is telling a story from before she ordained. But both the brahmin’s respectful form of addresses (*bhoti*) and the boldness of her teachings suggest she was already a nun.

19. *Ayyānam* is ambiguous; it could be either male or female.

performs a wicked deed,  
by ablution in water they are  
released from their wicked deed.”

5.1 “Who on earth told you this,  
one ignoramus to another:  
‘Actually, by ablution in water one is  
released from a wicked deed.’

6.1 Would not they all go to heaven, then:  
all the frogs and the turtles,  
serpents, crocodiles,  
and other water-dwellers too?

7.1 Butchers of sheep and pigs,  
fishermen, animal trappers,  
bandits, executioners,  
and others of evil deeds:  
by ablution in water they too would be  
released from their wicked deeds.

8.1 If these rivers had carried away  
your bad deeds in the past,  
they would also carry away your good deeds,  
from which you’d be prevented.

9.1 Brahmin, the thing that you are afraid of,  
when you always plunge into the water,  
do not do that very thing,  
don’t let the cold harm your skin.”

10.1 “I have been on the wrong path,  
and you’ve guided me to the noble path.  
Madam, I give to you  
this ablution cloth.”

- “Keep the cloth for yourself, 11.1  
 I do not want it.  
 If you fear suffering,  
 if you don’t like suffering,
- then don’t do bad deeds 12.1  
 either openly or in secret.  
 If you should do a bad deed,  
 or you’re doing one now,
- you won’t be freed from suffering, 13.1  
 though you fly away and flee.  
 If you fear suffering,  
 if you don’t like suffering,
- go for refuge to the Buddha, the unaffected, 14.1  
 to his teaching and to the Sangha.  
 Undertake the precepts,  
 that will be good for you.”
- “I go for refuge to the Buddha, the unaffected, 15.1  
 to his teaching and to the Sangha.  
 I undertake the precepts,  
 that will be good for me.
- I used to be brahmin by kin, 16.1  
 today I truly am a brahmin!  
 Master of the three knowledges,  
     accomplished in wisdom,  
 I’m a scholar, a bathed initiate.”

# The Book of the Twenties

Thig 13.1

Ambapālī

*Ambapālītherīgāthā*

- 1.1 My hair was as black as bees,  
graced with curly tips;  
now old, it has become like hemp bark—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.
- 2.1 Crowned with flowers,  
my head was as fragrant as a perfume box;  
now old, it smells like dog fur—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.
- 3.1 My hair was as thick as a well-planted forest,  
it shone, parted with brush and pins;  
now old, it's patchy and sparse—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.
- 4.1 With plaits of black and ribbons of gold,  
it was so pretty, adorned with braids;  
now old, my head's gone bald—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.
- 5.1 My eyebrows used to look so nice,  
like crescents painted by an artist;



now old, they droop with wrinkles—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

My eyes shone brilliant as gems, 6.1  
wide and indigo;  
ruined by age, they shine no more—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

My nose was like a perfect peak, 7.1  
lovely in my bloom of youth;  
now old, it's shriveled like a pepper;  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

My ear-lobes were so pretty, 8.1  
like lovingly crafted bracelets;  
now old, they droop with wrinkles—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

My teeth used to be so pretty, 9.1  
bright as a jasmine flower;  
now old, they're broken and yellow—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

My singing was sweet as a cuckoo 10.1  
wandering in the forest groves;  
now old, it's patchy and croaking—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

My neck used to be so pretty, 11.1  
like a polished shell of conch;  
now old, it's bowed and bent—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

My arms used to be so pretty, 12.1  
like rounded cross-bars;

with age, they wrinkle and sag as a patala tree—<sup>20</sup>  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

13.1 My hands used to be so pretty,  
adorned with lovely golden rings;  
now old, they're like red radishes—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

14.1 My breasts used to be so pretty,  
swelling, round, close, and high;  
now they droop like water bags—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

15.1 My body used to be so pretty,  
like a polished slab of lustrous gold;  
now it's covered with fine wrinkles—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

16.1 Both my thighs used to be so pretty,  
like an elephant's trunk;  
now old, they're like bamboo—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

17.1 My calves used to be so pretty,  
adorned with cute golden anklets;  
now old, they're like sesame sticks—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

18.1 Both my feet used to be so pretty,  
plump as if with cotton-wool;  
now old, they're cracked and wrinkly—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

19.1 This bag of bones once was such,

---

20. The patala has a characteristic bulging and wrinkly growth beneath the branches.

but now it's withered, home to so much pain;  
like a house in decay with plaster crumbling—  
the word of the truthful one is confirmed.

## Thig 13.2

## Rohinī

*Rohinītherīgāthā*

“You fell asleep saying ‘ascetics’; 1.1  
you woke up saying ‘ascetics’;  
you only praise ascetics, madam—  
surely you’ll become an ascetic.

You provide ascetics 2.1  
with abundant food and drink.  
I ask you now, Rohinī:  
why do you like ascetics?

They don’t like to work, they’re lazy, 3.1  
they live on charity;  
always on the lookout, greedy for sweets—  
so why do you like ascetics?”

“Dad, for a long time now 4.1  
you’ve questioned me about ascetics.  
I shall extol for you  
their wisdom, ethics, and vigor.

They like to work, they’re not lazy; 5.1  
by giving up greed and hate,  
they do the best kind of work—  
that’s why I like ascetics.

As for the three roots of evil, 6.1  
by pure deeds they shake them off.

They have given up all wickedness—  
that's why I like ascetics.

7.1 Their bodily actions are pure;  
their actions of speech likewise;  
their actions of mind are pure—  
that's why I like ascetics.

8.1 Immaculate as a conch-shell,  
they're pure inside and out,  
full of bright qualities—  
that's why I like ascetics.

9.1 They're learned and memorize the teaching,  
noble, living righteously,  
teaching the text and its meaning:  
that's why I like ascetics.

10.1 They're learned and memorize the teaching,  
noble, living righteously,  
unified in mind, and mindful—  
that's why I like ascetics.

11.1 Traveling afar, and mindful,  
thoughtful in counsel, not restless,  
they understand the end of suffering—  
that's why I like ascetics.

12.1 When they leave a village,  
they don't look back with longing,  
but proceed without concern—  
that's why I like ascetics.

13.1 They hoard no goods in storerooms,  
nor in pots or baskets.

They seek food prepared by others—<sup>21</sup>  
that's why I like ascetics.

They don't receive gold coins, 14.1  
or gold or silver;  
feeding on whatever comes that day,  
that's why I like ascetics.

They have gone forth from different families, 15.1  
even different countries,  
and yet they all love one another—  
that's why I like ascetics.”

“Dear Rohinī, it was truly for our benefit 16.1  
that you were born in our family!  
You have faith and such keen respect  
for the Buddha, his teaching, and the Sangha.

For you understand this 17.1  
supreme field of merit.  
These ascetics will henceforth  
receive our religious donation, too.

For there we will place our sacrifice, 18.1  
and it shall be abundant.”  
“If you fear suffering,  
if you don't like suffering,

go for refuge to the Buddha, the unaffected, 19.1  
to his teaching and to the Sangha.  
Undertake the precepts,  
that will be good for you.”

---

21. “Prepared by others” is *pariniṭṭhita*. The same phrase is at Thig 13.2:13.3, where it is spelled *para-* (“other”), which I assume is correct. Mendicants do not cook, but rely on what is cooked by others.

- 20.1 “I go for refuge to the Buddha, the unaffected,  
to his teaching and to the Sangha.  
I undertake the precepts,  
that will be good for me.
- 21.1 I used to be brahmin by kin,  
now I genuinely am a brahmin.  
Master of the three knowledges, I’m a scholar,  
a knowledge master, a bathed initiate.”

## Thig 13.3

## Cāpā

*Cāpātherīgāthā*

- 1.1 “Once I carried a hermit’s staff,  
but these days I hunt deer.  
My desires have made me unable to cross  
from the awful marsh to the far shore.
- 2.1 Thinking me so in love with her,  
Cāpā kept our son happy.  
Having cut Cāpā’s bond,  
I’ll go forth once again.”
- 3.1 “Don’t be mad at me, great hero!  
Don’t be mad at me, great sage!  
If you’re mired in anger you can’t stay pure,  
let alone be fervent.”
- 4.1 “I’m going to leave Nālā!  
For who’d stay here at Nālā!  
With their figures, the women trap  
ascetics who live righteously.”
- 5.1 “Please, Kāḷa, come back to me.

Enjoy pleasures like you did before.  
I'll be under your control,  
along with any relatives I have."

"Cāpā, if even a quarter  
of what you say were true,  
it would be a splendid thing  
for a man in love with you!" 6.1

"Kāḷa, I am like a sprouting iris  
flowering on a mountain top,  
like a blossoming pomegranate,  
like a patala tree on an isle; 7.1

my limbs are anointed with yellow sandalwood,  
and I wear the finest Kāśi cloth:  
when I am so very beautiful,  
how can you abandon me and leave?" 8.1

"You're like a fowler  
who wants to catch a bird;  
but you won't trap me  
with your captivating form." 9.1

"But this child, my fruit,  
was begotten by you, Kāḷa.  
When I have this child,  
how can you abandon me and leave?" 10.1

"The wise give up  
children, family, and wealth.  
Great heroes go forth  
like elephants breaking their bonds." 11.1

"Now, this son of yours:  
I'll strike him to the ground right here, 12.1

with a stick or with a knife!  
Grieving your son, you will not leave.”

- 13.1 “Even if you feed our son  
to jackals and dogs,  
I’d never return again, you bitch,  
not even for the child’s sake.”
- 14.1 “Well then, sir, tell me,  
where will you go, Kāḷa?  
To what village or town,  
city or capital?”
- 15.1 “Last time we had followers,  
we weren’t ascetics, we just thought we were.  
We wandered from village to village,  
to cities and capitals.
- 16.1 But now the Blessed One, the Buddha,  
back on the bank of the Nerañjara River,  
teaches the Dhamma so that living creatures  
may abandon all suffering.  
I shall go to his presence,  
he shall be my Teacher.”
- 17.1 “Now please convey my respects  
to the supreme protector of the world.  
Circling him to your right,  
dedicate my religious donation.”
- 18.1 “This is the proper thing to do,  
just as you have said to me.  
I’ll convey your respects  
to the supreme protector of the world.  
Circling him to my right,  
I’ll dedicate your religious donation.”



Then Kāḷa set out 19.1  
 back to the bank of the Nerañjara River.  
 He saw the Awakened One  
 teaching the state free of death:

suffering, suffering's origin, 20.1  
 suffering's transcendence,  
 and the noble eightfold path  
 that leads to the stilling of suffering.

He paid homage at his feet, 21.1  
 circling him to his right,  
 and conveyed Cāpā's dedication;  
 then he went forth to homelessness.  
 He attained the three knowledges,  
 and fulfilled the Buddha's instructions.

### Thig 13.4

## Sundarī

### *Sundarītherīgāthā*

“Before, good lady, when feeding 1.1  
 your departed children,<sup>22</sup>  
 you'd be racked with despair  
 all day and all night.

Today, brahmin lady, you have fed 2.1  
 all seven children.  
 Vāsetṭhi, what is the reason why  
 you're not so filled with despair?”

“Many hundreds of children, 3.1

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22. Read *khādamānā* as causative per Norman. But for context, see the funeral rites in Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 8.8.1.1, where the first duty is to make sure the departed are fed for their journey in the next life.

hundreds of family circles,  
both mine and yours, brahmin,  
have been fed in the past.

4.1 Having known the escape  
from rebirth and death  
I neither grieve nor lament,  
nor do I despair.”

5.1 “Wow, Vaseṭṭhī, the words you speak  
really are amazing!  
Whose teaching did you understand  
that you say these things?”

6.1 “Brahmin, the Awakened One  
back at the city of Mithilā,  
teaches the Dhamma so that living creatures  
may abandon all suffering.

7.1 After hearing the perfected one’s teaching,  
brahmin, which is free of all attachments,  
having understood the true teaching there,  
I’ve swept away grief for children.”

8.1 “I too shall go  
to the city of Mithilā.  
Hopefully the Buddha may release me  
from all suffering.”

9.1 The brahmin saw the Buddha,  
liberated, free of attachments.  
He taught him the Dhamma,  
the sage gone beyond suffering:

10.1 suffering, suffering’s origin,  
suffering’s transcendence,

and the noble eightfold path  
that leads to the stilling of suffering.

Having understood the true teaching there, 11.1  
he chose to go forth.  
Three days later  
Sujāta realized the three knowledges.

“Please, charioteer, go; 12.1  
take back this carriage.  
Bidding my brahmin lady good health, say:  
“The brahmin has now gone forth.  
After three days,  
Sujāta realized the three knowledges.”

Then taking the carriage, 13.1  
along with a thousand coins, the charioteer  
bade the brahmin lady good health, and said:  
“The brahmin has now gone forth.  
After three days,  
Sujāta realized the three knowledges.”

Hearing that the brahmin had the three knowledges, 14.1  
the lady replied:  
“I present to you this horse and carriage,  
O charioteer, along with 1000 coins,  
and a full bowl as a gift.”

“Keep the horse and carriage, lady, 15.1  
along with the thousand coins.  
I too shall go forth in his presence,  
the one of such splendid wisdom.”

“Elephants, cattle, jeweled earrings, 16.1  
such opulent domestic wealth:  
having given it up, your father went forth,

enjoy these riches Sundarī,  
you are the family heir.”

- 17.1 “Elephants, cattle, jeweled earrings,  
such delightful domestic wealth:  
having given it up, my father went forth,  
racked by grief for his son.  
I too shall go forth,  
racked by grief for my brother.”
- 18.1 “Sundarī, may the wish you desire  
come true.  
Leftovers as gleanings,  
and cast-off rags as robes—  
make do with these,  
free of defilements regarding the next life.”
- 19.1 “Ma’am, while I am still a trainee nun,  
my clairvoyance is clarified;  
I know my past lives,  
the places I used to live.
- 20.1 Relying on a fine lady like you,  
a senior nun who beautifies the Sangha,  
I’ve attained the three knowledges,  
and fulfilled the Buddha’s instructions.
- 21.1 Give me permission ma’am,  
I wish to go to Sāvattī,  
where I shall roar my lion’s roar  
before the best of Buddhas.”
- 22.1 “Sundarī, see the Teacher!

Snow gold in tint,  
     with sun-golden skin;<sup>23</sup>  
 tamer of the untamed,  
 the Awakened One who fears nothing  
     from any quarter.”

“See Sundarī coming, 23.1  
 liberated, free of attachments.  
 desireless, detached,  
 her task completed, without defilements.”

“Having set forth from Varanasi 24.1  
 and come to your presence, great hero,  
 your disciple Sundarī  
 bows at your feet.

You are the Buddha, you are the Teacher, 25.1  
 I am your rightful daughter, brahmin,  
 born of your mouth.  
 I’ve completed the task  
     and am free of defilements.”

“Then welcome, good lady, 26.1  
 you’re by no means unwelcome.  
 For this is how the tamed come  
 bowing at the Teacher’s feet;  
 desireless, detached,  
 the task completed, without defilements.”

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23. *Hema* (“snow gold”) evokes the golden radiance of a snowy mountain in the dawn light, a blessing of the gods that, it may easily be imagined, leaves its traces in the gold found in abundance in its streams. | Gold is also called *harita* (“yellow” or “sun”) at Thag 2.22:2.2 and Atharvaveda 11.2.12a.

## Thig 13.5

## Subhā, the Smith's Daughter

*Subhākammāradhītuttherīgāthā*

- 1.1 “I was so young, my clothes so fresh,  
at that time I heard the teaching.  
Being diligent,  
I comprehended the truth;
- 2.1 and then I became profoundly dispassionate  
towards all sensual pleasures.  
Seeing fear in substantial reality,  
I longed for renunciation.
- 3.1 Giving up my family circle,  
bonded servants and workers,  
and my flourishing village fields,  
so delightful and pleasant,
- 4.1 I went forth;  
all that is no small wealth.  
Now that I’ve gone forth in faith like this,  
in the true teaching so well proclaimed,
- 5.1 since I desire to have nothing,  
it would not be appropriate  
to take back gold and currency,  
having already got rid of them.
- 6.1 Currency or gold  
doesn’t lead to peace and awakening.  
It doesn’t befit an ascetic;  
it’s not the wealth of the noble ones;
- 7.1 it’s greed and vanity,  
confusion and growing decadence,

dubious and troublesome—  
there is nothing lasting there.

Depraved and heedless, 8.1  
unenlightened folk, their hearts corrupt,  
fight each other,  
creating conflict.

Killing, caging, misery, 9.1  
loss, grief, and lamentation;  
those sunk in sensual pleasures  
see many disastrous things.

My family, why do you urge me on 10.1  
to pleasures, as if you were my enemies?  
You know I've gone forth,  
seeing fear in sensual pleasures.

It's not due to gold, coined or uncoined, 11.1  
that defilements come to an end.  
Sensual pleasures are enemies and murderers,  
hostile forces that bind you to thorns.

My family, why do you urge me on 12.1  
to pleasures, as if you were my enemies?  
You know I've gone forth,  
shaven, wrapped in my outer robe.

Leftovers as gleanings, 13.1  
and cast-off rags as robes—  
that's what's fitting for me,  
the essentials of the homeless life.

Great seers expel sensual pleasures, 14.1  
both human and heavenly.  
Safe in their sanctuary, they are freed,

having found unshakable happiness.

- 15.1 May I not encounter sensual pleasures,  
for no shelter is found in them.  
Sensual pleasures are enemies and murderers,  
as painful as a mass of fire.
- 16.1 This is a roadblock, a threat,  
full of distress and thorns;  
it is a blind spot, uneven,<sup>24</sup>  
a great gateway to confusion.
- 17.1 Hazardous and terrifying,  
sensual pleasures are like a snake's head,  
where fools delight,  
the blind ordinary folk.
- 18.1 Stuck in the swamp of sensuality,  
there are so many ignorant in the world.  
They know nothing of the end  
of rebirth and death.
- 19.1 Because of sensual pleasures,  
people jump right on to the path  
that goes to a bad place.  
So many walk the path  
that brings disease onto themselves.
- 20.1 That's how sensual pleasures create enemies;  
they are so tormenting, so corrupting,  
trapping beings with worldly pleasures of the flesh,  
they are nothing less than the bonds of death.

24. The imagery of a wild road connects *gedha* with AN 3.50:2.2, where it is to be traced to Sanskrit *gudh* or *gunṭh* in the sense “enclosure, hiding place, blind spot”.



Maddening, enticing, 21.1  
sensual pleasures derange the mind.  
They're a snare laid by Māra  
for the corruption of beings.

Sensual pleasures are infinitely dangerous, 22.1  
they're full of suffering, a terrible poison;  
offering little gratification, they're makers of strife,  
withering bright qualities away.

Since I've created so much ruination 23.1  
because of sensual pleasures,  
I will not relapse to them again,  
but will always delight in extinguishment.

Having once made strife 24.1  
for the sake of sensual pleasures,  
now I am longing for that cool state.  
I shall meditate diligently  
for the ending of all fetters.

Sorrowless, stainless, secure: 25.1  
I follow that path,  
the straight noble eightfold way  
by which the seers have crossed over."

"Look at this: Subhā the smith's daughter, 26.1  
standing firm in the teaching.  
She has entered the imperturbable state,  
meditating at the root of a tree.

It's just eight days since she went forth, 27.1  
full of faith in the beautiful teaching.  
Guided by Uppalavaṇṇā,  
she is master of the three knowledges,  
conqueror of death.

- 28.1      This one is freed from slavery and debt,  
            a nun with faculties developed.  
            Unyoked from all yokes,  
            she has completed the task  
                    and is free of defilements.”
- 29.1      Thus did Sakka, lord of all creatures,  
            along with a host of gods,  
            having come by their psychic powers,  
            honor Subhā, the smith’s daughter.

# The Book of the Thirties

Thig 14.1

## Subhā of Jīvaka’s Mango Grove

*Subhājīvakambavanikātherīgāthā*

Going to the lovely mango grove 1.1  
of Jīvaka, the nun Subhā  
was held up by a rascal.  
Subhā said this to him:

“What harm have I done to you, 2.1  
that you stand in my way?  
Sir, it’s not proper that a man  
should touch a woman gone forth.

This training was taught by the Holy One, 3.1  
it is a serious matter in my teacher’s instructions.  
I am pure and rid of blemishes,  
so why do you stand in my way?

One whose mind is sullied against one unsullied; 4.1  
one who is lustful against one free of lust;  
unblemished, my heart is freed in every respect,  
so why do you stand in my way?”

“You’re young and flawless— 5.1  
what will going-forth do for you?

Throw away the ocher robe,  
come and play in the blossom grove.

6.1 Everywhere, the scent of pollen wafts sweet,  
born of the flowering woods.  
The start of spring is a happy time—  
come and play in the blossom grove.

7.1 And trees crested with flowers  
cry out, as it were, in the gale.  
But what kind of fun will you have  
if you plunge into the woods all alone?

8.1 Frequented by packs of predators,  
and cow elephants aroused by rutting bulls;  
you wish to go without a friend  
to the deserted, awe-inspiring forest.

9.1 Like a doll made of glittering gold,<sup>25</sup>  
like a nymph wandering in a park of colorful vines,  
your matchless beauty will shine  
in graceful clothes of exquisite muslin.

10.1 I'll be under your sway,  
if we are to stay in the forest.  
I love no creature more than you,  
O pixie with such captivating eyes.<sup>26</sup>

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25. Arthaśāstra 2.13.51 describes how to alloy the *tapanīya* ("glittering gold") that is ready to be worked.

26. "Pixie" is *kinnarī*, this marking the only appearance of these charming woodland sprites in early Pali; but see the synonymous *kimpurisa* at AN 2.60:1.1. They share with the *gandhabba* the attributes of being divine musicians, sometimes half-horse (or later, half-bird), and being sensual lovers; but where the *gandhabba* is associated with licentiousness, the *kinnara* and *kinnarī* live together as a perfect dyad of lovers, ever entranced with one another. They are spirits of nature, hidden in the mountains, and threatened by human encroachment (Ja 485). Occasionally, however, a human tribe in the mountains of

Were you to take up my invitation— 11.1  
 'Come, be happy, and live in a house'—  
 you'll stay in a longhouse sheltered from wind;  
 let the ladies look to your needs.

Dressed in exquisite muslin, 12.1  
 put on your garlands and your cosmetics.  
 I'll make all sorts of adornments for you,  
 of lustrous gold and gems and pearls.

Climb onto a costly bed, 13.1  
 its coverlet so clean and nice,  
 with a new woolen mattress,  
 so fragrant, sprinkled with sandalwood.

As a blue lily risen from the water 14.1  
 remains untouched by men,  
 so too, O chaste and holy lady,  
 your limbs grow old unshared."

"This carcass is full of putrefaction, it swells 15.1  
 the charnel ground, for its nature is to fall apart.  
 What do you think is so essential in it  
 that you stare at me so crazily?"

"Your eyes are like those of a doe, 16.1  
 or a pixie in the mountains;  
 seeing them, erotic delight  
 swells in me all the more.

Your eyes are like a blue lily's bud 17.1

---

Kashmir is called Kinnara (= Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh?). | The beauty of the pixie's eyes are praised at Ja 458:1.3, while the phrase "captivating eyes" (*mandalocana*) is used of a divine maiden at DN 21:1.5.26.

in your flawless face  
     shining like coruscant gold.<sup>27</sup>  
 Seeing them, sensual excitement  
 swells in me all the more.

- 18.1      Though you may wander far, I'll still think of you,  
             with lashes so long and eyes so bright.<sup>28</sup>  
             I love no eyes more than yours,  
             O pixie with such bashful eyes.”
- 19.1      “You’re setting out on the wrong road!  
             You’re looking to take the moon for your toy!  
             You’re trying to leap over Mount Meru!  
             You, who are hunting a child of the Buddha!
- 20.1      For in this world with all its gods,  
             there will be no more lust anywhere in me.  
             I don’t even know what kind it could be,  
             it’s been smashed root and all by the path.
- 21.1      Cast out like sparks from fiery coals,  
             it’s worth no more than a bowl of poison.  
             I don’t even see what kind it could be,  
             it’s been smashed root and all by the path.
- 22.1      Well may you try to seduce the type of lady  
             who has not reflected on these things,  
             or who has never attended the Teacher:  
             but *this* is a lady who knows—now you’re in trouble!
- 23.1      No matter if I am reviled or praised,

27. For “coruscant” (*hāṭaka*) gold, see AN 3.70:38.4.

28. The *dassane* (plural) are seen by him, so they must be the “eyes”. | In this poem, the English word “eye” must serve for five Pali words: *cakkhu*, *locana*, *akkhi*, and *dassana* are all from roots of “seeing”, while *nayana* is from the root sense “leading”.

or feel pleasure or pain: I stay mindful.  
Knowing that conditions are ugly,  
my mind clings to nothing.

I am a disciple of the Holy One, 24.1  
riding in the carriage of the eightfold path.  
The dart pulled out, free of defilements,  
I'm happy to have reached an empty place.

I've seen brightly painted 25.1  
dolls and wooden puppets,  
tied to sticks and strings,  
and made to dance in many ways.

But when the sticks and strings are taken off— 26.1  
loosed, disassembled, dismantled,  
irrecoverable, stripped to parts—  
on what could the mind be fixed?

That's what my body is really like, 27.1  
without those things it can't go on.  
This being so,  
on what could the mind be fixed?

It's like when you saw a mural made 28.1  
by painting yellow on a wall,  
and your vision was deceived by that—  
the perception 'human' is pointless.

Like an illusion cast before you, 29.1  
or a golden tree in a dream,  
you chase what is hollow, blind man,  
like a painted doll among the people.

Like a ball in a socket, 30.1  
with a pupil in the middle, and tears,

and mucus comes from there as well,  
different eye-parts are lumped together.”

- 31.1 Having plucked it out, the fair-eyed lady<sup>29</sup>  
was undismayed, unsnared in mind.<sup>30</sup>  
“Come now, take this eye,”  
she said, and gave it to the man right then.

- 32.1 And right then he lost his lust,  
and asked for her forgiveness:  
“May you be well, O chaste and holy lady;  
such a thing will not happen again.

- 33.1 Attacking a person such as this  
is like holding on to a blazing fire,  
or grabbing a deadly viper!  
May you be well, please forgive me.”

- 34.1 When that nun was released  
she went to the presence of the excellent Buddha.  
Seeing the one with excellent marks of merit,  
her eye became just as it was before.

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29. For *cārudassanā*, compare Sanskrit *cārulocanā*, “she whose eyes are fair”.  
Thig 14.1:18.2 above has already established the sense “eye” for *dassana*.

30. For *pajjittha*, compare Sanskrit *apādi*, “fall into ruin”.



# The Book of the Forties

Thig 15.1

Isidāsī

*Isidāsītherīgāthā*

In Pāṭaliputta, the cream of the world, 1.1  
the city named for a flower,  
there were two nuns from the Sakyan clan,  
both of them ladies of quality.

One was named Isidāsī, the second Bodhī. 2.1  
They both were accomplished in ethics,  
lovers of meditation and chanting,  
learned, crushing corruptions.

They wandered for alms and had their meal. 3.1  
When they had washed their bowls,  
they sat happily in a private place  
and started a conversation.

“You’re so lovely, Mistress Isidāsī, 4.1  
your youth has not yet faded.  
What problem did you see that made you  
dedicate your life to renunciation?”

Being pressed like this in private, 5.1  
Isidāsī, skilled in teaching Dhamma,

voiced the following words.  
 “Bodhī, hear how I went forth.

- 6.1 In the fine town of Ujjenī,  
 my father was a financier, a good and moral man.  
 I was his only daughter,  
 dear, beloved, and cherished.
- 7.1 Then some suitors came for me  
 from the top family of Sāketa.  
 They were sent by a financier abounding in wealth,  
 to whom my father then gave me as daughter-in-law.
- 8.1 Come morning and come night,  
 I bowed with my head to the feet  
 of my father and mother-in-law,  
 just as I had been told.
- 9.1 Whenever I saw my husband’s sisters,  
 his brothers, his servants,  
 or even he, my one and only,  
 I nervously gave them a seat.
- 10.1 Whatever they wanted—food and drink,  
 treats, or whatever was in the cupboard—  
 I brought out and offered to them,  
 ensuring each got what was fitting.
- 11.1 Having risen bright and early,  
 I approached the main house,  
 washed my hands and feet,  
 and went to my husband with joined palms.
- 12.1 Taking a comb, adornments,  
 eyeshadow, and a mirror,  
 I myself did the makeup for my husband,

as if I were his beautician.

I myself cooked the rice; 13.1  
 I myself washed the pots.  
 I looked after my husband  
 like a mother her only child.

Thus I showed my devotion to him,<sup>31</sup> 14.1  
 a loyal, virtuous, and humble servant,  
 getting up early, and working tirelessly:  
 yet still my husband did me wrong.

He said to his mother and father: 15.1  
 ‘I’ll take my leave and go,  
 I can’t stand to live together with Isidāsī  
 staying in the same house.’

‘Son, don’t speak like this! 16.1  
 Isidāsī is astute and competent,  
 she gets up early and works tirelessly,  
 son, why doesn’t she please you?’

‘She hasn’t done anything to hurt me, 17.1  
 but I just can’t stand to live with her.  
 As far as I’m concerned, she’s just horrible.  
 I’ve had enough, I’ll take my leave and go.’

When they heard his words, 18.1  
 my father-in-law and mother-in-law asked me:  
 ‘What did you do wrong?  
 Boldly tell how it occurred.’

‘I’ve done nothing wrong, 19.1

---

31. *Bhatti* “devotion” in this line is followed by *anuratta* (“loyal”) in the next. The persistence of senses of these words is shown by their occurrence together in the much later *Haribhaktikalpalatikā* 1.10 (*bhaktānuraktam*).

I haven't hurt him, or said anything bad.  
 What can I possibly do,  
 when my husband finds me so hateful?'

20.1 They led me back to my father's home,  
 distraught, overcome with suffering, and said:  
 'By caring for our son,  
 we've lost her, so lovely and lucky!'

21.1 Next my dad gave me to the household  
 of a second wealthy family-man.  
 For this he got half the bride-price  
 of that which the financier paid.

22.1 In his house I also lived a month,  
 before he too wanted me gone;  
 though I served him like a slave,  
 virtuous and doing no wrong.

23.1 My father then spoke to a beggar for alms,  
 a tamer of others and of himself:  
 'Be my son-in-law;  
 set aside your tonsure-cloth and pot.'

24.1 He stayed a fortnight before he said to my dad:  
 'Give me back my tonsure-cloth,  
 my pot and my mug—<sup>32</sup>  
 I'll wander begging for alms again.'

25.1 So then my mum and my dad  
 and my whole group of relatives said:  
 'What has not been done for you here?  
 Quickly, tell us what we can do for you!'

---

32. The words here are not the normal terms for a mendicant's possessions. Perhaps these were terms used in a non-Buddhist tradition, or else the author is aiming at poetic effect.

When they spoke to him like this he said, 26.1  
 ‘If I can make do for myself, that is enough.  
 I can’t stand to live together with Isidāsī  
 staying in the same house.’

Released, he left. 27.1  
 But I sat all alone contemplating:  
 ‘Having taken my leave, I’ll go,  
 either to die or to go forth.’

But then Mistress Jinadattā, 28.1  
 learned and virtuous,  
 who had memorized the monastic law,  
 came resorting to my dad’s house for alms.

When I saw her, 29.1  
 I got up from my seat and prepared it for her.  
 When she had taken her seat,  
 I honored her feet and offered her a meal,

satisfying her with food and drink, 30.1  
 treats, or whatever was in the cupboard.  
 Then I said:  
 ‘Ma’am, I wish to go forth!’

But my dad said to me: 31.1  
 ‘Child, practice Dhamma right here!  
 With food and drink  
 satisfy ascetics and the twice-born.’<sup>33</sup>

Then I said to my dad, 32.1  
 crying, my joined palms raised to him:  
 ‘I’ve done bad things in the past;

---

33. “Twice-born” (*dvijātī*) is an epithet of brahmins, referring to material and spiritual births. It is normally found only in later literature, and this might be the first recorded usage of the idiom.

I shall wear that bad deed away.'

- 33.1 And my dad said to me:  
'May you attain awakening, the highest state,  
and may you find the extinguishment  
that was realized by the best of men!'
- 34.1 I bowed down to my mother and father,  
and my whole group of relatives;  
and then, seven days after going forth,  
I realized the three knowledges.
- 35.1 I know my last seven lives;  
I shall relate to you the deeds  
of which this life is the fruit and result:  
focus your whole mind on that.
- 36.1 In the city of Erakacca  
I was a goldsmith with lots of money.  
Drunk on the pride of youth,  
I had sex with someone else's wife.
- 37.1 Having passed away from there,  
I burned in hell for a long time.  
Rising up from there  
I was conceived in a monkey's womb.
- 38.1 When I was only seven days old,  
I was castrated by the monkey chief.  
This was the fruit of that deed,  
because of adultery with another's wife.
- 39.1 Having passed away from there,  
passing away in Sindhava grove,  
I was conceived in the womb  
of a lame, one-eyed she-goat.

I carried children on my back for twelve years, 40.1  
 and all the while I was castrated,  
 worm-eaten, and tail-less,  
 because of adultery with another's wife.

Having passed away from there, 41.1  
 I was reborn in a cow  
 owned by a cattle merchant.  
 A red calf, castrated, for twelve months

I drew a big plow. 42.1  
 I shouldered a cart,  
 blind, tail-less, feeble,  
 because of adultery with another's wife.

Having passed away from there, 43.1  
 I was born of a slave in the street,  
 with neither male nor female parts,<sup>34</sup>  
 because of adultery with another's wife.

I died at thirty years of age, 44.1  
 and was reborn as a girl in a carter's family.  
 We were poor, of little wealth,  
 greatly oppressed by creditors.

Because of the huge interest we owed, 45.1  
 I was dragged away screaming,  
 taken by force from the family home  
 by a caravan leader.

When I was sixteen years old, 46.1

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34. The text is literally "neither woman nor man". The preceding verses speak repeatedly of castration, making it clear that this means having no genitals, rather than simply being a person who is non-binary.

seeing I was a girl of marriageable age,<sup>35</sup>  
 his son confined me as his wife—<sup>36</sup>  
 Giridāsa was his name.

47.1 He also had another wife,  
 a virtuous and well-known lady of quality,  
 loyal to her husband;  
 yet I stirred up resentment in her.

48.1 As the fruit of that deed,  
 they abandoned me and left,  
 though I served them like a slave.  
 Now I've made an end to this as well."

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35. For *pattayobbanam* as "come of age", i.e. old enough to have sex, see Ja 532:80.4.

36. Like an ox in a pen (AN 6.60:3.1).



# The Great Book

Thig 16.1

Sumedhā

*Sumedhātherīgāthā*

In Mantāvātī city, Sumedhā,  
the daughter of King Koṇca's chief queen,  
was converted by those  
who practice the Buddha's teaching. 1.1

She was virtuous, a brilliant speaker,  
learned, and trained in the Buddha's instructions. 2.1  
She went up to her mother and father and said:  
"Pay heed, both of you!

I delight in extinguishment! 3.1  
No life is eternal, not even that of the gods;  
what then of sensual pleasures, so hollow,  
offering little gratification and much distress.

Sensual pleasures are bitter as the venom of a snake,  
yet fools are infatuated by them. 4.1  
Sent to hell for a very long time,  
they are beaten and tortured.

Those who grow in wickedness 5.1

always sorrow in the underworld  
     due to their own bad deeds.  
 They're fools, unrestrained in body,  
 mind, and speech.

- 6.1      Those witless, senseless fools,  
           trapped by the origin of suffering,  
           are ignorant, not understanding the noble truths  
           when they are being taught.
- 7.1      Most people, mum, ignorant of the truths  
           taught by the excellent Buddha,  
           look forward to the next life,  
           longing for rebirth among the gods.
- 8.1      Yet even rebirth among the gods  
           in an impermanent state is not eternal.  
           But fools are not scared  
           of being reborn time and again.
- 9.1      Four lower realms and two other realms  
           may be gained somehow or other.  
           But for those who end up in a lower realm,  
           there is no way to go forth in the hells.
- 10.1     May you both grant me permission to go forth  
           in the dispensation of him of the ten powers.  
           Living at ease, I shall apply myself  
           to giving up rebirth and death.
- 11.1     What's the point in hope, in a new life,  
           in this useless, hollow body?  
           Grant me permission, I shall go forth  
           to make an end of craving for a new life.
- 12.1     A Buddha has arisen, the time has come,

the unlucky moment has passed.  
 As long as I live I'll never betray  
 my ethical precepts or my celibate path."

Then Sumedhā said to her parents: 13.1  
 "So long as I remain a lay person,  
 I'll refuse to eat any food,  
 until I've fallen under the sway of death."

Upset, her mother burst into tears, 14.1  
 while her father, though grieved,  
 tried his best to persuade her  
 as she lay collapsed on the upper floor of the long-  
 house.

"Get up child, why do you grieve so? 15.1  
 You're already betrothed to be married!  
 King Anīkaratta the handsome  
 is in Vāraṇavatī: he is your betrothed.

You shall be the chief queen, 16.1  
 wife of King Anīkaratta.  
 Ethical precepts, the celibate path—  
 going forth is hard to do, my child.

As a royal there is command, wealth, authority, 17.1  
 and the happiness of possessions.  
 Enjoy sensual pleasures while you're still young!  
 Let your wedding take place, my child!"

Then Sumedhā said to him: 18.1  
 "Let this not come to pass! Existence is hollow!  
 I shall either go forth or die,  
 but I shall never marry.

Why cling to this rotting body so foul, 19.1

stinking of fluids,  
 a horrifying water-bag carcass,  
 always oozing, full of filth?

- 20.1      Knowing it like I do, what's the point?  
             A carcass is vile, smeared with flesh and blood,  
             food for birds and swarms of worms—  
             why have we been given it?
- 21.1      Before long the body, bereft of consciousness,  
             is carried out to the charnel ground,  
             to be tossed aside like an old log  
             by relatives in disgust.
- 22.1      When they've tossed it away in the charnel ground,  
             to be eaten by others, your own parents  
             bathe themselves, disgusted;  
             what then of people at large?
- 23.1      They're attached to this hollow carcass,  
             this mass of sinews and bone;  
             this rotting body  
             full of saliva, tears, feces, and pus.
- 24.1      If anyone were to dissect it,  
             turning it inside out,  
             the unbearable stench  
             would disgust even their own mother.
- 25.1      Rationally examining  
             the aggregates, elements, and sense fields  
             as conditioned, rooted in birth, suffering—  
             why would I wish for marriage?
- 26.1      Let three hundred sharp swords  
             fall on my body everyday!

Even if the slaughter lasted 100 years  
it'd be worth it if it led to the end of suffering.

One who understands the Teacher's words 27.1  
would put up with this slaughter:  
'Long for you is transmigration  
being killed time and time again.'

Among gods and humans, 28.1  
in the realm of animals or that of titans,  
among the ghosts or in the hells,  
endless killings are seen.

The hells are full of killing, 29.1  
for the corrupt who have fallen to the underworld.  
Even among the gods there is no shelter,  
for no happiness excels extinguishment.

Those who are committed to the dispensation 30.1  
of him of the ten powers attain extinguishment.  
Living at ease, they apply themselves  
to giving up rebirth and death.

On this very day, dad, I shall renounce: 31.1  
what's to enjoy in hollow riches?  
I'm disillusioned with sensual pleasures,  
they're like vomit, made like a palm stump."

As she spoke thus to her father, 32.1  
Anīkaratta, to whom she was betrothed,  
approached from Vāraṇavatī  
at the time appointed for the marriage.

Then Sumedhā took up a knife, 33.1  
and cut off her hair, so black, thick, and soft.  
Shutting herself in the longhouse,

she entered the first absorption.

- 34.1 And as she entered it there,  
Anīkaratta arrived at the city.  
Then in the longhouse, Sumedhā  
well developed the perception of impermanence.
- 35.1 As she investigated in meditation,  
Anīkaratta quickly climbed the stairs.  
His limbs adorned with gems  
and honey-yellow gold,  
he begged Sumedhā with joined palms:
- 36.1 “As a royal there is command, wealth, authority,  
and the happiness of possessions.  
Enjoy sensual pleasures while you’re still young!  
Sensual pleasures are hard to find in the world!
- 37.1 I’ve handed royalty to you—  
enjoy riches, give gifts!  
Don’t be sad;  
your parents are upset.”
- 38.1 Sumedhā, having no use for sensual pleasures,  
and having done away with delusion,  
spoke right back:  
“Do not take pleasure in sensuality!  
See the danger in sensual pleasures!
- 39.1 Mandhātā, king of four continents,  
foremost in enjoying sensual pleasures,  
died unsated,  
his desires unfulfilled.
- 40.1 Were the seven jewels to rain from the sky  
all over the ten directions,

there would be no sating of sensual pleasures:  
people die insatiable.

Like a butcher's knife and chopping board, 41.1  
sensual pleasures are like a snake's head.  
They burn like a fire-brand,  
they resemble a skeleton.

Sensual pleasures are impermanent and unstable, 42.1  
they're full of suffering, a terrible poison;  
like a hot iron ball,  
the root of misery, their fruit is pain.

Sensual pleasures are like fruits of a tree, 43.1  
like scraps of meat, painful,  
they trick you like a dream;  
sensual pleasures are like borrowed goods.

Sensual pleasures are like swords and spears; 44.1  
a disease, a boil, misery and trouble.  
Like a pit of glowing coals,  
the root of misery, fear and slaughter.

Thus sensual pleasures have been explained 45.1  
to be obstructions, so full of suffering.  
Please leave! As for me,  
I have no trust in a new life.

What can someone else do for me 46.1  
when their own head is burning?  
When stalked by old age and death,  
you should strive to destroy them."

She opened the door 47.1  
and saw her parents with Anikaratta,  
sitting crying on the floor.

And so she said this:

- 48.1 “Transmigration is long for fools,  
crying again and again  
at that with no known beginning—  
the death of a father,  
the killing of a brother or of themselves.
- 49.1 Remember the ocean of tears, of milk, of blood—  
transmigration with no known beginning.  
Remember the bones piled up  
by beings transmigrating.
- 50.1 Remember the four oceans  
compared with tears, milk, and blood.  
Remember bones piled up high as Mount Vipula  
in the course of a single eon.
- 51.1 Transmigration with no known beginning  
is compared to this broad Black Plum Tree Land;  
if divided into lumps the size of jujube seeds,  
they’d still be fewer than his mother’s mothers.
- 52.1 Remember the grass, sticks, and leaves,  
compare that with no known beginning:  
if split into chips four inches in size,  
they’d still be fewer than his father’s fathers.
- 53.1 Remember the one-eyed turtle  
and the yoke with a hole  
blown in the ocean from east to west—  
sticking the head in the hole  
is a metaphor for gaining a human birth.
- 54.1 Remember the form of this unlucky body,  
insubstantial as a lump of foam.



See the aggregates as impermanent,  
remember the hells so full of distress.

Remember those swelling the charnel grounds 55.1  
again and again in life after life.  
Remember the danger of gharials!<sup>37</sup>  
Remember the four truths!

When freedom from death is there to be found, 56.1  
why would you drink the five bitter poisons?  
For all erotic delights  
are so much more bitter than them.

When freedom from death is there to be found, 57.1  
why would you burn for sensual pleasures?  
For all erotic delights  
are burning, boiling, bubbling, seething.

When there is freedom from enmity, 58.1  
why would you want your enemy, sensual pleasures?  
Like kings, fire, robbers, flood,  
and people you dislike,  
sensual pleasures are very much your enemy.

When liberation is there to be found, 59.1  
what good are sensual pleasures that kill and bind?  
For though unwilling,  
when sensual pleasures are there,  
they are subject to the pain of killing and binding.

As a blazing grass torch 60.1  
burns one who grasps it without letting go,  
sensual pleasures are like a grass torch,  
burning those who do not let go.

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37. A reference to the metaphor for gluttony at MN 67:17.1 and AN 4.122:3.1.

- 61.1 Don't give up abundant happiness  
for the trivial joys of sensual pleasure.  
Don't fret later,  
like a catfish on a hook.
- 62.1 Deliberately control yourself  
among sensual pleasures!  
You're like a dog fixed to a chain:  
sensual pleasures will surely devour you  
as hungry corpse-workers would a dog.
- 63.1 Harnessed to sensual pleasure,  
you undergo endless pain,  
along with much mental anguish:  
relinquish sensual pleasures, they don't last!
- 64.1 When the unaging is there to be found,  
what good are sensual pleasures in which is old age?  
All rebirths everywhere  
are bonded to death and sickness.
- 65.1 This is freedom from old age, freedom from death!  
This is freedom from old age and death, the sor-  
rowless state!  
Free of enmity, unconstricted,  
faultless, fearless, without tribulations.
- 66.1 This freedom from death has been realized by many;  
even today it can be obtained  
by those who rationally apply themselves;  
but it's impossible if you don't try."
- 67.1 So said Sumedhā,  
lacking delight in conditioned things.  
Soothing Anīkaratta,  
Sumedhā cast her hair on the ground.

- Standing up, Anikaratta 68.1  
 raised his joined palms to her father and begged:  
 “Let go of Sumedhā, so that she may go forth!  
 She will see the truth of liberation.”
- Released by her mother and father, 69.1  
 she went forth, afraid of grief and fear.  
 While still a trainee nun  
     she realized the six direct knowledges,  
 along with the highest fruit.
- The extinguishment of the princess 70.1  
 was incredible and amazing;  
 on her deathbed, she declared  
 her several past lives.
- “In the time of the Buddha Koṇāgamana, 71.1  
 we three friends gave the gift  
 of a newly-built dwelling  
 in the Saṅgha’s monastery.
- Ten times, a hundred times, 72.1  
 a thousand times, ten thousand times,  
 we were reborn among the gods,  
 let alone among humans.
- We were mighty among the gods, 73.1  
 let alone among humans!  
 I was queen to a king with the seven treasures—  
 I was the treasure of a wife.
- That was the cause, that the origin, that the root, 74.1  
 that was the acceptance of the dispensation;  
 that first meeting culminated in extinguishment  
 for one delighting in the teaching.

75.1

So say those who have faith in the words  
of the one unrivaled in wisdom.  
They're disillusioned with being reborn,  
and being disillusioned they become dispassionate.”

*That is how these verses were recited by the senior nun Sumedhā.*

THE VERSES OF THE SENIOR NUNS ARE FINISHED.

# Colophon

## The Translator

Bhikkhu Sujato was born as Anthony Aidan Best on 4/11/1966 in Perth, Western Australia. He grew up in the pleasant suburbs of Mt Lawley and Attadale alongside his sister Nicola, who was the good child. His mother, Margaret Lorraine Huntsman née Pinder, said “he’ll either be a priest or a poet”, while his father, Anthony Thomas Best, advised him to “never do anything for money”. He attended Aquinas College, a Catholic school, where he decided to become an atheist. At the University of WA he studied philosophy, aiming to learn what he wanted to do with his life. Finding that what he wanted to do was play guitar, he dropped out. His main band was named Martha’s Vineyard, which achieved modest success in the indie circuit.

A seemingly random encounter with a roadside joey took him to Thailand, where he entered his first meditation retreat at Wat Ram Poeng, Chiang Mai in 1992. Feeling the call to the Buddha’s path, he took full ordination in Wat Pa Nanachat in 1994, where his teachers were Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Jayasaro. In 1997 he returned to Perth to study with Ajahn Brahm at Bodhinyana Monastery.

He spent several years practicing in seclusion in Malaysia and Thailand before establishing Santi Forest Monastery in Bundanoon, NSW, in 2003. There he was instrumental in supporting the establishment of the Theravada bhikkhuni order in Australia

and advocating for women's rights. He continues to teach in Australia and globally, with a special concern for the moral implications of climate change and other forms of environmental destruction. He has published a series of books of original and groundbreaking research on early Buddhism.

In 2005 he founded SuttaCentral together with Rod Bucknell and John Kelly. In 2015, seeing the need for a complete, accurate, plain English translation of the Pali texts, he undertook the task, spending nearly three years in isolation on the isle of Qi Mei off the coast of the nation of Taiwan. He completed the four main Nikāyas in 2018, and the early books of the Khuddaka Nikāya were complete by 2021. All this work is dedicated to the public domain and is entirely free of copyright encumbrance.

In 2019 he returned to Sydney where he established Lokanta Vihara (The Monastery at the End of the World).

## Creation Process

Primary source was the digital Mahāsaṅgīti edition of the Pali Tipiṭaka. Translated from the Pali, with reference to several English translations, especially those of K.R. Norman.

## The Translation

This translation aims to make a clear, readable, and accurate rendering of the Therīgāthā. The initial draft was by Jessica Walton, and it was revised and finished by Bhikkhu Sujato in 2019. The terminology has been brought in line with Bhikkhu Sujato's translation of the four Nikāyas.

## About SuttaCentral

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languages, parallels between these texts, and translations in many modern languages. Building on the work of generations of scholars, we offer our contribution freely.

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## About Bilara

“Bilara” means “cat” in Pali, and it is the name of our Computer Assisted Translation (CAT) software. Bilara is a web app that enables translators to translate early Buddhist texts into their own language. These translations are published on SuttaCentral with the root text and translation side by side.

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