Poems of the First Buddhist Nuns

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:46

This month, for some reason, when I drive around at night and see the Christmas lights—or the holiday lights, to be PC—I've been appreciating them more than ever. More than I usually do, in terms of the symbolism of the solstice and how the dark time of day has been accumulating more and more. And then slowly, slowly, the light starts to come back in. It's really a symbol of awakening.

The last couple of days, this line has just been running through my mind. In a way, it just feels like a time when I personally need inspiration, and the world could use some inspiration. We all could use some inspiration. And this line that keeps coming to me is a fairly common phrase in many of the first Buddhist nuns' enlightenment poems. I'll just read this paragraph—it's a classic description in these poems of a woman's awakening:

Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed, the great dark is torn apart, and death, you too are destroyed.

That's just been running through my mind. "Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed"—I know some of us don't really want to destroy the love of pleasure. "The great dark is torn apart." That image I love.

Since it's been running through my mind, it made me start thinking more about the poems of the first nuns, and I decided that it makes me happy to talk about them, to tell their stories and read their poems. So that's what I'm going to do tonight.

If we read the suttas, we hear so much about the monks at the time of the Buddha. So many of his discourses begin, "Oh bhikkhus." Over the years, it's been very supportive and inspiring to me to read about and get in touch with the stories and poems of many of the women who were nuns at the time of the Buddha. A few I'll tell stories about were lay women who did not become nuns.

What I like about it is knowing the story of each woman and then having the translation of the poem that she wrote. It takes the whole thing, for me, out of the realm of mythology, of story, because it makes the women really real. They feel like my sisters. All of us—the men too—going through the same difficulties, coming from all different walks of life. Some very easily walking on the path of awakening, some really struggling for years and years. Of course, if we have a poem from them, that means they got enlightened. We don't really have a lot of poems from all the ones who struggled and didn't make it. But that's beside the point. It's more about hearing them and seeing the different qualities—the depth of faith and perseverance and commitment—and the inspiration that comes to me from their poems. It just makes me happy to talk about it, so I want to share it with you all again tonight.

The first woman I have to talk about is the one who's considered really the mother of the bhikkhuni order,

the woman because of whom the Buddha actually agreed to ordain women in the first place. That's Mahapajapati Gotami, his stepmother—really his aunt. The Buddha's mother died when he was a week old, and his aunt, his mother's younger sister, was also married to the Buddha's father. Kings had many wives in those days. She raised the Buddha along with her own son and daughter.

The Buddha, as you know, went off and got enlightened and left his family. He came back and was teaching and preaching to his family, and they became followers. When Mahapajapati Gotami's husband, King Suddhodana, died, she faced a situation that was the situation of many Indian women in that time. Women's place in society was accorded to the man she was connected with. She was the daughter of someone when she lived with her father. She was the wife of someone when she lived with her husband. She was the mother of someone and lived with her son. Women were very connected to men.

So when her husband died, her son and her nephew—the Buddha—well, her son had gone off and become a monk. She didn't really have any man to protect her. In another way, she was also free then to do what she wanted. There were many other women at that same time in that kinship group who were also without husbands—partly because many men had gone off and become monks with the Buddha, leaving behind their wives and mothers and daughters. At this time as well, her family and King Suddhodana's family, their extended kin, had a war over water rights to a particular river.

They were so closely related, and yet they had a war, and many men were killed.

The Buddha was called in at that time to arbitrate. And he was so inspiring in calling people to peace that a whole lot of other men then went off and became bhikkhus as well.

So this left Mahapajapati and many, many women. They say 500 women. Andy Olenski, the head of BCBS, who's a Pali scholar, says that when they say 500 people, it basically means a big bunch of people, a lot of people. It's a kind of shorthand.

Mahapajapati was really inspired—just as inspired as her male kin—by the Buddha's teaching and by the possibility of awakening. She had great faith, and she went together with 500 women to the Buddha and asked him, saying that she also wanted to become a mendicant. She wanted to ordain, to become a nun.

And there were no nuns. It was just a wandering order of monks. At this time, it would have been very shocking. It simply wasn't done to make an equal order of nuns.

And the Buddha said no. When she asked him the requisite three times, after the third time—at which point he's supposed to say yes, if he's going to say yes—he still said no. He said, "Enough, Gautami. Don't set your heart on women being allowed to do this." This was a final no. And he took his robes and went wandering off to another town, to Vesali.

So Pajapati shaved her head and put on orange robes. In India, even now, wandering ascetics dress in orange, men and women both. She shaved her head, dressed in orange, and barefoot, accompanied by all

these women, followed him to this next town.

Now remember, she was the wife of a king. For her, walking barefoot 200 miles—when she got there, her feet were swollen and bleeding. She was exhausted, and she stood outside the hall where the Buddha was, weeping.

But this wasn't some kind of challenge to the Buddha. She just felt so filled with faith and determination. That sense of urgency: "Yes, I want to really renounce the world and practice the Dhamma." She wasn't trying to push the Buddha; she just followed him because that's where her heart was.

She's standing outside crying when Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, came along. This is one of the many places in the suttas that has the effect of making one really love Ananda, because he was so kind. His motivation always seems to have been: what can I do to help people come closer to the Buddha, come closer to the Dhamma? Kind in a really impersonal way.

Of course he knew her, because Ananda was the Buddha's cousin. He said, "What's going on?" She told him, and he went to the Buddha and said, "Pajapati is standing outside with swollen feet, covered with dust, and crying because you do not permit women to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless state. It would be good, Lord, if women were to have permission to do this."

And the Buddha says, "Enough, Ananda. Don't set your heart on this."

Ananda asked the requisite three times, after which the Buddha still said no. But Ananda doesn't give up. He knows the way around the Buddha. He said, "Let me think about it a different way. Are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of stream entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship?" In other words, can they have the same awakening as men?

And the Buddha said, "Yes, that is so."

So then Ananda said, "If women are able to realize perfection, and since Pajapati was of great service to you—she was your aunt, nurse, foster mother; when your mother died, she even suckled you at her own breast—it would be good if women could be allowed to enter into homelessness."

And he basically just wore the Buddha down.

So at this point, the Buddha said, "All right, okay, women can enter." And he made eight special rules which drive all contemporary women crazy. I don't want to go into the politics, because who knows the politics of that time. He made rules that basically were for women's protection, but also the first rule being that the most senior nun still had to bow to the most junior monk.

He doesn't explain why he does things, of course. But because he's made it clear that it has nothing to do with awakening—any woman, any man can awaken—my best guess is it had to do with how women are perceived in society, and just trying not to make a ruckus.

So Pajapati, at any rate, agreed with great gratitude and became a nun, as did the 500 women with her.

And Pajapati over time became a great teacher. She was clearly a very committed, courageous, and energetic person, filled with great faith and perseverance—not to be turned down. I could imagine if I had traveled really far after a revered teacher and he kept telling me no, how easy it would be to say, "Oh, okay, if you say so, I'll go somewhere else." And she said no. Of course, she did raise him—there is something to that. But she just wasn't taking no for an answer, really, but in a very loving way.

Something that's interesting, just to know that she had this kind of courage and faith in knowing that women are just as able to awaken as men, and she kept that—not sort of what we'd say trying to push the envelope, but really to the end. It's not talked about much, but at some point later she went back to the Buddha and asked him if he would revoke that first rule, the one that senior nuns have to bow to junior monks. And he said no. He said, "I can't do it. I can't allow it. Even those teachers of false dharma don't permit such conduct in relation to women. So then how can I do it?" We can't understand it. But it's cultural. Don't waste your time on it. But I'm bringing it up to show you the kind of courage and steadfastness of heart.

Also, it is said—and this is a little mythological—but she died very old. They say 120. But when she was very sick, she knew she was going to die. At that point, some of the monastic rules that had sprung up were that a sick nun could not be visited by a monk. All the rules just had sprung up in reaction. The Buddha would make a rule whenever something happened that caused harm to a monk or a nun, or that shook the faith of lay people. And that's really important to remember. A lot of the monks' rules—for instance, this would be one, that a monk couldn't visit a sick nun—it wouldn't be that there's something bad about a monk visiting a sick nun, but that lay people could get the wrong idea and talk and shake their faith. And that's really interesting. The Buddha put a lot of importance on that.

But anyway, Pajapati knew that it was against the rules, but she requested that the Buddha come to her. And he did. So in effect, that changed the rule again by his doing that. He came to her when she was dying.

So I just want to read to you her poem because it brings up some of her qualities:

Homage to you, Buddha, the best of all beings, who set me and many others free from pain. All pain is understood. The cause, the craving is dried up. The noble eightfold way unfolds. I have reached the state where everything stops. I have been mother, son, father, brother, grandmother, knowing nothing of the truth I journeyed on. But I have seen the Blessed One. This is my last body. And I will not go from birth to birth again. Look at the disciples all together, their energy, their sincere effort. This is homage to the Buddhas.

I love that. Because if you think about it, that last stanza—that's you. That's all of us, the disciples all together, their energy, their sincere effort. This is homage to the Buddhas.

That's part of what I find so inspiring, reading about and just connecting with the energy of these women. Because just as at that time, down through all these two and a half millennia, it's still so that there are

women and men with their sincere effort and energy practicing, in that way giving homage to all the Buddhas. And I think, having spoken with each of you in the last couple days, I felt really inspired by the depth of commitment. For many of you, it's been years and years and years of your life commitment, with ups and downs. And I know a lot of times we really lose touch with what this is all about.

Why am I doing it? But just the being together with sincere effort, with your sincere energy—it is paying homage to the Buddhas and keeping the Buddhasasana alive.

We're really direct descendants of these women.

In fact, one of the things I've loved in the last three or four years that I've been teaching the retreat in northern Burma at Cha Shwa up in Sagaing—there are many monasteries and many nunneries. Right next door to the monastery where our retreat is, there are three nunneries. One of them has about forty nuns, one has thirty-five, the smaller one has ten or fourteen. Nuns ranging from little girls, five or six years old, in their little pink robes—so adorable—up through all ages to really older women. They're just doing it, living the life. It's a hard life, but with great dedication. And of course, a whole range of personalities, a whole range of ways that they are.

But the sense of radiance from some of these women, even as little as we can talk, because we can't talk very well—I don't speak Burmese—but the last couple of years, we've been inviting some of them to come over for our last sitting in the evening. It's at eight o'clock at night, it's dark. And it's work for them. They're studying. Most of them are studying very hard to pass these Pali exams that are given every year. They're really working hard, and they have to go out and get their food.

So they come over to do some chanting at the beginning of our sitting. There's something about that—I can just describe it, but I can't really give you the feeling. It's dark, they come filing in, in their order of ordination. They always walk in order. They come and sit down and start chanting, and it just feels like we could be sitting back there in Vesali twenty-six hundred years ago. They're just so... I don't know, I just get this feeling of timelessness and the power of the Buddhasasana, and the men and women who have kept it alive and are keeping it alive.

So even though we're not in robes, we're part of that.

You can see in reading about the different women, the different nuns at that time, how they came from all different stations of life. Mahapajapati Gotami came from a very privileged class. Some of the other women who became great teachers to the other nuns also came from privilege. But others became great teachers who had very different backgrounds, and still others, depending on their personality, found different expressions entirely.

Just like us—we each express our Dhamma, we each express our insights and our awakenings in the way that's unique to our particular personality, our particular life situation, our particular choices. And that's the same with these women.

Some became teachers. Some became inspirational, like Mahapajapati. She wasn't so much a teacher as a guide and inspiration. Others became very quiet ascetics, just living in quiet, renowned for their asceticism. Some became the women who ran the communities, made things comfortable, made it easy for the women to live together. Everyone found their own way of expressing.

And they all came from such different circumstances: rich backgrounds, enormous suffering, states of great happiness, destitution. There were queens, there were courtesans, there were really poor prostitutes, there were middle-class women, there were women who had been slaves.

What was radical in the Buddha's sasana, both the nuns and the monks, was that once someone became ordained—you know how in India the caste system was so strong, so rigidly applied. The caste you were born in determined your class, determined your life. Once one became ordained, that was done away with. It was all just in order of ordination. Someone could have been a really destitute prostitute and she would be senior to the wife of a king. It had nothing to do with where you came from.

I find that inspiring as well.

So I want to talk about one other example. I mentioned it the other night—one of the women who became the greatest teacher, who brought many other women into the nuns' sangha, was this woman Patachara. I told her story the other night, so I don't want to go into it too much, just to remind you. For those who weren't here: she was middle class, and her parents had arranged a marriage which she didn't want. She had fallen in love with a servant, which was not done. So she and the servant ran away and got married in another town.

But when she got pregnant, she wanted to go back to her parents, to her family, to have the baby. Understandably, her husband really didn't want to go. So they waited until too late. They started out, she had the baby on the way, and they thought, oh well, forget about it, and went back to their home again.

She got pregnant again. Same story. And this time—I'll just make it short—she starts to have the baby again on the way. You'd think they would have learned, but no. So she starts to have the baby again. A big storm starts coming. Her husband goes out to cut some brush to make a shelter. He's bitten by a poisonous snake and dies. She doesn't know what happens to him. She just has the baby. She doesn't know where he is, but gets up the next morning and starts to walk, and finds his body—grief-stricken.

And she keeps on going to her parents' home. She has to cross a really swollen river, and in the course of that crossing, both of her children get swept away and die. So she's almost crazed by now. She keeps going to her parents' home, gets to the edge of the town—and they've had this huge storm as well—and says to the first man she meets, "Where is the home of my family?" And he says, "Ask me anything, but don't ask me that." She says, "That's the only thing I want to know." And he says, "See that smoke? That's from the funeral pyre. The storm caved in the house, and both parents and your brother were killed."

So she loses it. She really goes insane. She wanders for years, and people just throw things at her. She

wanders around crazed until she comes finally to the Buddha. And even there, not Ananda, but some of the other lay people around pick up things and throw them at her, trying to drive her away. "Don't bother the holy man." But of course, he says otherwise. He says, "Sister, recover your senses." And she does. She's naked also—she's lost her clothes—so a kind man gives her a cloak. She comes and sits in front of the Buddha.

Remember, this is where I said—I think it was last week—how I love the Buddha's response. She tells him her whole story. And this is where the power of speaking truth to suffering comes through. Not "Oh, too bad, you know, it happens," but: "Patachara, don't think you've come to someone who can help you. In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than there is water in the four oceans."

And this helps her. And he then goes on to say that when you come to die, no one can help you. None of your kin can help you. Nobody else can help your suffering. You have to practice and understand for yourself.

And so she does. She ordains and becomes a nun.

Now, what I also love about her story is that it's not one of these—oh, okay, that's what you say, completely awaken, that's the end of it. No, she had to practice quite some time and have some struggles. But her poem is a lovely poem because she's describing in this poem the moment of her awakening. And I can really relate to it. It's just so precise. It could be any of us.

She's saying: "When they plow their fields and sow seeds in the earth, when they care for their wives and children, young Brahmins find riches. But I've done everything right and followed the rule of my teacher. I'm not lazy or proud. Why haven't I found peace?"

"Bathing my feet, I watched the bathwater spill down the slope."

This is a good poem about why being continuous, even when you're doing other things than sitting or walking, is really valuable.

"Bathing my feet, I watched the bathwater spill down the slope. I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse. Then I took a lamp and went into my cell, checked the bed, and sat down on it. I took a needle and pushed the wick down."

When the lamp went out, my mind was freed.

That's also a kind of pun on the word *nirvana*, because *nirvana* means "going out" in a way. But isn't that lovely? You get the sense of the struggle. And that's something I love about these poems. There are many that reflect the struggle these women went through. It's not all, "Oh, the Buddha said this, and I'm enlightened," like Khema, that queen I told you about. That's a rarer story than the struggle.

But Patachara, because of the enormity of her suffering, what she went through, was able to really help

others with great compassion. There are quite a few poems that refer to her without using her name, describing how she helped them. Maybe you can get a sense from this one of her compassion.

This poem is by a woman named Chanda, who had also lost all her family to some kind of plague or disease. Her parents, her husband, her children—everyone died but her. And because, as I said, a woman's livelihood really depended on the male members of her family, there was no one left. She had to wander from house to house begging for food for her subsistence. When she finally came to Patachara and encountered the Dhamma, she had really been suffering for a long time. So this is her poem:

I was in a bad way, a widow, no friends, no children, no relations to give me food and clothes. I was a beggar with a bowl and stick and wandered house to house in the heat and cold for seven years. But I met a nun who had food and drink, and I went up to her and said, "Take me into the homeless life." She was Patachara. Out of pity, she guided me in leaving home, encouraged me, and urged me to the highest goal. I took her advice. It wasn't wasted.

But do you notice? The first thing she says is, "I met a nun who had food and drink." In other words, what did this woman need first? She needed food. She needed sustenance. Just get a sense of that natural compassion.

Often—and I may be totally projecting onto you—but often when I would read some of the suttas, and they sound kind of formal, it can all sound very much like the Buddha or the monk is just preaching, and everyone says, "Oh yes, Reverend Sir," and that's it. You don't quite get the human quality. But of course there's this sense: this poor, emaciated beggar woman comes, and the first thing Patachara does isn't preach the Dhamma—it's give her some food. And then the woman becomes interested and wants to learn the Dhamma and asks for instruction. So I quite like that.

Now I want to talk about another woman who became a great teacher. Dhammadina—the Buddha referred to her as foremost in preaching. In other words, in giving Dhamma instruction, Dhamma talks, she was the foremost among the nuns. She came from a very privileged background. Her story is lighter, an easier story.

She was the wife of an important man in Rajagaha, and they had a very happy marriage. So she wasn't coming from suffering at all. But one day her husband had been out hearing the Buddha teach. Actually, it shows up in several of these stories that the wives of rich men or the wives of kings couldn't get around so much. The men could go hear teachings, and even women's servants often had more freedom to move about and hear the Buddha teaching than the rich women themselves.

So she was home, and her husband came back this day from hearing the Buddha preach. Usually he would come in and they'd sit and eat together and have a very friendly meal. Instead, he just walked by without noticing her. Right away, of course, she thought, "Is he angry? What did I do? What's wrong?" I really relate to that—right away thinking, "What did I do wrong? Why is he not nice to me?"

But then he called to her and explained. He had been so deeply inspired hearing the Buddha teach that he'd had a profound realization. He wanted to renounce the world and become a monk. He realized this left her in a difficult position, but he said he would give her all his wealth. She could do with it whatever she pleased and she'd be taken care of. He was going to go off. She could stay in the home, go back to her family, whatever she wished.

So she thought about it. And she said, "You know what?"

I also want to renounce.

The bhikkhuni order existed at this time. He said, okay, and he respected her wishes. He sent her off in great fanfare, being carried in a litter to the nuns, to the bhikkhuni sangha to ordain. And she did. She ordained and practiced very hard. She was one who didn't have to practice for such a long time to really achieve the highest awakening.

Later she was wandering with some other bhikkhunis and came back to Rajagaha, where she had lived. And lo and behold, her husband had changed his mind and had not become a monk. He was still hanging out in Rajagaha, doing his business, whatever. Just a little dig here—Sayadaw U Pandita often liked to say that women make the best yogis. I just thought I'd tell you that.

But her husband was still quite a devoted follower of the Buddha. When she came back, he went to her—not as his former wife, but as a respected nun—and sat at her feet and asked for teachings. Again, in India of this time, this was revolutionary.

So for Dhammadina, what we have is not a poem. What we have is a whole sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya. Sutta number 44 is basically the series of questions that her former husband asked Dhammadina and the answers that she gave. I'm not going to read the sutta—it's fairly long. The questions are very subtle and complex, addressing the nature of personality view, how to abandon it, the nature of consciousness, all kinds of things. A very subtle sutta. He asks her all these questions, and she answers.

The reason it's in the Majjhima is because afterwards he went and told the Buddha everything Dhammadina had said, which is commonly what happens after someone other than the Buddha has given a talk—it's always reported to the Buddha. And if it made it into the suttas, it's because the Buddha approved. As he said after this: "Dhammadina is a very wise woman. I would have answered exactly as she did. Just what she said, such is its meaning, and so you should remember it."

So he's basically saying that her words are buddhavacana—words of the Buddha. He's giving the stamp that her words are the equivalent of the words of the Buddha. That's really quite a powerful statement in terms of the realization and the power to communicate it of this woman, Dhammadina. And there were quite a few women for whom she was their teacher, their guide in coming into the sasana, into the sangha, and in their practice.

But I want to read a few of the hard-time practice poems, partly because I like them. They seem so real, and they're short. And just because they give us something we can really relate to. Some of them are really, I mean, hard-time practice.

The first one is from a woman known as Sama. She ordained in great sorrow at the death of one of her friends, and maybe I'll tell that story in a little bit. But this is her poem. She was struggling for twenty-five years after she ordained. Just so you know, it's not all like three months or so:

It was twenty-five years since I turned away from home, and I hadn't had a moment's peace.

Can you relate? Twenty-five years—we're not talking two weeks or two months.

I had no peace because I didn't know my own mind. Then suddenly I was shaken with dread, remembering the words of the Conqueror.

That means the Buddha.

Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert. I have finished with craving. The Buddha's teaching has been done. It is the seventh day since my craving died. Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert.

To me, that's a pith line, a pith teaching of the Buddha's Dhamma. Because how does delusion work? How does denial work? Because of the pain of things, I love to space out.

Because of the pain of things, I love to distract myself. That's how we live our lives in delusion and confusion. It's really a great heart, a great commitment, a great faith that says, "Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert." Really knowing that awakeness takes us right through the core of the pain, and from the pain out to freedom. But it's not by avoiding the pain. "Twenty-five years I didn't know peace."

Here's another one. This woman's name is Uttama, and this is another very specific poem. She came from a banker's family, so she came from a pretty easy background. She practiced hard, but this is another specific incident poem:

Four or five times I left my cell. I had no peace of mind, no control over my mind. I went to a nun I thought I could trust.

And they say this is Patachara here again.

She taught me the Dhamma—the elements of body and mind, the nature of perception, and earth, water, fire, and wind, the elements. I heard what she said and sat cross-legged seven days full of joy. When on the eighth I stretched my feet out, the great dark was torn apart.

We can really relate. She kept going in and out of her cell, in and out of her cell. She had no peace of mind, no control over her mind. We all have sittings like that. We may not all sit for seven days cross-legged, full of joy. But that quality of willingness to persevere—that's really lovely.

This is one of my favorites. Sometimes I don't read it. My friend said I shouldn't read it because it's too depressing, but I like it. This is just not to give you any ideas, though. This is about Sihah. Sihah means lioness—that's her name. She was the niece of a very famous general of the Licchavi sect who would show up from time to time in different suttas. So you can imagine being the daughter of a general, she might have a little bit of striving and a little bit of needing to excel going on.

She heard the Buddha preach, Gautama preach, and then she decided to enter the nun's order. She very sincerely practiced for seven years. Nothing happened. And she got so distressed, so filled with despair, that she couldn't take it anymore and decided to kill herself. This is what I mean about not giving you any ideas. But just notice—it's a mind state. She just had this mind state of deciding to kill herself. She acted on that mind state. Now, this is what we have the wisdom not to do. But she acted on it. She went to hang herself, and obviously, just at the moment she was putting the rope about her neck and about to hang herself, she woke up.

I don't advocate relying on that happening. It's just like trying to pay attention to pain but really paying attention so you know it'll go away—knowing it doesn't work. This is the same. Anyway, this is her poem:

Obsessed by sensuality, I never got to the origin, but was agitated, my mind beyond control. I dreamed of a great happiness. I was passionate but had no peace. Pale and thin, I wandered seven years, unhappy day and night. Then I took a rope into the forest and thought I'd rather hang than go back to that narrow life. I tied a strong noose to the branch of a tree and put it around my neck. Just then my heart was set free.

"Obsessed by sensuality, I dreamed of a great happiness. I was passionate but had no peace." That really rings true, doesn't it? It doesn't sound like just some kind of stock statement. You know that sense we have of hitting ourselves against the wall, against the wall—we don't know how to let go until finally we get to the point where we just totally give up, and it happens by itself. That's why we can't fool it, because it happens by itself.

So that's Sihah, the lioness.

This next one is Mita Kali. She entered the order when she heard the Buddha give the Maha Satipatthana Sutta. Can you imagine actually hearing the Buddha give the discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness? I mean, can you imagine that? No, not really, but that would be something. Anyway, that inspired her to become a nun, but it's said that up until then she had the reputation of being a very difficult person—very angry, unpleasant, very self-centered. So she really worked on herself as a nun, but she had some work to do, and it was hard for a while. Again, this is her story, her poem:

Although I left home for no home and wandered full of faith, I was still greedy for possessions and praise. I lost my way. My passions used me, and I forgot the real point of my wandering life. Then as I sat in my little cell, there was only terror. I thought, this is the wrong way. A fever of longing controls me. Life is short. Age and sickness gnaw away. I have no time for carelessness before this body breaks. And as I watched the

elements of mind and body rise and fall away, I saw them as they really are. I stood up. My mind was completely free. The Buddha's teaching has been done.

That particular image she gives—life is short, watching the elements of the body kind of decay—that's used often. And it brings me to mention that there are quite a few poems of nuns, of women who became nuns when they were quite old in their life. Sometimes people come to practice rather late in life. We run into it often. And it's not uncommon for them to say, "Oh, I wasted so much of my life. I could have been practicing all those years." And that could be whether you start at twenty or thirty or forty. It's easy to get into that: "I wasted my life. I could have been." But that's just not relevant. It doesn't matter.

There are stories of women who became nuns really quite late in life, but through their great dedication and faith and practice, they were also able to really come to some understanding, come to some freedom. In fact, I was a nun for a little while in Thailand quite a few years ago. In Thailand, I didn't run into the same support for nuns, or the same number of nuns and dedication of nuns and nunneries, that I see in Burma. I think there's starting to be a resurgence in Thailand, but the places I was—which was admittedly only two or three places—there were only very few nuns, and many of them were really quite elderly. I really have no way of knowing how they related to practice, but I was told that in some cases, old women would become nuns just sort of like going to an old age home. They didn't have somewhere else to go. And that's kind of sad, but it doesn't have to be that way.

So I wanted to read one poem from a woman who was simply called Dhamma. She was a very good wife, very obedient wife. She wanted to ordain younger in her life, and her husband said no. She had a respectable middle-class marriage. She was very devoted to the Buddha, but her husband said no. And so in the way of a devoted and honorable Indian wife, she respected her husband's wishes, stayed home, and was quite devoted until he died. When he died, she ordained. Her realization experience—again, it's described from one example—happened because of her aging body and the problems with it. She said:

I wandered for alms. I leaned on a stick. My whole body was weak and trembled. Suddenly I fell down and could see clearly the misery of this body. My heart was freed.

I find that quite inspiring. "I could see clearly the misery of this body. My heart was freed."

It's really a different way to go with it than "I can't handle it, it's just all falling apart," bitching and groaning. To really see it—it frees the heart from clinging, from false identification.

Here's another one from a woman named Chitta, the same kind of thing: "Though I am thin, sick, and lean on a stick, I have climbed up Vulture Peak. Robe thrown down, bowl turned over, leaned on a rock, then great darkness opened."

One thing these women possessed for sure, besides faith, was a real strong commitment—perseverance, energy. It may not be the energy of a young person who can go all day, but the energy of steady perseverance. That's quite inspiring. We all have that capacity. It doesn't matter if we're not as strong as

we used to be or can't remember what we used to remember. We can still be present with that faith and perseverance, moment after moment.

I want to mention a couple of laywomen who didn't ordain as nuns, but whose stories make it into this context. One is the woman Samavati. She was the queen of King Udena, one of his queens. She's the woman because of whose death Sama became a nun. Now Samavati was very generous and loving, and she was a great devoted follower of the Buddha. She was said by the Buddha to be the laywoman most skilled in spreading metta. She was a very powerful metta being.

But because she was a queen, the wife of a king, she didn't have the freedom to follow the Buddha and hear his teachings. But—and this I find very interesting—her servant woman, whose name was Khujjuttara, could go about. The servants could go to the market, buy things. They could get around where the higher women couldn't. And so Samavati used to send Khujjuttara every day to the market with money to buy flowers to put in front of her altar.

Khujjuttara was doing this thing of keeping half of the money, only buying half as many flowers as she was supposed to and keeping the rest of the money. She had been doing this for so long, and Samavati just didn't suspect her. But then one day Khujjuttara heard the Buddha teach and was so inspired—in fact, it's said that she had a little awakening. She came back and confessed it all to Samavati, who, because she was so skilled in loving-kindness, readily forgave her and said, "But you have to tell me what this teacher said."

Khujjuttara had this prodigious memory. She would actually go and hear the Buddha talk and come back and share it with Samavati and all of her women friends, to the point that one of the smaller books in the Pali Canon, the book called the Itivuttaka, is said to be poems and prose that was remembered and related by Khujjuttara—the whole book. So both of these women had very profound understanding.

What happened is that one of Samavati's co-queens was very jealous of her because she was so beloved of the king, beloved of everybody. Why was she beloved? Because she was filled with metta. To make a long story short, this other queen got so jealous that she locked Samavati and all of her women in a building and set fire to it, and they were all killed in the fire. So it wasn't all peaches and cream back then either.

But the Buddha said—because with his psychic mind he could tell the destination of people in their next life—he said that all of those women had to some degree awakened. And that was really thanks to the teachings that Khujjuttara was able to share. I find that quite lovely.

I'll just end with one other story and poem of a different kind of woman, and this is a woman who was a courtesan, basically a really high-class prostitute. They had both, you know—poor low-class prostitutes and courtesans. In this society, if you were a very rich courtesan, you were the courtesan for kings and the high-class men of the culture.

This woman's name is Ambapali. She was considered the most beautiful woman in Vesali. In fact, she was so beautiful that she was found under a mango tree. Ambapali kind of means "mango guardian woman."

As she grew up, she was so beautiful that all the different rich men and kings were fighting over her. They resolved this by making her the official courtesan of the whole town of Vesali. And somehow that wasn't a shameful thing—it gave her great prestige and great wealth. She was very well respected, this beautiful Ambapali. She actually had a son by a king of the time, King Bimbisara. And there are stories about her in the suttas where she would come to visit the Buddha and invite him and all his bhikkhus to come for a meal with her.

And he would accept and go. There was no shame in it, but he would tell his bhikkhus, "Keep your eyes down. She's very beautiful. Don't let yourself get distracted by her beauty. But it's totally appropriate to appreciate her generosity and her support of the Sangha."

At some point, her son—the one she had by King Bimbisara—became a monk also. And eventually, he talked his mother into becoming a nun. It's said that she came to her really deep understanding by studying impermanence in her own aging body. Now, this is someone who had been very beautiful, whose whole life was centered around how beautiful she was.

Her poem is quite long, so I will only read part of it. I particularly love it because it has a sense of humor—at least to me it does.

My hair was black and curly, the color of black bees.
Now that I am old, it is like the hemp of trees.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

Fragrant as a scented oak, I wore flowers in my hair.
Now because of old age, it smells like dog's hair.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

It was thick as a grove, and I parted it with comb and pin.
Now because of old age, it is thin, very thin.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

My eyes flashed like jewels, long, black—
Now they don't make anyone look back.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

My teeth were beautiful, the color of plantain buds.
Now because of old age they are broken and yellow.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

She goes on through all different parts of her body. And she ends with: *This is how my body was. Now it is dilapidated, the place of pain, an old house with the plaster falling off.*

But that's not coming from a place of complaining. It's coming from a place of awakening—a place of

recognizing, "How can I be attached to this?"

I will end with this one poem from Uttama:

The Buddha taught seven factors of enlightenment.
They are ways to find peace, and I have developed them all.
I have found what is vast and empty, the unborn.
It is what I've longed for.
I am a true daughter of the Buddha,
always finding joy in peace.
I have ended the hunger of gods and humans,
and I will not wander from birth to birth.
I have no thought of becoming.

May we all have no thought of becoming.

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