The Stories and Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:03:52

So this seems like a good way to end the year, taking the refuges and the precepts, recommitting.

Tonight I just thought I'd talk about appreciating the Sangha, basically recognizing that what we are doing—as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago—by the act of the commitment that you make in your life, the commitment you're making sitting here, we are taking our place in the line of active Sangha women and men that stretches back, at least in the Buddhist Sangha, 2600 years to the time of the Buddha.

The way I want to share tonight is through some of the stories and poems from some of the women who were nuns at the time of the Buddha. Some of their poems—the women's and the men's, though I'm just sharing the women's tonight—have been saved in some of the suttas at the Therigatha. And of course, there's only poems from enlightened women. Many others wrote poems, we know, that didn't get in there. But the poems and also some stories about their lives—some of them we know more about than others.

What I love about this is it takes away, for me, the sense of somehow being distant in time and maybe not real, maybe some kind of mythological thing. To actually hear about, read about the lives of these women and the choices that they made to become nuns—and many of them were practicing the Dharma well before they became nuns and awakened in daily life as well—is very inspiring to me, because the outer circumstances of their lives are of course different from ours, but I can relate to many of the inner circumstances. People don't seem to have really changed that much. It just really inspires me with the immediacy of the teachings, of the truth that the Buddha shared with us, and of our own capacity to understand this, to live from this truth, to really recognize it in our hearts. We're not so different.

These women—I can't talk about all of them—but they all come from very different backgrounds. Some were very wealthy and privileged, some poor. Some came to the Buddha out of great grief and distress, actually having lost their mind from grief. Some were tricked into coming. Some were dying to come and their husbands wouldn't let them, and they had to wait till their husbands died. Some came out of grief at their children having died. Some just happened to hear the Buddha teaching and got lit up. Some became nuns and right away that was it—like the stories you hear where they heard one talk from the Buddha and sixty people became arhats. But others struggled for their whole life and didn't really come to deep understanding until they were old. The whole range.

One of the things about the Buddha is that once someone joined his Sangha, women and men both, there was a radical change in how they were regarded. In ancient India—and it still exists in India today—the

caste system was more than strong. It completely ruled your life. If you were born in the Brahmin priestly caste, that was it. If you were born in the lower caste, that was it. It determined who you could live with, talk to, the work you could do. Very segregated.

In the Buddhist Sangha, once you joined, there was no sense of caste. There was no sense of, "Well, this monk used to be a prince, so he should get better treatment than this monk over here who was an iron worker." It didn't matter. This woman was a courtesan. This woman was a prostitute. This woman was a poor slave. This woman was a queen. Once they became nuns, seniority was simply determined by the day that you joined. You were senior to the person who joined the next day. That was really quite radical in terms of the way the Buddha set up his Sangha. Even today in India there's still a huge movement of people in the lowest caste, the Dalit caste—which is a Hindu designation—to become Buddhists. Many of them for a few generations have been converting to Buddhism as a way of stepping outside of that really stringent caste system.

That's an aside. I just want to tell some stories and read some of their poems as they've been translated.

The first woman one has to talk about—you can't really skip over her—is Mahapajapati Gotami, because she is the one who insisted to the Buddha that he open up his Sangha to women. There had just been monks, men monks, for a while.

Mahapajapati Gotami was the Buddha's aunt, the younger sister of his mother. Before he was the Buddha, when he was Siddhartha Gautama, the young prince, his mother died when he was a week old. His aunt Pajapati Gotami was also married to the same king that her sister had been married to—the kings had several wives, lots of courtesans, it was a whole different scene. And so Pajapati raised Siddhartha as her own son. She also had a son herself, so she was really like his second mother.

At some point, after Siddhartha had left home—he was married, he left his wife, his son, went off, became the Buddha—he came back.

His family came to respect him, many became awakened—his father, many of his cousins, the men in his clan.

At some later point, after his father had died, Mahapajapati's husband was gone, and her son, the Buddha's cousin, had joined the order of monks. This left Pajapati without a male family member to live with. In the India of that time, even higher-class women—unless you were a courtesan or belonged to some special category—their place in society was defined by their relationship to a man: a husband, a father, or a son. And so she didn't have any.

At the same time, many other women looked to her for leadership. She was obviously a strong woman, the head of her clan. Well, she had married into the Sakya clan; her birth clan was the Koliyas. Her son, her grandnephew—they went off to become bhikkhus. And many other men in the clan did the same, just leaving the women behind.

Then the two clans, the Sakyans and the Koliyas, went to war over water rights in a river. These are the two families of the Buddha! So he came and spoke with both sides, established a peace, and eased the conflict between them. At which point, some of the men had been killed in that war, and many of the others were so inspired by the Buddha that they went off and became monks.

This left Mahapajapati and, it is said, five hundred women. As Andy Olendzki notes, when the texts say five hundred, it usually just means "a lot"—not really counted. So a lot of women said, "You know what? All the men are going off and ordaining. Why can't we do the same thing?" They had real faith in the Buddha. They saw the power of his teaching and its effect in their lives. And they said, "Let us go off too."

So they went with Pajapati. And through all of this, some of the qualities she demonstrates are enormous faith, real courage and persistence, a dedication. You'll see what I mean—she just doesn't give up. It's the courage of faith, of commitment.

She goes to the Buddha, whom she had raised like a son, and asks him—I'll read the translation: Standing at a respectful distance, she says, "It would be good, Lord, if women could be allowed to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless state under the Dharma and the discipline of the Tathagata."

And he says, "Enough. Don't set your heart on women being able to do this."

She asked three times, which is the requisite three times, at which point if he could say yes, he would say yes. But he didn't say yes. He still said no. And so after three times—that's all you could ask—she left, really upset, weeping.

Then the Buddha went off with the monks to another town, some couple hundred miles distant. So Mahapajapati and all the women with her shaved their heads and put on yellow robes. In India at that time, sadhus or renunciates, men and women, could go around in yellow robes. And they followed him.

When they arrived where he was teaching, it is said that Pajapati, Mahapajapati, was standing outside the door of the hall where he was teaching. Her feet were all dusty and bloody. She was standing out there weeping.

And Ananda, kind Ananda, comes along. Now, Ananda was also a cousin of the Buddha—they're all related—so she was his kinswoman too. He says, "What's going on? Pajapati, why are you standing here all dusty and bleeding and crying? What's happening?"

She says, "The Blessed One does not permit women to renounce their homes and enter into homelessness."

So Ananda says, "All right, I'll go ask the Buddha." And he goes and he says, "Pajapati is standing outside under the porch with swollen feet, covered with dust and crying, because you do not permit women to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless life. It would be good if women could have permission to do this."

And the Buddha says the same thing: "Enough, Ananda. Don't set your heart on women being able to do this."

The same response, three times.

Why? We don't know.

And I haven't personally found it very helpful to go there from this way of looking. But anyway, he said that.

So then Ananda, because Ananda is very persistent in wanting everyone to have access to the Buddha—that's one of the beautiful things about him as an attendant for twenty-five years. He's not trying to keep people away. You know how some attendants to famous people are like, "Get back, don't come too close to the famous person." Ananda's always trying to get everybody in to see the Buddha.

So he switched tactics. He said, let me try asking another way. He says, "Are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of stream entry, once returning, non-returning, and arahantship?" Those are the four levels, same as men. And the Buddha says, "Yes, absolutely. They're able. There's no difference."

So Ananda says, "So if women are able to realize this perfection, and since Pajapati was of great service to you—she was your aunt, your nurse, your 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 so at this point, the Buddha said, "All right, all right already, okay." And so he allowed it.

As time went on, he made special rules for nuns. And as I say, the special eight rules, the most unappealing of them being that any nun, no matter how many years, was less senior than any monk, even if the monk was a monk of one day. A little known thing is that some years later, Pajapati came back to the Buddha and tried to get him to take that rule back. So I think the women were probably the same then—it's like, "Enough of this. Take it back." But he wouldn't. From what I can tell, it seems more of a social thing. Anyway, who knows?

Anyway, he let women enter the homeless life. And so at this point, as you see, Pajapati had this real commitment and dedication based on faith. When she became a nun, all these other five hundred women became nuns as well. She was really the first true leader of the women. Many women looked up to her because of her making this happen, but also because of her setting the example by becoming a nun and living the homeless life. It made it possible for many, many other women.

If you read through the suttas, it just comes out that as time went on, the Sangha of nuns became a very strong community—many different communities, really. And you can see within it that women had their own personalities and their own way of manifesting their homeless life and their understanding. Some women became teachers, like Mahapajapati, who brought many other women in. The couple of women I'll

tell you about next were ones who, just by dint of their personality, became teachers. But others were the compassionate, quiet ones who kind of kept the sangha together. Others were the organizational leaders. Others were more drawn to solitude and living quietly in silence—all in the way that their particular personalities expressed themselves. There was no one right way.

Let me read you some of Pajapati's poem—not the whole thing, but after she's awakened:

Homage to you, Buddha, best of all creatures,
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.

Look at the disciples all together,
their energy, their sincere effort.
This is homage to the Buddhas.

Maya gave birth to Gotama for the sake of us all.
She has driven back the pain of the sick and the dying.

Did you catch that second to last stanza? That's us. "Look at the disciples all together, their energy, their sincere effort. This is homage to the Buddhas." It really hasn't changed.

In Thailand, which as you know is a Buddhist country, it has happened over the years that in the Theravada tradition, the bhikkhuni order—which is the status of nuns that the Buddha organized through Pajapati, really on a par with the bhikkhus—ended up having more rules. That bhikkhuni order hasn't lasted in the Theravada. Somehow it all died out. And so ordained nuns in Burma, in Thailand, in Sri Lanka take eight to ten vows. There are really many more that are subsidiary—not exactly precepts, but many other rules that the nuns live under. But they're not formally bhikkhunis.

In Thailand, there's a woman—this is from the New York Times, just a couple of years ago. She's a Buddhist scholar, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. She taught as quite a well-known Buddhist scholar in Bangkok, married, in her fifties. And a few years ago, with the consent of her husband and her grown children, she went to Sri Lanka and ordained in another tradition as a bhikkhuni, then came back to Thailand. And so she's living now as a fully ordained bhikkhuni, really committed to keeping this line of women renunciate practitioners going. In Thailand, this is very political, and she gets a lot of flack from some of the monks, while others really support her. It's a whole political thing. But that she's doing this, keeping it alive today—I think it's really quite inspiring.

This is just one thing from her. She's talking about the politics. She said, "This is a conflict between ignorance and right understanding." Her name is Dhammananda now. She quotes the Buddha, which he

did say: the health of Buddhism, the health of the sasana—the whole of disciples practicing this—the health of the sasana depends on four pillars: male and female monks, male and female lay people. He did say this, that all four are necessary for a healthy and vibrant sasana to continue. Male and female monks, male and female lay people. So Pajapati's commitment has really had a profound effect and continues to.

Now I'll tell you about another woman who became one of the most well-known teachers—one who became so strong in compassion because she came through so much suffering herself. It's said that once she was an awakened nun, she's the one whose name was mentioned the most in the other poems of women as one of the nuns who brought them to the teaching. Her name is Patachara.

She's one of those, you know, going from bad to worse stories. It would be like worse than the worst soap opera on television, where each new thing makes you think, "Come on, it can't get that bad." But this is her story.

She came from a banker's family in Savatthi, so quite well off. When it was time for her to be married—as you know, in India at that time marriages were arranged, and of course within one's own caste, one's own social class—she had fallen in love with a servant. Her parents would never permit that, so they ran off together, got married, and settled in another town.

She got pregnant, and in the Indian tradition, when you get pregnant, you go back to your home village, your parents' home, to give birth. Even so, she wanted to do that. Her husband, understandably, wasn't really too keen to go back. So he procrastinated and procrastinated. Finally, she started on her own. But she was so pregnant that she had the baby on the way. Her husband came after her, found her, and they went back home.

A year or two later, she got pregnant again. The whole cycle repeated. She started off, and this time he caught up with her. She was about to have the baby again, halfway there, and a huge storm started up. So she's having the baby there in the field. Her husband goes off to collect boughs and reeds to build her a shelter. He goes off and doesn't come back. It turns out he was bitten by a poisonous snake and killed while he was off. She has the baby in the rain, doesn't know what happened to her husband, gets up afterwards, goes out, and sees him lying there dead. Pretty intense.

So what is she going to do? Nothing else to do but get up with the newborn and the little boy and start walking towards her parents. They get to a river that normally is fairly easy to cross, but because of the rains, it's swollen with a huge current, and she can't walk over with both children. So she has to take each child one at a time. She takes the newborn, puts it down on the bank, starts back over. She's halfway across, in the middle of the river.

A giant bird of prey comes down and grabs her newborn baby. She starts screaming. The other little boy thinks she's calling him, so he jumps into the river. The baby is gone. The little boy is swept away in the current, and she cannot save him.

She gets up and staggers on towards her parents' village. She arrives there almost crazed, reaches the outskirts, and runs into some man. "All I want to know is where is my parents' house, where are they?" she asks. The man says, "Ask me anything, but don't ask me that." She says, "What do you mean? Don't even ask me." She persists. He says, "Well, there was that—see that smoke over there? In the huge storm last night, a tree fell, knocked through the ceiling of the house. It fell and killed your parents and your brother. That's their funeral pyre."

That was it for her. She lost it and basically lost her mind. Just went crazy. For—it doesn't really say how long—she was just going about mad, walking in circles. People made fun of her, threw things at her. You know how people can be. Her clothes were falling off, becoming rags. And finally, at some point, she came to the Jeta Grove where the Buddha was teaching. She's on the outskirts of this crowd and the people are saying, "This mad woman, get away, don't bother the Blessed One, you should stay away, you're too crazy," throwing things at her.

But of course, he saw what was happening and called her to him. She came up with no clothes on, and some kind man gave her a cloak. The Buddha just looked at her and said, "Sister, recover your presence of mind." And she did at that moment—just enough to look at him and say, "Help me." He asked, "What's happened?" And she tells him the story.

What he says really touches me because it's just so—this is the truth. Nothing like "Oh, I'm so sorry, that must be hard." Just, this is the truth. He said, "Patachara, don't think you have 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."

It's kind of counterintuitive to what I would think—that he's like, this is the truth. But this made her grief less heavy. He went on to say that when she herself went to another world, no family can help. No family can help you when you die. And you can't help your family when you die. And he spoke of the Buddhist path.

This made her want to become ordained. It wasn't one of these "Yes, I'm completely awakened" moments. But it made her see: okay, there's more to this than I know, and can I become a nun and join your path? So she did.

She had periods of difficulty. She didn't just la-di-da awaken right away and start teaching. She had to struggle for some time. But when she did, her poem is a really nice one. I like it because it describes the exact moment of her awakening—what she was doing. That's kind of cool. It's also a good advertisement for a willingness to be mindful no matter what you're doing, not just when you're sitting on the pillow. Sometimes those in-between moments are when awakening happens. What's going on with her is she's had a period of strong concentration, and then she just relaxes it a little bit, still paying attention but not with that strong concentration, and that's when she wakes up.

So 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?"

Does that sound familiar? "But I've done everything right."

"Bathing my feet, I watched the bath water 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 of the lamp down. When the lamp went out, my mind was freed."

I get chills. I can just see the whole thing, so present. "When the lamp went out, my mind was freed."

Obviously, many women were drawn to Patachara once she joined the Order, but especially those who had experienced periods of deep grief. I read somewhere that of the women whose stories we know about, eighteen had been mothers, and six of them came having experienced the death of a child—something that happened rather frequently in those times.

I want to read a couple of poems from women whom Patachara helped. This one is from Chanda. She was originally from a wealthy family, but they lost all their wealth and possessions when she was a child, so they became quite poor. Then a mysterious plague came through—I mean, life was hard. This plague came through and killed everybody in her family except for her. Her grandparents, her parents, her siblings, her entire family, her husband, her children—only she was left. She became a beggar.

So this is her poem: "I was in a bad way, a widow, no children, no friends, no relations to give me food and clothes. I was a beggar with a bowl and stick and wandered from 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. There are no obsessions in my mind."

Another point I like about this is: "I met a nun who had food and drink." It's practical, realistic. You care for people. They need to eat and drink. When some starving person comes, you don't just start preaching the Dharma. They need to eat, they need to drink—you take care of people. I like that. This is just one of many examples of people Patachara helped, women that she helped.

Now, this is a different woman who also became one of the most respected teachers. She was said to be foremost in preaching—in other words, she could give a good talk. They always kind of labeled everybody: foremost in wisdom, foremost in preaching, foremost in compassion. This is Dhammadina.

Actually, in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 44, there's a whole sutta that consists of questions asked to Dhammadina. Dhammadina is answering the questions, not the Buddha. It's included in the canon because after this series of questions and answers, the person who was asking her went to the Buddha

and repeated it all. And the Buddha said, "Yes, what she said is just what I would have said." That elevates it to what's called "word of the Buddha." So we have a sutta from Dhammadina.

She didn't have a time of suffering. She was the wife of a man named Visaka, who was an important man in Rajagaha, and they had a happy marriage. They were very content together. Whenever he'd come home from his day of business, they'd eat together—which isn't that usual—and talk and share.

One day when he went out, he met the Buddha and got so inspired by the Buddha's teachings that when he came home, he just kind of walked past Dhammadina without saying hello, without sitting down. And she's wondering, "What's the matter? Is he angry?"

What did I do wrong? You know, right away, that's where her mind went. What did I do wrong?

And he called her after a while and said, "No, I heard this man, the Buddha. I'm so inspired. I really want to... I'm thinking of renouncing, becoming a bhikkhu. That leaves you, but I will give you all my wealth. You can really do what you like with it. You can live here at ease and comfort. You have all my wealth. You can go back to your family. It's completely up to you. But I really feel this call to be a bhikkhu."

So she thought about it, and she thought, well, if he can do that, why can't I? I too want to renounce. So she said that, and he supported her in that too. He called for a palanquin and took her to the nuns, and she became a nun and went off and practiced and became quite accomplished. She practiced intensively. She is said to have attained the highest insight and awoke.

Sometime later, after she was awakened, she went back to Rajagaha, and to her great surprise, her husband had never actually gotten it together to become a bhikkhu. Well, what did she care? She was an arahant. She didn't care. And she went back, and actually he was the one asking her all these questions that made it into the sutta, because he realized, wow, Dhammadina is a respected bhikkhuni at this point.

So she doesn't have a poem so much. She has the whole sutta, which I'm not going to read to you. Just one line—when he's asking her, "What is meditation?" She says, "Meditation is the focusing of the heart." So she became the foremost in preaching. And her husband just kind of drops off the map of history. We don't know what happened to him.

One other happy story, because then there are a number of unhappy ones. Although Patachara took the cake for unhappiness.

Khema. Khema is the opposite of Patachara in that she was incredibly beautiful. Khema means "gold skin." Whenever they talk about someone being beautiful, they always talk about them having golden skin. She was the chief consort of one of the famous kings of the time, Bimbisara. Now, consort is not wife. He would have had all his wives and then his consort. She was the chief consort, a position of great respectability, a great deal of fame really, and comfort.

So she was quite conceited, actually, because she was incredibly beautiful. She had this high position. She

loved sense pleasures and beauty and everything. Bimbisara was a disciple of the Buddha, and he would try to get Khema to go and hear him, but she wasn't interested. She said, "Look, I've heard. He puts sense pleasures down. He's not really into beauty. I don't want to go listen to that."

So she would never go. So Bimbisara tricked her. The Buddha was staying and giving teachings at a hermitage that was said to be really beautiful, a really beautiful park. So Bimbisara hired a lute player, a poet and singer, to sing about how beautiful this grove was, the beauties and pleasures of this place where the Buddha was teaching. So he went and sang this to Khema, and she couldn't resist it because she was really into beauty and sense pleasures. So she said, "Okay, okay, well then I'll go."

What I like about this is that sense of how we really don't want to hear. I like my beauty. I'm attached to my status.

I don't want to hear anything that's going to take it away from me. I'm happy like this, thank you very much.

So she went, and the Buddha, of course, with his mind that could read what was happening in everyone's awareness, needed only to see her on the outskirts of the crowd to know who she was. And he could also see that actually she was very ripe for awakening.

So what he did, with his amazing mental powers, was project the image of an incredibly beautiful female goddess—like a hundred times more beautiful than Kema. And she loved beauty, so she was completely entranced. She thought, "Wow, that's so much more beautiful than I am." Not with envy, just entranced.

And then the Buddha had this image of the beautiful goddess gradually, gradually go from youth to middle age to old age. Her hair turned gray, her teeth started decaying, her skin became all wrinkled, and she just kind of withered away and died. And then Kema, who was no fool, thought, "Huh, that's going to happen to me."

Then the Buddha gave her a pithy little talk about how some people are devoted to physical beauty, and so they're bound to the world. And people devoted to pleasures of the senses are bound to the world. One who renounces this world of attachment is free in their heart, in their mind. Of course, he knew exactly what to say—that's one of the wonderful things about receiving a talk from a Buddha. They know exactly what to say to touch you.

So Kema is one of the rare occasions of a layperson being completely awakened on the spot—all four stages, right then, hearing that talk. Not for nothing is she considered foremost in insight.

This backfired on Bimbisara, of course. Because as soon as she was completely enlightened, she went and said, "Look, I can't be your consort anymore. I have to go and become a nun." Which of course she did. So she was the nun with the greatest insight, and she was one of the two women who ran the whole order of nuns, kind of in charge.

Her poem is not one of the greater ones, in my totally personal opinion, but I'll just read you a little of it so you hear her voice:

Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed, the great dark is torn apart, and death, you too are destroyed. Fools who don't know things as they really are revere the mansions of the moon and tend the fire in the wood, thinking this is purity.

Here she's talking about rites and rituals.

But for myself, I honor the enlightened one, the best of all, and practicing his teaching, I'm completely freed from suffering. Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed. The great dark is torn apart.

That's the line they use a lot: "The great dark is torn apart."

There's also a story where King Pasenadi of Kosala—who was another very serious disciple of the Buddha, actually more serious than Bimbisara—came looking for the Buddha for teachings, or for a senior monk for teachings, and there weren't any around. But Kema was around. And so without hesitation he went right over and sat at the feet of Kema, and listened to her teachings with the same appreciation and respect as if it was any monk or the Buddha himself.

At that time, that's really something. Just a realization within the Buddha's sangha that awakening insight has nothing to do with gender or status or history or life situation. Really available to all and respected as it is in whoever manifests it.

A very different story, which I also like, is very spunky—based on the commitment of verified faith. This is Punika.

She was a slave, so a very different social experience, the daughter of a slave. Apparently there were many men and women who were slaves, kind of a situation where if their parents were, they were. She was actually a slave in the house of Anathapindika. Anathapindika was the most generous of all the Buddha's supporters, and also a sotapanna. So it doesn't jive with our understanding of culture at all, that someone like Anathapindika could have a slave. But anyway, she was a slave.

In her poem, her poem tells the whole story—she had to carry water down from the river and carry water up. And when she's down at the river one day... Interestingly enough, it seems that women who were slaves or servants often had more freedom of movement than upper-class women. There are several stories, and in this one, Punika the slave is able to go out and actually hear the Buddha's talks, where many of the upper-class women are kept secluded in their houses, in their families, and they can't go out.

There's another story, maybe if I have time I'll tell it later, of another servant, not a slave, who goes out, hears the Buddha's talks, has this amazing memory, and comes back and repeats them all word for word to her mistress. And they all together get enlightened through this woman who actually remembers all of these teachings. Her name is Khujjuttara.

She remembered all these discourses, and actually the ones she remembered and came back and told to her mistress, whose name was Samavati, are collected in one of the small books in the suttas called the Iti Vutaka, which contains the sayings that Kujutara remembered and came back and told to her mistress.

In this case, Punika the slave was able to go out and hear the Buddha's teachings, and she had become a Sotapanna, a first-stage awakened person, at this time. She goes down to the water to bring it up to her mistress and ran into a Brahmin, a Hindu man from the Brahmin caste, who was doing ablutions in the river, like they bathe in the Ganges. The belief was that by washing yourself in the water, you could wash off all your previous bad karma and purify yourself. And she basically, as you hear in the poem, just lights right into him and says, "What are you doing?" Really what we would call speaking truth to power, but with real clarity, just speaking the Buddhist truth.

I'll read you her poem. It's a dialogue poem.

Punika says: "I am a water carrier. Even in the cold, I've always gone down to the water, frightened of punishment or the angry words of high-class women. So what are you afraid of, Brahman, that makes you come down to the water? Your limbs are shaking with the bitter cold."

And this man, whose name is Uddhaka Suddhika, says: "You know why, Punika. I am doing good to prevent evil. Anyone young or old who has done something bad is freed by washing in the water."

Punika says: "Who ever told you that you were freed from evil by washing? The blind leading the blind. In that case, all frogs and turtles would go to heaven, and water snakes and crocodiles and the rest of the water creatures. Thieves, executioners, and other wrongdoers would be freed from their bad karma by washing in water. Also, if these streams carried away all your old evil, they would carry away your virtue too. Just don't do that thing, the fear of which leads you down to the water." She's tough. "Stop now, Brahman, and save your skin from the cold."

And he says—and she's won him over, this is how it happens—he says: "Lady, I was on the wrong road and you brought me back to the great road. I will give you the robe I bathed in."

And Punika says: "Keep your robe, I don't want it. If you're afraid of pain, if you don't like it, then do nothing evil, either openly or in secret. For if you do, even if you get up and run away, you won't escape its pain. If you're afraid of pain, if you don't like it, take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Train in the precepts. This is good."

It's a little mini-lesson on karma.

Uddhaka Suddhika says: "I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. I train in the precepts. This is good. Now I am a true Brahman, I am washed clean"—meaning washed clean by the precepts.

There is that sense that when you know verified truth, there's no fear to say what you know, and it carries. The truth communicates itself.

And that's not the end of her story. She did want to go off and become a nun, but being a slave, she wasn't free to do so. She asked the Buddha to help her, and he basically spoke to Anathapindaka, who of course immediately released her, adopted her as his daughter, and she became a nun and became completely awakened.

That aspect of confidence—confidence in our own understanding, confidence in awakening, confidence in awareness—it's really important. It's what gives us the faith, the courage to keep on practicing. It's not something to brush aside with "Oh no, not me, I don't really know anything." What we really know, not ideas but our verified faith, it's kind of incumbent on us to share it. It communicates itself.

Not everyone who became a nun popped awake right away, as I said. Khema, before she even became a nun, is a really rare case. I'll read you a couple of poems that perhaps we can relate to.

One is from Vadesi. She was one of the five hundred who came along with Mahapajapati Gotami; she was actually Pajapati's old nurse. So she wasn't so young at the time they ordained, and she still struggled for another twenty-five years. She had a hard time being a nun.

And it makes it clear that it's not easy for everybody. This was a way that one chose, but that doesn't mean it's just kick back your shoes and be enlightened and cruise under the tree for the rest of your life. It can be really quite a lot of struggle.

So this is Vadesi. Susan Murcott says her persistence comes through, that she really had to struggle for those 25 years:

It was 25 years since I left home, and I hadn't had a moment's peace. Uneasy at heart, steeped in longing for pleasure, I held out my arms and cried out as I entered the monastery.

I can just see it, you know.

I went up to a nun I thought I could trust. They say this was Dhammadinna. *She taught me the Dharma, the elements of body and mind, the nature of perception, and earth, water, fire, and wind. I heard her words and sat down beside her. Now I have entered the six realms of sacred knowledge. The eye of heaven is pure and I know the minds of others. I have great powers and have annihilated all the obsessions of the mind. The Buddha's teaching has been done.*

So she clearly attained a lot of psychic powers, which are kind of like a sideline, not the main thing. But it's interesting—after 25 years of not having a moment's peace, she finally broke through. You just never know. It's like trying with a hatchet to break open a stump—you hit it a hundred times, and 99 times nothing happens, and the hundredth time it opens. But you can't discount the 99 times. You can't discount the 25 years.

One other one. Number forty-two. This woman became a nun out of great sorrow. Her name is Sama. Her best friend, her dear friend Samavati, was the high-class woman I mentioned before, whose servant

Khujjuttara would go out and memorize the suttas of the Buddha and come back and teach them to Samavati and all her women who were in the court. Samavati was, as the Buddha said, quite awakened, even though she was a laywoman. And she was known as the laywoman most renowned for being filled with metta. She just pervaded metta and everyone loved her—except her husband's other wife. Her husband was a king.

That other wife didn't love her. In fact, she murdered Samavati. Samavati and all her women were in a house, and this other wife caused it to be locked up and then set fire to it. Samavati and all of her women were burned to death in that fire. And this was precisely the point of the Buddha's saying that Samavati had been the most accomplished in spreading metta.

So anyway, this other Sama was Samavati's dearest friend, and she was so upset at this murder—that this could happen to someone so filled with metta and so devoted—that she became a nun. But her mind was always distracted. She didn't have an easy time either. This was another case where that stock phrase appears:

It was 25 years since I turned away from home and I hadn't had a moment's peace. I had no peace because I did not know my own mind. Then suddenly I was shaken with dread, remembering the words of the Conqueror.

That's 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.

I love that one. "Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert." She sounds like an aversive type to me, whereas the one before, who was lost in wanting things, was more of a greedy type—both suffering. "I finished with craving. The seventh day since my craving has died."

Alright, just a couple more. There are quite a few stories of women who only became nuns when they were really old. When I was a nun in Thailand, about 20 years ago, there really weren't so many nuns as there were monks. And quite a few of the nuns were really quite elderly. It seemed that they would become nuns sort of when their families were gone and they didn't really have someone to take care of them.

Not all nuns were like that, but you could really see a lot of it.

Well, here in the Therīgāthā there are some women who became nuns when they were quite old—but not in the same way, where they're just hanging around being taken care of because they have nothing else to do. These women were really sincere.

One of them was simply called Dhammā. She's the one I mentioned who wanted to ordain, but she waited until her husband's death because he didn't want her to. Like a good wife, she stayed with her husband.

And in her old age, after he died, like a shot she went off to become a nun in the Buddha's sangha.

Her poem is interesting because she actually woke up through experiencing the misery, the unreliability of her old aging body:

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.

You see, when we talk about really seeing dukkha, it's not to make us suffer more. She really saw, and her heart was freed.

Another old woman wrote this poem when she woke up:

Though I am thin, sick, and lean on a stick,
I have climbed up the Vulture Peak.

That's a really high, rocky hill. So she climbed up it, shaking on her stick.

Robe thrown down, bowl turned over,
leaning on a rock—
then the great darkness opened.

In fact, the nun who was commended by the Buddha for the strongest capacity for effort, who was really celebrated for her diligence, was a woman who only became a nun when she was quite elderly.

Her name was Soṇā, and it's said that she had seven sons and seven daughters, and she was wealthy, and they were all married. When she was old, she said, "You know, instead of you waiting until I die to inherit my money, why don't I divide it equally among you all now, and then I can just take turns traveling and living with each of your families. It's not that long in a year—fourteen of you."

And they said, "Oh, sure, Mother, we'll take care of you."

So that's what she did. But as she traveled from family to family, they became less receptive, less welcoming, treating her like the old mother-in-law in the way. So finally she said, "Okay, enough of this. I'm out of here. I'm going to become a nun."

By the time she joined, she was old and feeble. She couldn't do much. Some of the other nuns had her doing simple little chores, but they made a little bit of fun of her for being so old. She would bring them water and just do what she could.

But she was so committed. She was so committed to awakening.

The story goes that one night, the other nuns were all out, and she was just committed. She was just going to do her walking meditation. She had to hold her hand up on a wall to hold herself up because she couldn't see, she was so shaky, so old—but she was just committed to her practice.

The Buddha saw this with his mind, and he appeared to her like a radiant vision and inspired her. And it so inspired her that she awoke that night. Then, according to the commentaries, she became a complete arahant.

Now, one of the classic rules is that you don't go bragging when you're awakened. You don't show up and say, "Okay, ladies, now I've done it, so a little respect, please." So she'd become an arahant, but the next day she came bringing the water in the normal way.

However, it's really unwholesome karma to insult an awakened person in any way. It's just not a good thing to do. So she came the next day, and they sent her to heat up the water and were about to berate her a little because she was so slow.

She knew she had to do something so they wouldn't have a chance to berate her now that she was an arahant—because it would be really bad for them. But she also couldn't just announce it.

So with the concentrated power of her mind, she caused the water to be heated.

I guess she knew tummo yoga somehow. And she caused the water to be heated. Seeing that, the other nuns knew. They simply knew.

Just like when Ananda, after the Buddha died and there was the council of five hundred arhats getting together to repeat all the suttas, to begin codifying the teachings—they really wanted Ananda because he was the one who remembered them all by heart, but he wasn't yet an arhat. There's that story of how Ananda had to practice really hard the night before to become an arhat, and he was just giving up, just lying down, giving up. It's always said it happened in the one posture that isn't any particular posture—he was just about to lie down, halfway between standing and lying, when he awakened. So again, the way he signaled that he was an arhat is that he simply appeared, magically, sitting at the table with all the others. And they said, "Oh, okay, you did it." That was the sign.

Just to know, the one who was most known for her energy, for her effort, was Bahupitaka, a really old woman. So age—even health, as long as there is wakefulness—is not in the way.

Just two more. This one is kind of humorous—I find it humorous. A woman who was clearly happy to have left her marriage and become a nun. She is known simply as Sumaṅgala's Mother, not by her own name:

Free, I am free!

How glad I am to be free from my pestle.
My cooking pot seems worthless to me,
And I can't even bear to look at his sun umbrella.
My husband disgusts me.
So I destroy greed and hate with a sizzle.
And I'm the same woman who goes to the foot of a tree
And says to herself, "Ah, happiness,"
And meditates with happiness.

And then I'll end with Uttama, because I just like her poem. She was another one of Paṭācārā's disciples, from a Brahmin family. I don't know too much else about her. This is her poem:

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 be true daughters and sons of the Buddha.

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