Stories of Some Buddhist Nuns: Then and Now

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:22

So tonight, in this kind of changeover period, I thought it would be story time.

But really what I want to talk about, we don't hear so much about the women in the history of the time of the Buddha and also now. So I want to talk about some of the nuns who were enlightened nuns at the time of the Buddha, and also some nuns that I know today who remind me of similar stories.

I feel it's really important to remember that there's quite a rich place in the texts where there are poems from enlightened monks and poems from enlightened nuns. And then we have a little bit of the story about some of the nuns. It's really wonderful to read them because it brings them alive. Just as if you read the suttas you might think they feel very dry and dull, but you start to get a sense of the personalities of the different monks, and so also with some of these nuns.

I only have time to pick out a very few, just to give you a sense of the range. But what I love about it is that I really feel like I can relate to different personalities, different situations in life before they became nuns, different ways that they awoke—quickly, slowly, good horse, bad horse, all of that. It's very accessible to how we are today. And it brings it alive for me, from just being some distant, "Oh yeah, and there were some women too," kind of fluffing along, doing their best. It's not like that at all. It really gives a sense of the power of the women just as much as the men, yesterday and today.

So first I want to read a translation by Andy Olendzki from the Study Center. He likes to translate poems from Pali to English. And this is a poem of a nun, Soma, with Mara. Mara is the personification of delusion, the personification of kilesa, of temptation. There are often these dialogue poems with both nuns and monks and the Buddha, where Mara comes and tries to say, "What are you doing? You're wasting your time. You're too stupid. You'll never do it." Whatever he thinks will seduce them.

So in this poem, she enters this grove to practice and Mara comes and wants to make her waver and abandon her commitment. Mara says: "That which can be attained by seers, the place so hard to arrive at, women are not able to reach since they lack sufficient wisdom."

And Soma thinks, "Who is this? I see you, Mara." And she answers—she's not thrown off at all. She says: "What difference does being a woman or a man make when the mind is well composed, when knowledge is proceeding on, when one rightly sees into Dhamma? Indeed, for one to whom the question arises, am I a man or a woman, or even am I something at all? To them alone is Mara fit to talk."

These women, these awakened women, they're tough and clear and strong just as equally as the men. And as Andy says, he thinks this is a definitive statement in the Buddhist tradition about the equality of the

sexes in terms of awakening.

These women whose poems we have—of course we only have poems from the enlightened ones, same with the monks—they come from all walks of life and they manifest their awakening in all different ways. There's not one way to be, either before you begin your practice or after. Some became great teachers, well-known. Some lived quiet lives of a hermit. Some were just happy to run the community or just live quietly in the community. Some were reclusive, just as with the monks, living in all different ways.

One has to start with the woman who's kind of like the mother of the nun sangha—you can't really skip her—Mahapajapati Gotami, who was the aunt and stepmother of Siddhartha before he became the Buddha, because his mother died when he was a week old. His mother was the queen married to King Suddhodana, and her younger sister, Mahapajapati Gotami, was also married to the king. The kings had various wives at that time. So she really raised Siddhartha as her own son, and also his son, Rahula.

After he'd gone and become the Buddha, she was of course living with her husband the king. During this period, many of the men in the Buddha's family were leaving to become monks. Women at this time in this society defined their social status by their male relationships. They were somebody's daughter, somebody's wife, somebody's mother.

So when her husband King Suddhodana died, and then her son also went off to become a monk—Buddha was already the Buddha—there came a period where both sides of the Buddha's family, the Sakyans and the Koliyas, the two clans, got into a battle over water rights of a river. And they had a big battle.

And so, again, a lot of men were killed. The Buddha came to try to help them bring an end to the conflict. He gave such an inspiring Dharma talk that the fighting ceased, but then many of the men who weren't killed also went off and became monks with the Buddha.

It was actually at this time that Pajapati, being the queen and a natural leader, found herself along with many other women left without male relatives. So they started thinking, "Why don't we too renounce the world and wake up?" Not just because there was nothing else to do—which sometimes is why people ordain as monks and nuns even today—but really out of genuine aspiration. They too wanted awakening.

At that time, there was no order of nuns. As we've mentioned, during that period in India there were various wandering ascetic orders and loose cannons wandering around being ascetic as well. But the orders were all those of men. It simply wasn't done in that society. In a way, it was seen as a real threat to society to set up an order of renunciate women, because of course, the women hold society together. So no, that couldn't be permitted.

Mahapajapati went to the Buddha and asked him very sincerely if she might ordain. He listened, but he said, "No, sorry, Gotami. Please don't set your heart on women being allowed to do this." She asked the requisite three times, after which if the Buddha were ever going to say yes, he would have. And he didn't. He still said no. Then he took his bowl and went with his monks to another place on their regular tour,

about a hundred miles away.

So Pajapati, along with quite a few women, cut off their hair, put on saffron-colored robes, and barefoot, followed the Buddha and the monks to the next town, to Vesali. They weren't accustomed to walking barefoot on the roads as the monks were. It's said that when she arrived at Vesali with a number of Sakyan women, she was standing outside the hall where the Buddha was teaching, her feet swollen, covered with dust, looking pitiful and crying.

This is where Ananda steps in. Ananda is also a cousin of the Buddha, so in some way related to Pajapati as well. They were all related back then—it wasn't such a huge scene. Ananda, having been the Buddha's attendant for twenty-five years, comes across as perhaps the most human of all the monks. He's kind, he's friendly. But whereas sometimes these days, if you encounter a great spiritual teacher, their attendant seems to serve the function of keeping people away, Ananda served the function of trying to get as many people in to hear the Dhamma from the Buddha as possible. He was always kind.

So he intervenes at this point. He asked, "It would be good, Lord, if women were to have permission to do this." And again the Buddha says no to Ananda: "Don't set your heart on this."

So Ananda thought, let me try asking in another way. He says, "Are women able, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of stream entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship?" These are the levels of awakening. And the Buddha says, "Yes, Ananda, they are able." It's really clear throughout—there's absolutely no difference in potential for awakening.

Then Ananda goes on to say, "Since they can realize perfection, and since Pajapati was of great service to you—she was your aunt, your nurse, your foster mother, she even suckled you at her breast—it would be good if women could be allowed to enter into homelessness."

And the Buddha goes, "Okay, all right." And at this point began the Sangha of Bhikkhunis.

What really comes across, of course, is that within the structure of the time, Pajapati was clearly a woman of huge faith—faith in awakening—but also real determination, a willingness not to simply go along with what she was told, which was how women were supposed to be at the time. She should just agree. But it was a very bold request. And she didn't say, "Okay, well, I'll just give it up and go back home." She was clear and strong in her faith, in her determination, and in her wanting to wake up.

So she became really the mother of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. From the time that she and all these other women were ordained, she was obviously the first teacher, but also a very powerful and popular one. Many women came to her. She's said to have lived to be a hundred and twenty years old, and when she died, the Buddha came to be with her. It is said—and this is in the mythology—that there were earthquakes and flowers falling from the sky. Second only to the death of a Buddha were there such miracles occurring on the earth to mark her passing. It's a way of acknowledging the strength of who she was and what she did.

Her poem says: "Homage to you, Buddha, 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 all the disciples all together, their energy, their sincere effort. This is true homage to the Buddhas."

That's you, you know—disciples together with your energy and your sincere effort. It's homage to all the Buddhas and the potential Buddhas that each of us are. And I get a sense from her of how she's really the holder of the community, that what she looks out and sees is how all the disciples are paying homage through their sincere practice.

Just as in that time the societal structure really held women in a certain place, the Buddha recognized that in terms of awakening, in terms of the practice that's possible, there's absolutely no difference between men and women. That was already quite radical. And once he agreed to have the sangha, as I said, just as with the men, so with the women. He kept them quite separate, which was really essential in those days. It wasn't like mixing up. The bhikkhunis had their monasteries, and the bhikkhus had theirs. The bhikkhunis had their own teachers. They could come and hear the Buddha, and some of the monks would go and teach with the bhikkhunis, but they had their own systems.

Within the bhikkhuni order, the same as with the monks, the class structure of India at that time was absolutely rigid. Whatever caste you were born into, that's the caste you had to live in your whole life. They couldn't mix. There was one really low caste called untouchables, where if you were from a higher caste, you couldn't even take water from an untouchable person's hands. That stratified.

And once in the Sangha of either nuns or monks, the Buddha completely did away with that. The only sense of hierarchy within the nuns was when you ordained. Each person who came in—every ordained nun was junior to those who had already been there. Same with the monks. It didn't matter if the one who came in had been a queen and the one who ordained two minutes before her had been a prostitute or a beggar. It didn't matter. The prostitute, the beggar, was senior to the queen. This is radical in that time.

Who came to mind when I was thinking about these stories is a Thai woman named Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. Her Thai name was Chatsuman Kabilsingh. She was a professor in a university in Bangkok. When she was in her fifties—and I don't want to go too much into the politics—but in Burma and Thailand, the bhikkhuni order has fallen away, and the nuns only have eight or ten precepts, so they're not on a parity. Without getting into the politics, it's believed in the political system, and the monkhood is mixed up with the political system to some degree in Thailand and Burma, that bhikkhunis must have bhikkhunis present in the ordination ceremony. And since there are no bhikkhunis, they can't ordain new ones. It goes like that. And they don't recognize the Mahayana lineage—some do and some don't.

So Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, some years ago, went to Sri Lanka, where there are bhikkhunis who have been ordained in the Mahayana tradition. She came back to Thailand and began to open a nunnery. Now, this is really more than a political hot potato. But she is very well known and was quite a scholar. She wasn't just some person they could ignore or mistreat.

This is from an article, actually from years ago in The New York Times. It says the government and conservative monks and laymen accused her of intentionally creating problems to further erode the religion, which was plagued in that nation by numerous sex and money scandals in recent years. Just like everything, there are good monks and bad monks, good nuns and bad nuns. Don't be too idealistic.

But anyway, she said—and this is great—she said, "This is a conflict between ignorance and right understanding."

And she quotes the Buddha, who said very often that the health of the sangha, the health of the Buddhasasana surviving in the world, depends on four pillars: male and female ordained people, and male and female lay people. These are the four pillars of the Buddhasasana.

And so she said, "You know, I'm not trying to cause trouble. I just hope that allowing female ordination as bhikkhunis will strengthen women's status, strengthen the Buddhism." And she has no plans to seek official recognition. She said the recognition comes after trust. "I will prove that bhikkhunis are really a boon to Thai Buddhism. This is my mission in life."

So now she has this huge center outside of Bangkok. I was on the webpage last year sometime. She speaks English really well. She has talks online, and she's been ordaining temporary bhikkhunis, just tons at a time. So she's just in her not-so-quiet way, but steady way—she really is, in a way, trying to be the mother of the new birth of the bhikkhuni sangha in Thailand. So this is someone who's quite active today, in a way similar to Mahapajapati.

So back to the Buddha's time. The kinds of women and the stories of how they became nuns—they're all very different. First I want to tell another story, of a woman named Dhammadina, who after she became a nun was recognized by the Buddha as the foremost in teaching the Dhamma, the foremost in expounding the Dhamma, in preaching.

She was the wife of a man named Wisaka, a very important man in Rajagaha. They were quite well off—not a king, a businessman, but quite well off. And they had what was a very happy marriage. There are plenty of other nuns who had really unhappy, oppressive marriages and wanted to become nuns for that reason. Of course, their husbands wouldn't let them. But Dhammadina had a happy marriage.

One day, however, her husband had been out and heard the Buddha teach for the first time. When he came home to lunch—usually he would come in and they would chat, sit down and eat together—but this time he just walked by her without saying anything. Her reaction, as it's told in the story, is so typical. She goes, "Oh, he's angry. What did I do? Why is he angry at me?" And she got all worried.

But then he called her and said, "No, no, I'm not angry." He was so inspired by hearing the Buddha teaching that he'd had some kind of realization. And he decided he was going to renounce the world and become a monk. So he said, "I'll give you all my wealth. You can stay here with my wealth. You can go back to your family—I'll really take care of you. But I'm going off to ordain with the Buddha."

So she thought about it. It had never even occurred to her that this was a possibility before. But she said, "You know what? I want to do that too. I also want to ordain." So he said, "Great!" And he sent her off with great fanfare and a golden palanquin—you know, where you're carried—sent her off in all this state to become a nun.

And so she did. She went off, practiced intensively, became an arahant, and was this great teacher. Then she was going back to Rajagaha, where lo and behold, it turned out her husband never went to become a monk after all. He was still just hanging out there in Rajagaha. But he was still really interested in the Dhamma. She just had more energy and more faith.

So when she came back—and this isn't just a poem in the Therigatha, but actually a whole sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya—she comes back to Rajagaha and her husband, her former husband Wisaka, comes up and he's eagerly asking her all these questions. Very subtle questions, just one after the other after the other. And she's answering them as best she can.

And he's just pounding her with questions. She says meditation is the focusing of the heart. He says, what are its outward signs? She says its outward signs are the presence of four kinds of attention; four kinds of right effort are needed. And he kept on going and kept on going, and finally she said—and this is a whole sutta—"You will never get to the end of your questionings. So go, if you have more questions, go and ask the Buddha."

So he went. And of course, when you've been questioning another monk or nun, you always go and report to the Buddha what you asked and what they said. So he did that. And the Buddha praised Dhammadina, saying, "Dhammadina possesses learning and great wisdom. Had you asked me, I would have answered exactly as she did. Her answer was correct, and you should treasure it accordingly."

This is actually a very high form of praise—but more than praise, it's a statement. They call it a buddhavacana, the word of the Buddha, which is really a rare example of saying there's an equivalence in this statement between her wisdom and the Buddha's wisdom. It's a very strong statement about her.

So that's Dhammadina. And the person she reminds me of, whom I wanted to tell you about, is a nun who lives in Burma today. Her name is Daw Yuzna. I've met her quite a few times. She is a very serene, calm, and very strong person—maybe mid-forties, I would say. She's a teacher in the Mogok Sayadaw tradition, which is a different technique and emphasis from the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition. Those are probably the two main strands of Vipassana meditation styles in Burma, with Pa Auk Sayadaw perhaps being the third.

She lives in a monastery where the Sayadaw, a male monk, is the abbot. But she is really the well-known

one, the famous one—Daw Yuzna. People come from all over to ask her questions, to ask her advice, to make offerings to her. She's a very strong teacher, very calm. I've never seen her flustered or upset. She can be very friendly and loving—joking around is perhaps too strong a description, but there's a warmth to her.

She has these dogs that bark like crazy when you come. They're just barking and barking, and they come and be quiet, but only for her—not for anybody else in the monastery.

She told us once her story. She wanted to become a nun, but her parents wouldn't let her. Finally they agreed when she was about nineteen, but only for a year. After that year, she really wanted to stay, and her father was actually quite mean to her, even beating her, trying to get her to stop being a nun. But her will was so strong, her commitment and faith so strong. She just loved the Dhamma, loved practicing, loved sharing. You can feel this sense of power and strength and calm inside of her—it's just how she is. She emanates that quality. She simply loves the Dhamma.

And she has amazing energy. We went to visit her one time on her birthday, which is often when people will offer a big feast. So we arrived, and she's cooking. She's offering a feast to everyone in the monastery—cooking it herself, making the dessert. And then out of the meditation hall come about one to two hundred yogis, men and women. Oh yes, by the way, she's teaching a ten-day retreat to these yogis, just her. The Sayadaw wasn't teaching. She's teaching it, making this meal, hanging out with all the visitors. That's what she's like.

It's not common for a nun to be teaching huge retreats to mixed populations like that. It's a statement of the power of her understanding.

And then after Cyclone Nargis, which was three years ago—which was really sort of like Katrina here, in the southwestern part of Burma—just hundreds of villages were destroyed. People died.

Lots of young kids were orphaned, or their parents lost all their way to support themselves. And so she just got the clear message in herself that she's in Yangon, that she needed to start a school for orphaned and poor girls—just for girls.

She is such a force of nature. She didn't just build a little shack, which some other nuns we know have done. She does have a few more resources because she's so well-known. She starts raising money. She built this huge three-story building. She said she wants to make it a school that's really good. So she's hiring really good teachers, paying them much more than the public school pays the teachers. She had about 200 girls from young all the way up to 10th standard, which is like graduating from high school—which not that many Burmese kids get to. And now she's even hiring some computer experts and looking for computers to help the few girls who finished the 10th standard to learn some more. Amazing.

And this is all on dāna. She has a very precise budget. She showed us her budget—our friend Ari Anani translated it; it was all in Burmese. Very precise, complex as it would be for such an undertaking, because

half of the girls live there. So it's not only the building and the teachers and the materials, it's the food and the clothing. All on dāna.

So for instance, we came and gave her from some of the dāna various people had offered us, maybe $200 or $300. And she said, "This is great, now I can meet my payroll this month." It's like month to month. She needs something like 300,000 kyat a month, which is in the neighborhood of $300 to us, but that's really a lot of money over there. Every month she needs that. And she's just completely serene, trusting it's going to come. "Great, okay, good, I can pay the teachers this month." She knew if it hadn't been us, it would have come from somewhere else.

And she's still teaching retreats, and she's still seeing people. This is just one example of a really powerful woman teacher who's also trying to support young girls as well as she can. And she's kind of fun to hang out with.

She told us this last time—there were just a few of us, and she was talking in Burmese, so she was really speaking from her heart. She was talking about this school and how she, of course, wanted to help the young girls who didn't have parents, didn't have a way to schooling. But she said, and she just seemed so sincere, "Of course, my motivation in all of this is the Dhamma. Behind everything I do is the love of awakening and wanting to be able to offer to these girls the chance to really understand the Dhamma and awaken themselves. Everything else is extra, but that's why I do everything that I do."

She's really quite an amazing person. So that's Daw U Zana.

There are many nuns in the suttas who became nuns not like Dhammadina—just "Oh yeah, sure, why not?"—but from amazing, really intense suffering in their lives, where they were just at their last wit's end. And of course, afterwards, when they awaken, they have so much compassion and understanding of suffering that they become powerful teachers for other women in suffering.

I'm going to really condense this next story. But this is one of those out-there stories where you think it couldn't get any worse and then it gets worse, and you think it couldn't get any worse and then it gets worse again.

This woman was named Patācārā, from a well-to-do family, but she fell in love with a servant. Of course, in those days it was arranged marriages. But she fell in love with a servant, and they ran away and got married, which was just beyond not done. So they had to go to another town and never see her family again.

When she got pregnant, she wanted to go back and see her family. But understandably, her husband wasn't so thrilled with that idea. So he put it off and put it off, and she had the baby. The second time she gets pregnant, same thing. He keeps putting it off. He doesn't want to go. But finally, she's just about to have the baby, and they start walking to the other village. She's some distance away, maybe a couple of days' walk. But she was too pregnant. She starts to go into labor in the middle of a field.

And it's about to start storming. So her husband goes off to get leaves and brush and build a shelter. But he gets bitten by a poisonous viper and dies. So she's lying there having the baby. She doesn't know what happened to him. She has the baby, stays there, and then she doesn't know what to do. The next day, she gets up and starts walking, finds his body, filled with grief. Really nothing to do but walk on to her family.

Because it had rained so much, she comes to a river that's way swollen. And she thinks, how can I get across this river with the newborn baby and her little two-year-old? So she decides, okay, I'll leave the baby on this side, walk across with the two-year-old, and then come back.

Yes, you're right. The two-year-old gets swept away. She's completely losing it. She looks back and a big bird of prey has come down and taken the little baby while she's in the river.

So she's pretty much losing it, but goes on to her family's village. She gets there and sees smoke rising up, and she says to someone, "Where's my parents and my brother?" And the person says, "Ask me anything else. Don't ask me that." She said, "That's the only thing I want to know." They had all just died in a fire.

You see, it couldn't get worse.

So she went crazy. She just went completely mad. And her name, Patachara, means "cloak walker." Her clothes just dropped off. She's just walking in circles. She's just mad. And people, being how people can be, would chase her away and throw clods of dirt at her. They didn't want her around.

At one point, she came to where the Buddha was preaching. And the people tried to push her away, make her go away—she's naked, she's embarrassing, she's crazy. But the Buddha went and got in her way. He went deliberately up to her and said, "Sister, recover your presence of mind." And she did. Then someone gave her a cloak so she wasn't naked. And she said, "Help me, please help me." And out poured her whole story.

And it said that the Buddha said—and this is really this kind of powerful teaching—he didn't say, "Oh, you poor thing." He said, "Don't think you have come to someone who can help with that. In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than the water in the four oceans."

And this actually calmed her down a little bit. Then he went on and gave more teachings about how when we ourselves die, no one else can help us. No one can be with us. Even when we're alive, in the depth of our suffering, even our kin, our family, cannot take our suffering away from us. This is how it is.

And then he preached the Dhamma. And she really was back in her right mind. She said, "Yes, may I become a nun." And the Buddha says sure. He takes her, goes with her to the Sangha of Bhikkhunis. And the Sangha of Bhikkhunis ordained her.

She had to practice for a while. She wasn't one of these who in five minutes completely woke up. But she became, obviously, a very powerful teacher. It's said that she's the one who's mentioned the most in other poems as someone who's helped.

And her awakening poem—I like it because it describes her moment of awakening.

So I feel the immediacy of it. Also that it wasn't so easy for her.

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

Can you relate?

"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 down. When the lamp went out, my mind was freed."

She wasn't even in meditation. She was walking into her room, sitting on her bed, pushing the wick down on her lamp—just being here. Her mind was freed. And she became a great teacher for those in suffering.

Here's one of the poems by another woman named Chanda that Patachara helped: "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 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."

Notice that food and drink. The first thing Patachara did was feed her. She was hungry and ragged and cold, and Patachara fed her, then taught her the Dhamma and supported her. Metta and karuna flowing directly from understanding suffering, combined with really straight teachings. It's a great one-two combination.

If you want to think of a current-day person, Dipa Ma is absolutely the best example of exactly this combination. She wasn't a nun, but she embodied this path of becoming a practitioner and awakening through meditation, of incredible suffering in her life that took her almost to the point of death and madness, and then becoming such a loving and really strong teacher.

Her story, incredibly shortened: little Indian lady, married to an Indian man in a very loving marriage, but for maybe twenty years they had no children, which was really devastating in that culture that was all about having children. They had moved to Burma where her husband was working. Finally, after twenty years, she got pregnant, but the baby died. Then she got pregnant again, and Dipa was born, who survived. Then she got pregnant again, and that baby was born and died very soon. She went into such a depression, actually started having heart problems. Then her husband died. She went into not just depression but became so sick with her heart that she was just in bed. She could hardly get out of bed for months, for years. She could barely take care of her daughter. She was really on the point of death.

She had wanted to go to the Mahasi Center to meditate when she was married, but her husband always said, "Wait till you're older." But finally, on the point of going crazy and dying with nothing else to do, she went. It's said she was so weak that she almost had to crawl up the steps to get into the center to sit. She starts sitting, and of course, she's one of these "in one week" people. She had such strong samadhi and such amazing paramis that she had some enlightening experience within a week. She went home, took care of her daughter Dipa, and went back again after a while. Amazing, amazing paramis. She really transformed. She had very, very deep depths of awakening.

After some time of her practice, those who knew Dipa Ma were fascinated by her transformation. She had changed from a sickly, dependent, grief-stricken woman into a healthy, independent, radiant being. Dipa Ma herself said, "You have seen me. I was disheartened and broken down due to the loss of my husband and children and due to disease. I suffered so much. I could not walk properly."

But now, how are you finding me? All my disease is gone. I am refreshed and there is nothing in my mind. There is no sorrow, no grief. I am quite happy. If you come to meditate, you will also be happy. There is no magic. Only follow the instructions.

That might be our problem. Only follow the instructions.

Okay, so she has some paramis. We'll give her that. Amazing suffering leading to really quick awakening on her part. And then, as I think I was saying, she was renowned for just beaming love, just being so filled with love for whoever was there. But not only love—this really straight teaching as well.

The first thing is she was really clear that it's not just about sitting meditation. It's not just about being on retreat. That waking up, that the practice is about everything we do. She was really clear about this. So she didn't become a nun. She had Deepa, and she went back to India, and they lived together in this tiny little one-room apartment in Calcutta for the whole rest of her life with Deepa and Deepa's son. And she would just welcome anyone who came, all day, every day, and teach them. She said, "As long as they want to come, let me share the Dhamma with them." She was, again, like a mother to all in the Dhamma.

This is one example of how she believed that awakening is possible in any environment. She devised practices that her students could do at home. So one woman who was trying to raise six young children alone, with no way she could even sit down and meditate, never mind go to a meditation center—Deepa Ma taught this woman to notice very steadily the sucking sensation of the infant at her breast with complete presence of mind for the duration of each nursing period. This amounted to hours each day. And as Deepa Ma had hoped, Malati attained the first stage of enlightenment without ever leaving her home.

Cool, huh? We've got no excuse.

So this is love and commitment, but also she was really strong in her teaching. No mincing words. This is another story from another Indian woman who was one of her students, Sudipti. And this is very straight:

"When my son died in 1984, Deepa Ma shocked me with her words. It was a hard teaching I have not forgotten. She said, 'Today your son has gone from this world. Why are you shocked? Everything is impermanent. Your life is impermanent. Your husband is impermanent. Your son is impermanent. Everything is impermanent. Your money is impermanent. Your building is impermanent. There is nothing that is permanent. When you are alive, you might think, this is my daughter, this is my husband, this is my property, this car belongs to me. But when you are dead, nothing is yours. Sudipti, you think you are a serious meditator, but you must really learn that everything is impermanent.'"

Coming from someone who knows, and from a field of boundless metta, it's not like it's easy to hear. But the conditions are there to let it in. And it's really, really powerful to just be in the presence of someone with this degree of compassion and this level of understanding and the ability to share it.

Than one other suffering story, from another nun I know. Not such a brilliant attained person and not a known teacher, but one who is a representative, I would say, of many, many of the nuns in Burma who have enormous purity and faith and compassion and dedication. And I'm sure it's the same from the time of the Buddha. Most of the nuns and most of the monks, we don't know anything about, but they are enormously dedicated fields of purity and wisdom.

So this nun, her name is Uttara Tengi, and her younger sister is Uttama Tengi. They have a little nunnery near one of the meditation centers where I sit. Again, after the cyclone Nargis, a lot of nuns moved to this area in the outskirts of Yangon and started building. They would get a little bit of land that someone would buy for them, and they would build. So these two nuns, with the help of their brother, their actual brother, built for themselves this little shaggy nunnery. The walls are plaited bamboo, which lasts about a year, and the floor is plaited bamboo, which lasts six months as a floor. They just suddenly show up there, these two sisters and ten little girls that are nuns.

So we got to know them. We got to know them because we were going around trying to see what some of these nuns needed—there are lots of nuns in this area—offering support to the ones that just somehow through their vibe, or through talking with them, felt really sincere, with some sense of purity and commitment. And they just had such a sense of love and purity when we would hang out in their little place that we just got to know them better, offering them support.

And then we came to know their story. Again, because we were with Aryanani, who can speak Burmese and translate—it really helps.

So Uttara Tengi, who is the older one, just has this brightness. You can just feel it. You're drawn to her. You just kind of light up. She and her sister, along with some other siblings, were living down in the delta area. Their family were small farmers, but okay, well enough off, could hire a few helpers. But slowly over the past few years, they'd gotten poorer. She didn't really say why, as have many people in Burma. But they still had their land and they were still working.

But she began in her late teens to develop some kind of illness. No one knew why, but she was getting weaker and weaker. After some time, she was just in bed all the time. She couldn't work, and the family was struggling. They were selling their jewelry to try and get doctors and find out how to take care of her. She said she got so weak it was to the point where if her arm was lying next to her on the bed, she couldn't lift it up and put it on her chest. She could hardly even talk because she was so weak.

But she heard her parents talking, saying, "Well, we have nothing else, but we need to get more money to take care of her, so we need to sell our house." And she heard them. They didn't know she heard. She said, "No, no, no, no way. Let me become a nun. Then you don't have to take care of me."

But instead of saying, "Oh, yeah, good idea," the parents said, "No, no, we don't want you to become a nun. Please, let us take care of you."

But she insisted. So they said, "Well, only if your younger sister becomes a nun with you can you become a nun." The sister was sitting there, so we asked, "Well, how did you feel about that?" She said, "Oh, I always wanted to become a nun. So this was great for me."

There was a Sayadaw in that village that they really respected, and he agreed to ordain them. She said on the first day after she became a nun—within two days—she got so much strength back that she could start walking. Just two days after becoming a nun, and she could start talking. She just got better and better.

I was telling this to Jack Kornfield. He goes, "Well, what she needed was good therapy." Then he stopped a minute and goes, "Oh, I guess she did get that."

And so, just a side story: We were in their little house. Every nunnery, every monastery is going to have a little shrine area with a Buddha statue and flowers.

And they had this beautiful little shrine where they would bow and do their chanting every morning with the young nuns they were teaching. She pointed to it and said, "Do you see that Buddha statue?" It was a sweet little statue. "Well, when we ordained, we both had really beautiful long hair, down to our knees. And of course, we had to shave it all off. So we sold it." I guess there's a use for hair. And with the money from selling their hair, they bought that Buddha statue. Ten or fifteen years later, they still have it. Their grandmother and family were all crying when they shaved their hair and became nuns, but the two sisters were so happy.

They went to Yangon to study. Many nuns in Burma study extensively—they learn Pali, study the suttas, study Abhidhamma. They take this series of examinations, the same tests as the monks. It's a five, seven, ten year process, and when you finally pass them all, you become what's called a Dhammacharya. These nuns were studying intensely, going on alms round, and practicing.

After studying for some years, they were thinking, "Well, now we're ready to go to a meditation center and really learn—to wake up." But just then, the Sayadaw from their home village, who had been supporting

them and was their teacher, their guru you could say, was getting old and sick. He had been taking care of some young orphan girls. So he wrote to these two nuns: "Now you have to take care of these ten little girls. I'm sending them to you."

They were like, "Whoa, we didn't think of that. We were going to go and meditate."

But as they're telling us this, we're sitting in their little monastery with the ten little girls they've been living with and taking care of for the last two or three years—teaching them Pali and Burmese and English, sewing their clothes, teaching them chanting. They just did a complete turn. They said, "Oh, okay. This will go fine."

They came and built this tiny monastery with their brother's help. And they were totally committed to taking care of these little girls who become little nuns—very, very cute little nuns, various ages, sweet, laughing. There's so much love. They're all sitting there while we're talking.

And again, Uttara said with such sincerity, "We really want so much to be able to offer them the chance of a decent life. Otherwise they'd just be on the street, somebody's slave, somebody's servant. Here we're teaching them to read and write, teaching them the Dhamma, teaching them what it means to be a good person. And when they grow up, if they want to stay nuns, great—then they can take care of and teach the younger ones, and we can finally go off and meditate. And if they don't want to become nuns, that's fine with us. At least they know how to be good people." They said, "We're totally dedicating our life to this."

This was spoken with so much sincerity. Joy—not just "okay," but joy to be able to offer this.

This is one of countless examples of nuns raising orphan girls like this, or girls whose parents are so poor they beg the nuns to take their children even if they only get to see them once a year. When you come out of there, you're just so filled with light and happiness. And these are quiet people. No one's ever going to know them. They're examples of probably hundreds. I could name you ten other nunneries with similar kinds of stories—maybe not the story about the sickness, but really very inspiring and very alive. You can feel it's like a realm of purity, of sīla, that you really can feel when you walk into a place like that.

So that's another suffering story. Just two more.

Khema, from the time of the Buddha, offers perhaps the most striking example of immediate awakening. She was the consort of King Bimbisara—not the queen, but a consort, which was nonetheless a very prestigious position. Kings had many wives, many consorts. And Khema was very beautiful, very rich, and very conceited.

Bimbisara, the king, was one of the Buddha's followers, and he would try to get Khema to come with him to listen to the teachings. But she refused. "I don't want to go hear that," she said. "He's talking badly about wealth and beauty and sense pleasures. I'm not interested."

So Bimbisara decided to trick her. He hired a singer and poet to compose songs about the beauty of the

grove where the Buddha was teaching—this beautiful park, this exquisite setting. Troubadours strolled around singing where Khema would hear them. And of course, she couldn't resist. So she went.

What I love about this story is how relatable it is—the way we resist hearing the very thing that's going to bring us happiness and freedom. We hold on to what's actually keeping us suffering. For Khema, it was her beauty, her love of sense pleasure.

So she arrives, and of course the Buddha knew how to teach everyone. Using his psychic powers, he created the image of an incredibly beautiful woman—a hundred times more beautiful than Khema. She saw it and thought, "Wow, she's really beautiful." Then, slowly, slowly, he had the image age and decay. The woman grew old, her teeth rotted, she fell apart.

Khema got it. Really got it. "Oh—that's going to happen to me too."

The Buddha said, "People devoted to physical beauty are bound to the world by this attachment. When you renounce this world of attachment, you're truly free."

And she understood. Khema is a rare example of a layperson who became an arahant on the spot—right there, listening to a dharma talk. She became known as the nun with the greatest insight, and also a great teacher.

This reminds me of someone I want to tell you about briefly—Sister Dipankara. She is a nun trained by Pa Auk Sayadaw, the teacher who's currently at the Forest Refuge. His method involves very deep absorption jhana as a foundation, then using that concentration for vipassana. It's a program that many of us could never complete, and if we do, it takes months and months. He's there for four months, and when we asked him how it was going, he said, "Four months isn't really long enough."

We met Sister Dipankara some years ago when she was visiting here. She was describing the whole process, which we didn't know. Several of us three-month teachers were sitting there listening, our mouths dropping open. She described this amazing process—the depth of samadhi and jhana, then vipassana, watching the kalapas in the eye, the earth, air, fire, and water breaking up in each tiny molecule, on and on. Then she mentioned that she had completed all of this in a week.

Sister Dipankara is a force of nature.

She now has a meditation center in Maymyo, in northern Burma. We visited her last winter—quite a lovely spot. She teaches there two months a year, offering retreats for Westerners, for foreigners. The rest of the year, she travels around the world teaching. She speaks excellent English.

When you're in her presence, she's loving and kind, wanting to make sure you have enough to eat. She invited us for this wonderful meal, but she didn't eat with us—she went off to be by herself. So she comes out, totally loving, kind, thoughtful, and then she's off, and who knows where she is, in the day's pleasant abiding. A force of nature.

There are still women and men like this today—with such deep and immediate understanding.

I just want you to know that this is existing in our world today. It's not just something that happened at the time of the Buddha.

I'll end with one poem from the Buddha's time, from a woman named 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.

So let's just sit quietly and find joy and peace for a moment.

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