Stories of Early Nuns and Modern Women Teachers

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:12

So I thought tonight, a little bit of story time.

I want to talk about a few of the nuns, the enlightened nuns from the time of the Buddha that we know about because of the Therigatha, which is in the Pali Canon—a book of the enlightened nuns' poems. I want to tell the story of two or three of them, and then tell the stories of a few more modern women teachers whose lives remind me of these ancient women. Some are dead, some I know. I find it inspiring to share these, and fun as well, because mostly we only hear about the monks and the men, since they write the history.

Before I say anything much about the nuns from the time of the Buddha, it's important to know that it was quite a while after the Buddha started his sangha of monks before there were nuns. It was just monks for a long time. Many of you are familiar with this story, so I'll tell it without too much detail.

The woman who is really responsible for getting the Buddha to finally agree to begin an order of nuns was Mahapajapati Gotami, who was actually his aunt, but who raised him. When the Buddha was a week old, his mother died, and her sister took in the Buddha-to-be and raised him. Both sisters were married to King Suddhodana, so the big family could stay together easily.

She was both his stepmother and his aunt. After the Buddha left and became awakened, at some point he came back to his family. His father, his son Rahula, his aunt Mahapajapati Gotami, and other cousins all became deeply interested, became disciples, and came to some degree of wisdom and understanding.

As time went on, King Suddhodana died. Even among these high-class people, the culture was set up so that a woman's identity was mainly derived from either her husband, her son, or her father—by the male she was connected to. So her husband had died, and her sons had gone off with her nephew to be monks. There were many other women in this situation as well. That was one thing. Also, of course, she was very inspired by the Dhamma.

Then another thing happened. There was a big dispute coming to war about water rights between two clans: the Sakyan clan, which was the Buddha Gautama's father's clan, and the Koliyan clan, which happened to be Pajapati Gotami's clan. These two clans got into a big fight about water rights—even back then, what we're coming to now. Many men were killed. Someone went to get the Buddha to come help resolve this, as he was part of both clans. It's said that he came and gave such an inspiring discourse that

many more men went off with him and ordained.

So now all these men were going off and ordaining. Pajapati Gotami was left somewhat alone, as were many other women. Both because of her natural personality as a leader and her position, they would turn to her. Together, they all decided that they too wanted to follow the holy life as renunciates.

So they went to the Buddha where he happened to be at the time. From her story, you can see the power of faith, the energy it takes, the courage, the persistence, the determination. We know this is required of all of us, but for women at this time in particular, it took much more determination.

She went to the Buddha and asked him, saying, "It would be good, Lord, if women could be allowed to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless state under the Dhamma and discipline of the Tathagata."

He said, "Enough, Gotami. Don't set your heart on women being allowed to do this."

She asked the requisite three times. Usually at the end of the third time, if he was going to agree, he did. But he didn't agree. He said no, and he didn't really explain why. We don't really know why even today.

After some time, he left with his monks and set out for another town, Vesali. But she didn't give up. Pajapati cut off her hair, and with five hundred women—which just means a lot; as Andy Olendzki, the director of the study center, says, when the texts say five hundred were enlightened, it just means many—they all set off together, walking barefoot as the Buddha and the monks would have been doing, and went to Vesali.

I don't know how far that was. It sounds far.

When they got there, they went to the grove where he was staying. And it's said that she and the women stood outside the sala where the Buddha was, with swollen feet and all dusty from walking all those miles. She stood outside the hall there, weeping.

And here Ananda comes in. I don't know if you remember I mentioned Ananda. He's always the kind of intermediary—he was the Buddha's attendant. But instead of being like some gurus' attendants who sort of keep everybody out and control the inner circle for the special people, Ananda was just the reverse. Whatever it was, he would try to get people to come and hear the Dhamma. It's beautiful, really.

So he came, and Ananda was also the Buddha's cousin, so he was related to Mahapajapati as well. He came and said, "Why are you crying?" And she told him.

So he said, okay. And he went in and talked to the Buddha. First he simply said, "She's standing outside on the porch, her feet are swollen, covered with dust, crying because you do not permit women to renounce. It would be good if women were to have permission."

The Buddha said the same thing—"Enough, Ananda"—three times.

So then Ananda also, with faith, determination, perseverance, and great devotion, said, "Okay, let me ask it another way." And this is what I love. He says, "Are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of stream entry, once-returner, non-returning, and arahantship?"

He said, "Yes, Ananda, they are able."

This is exactly what goes through all the teachings. There's no difference between gender or class or how one lives as to the potential for awakening. It's for all of us.

So he said yes. And then Ananda says, "Well, since that's possible, 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."

So he goes, "Okay. Okay, Ananda. Okay."

And then he made eight special rules that women have to follow. So in some way there was a difference. And there are other kinds of rules. But basically, in terms of practice and awakening, the bhikkhunis were on an equal level with the bhikkhus.

So the eight special rules—we really don't know. I really don't know how much of that's cultural, how much of it was him trying not to shock the lay people, because at that time there weren't equal nuns in other systems. I really don't know. I'm not trying to explain it.

But anyway, she was absolutely the one who, through her faith and determination and just love of the Dhamma and awakening, persuaded the Buddha to establish a community of nuns. And so she, of course, became one of the first teachers. Many, many women followed her because of her position, and the community of nuns grew and grew and became very stable.

So I just want to read her poem as it's translated by Andy Olenski, who was for many years the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Not all of it—I'll read some of it.

"Praise to Buddha, you foremost among all beings. You who have released me from pain and so many other folk too. All suffering has been understood. The source of craving has withered. Cessation has been touched by me on the eightfold noble path. I have been mother and son before, and father, brother, grandmother too. Not understanding what was real, I flowed on without finding peace."

But now I've seen the Blessed One. This is my last compounded form. The onflowing of birth has expired. There's no more re-becoming now. See the gathering of followers, putting forth effort, self-controlled, always with strong resolution. This is how to honor the Buddhas.

So that's you. She's talking to the nuns there, really, but that's you—the gathering of followers, putting forth effort, self-controlled, with strong resolution. This is how to honor the Buddhas. And Buddha really means the awakened heart, the awakened mind. We just have to honor that.

So, Mahapajapati Gotami.

As the Bhikkhuni Sangha grew, it really showed—as with the Bhikkhu Sangha—that in terms of societal structure, Buddhism was quite radical in many ways. Once a woman entered the order, and it was the same for bhikkhus, any element of society was welcome. Once you became part of the Sangha, the only ranking was seniority based on when you joined. There were consorts to kings, queens, middle-class women, really poor women, prostitutes, wealthy courtesans, beggars, the young, the very old, some who were utterly miserable when they became nuns, some who were filled with faith—the whole range, even those who had been enslaved or were servants. All different kinds of women.

I'm not going to talk about all of them because I want to focus on others, but the awakened poems are representative of all these women. It's not just the rich queens and consorts who awaken. Background has nothing to do with it. Just like that story I told—maybe I didn't tell it—the Buddha looked over a group of people to see who was ready to hear the Dhamma, and the one who was ready was the poor leper who had just come because he thought they were giving out food. You never know. It's the same with the women. Awakening is the potential of everyone.

The present-day person I thought of is, of course, not quite on a par with Mahapajapati Gotami—because who could be? Who else is the aunt of the Buddha? But today in Thailand, I want to talk about Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni. She's a Thai woman whose lay name was Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. She was a very well-known professor at Thammasat University in Bangkok, with a PhD in philosophy and religion. She's still alive.

Just a quick synopsis of her life: she was born in 1944, and her mother, Voramai, was very devout. After Chatsumarn was born, her mother ordained as a precept nun. In the Theravada tradition at this point, the full bhikkhuni ordination had died out, although in the Mahayana tradition it still exists. So especially in strict Theravada countries—Thailand and Burma in particular, where Buddhism is also the state religion—women can ordain as eight or ten precept nuns, but not as full bhikkhunis on a par with bhikkhus. That is not recognized. This is starting to change, and Venerable Dhammananda is a key mover in that change in Thailand.

Her mother was very devout, and in 1971 she went to Taiwan and ordained in the Mahayana tradition as a bhikkhuni. She came back to Thailand and founded a temple, a meditation center called Songdhammakalyani, which means "temple where women uphold the Dhamma." So this is the atmosphere that Chatsumarn Kabilsingh grew up in.

I noticed, as these women came to me to talk about, they're all from Thailand, Burma, India. I don't mean to say awakening is only possible if you grew up in a Buddhist country. But what I feel is the support—really growing up with the sense of faith strong, having that embedded in the culture. You don't have to kind of...

The faith in the Dhamma, the faith in practice—even many people who don't practice have great faith in it. And so growing up in a country where that faith is woven into the culture... For me, in a country where I didn't know anything about Buddhism, where it certainly wasn't taught, I didn't have natural faith. There's a whole other level of having to find your way in that you simply don't have to navigate there.

Anyway, so she grew up and taught for 27 years at the university, then took early retirement. In 2001, she went to Sri Lanka and became a samaneri, which is like a novice bhikkhuni. Then in 2003, in Sri Lanka—where they had reestablished some bhikkhunis—she took full bhikkhuni ordination and came back to Thailand.

So in the Theravada lineage in Thailand, she was the first woman ordained as a bhikkhuni in that tradition. But you must understand, this was completely controversial in Thailand—and it still is, even though this was 2003. Coming back, many monks and laypeople were very opposed to her, even saying it was illegal. Because this is part of the Theravada religion as opposed to practice and awakening—it's part of the political religion of the country. There's a whole other set of laws and rules that get involved, different from Burma but similar in nature.

So she faced huge resistance. It was very controversial, with many people really angry. But there was also support, and not just from women. There were plenty of monks who supported her as well.

She's still there. She went back to Songdama Kalyani, settled down, and really began practicing and teaching. She's very vibrant and speaks excellent English, so if you go online you can hear talks by her—very lively and vivacious. She's been working tirelessly to reestablish the Theravada bhikkhuni lineage in Thailand. That's what she's been doing since 2003. The temple has grown, and she's also very well known as a scholar around the world.

If you go to their website, it says at the top, "Everything begins here in our hearts." That's what she says. When I was just searching for information about her, I saw that BBC listed her among the 2009 hundred most influential women in the world. So she's become quite well known. That article mentioned that now, all over Thailand—not just at her place—there are 270 bhikkhunis nationwide. Slowly, slowly, it's growing. At her center, they're also attuning to ecological awareness, social awareness—just different times.

A couple of years ago, she organized a special period—I can't remember if it was two weeks or a month—where hundreds of women could come and ordain temporarily, practice for a few weeks, and then return to their lives. So very, very powerful, and having a huge effect in these days.

Let me read one quote where she's explaining what she's doing: "I do not choose to be ordained because I want people to recognize me. I did it because I want to carry on the heritage of the Lord Buddha. I'm trying to revive the four pillars of Buddhism"—something the Buddha talked about often—"the fourfold Sangha: bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen, and laywomen that will sustain the religion into the future." And

the Buddha did say that if you have those four pillars, the sasana will continue. She goes on: "I don't mind if some people hold different opinions about bhikkhunis. The public will be the ones to judge our worth."

That's just a typical example of how she speaks. This really takes a strong heart and a genuine sense of dedication, but she is truly doing it and having a tremendous effect. So I just wanted to mention her.

Now, there are so many to choose from, and I can see I'm never going to get through even what I thought I had really narrowed down. So the next awakened nun from the time of the Buddha that I wanted to mention is one whose name was Dhammadinna. After she was awakened, she was considered—they all had little taglines describing their particular excellence—the foremost in preaching, in expounding the Dhamma. In fact, there's not just a poem but an entire sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 44, called the Shorter Set of Questions and Answers, where she is the one speaking. Questions are asked of her, and she is the one answering.

And of course, at the end, the person keeps asking questions, and she said, "Well, go ask the Buddha." And he went to the Buddha. It's already unusual that a man is coming to a bhikkhuni for teaching. So he went to the Buddha and reported everything. And the Buddha said, "Just as Damodina has said, so I would have said." Her word is called buddhavacana—the same as the Buddha's teaching. So that's really powerful there in the Majjhima Nikaya.

Her story is that she had a happy marriage. Her husband's name was Wisaka. Fairly important, fairly well-to-do—not a suffering life. He was an important man in Rajagaha. And when he first encountered the Buddha, he was off one day and heard the Buddha's teaching. When he came home, he was really moved by it, very inspired. But instead of being his normally friendly self, coming in, eating together, he was just kind of distracted. He passed by without even noticing her. He seemed in another world.

She asked, "What's wrong? Are you angry?" You can relate, right? "What's wrong, honey? Are you angry?"

He said no, he had just been thinking about things. But he said, really from his heart, after hearing the Buddha, "I'm really called. I really want to renounce the world. I want to go and join his Sangha of bhikkhus." And he said, "So I support you in whatever you want. I'll give you all my wealth. I'll support you in whatever you need."

So she thought it over. And she said, "You know what? I want to renounce also"—because the bhikkhunis obviously existed then. So he said okay, and he put her in a golden palanquin and sent her off to the bhikkhunis, and she joined up. And then, you know, you would not be in touch with the home. So she became a bhikkhuni, and she practiced, and obviously, since she's one of the arahant nuns, she became awakened.

After some time, she happened to go back to Rajagaha. And it turned out her husband hadn't become a bhikkhu after all. He got—oh, you know, whatever—he hadn't. But he was still really interested. So he's actually the one who went to her for teachings, who's asking the questions in the sutta. He could see she

was awakened, and he had really deep respect for her. So it's kind of a cool story, that she really went. Motivated by him initially, but she just had more energy, more faith.

I won't read you the whole sutta, just my favorite line from it. He's asking her, "What is meditation?" And she says, "Meditation is the focusing of the heart, or unification of mind." He keeps going on and on until he's asking about Nibbana. And finally she says, "Go talk to the Buddha. Go talk to the Buddha." But it's a very deep wisdom sutta and very inspiring.

Sayadaw U Pandita used to often say that women make the best yogis somehow. It wasn't that women are more able, but just somehow in his experience—and this is mostly Burmese people that he'd be working with—the women just had some kind of commitment or steadiness or something that was more frequent, maybe for whatever reason. Just putting it out there.

So I want to talk about two great women teachers. One is no longer alive. I mentioned her the other night: Upasika Kee Nanayon.

And she's the one whose talks make up this book, *Pure and Simple*, that he just quoted a little bit from. This book, *Six Talks*, is put together and translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu from Metta Vihar. Very interesting. I thought I'd give you a little bit about her life, to make her feel like a real person.

So she was Thai, born in 1901. Thanissaro Bhikkhu says she was the foremost woman Dharma teacher in Thailand in the twentieth century. She remained a lay woman, living as an eight-precept lay woman—so that's kind of like all of you here, those who are keeping eight precepts but not taking robes. That's how she chose to live her life.

She was born in Rajburi to a merchant family. Not super rich, but they had small shops. The eldest of five children, her mother was somewhat religious, so she grew up with a sense of faith in the Dhamma—not really heavy duty, but it was familiar.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu says that she reported how seeing the suffering of her mother during the birth of her siblings, just witnessing how much suffering that was, along with her parents' painful separation and the suffering that entailed, convinced her that she never wanted to marry. So she didn't.

Through her teens and early twenties, she ran a small store, using it to support her elderly father in his old age. She studied the Dhamma a lot in her spare time. In her mind, she was working and saving up until she had enough to go off and live a quiet, simple, secluded life—to just practice for the rest of her life. Her aunt and uncle at this time had a small forest hut not far away at the base of a mountain, and sometimes she would go there and practice, so it was a familiar place.

At the end of World War II, when the war had ended and things were starting to settle down, she decided this was her chance. She handed the shop over to one of her younger sisters, and she and her aunt and uncle went off together to stay at this little piece of land they had at the foot of what's called the Royal

Park Mountain in English, or Khao Suan Luang—I'm sure I'm pronouncing that wrong in Thai, but that's the name of the place. She stayed there the rest of her life.

When they first moved in, it was a lovely forest at the foot of this mountain, but they were living in an old, abandoned monastic dwelling—very frugal, very Spartan. Obviously people weren't coming to support them much. They just dedicated themselves to meditation, and that was it for the rest of their lives.

Gradually, they made the place a little more livable. As she kept on practicing, people would come—mostly women—drawn to practice with them for a while. When she was feeling well, she would give little Dharma talks, and more and more Dharma talks. More and more people were drawn, and it really became a center where many women came to practice.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu says it's still in existence today. Even though she died in 1978, her sister took it over for some time until the nineties when she died, and now it's run by a group. But it still exists, and many women come and practice there.

Living a very simple life, she mostly practiced on her own. She didn't have one in-person teacher. She learned a lot from books—both the Pali Canon and also books by contemporary Thai teachers. But much of her practice was just there on her own.

I don't know if you got a sense of her from the reading—incredibly straightforward, no-nonsense, calling it like it is, always speaking the truth, always oriented toward awakening. Really dedicated and just down to earth.

I'll read a couple of things to give you a feeling. The first is her describing when they first went to the forest:

"Coming to the forest and living very simply, I came to feel lighthearted and free. Seeing nature all around me inspired me to explore inside my own mind."

And a little poem:

"With no struggling, no thinking, the mind still will see cause and effect vanishing into the void. Attached to nothing, letting go, knowing that this is the way to allay all stress."

With this book, you can just pick it up anywhere and look at it.

I could go on, but I don't want to let this become too much. It's just straightforward teaching. No nonsense.

Okay, one more. I just enjoy reading her words.

Here she's talking about stilling your mind:

"When something succeeds in distracting you, it will fool you into seeing it as right, wrong, good, bad, and

so forth. Eventually, you have to come down to the awareness that everything simply arises, persists, and then disbands. Make sure you stay focused on the disbanding."

Disbanding means coming apart. If you watch just the arising, you may get carried off on a tangent. But if you focus on the disbanding, you'll see emptiness. Everything is disbanding every instant. No matter what you look at, no matter what you see, it's there for just an instant and then disbands. Then it arises again, then it disbands. There's simply arising, knowing, disbanding.

So let's watch what happens of its own accord. Because the arising and disbanding that occurs by way of the senses is something that happens on its own. You can't prevent it. You can't force it. If you look and know it without attachment, the mind will be unaffected by the confusion that comes from joy or sorrow.

Just pure and simple, straight to the point. She was a really powerful teacher in the 20th century.

So back to the enlightened nuns. The next one is another very famous figure, one of the most influential nuns and one of the most skillful teachers. She's mentioned in the Therīgāthā, referenced in the other poems, more than any other of the nuns. And she's one who came to the Buddha and the Dhamma from enormous suffering. I mean, it's one of those stories that you can't think could really be true because it's just too much. But I'll tell it.

She was from a wealthy banker's family in Sāvatthī, and they were arranging a marriage for her. But she happened to fall in love with one of the servants, which of course would never be allowed. So they ran away, got married, and went to another area. Her family disowned her. She got pregnant, and when she wanted to go home, they started walking back. But she had the baby before they got there, so they went back to where they'd been living.

She got pregnant again, and they kept putting off the journey home because they didn't exactly expect a warm welcome. Finally, they started again when she was quite pregnant. And again, she started to have the baby along the way.

So picture this—she's having the baby in a field when a huge monsoon storm starts. Her husband goes off to cut down some rushes and try to make a little lean-to shelter. He gets bitten by a poisonous snake and dies.

So he never comes back. She has the baby alone in the storm. Then she struggles on with a newborn and a little one- or two-year-old, making her way to her parents.

She gets to a river that normally you could walk across, but because of the huge storm, it's become a raging torrent. How can she possibly get across? She couldn't manage it holding both babies. So she tells the toddler to wait, takes the newborn across and leaves it on the other bank, then comes back to get the toddler.

This is where it really starts to get out there.

The newborn is on the bank, and a giant eagle—a bird of prey—swoops down and takes it. She's halfway through the water with the other child, sees this happen, gets completely distraught, tries to run across, loses her grip on the toddler, who gets washed away. Both children die.

She's crazed at this point. But it's not over. She keeps going, makes it to her home village, and sees smoke rising from somewhere in the distance. She asks, "What's that smoke? What's that fire?" The people recognize her, and they say, "Don't ask us that. Ask us anything but that." It was her parents' house that had just burned, and they had just died.

This basically snapped her mind. She spent years just wandering around, truly out of her mind. Her name is Patachara—it means something like "cloak walker." She just walked in circles.

At some point, perhaps years later, she came to the Jeta Grove where the Buddha was teaching. She was mad, walking in circles. Some of the people there—not Ananda, but others—started throwing rocks at her, trying to keep her away from the Blessed One. But of course he sees this and goes to her. He speaks to her and says, "Sister, recover your presence of mind."

Which she did. The Buddha, remember.

"Sister, recover your presence of mind." And she did.

Then she told him her whole story. And this is, again, the power of hearing the truth—absolute hearing of the truth. No candy coating, but coming from someone you know speaks the truth.

It's said that he told her, "Don't think that you have come to someone who can help with that. In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than the waters in the four oceans." Literally telling her: this is the first noble truth. And when we ourselves die, no one else can help us. Even in this world, no family can really end our suffering.

Then, of course, he preached the Dhamma. She was deeply touched and asked to ordain. Together they went to the community of nuns, and she was accepted as a bhikkhuni.

Incredible suffering. And the Buddha not simply saying, "Oh yes, that's really tough," but rather, "Yes, this is how it is." There are many examples where suffering really is the catalyst to see through our confusion and wake up.

Patachara is said to have become one of the most accessible teachers, one of the better teachers—someone who truly affected many women.

So I thought I'd read her poem. This version is a new translation and interpretation that hasn't come out yet but will soon, by a friend of ours. I like her poem because it's one of the few that actually describes her moment of awakening. Right at the end, that's what she's describing:

Farmers turn up the soil, plant seeds, and wait.

All by itself, water pours down from the sky and turns earth into food. I keep all the precepts and always wake before dawn. I don't pretend to know more than I do, and when others ask for help, I do what I can. Yet after all these years, where's my harvest?

Late one evening, I was washing my feet after another long day of sitting and walking. The water poured over my feet and onto the ground. I let my mind go, and it flowed downhill with the water toward my little hut. I went inside, sat on the bed, and lowered the wick of the lamp. All by itself the flame went out.

All by itself the flame went out. She doesn't mean the lamp, right? You understand—it's a metaphor. But because of her life, she had deep, deep compassion. And so many of the women who joined and became bhikkhunis could really go to her for teaching and understanding.

So I want to tell you then about Dipa Ma, because she came to the Dhamma through huge suffering. And she was a ball of energy, I'll tell you.

I first met her in 1980, I think, when she first came here with her daughter Dipa and her grandson Rishi, who was just two or three and deep in the terrible twos—a holy terror. And I can still remember her. She was maybe four feet tall, a tiny little lady with gray hair pulled back in a bun. I can see her now, with all the love in her heart and good humor, running after Rishi, trying to catch him, her white sari flapping as he ran all over the place because he never sat still for a moment. She was really a lot of fun.

Her life—she had a happy marriage. She was from Chittagong, from the Indian Barua family, which is a Buddhist clan in India. At some point, she and her husband moved to Burma, where he was working. They really wanted children, but it took many years. Finally her first two children died as babies. Then at last they had one who lived—that was Dipa. But the deaths of those children left her so distraught.

Even though Dipa was still alive, she became ill for years, just depressed and bedridden. Her husband devotedly took care of her. But she was lost in grief and illness for a long time.

Then in 1957, her husband had a heart attack and died. And she really just sank down. She was in her mid-forties. Dipa was seven years old. Her health continued to deteriorate. She was just lost, lost in grief and confusion for years.

Earlier, many years before, she had wanted to go meditate. Her husband had said, "No, no, you're too young." This was before she sank into all the grief. So in her mind, she really hadn't practiced at all. But she had this deep faith that she needed to do that. Yet in this state of grief and illness, she just couldn't get it together.

But finally she did. She started thinking, "I'm going to die. What can I take with me?" She looked at all her possessions, even her daughter. She said, "I can't take any of this with me."

She went to a meditation center. A Buddha appeared in a dream, and she knew she must practice. So she went to one center, and obviously she had strong paramis. She got incredibly, deeply absorbed in just a

couple of days—three days.

The story goes that she was doing walking meditation, and suddenly she couldn't move her leg. She thought, what's going on? For the longest time she couldn't move her leg. Finally she looked down, and a big dog had its jaws around her leg. She hadn't even felt it or noticed. This is another realm, right? But anyway, they came and took the dog off. She was worried about rabies, so she went to start the series of rabies shots. Because it was at a certain time every day, and in the meditation center you only had one meal a day, she was missing the meal every day. She got very weak, and she was weak to begin with, so the monk said maybe she should go home. She went home that time, and it was another few years.

Then she heard that a friend of her family's, another member of the clan—Anagarika Munindra, who we've spoken about—was in Burma, living at the Mahasi center, Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha. He came and visited her, and knowing he was a family friend who spoke her language, he said, "Yes, you must come and meditate."

So then she went to the Mahasi center and again got so deeply into the practice, so quickly. By the third day she was sitting so long that Munindra came and said, "No, you're getting unbalanced. You've got to get up and go to the talk." But she was so weak—she was still really weak. Then she wasn't eating because she got so into practice. So don't do that. She had to crawl up the stairs to get to the Dhamma talk.

But anyway, as these stories go—which is very much like the Arhat nuns—she had very deep, deep awakening very quickly. Very quickly.

And this is what she said. Just to read one thing she said: Those who knew Dipa Ma were fascinated by her transformation. Almost overnight, she had changed from a sickly, dependent, grief-stricken woman into a healthy, independent, radiant being. Dipa Ma told those around her, "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. 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 instructions."

She always said that: "I didn't make it up."

As I said, she was a real bundle of energy, even in her old age. She and Dipa and Rishi lived in a very small, crummy little one-room apartment in Calcutta. She had really very little money, but she was a really powerful, powerful teacher.

So as I said, I met her in 1980, and the last time I saw her was 1989. Several friends—she was not so healthy, and I think she died like the next year maybe. We went to Bodh Gaya, and she was there at that time with Dipa and Rishi. We went there to visit her because we knew we wouldn't see her again. And this is—again, she's little and old, but you can't even imagine that she was so sick and weak like that.

I remember two things from that time. One was that just a few months before, I had developed a kind of autoimmune disease that was very much affecting my movement. It was hard for me to move, and traveling in India, I couldn't have done it without a bunch of friends.

So she's like, oh, you must exercise. And she bounds up and runs over to the wall, puts her hand on the wall, and starts vigorously swinging her feet around, doing all this exercise. "This is what you must do!"

And then she said to Joseph, who had been her student for many, many years and knew her very well, "Joseph, you should sit for two days." He goes, "Oh, I often do." She says, "No, sit down for two days." Which she would do, you know. Joseph being Joseph, of course he just laughed. He said, "Yeah, right."

But that's how she was, you know. Filled with love, but not what we would call, "Oh, compassion. Yeah, that's tough. You shouldn't sit for two days. It might strain you." Come on, sit for two days! Oh, you can't walk? What do you mean? Jump up. Exercise. Come on, let's get on with it. Really quite an amazing person. Really amazing.

One last quotation from her: "There is so much sameness in ordinary life. We are always experiencing everything through the same set of lenses. When greed, hatred, and delusion are gone, you see everything fresh and new all the time. Every moment is new. Life was dull before. Now every day, every moment is full of taste and zest."

So don't be afraid of no greed, no hatred, no delusion. Don't be afraid of it.

Now, in terms of another nun I wanted to tell you about, one who's alive now in Burma. She didn't come through so much suffering, but she's also a very well-known teacher there. Her name is Daw Yuzana. She's not a bhikkhuni, because in Burma they don't allow bhikkhunis, really. She's an eight-precept nun. But she's a teacher, very well-known, and she's been practicing sincerely in the Mogok style of meditation, which we in the West don't know that well, but it's equally popular in Burma as the Mahasi style. Many, many people practice it.

I haven't practiced it myself; I've just been around her when she does it. They're both cultivating samatha and vipassana, but in any retreat that's in the Mogok style, they use the dependent origination—the wheel of life, dependent origination, up on display.

She's a very deep practitioner, really dedicated. She told us her story one time. She only speaks Burmese, but we go with friends who can translate. She really wanted to become a nun when she was a teenager, but her parents didn't want her to. She told us later that her father would beat her when she would try to go off and be a nun. But finally she managed to ordain.

Where she lives now is her own kind of house and meditation hall, but it's on another Sayadaw's monastery—a monk's monastery. She was the one, and we've known her for some years, who was really well known for her depth of practice, her deep devotion, and also, she's kind of psychic. This is the other

side of things.

You know Nagas, which are the great snakes that protected the Buddha. She has a real connection to spirit Nagas. As you come in before her house, there's a big fountain. All over Burma you'll see statues of a Buddha with a big snake protecting him, its cobra-like hood spread out, shielding him from the elements. That's a very common Buddha image. And she has lots of Naga imagery around her.

statues around. And she actually has Naga spirits that talk to her. She's quite psychic, so many people go to her for that. She'll happily, if you come and really ask about people you love, speak to the Nagas and tell you what they say. But her true love is the Dhamma. And again, she's a profoundly committed teacher.

One time, with some friends, we went to visit her on her birthday. On your birthday, it's common to offer a meal to a nunnery or monastery. She happened to be teaching a retreat of about a hundred people—men and women, not just women. It was a residential retreat, and she was teaching it alone. She was offering the lunch meal. Not only offering—she was cooking it. So we came in, she's cooking the lunch meal, the hundred yogis come in this slow line to get their food, and then she hung out with us and invited us to eat. Amazing energy.

When we talk to her, her sense of the Dhamma is this very straightforward, no-nonsense approach. She's often saying, "I just wish I could just go off and practice, just meditate." But she can't, because in 2007, when there was the huge Cyclone Nargis, which I think I mentioned last week, she felt compelled—and maybe the Nagas told her, I'm not sure—but she felt compelled to start a school. I mentioned that many nuns have started schools, but she did it on a whole other level: a beautifully built building, hiring the best teachers on a level with the best schools, which is much more expensive. She started with two hundred girls. I think it might be about four hundred now. Many of them live there. Some are nuns, not all. And she has it all the way through tenth standard, which is the highest you can go.

When we go and talk to her, she's so grounded. She gives us more sense of what's really going on in the society than almost any other person I've talked to. She has deep faith. She's totally committed to having the school and helping these girls really have a life, but also to bring them to liberation. That's foremost in her mind. She can't go off and practice because she's the sole earner of the dāna. It's all on dāna, and it's a huge amount every year to run the school, to hire the teachers, to feed the young girls. That's a lot. She'll show us incredibly detailed and carefully kept accounts—of course in Burmese, I can't read it, but my friends can—with each donation and how much it was throughout the whole year.

She's so dedicated, and sometimes she's just so tired. Some years there's been difficulty with the Sayadaw. Probably, I think, because she was more famous, more known than he. But anyway, it got petty and nasty, as these things do. So now in this whole ground that was her nunnery and his monastery, there's a fence down the middle. But she's still living there and practicing and taking care of these young girls. And she would just say sometimes about the school, "I just wish I could just go off and practice."

A few years ago, Steve Smith tried to bring her over. We were going to have her and him teach a month at the Forest Refuge. She couldn't get a visa—this was years ago. Couldn't get a visa to the US.

And this was like 10 years ago. A single unmarried woman—they're afraid she's going to come and get married here. For a monk, they don't think that. But for a nun, it didn't really register. And she couldn't get in twice, two different times. Her visa was refused. So she's kind of given up on that.

But she's also very funny. Again, she's so direct. We were talking, I think it was last year, and she's just describing some of the stuff that's going on in Burma—some of which is horrible. Never mind the Rakhine crisis, which is really horrible, but even just as the country opens up, there's more sex trade than there ever was, as it opens up to other countries and money, just as it goes. She sees that, because she's working with young women up until about sixteen. She's really tuned in.

So we were just talking about how crazy the world seems somehow, and how people are doing things that seem so horrible, and they seem so proud of it. And she goes, "Yes. It's as if people tied up their mother and father, and they're beating them, and they think, *this is a really good thing to do*." She's just saying people are crazy.

So she's a very powerful woman, and a lot of fun to hang out with, and very inspiring.

I'll just read you two more short poems from this collection of the first Buddhist nuns. Again, this is from the new translation by Matt Weingast. So another Uttara, and this one is addressed to Patachara:

I asked Patachara, what is the path?
Patachara said, just see all thoughts, words, and actions arising all by themselves, not from some imaginary point within.
I only partly understood, but I took a seat.
As the sun was setting, I saw the endless line of one thing leading to another that had brought me to the cushion that night.
As the moon was coming up, I saw the arising and passing away of all things in every direction.
As dawn was breaking, wisdom rose in the east and set fire to the long dark night.
But don't take my word for it.
Set fire to the darkness within.
I promise it's like nothing you've ever seen.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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