Poems from the First Buddhist Nuns

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:16

So tonight, it's going to be a little bit story time. It's always kind of hard to find a balance for what to talk about on this night when half of you have one foot out the door and the other half of you are really deep in silent retreat.

What I want to talk about is something that makes me very happy to talk about. You know, we're always referring to the Buddha as the source of our teachings and practice, and as we always say, he's a real person. But sometimes, to me, you can almost start to get the feeling of myth. He's so perfect.

So what I want to talk about tonight is some of the nuns, some of the women who were nuns during the time of the Buddha. We know about various of the monks and nuns if you read the suttas. If you really go through them, you get a sense of them just being real, normal people—except the ones you hear about are all enlightened. You don't hear about the others. But the different personalities, different reasons in their life that they came to the Buddha's teaching and the practice, different courses of practice, some easy, some difficult—it gives me a sense of these as real people. And even though it was a long time ago and the external conditions are different, internally we haven't changed very much.

There's a lot, but I just want to talk about a few of the stories of some of the different nuns and read their poems, because there are some poems from nuns and some poems from monks that are in the suttas—their enlightenment poems. To me it gives a real life, a voice to these distant people. It's not just some people who gathered around the Buddha 2600 years ago, and we give lip service to it but really know for us it's hopeless because they were so much better and different. I just love sharing about them.

There were, of course, many women who joined the order of nuns, and they had all different ways of manifesting, just as we all do. Some were very strong women who became great leaders, became great teachers, either in the way they spoke the Dhamma or in sharing compassionately with other women who joined. Some were just very quiet, simple practitioners—you don't hear much about them except for their poems. Some were young, some were old, some were rich, some were poor—the whole gamut of different kinds of people. So I just want to share a little bit, some of the poems that I particularly like, and give a sense of the women.

To start, of course, one has to start with the woman who was responsible for convincing the Buddha to begin an order of nuns, because he didn't do so right away. I don't want to spend too much time with Mahapajapati Gotami, because her story is the most well known. But she was the stepmother—really the aunt—of the Buddha. His mother died when he was a week old, and her sister, Mahapajapati Gotami, was also married to the Buddha's father, King Suddhodana. I guess kings at that time, or leaders, whatever

they were, had various wives and various courtesans, and they had a whole show going on. So anyway, she was the stepmother; she raised the Buddha, married to the king.

At some point in this period in India, the strata of society was extremely rigidly held in terms of caste system, and women's roles were really defined in relationship. Their social status was decided by their male relatives. They didn't really have much autonomy and freedom at all. It would be, you know, your father, then your husband, then your son.

Of course, Mahapajapati Gotami was quite devoted when the Buddha left the family and came back as the Buddha and was teaching. He was teaching to his family, and his son became a monk and got enlightened, and his father got enlightened, and Mahapajapati Gotami began to get enlightened. They were all quite devoted.

So at some point, her husband died—the king—and her son, well, the Buddha was her stepson, was already the Buddha, and his son became a monk, and then her son and her nephew also became monks. So she didn't really have any man. In one way she didn't have a social status; in another way she's like, "Wow, free! Free at last! I can try and do what I want." And there were a lot of other women in similar situations. She was really a leader.

There was a period when her side of the family and the Buddha's father's side of the family, the two clans, got into a dispute—really a war—over the water rights in a particular river. So even, you know, that's how it was then, that's how it is now. Quite some men got killed, but the Buddha came and gave a very inspiring discourse to the men who were fighting, which we don't have recorded, to stop the fighting, to stop the war—which he did. And they all got really inspired. As the texts say, they all went off and became monks.

So that left a whole other bunch of wives and mothers and daughters, like, "Okay, well now what?" So they were all quite inspired too. But at this point, there wasn't a bhikkhuni sangha, a nun's sangha. So Mahapajapati Gotami got really inspired and went to the Buddha and requested that it would really be good, lord, to ordain a women's sangha. And again, I don't want to go into the whole thing because it's a whole discussion, but for whatever reason, he was very reluctant to do so. He said no, he really didn't think so. And I think it was societal.

So at that point, he wouldn't do it. But she—and this is where her courage shows, but also her faith, because she was filled with faith. She wasn't being arrogant and demanding. But it's the dedication, really—the parami of adhitthana, of resolution—which is a very powerful sense of knowing wholesomely what one must do and then having the courage and the energy to do it. That can be as simple in your practice as when you're getting lost in a particular train of thought for the seven million and thirty-fifth time, and you see it, and the mind goes, "No, I don't need to go there."

It's not aversion. It's a collecting of energy, really clearly, around what is wholesome—just "no, I don't

need to do this," or "yes, I need to do this." It's a really powerful quality in the mind.

So she possessed this quality, this resolution, but it was really based in her devotion, in her faith—not only in the Buddha, but in the teachings, in awakening. She basically, as we say, wouldn't take no for an answer.

The Buddha went off, as he did, two hundred miles away. He was always traveling. So she gathered a group of women who followed her, because she was a great leader, and they shaved their heads, put on orange robes, and walked barefoot the two hundred miles to where the Buddha was. She arrived outside where he was teaching and just stood there quietly, but crying.

And this is where you get a sense of the people around the Buddha. Ananda, who was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life—also a cousin—took total care of the Buddha with great love. He was also the person through whom many people would have to go to get access to the Buddha. One thing I love reading about Ananda, comparing it to different guru scenes I've been around where there's a big teacher—as they get more well-known, there's always a little inner circle of people protecting them. Their job is to control access: who gets in, who doesn't get in.

Ananda saw his job as getting people in to hear the Dhamma. You never hear him saying, "Oh no, you can't come, he's too busy now." It's always, "Get them in, come hear the Dhamma." He was a very beloved person. And being the Buddha's cousin, he would also be related to Mahapajapati Gotami.

So he saw her out there crying, and this is where he really interceded. He came and said, "Blessed One, are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of stream entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship?" You know all those from Bhante's talk the other night, right? The test.

And the Buddha said, "Yes, Ananda, of course."

Then Ananda said, "Well then, since women are able to 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 own breast—it would be good if women could be allowed to enter into homelessness."

And so, basically... okay, you put it that way. Very good. I'm rephrasing it, but I imagine it was more or less like that.

But the thing is, once he agreed—that's the point. He was absolutely clear, and this was a radical aspect of the Buddha altogether: in terms of wisdom and compassion and potential for understanding and awakening, there is no difference in terms of sex or gender. There is no difference in terms of what caste or level of society one belonged to. There was no difference if you were rich or poor, if you were the Brahmin caste who controlled spirituality at that time, or you were the lowest—not even a caste—the so-called outcastes, called Dalits now, that people wouldn't want anything to do with. He said: no

difference.

And so once he established the Sangha of nuns, it was in the same way open to anyone—any woman who was sincere, coming from any background, sincere in wanting to practice, sincere in faith. And once he embraced it, the Sangha of nuns grew quite rapidly.

Mahapajapati was a great leader because she was the one who had the courage and energy to begin it, and many women came with her. So I'll just read a little bit of her poem:

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

I like that last line, because that's you. All the disciples together, your energy, your sincere effort—this is the best homage we can give to all the Buddhas.

So Gotami really manifested enormous energy, courage, dedication, and resolution. Because of her, many, many women had the opportunity to join the Sangha. And they were from all classes and all life situations. There were some who were like queens or consorts to kings.

She was from a well-to-do banker's family in Savatthi, and as was always the case, her parents arranged a marriage for her with someone from a similar background, a similar caste. But she had fallen in love with a servant, which there was no way that would ever have been sanctioned, and so they ran away together. They had to run far away so that her family couldn't come find her. And her husband had even more reason to want to run far away because they probably would have killed him if they'd found them.

So they ran away and were living in another city, another little town. When she got pregnant, she wanted to go back to her family, and the husband understandably procrastinated. So they didn't make it with the first child. When she got pregnant the second time, she really begged, and even though he procrastinated, they finally started off. She was quite pregnant when they finally started off to go back to her family, but they had waited too long.

On the way, on the trip, she started going into labor. And of course, this is like one of these stories—of course, then at the same time, she's out in some field somewhere going into labor and a horrendous, horrific kind of cyclone storm starts. So her husband goes off to some distance where there are reeds and things to try and cut some reeds to make her some kind of shelter. He's out of sight of her, and she's with the other little two-year-old and having a baby. He gets bitten by a poison snake and dies.

She of course doesn't know what happened. She's just lying out in the field in this storm. She has the baby,

and then the next day—what to do? He didn't come back. So she starts with both children, comes across his body, is devastated, but keeps going.

She gets to a little river near her parents' village where normally you could just walk across it, but the storm had been so humongous that it was a huge torrent. There was no way she could walk across with her little toddler and her baby. So the best she could do was to leave the toddler—toddler means like a two-year-old little child—and with the newborn baby, walk across the river, put it down, go back. Yeah, you see trouble coming, right? Go back and get the other one.

So while the baby's on the one side and she's in the middle of the river with the other child, a giant bird of prey comes and takes the baby. She gets all upset, and the other child gets swept away.

She manages to get out. She's completely—not completely, but close to crazy. She gets to her village, asks the first person she sees, "Where are my parents?" And the man says, "Ask me anything, but don't ask me that." She says, "What do you mean?" He says, "Well, that huge storm, it stove in their house, they were killed. That smoke you see is from their funeral pyre."

So this was in the space of 24 hours. She just went completely mad, completely out of her mind. And so for some years she was just wandering around, utterly out of her mind, wearing ragged clothing, and whenever she'd get near town, people would throw things to make her go away. The better side of human nature.

And at one point, after some years, as she was mad and wandering around, she came to the Jeta Grove where the Buddha was teaching. And again, people on the outskirts tried to drive her off—"Get out of here, you're crazy, go away." But of course the Buddha saw her and beckoned her to come over and just looked at her and said, "Sister, recover your presence of mind." And she did. That's why he was the Buddha. He could do things like that.

So she did, and someone gave her a cloak, and then she sat down and said, "Help me," and told him her story. And he said—and this I love because it's like the power of really speaking the truth, the compassionate truth, but the straight truth. You know, I can see in myself how the tendency might be to think compassion means saying, "Wow, that is unbelievably tough. No wonder you're crazy. I would be too." And that's compassionate. But the Buddha offered real compassion. He said, "Don't think that you have come to someone who can help you with that. In your many lives you have shed more tears for the dead than the water in the four oceans." He's saying this with compassion, but this is how it is. "I can't change this for you." And he kept on going. He said, "Yet when we ourselves die, no one can help us. No kin, no teacher. When we die, no one can be there for us or help us. Even in this world, our family cannot end our suffering."

You can get that. He's not saying it in a harsh way. He's saying, this is the truth of things. And she could hear it. It brought her back to her senses and it really went in. And then he told her about the Eightfold

Path and the path of his teachings. And at that point, she asked for the going forth, which is to take the three refuges. And he took her to the community of nuns and she became a nun.

I love that because of the power of compassionately speaking the truth. But you can also get a sense—at least I do—that one can't speak like that unless one really knows it. If it's intellectual and I'm saying, "Yeah, well, no one can help," it just doesn't have the depth unless you're speaking from absolute depth, from knowing that. And from that, there's really this depth of compassion. He's saying it because it's the most helpful thing he could say.

So she became a nun and practiced for quite some time before she awoke. And her poem is one that I like very much because it describes the moment, the moment of her awakening. And you'll notice that it is something you hear sometimes—we're always trying to kind of give a sense of it—she's moving from a period of really concentrated, focused practice, and then she just kind of relaxes, and she's in an everyday activity, and in that moment, her mind wakes up. So that's in the poem. Let me just read it:

I've done everything right and followed the rule of my teacher.
I am not lazy or proud.
Why have not I found peace?

Can you relate? See, that's what I mean. It's not different.

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.

Just that moment. You get a sense of it?

From really strong concentration and focus to just relax, but with care and presence. As my lamp went out, my mind was freed.

So you can understand how she would be a source of great wisdom and compassionate support to other women who came into the Bhikkhuni Sangha. And so she is the one whose name is mentioned the most.

I'll just read you one other poem, from a woman named Chanda. Again, another horrible suffering. This woman Chanda—her husband, her parents, and her children all died in a plague. You know, this was a tough time. There were wars, and plagues, much like now. And when a woman had lost all her family, there wasn't social security or really any kind of safety net. So she basically became a beggar, just had to go from house to house begging for food because there was no family at all to support her.

This is her poem, Chanda:

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 compassion, 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.

I love that the first thing Patachara did was give this starving woman food and drink. You know, that sense of compassion. And then, when she said that she wanted to enter the homeless life, took her in and taught her the Dhamma. But the first thing she did was give her what she needed—food and drink.

"There are no obsessions in my mind." Isn't that nice? Wouldn't that be nice? It would be nice. We all have moments of it. Remember that, keep noticing that.

There are so many directions I could go from here. I think I'll talk about older women first. Quite a few nuns joined when they were older. Some of them had husbands who wouldn't want them to become nuns, but after their husbands died, they were able to join the order.

Sometimes people say in interviews—women and men, of course—they say, "You know, I started practicing, and I'm so old," however old you started, "and look at these people who are starting young. It's so inspiring. And I'm starting old—is it too late for me? I don't have enough time. I'll never make it."

So just to see that this was true then as well—I'll talk about a couple of these women.

One, her name was Bahupitika. She became a widow. She was fairly well off and had—there are two different versions—in one she had ten children, and in the other she had fourteen children. And her husband died before she did, so she had to be strong.

When her husband died, and she had quite some money, she said, "Why don't I just divide the money rather than holding on to it? I'll divide it between all my children"—let's stick with ten children—"and their spouses, and then they'll take turns taking care of me," which was the appropriate thing in the culture, that the children did take care of their elders.

So she did that, and she would spend a little time in one son's house and then go to the next daughter and husband's house, and like that. But after a while, she noticed they were starting to resent her. She'd be there and they'd start muttering, "Well, you'd think she didn't have any other houses to go to. Why does she have to stay with us for so long?"

After a while she thought, "Who needs this? I'm going to go ordain." So she went and ordained with the Sangha. But she was quite old by this time, elderly and rather weak.

What's interesting about her—just to let you know the end now—the nuns were often described as the nun or the monk who was most known for teaching, most known for wisdom, or whatever quality. Bahupitika was the one most recognized by the Buddha for her diligence, for her perseverance.

She was quite weak, and as a really junior nun, even though she was elderly, she would wait on and take care of the other nuns. But all she could really do was bring them water. And she thought, "I entered the order in my old age, so I want to be really diligent." So she would practice all night, stay up all night practicing and doing walking meditation.

But because she was quite old and weak, she was a little shaky and also tired, so she would do walking meditation all night with one hand going along the wall or holding onto the trees, simply because she felt too weak to walk unaided. But she would just keep on practicing all night.

At one point the Buddha heard about this, and he appeared to her and simply beamed her with radiance and appreciation. She became—I don't know if it was at that exact moment—but she became an arhat. And the Buddha declared, "This is the bhikkhuni, the nun, most known for her diligence, for her energy."

So you never know. It's never too late.

A little side story, and this might be apocryphal: they said that before she was awakened, her job was bringing water to the nuns. And if you read all the suttas, you'll see that with the groups of nuns and the groups of monks, it's like groups of people anywhere—all different personalities, more or less nice, more or less able to get along with each other. Really, there's lots of friction. You read how many of the Vinaya rules came about because of stuff like that: "So-and-so's doing such and such," and "Oh really, is he? Okay, we need a rule."

So in this case, apparently, as she was waiting on the nuns, some of them weren't treating her very nicely. I don't know exactly what they were doing—making fun of her, little put-down remarks, "you're too old" or something. But technically, in terms of unskillful speech and behavior, it's really not good karma to say or do unwholesome things to anybody, but particularly to an arhat. You don't want to insult an arhat with aversion. It's not good.

And so when she awoke—you wouldn't know, and you also don't go around talking about your own attainments, particularly as monks and nuns. You just don't do that. It's not appropriate. So she's not going to show up and announce, "I'm an arhat, you better be nice to me now." But at the same time, out of compassion, she didn't want the nuns to say something that would cause their own suffering later. So she's trying to figure out, what can I do?

Apparently—and again, this is why I say it's apocryphal—she had developed some psychic powers. So when she was bringing them the water, she used her energy to heat it up psychically. When they saw that she could do that and was bringing them hot water, that was her way of telling them, you know, out of kindness. And then they really realized.

It's kind of interesting, all these back roads.

So she was the one most appreciated by the Buddha for her perseverance, for her energy. Her poem I

don't like so much, but there's another older woman, similar to her, named Dhamma. I'm going to use her poem instead. I don't like all the poems—you're getting this through me. You can read the book and read the other poems if you want. There's lots of them. I have to choose.

My teaching point is with Dhamma, who's another similar older woman. Again, she waited until her husband's death and then ordained. Her poem describes her moment of waking up, which occurred because she was out walking with a cane and was so weak that she fell over.

This is her poem:

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

I love that.

So whether it's seeing the misery of the body getting old, the misery of our body being sick—you don't have to wait until you get old. You get sick. Just seeing, instead of resisting... We get sick. It's a chance for awakening. Is that how you felt when you got a cold last week? I'm saying it lightly, but I mean it.

This is a chance to awaken. How do we choose to look at what's happening? This is the misery of the body. Seeing this, my heart was freed. That willingness to meet what's happening—of course, just with non-judging attention—and then it moves into the wider space. Oh, this is how it is. Every body gets sick. Every body—I mean body as body—dies. Every body gets old. Seeing that, we can go the way of self-pity, and sometimes we do, that's okay, until we really learn: oh, this is how it is. The heart can be freed. Same for them, same for us.

Okay, I'll tell one that isn't so much about suffering. There are some that aren't so much about suffering.

This is a woman named Punika, and I like her because she's very confident and gutsy. Her role in society was as a lower-class servant—almost like an indentured servant, I would say, nearly a slave, where she didn't have the freedom to come or go. It's not like she was working for wages. She was working for a rich family, a family that was very dedicated to the Buddha.

What's interesting, as you read about Punika and some others too, is that these servant women, or almost slave women, actually had more freedom to come and go than the really high-caste, well-to-do women. The wealthy women were kind of sequestered; they couldn't just go out and hear the Buddha speak, whereas the servant women could. So there are different stories where the servant women would go out, hear the Buddha talk, and come back and report it to the women for whom they worked. They were

sharing the teachings in that way.

Punika's job was to go and get water in the morning from the river, which was very cold, hard work. She had been going out and hearing the Buddha teach quite a bit, and she was a stream-enterer at this point—the first stage of awakening—from listening to the Buddha teach. As Bhante was talking about, one of the fetters that dissipates at stream-entry is doubt. So at this point, her faith, her confidence in the truth of the Dhamma and in the power of the Dhamma to free the heart and mind, was very clear and strong. To me, she's an example of the courage and confidence of speaking the truth of Dhamma to power.

The story and her poem unfold like this: She was down at the river in the early morning to get water for her mistress. At that time, it was one of the beliefs of the Brahmins that in certain rivers you could wash yourself and they would function as holy rivers—this wasn't the Ganges, but similar. You wash yourself and it washes away all the evil deeds you've done, all the bad karmic results.

She was down there and a Brahmin comes down to do this. And you'll hear how spunky she was. She says:

I'm a water carrier. Even in the cold, I have always gone down to the water, frightened of punishment or the angry words of high-class women. But what are you afraid of, Brahman, that makes you go down to the water? Your limbs are shaking with the bitter cold.

The Brahmin, whose name was Udaka Suddhika, replies: *But 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 water.*

Punika says: *Whoever told you you are 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. Thieves, executioners, and other wrongdoers would be freed from their bad karma by washing in water. If these streams carried away all your old evil, they would carry away your virtue too. You would be separated from both. Rather, don't do that thing, the fear of which leads you down to the water. Stop now, Brahman, and save your skin from the cold.*

She's pretty spunky, right? And he listens to her, because she has so much faith and confidence—she knows what she's speaking of. He says: *Lady, you've brought me back. I will give you the robe I bathed in.*

She says: *Keep your robe. I don't want it.*

I love Punika. She continues: *If you are 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 are afraid of pain, if you don't like it, take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.*

Train in the precepts. That is good.

So of course he listened and took refuge. But I just love that exchange. She went and spoke with the Buddha, who then spoke to her master, who freed her so that she could become a nun—which is why we

have her poem.

You can hear her personality in those verses. Someone else could have that same confidence, that same faith, and not be quite so spunky about it. But it's really coming from speaking truth to power, from *knowi ng* the truth. That confidence. You see, when we have some knowing of the truth, however our personalities are, we're going to express it in a way that somehow is shared in the world. We share our wisdom, we share our light when we have confidence in it, when we have faith.

That's why we're always encouraging you to trust your insights, to trust your practice. It's not just for you—it's for everyone that you come in contact with.

I'll tell you one more story that isn't about suffering. The woman who was known by the Buddha as the foremost in preaching, the foremost in expounding the Dhamma, was named Dhammadina. She was the wife of an important man named Visakha in the town of Rajagaha, and had a very happy marriage. Very settled, upper class, well-to-do. And he went out—again, the women stayed home while the men could go out, the servants could go out. So he went out one day and heard the Buddha teach. He became quite inspired.

When he came home, usually they would be friendly—he would eat and invite her to eat with him, he'd greet her. But this time he came home and just walked right past her without speaking. She thought, "I wonder what's wrong? Well, when we eat, he'll invite me to eat with him. We'll talk about it." But he didn't. He just ate and ignored her.

So she thought—and I love this, it's so like what we do—"What did I do? What's wrong? Why is he angry at me? What could it be?" Taking it all personally, trying to figure it out.

But of course he wasn't angry. He called her and said, "You know, after hearing the Buddha, I'm so inspired. I've been thinking about it, and I want to renounce the world and become a bhikkhu. So if I do that, I'll give you all my wealth, all my money. I want to take care of you. What do you want to do? You could keep my money and stay here in Rajagaha, or you could go back and live with your parents. I'll support whatever you want."

She thought about it and said, "You know, I want to renounce also. I also want to become a bhikkhuni."

He said, "Great!" and sent her off in grand style, on a golden palanquin carried by attendants. She went to meet the Buddha, became a nun, traveled to a distant village, practiced, and became awakened.

After some time—we don't know how long—she happened in her travels to return to Rajagaha. And lo and behold, her husband Visakha had not managed to go off and become ordained. He was still living there. But he was still very inspired by the Buddha. So he approached her—not as his former wife, but as an awakened being, as an awakened nun—and very sincerely asked her a whole series of subtle and profound questions.

I won't go through it all because it's quite long. It's an entire sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, and it's the only sutta, really, that is a series of questions where a woman, a nun, gives all the answers.

At the end of this whole series of questions, these subtle, profound ones, she finally said, "Okay, that's enough. Go to the Buddha and really get the full teaching from him if you have more questions."

So her ex-husband went and told the Buddha the whole exchange. And the Buddha said, "Just as she answered—that's exactly what I would have said. Just as she said, so you should remember it."

And so her words became what they call *Buddha-vachana*—the word of the Buddha. It became, in the Majjhima Nikaya, an entire sutta that is Dhammadina's answers to her husband. She had an easier route to awakening. And her poem is actually in the Dhammapada. As the foremost in expounding the Dhamma, she was truly recognized in awakening and in teaching as equal with men.

And in those days, for a man to go to a woman to learn Dhamma was extremely unusual. And to have the Buddha say, "Same, same—I would have said the same," extremely unusual.

Here is a little poem from Dhammadina:

Eager for the end of suffering, full of awareness—that's the way. When one's heart is not attached to pleasure, we say that woman has entered the stream.

Just simple. Eager for the end of suffering, full of awareness—that's the way. So Dhammadina, of course, became one of the great teachers among the nuns.

Now, a couple of poems that I particularly love. These are from women who, after they became nuns, really had a tough time—the opposite of those stories where the Buddha gave a talk and five hundred people became arahants. These are women who really had to struggle. And I find it inspiring to know this. We think, "Well, in these days where the Dhamma is kind of going downhill and we don't have the Buddha to teach us and we struggle—but back then it wasn't like that." But for plenty of people, it was a long life's journey, even with deep commitment, even after having joined the order.

The first is a woman named Sama. She joined when her best friend, who was a queen, was killed. Both were deep followers of the Buddha. So Sama became a nun, but she was suffering for a very long time. This is her poem:

It was twenty-five 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 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 had no peace because I didn't know my own mind. Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert."

I don't know how it is for you, but I really feel a real person there. Twenty-five years without a moment's

peace—and you thought six weeks was a long time! But you hear the commitment, the dedication it takes. And of course, if she came to me, I'd say the same thing I'd say to you: I don't believe for a minute that for twenty-five years you didn't have a moment's peace. For sure there were some moments. But it feels like that. It feels like that. And you hear—it's tough. It takes deep, deep commitment and perseverance for everyone.

Another similar poem, from a different woman. Her name was Mita Kali. Before she became a nun, she heard the Buddha preaching the Maha Satipatthana Sutta—that's the long discourse on the four foundations of awakening, of enlightenment. Just to say—can you imagine getting to hear the Buddha teach the four foundations of mindfulness? Wouldn't that be something? I mean, amazing.

So she heard it, and she became a nun. And the reputation was that she was actually a very difficult person—very angry, very self-centered. This is how it's reported. And she changed gradually. Not overnight. She was quite angry and self-centered and struggled a lot.

This is her poem:

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

I stood up. My mind was completely free. The Buddha's teaching has been done."

You see, we lose our way. Our passions use us. We forget the point of our wandering life. But the remembrance is just as close as the forgetting, however long it's been. Same for her, same for us.

I'll give you two more short poems. One I find humorous, and one I simply like.

The humorous one is from a woman known only as Sumanagala's mother. Not much is known about her story, except that she was clearly a wife and mother, and from her poem, she was evidently extremely happy to no longer be living the domestic life. We don't know what happened to her husband or son, but this is her poem:

"Free, I am free. How glad I am to be free from my pestle"—the pestle being the thing that grinds grain. "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 am the same woman who goes to the foot of a tree and says to herself, 'Ah, happiness,' and meditates with happiness."

Nothing personal. It's simply that the renunciate life has an element of deep happiness also. It's not all struggle and suffering. Just the peace of happiness.

This last poem is from a woman named Uttama. Again, not much is known about her, but she came from a Brahmin family. She is simply describing her moment of awakening:

"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."

So let us all be true daughters and sons of the Buddha.

Thank you for listening to the Dhamma.

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