First Saṅgha of Nuns

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:05:39

The longer I'm involved in this practice, both sitting and teaching all the different aspects, the more appreciative I am of the sense of lineage—that we're not just hanging out here doing something that somebody made up fifty years ago and hoping that it works. There's this long, 2,500-year documented history of people going through more or less what we're going through here, believe it or not.

Of course, we think of the Buddha, perhaps, as the beginning of the lineage. But tonight I want to share some of the stories and poems of some of the first women who became nuns during the time of the Buddha. We hear about the Buddha a lot, and we hear about his chief male disciples. There are some books in the suttas that contain poems of some of the main monks and some of the main nuns from the time of the Buddha. Reading these poems and then reading the stories of the women to whom they are attributed is really incredibly inspiring to me, because it's not at all a sense of some dry women who lived somewhere and have nothing in common with me.

Even though it's true that all the poems are written by women or men who became fully enlightened—it seems that was the criterion to get your poem published through posterity, so there are really no poems of miserable, dejected failures—some of the poems are written by women who felt like miserable, dejected failures for long periods of time during their practice.

I want to tell some of these stories and share some of their poems, because to me they seem just as real now, reading their poems, as we are. They come from all different backgrounds within the tradition of the Indian subcontinent 2,500 years ago—all economic levels and all life backgrounds. Their stories were incredibly difficult, incredibly easy, just like us.

To begin, of course, one has to begin with the woman who is credited for bringing the nun or bhikkhunī saṅgha into existence in the first place. Her name was Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. That's a long name. We'll just call her Pajāpatī. She was the aunt of the Buddha, the younger sister of his mother.

She's credited with bringing the bhikkhunī saṅgha into existence because for some years after the Buddha left home, when he came back, met his family, and began the teachings, there was a whole monk saṅgha around him. But while he had many women lay followers, there wasn't an ordained women's saṅgha for some time. So she started it.

As I said, she was the younger sister of the Buddha's mother, and both sisters were married to the same man, the Buddha's father, King Suddhodana. This is all I'll say about it, but you'll hear through all these stories a really different culture from this one. All the kings and wealthy men had numerous wives and

consorts and women in their harem. There's a whole different ideal of wifely devotion—sort of forced devotion, you could say—in a marriage. It's just a very different context.

The Buddha's mother, Māyā, died when he was a week old. Pajāpatī, his aunt, brought him up. She also had two children of her own. When the Buddha, before he was the Buddha, left his kingdom, his aunt who was like his mother, his wife, and his newborn son—when he went off to do his practice and become the Buddha, leaving the whole family behind—and when he came back, his welcome was maybe a little tentative at first. But the family did welcome and listen to him. His father King Suddhodana, Pajāpatī, and also her son, who was close to the Buddha's age, all became great followers of the Buddha, though they remained lay followers.

Over the years, not really so very long, both the Buddha's son and Pajāpatī's son left home to become monks, followers of the Buddha. Soon after that, the king died. Now this left Pajāpatī—even though she was from a wealthy family and there was a whole court—in a difficult position. In that time, women's place in society was usually very much determined by the men in their lives: either their husband or their father or their son. In Pajāpatī's case, her husband had died, her father was dead, and her sons had left to become monks.

She was a very powerful woman, and many other women looked to her for guidance. At this time, as many men were joining the bhikkhu saṅgha, many other women were left alone. They came to Pajāpatī for guidance and to see what to do. Remember, Pajāpatī was very devoted to the teachings, not only to the Buddha himself.

At this time, with all these women on their own, there came another event: a small war between the kingdom of the Buddha's family and the neighboring kingdom. The Sakyans and the Koliyans had a fight over water rights, which seems like the way we're going again. In this fight, more men were killed, so more women were left alone.

They all went to the Buddha and asked him to help with this dispute. He came, being related to both sides, and gave such a rousing and inspiring Dhamma talk that many more men went and became monks. So now you have what's called "five hundred women"—five hundred is the number used in the texts to mean "many"—five hundred women, together with Pajāpatī Gotamī, sitting around saying, "Now what do we do?" But they were really very devoted. They got together and said, "Why can't we also join the homeless life? We really want to come to freedom."

This is where who Pajāpatī was really comes into play. It's her qualities of real courageous devotion, persistence, steadfastness, and humility that got the bhikkhunī saṅgha going.

Because when they first went to ask the Buddha if they could be ordained, with Pajapati at their head, the Buddha said no. She asked three times, which is the classical technique. The first time you get a no, the second time you get a no, and you're supposed to get a yes the third time. But she didn't get a yes the third

time. The Buddha still said no. He said, "Enough. Don't set your heart on women being allowed to do this." No explanation. Just don't.

It's hard to look at something not through our cultural bias. But at that time, even though within the Buddha's Sangha—both nuns when they came to be and also monks—he was quite radical in that there was no sense of caste division, no sense that if a king came to become a monk he was considered better than a beggar who became a monk. Nothing of that. He wiped it away. But still, there's a way that the Buddha didn't really go around trying to completely uproot the outer society. A lot of his important lay followers were kings and wealthy people. And while he preached the precepts and generosity, he really wasn't, at least from what we read, preaching radical politics or economics. So anyway, he wouldn't do it.

Now, another person—a woman less devoted, a woman less awakened and clear in the fact that the ordained life would be worthwhile for her—might have given up. I mean, really, it's the Buddha who said no, not his second in command. But she didn't give up.

The Buddha left with his retinue, as was his wont, and wandered some hundred and fifty miles or so away. And she, with the women, followed him. She shaved her head, put on orange robes, and barefoot they followed him all that way, and came to the hall where he was staying and just stood outside crying.

At this point, Ananda—remember Ananda, the Buddha's very devoted, kindhearted, compassionate attendant—stepped in. He saw her there, asked why she was there and what was the problem, and she said the Buddha would not permit them, the women, to enter the homeless life.

So Ananda went to the Buddha, and he said, "Pajapati is standing outside with swollen feet covered with dust. It would be good if you would allow women to enter the homeless life." And the Buddha said the same thing to Ananda three times: "Don't set your heart on allowing women to do this. Enough."

But Ananda also didn't give up. He's very persistent in the service of compassion. So it's said that he thought about it and thought, okay, let me try asking another way. And he says, "Are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of awakening, the four stages of enlightenment?"

The Buddha says, "Of course, no question. It's nothing to do with that."

And Ananda says, "Well then, if women are able to realize perfection, and since Pajapati did so much for you—she was your aunt, your nurse, your foster mother, and when your mother died she even suckled you at her own breast—it would be good if you allowed women to enter into the homeless life."

So then the Buddha said, "All right. You can enter." He did make eight special rules for women. And all through the history of the bhikkhuni order, the rules of both orders were made up as they went along. He didn't sit down and think, "Two hundred and twenty-seven rules for monks have arisen in my mind, and here they are." Rather, each time something would go wrong, they'd make a new rule. And so the women

ended up with more rules, sort of out of protection in that society. He started by making special rules for women that they had to agree to, which she did. She agreed to them, and so the Bhikkhuni Sangha was born.

And what's wonderful is that out of this Bhikkhuni Sangha—sure, they all looked to the Buddha as their teacher and listened to the Buddha's teachings—but within the bhikkhuni sangha, just as many really inspiring and courageous and great women teachers arose as within the men's sangha. In these poems, there are many verses just referring to how another nun helped to inspire awakening in the heart of the nun who's writing the poem. And so in a way, within the ordained sangha, the women really were inspirations and sisters and supports for one another. A really very rich and alive sangha.

It's very inspiring to me to get in touch with that by reading about these women. And they were all different.

You know, Pajapati was a great leader and teacher. There were several other women very well known as great teachers, each with different qualities. Other women preferred the quiet life of a recluse, just living in nature in the forest, as did many of the monks. Some had enormous struggle through years and years of practice. Some awakened right away and cruised. It's different for everyone, but the Sangha of women was very rich and very deep in understanding.

So I want to read you Pajapati's poem. This particular translation is by Andrew Olendzki, who is the director of the study center down the road.

She says:

Buddha, hero, praise be to you,
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 noble eightfold path.

I've 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 birth.

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.

There's that sense of how courageous practice is how we honor the Buddhas. That's really what it's about.

It's said that Mahapajapati died when she was 120 years old. And just as there's a lot of mythology around the birth and death of the Buddha, so also around Mahapajapati. It's said that at her death, and again at her cremation, all kinds of miracles occurred in the earth and in the heavens. I like that because it shows that in the mythology, there's a real honoring of her as a very important woman in the beginning and the carrying out of the teachings.

Now I want to talk about some of the other women who became very important teachers to the other nuns and also to laypeople. And then just some of the range—because it's so wonderful—the range of lives that led these women to come into the homeless life, and then the range of experience they went through after. It's just like here on retreat: it wasn't a picnic.

Women from all classes came: sisters of kings, consorts to kings, really poor beggar women, poor prostitutes, very well-to-do prostitutes, slaves, women who were actually insane at the time they met the Buddha. Just the whole range.

The first one I'll speak about, her name is Khema. She came to be known as the nun with the deepest insight. Her story is fun—it's one of the more delightful stories.

She was incredibly beautiful. And because of her great beauty, she was the chief consort of King Bimbisara. Now a consort isn't a wife. He also had a couple of wives and many other consorts, but she was the chief consort. In that time, this gave her a lot of status. She lived a life of great ease and comfort. She was very conceited about how beautiful she was. And she really liked her life of pleasure.

So it's not that she was going around looking for some teaching of renunciation. She didn't really want to know about it. But King Bimbisara was a follower of the Buddha. The Buddha often came to his palace grounds to preach. But Khema would never go hear him, because she had heard that he spoke about the dangers of sense pleasures and the need for renunciation. She thought, "I don't want to hear that."

I like that, because I can relate. The very thing that's going to free us—we think it's going to take away our pleasure. We don't want to know about it. So she was like that.

But the king tricked her. Because he knew how much she liked beauty, and the Veluvana Hermitage where the Buddha would come and teach was very beautiful, he had court poets compose poems about

the great natural beauty of this hermitage. Finally Khema said, "Well, I have to go and see this."

So she did. And of course it was beautiful, and of course, she couldn't avoid seeing the Buddha. When she came within his presence, he performed what might be called one of his magical displays—a technique that appears in several other stories as well. As she came close to him, with his magical powers he created an image of a goddess, one so much more beautiful than Kema that she was utterly fascinated. She thought, "Wow, she's incredibly beautiful." And then he had this image slowly grow old and decay, moving from beauty to aged and wrinkled skin and rotting teeth, gradually falling apart completely.

And she got it. It really went in. "Oh, yes—it's the same for me."

At that moment she was so open, so deeply struck, that as is so often the case, the Buddha only had to say a few things. He spoke more about how people devoted to physical beauty are bound, how they suffer in this world, and how those who can let go of that attachment are free. It is said that this penetrated so deeply that Kema became a rare example of a lay person who was fully enlightened at that moment—all four stages at once, just from hearing those words.

So of course she went to King Bimbisara and said, "I want out. I want to become a nun." And he gave permission. She came to be considered, as I mentioned, the nun with the deepest insight. It is extremely rare that someone is completely awakened as a lay person in just one moment.

Her story, her poem—I'm sure you've heard about, if you haven't actually read, how many of the poems of the monks or teachings about sense pleasures use as a way of counteracting lust a great deal of talk about the repulsiveness of the body, or what are often framed as the dangers of women, who might get in the way of the monk's chastity and purity of purpose. Many times in reading this, I know women who feel rather offended. And I think it's important to realize that this wasn't simply something male directed toward female. Many of the nuns' poems contain the same imagery, the same sense of examining the almost repulsive nature of sense pleasures and the decaying aspects of the body. It's not that the men alone see it this way while women are all out there being dangerous. Although being in some monastic places in Thailand, it might seem like they think that.

There's one thing I perhaps shouldn't mention. At Suan Mokkh, which is actually very eclectic for a Theravadan monastery in Thailand, they have one big building called a spiritual theater with all kinds of poems and pictures—including the Zen ox herding pictures, which if you're familiar with Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, to find in a monastery is really quite amazing. But what I really remember was this one very large drawing of a woman with chains coming out of her, hooks on the ends, as if ready to snare the monks. I mention this only because the same imagery appears from the women's side as well. And I think that's genuinely interesting.

So—Kema's poem:

Pleasures of the senses are swords and stakes.

The elements of mind and body are a chopping block for them.
What you call delight is not delight for me.
Everywhere, the love of pleasure is destroyed.
The great dark is torn apart.
And death, you too are destroyed.
For myself, I honor the Enlightened One.
And best of all, in practicing his teaching, I'm completely freed from suffering.

They use this phrase often—"the great dark is torn apart"—as a kind of expression for the experience of awakening. But I love it because it's so vivid. The great dark is torn apart.

There's a lovely story that follows the account of Kema the Nun. One of the other great kings, King Pasenadi—who was actually a much more devout follower of the Buddha than Bimbisara—came to a town looking for a senior monk to instruct him. None could be found, but they said, "Here is the Bhikkhuni Kema." At that time, for a king to go and sit at the feet of a woman and take teachings would have seemed quite outside the structure of society. But he didn't even think about it. He went straight there, bowed to her, and received teachings from her, with which he was very pleased and happy. Just a sign that the process of awakening has nothing to do with gender or age or class or anything else. And that's the radical aspect, I think, of the Buddha's teaching and of the lives of the women and men who lived with him.

Now, this next story is very different. Patachara was also one of the greatest teachers among the nuns. In fact, in all the poems of the nuns, she is referred to more than any other woman as helping to awaken the hearts of the different nuns. She came to be a nun through enormous, enormous suffering. The last time I was telling this story on a retreat, some friends told me later that it was one of those stories that goes on and on to the point where they said they were almost ready to start laughing—you simply can't believe one more thing is going to happen. But I'll try to shorten it while still giving you the full story.

Born to a wealthy banker's family in the town of Savatthi, at a time when all marriages were arranged, she fell in love with a servant—someone her parents would never allow her to marry. So they ran away to a distant village, got married, and were happy.

When she began to have her first child, the custom at the time was to return to your family to give birth. But understandably, her husband didn't really want to go. He procrastinated. They started out so late that she had the baby while they were still on the road, so then they went back to their distant village.

When she was about to have her second child, the same thing happened. The husband didn't want to go, and she finally started out without him. He caught up with her on the road, and she began to go into labor—again, not all the way home. He was with her, but just as she began to go into labor, a huge violent storm started. Thunder, pouring rain. So the husband went off to collect some branches and brush to build a shelter for her while she was having this baby.

While he's off, he's bitten by a poisonous snake and he dies. She doesn't know where he is. She thinks he's deserted her. She has the baby in this terrible storm, and then as the storm passes the next day, she has no idea where he is. But what can she do? She gathers up her first child, a couple of years old, and the baby, and says, "Well, I might as well keep going towards my parents' house." She stumbles across her husband—her dead husband. Understandably, she's crazed. But what can she do? She keeps going.

She comes to a river that's hugely swollen from the rain. This is where it really gets bad. It's so swollen she can't cross it holding on to both children. So she leaves the older child on one bank, crosses over and puts the baby on the other bank, starts crossing back—and a big hawk swoops down and takes the baby while she's in the middle of the river. She starts screaming. The other child thinks she's calling him. He starts into the river, but she can't get to him, and he's swept away and dies.

So she keeps on going towards Savatthi. She gets to the edge of town and says to the first person she sees—and she's pretty crazed by this time—asks about her family. And the man says, "Ask me anything else, but don't ask me that." And she said, "But that's all I want to know." The storm had brought down their house and it caught on fire, and both her parents and her brother were dead.

At that moment, she went insane—just literally crazed with grief. She tore off all her clothes, began walking in circles and babbling. People didn't want her around. They threw things at her, drove her out of town. And she was, for some time, like that—just walking around crazed.

At some point, and it's not clear how long—if it's days or weeks or years—she comes to the Jeta Grove, one of the places the Buddha stayed often. But as she began to come close to him while he was teaching, because she looked insane, because she didn't make sense, because she didn't have clothes on, his disciples tried to protect him, tried to drive her away. But he, of course, sensed what was happening. He made them stop and said, "Sister, recover your presence of mind."

And immediately she did. She came and sat in front of him, and a kind man gave her a cloak to wear. She told him her story and said, "Please, Lord, help me."

What the Buddha said is so powerful. It's really the power of speaking truth to suffering—how he was just so straight. Not like, "Oh, it's okay." He said, "Don't think you've come to someone who can help you with that. In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than all the water in the four oceans."

It's powerful. When someone comes to me with a story, to just be able to be that clear, that direct. And you think this is bad—all your other lives, this is how it is. And that, of course, really went in for her.

He kept talking about how when we die, no one else can help us, just as we can't help our relatives who die, and everyone is going to die. And that really opened her up to begin to just accept the truth. She became a nun.

It's not one of those stories where immediately she was awakened, but it opened her to be able to use her

immense, unbelievable suffering to first awaken herself—which she did, and there's a lovely poem of her awakening. But then you can imagine how she would become such a vast reservoir of compassion and support and inspiration

for the many, many other women who joined the Sangha. There were many women who joined out of grief—their husband or their children or their families had died. And just having been through that, she became, as I said, really the greatest teacher of the women nuns and the one most often referred to by the others.

What's nice about her story—I mean her poem—is that it describes the moment when her heart awakened. And it's clear it's not just at the beginning of the time that she became a nun, because it begins with a sort of lament about what am I doing wrong, one that maybe you can relate to. She says:

I've done everything right. I followed the rule of my teacher. I'm not lazy or proud. Why haven't I found peace?

Then she says:

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. I 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 simple moment. And if you notice, it's also the sense of discouragement, picking yourself up and concentrating your mind again. You just do it. And then after a period of concentration, real awareness, but also that relaxation of just being in the moment—the simple moment of patting your bed and putting down the wick of your lamp—the mind was freed. Now we're always telling you it's not just about the sitting and the walking. It's really just about that presence.

So that's Patachara.

And I'll just read you one poem by one of the women who mentions her. Chanda was one of the women in deep grief whose whole family—husband, children, parents—all died at once of an epidemic. And she, having no other family to take care of her, she didn't go crazy, but she had to become a beggar to survive. It was such a family-oriented culture. And so she was a beggar for years. This is her poem:

I was in a bad way, a widow, no children, no friends, no relations to give me food and clothes. I was a beggar with a bowl and stick and wandered house to house in the heat and cold for seven years. 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.

But you notice, the first thing is: I met a nun who had food and drink. It's not like she was starving and Patachara said, "Sit down, let me teach you the high dharma." She fed her. We need to be taken care of.

And then she urged her to the highest goal.

The last of the really great teachers I want to mention has, again, a different story. Her name was Dhamma Dina, and she was supposed to be—everyone seems to have a label. I don't know if that's just the way they could remember to write down later who was who. But she was considered the foremost in preaching, the best in answering questions in oratory.

She was married to an important man in Rajagaha, Visaka, and they had a very happy marriage, which was lucky at that time since the marriages were arranged. But one day her husband went out and he heard the Buddha teaching, and he was awakened to some degree. And when he came home, he was so absorbed in what he had heard and in his new perspective on life that instead of greeting Dhamma Dina, sitting down, eating together as they usually did, he just ignored her and kept going.

And she, of course: What did I do wrong? Oh, my Lord, are you angry at me? How can I make you happy? You know, the whole thing. And finally he said, "Okay, let's talk." He told her about the Buddha, about his realization, and that he really wanted to renounce the world and become a monk. And he said, "I'll give you all my wealth. You can stay here. You can go back to your parents. Here's all my money. What do you want to do?"

And she thought it over and said, "Well, I'll renounce too."

And he gave her a big send-off, carried in on a litter and everything, as she went to join the bhikkhuni order. So she became a nun. She practiced intensively and, of course, awakened after some time.

Then at some point after her awakening, she found herself back in Rajagaha, where she had lived with her husband. And it turned out he'd changed his mind—he hadn't actually become a monk after all. But now she was an arahant, completely awakened. She didn't care. And really, he'd done her a big favor.

She doesn't have a poem so much, but she has actually a whole sutta in the Middle-Length Sayings where her husband Visakha is asking the lady Dhammadina all these questions. It's a very subtle and profound question-and-answer sutta with this nun. And what's really special—I just read it tonight, and it's really very subtle stuff—at the end, he keeps on asking and asking and asking, and finally she says, "Enough. You're never going to come to the end of your questions. Go ask the Buddha."

So he goes to the Buddha and reports everything Dhammadina had said, and the Buddha said, "Very good. I would have answered exactly as she did. What she says, I would have said. So that's the meaning, and you should remember it."

There's a special word for this, when the Buddha says that what a nun or monk said is exactly the same as he would have said. It's called Buddhavacana—word of the Buddha. It's basically saying their understanding, their wisdom is equal to his own. And so this is the case of his saying that about the nun Dhammadina. Again, another example that once there's awakening, gender, caste, class has nothing to do

with anything—that truth can exist and does exist in all of us.

So those are some who became great teachers. There are a couple others whose stories I really like, from very different levels of society. They didn't particularly become great teachers after they entered the bhikkhuni order, but their stories are wonderful.

One is a woman named Punnika, who was a slave woman. She was a slave in the household of Anathapindika. You read his name a lot—he was the main lay supporter of the Buddha. Many of these suttas take place somewhere called the Jeta Grove, and Anathapindika actually gave the Jeta Grove to the Buddha's Sangha. And yet he had slaves. I can't put it together. It's a different culture.

But anyway, Punnika was a slave woman, and even when she was a slave she heard the Buddha teach, and she became awake in the first stage of enlightenment. In the Theravada there are four stages, and she heard the teaching and was awakened to the truth. What I love about this story is the power of truth—that she knew what was true and had so much faith and courage in that knowing that she was willing to speak that truth in a place where a slave woman could have really gotten in big trouble.

Her job was to go down to the river every day and draw water, bring it back to the house. One morning she was down there when a Brahmin man came along. Now, you know in India they had this whole caste system that you were born into, and there was nothing you could do about it. The Brahmin caste was the highest caste, so a Brahmin man would be of the highest standing. I would imagine a slave woman would be among the lowest. And this Brahmin man came down to the river pursuing a Hindu custom of that time—washing himself in the river to wash away his past misconduct.

Punnika, taking her stand on what she knew was the truth, completely challenged him on it. Let me read you the poem, because I find it so moving—to be so sure of what is true and so unconcerned with what could happen.

She says, "I'm a water carrier. Even in the cold, I've always gone down to the water, frightened of punishment or the angry words of high-class women." It's a dialogue poem. She says, "So what are you afraid of, Brahmin, that makes you go down to the water? Your limbs are shaking with bitter cold."

And he says, "You know what I'm doing? I'm washing away my bad deeds."

And she says, "Whoever told you that you are freed from evil by washing?"

The blind leading the blind. In that case, all frogs and turtles would go to heaven.

And she said, thieves, executioners, other wrongdoers would be freed from their bad karma by washing in the water. If these streams carried away all your old evil, they would carry away your virtue too. You'd be separated from both.

And she says, just don't do that thing, the fear of which brings you down here to wash.

See how powerful it is just to speak the truth. And of course, he immediately realizes that she's right. He immediately sees into the truth and says, "You're right. I'm wrong. You've brought me back to the right road. Here, let me give you the robe I bathed in," as a gesture of gratitude.

And she says, "Keep your robe. I don't want it."

But she gives him a little lecture on sila. If you're afraid of pain, if you don't like it, then don't do anything evil, either openly or in secret. If you're afraid of pain, if you don't like it, then take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Train in the precepts. This is good.

Can you imagine a slave woman saying this to a Brahmin man? And of course he completely takes refuge and goes to the Buddha. And then Anathapindika gave her her freedom, adopted her as a daughter, and she renounced and went and joined the bhikkhuni order.

I just love that story because the power of truth transcends all differences. And it took a lot of guts on her part.

Another very different story is that of Ambapali. Ambapali was the chief courtesan, not of a particular person, but of the whole town of Vesali. She was born really beautiful and all the princes were fighting over her. So they decided, in order not to have these fights, they would just make her the chief courtesan of the town. That means basically the head prostitute—any man could pay her. So she was really rich and had a very high status, and was really beautiful. She had a very good life.

She had a son by King Bimbisara—we've met him before. Her son went off and became a monk, and he would come back and talk to his mother about the Buddha's teachings. So she didn't actually meet the Buddha until she was pretty old.

But when she did, the first time she was going out in her carriage to the grove where the Buddha was teaching, he knew she was coming and had to give all his monks a warning to keep their senses guarded, because she was so stunningly beautiful and seductive. But she was really going just to hear the Buddha. And she got very excited, invited him and all the monks to come for lunch the next day. He came, and he gave them a little lecture—just eat your lunch and watch what you're doing. But nothing happened.

It's said that later in her life, after hearing her son preach, she renounced the world. What's interesting is that according to the commentaries, the thing that actually brought her to awakening, the thing she studied, was impermanence—using her own aging body as the subject, watching how her beautiful body, which had been her whole life, was breaking down. Just seeing this in herself, she came to complete awakening.

I wanted to read some of her poem because I find it has a real sense of humor about it. Remembering that this was her avenue—watching her body decay—something that's available to all of us:

My hair was black and curly, the color of black bees.

Now that I am old, it is like the hemp of trees.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

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

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

And she goes on and on through every part of her body:

My hands were beautiful, set off by rings, gold as the sun.
Now because of old age, they're like radishes or onions.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

My feet were beautiful, delicate, as if filled with cotton.
Now because of old age, they are cracked and rotten.

This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

And she ends with, "This is how my body was. Now it is dilapidated, a place of pain, an old house with the plaster falling off."

If you really let that in—an old house with the plaster falling off—really coming from someone who spent her whole life engrossed in the pleasures of the body and how beautiful she was, that she can look at that not with discouragement or devastation, but that that is the seed for awakening. Really, in so many of these stories, the suffering is the seed of awakening, just what we keep saying all the time. And what I know a lot of you have discovered in your practice—it's the same now as it was then. Now when you're feeling really sick, instead of it being something wrong, it becomes the avenue for awakening.

We fall apart. More and more of us in chairs, more and more of us going through all kinds of physical difficulties. It's not a mistake. Sooner or later the plaster's going to fall off of all of us. Can we use it to awaken?

Speaking of suffering, there's a whole series of poems about women who, after they became nuns, still found it really tough. And to me, that's not discouraging. That's actually supportive, because so often you hear stories like Kema's—she heard three lines and became completely enlightened. Or we read that the Buddha gave a talk and five hundred people became completely enlightened. And we think, "Five years, ten years—what am I doing wrong?"

There are quite a few women with poems that show they had the same frustrations and struggles after

they became nuns and were really seriously practicing. So just so we feel some solidarity.

The first is Utama. She was one of Patacara's disciples—remember, Patacara is the one with all the suffering. But I like this poem because it describes a moment in practice of utter frustration:

"Four or five times I left my cell. I had no peace of mind, no control over my mind."

You can get the feeling—in and out of your room, in and out, the mind going wild.

"I went to a nun I thought I could trust. She taught me the Dharma, the elements of body and mind, the nature of perception, earth, water, fire, and wind. I heard what she said and sat cross-legged, seven days full of joy. When on the eighth I stretched my feet out, the great dark was torn apart."

And this is Vadesi. She was actually the nurse of Mahapajapati Gotami, the founder of the bhikkhuni order. She entered the order with Mahapajapati, but she didn't get enlightened right away. She had a long, hard struggle:

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

So you think three months is long? You can just stop whining.

"Uneasy at heart, steeped in longing for pleasure, I held out my arms and cried out as I entered the monastery."

And you can really relate. It's not like some pure thing. We're just wanting pleasure—for twenty-five years.

"I went up to a nun I thought I could trust."

The commentaries say she's talking about Dhammadinna here.

"She taught me the Dharma, the elements of body and mind, the nature of perception, earth, water, fire, and wind. I heard her words and sat down beside her. I have great magic powers now and have annihilated all the obsessions of the mind. The Buddha's teaching has been done."

I love that—when they're really free, "the Buddha's teaching has been done." But it's hard work.

One other: Mitta Kali, who joined when she heard the Buddha preach the Satipatthana Sutta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. That teaching was so inspiring that she became a nun. But it's said that she was a very difficult person—very angry, very self-centered, very difficult to get along with. Coming into the bhikkhuni order, she had a hard time at first. But gradually, through very sincere practice, these qualities eased.

Here 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.

This is another one of those moments. She 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.

Again, we see that movement from feeling totally lost, filled with longing for pleasure and gripped by terror, to that willingness to come back and meet the moment. Just see what's happening. She found that sense of determination—"I have no time for carelessness"—and simply started watching the elements of mind and body rise and fall away. It just takes that moment of coming back again, no matter how hard it gets.

There are many others along similar lines. But there are also poems from women whose lives before held such suffering that joining the nunhood, renouncing the world, was actually a movement into freedom. I want to read you a few of these.

The difficulty of living in an arranged marriage with a difficult husband, where the wife is really like a slave or servant, having no freedom whatsoever—and in fact, women were not allowed to become nuns unless their husbands gave them permission. There's one poem from a woman known only as Sumangala's Mother. We don't even have her name; Sumangala was another monk. But this is her poem:

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

Renunciation can be a great joy.

Here's another, from a woman named Muta who was in a very unhappy marriage. Her husband didn't treat her well, but she finally convinced him to let her become a nun. Again she says: Free, I am free! Free by means of the three crooked things—mortar, pestle, and my crooked husband. She doesn't say free *from* them; she says free *by* them. In other words, those very difficulties were the avenue. Seeing that suffering was itself the avenue for deliverance. "I'm free from birth and death and all that dragged me back."

And one more story of an unhappy housewife whose unhappiness led her into freedom. Another woman, an anonymous wife—we don't have her name—but her husband would not let her become a nun. So she continued to live out her obligations as a Brahmin wife, cooking and taking care of her husband. One day she was in the kitchen cooking curry, and the whole pot caught fire; all the vegetables burned up. She was so tuned in that this little mishap brought her to the third stage of enlightenment. Impermanence was just

so clear. So next time you break a glass, you know...

Again, it's another example of a lay person, a lay woman, just being so present and open that a little incident really awakened her. Then she went to her husband and said, "I just can't do this anymore," and he let her go to be a nun.

Just one other group I want to mention: really old women. So many times, over the years, I've heard people of all ages say, "I wish I could have started practice earlier. Imagine if I knew about this twenty years ago, or thirty years ago, or forty years ago." But there were many women who, like these wives, could not become nuns until their husbands died. There's another woman who was taking care of her grandmother, whom she deeply loved, or her mother, and who couldn't or wouldn't ordain until she was free from her obligations. Some women were quite elderly by the time they became nuns.

And it's okay. Sometimes the feebleness of the body itself became the very point of awakening. There's one woman who actually awakened because she fell down—because she was so weak—and that's the thing that woke her up. Her name was Dhamma.

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.

Do we think of those two lines together? "I could see clearly the misery of this body. My heart was freed." I think that's amazing.

Another woman, her name is a mouthful—Bahu Pitika—had seven sons and seven daughters. Very wealthy. And she said, "Well, I'll give you children all the money now, and then you can just sort of take care of me." And they said, "Great, Ma. We'll take the money." And then they were passing her from family to family. It's sort of like a modern story. None of them wanted her. They started not treating her well. They started being sarcastic. She really felt unwanted. And finally said, "Who needs this? I'm going to go become a nun."

And this woman, quite elderly, became renowned as the nun most known for her courageous effort. Of all the nuns—not just the old nuns, of all the nuns—she was the most known for her courageous effort. She'd serve the nuns all day, and then she'd practice all night. And so, again, she became awakened. To me, that's also inspiring.

I'll just end with one story—not even a story, just a poem that I like very much from a woman named Dantika. It's another one of those moments:

As I left my daytime resting place on Vulture Peak, I saw an elephant come up on the riverbank after its bath. A man took a hook and said to the elephant, "Give me your foot." The elephant stretched out its foot, the man mounted. Seeing what was wild before gone tame under human hands, I went into the forest and concentrated my mind.

So let's sit quietly in the forest, concentrate our minds.

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.

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