

# Of *Theras* and *Therīs*: Visions of Liberation in the Early Buddhist Tradition

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## I

The *Thera* and *Therīgāthā* have been available to modern scholars for over a century, when they were “recovered” from Burmese and Sinhalese manuscripts, published (in 1883) and subsequently translated. The first translation was in German (Neumann 1899). This was followed by the classic English version of Rhys Davids (1909, 1913), and, more recently, those of Norman (1969-71) and Murcott (1991).<sup>1</sup>

The word *thera* (masculine) literally means elder, and the texts are collections of verses attributed to respected monks and nuns. Technically the *gāthas* (literally songs) were supposed to have been uttered by their “authors” to mark the attainment of enlightenment or liberation. These were recognized within the Buddhist tradition as part of the canon, and were incorporated within the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, itself an appendage of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, one of the three Pitakas or canonical works of early Buddhism. Both the composition and the compilation was a long-drawn process which probably spanned at least three centuries. While many of the elders were contemporaries of the Buddha, others were recognized within the tradition as being late entrants into the community (Norman 1983: 73-4).

In some manuscripts, the *gāthās* are found embedded in a prose commentary. Known as the *Paramatthadīpanī*, this is attributed to Dhammapāla, a monk who lived in Kanchipuram in the sixth century AD. Dhammapāla refers to the works of at least three predecessors, suggesting that the tradition of recording comments on the *gāthās* was fairly old. The extant commentary has two components: one, an explanation of difficult or unusual terms, and second, and more interesting, a short biography of the “author” of a specific *gāthā* or set of *gāthās*.

The arrangement of the *gāthās* and the commentary provide certain broad parallels with the structure of the more well-known compilation of the *Jātakas*. In both cases, the shortest compositions, consisting of a single *gāthā* are grouped together, followed by an arrangement in

ascending order. However, while the longest compositions in the *Thera* and *Therī gāthā* contain around seventy verses, the longest Jātakas run into hundreds of verses. Within each text, moreover, the number of smaller compositions is generally much higher than the longer ones (see Table I for details).

As in the case of the Jātakas, the commentary on the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā* provides a narrative which contextualizes the verse, and is particularly valuable in the case of the shortest compositions.<sup>2</sup> The basic constituents of the narrative include the name and the social background of the "author". This is followed by a description of the occasion on which s/he either accepted Buddhism or/and joined the *samgha*. This could mark a more or less dramatic turning point. This culminates in an expression of the experience of *nibbāna*. Each of these components could be, and often was more or less embellished. Such embellishments cannot be dismissed as extraneous or superfluous. They rescue the *gāthās* from anonymity, and provide a means of constituting gendered identities amongst other things.

The prose narrative is also a reminder that the verses and the stories with which they were more or less connected were circulated and transmitted for generations amongst communities of actual or potential believers, consisting of monks and nuns, lay women and men. One can then visualize a situation where the corpus served as a narrative pool as it were, from which narrators could retrieve and recast a specific version which they felt would be appropriate on a particular occasion. Such occasions may have been associated with rituals around *stūpas* or in monasteries or nunneries. Besides, lay women and men probably organized religious events (including narrations) within the domestic setting. What to narrate and how, would have been conditioned by such circumstances.

Varied narrative contexts probably account for a certain fluidity which is evident within the text. In spite of its explicitly canonical character, verses found in the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā* are by no means unique to them. Some of these occur in the Jātakas, as well as in the *Dhammapada*, occasionally ascribed to different "authors" (Norman 1983:73), others have resonances with texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā*, or aphoristic collections such as *Subhāṣitas*. Besides, verses attributed to our "authors" occasionally occur in other Buddhist works but are not found within the compilation of the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā* (Oldenberg 1966: xi). In other words, many *gāthās* were drawn from and fed into a range of Buddhist and alternative compositions.

TABLE I

Showing the distribution of "authors" in each book or *nipāta*. Figures in brackets indicate the percentage of authors in each segment, calculated in terms of the total number of *therīs* (73) and *theras* (264).

Book	<i>Therīgāthā</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
I	18(24.66)	120(45.45)
II	10 (13.70)	49(18.56)
III	8(10.96)	16( 6.06)
IV	1(1.37)	12( 4.5 )
V	12(16.44)	12( 4.5 )
VI	8(10.96)	14(5.3 )
VII	3(4.11)	5(1.89)
VIII	1 (1.37)	3(1.14)
IX	1(1.37)	1(0.38)
X	1(1.37)	7(2.65)
XI	1(1.37)	1(0.38)
XII	1(1.37)	2(0.76)
XIII	5(6.85)	1(0.38)
XIV	1(1.37)	2(0.76)
XV	1(1.37)	2(0.76)
XVI	1(1.37)	10( 3.79)
XVII		3(1.14)
XVIII		1(0.38)
XIX		1(0.38)
XX		1(0.38)
XXI		1(0.38)

It is in this context that questions of image and self-image become complicated. To an extent, this is reflected in the history of the treatment of the *Therīgāthā*. Neumann; one of the earliest translators of the text, and a man, had no doubt that although the verses were ascribed to women, their real authors were men. Rhys Davids, a woman scholar, who produced the first English translation in 1909 energetically refuted Neumann (ibid. xxi) pointing to differences in style and content between the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā*, apart from highlighting the obvious bias in attributing any and every literary composition to men.

Since then the *Therīgāthā* has been hailed, to a greater or lesser degree, with occasionally uncritical enthusiasm, as a text containing "women's voices." As someone who has shared this enthusiasm, I must point out that it is not entirely misplaced. A recent student of the text, Blackstone (1998:1) observes: "The *Therīgāthā* is an exciting and provocative text. As far as I know it is the only canonical text in the world's

religions that is attributed to female authorship and that focuses exclusively on women's religious experiences."

Yet, it is simplistic to suggest, as we have occasionally done, that the *gāthās* as they stand provide us with direct access to women's voices. The contexts within which the *gāthā* circulated through centuries have shaped both form and content in ways which may not be immediately apparent. So, it is worth bearing in mind that while we can pull out images of women (and men) from both *gāthā* and commentary, these are images which were drawn and assembled from diverse traditions and incorporated within the canonical framework.

Within this framework, the lives of *theras* and *therīs* were constructed along a fairly consistent threefold pattern, as noted earlier. Yet, there was scope for considerable variation within this structure. I will explore some elements of these variations in terms of the images of men and women. I will also examine the extent to which the process of liberation was envisaged as transformatory as far as gendered images were concerned.

## II

The *Paramatthadīpanī* almost invariably ascribes compositions to named *therīs* and *theras* (see Table II, columns I a and b). Clearly, such names constituted a crucial element in assigning authorship, and in defining each composition as unique. Given their importance, it is intriguing to note that the mention of names within the *gāthās* themselves is relatively infrequent (Table II, Columns II a and b).

A closer examination of the data indicates that the use of names in the *gāthās* occurs in certain specific contexts. First, they occur in verses which are attributed to a different author. In many cases, we are told that a particular verse was uttered by the Buddha (e.g., Tag 1.29)<sup>3</sup> to either reprimand or praise the named *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhuni*. such a verse "becomes" his or hers when s/he meditates on it in order to attain *nibbāna*.

A second situation where names occur within verses is where *bhikkhus* or *bhikkhunis* had what has been approximately designated as nicknames (Norman 1983:73). Such names were derived from physical appearance, from one's past or present lifestyle, or less tangible attributes such as virtue. Invoking these names could be (and often was) connected with foregrounding gendered identities.

This seems to be especially true in the case of the *therīs*, whose physical beauty was often noted, and condemned on account of its presumed transience/superficiality. Such condemnations are typical of



the *gāthās* addressed to or by Abhirūpa Nandā (Tg 2.19) and Sundari Nanda (Tg 5.41), whose very names were suggestive of their apparently delightful forms. The use of the names in this context thus became a means for contesting preoccupations with physicality, which was represented in terms of feminine beauty.

By contrast, where *bhikkhūs* are named after their physical attributes, the focus is on external deformities combined with less tangible skills. So we find mention of Khujja (hunch-backed) Sobhita (Tag 3.175) renowned for his learning, and Lakunṭaka (dwarf) Bhaddiya (Tag 7.225) with an enchanting voice. As in the case of the women mentioned above, the use of these names was also suggestive of an attempt to transcend the physical, but from an entirely different perspective.

There is a related context within which women's names figure. These are names which signify certain qualities, e.g., Puṇṇā or full (Tg 1.3) who is compared to the full moon, 'Dhīrā or firm (Tg 1.7) who is implicitly advised to live up to her name, Mittā, the friend (Tg 1.8) who is advised to be friendly and so on. Here we have, as in earlier instances, a play on names, what is different is the focus on intrinsic rather than extrinsic qualities, and the consequent valorization of the name.

Table II

Showing the distribution of named authors in the commentary and text.  
All percentages calculated in terms of the number of authors  
attributed to each book.

Book	<i>Therīgatha</i>			<i>Theragatha</i>		
	Names in Cmy	Names in Text	Percent	Names in Cmy	Names in Text	Percent
I	18	11	61.11	120	17	14.17
II	10	1	10	49	3	6.12
III	8	1	25	16	1	6.25
IV	1	2	100	12	2	16.67
V	11	1	9.09	12	1	8.33
VI	8	3	37.5	14	2	14.29
VII	3	-	-	5	4	80
VIII	1	-	-	3	-	-
IX	1	-	-	1	-	-
X	1	-	-	7	1	14.29
XI	1	-	-	1	-	-
XII	1	1	100	12	-	-
XIII	5	4	80	1	-	-
XIV	1	1	100	2	-	-

Book	Therīgatha			Theragatha		
	Names in Cmy	Names in Text	Percent	Names in Cmy	Names in Text	Percent
XV	1	1	100	2	1	50
XVI	1	1	100	10	5	50
XVII				3	1	33.33
XVIII				1	-	
XIX				1	-	
XX				1	1	100
XXI				1	1	100

The use of nicknames to focus on unique lifestyles is confined exclusively to *theras*. We find, for instance, Gaṅgātūriya (Tg 2.124) living on the banks of the Gaṅgā, or Kappaṭakura (Tg 2.160) living on rags and substandard rice, as also kutiviharins (Tg 1.56, 57) who lived in huts. The absence of parallels in the case of *therīs* may indicate that such individualistic options were less accessible to women (Blackstone 1998). Alternatively, or additionally, one can argue that women who adopted such strategies may not have been accorded canonical recognition.

The third, but rather rare context in which names occur within the *gāthās* is one I would classify as celebratory. This is common to both *theras* and *therīs*. We have, for example, Sumangala, a poor farmer, who celebrates his liberation from his crooked plough, spade, and sickle (Tag 1.43) as well as Bhaddā Kapilīnī, the wife of a *brāhmaṇa*, who proclaims the attainment of the cool bliss of *nibbāna* by both herself and her husband (Tg 4.37).

Overall, if one compares the relative frequency with which names occur in the *gāthās* (Table II, column III), two patterns emerge. The first, names are mentioned more often in the *Therīgāthā* than in the *Theragāthā*. This has to do with the relative preponderance of verses of advice or instruction attributed to the Buddha. One can take such attributions as being a literal representation of an event or fact. Alternatively, the use of the second person as a stylistic device to structure the song in the form of a dialogue with the self may have been more typical of *therīs*. In that case, attributing such verses to the Buddha may have been a commentarial strategy to flatten out and homogenise a more distinctive text.

The other pattern is more uniform in both texts. We find that as the compositions grow longer, the percentage of works which mention the name of the author increases sharply. It is obvious that in lengthy poems

running into dozens of verses there was greater scope for both mentioning and occasionally elaborating on biographical details.

The second element which is mentioned almost invariably in the commentary is the natal family ascribed to the *thera/therī*. This is mentioned in the case of seventy two of the seventy three *therīs* and two hundred and forty eight of the two hundred and sixty four *theras* (see Table III). What is obvious is that the family of birth was regarded as a significant marker of identity for both categories.

There are certain broad similarities between the social origins attributed to *theras* and *therīs*. By far the largest number of *theras* (and to a lesser extent *therīs*) were identified as *brāhmaṇas*. Others were identified as belonging to "good" families (*kulas*), often qualified as being wealthy, prosperous or landowning. Other possibilities which were recognized included birth in the oligarchic clans, the Sakyas (associated with the Buddha) in particular, but also the Licchavis and Mallas. Origins within commercial groups such as *setṭhis* (traders/bankers) and *sāttavāhas* (caravan leaders) were also recognized, as were those within ruling groups, including *rājās*, provincial officials, and miscellaneous ministers. Taken together, nearly 90% of the *theras* and 88% of the *therīs* were ascribed relatively "high" origins. As opposed to this, only 4 to 5% were recorded as belonging to poor or slave origins.

Yet, there are subtle differences as well. While *brāhmaṇa* identity was regarded as predominant for both *theras* and *therīs*, it was far more

TABLE III

Showing the social origins attributed to *therīs* and *theras*. Figures in brackets indicate the percentages, calculated in terms of the total number of *therīs* (73) and *theras* (264)

Category	<i>Therīgāthā</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
Brāhmaṇas	18 (24.66)	101 (38.4)
Oligarchic clans	18 (24.6)	31 (12.5)
Khattiya/rājā officials	5 (6.85)	41 (15.53)
"good" families	11 (15.07)	27 (10.23)
setṭhi/sāttavāha	11 (15.07)	20
courtesans	4 (5.48)	-
Poor/slaves	3 (4.11)	13 (4.92)
Other	2 (2.74)	14 (5.30)

marked in the case of the former. What is more, the identity of the *brāhmaṇa* is at least occasionally problematized and redefined in the *Theragāthā* (for details, see Section III).

If one goes by the number of recorded cases, identities based on membership of oligarchic clans was as important as the mention of *brāhmaṇa* origins in the case of the *therīs*. This contrasts sharply with the use of such categories for identifying *theras*. As will be evident from Table III, *theras* identified as belonging to such clans are far fewer than *brāhmaṇas*.

A similar contrast is evident if we compare the figures for men and women who were attributed *setthi* or *sāthavāha* origins. Once again, there are proportionately more women than men. This is true for the category of "good" families as well. It is only in the category of ruling groups that we find these proportions reversed, with more references to men than to women.

To some extent, the difference between the social origins attributed to *theras* and *therīs* is reinforced by the third regular component of the commentary, viz., mention of the place of origin. This is stated in the case of fifty of the seventy three *therīs* and two hundred and thirteen of the two hundred and sixty four *theras*. Without going into the details of localizing these places, I have broadly classified them into settlements located within kingdoms and those located within oligarchies. Approximately one-third of the *therīs* were ascribed residence in oligarchies as opposed to one-fourth of the *theras*. Social stratification in the kingdoms was probably sharper and more complex than that in the oligarchies (Chakravarti 1996). More specifically, gendered identities were probably somewhat differently constituted in each of these socio-political situations.

There is, moreover, the category of the courtesan, which is, for obvious reasons, exclusive to the *therīs*. As in the case of the women named for their beauty, the verses attributed/addressed to the ex-courtesan or *therī* occasionally dwell on the illusory nature of the female body.

What emerges then is a situation where the natal identities ascribed to the *theras* shows greater affinity with (though not complete correspondence to) the *varṇa* framework, whereas those of the *therīs* diverges substantially, if not significantly. This may reflect an actual historical situation, where men and women who joined the order came from many and different social groups. Additionally, one can argue that preserving the memories of such diversities was necessary where both commentary and *gāthā* were directed towards a range of audiences/narrative situations.



## III

In the commentary, the move from home to homelessness (from *agara* to *anāgariya*) is attributed, more often than not, to hearing or seeing the Buddha. Not surprisingly, this is more common in the case of *theras* than *therīs*, and as has been suggested fairly often, this may be connected with the relative ease/acceptability of establishing contact with him. Other alternatives mentioned include hearing or meeting a renowned teacher. Almost invariably, both teacher and taught are represented as belonging to the same sex.

In the case of the *theras*, a desire to escape from the bonds of the world was recognized as a major reason/opportunity for the transition to homelessness. As may be expected, such bonds were typified by the wife and/or the son (e.g., Tag 1.8 cmy, 1.10 cmy, 1.34 cmy etc.). So marriage (either intended or actual) and/or the birth of children were regarded as legitimate reasons for renunciation.

For *therīs*, on the other hand, the birth of children is virtually never projected as an occasion for renunciation, and the treatment of marriage is also relatively more complicated. Perhaps, the point can be best illustrated by a comparison of the stories of Mahākassapa (Tag 18.261 cmy) and Sumedhā (Tg 16.73). In the first case, both Mahākassapa and his wife to be, Bhaddā, unknown to one another, resolve not to marry but to seek enlightenment instead. A series of coincidences results in a ritual union, but husband and wife sleep separated by a garland and a stick. When Mahākassapa's parents die, the couple cut each others' hair and undertake a life of wandering. However, and perhaps predictably, the husband insists that they go their separate ways in deference to public opinion. Here the separation is represented as necessary but virtually painless.

Sumedhā, like Mahākassapa, is depicted as deciding against marriage and domesticity (*gahaṭṭha*, Tg 16.73.460). Her father resolves otherwise, and invites a royal suitor. Sumedhā harangues them on the evils of bodily desire and cuts off her hair with a sword (ibid.:480), lays down her tresses at her suitor's feet (ibid.:514) and ultimately gets her way. In other words, the choice between renunciation and marriage is constructed as a dramatic conflict.

The dramatization of the contrast between marriage and renunciation is even more sharply drawn in the song of Isidāsī (Tg 15.72). The *gāthā* is almost entirely biographical, spanning several births. The starting point is when Isidasi was a man, a goldsmith intoxicated with his youth, who assaulted the wives of other men. Consequently, he was reborn as a monkey, goat, and calf, all of whom were duly castrated. In due course

she was reborn as a woman who tried to displace her more virtuous co-wife. The consequences of these acts pursued her into the present birth, where she was thrice given in marriage by her father, who loved her dearly, and rejected each time, in spite of her virtuous conduct. Ultimately, she asked for and was granted permission to renounce the world under the guidance of Jinadatta, who was described as learned (*bahussutā*), an epithet which is used by or for Isidasi as well (ibid.:401).

Although the story invokes *kamma* or one's past actions as the major causative force, *Isidāsī*'s story can and has been treated as a more or less realistic representation of the travails of married women. While this is plausible, I would suggest that what is also involved is an understanding of the relationship between marriage and renunciation. For the *theras* this was represented as a relationship of unproblematic opposition or alternatives. For the *theris*, on the other hand, renunciation was constructed as an alternative which had to be achieved rather than assumed as an automatic possibility.

One renunciatory situation seems to have been exclusive to *theras*. This is the case of what I would call the child prodigy, who renounces the world typically at the age of seven, and more often than not with his parents' consent (e.g., Tag 1.73, Tag 11.240 cmv). We had noted the relative importance of *brāhmaṇas* as "authors" of the *Theragāthā*, and I had suggested in that context that *brāhmaṇa* identity was both acknowledged and redefined within early Buddhism. This redefinition was attempted, if not achieved, through a variety of strategies, by offering a range of alternative definitions of rituals, practices, and lifestyles. In this case, we can see a partial parallel between the image of the precocious ascetic who joined the Buddhist order, and the brahmanical ritual of the *upanayana* or initiation of the young boy. What distinguished the young monk's case was the fact that his decision was recognized as a conscious, enlightened one, and was marked with minimal ritual activity.

If the child prodigy is represented as a uniquely male figure, the bereaved and grieving parent is almost as invariably female. And, within the tradition of the *Therīgāthā*, she is consistently depicted as finding refuge within the *samgha* and thus overcoming her overwhelming grief.

Some of the most powerful and stark imagery of the texts centres around these mourning women. The story of Paṭācārā (Tg 5.47), one of the most well-known teachers, is an example. She was supposed to have married well below her status, and through a bizarre series of coincidences, lost her two sons, her husband, parents and brother. Literally mad with grief, she apparently wandered wearing a single piece of cloth (hence her name) till she met the Buddha and was pacified. In another instance,

Kisā Gotamī is represented as describing how she saw her dead son's flesh being eaten in the cremation ground, but although she had lost her family (*hatakulikā*) was despised by all (*sabbagarahitā*) and a widow (*matapatikā*) she attained immortality (Tg 10.63.221). Yet another woman wandered restlessly, naked, with dishevelled hair, starving herself, till she was placated by the Buddhā (Tg 6.51).

The teaching attributed to the Buddha (and Paṭācārā) on such occasions is deceptively simple. To the woman who mourns the death of her daughter, the question is which one, the one in this birth or her numerous daughters of previous births (Tg 3.33.51). Similarly, Paṭācārā is supposed to have pointed out the futility of referring to a particular man as "my son" (Tg 6.50.127). The reality of death is not denied, but it is located in a near timeless sequence of births and deaths, whereby the particular event loses its sting (or thorn, *salla*, e.g., Tg 6.50.131).

If the transition from grief to enlightenment was a path which was envisaged as primarily feminine, that of experimenting with alternative systems of beliefs and practice was defined as a more masculine possibility. Also, and explicable in terms of the recognition accorded to *brāhmaṇa* origins, we find at least occasional reference to the contrast between Brahmanical ritual practices and the path of the Buddha, between the worship of fire, and alternative methods of purification, for instance (Tag 3.170.219).

The *gāthās* also testify to more direct attempts to contest, transform, and appropriate definitions of brahmanhood. It is suggested for instance, that *brāhmaṇas* should be distinguished by inner "colour" or quality (*antahvaṇṇa*) as opposed to outer appearance (*bahivaṇṇa*, Tag 2.130.140). Elsewhere, the contrast is expressed in terms of physical versus spiritual birth. The notorious Aṅgulimāla, so-called for the string of human fingers he was collecting, claims to have been born a *brāhmaṇa* (*brahmajacca*) but was transformed into the Buddha's own son (*sugatassa putta*, Tag 16.225.899). Less dramatic changes are also recorded, as in the case of those who begin as *brahmabandhus* (i.e., as kinsmen of *brāhmaṇas* and, by extension, *brāhmaṇas* merely by birth, e.g., Tag 3.170.221) and then become "true" *brāhmaṇas* through the attainment of enlightenment.

As interesting is the story of the flower sweeper (*puppha chaddaka* Tag 12.242), a category recognized as particularly low within the Buddhist tradition. He refers to himself as poor (*daḷidda*), hungry (*appabhojana*), born in a low family (*nīcakula*) and engaged in a despicable occupation (*hīnakamma*, *ibid.*: 620). Once he attains enlightenment, we are told that the deities praise him (*ibid.*: 629) as does the Buddha, who reputedly describes him as the best of *brāhmaṇas* (*brāhmaṇamuttamam*) on account



of his austerities (*tapas*), *brahmacariya* and self-control (*samyama*).

It is evident that the transition to homelessness, envisaged as a necessary first step in the quest for *nibbāna*, was constructed, to an extent, as a gendered process within the early Buddhist tradition. The break from the world was represented as more dramatic in the case of women. Also, it was often envisaged as being triggered off by traumatic experiences, personal tragedies which were ideally universalized and then transcended.

In the case of men, the transition is depicted as sharp but less dramatic. What is more, in some cases, older available identities, including and especially those of the *brāhmaṇa*, seem to be reworked rather than abandoned.

As has been suggested fairly often, these differences may reflect the diverse paths to renunciation actually adopted by women and men. Besides, as I have argued earlier, the fact that such alternatives were accorded canonical recognition may have reinforced the understanding that some alternatives were more legitimate than others. In other words the divergent images of the journey towards *nibbāna* which were preserved both reflected and shaped the choices open to women and men.

#### IV

Descriptions of *nibbāna* are amongst the most formalized parts of the *gāthā*. Many of these are common to men and women. These include attaining what has been defined as the cool bliss of *nibbāna* (e.g., Tag 1.79, Tg 2.26.34, *sītibhūto/ā asmī nibbuto/ā*), divine insight (*ḍibbacakkhu*, e.g., Tag 8.231.516, Tg 5.44.100) and liberation (*vimucci*, Tag 4.186.270, Tg 5.43.96).

*Nibbāna* was also envisaged as freedom from rebirth (*punabbhava* Tg 5.45.106, Tag 1.67), from bondage (*gantha*, Tag 1.89) and the *āsavas* (ideas which trapped the mind, Tg 13.73.364, Tag 1.116). It also involved the cessation of desire (*rāga*, Tag 1.12), or, more typically, thirst (*tanhā*, Tg 1.18, Tag 2.14.161).

The transformation attendant on *nibbāna* was occasionally defined in terms of attaining kinship with the Buddha. Those who achieved this status could be described as heirs (*dāyāda*, Tag 1.18), or, more vividly, as his *orasa putta* (literally born from the breast, Tag 2.147.174). While such terms were used by/attributed to those who belonged to the Buddha's clan, the Sākyas, including his son Rāhula (Tag 4.193.295), they were also extended to *brāhmaṇas* (e.g., Tag 5.204.348).

In the case of *therīs* such claims are few and far between. This may



appear somewhat paradoxical, given the relative preponderance of the Buddha's kinswomen within the *bhikkhuni samgha*. It is a pointer to the disjuncture between social and spiritual kinship, and to the relative valorization of the latter. The use of the idiom of kinship in this context indicates that what was envisaged was not simply a denial of the existing social order, but its replacement by an alternative. While this was technically a sexual, the fact that kinship terminology was selectively deployed meant that the definition of *nibbāna* as universally accessible was effectively and implicitly gendered, and thus deflected.

Further, the attainment was occasionally proclaimed through the *sīhanāda* (literally the lion's roar). The imagery invoked is one of power and pride. There is only one *therī*, Sundarī (Tg 13.69.332) whose verse is characterised in such terms, whereas such attributions are fairly common in the case of *theras* (e.g., Tag 1.20, 2.126 etc.).

An implicitly gendered definition of *nibbāna* is also evident in the depictions of the means or processes whereby it was attained. At one level, the cultivation of the *sīlas* or virtues (e.g., Tag 3.177.240), adherence to the eight fold path (*aṭṭhāṅgikam*, Tag 1.35), and the acquisition of the three fold learning (*tevijjā*, eg Tg 13.70.363)<sup>5</sup> were recognized as necessary for both *therīs* and *theras* en route to *nibbāna*. However, in the case of the *theras*, there is an occasional mention of valour (*viriyaparakkamam*, Tag 3.171.244) as a possible aid in the quest. Such imagery is rather infrequent in the *Therīgāthā*. We have one instance of a *therī* engaged in battle with desire (Tg 13.70.360), but this is exceptional.

Besides, there is much greater emphasis on *brahmacariya* as a desirable attribute for *theras* (e.g., Tag 3.175.236). Although *brahmacariya* is not unknown in the *Therīgāthā* (see for instance 16.73), it is relatively marginal. The focus on *brahmacariya* in the case of the *theras* can be understood in terms of the preoccupation with brahmanism, mentioned earlier. While brahmanical *brahmacarya* was a stage of life marked by celibacy and the study of the Vedas, it was probably defined exclusively in terms of the former attribute in the context of the Buddhist monastic order. As such, it would have reinforced the notion that the attainment of *nibbāna* depended on the cultivation of asexual if not antisexual attitudes.

In this context, the body was envisaged as one of the greatest obstacles to the attainment of *nibbāna*. The condemnation of the body (*kāya*) in the *gāthās* is therefore routine and somewhat dreary. Typically it is described as being full of filth, rotten, serpent-like, the root of rebirth and illusion (e.g., Tag 10.237.567 ff, Tg 5.41.82).

The body was more often than not particularized, and almost

invariably conceptualized as feminine. The female body was envisaged as foul-smelling and dripping with excretions (e.g., Tag 4.189.279). At the same time, it was represented as exemplifying the noose of death (*maccupāsa*, e.g., Tag 4.194.299) on account of what was perceived to be its apparent, skin-deep attractiveness, which was enhanced by the use of jewellery, fine clothes, and fragrances (e.g., Tag 4.186.267-68). This literally fatal attraction was viewed as extending, in extreme cases, to the female corpse (Tag 5.198).

The deadly qualities attributed to the female form stemmed from the understanding that it was the embodiment of desire (e.g., Tag 6.223.455, where the *itthirūpais* equated with the *pañcakāmaguṇa*). The mechanisms devised to overcome this "trap" included representing the female body as being subject to aging when alive (e.g., Tag 1.118) and eaten by worms when dead (Tag 6.213.393).

Such imagery is fairly stereotypical, and much of it is echoed in the *Therīgāthā* as well. As such, one looks in vain for an alternative definition of the female form in the text. Nevertheless; the *gāthās* occasionally incorporate representations which shift the emphasis subtly, if only slightly. Perhaps the best example of this is provided by the composition attributed to Subhā (Tg 14.71), which is structured in the form of a dialogue between the *therī* and a male protagonist. The action begins when Subhā goes to meditate in a forest, but is confronted by a seducer, a young man who tempts her to return to the pleasures of the world. He is particularly fascinated by her lovely eye (ibid.:375). After a long discourse on the futility of desire and the illusory nature of the body, Subhā plucks out her eye, and hands it to him (ibid.:396). Needless to say, he is immediately contrite, and the eye is miraculously restored when the *bhikkhunī* enters the presence of the Buddha (ibid.:397-99).

What is interesting here is the complete role reversal. The conventional temptress takes on the role of redeemer. What is more, redemption is achieved through the giving of the eye. Apart from being symbolic of insight, this was recognized within the Buddhist tradition as the ultimate act of generosity, typically ascribed to certain Bodhisattas. The appropriation of the motif in the present context would have probably undermined the equation of the feminine with evil for those who heard the vivid and dramatic song. As such, while the *gāthā* did not provide an overt contestation of canonical definitions of femininity, it suggested and opened up alternative possibilities.

The image of the aging female body, frequently invoked as symbolic of the transience of worldly pleasures, and one of the recommended objects of contemplation for *bhikkhus*, is reworked in another instance.

This is undertaken in the *gāthā* attributed to the renowned ex-courtesan Ambapālī (Tg 13.66). The *gāthās* is cast as a monologue, almost a lamentation, in which the courtesan contrasts her past glory with her present state. This is achieved by juxtaposing the stereotypes of Sanskrit (and prakrit) *kāvya* with a more sombre reality. Thus, her hair which was like a swarm of black bees now resembles hemp (ibid.:252), her eyes which sparkled like jewels have lost their lustre, her breasts sag, and her feet are cracked (ibid.:257, 265, 269). Once again, the overarching symbolic codes remain unchallenged, but there is a shift from a superficial representation of the femal body as horrific to a more resigned acceptance of aging and decay.

While conventional definitions of femininity were only partly modified through such strategies, masculinity was more open to redefinition. In one instance (Tag 18.281.1057), the man (*nara*) who was renowned in all directions was defined as one who survived on alms, wore rags, and lived under trees. Such definitions called into question conventional symbols of worldly prosperity—good food, good, fine clothes, and a palatial residence. Simultaneously, the less visible power of an ascetic lifestyle was valorized.

In other situations, *nibbāna* was conceptualized as leading to (amongst other things) a bodily transformation. This was envisaged in one case as a state of weightlessness or lightness, the result of being touched by immense bliss (*lahuko vata me kayo phutto ca pitisukhena vipulena*, Tag 1.104). Elsewhere, the limbs and organs acquire new meaning. For Mahakassapa, one of the most famous monks in the tradition the neck becomes the source of mindfulness, the hands symbolize faith, while the head represents insight (Tag 18.261.1090). In this context, the body no longer symbolizes transience or temptation (and hence an obstacle to be overcome). It is regarded, instead, as an instrument for both attaining and experiencing the ultimate goal.

In fact, some of the most beautiful imagery is deployed to represent the Buddha's form. This was envisaged as luminous (e.g., *mahappabham*, *mahājutim*, Tag 4.191.288), comparable to the sun (*ādiccabandhu* Tag 6.217.417), glowing like gold (*hemavanna*, Tg 13.69.333, *suvaṇnavanna*, Tag 16.25.818). His body is envisaged as most complete (*Paripunnakāya*, Tag 16.25.818) with all the signs of a great man (*mahāpurisalakkhana*, ibid.:219), attractive, with beautiful teeth, happy eyes and face (ibid.:818-820), in short, incomparable (*atuladassana*, Tag 4.191.288).

Comparisons are nevertheless made, especially with majestic animals such as the elephant (ibid.: 289) and the lion (Tag 5.208.367). Elsewhere (Tag 17.259.1013) we are told that the ocean, earth and mountains are



incapable of providing similes for describing the Buddha.

Other epithets used to characterize the Buddha include *bhagavan* (Tag 1.86), *satthā* (ibid), *mahāvīra* (Tag 1.66 38), *akutobhaya* (fearless, Tag 4.191.289), *brāhmaṇa* (Tag 2.15.182), *vinayaka* (Tag 4.191.288), *dhammarāja* (Tag 6.217.389), *puṇṇakhetta* (Tag 10.236.566) and *cakkavatti rājā* (Tag 21.264.1235). Small wonder then that seeing him was supposed to make the hair stand on end (Tag 6.210.376).

One can see certain parallels between the treatment of the male body and that of the *brāhmaṇa*. As in the case of the *brāhmaṇa*, the existence/ importance of the male body is not denied. What we have instead is an acceptance and a redefinition. This culminates, moreover, in a somewhat paradoxical situation, where the luminous form of the Buddha becomes the ultimate symbol of the realization of *nibbāna* or extinction. The use of the image of the female body, on the other hand, remains confined to situations of entrapment. It was thus represented as something to be transcended rather than transformed.

## VI

There is one major intangible, but none the less perceptible difference between the *Therī* and *Theragāthā*. Overall, the tone of the latter is far more impersonal, didactic if not pedantic. Moreover, as we have seen, the gender imagery available in the *Theragāthā* tends to be stereotyped and somewhat superficial.

In the *Therīgāthā*, on the other hand, there is far more specificity and immediacy. The *gāthās* attributed to Bhaddā Kuṇḍallakeeī (Tg 5.46) and Punna (Tg 12.65) are illustrative of this. Bhadda is one of the few women represented as experimenting with alternative traditions and practices before adopting Buddhism. Her history, as collated in the commentary, is an amalgam of folk tales. She was born into a rich family but fell in love with a robber and married him. The robber wanted to make off with her jewels, but she foiled this attempt by simply knocking him down a cliff. Unable to return home after this, she took to a life of wandering, and became a famous debater, who literally staked her claim by planting a branch outside the city gates, inviting challengers to pull it down. She was ultimately outtalked by the eminent monk Sariputa.<sup>6</sup>

Puṇṇā (Tg 12.65), figures as a slave woman who goes to draw water from the river as she is afraid of being beaten by her mistress (*ayyānam daṇḍabhayabhītā*, Tg 12.65.236). Her *gāthā* is constructed as a dialogue with a *brāhmaṇa*, who shivers as he takes a dip in the river to wash away his sins. Puṇṇā tries to dissuade him by using commonsensical arguments.



She wonders whether fish and tortoise are redeemed, for example, and whether the water will not wash away his merits as well. Ultimately, the *brāhmaṇa* is convinced, declares that he was merely a *brahmabandhu* and now become a true *brāhmaṇa*.

The question of the literal truth or accuracy of such stories is obviously not the point. What is clear is that, whether narrated in prose or verse (or both), they had the basic elements of a good narrative. They achieved and maintained the delicate balance between the plausible and the unusual, and would have attracted audiences.

It is in this context that the question of narrative situations becomes important. Here, what I can offer are tentative and speculative possibilities. Can we suggest that the more standardized *Theragāthā* was primarily directed towards monastic audiences? For, such an audience, a stereotypical, shorthand allusion to a situation or state may have been considered sufficient. This was probably more in the nature of preaching to the converted—a mere reference to a threat or possibility could be used as an adequate communicative device.

It is also likely that the *Theragāthā* was shaped by the interaction between brahmanical conventions and Buddhist values to a greater extent than the *Therīgāthā*. As we have seen, this is evident in the reworking of brahmanical ideas. Besides, it is likely that certain strategies of the brahmanical tradition—including standardization, and repetition to the point of generating redundancy, may have been adopted within the Buddhist canon.

This is not to suggest that the *Therīgāthā* was entirely free of such devices. They occur often enough in the descriptions of *nibbāna*. And such similarities are only to be expected in compilations which were explicitly part of the canon.

If, nevertheless, the images of women in the *Therīgāthā* strike us as somewhat different, this may be because the text was directed less towards monks (for whom references to the horrors of the female body may have sufficed) but more towards lay men and women, including potential believers. To be successful with such an audience, the monotony of the stereotype probably had to be broken and replaced with the variety and individuality which characterizes the *Therīgāthā*. This may also explain the preoccupation with the turning points/crises of lay existence, including marriage, and, especially, the death of children.

Some of us have emphasized the fact that the early Buddhist tradition provided women (and men) with an opportunity for self-expression. What I would now suggest is that this is only partly true. The *gāthās* may represent the voices of individual men and women. They also represent

the interests and views of those who heard them. As such, we cannot maintain a water-tight distinction between image and self-image in this (and possibly other) context(s).

It is also worth pointing out that insofar as distinctive (as opposed to negative, stereotypical) images of women were preserved, this seems to have been achieved less in an exclusively monastic setting, than in situations of interaction between the laity and renouncers. It is obvious that the latter context was less closely structured. It is this which probably provided the spaces for generating, disseminating and preserving a range of images. While these did not lead to the overthrow of monastic misogyny, they evidently had a widespread appeal which ensured their accommodation within the canon. It is true that the female form was not used to signify nibbanic bliss. But representations of women in less exalted situations which were both more commonplace and varied, could at least occasionally develop beyond the stereotype of the transient temptress.

## NOTES

1. The focus in the present discussion is on the "original" Pali version of the text.
2. There is no direct correlation between the length of the commentary and that of the composition. In fact, single, short *gāthās* probably required greater prose elaboration or explanation than the longer compositions, which were often relatively self-explanatory.
3. The following abbreviations have been used throughout:

Tag: *Theragāthā*

Tg: *Therīgāthā*

Cmy: Commentary.

Unless otherwise mentioned, all references are to Oldenberg and Pischel's (1883) edition of the text. In all citations, the first number refers to the book or *nipāta*, the second to the author, and the third to the verse. All three, i.e., books or sections, authors and verses are numbered consecutively.

4. For a detailed account of the relative importance of such definitions for *therās* and *therīs*, see Blackstone 1998.
5. This involved the development of *sīla* (virtue), *citta* (mental ability) and *paññā* (insight). The reference to *tevijja*, threefold learning, would also have resonances with the brahmanical tradition which defined learning in terms of the three Vedas. The use of a more or less identical term while redefining its meaning would tie in with the strategies for dealing with *brāhmaṇas*/brahmanism mentioned earlier.
6. The *gāthās* ascribed to her mention her wandering as a Jaina ascetic (Tg 5.46.107)—shaven, dirty, and with a single cloth, through the realms of Anga, Magadha, Vajji, Kasi and Kosala, i.e., present-day Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh.

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