



Poems of the Elders

AN ANTHOLOGY
FROM THE
THERAGATHA
&
THERIGATHA

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FROM THE

THERAGĀTHĀ

&

THERĪGĀTHĀ

A TRANSLATION

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

by

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Introduction

This is an anthology consisting of 88 poems from the Theragāthā (Poems of the Elder Monks) and 32 from the Therīgāthā (Poems of the Elder Nuns). These texts are, respectively, the eighth and ninth texts in the Khuddaka Nikāya, or Collection of Short Pieces, the last collection of the Sutta Piṭaka in the Pāli Canon.

The Theragāthā contains a total of 264 poems, the Therīgāthā, 73, all attributed to early members of the monastic Saṅgha. Some of the poems are attributed to monks or nuns well-known from other parts of the Canon—such as Ānanda and Mahā Kassapa among the monks, and Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and Uppalavaṇṇā among the nuns—whereas the majority are attributed to monks and nuns otherwise unknown.

Both texts are landmarks in the history of world literature. The Therīgāthā is the earliest extant text depicting women’s spiritual experiences. The Theragāthā contains the earliest extant descriptions extolling the beauties, not of domesticated nature, but of nature where it’s wild.

The poems in both compilations are arranged by ascending size, starting with chapters in which every poem consists of only one stanza, and working up numerically, chapter by chapter, to poems of many stanzas. The longest poem in the Theragāthā is 71 stanzas; the longest in the Therīgāthā, 75. Unlike the Dhammapada and Udāna, there is no overall aesthetic structure to either collection, although within a few of the chapters, such as the first chapter of the Theragāthā and the seventh of the Therīgāthā, poems of similar themes are grouped together.

Because the poems are attributed to a wide variety of authors, it should come as no surprise that they differ widely in style, content, and artistic interest: Thus my choice to present an anthology of selected poems rather than a complete translation of either text. Some of the poems are autobiographical; some didactic. Some repeat verses attributed to the Buddha in other parts of the Canon, whereas others appear to be original compositions. Some are very simple and just barely poetic, whereas others are polished and artful, composed by people who obviously had a sophisticated literary background.

The polished poems are among the most interesting, and to fully appreciate them it’s necessary to know something of the aesthetic theory that shaped their composition.

ANCIENT INDIAN AESTHETICS

The central concept in ancient Indian aesthetic theory was that every artistic text should have *rasa*, or “savor,” and the theory around savor was this: Artistic literature expressed states of emotion or states of mind called *bhāva*. The classic analysis of basic emotions listed eight: love (delight), humor, grief, anger, energy, fear, disgust, and astonishment. The reader or listener exposed to these presentations of emotion did not participate in them directly; rather, he/she savored them as an aesthetic experience at one remove from the emotion, and the savor—though

related to the emotion—was somewhat different from it. The proof of this point was that some of the basic emotions were decidedly unpleasant, whereas the savor of the emotion was meant to be enjoyed.

Each of the emotions had its corresponding savor, as follows:

love — sensitive
humor — comic
grief — compassionate
anger — furious
energy — heroic
fear — apprehensive
disgust — horrific
astonishment — marvelous

Thus, for instance, a heroic character would feel energy, rather than heroism, but the reader would taste that energy as heroic. Characters in love would feel their love, but the reader/listener, in empathizing with their love, would taste that empathy as an experience of being sensitive.

An ideal work of literary art was supposed to convey one dominant savor, but if it was long enough, it was expected, like a good meal, to offer many subsidiary savors as well. Some savors were believed to supplement one another naturally. The sensitive, for instance, was believed to blend well with the comic and the compassionate. The heroic often started with the apprehensive or furious, and tended to end with a touch of the marvelous. Other savors, however, worked at cross-purposes. The horrific, in particular, did not blend with the sensitive or the comic.

All eight of the classic savors can be found in the poems of the Theragāthā (Thag) and Therīgāthā (Thig). [Thig 14](#), for instance, begins with long passages conveying the sensitive savor, and ends with a jolt conveying an unusual and rule-breaking combination of the comic, horrific, heroic, and marvelous. [Thag 16:1](#) is a more classic example of the heroic and marvelous, whereas [Thag 1:104](#) conveys the marvelous on its own, and [Thag 2:24](#), [2:37](#), and [3:8](#) convey the purely heroic. [Thag 2:16](#) and [10:5](#) offer a savor of the horrific; [Thig 3:5](#) and [6:2](#), the compassionate. [Thag 5:8](#) and [6:2](#) begin with the apprehensive before moving on to the heroic, and [Thag 2:47](#) conveys the furious by depicting a monk angry at his own mind.

Unlike plays, however, which can convey savor through language, costumes, and the gestures of the actors, these poems, like all poems, convey savor solely through their use of language. Classical treatises devoted a great deal of space to discussions of how language could be used to convey different savors. And, while many of their recommendations had to do with the sound of the language—and are thus hard to convey when translating—some do survive translation.

This is particularly true of two types of ornamentation: similes and a type of figure called a “lamp.” Lamps are a peculiarity of poetry in Indian languages, which are heavily inflected, a fact that allows a poet to use, say, one adjective to modify two different nouns, or one verb to function in two separate sentences. (The name of the figure derives from the idea that the two nouns radiate from the one adjective, or the two sentences from the one verb.) In English, the closest we have to this is parallelism combined with ellipsis. An example from the Theragāthā is [1:2](#)—

Calmed, restrained,
giving counsel unruffled,
he shakes off evil qualities—
as the breeze,
a leaf from a tree.

—where “shakes off” functions as the verb in both clauses, even though it is elided from the second. This is how I have rendered the lamps in most of the poems, although in a few cases, such as [Thag 1:111](#), I have repeated the lamp word to emphasize its double role.

Glancing through this anthology, you will quickly see that many of the poems succeed in conveying savor precisely because of their heavy use of similes and lamps. The lamps, through their concision, give a heightened flavor to the language without making it flowery. The similes flesh out with graphic images/messages that without them would be abstract and dry.

Other rhetorical features traditionally used to convey savor can also be found in the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā, such as: admonitions (*upadiṣṭa*) [[Thag 2:37](#), [Thag 3:12](#), [Thig 6:7](#)], distinctions (*viśeṣaṇa*) [[Thag 5:10](#), [Thag 12:1](#), [Thag 14:2](#)], encouragement (*protsāhana*) [[Thag 2:37](#), [Thag 5:8](#), [Thag 6:2](#)], examples (*dr̥ṣṭānta*) [[Thig 3:4](#)], explanations of cause and effect (*hetu*) [[Thag 4:10](#)], illustrations (*udāharāṇa*) [[Thag 2:24](#)], rhetorical questions (*pr̥cchā*) [[Thag 1:56](#), [Thag 1:109](#), [Thag 5:8](#), [Thig 3:5](#)], prohibitions (*pratiṣedha*) [[Thag 2:47](#); [Thig 9](#)], and praise (*guṇakīrtana*) [[Thag 15:2](#), [Thig 6:6](#)].

In all these formal respects, the poems in the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā do not differ markedly from those attributed to the Buddha in the Dhammapada, Udāna, and Itivuttaka. And although some of the poems in the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā, such as [Thag 1:100](#), seem fairly formulaic in their attempts at inducing savor, others—in terms of Indian aesthetic theory—break new ground.

One way in which they do this relates to the emotions some of the poems portray. As Indian aesthetic theory developed through the centuries, various writers argued for and against the addition of other savors to the standard list of eight. One of the prime candidates for a ninth savor was the *calmed*, the savor tasted when witnessing another person achieve peace. There are good reasons to believe that the first proponents of the calmed as a legitimate savor for literary works were Buddhist. For example, the great Buddhist poet, Aśvaghōṣa, who wrote epics and plays in the 1st century C.E., insisted that he was trying to lead his audience not to pleasure, but to calm. In this, he was echoing a sentiment expressed much earlier, in the Dhammapada, concerning the effect that Dhamma should have on its listeners:

Like a deep lake,
clear, unruffled, & calm:
so the wise become clear,
calm,
on hearing words of the Dhamma. — *Dhp* 82
And better than chanting hundreds
of meaningless verses is

one
Dhamma-saying
that on hearing
brings peace. — *Dhp* 102

Both the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā contain many poems that achieve this effect of calm and peace by describing how the speaker attained the peace of awakening. A typical example is from Vimalā’s poem, [Thig 5:2](#):

Today, wrapped in a double cloak,
my head shaven,
having wandered for alms,
I sit at the foot of a tree
and attain the state of no-thought.
All ties—human & divine—have been cut.
Having cast off all
effluents,
cooled am I. Unbound.

Reading these lines, the reader savors some of Vimalā’s coolness and peace. Other poems in both compilations convey the same savor through other means. A prime example is Ambapālī’s poem, [Thig 13:1](#), in which she graphically catalogs, part by part, how age has changed her body. After each part, however, she repeats the refrain: “The Truth-speaker’s word doesn’t change.” This refrain, which itself doesn’t change, has a calming effect, so that the reader tastes some of Ambapālī’s peace of mind as she views, from the bemused perspective of the timeless Dhamma, the changes wrought in her body by the ravages of time.

These examples suggest that the poems of the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā may have been among the first conscious attempts to convey the calmed as a new savor, thus setting the stage for the further development of this savor in later centuries of Buddhist and even non-Buddhist poetry in India.

Another way in which the poems of the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā broke new ground can be seen in how they subvert some of the traditions of ancient Indian aesthetic theory.

A prime example is the rule-breaking poem mentioned above, [Thig 14](#). Its story tells of a nun, Subhā, who is accosted by a libertine as she is going through a secluded patch of woods. He tries to persuade her to abandon her vows and become his wife. She, in turn, tries to show him the foolishness of his lust for her body. When asked what in her body he finds attractive, he focuses on the beauty of her eyes. So, after some further admonitions about the unattractive aspects of eyes, she plucks out one of her eyes and offers it to him. This, of course, makes very explicit the message that what he thought he desired is nothing worthy of desire. The libertine, shocked into his senses, asks for her forgiveness and allows her to go on her way. She returns to the Buddha, and when she gazes at him, her eye is restored.

From an aesthetic point of view, two features of the poem are especially striking. First, the libertine is given some of the most beautiful lines in Pāli poetry. But this is a setup. The lines are

obviously intended to create a savor of the sensitive, but this savor will then be drastically undercut by the horrific savor induced when Subhā plucks out her eye. The libertine's skill with words is thus exposed as the skill of a fool. In this way, the poem conveys the message that when people deny the allure of sensuality, it's not necessarily because they are too dull to have developed refined tastes. They, too, are able to appreciate the beauties of language well enough to compose alluring lines. So their rejection of sensuality is not a sign of lack of sophistication. Instead, it's a sign that they have gone beyond sophistication to something higher.

The second striking feature is the combination of the comic and the horrific at the conclusion to the poem. Subhā's act of removing her eye is obviously disgusting, yet at the same time it's hard not to imagine her laughing at her own bravado in carrying it out. "You want it?" she seems to say, "all right, you can have it." This combination of the comic and the horrific broke one of the classic rules of Indian aesthetic theory, a fact that underscores the complete freedom with which Subhā is acting. Not only is she so free of attachment to sensuality that she can play a trick like this on the libertine, she is also free enough to break long-established literary conventions.

Another poem that breaks with ancient Indian aesthetic theory is [Thag 14:1](#). This poem depicts Ven. Revata's last words before entering total unbinding, and in so doing it breaks with an ancient Indian taboo against presenting a character's death. The standard procedure in plays, when dealing with a death, was to report it as happening off-stage. The dying character was never presented saying his last words. The reason that the compilers of the Theragāthā felt free to break with this tradition may be related to the fact that the ability to attain arahantship gave a new meaning to death. Instead of being an occasion for fear or grief, an arahant's death was peaceful. A poem presenting an arahant's last words would thus convey, not apprehension or compassion, but a savor of calm.

The poems of the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā break new ground not only in terms of their aesthetic form but also in terms of their subject matter. As noted above, the Therīgāthā is the earliest extant text to convey accounts of women's spiritual experiences, ostensibly in their own words. This in itself is quite countercultural, but doubly countercultural are the poems in which women report the sense of freedom that comes from contemplating the unattractiveness of the body (see, for instance, [Thig 2:4](#), [5:4](#), and [14](#)) to counteract pride and lust. Because ancient Indian culture, like so many human cultures, taught women to identify strongly with their bodies and to judge themselves by how attractive their bodies appeared, these poems make an important point: The best way not to suffer over the issue of your body's appearance is not to work at cultivating a continually positive image of that appearance. It's to develop dispassion toward the issue of appearance entirely, and to find a happiness not based on things inconstant and subject to change. At the same time, because the contemplation of unattractiveness is regarded as a painful practice (AN 4:163), the accounts of women who have succeeded at this practice convey a savor of the heroic.

As for the Theragāthā, it breaks new ground in terms of subject matter with its poems extolling the beauties of the wilderness. Ancient Indian culture, like all pre-modern cultures that had developed past the hunter-gatherer stage, tended to view the wilderness with suspicion and fear. But the Buddhist monks had essentially returned to an economy very similar to that of

hunter-gatherers—hunting, in the words of [Thig 13:2](#), only what is already cooked. Thus they had learned, like earlier hunter-gatherers, to view the wilderness as home, an ideal place to hunt for the deathless. Thus there is good reason for the many poems in the Theragāthā dealing with the beauty of the wilderness—[Thag 18](#) is the primary example, but [1:13](#), [1:22](#), [1:41](#), [1:110](#), [1:113](#), [10:2](#), and 11 fall into this category as well. The point of these poems is not that beauty of this sort is an end in itself, but that the wilderness provides an ideal place to refresh the mind in its quest for a higher happiness.

Now, it's true that other poems in the Theragāthā, such as [Thag 1:31](#), [3:5](#), [3:8](#), and [5:8](#), detail the hardships of living in the wilderness, but these poems are not meant to discourage their readers from taking up the wilderness life. On the contrary, they appeal to the reader's desire to take up a life with a heroic dimension. In this way, the Theragāthā makes the wilderness life of a monk attractive both aesthetically and energetically. Thus these poems are good inducements for seeking seclusion and trying to gain the benefits of practicing there.

And in these ways, by breaking new ground in terms of subject matter, both the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā at the same time provide new standards of heroism for ancient Indian culture—and for world culture at large.

AUTHORSHIP & AUTHENTICITY

Just who composed these poems, and put so much art into them, is a matter of conjecture. There is also no way of knowing who compiled them in their present form or when. There are several reasons to believe that many parts of both the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā were composed quite late, at least two centuries after the Buddha's passing away. [Thag 10:2](#), for instance, is attributed to King Asoka's younger brother, who postdated the Buddha by a century or two. Also, both the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā are placed in the Khuddaka after two other compositions generally regarded as late—the Vimānavatthu and Petavatthu—which suggests that they too, even though they may contain earlier material, were compiled at a relatively late date.

Some scholars have proposed that the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā were compiled as part of the movement to provide early Buddhism with dramatic stage pieces as a way of making the teaching attractive to the masses: a trend that culminated in later centuries in a thriving Buddhist theatre as Buddhism became an established, wealthy religion. In formal terms, many of the poems in the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā would seem to bear this theory out. [Thag 10:2](#), [11](#), and [14:1](#), for instance, read like dramatic monologues; [Thag 16:1](#), [Thig 9](#), [Thig 12](#), and [Thig 13:2](#), like dramatic dialogues. Three poems—[Thig 7:2](#), [7:3](#), and [8](#)—have parallels in another part of the Canon (SN 5), and one of the ways they differ from those parallels is that each is introduced with a stanza that would serve well as a dramatic introduction on stage.

Another dramatic element in both the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā that differs from the earlier suttas is that in many of the autobiographical poems, the speaker proclaims his/her awakening in these terms: “Cooled am I”—or “calmed am I”—“unbound.” (See, for instance, [Thag 4:10](#) and [Thig 5:2](#).) These statements would make a dramatic impact if presented on stage. But, in the context of the early teachings, such an announcement, with its reference to “I,” was proof that the speaker was not really awakened. See for instance, the Buddha's statement at MN 102, referring to

a person announcing, “I am at peace, I am unbound, I am without clinging”: “The fact that he envisions that ‘I am at peace, I am unbound, I am without clinging!’—that in itself points to his clinging.” Or this statement in AN 6:49 about the proper way to proclaim gnosis, or the knowledge of full awakening: “Monks, this is how clansmen declare gnosis. The meaning is stated, but without mention of self.” This is one way in which the dramatic form of the poems distorts an important point in the training of the mind.

The predominance of drama over Dhamma in the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā can also be seen in the way some of their poems treat an issue central to both compilations: attachment to the body. Many poems—such as [Thig 5:4](#), [Thag 5:1](#), and [Thag 7:1](#)—relate how the speakers gained full awakening on abandoning precisely this attachment, but the description of the process in each case leaves out many details that other texts show are crucial. To begin with, in the poems of this category in the Theragāthā, full awakening comes with overcoming attachment to the body of the opposite sex. Only in the Therīgāthā poems does awakening come with overcoming attachment to one’s own body. In this respect, the Therīgāthā is closer than the Theragāthā to the sutta accounts of what is required for overcoming this attachment, because, as AN 7:48 points out, attraction to the opposite sex begins with attraction to one’s own body. So in this way, the Theragāthā poems leave out an important step when describing how attachment is overcome.

However, poems of this category in both compilations leave out an even more important step in describing how the abandoning of attachment leads to awakening. In each case, these poems describe the awakening that comes with abandoning passion for the body as total. But suttas detailing the fetters abandoned with the four stages of awakening, such as AN 10:13 and MN 118, indicate that simply overcoming sensual passion is a mark, not of the fourth state, total awakening, but only of the third stage, non-return. Some of the poems in the Theragāthā dealing with this topic, such as [Thag 10:5](#), do indicate that total awakening requires more than abandoning attachment to the body, but [Thig 5:4](#), [Thag 5:1](#), and [Thag 7:1](#), if read on their own, could create the impression that nothing more is needed.

Now, if these poems were intended for dramatic presentation, it’s easy to understand why they give such a compressed account of how awakening is achieved: More detailed accounts would deprive the poems of their dramatic effect. But the effect has its price, in giving a distorted sense of the practice.

For these reasons, it is possible that the existence of the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā is related to a complaint, voiced in some of the other suttas, that with the passage of time people will become less interested in the Buddha’s teachings and instead will pay more attention to “literary works—the works of poets, artful in sound, artful in rhetoric... words of disciples” (AN 5:79). Many of the poems in the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā fit this latter description precisely.

All of this means that for a person interested in the practice of the Dhamma, the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā should be read with caution and care. The stories told in their poems, and the people they portray, are inspiring and attractive, but their example may not be the best to follow in every respect, and the Dhamma they teach has to be checked against more reliable sources.

These poems do mention many of the standard doctrines of early Buddhism, such as the triple refuge ([Thig 13:2](#)), kamma ([Thig 12](#)), the four noble truths ([Thig 7:3](#)), the eightfold path ([Thig](#)

6:6), the establishing of mindfulness ([Thag 1:100](#)), the ten fetters ([Thig 6:7](#)), the five hindrances ([Thag 2:26](#)), the five aggregates ([Thag 1:23](#)), the practice of goodwill, or *mettā* ([Thig 14](#)), and the practice of *jhāna*, or meditative absorption ([Thag 1:41](#), [1:43](#), [1:85](#), [1:119](#)). They also employ the concepts of effluent (*āsava*) and kamma in their strictly Buddhist sense (see [Thag 1:100](#), note 1, and [Thag 16:8](#), note 4), and [Thag 3:14](#) provides a quick tour of the Buddhist cosmos. However, none of these doctrines are discussed in any detail. For discussions detailed enough to be of practical help, you have to look elsewhere in the Canon.

Like the Udāna, the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā seem concerned less with explaining specific Dhamma teachings and more with portraying early Buddhist values. In particular, the values listed in two suttas from the Aṅguttara Nikaya—AN 7:80 and AN 8:53—are well-represented in the poems of both collections.

Here, for example, are some poems illustrating the values listed in AN 8:53:

dispassion — [Thag 1:39](#); [Thig 5:4](#); [Thig 13:5](#)
being unfettered — [Thig 1:11](#); [Thig 2:3](#); [Thig 6:7](#)
shedding — [Thag 6:9](#); [Thig 5:2](#)
modesty — [Thag 6:10](#)
contentment — [Thag 16:7](#); [Thag 18](#)
reclusiveness — [Thag 3:8](#); [Thag 18](#)
aroused persistence — [Thag 2:24](#); [Thag 3:5](#)
being unburdensome — [Thig 13:2](#)

And here are some poems illustrating the values listed in AN 7:80:

disenchantment — [Thag 5:1](#); [Thag 6:6](#); [Thag 7:1](#); [Thag 10:5](#)
dispassion — [Thag 1:18](#); [Thag 2:30](#)
cessation — [Thig 6:6](#); [Thag 3:15](#)
stilling — [Thig 7:2](#)
direct knowledge — [Thag 3:14](#); [Thig 7:3](#); [Thig 9](#)
self-awakening — [Thag 12:2](#); [Thag 14:2](#)
unbinding — [Thag 1:32](#); [Thag 14:1](#); [Thig 5:10](#)

Fortunately, given the uncertain provenance of the poems in the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā, only a few attempt to discuss high-level Dhamma in any detail. [Thag 15:2](#) is one of the exceptions, as it contains a rare image to illustrate why the arahant, prior to death, is said to experience unbinding “with fuel remaining,” and why, by extension, the experience of unbinding after death is said to have “no fuel remaining.” However, the same poem appears in AN 6:43, indicating the Theragāthā here is not deviating from a more reliable source.

There is also only one teaching appearing in these texts that doesn’t appear elsewhere in the early suttas: [Thag 16:7](#) contains the only complete list of all thirteen ascetic (*dhutaṅga*) practices to be found anywhere in the Canon. But this is not a point of high-level theory, and more a matter of everyday practice that the reader can easily test for him or herself.

So these texts seem meant to be read, not for detailed information about the path of practice, but for the savor with which they make the practice attractive and the encouragement they give for taking up the practice yourself.

RECOLLECTION OF THE SAṄGHA

The best way to use these poems is to read them as aids in the meditative exercise called recollection of the Saṅgha (*saṅghānussati*). And they aid in this exercise in two ways.

The first way relates to the fact that, elsewhere in the Canon, the description of this practice is fairly abstract and dry:

“There is the case where the disciple of the noble ones recollects the Saṅgha, thus: ‘The Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples who have practiced well... who have practiced straight-forwardly... who have practiced methodically... who have practiced masterfully—in other words, the four types (of noble disciples) when taken as pairs, the eight when taken as individual types—they are the Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples: worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of respect, the incomparable field of merit for the world.’” — *AN 3:71*

The narratives in both the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā add flesh and blood to this contemplation, giving graphic examples of what it means to practice well and why those who practice well are worthy of respect. This point applies both to the cases where the narratives tell of monks and nuns who face danger with nobility and calm already firmly in place (such as [Thag 16:1](#) and [Thig 14](#)), and in those where the monks and nuns have to overcome great weakness, misfortune, or discouragement to achieve final awakening (such as [Thag 6:6](#) and [Thig 10](#)).

These latter examples, in particular, aid in a strategy that Ven. Ānanda called relying on conceit to abandon conceit:

“There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, ‘The monk named such-and-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now.’ The thought occurs to him, ‘The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now. Then why not me?’ Then, at a later time, he abandons conceit, having relied on conceit.” — *AN 4:159*

Seeing the difficulties that others have overcome before reaching awakening makes it easier to imagine that you, too, can overcome your personal difficulties and reach awakening as well. If they can do it, why not you?

The second way in which the poems of the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā aid in the practice of recollecting the Saṅgha comes in their own examples of monks and nuns who engage in this practice themselves, showing the purposes for which it’s useful.

Elsewhere in the suttas, the recollection of the Saṅgha is said to serve three purposes: AN 3:71 says that it cleanses the mind, gives rise to joy, and helps one to abandon defilements. SN 11:3 says that it helps to overcome fear when one is practicing alone in an empty dwelling or in the wilderness. SN 47:10 points out that if one has trouble staying with any of the four establishings of mindfulness, one can focus on an inspiring theme—and the recollection of the Saṅgha counts as an inspiring theme—to wake up the sluggish mind, gather the scattered mind, and give rise to rapture and calm. Once the mind has gained this rapture and calm, it can drop the inspiring theme, and it will be in a state of concentration devoid of directed thought and evaluation: apparently, the second jhāna.

The Theragāthā presents two additional rewards for the practice of recollecting the Saṅgha: [Thag 6:2](#) gives an example of a monk who, gaining no alms, nourishes himself with the rapture coming from recollecting the Saṅgha. [Thag 5:8](#) portrays a monk who, alone in the wilderness, has fallen sick. He gains strength of heart not to retreat from the wilderness and instead to use the Dhamma to cure his illness with this reflection:

Reflecting on those who are resolute,
their persistence aroused,
constantly firm in their effort,
united in concord,
I'll stay in the grove.

Although much of the initial appeal of the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā lies in the artistry of the poems, it's when they yield this sort of reflection that they prove most useful in the long run.

THERAGĀTHĀ

Poems of the Elder Monks

1:1 Subhūti

My hut is roofed, comfortable,
free of drafts;
my mind, well-centered,
released.
I remain ardent.
So, rain-deva.
Go ahead & rain.

See also: AN 3:110; Sn 1:1

1:2 Mahā Koṭṭhita

Calmed, restrained,
giving counsel unruffled,
he shakes off evil qualities—
as the breeze,
a leaf from a tree.

1:3 Kaṅkhā (Doubting) Revata

See this:
the discernment
of the Tathāgatas,
like a fire ablaze in the night,
giving light, giving eyes,
to those who come,
subduing their doubt.

1:6 Dabba (“Capable”)

Whoever,

hard to tame,
has been tamed by taming,
—capable, contented,
crossed over doubt,
victorious, as his fears
are dispersed:
He is capable,
unbound,
steadfast in mind.

1:7 Bhalliya

Who scatters the troops
of the King of Death—
as a great flood,
a very weak bridge made of reeds—
is victorious,
for his fears are dispersed.
He's tamed,
unbound,
steadfast in mind.

1:10 Puṇṇamāsa

Whoever,
a master of knowing,
contented,¹
restrained in mind,
destroys longing for here & beyond,
unsmeared with regard to all dhammas,
would know the arising-&-disbanding
of the world.

NOTE

1. Reading santusito with the Thai edition. Other editions have samito—calmed, appeased—which doesn't fit the meter.

1:13 Vanavaccha

The color of blue-dark clouds,
glistening,

cooled with the waters
of clear-flowing streams
covered with ladybugs:
Those rocky crags
refresh me.

1:14 Vanavaccha's pupil

My preceptor said to me:
Let's go from here, Sīvaka.
My body stays in the village;
my mind has gone to the wilds.
Even though lying down,
I go.
There's no tying down
one who knows.

1:16 Belatthasā

Just as a fine thoroughbred steed,
with swishing tail & mane
runs with next-to-no effort,
so my days & nights
run with next-to-no effort
now that I've gained a pleasure
not of the flesh.¹

NOTE

1. See SN 36:31 and [Thag 1:85](#).

1:18 Siṅgālapitar

There was an heir to the One Awakened,
a monk in the Bhesakaḷā forest,
who suffused this whole earth
with the perception of
“bones.”
Quickly, I'd say, he abandoned
sensual passion.

1:21 Nigrodha

I'm not afraid
of danger,
of fear.

Our Teacher's adept
in the deathless.
Where danger, where fear
do not remain:
That's the path
by which the monks go.

1:22 Cittaka

Peacocks,
crested, blue, with gorgeous necks,
cry out
in the Kāraṃvī woods,
thrilled by the cold wind.
They awaken the sleeper
to meditate.

1:23 Gosāla

I—having eaten honey-rice
in a bamboo patch
and rightly grasping the aggregates'¹
arising-disbanding—
will return to the hillside, intent
on seclusion.

NOTE

1. The aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. See SN 22:48, 22:59, and 22:79.

1:25 Nandiya (to Māra)

Like splendor, his mind,
continually fruitful:
Attack a monk like that,
you Dark One,
and you'll fall
into pain.

See also: SN 5; Ud 4:4; Sn 3:2

1:26 Abhaya

Hearing the well-spoken words
of the Awakened One,
Kinsman of the Sun,
I pierced what is subtle—
 as if, with an arrow,
 the tip of a horse-tail hair.

See also: SN 56:45

1:29 Hārīta

Hārīta,
raise yourself up-
 right
and, straightening your mind
—like a fletcher, an arrow—
 shatter ignorance
 to bits.

1:31 Gahuratīriya

Touched by gnats & mosquitoes,
in the wilds, the great forest,
like a nāga elephant
at the head of a battle,
 mindful,
he acquiesces to that.

1:32 Suppiya

I'll make a trade:
aging for the ageless,
burning for the unbound—
 the highest peace,
 the unexcelled rest
 from the yoke.

1:33 *Sopāka*

Just as one would be good
to one's dear only child,
one should be good to all creatures
everywhere.¹

NOTE

1. Notice how this image differs from a similar image in Sn 1:8:

As a mother would risk her life
to protect her child, her only child,
even so should one cultivate the heart limitlessly
with regard to all beings.

Whereas the image here draws a parallel between being good to one's child and being good to others, the image in Sn 1:8 draws a parallel between protecting one's child and protecting one's limitless attitude of goodwill to all beings.

1:39 *Tissa*

As if struck by a sword,
as if his head were on fire,
a monk should live the wandering life
—mindful—
for the abandoning of sensual passion.

1:41 *Sirivaḍḍha*

Lightning lands on the cleft
between Vebhāra & Paṇḍava,¹
but,
having gone to the cleft in the mountains,
he's absorbed in jhāna²—the son
of the one without compare,
the one who is Such.³

NOTES

1. Mountains near Rājagaha.
2. Meditative absorption, one of the four levels of intense concentration that constitute right concentration in the noble eightfold path.
3. Such (tādin): an epithet for an arahant, indicating that his/her attainment is indefinable and not subject to change.

1:43 *Sumaṅgala*

So freed! So freed!
So thoroughly freed am I
from three crooked things:
my sickles, my shovels, my plows.
Even if they were here,
 right here,
I'd be done with them,
 done.
Do jhāna, Sumaṅgala.
Do jhāna, Sumaṅgala.
Sumaṅgala, stay heedful.

See also: [Thig 1:11](#); [Thig 2:3](#)

1:49 *Rāmaṇeyyaka*

Even with all the whistles & whistling,
the calls of the birds,
this, my mind, doesn't waver,
for my delight is in
oneness.

1:50 *Vimala*

The earth's sprinkled
with rain, wind
is blowing, lightning
wanders the sky,
but my thoughts are stilled,
 well-centered
 my mind.

1:56 *Kuṭivihārin (1)*

Who's in the hut?
A monk's in the hut—
 free from passion,
 with well-centered mind.
Know this, my friend:

The hut you built
wasn't wasted.

1:57 Kuṭivihārin (2)

This was your old hut,
and you aspire to another,
new hut.
Discard your hope for a hut, monk.
A new hut will be
painful all over again.¹

NOTE

1. See [Thag 2:32, note 1](#).

1:61 Vappa

One who sees
sees who sees,
sees who doesn't.
One who doesn't see
doesn't
see who sees
or who doesn't.

1:73 Māṇava

On seeing an old person;
&
a person in pain, diseased;
&
a person dead, gone to life's end,
I left
for the life gone forth,
abandoning the sensuality
that entices the heart.

1:75 Susārada

Good the sight
of the well-rectified:

Doubt is cut off,
intelligence grows.
Even fools
they make wise—
so the company of the true
is good.

1:84 Nīta

Asleep the whole night,
delighting in company by day:
When, when
will the fool
bring suffering & stress
to an end?

1:85 Sunāga

Adept in a theme for the mind,
sensing the savor of solitude,
practicing jhāna,
masterful, mindful,
you'd attain a pleasure
not of the flesh.¹

NOTE

1. See SN 36:31.

1:86 Nāgita

Outside of this path,
the path of the many
who teach other things
doesn't go to unbinding
as does this:
Thus the Blessed One
instructs the Saṅgha,
truly showing the palms of his hands.¹

NOTE

1. This is a reference to the fact that the Buddha was an “open-handed” teacher who did not wait to the end of his life to give his most crucial teachings. See DN 16. The message of this verse may be related to the

fact that the Buddha addressed three of his most plain-speaking suttas to Nāgita: AN 5:30, AN 6:42, and AN 8:103.

1:88 Ajjuna

Able was I
to raise myself from water
to dry land.¹
Swept along by the great flood,
I penetrated
the truths.²

NOTES

1. A standard image for the practice is that of making one's way across a river from its dangerous near shore to the safety of the further shore. For other uses of this image, see SN 35:197, AN 4:5, AN 7:15, and Sn 5.

2. The four noble truths.

1:93 Eraka

Sensual pleasures are stressful,
Eraka.
Sensual pleasures aren't ease.
Whoever loves sensual pleasures
loves stress, Eraka.
Whoever doesn't,
doesn't love stress.

1:95 Cakkhupāla

I'm blind,
my eyes are destroyed.
I've stumbled
on a wilderness track.
Even
if I must crawl,
I'll go on,
but not with an evil companion.

1:100 Devasabha

Consummate in the right exertions,
the establishing of mindfulness his range,¹
blanketed with the flowers of release,
he will, without effluent, totally unbind.²

NOTES

1. The right exertions are the four aspects of right effort; the establishing of mindfulness, the four aspects of right mindfulness. See SN 45:8. On the image of the establishing of mindfulness as a monk's proper range, see SN 47:6–7.

2. Formally, this verse is noteworthy in that each of the first three lines is composed of a single long compound. This style, which became common in later Indian literature because it was considered to convey strength, is uncommonly “strong” for a verse in the Pali Canon. For a similar example, see Dhṛp 39.

“Effluent” here is a translation of the term *āsava*, which stands for three tendencies that “flow out” of the mind and lead to the flood of rebirth: sensuality, becoming, and ignorance. The Jains, contemporaries of the Buddha, also used the term “effluent” in their teachings, but the Buddhist use of the term differed from theirs in two important respects. First, for the Buddhists, effluents were mental, whereas for the Jains they were physical: sticky substances that kept what they regarded as the soul attached to the process of transmigration. Second, for the Jains a living person could become freed of the effluents only at his/her final death. Thus a living person could not be effluent-free. For the Buddhists, however, one became effluent-free at the point of total awakening. Thus a living arahant was effluent-free. Many of the speakers in the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā speak of themselves as effluent-free—see, for instance, [Thag 18](#), [Thig 5:11](#), [Thig 14](#)—which means that they are employing the concept in its strictly Buddhist sense.

See also: SN 47:6–7

1:101 Belaṭṭhikāni

Abandoning the householder's state,
but with no mastery,
lazy, gluttonous,
using his mouth as a plough
like a great hog fattened on fodder:
 Again & again
he goes to the womb—
 the dullard.

1:104 Khitaka

How light my body!
Touched by abundant
rapture & bliss,
—like a cotton tuft

borne on the breeze—
it seems to be floating
—my body!

1:109 Sangharakkhita

Why,
having gone into solitude,
does he not take account
of the message
of the one sympathetic
to his foremost well-being?
Because he dwells
with his faculties
exposed,
like a tender deer
in the forest.

1:110 Usabha

Trees on the hilltops
are flourishing,
watered by a new high-rising cloud,
giving birth to even more goodness
for Usabha—
desiring seclusion,
conscious of
“wilderness.”

1:111 Jenta

Going forth is hard;
houses are hard places to live;
the Dhamma is deep;
wealth, hard to obtain;
it's hard to keep going
with whatever we get:
So it's right that we ponder
continually
continual
inconstancy.

See also: *Dhp* 302

1:113 Vanavaccha

With clear waters &
 massive boulders,
frequented by monkeys &
 deer,
covered with moss &
 water weeds:
Those rocky crags refresh me.

1:114 Adhimutta

For one heavy
 with bodily offenses,
greedy
 for carcass pleasures
while life is wasting away:
 From where will there come
 contemplative-excellence?

1:118 Kimbila

As if sent by a curse,¹
it drops on us—
 aging.
The body seems other,
though it's still the same one.
I'm still here
& have never been absent from it,
but I remember myself
as if somebody else's.

NOTE

1. Reading abhisatto with the Sinhalese and Burmese editions. The Thai and PTS have abhisattho, "ordered."

See also: [*Thig* 13:1](#)

1:119 Vajjiputta

Coming to the bower
at the root of a tree,
placing
 unbinding
in your heart,
do jhāna, Gotama,
& don't be heedless.
 What use is this
 chitter-chatter
 to you?¹

NOTE

1. In SN 9:5, a deva addresses this verse to Ven. Ānanda, who has been spending too much time teaching Dhamma to laypeople.

1:120 Isidatta

The five aggregates,
having been comprehended,
stand with their root
 cut through.
For me
 the ending of stress
 is reached;
 the ending of effluents,
 attained.

2:3 *Valliya*

A monkey,
coming to the little hut
with five doors,
goes from door to door, knocking
moment by moment.

Stand still, monkey,
don't run.

It's not yours
as it was before.
You're bound by discernment.
You won't get far away.

See also: SN 35:199

2:9 *Gotama*

At ease sleep the sages
who
are not bound to women,
in whom
always to be protected
is the truth
very hard to gain.
Sensuality,
we've carried out
your execution.
No longer are we in your debt.
We go now to unbinding
where,
having gone,
one doesn't
grieve.

See also: [Thig 1:11](#)

2:11 *Mahā Cunda*

Listening well increases learning.
What is learned increases discernment.

Through discernment one knows the goal.
When known, the goal brings bliss.
Stay in isolated lodgings;
live liberated from fetters.
If you don't attain delight there,
then live in the Saṅgha,
your mind protected
& mindful.

2:13 Heraññakāni

Days & nights
 fly past.
Life
 comes to an end.
The span of mortals
 runs out,
like the water of a piddling stream.
But the fool doing evil deeds
doesn't realize that later
it's bitter for him:
evil for him
 the result.

2:16 Mahākāla

This swarthy woman
[preparing a corpse for cremation]
—crow-like, enormous—
breaking a thigh & then the other
 thigh,
breaking an arm & then the other
 arm,
cracking open the head,
 like a pot of curds,
she sits with them heaped up beside her.
Whoever, unknowing,
makes acquisitions
 —the fool—
returns over & over
to suffering & stress.

So, discerning,
don't make acquisitions.
 May I never lie
 with my head cracked open
 again.

2:24 Valliya

What needs to be done
with firm persistence,
what needs to be done
by one who hopes for awakening,
 that I will do.
 I will not fail.
See: persistence & striving!
You show me the path:
 the straight,
 the plunge into deathlessness.
I, through sagacity,
will reach it, know it,
as the stream of the Ganges,
 the sea.

2:26 Puṇṇamāsa

Shedding five hindrances¹
so as to reach the unexcelled rest
 from the yoke,
taking the Dhamma as mirror
for knowing & seeing myself,
I reflected on this body—
 the whole thing,
 inside & out,
 my own & others'.
How vain & empty the body appeared!

NOTE

1. The five hindrances are sensual desire, ill will, sloth & drowsiness, restlessness & anxiety, and uncertainty. See SN 46:51.

2:27 Nandaka

Just as a fine thoroughbred steed
stumbling, regains its stance,
feeling all the more urgency,
& draws its burden
undaunted.

In the same way, remember me:
consummate in vision,
a disciple of the Rightly
Self-awakened One,
the Awakened One's thoroughbred child,
his son.

See also: MN 146

2:30 *Kaṇhadinna*

Men of integrity
have been attended to,
the Dhamma repeatedly
listened to.
Having listened,
I followed the straight way,
the plunge into deathlessness.

Passion for becoming,¹
having been killed by me,
no further such passion
is found in me.

It neither was
nor will be
nor is found in me
even now.

NOTE

1. *Becoming (bhava)* is a term to describe a sense of identity in a particular world of experience, which can develop on any of three levels: sensuality, form, or formlessness. Craving for becoming is one of the causes of stress and suffering; passion for becoming is one of the last fetters abandoned at full awakening. For more on the topic of becoming, see *The Paradox of Becoming*.

2:32 *Sivaka*

Inconstant little houses:

now here,
now there, again
 & again,
I sought the house-builder.
Painful is birth, again
 & again.
House-builder, you're seen!
You will not build a house again.
All your rafters are broken,
and your gables torn down.
Released from restriction, the mind
 will
 be blown out
 right here.¹

NOTE

1. Compare Dhp 153–154:

Through the round of many births I roamed
 without reward,
 without rest,
seeking the house-builder.
 Painful is birth again
 & again.
House-builder, you're seen!
You will not build a house again.
All your rafters broken,
the ridge pole dismantled,
immersed in dismantling, the mind
has come to the end of craving.

See also: [*Thag 1:57*](#)

2:36 *Khitaka*

Whose mind, standing like rock,
 doesn't shake,
dispassionate for things that spark passion,
unprovoked by things that spark provocation?
 When one's mind is developed like this,
 from where can there come to him
 suffering & stress?
My mind, standing like rock,

doesn't shake,
dispassionate for things that spark passion,
unprovoked by things that spark provocation.
When my mind is developed like this,
from where can there come to me
suffering & stress?

See also: AN 6:55; Ud 3:2–4; Ud 4:4

2:37 Soṇa Potiriyaputta

It's not for sleeping,
the night garlanded
with zodiac stars.
The night, for one who knows,
is for staying awake.
If I were to fall from my elephant's shoulder,
and a tusker trampled me,
death in battle would be better for me,
than that I, defeated,
survive.

See also: Sn 3:2

2:47 Anūpama

Coming into the conceit of delight, the mind
impales itself on a stake.
Wherever's a stake, a chopping block,
there, only there, you turn.
You, mind, I call an unlucky die.
You, I call a mind-traitor.
You've gained a Teacher hard to gain.
Don't urge me on to my loss.

3:5 Mātāṅgaputta

*It's too cold,
too hot,
too late in the evening—*
people who say this,

shirking their work:
The moment passes them by.

Whoever regards cold & heat
as no more than grass,
doing his manly duties,
won't fall away
from ease.

With my chest
I push through wild grasses—
spear-grass,
ribbon-grass,
rushes—
cultivating a heart
bent on seclusion.

See also: AN 8:95

3:8 *Yasoja*

His limbs knotted
like a *kālā* plant,
his body lean
& lined with veins,
knowing moderation
in food & drink:
the man of undaunted heart.

Touched by gnats
& horseflies
in the wilds,
the great wood,
like an elephant
at the head of a battle:
He, mindful,
should stay there,
endure.

One alone is like *Brahmā*,
two, like *devas*,
three, like a village,
more than that:
a hullabaloo.

See also: Ud 3:3; Sn 4:16

3:12 Abhibhūta

Listen, kinsmen, all of you,
as many as are assembled here.
I will teach you the Dhamma:
 Painful is birth,
 again & again.

Rouse yourselves.
 Go forth.
Apply yourselves
to the Awakened One's bidding.
Scatter the army of Death
as an elephant would
a shed made of reeds.

He who,
in this Dhamma & Vinaya,
stays heedful,
abandoning birth,
 the wandering-on,
will put an end
to suffering & stress.

3:14 Gotama

While wandering on
I went to hell;
 went again & again
to the world of the hungry ghosts;
 stayed countless times, long,
in the pain of the animal womb;
 enjoyed
the human state;
went to heaven
 from time to time;
settled in the elements of form,
the elements of formlessness,
neither-perception, perception-less.
Ways of taking birth

are now known:
 devoid of essence,
 unstable,
 conditioned,
 always blown along.

Knowing them
as born from my self,
mindful
I went right to peace.

3:15 Hārīta

Whoever wants to do later
what he should have done first,
falls away from the easeful state
 & later repents.

One should speak
as one would act,
& not
as one wouldn't.
When one speaks without acting,
the wise, they can tell.

How very easeful:
 unbinding,
as taught by the Rightly
Self-awakened One—
 sorrowless,
 dustless,
 secure,
where stress
& suffering
cease.

4:8 Rāhula

In both ways
consummate,¹
I'm known as Rāhula
 the Fortunate:
because I'm the son of the Buddha,

because I've the eye that sees Dhammas,
because my effluents are ended,
because I've no further becoming.
I'm deserving of offerings,
a worthy one

a three-knowledge man,²
one with sight
of the deathless.

Those
blinded by sensuality
covered by the net,
veiled by the veil of craving,
bound by the Kinsman of the heedless,³
are like fish in the mouth of a trap.

Throwing that sensuality aside,
cutting through Māra's bond,
pulling out craving, root & all,
cooled am I.

Unbound.

NOTES

1. This phrase can be taken in two ways: (a) consummate in that he has a pure lineage on both his mother's and his father's side; and (b) consummate in that he belongs both to a well-born lineage in the worldly sense and, by means of his meditative attainments, to the lineage of the noble ones. See AN 4:28.

2. One with knowledge of past lives, knowledge of the passing away and rearing of living beings, and knowledge of the ending of mental effluents. See MN 4. This list is the Buddhist response to the brahmanical claim that a person should be a master of three knowledges. In the brahmanical case, a three-knowledge man knew the three Vedas. The Buddhists claimed that their three knowledges were superior in that they were not mere hearsay, they could be known by men and women of all castes (see [Thig 13:5](#)), and they could put an end to suffering.

3. Māra.

4:10 Dhammika

The Dhamma protects
those who live by the Dhamma.
The Dhamma well-practiced
brings bliss.
This—the reward
when the Dhamma's well-practiced:
One who lives by the Dhamma

doesn't go to a bad destination.

For Dhamma and non-
don't bear equal results.
Non-Dhamma leads you to hell;
Dhamma, to a good destination.
So you should engender desire
for acts of Dhamma,
 rejoicing
in the One Well-Gone,
the one who is Such.
Standing firm in the Dhamma,
of the foremost
One Well-Gone,
his disciples are guided
—enlightened—
to the foremost
refuge supreme.

Burst is the root of the boil;
the net of craving uprooted.
He, having ended his wandering-on,
has no stain—
like the moon
on a clear full-moon night.

5:1 Rājadatta

I, a monk,
gone to the charnel ground,
saw a woman cast away,
 discarded
there in the cemetery.
Though some were disgusted,
seeing her—dead, evil—
 lust
 appeared,
as if I were blind
 to the oozings.

In less time than it takes
for rice to cook,
I got out of that place.
Mindful, alert, I

sat down to one side.
Then apt attention arose in me,
the drawbacks appeared,
 disenchantment stood
 at an even keel:

With that, my heart was released.
See the Dhamma's true rightness!
The three knowledges
have been attained;
the Awakened One's bidding,
 done.

5:8 *Vakkali*

Stricken by sharp, wind-like pains,
you, monk, living in the forest grove
—harsh, with limited range for alms—
 what, what will you do?

Suffusing my body
with abundant rapture & joy,
& enduring what's harsh,
 I'll stay in the grove.

Developing the establishings of mindfulness,
strengths, faculties,
the factors for awakening,¹
 I'll stay in the grove.

Reflecting on those who are resolute,
their persistence aroused,
constantly firm in their effort,
united in concord,
 I'll stay in the grove.

Recollecting the One Self-awakened,
self-tamed & centered,
untiring both day & night,
 I'll stay
 in the grove.

NOTE

1. On the four establishings of mindfulness, see DN 22 and SN 47:40; on the five strengths, AN 5:2; on the five faculties, SN 48:10; and on the seven factors for awakening, SN 46:51–52.

See also: DN 26; SN 11:3; Sn 4:16

5:10 *Yasadatta*

Intent on quibbling,
the dullard hears the Conqueror's teaching.

He's as far from the True Dhamma
as the ground is from the sky.

Intent on quibbling,
the dullard hears the Conqueror's teaching.

He wanes from the True Dhamma
like the moon in the dark half of the month.

Intent on quibbling,
the dullard hears the Conqueror's teaching.

He dries up in the True Dhamma
like a fish in next to no water.

Intent on quibbling,
the dullard hears the Conqueror's teaching.

He doesn't grow in the True Dhamma,
like a rotten seed in a field.

But whoever hears the Conqueror's teaching
with guarded¹ intent,
doing away with effluents
—all—
realizing the unshakable,
attaining the foremost peace,
—effluent-free—
totally unbinds.

NOTE

1. Reading guttena with the Thai edition. Other editions have tuṭṭhena, contented.

See also: AN 6:86–88

6:2 *Tekicchakāni*

The grain: harvested.
The rice: gone to be threshed.
But I don't get any alms.

How will I get by?

Confident, recollect
the immeasurable Buddha.
Your body pervaded with rapture,
you'll be at the height
of continual joy.

Confident, recollect
the immeasurable Dhamma.
Your body pervaded with rapture,
you'll be at the height
of continual joy.

Confident, recollect
the immeasurable Saṅgha.
Your body pervaded with rapture,
you'll be at the height
of continual joy.

You live in the open air.
Cold are these wintry nights.
Don't suffer, overcome with the cold.
Go into your hut, with its fastened bolt.

I'll fasten the four
immeasurables.¹
With them, I'll dwell
in comfort.
I won't suffer from the cold,
dwelling
unperturbed.

NOTE

1. Concentration based on immeasurable goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. See AN 3:66 and SN 42:8.

See also: DN 26; SN 11:3; AN 3:35; AN 5:27; Sn 4:16

6:6 *Sappadāsa*

Twenty five years since my going forth,
and no peace of awareness
—not a finger-snap's worth—
attained.
Having gained no oneness of mind,

I was wracked with lust.
Wailing, with my arms upheld,
I ran amok from my dwelling—
“Or... or shall I take the knife?
What’s the use of life to me?
If I were to renounce the training,
what sort of death would I have?”

So, taking a razor,
I sat down on a bed.
And there was the razor,
placed ready to cut my own vein,
 when apt attention arose in me,
the drawbacks appeared,
 disenchantment stood
 at an even keel:

With that, my heart was released.
See the Dhamma’s true rightness!
The three knowledges
have been attained;
the Awakened One’s bidding,
 done.

6:9 Jenta, the Royal Chaplain’s Son

I was
drunk with the intoxication
of my birth, wealth, & sovereignty.
Drunk with the intoxication
of my body’s build, coloring, & form,
I wandered about,
regarding no one
as my equal or better.
 Foolish, arrogant, haughty,
 my banner held high.
I—disrespectful, arrogant, proud—
bowed down to no one,
not even
 mother,
 father,
or those commonly held
in respect.

Then—seeing the ultimate leader,
supreme, foremost of charioteers,
 like a blazing sun,
arrayed with a squadron of monks—
casting away pride & intoxication
through an awareness serene & clear,
 I bowed down
 my
 head
to him, supreme
among all living beings.

Haughtiness & contempt
 have been abandoned
 —rooted out—
the conceit “I am” is extracted,
all forms of pride, destroyed.

See also: AN 3:39; AN 7:48; [Thig 5:2](#)

6:10 Sumana the Novice

When I was seven
& newly gone forth,
having conquered with my power
the great powerful serpent,
I was fetching water for my preceptor
from the great lake, Anotatta,¹
when the Teacher saw me & said:

“Look, Sāriputta, at that one,
the young boy coming there,
carrying a pot of water,
well-centered within,
his practices—inspiring;
his bearing—admirable.

He’s Anuruddha’s novice,
mature in his powers,
made thoroughbred by a thoroughbred,
good by one who is good,
tamed by Anuruddha,
trained by one whose task
 is done.

He, having reached the highest peace
& realized the unshakable,
Sumana the novice
wants this:
‘Don’t let anyone know me.’”

NOTE

1. Anotatta: A fabulous lake located in the Himalayas, famed for the purity of its cool waters. Sumana would have had to use his psychic powers to fetch water from there.

See also: AN 8:30; Ud 3:1

6:12 *Brahmadatta*

This poem repeats a poem attributed to the Buddha in SN 7:2. The second and third stanzas also appear in a poem attributed to Sakka the deva-king in SN 11:5.

Whence is there anger
in one without anger
tamed, calmed, living in tune,
released through right knowing,
Such?

You make things worse
when you flare up
at someone who’s angry.
Whoever doesn’t flare up
at someone who’s angry
wins a battle
hard to win.

You live for the good of both
—your own, the other’s—
when, knowing the other’s provoked,
you mindfully grow calm.

When you work the cure of both
—your own, the other’s—
those who think you a fool
know nothing of Dhamma.

If anger arises,
reflect on the saw simile.¹
If craving for savor,
remember the son’s-flesh simile.²

If your mind runs loose
after sensual pleasures
& states of becoming,
quickly restrain it with mindfulness
as you would a bad ox
eating grain.³

NOTES

1. See MN 21 and MN 28.
2. See SN 12:63.
3. See MN 19.

See also: SN 7:2; SN 11:5

6:13 *Sirimāṇḍa*

Rain soddens what's covered
& doesn't sodden what's exposed.
So open up what's covered up,
so that it won't get soddened by the rain.¹

Attacked by death
is the world,
surrounded by aging,
beset by the arrow of craving,
always obscured by desire.

Attacked by death
is the world,
& encircled by aging,
constantly beaten, with no shelter,
like a thief
sentenced to punishment.

They encroach like masses of flame,
these three:
death, aging, & illness.
There's no strength to confront them,
no speed to run away.

Make the day not-in-vain,
a little or a lot.

However much
the day passes,
that's how much less

is life.
Your last day approaches.
This isn't your time
to be heedless.

NOTE

1. This verse is identical with the verse in Ud 5:5.

See also: MN 82; SN 3:25; SN 35:202

7:1 Sundara Samudda & the Courtesan

Ornamented, finely clothed,
garlanded, adorned,
her feet stained red with lac,
she wore slippers:
a courtesan.
Stepping out of her slippers—
her hands raised before me,
palm-to-palm over her heart—
she softly, tenderly,
in measured words
spoke to me first:
“You are young, recluse.
Heed my message:
Partake of human sensuality.
I will give you luxury.
Truly I vow to you,
I will tend to you as to a fire.
When we are old,
both leaning on canes,
then we will both become recluses,
winning the benefits of both worlds.”
And seeing her before me—
a courtesan, ornamented, finely clothed,
hands palm-to-palm over her heart—
like a snare of death laid out,
apt attention arose in me,
the drawbacks appeared,
disenchantment stood
at an even keel:
With that, my heart was released.

See the Dhamma's true rightness!
The three knowledges
have been attained;
the Buddha's bidding,
done.

See also: SN 1:20

10:1 *Kāludāyin*

This is a poem in at least two parts. In the first part, Ven. Kāludāyin is addressing the Buddha soon after the latter's awakening, inviting him to return home to visit his family. In the second part, Kāludāyin is addressing the Buddha's father, Suddhodana, at the time of the Buddha's return, perhaps to make Suddhodana favorably inclined to receive his son.

There is a question, though, as to where the first part ends and the second begins. The Commentary assigns only the last stanza—beginning with, “I am the son of the Buddha”—to the second part, and everything before that to the first. This, however, doesn't fit with the fact the seventh stanza is obviously addressed to the person who engendered the Buddha, and not to the Buddha himself. For this reason, I have placed the division into two parts after the sixth stanza, as the first six stanzas are unified by the theme of bearing fruit, with the fourth and fifth stanzas possibly included to remind the Buddha of the good results that would come to his family if he provided them with the opportunity to give him alms. Alternatively, the division could be placed after the fourth stanza, in that the fifth stanza could be interpreted as beginning a line of thought aimed at putting the listener into the proper mood to accept the principle of the results of good kamma seen not in this lifetime but in the next.

Covered in embers now are the trees,
shedding their canopy, lord, in search of fruit.
As if flaring up, they glow.
The time, great hero, partakes of savors.
The trees in bloom, delightful,
 waft delights
all around, in all directions,
dropping their petals in hope of fruit.
Now, O hero, is the time to set forth.

Neither too cold nor too hot:
pleasant the season, lord, fit for a journey.
Let them see you—the Sakyans & Koliyans—
facing west, crossing in the Rohiṇī.¹

In hope they plow the field.
In hope the seed is sown.
In hope do merchants go to sea,
 bringing back wealth.
Let the hope in which I stand bear fruit.²

Again & again they sow the seed.³
Again & again the deva-kings rain.
Again & again farmers plow the fields.
Again & again grain comes to the kingdom.

Again & again beggars wander.
Again & again lords of giving give.
Again & again having given, the lords of giving
again & again go to the heavenly place.

* * *

Truly, an enlightened⁴ one of deep discernment
cleanses, back for seven generations,
the family in which he's born.

I would imagine you to be Sakka,⁵ the deva of devas
for you engendered a sage truly named.

Suddhodana is the name of the Great Seer's father,
and Māyā name of the Buddha's mother⁶
who, having nurtured the bodhisatta with her womb,
at the break-up of the body, rejoices in the threefold divine realm.⁷

She, Gotamī, having passed away,
having fallen away from here,
is now endowed with heavenly sensual pleasures.
She rejoices in the five strings of sensuality,
surrounded by those groups of devas.

I am the son of the Buddha,
who endures what is hard to endure—

Aṅgīrasa⁸: incomparable, Such.
You, Sakka, are my father's father.

 In the Dhamma, Gotama,
 you are my grandfather.

NOTES

1. Rohiṇī is the name both of a river at the edge of the Sakyan lands and of an asterism, i.e., a star in the zodiac used to indicate a season of time.

2. Reading *vipaccatu* with the Thai edition, which seems to fit better with the imagery in the earlier part of the poem than the reading in the other editions—*samijjhatu*, “may it succeed.”

3. Reading *kasate* with the Thai edition.

4. Reading *dhīro* with the Thai edition. The other editions read *vīro*, hero.

5. Sakka is the name of the king of the devas of the heaven of the Thirty-three. Ven. Kālundāyīn is playing here with the similarity between this name and that of the Sakyan lineage.

6. Reading *Māyanāmā* with the Sri Lankan and PTS editions. The Thai edition reads *Māyā mahesī*, so that the line would read, “The Buddha's mother is Queen Māyā.” This would provide a play on words—*mahesi*, great seer, and *mahesī*, queen—but there is nothing in the early suttas to indicate that Suddhodana was a king, or Māyā a queen.

7. The Commentary identifies the threefold divine realm as the Tusita (Contented) heaven, but doesn't

explain why that heaven would be given this name. Some verses in the Jātaka identify the threefold divine realm as the heaven of the Thirty-three, and the later reference to “those groups of devas” in this poem would seem to support this latter interpretation.

8. An epithet for the Buddha, meaning “resplendent.” Aṅgīrasa was the name of an ancient brahmanical sage to which the Gotama clan claimed a connection. The Commentary suggests that this was one of the bodhisatta’s personal names prior to his awakening.

10:2 *Ekavihāriya*—“*Dwelling Alone*”

This poem, which is attributed to King Asoka’s younger brother, falls into three parts: The first expresses his initial desire to leave the life of the palace and go into the forest; the second depicts his going forth; and the third announces his awakening. Some scholars have suggested that many of the poems dealing with events in the lives of the early Buddhist monks and nuns may have originally been intended for dramatic performance, and this poem could easily have been written with that intent. The language of the original, with its heavy use of poetic terms, certainly indicates that the author had a literary background and was writing for a sophisticated audience.

If, in front or behind,
there is no one else,
it’s extremely pleasant
for one staying alone
in the forest.

Come then! Alone
I will go to the wilderness
 praised by the Awakened One
 pleasant for a resolute monk
 dwelling alone.

Alone,
astute in my goal,
I’ll quickly enter the grove
 —refreshing,
 giving rapture
 to meditators—
 the haunt
 of elephants in rut.

When the Cool Forest’s in full flower,
in a cool mountain gorge,
having bathed my limbs
I’ll walk back & forth
 alone.

Ah, when will I dwell,

alone and free from companions,
in the refreshing great forest—
 my task done,
 effluent-free?

As I desire to do this,
may my purpose succeed.

I myself
will bring it about.
No one can do it
for anyone else.

* * *

I myself
bind on my armor.
I will enter the grove
and will not emerge
without having attained
the end of the effluents.

While soft breezes blow—
cool,
heavily, fragrantly scented—
I'll make ignorance burst,
as I sit on a mountaintop.

In the forest covered with blossoms
or perhaps on a cool hillside,
blessed with the bliss of release,
on Giribbaja I'll delight.¹

* * *

I am now he
whose resolves are fulfilled
like the moon on a full-moon night.
 With effluents all
 totally ended,
 there is now no further becoming.

NOTE

1. Giribbaja is the ring of mountains surrounding Vulture's Peak.

10:5 Kappa

Full of the many clans of impurities,

the great manufacturer of excrement,
like a stagnant pool,
 a great tumor,
 great wound,
full of blood & lymph,
immersed in a cesspool,
trickling liquids, the body
is oozing foulness—always.

Bound together with sixty sinews,
plastered with a stucco of muscle,
wrapped in a jacket of skin,
this foul body is of no worth at all.
Linked together with a chain of bones,
stitched together with tendon-threads,
it produces its various postures,
from being hitched up together.

Headed surely to death,
in the presence of the King of Mortality,
the man who learns to discard it right here,
 goes wherever he wants.

Covered with ignorance,
the body's tied down with a four-fold tie,¹
 sunk in the floods,²
 caught in the net of obsessions,³
 conjoined with five hindrances,⁴
 given over to thought,
 accompanied with the root of craving,
 roofed with delusion's roofing.

That's how the body functions,
compelled by the compulsion of kamma,
 but its attainment ends
 in ruin.

 Its many becomings go
 to ruin.

These who hold to this body as *mine*
—blind fools, people run-of-the-mill—
fill the horrific cemetery,
taking on further becoming.
Those who stay uninvolved with this body
—as they would with a serpent

smear'd with dung—
disgorging the root of becoming,⁵
will, without effluent,
totally unbind.

NOTES

1. The four-fold tie: greed, ill will, attachment to habits & practice, and dogmatic obsession with views.
2. Floods: sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance. See SN 45:171. These are identical with the four yokes. See AN 4:10.
3. Obsessions: sensual passion, resistance, views, uncertainty, conceit, passion for becoming, and ignorance. See AN 7:11–12.
4. Hindrances: sensual desire, ill will, sloth & drowsiness, restlessness & anxiety, and uncertainty. See DN 2 and SN 46:51.
5. The root of becoming: craving.

See also: AN 7:48; Sn 1:11

11 *Saṅkicca*

Ven. Saṅkicca ordained as a novice at the age of seven, and is reported to have attained arahantship as his head was being shaved prior to his ordination. In the first of the following verses attributed to him, he engages himself in a rhetorical conversation while sitting in a rainy forest.

What do you want in the woods, my boy,
like a bird¹ exposed to the rain?
Monsoons refresh you,
for seclusion is for those in jhāna.

As the monsoon wind
drives the clouds in the rainy season,
so thoughts concerned with seclusion
impel me.

* * *

A black crow
making its home in a charnel ground
inspires within me
mindfulness in—
based on dispassion for—
the body.²

* * *

One whom others don't guard,
who doesn't guard others:
He is a monk

who lies down in ease,
unconcerned with sensual passions.

* * *

With clear waters &
massive boulders,
frequented by monkeys &
deer,
covered with moss &
water weeds:
Those rocky crags
refresh me.

* * *

I've lived in wildernesses,
canyons, & caves,
isolated dwellings
frequented by predator & prey,
but never have I known
an ignoble, aversive resolve:
"May these beings
be destroyed,
be slaughtered,
fall into pain."

* * *

The Teacher has been served by me;
the Awakened One's bidding,
done;
the heavy load, laid down;
the guide to becoming,³ uprooted.
And the goal for which I went forth
from home life into homelessness
I've reached:
the end
of all fetters.

I don't delight in death,
don't delight in living.
I await my time
as a worker his wage.
I don't delight in death,
don't delight in living.
I await my time,

mindful, alert.

NOTES

1. Ujjuhāna. The Commentary offers two interpretations for this word. The first is that it is a hill covered with jungle and many streams that tended to overflow in the rainy season. The other is that it is the name of a bird that could stay comfortable even when exposed to cold, wind, and rain. I've chosen the second alternative. K. R. Norman speculates that the term could be written ujjahāna, in which case it would be the present participle for a verb meaning "abandoned" or "cast off." However, none of the manuscripts support his speculation.

2. In other words, the sight of the crow taking up residence in skulls and other body parts provided a chastening perspective on how the mind takes up residence in the body.

3. The guide to becoming is craving.

See also: [Thag 5:8](#); [Thag 14:1](#); [Thag 18](#)

12:1 Sīlavat

Here master the virtue
that in this world is well-mastered,
for virtue, when cultivated,
brings every consummation near.

Wise, one should protect one's virtue,
aspiring to three pleasures:
praise, the gaining of wealth,
and—after death—rejoicing in heaven.

The virtuous one, through restraint,
acquires many friends,
while the unvirtuous one, practicing evil,
from friends is estranged.

The unvirtuous person gains
disrepute & dishonor;
the virtuous person, always,
repute, honor, & praise.

Virtue is the beginning, the establishing,
the mother of what is fine,
the foremost of all qualities:

Therefore virtue should be purified.

Virtue is also control, restraint,
the delight of the mind,
the ford of all Buddhas:

Therefore virtue should be purified.

Virtue: an incomparable strength.
 Virtue: the ultimate weapon.
 Virtue: the highest adornment.
 Virtue: an astounding coat of mail.
 Virtue: an imposing bridge.
 Virtue: an unexcelled fragrance.
 Virtue: the highest fragrant ointment
 by which one wafts
 this direction & that.
 Virtue: the supreme provision.
 Virtue: the ultimate food for the journey.
 Virtue: the highest vehicle
 by which one goes¹
 this direction & that.

Right here he gains blame,
 and after death, in deprivation,
 he's unhappy at heart:
 Everywhere the fool
 is unhappy at heart,
 not concentrated on virtues.

Right here he gains honor
 and after death, in heaven,
 is happy at heart:
 Everywhere the enlightened one
 is happy at heart,
 well-concentrated on virtues.

Here virtue is supreme,
 but one with discernment is the ultimate.
 Among human beings & devas
 one conquers
 through virtue & discernment.

NOTE

1. Reading yāti with the PTS and Sinhalese editions. The Thai has vāti—“wafts”—which seems to be a mistake.

12:2 Sunīta the Outcaste

In a lowly family I was born,
 poor, with next to no food.
 My work was degrading:

I gathered the spoiled,
the withered flowers from shrines
and threw them away.
People found me disgusting,
despised me, disparaged me.
Lowering my heart,
I showed reverence to many.

Then I saw the One Self-awakened,
arrayed with a squadron of monks,
the Great Hero, entering the city,
supreme, of the Magadhans.
Throwing down my carrying pole,
I approached him to do reverence.
He—the supreme man—stood still
 out of sympathy
 just
 for me.

After paying homage
to the feet of the teacher,
 I stood to one side
 & requested the Going Forth from him,
supreme among all living beings.

The compassionate Teacher,
sympathetic to all the world, said:
 “Come, monk.”
That was my formal Acceptance.

Alone, I stayed in the wilds,
 untiring,
I followed the Teacher’s words,
just as he, the Conqueror, had taught me.

In the first watch of the night,
 I recollected previous lives;
in the middle watch,
 purified the divine eye;
in the last,
 burst the mass of darkness.

Then, as night was ending
& the sun returning,
Indra & Brahmā came to pay homage to me,
hands palm-to-palm at their hearts:

“Homage to you,
O thoroughbred of men,
Homage to you,
O man supreme,
whose effluents are ended.
You, dear sir,
are worthy of offerings.”

Seeing me,
arrayed with a squadron of devas,
the Teacher smiled & said:
“Through austerity, celibacy,
restraint, & self-control:
That’s how one is a brahman.
He is a brahman supreme.”

See also: SN 3:24; AN 3:58; Ud 5:3

14:1 Revata’s Farewell

Since I went forth
from home into homelessness,
I haven’t known
an ignoble, aversive resolve.
“May these beings
be destroyed,
be slaughtered,
fall into pain”—
I’ve not known this resolve
in this long, long time.
But I have known goodwill,
unlimited,
fully developed,
nurtured step after step,
as taught by the One
Awake:
to all, a friend;
to all, a comrade;
for all beings, sympathetic.¹
And I develop a mind of goodwill,
delighting in non-malevolence
—always.

Unvanquished, unshaken,
I gladden the mind.
I develop the sublime abiding,
not frequented by
the lowly.

Attaining no-thinking,
the disciple of the Rightly
Self-awakened One
is endowed with noble silence²
straightaway.

As a mountain of rock
is unmoving,
firmly established,
so a monk,
with the ending of delusion,
like a mountain,
doesn't quake.

To a person without blemish,
in constant quest of what's pure,
a hair-tip of evil
seems a storm cloud.

As a frontier fortress is guarded
within & without,
you should safeguard yourselves.
Don't let the moment
pass you by.

I don't delight in death,
don't delight in living.
I await my time
like a worker his wage.
I don't delight in death,
don't delight in living.
I await my time,
mindful, alert.

The Teacher has been served by me;
the Awakened One's bidding,
done;
the heavy load, laid down;
the guide to becoming, uprooted.
And the goal for which I went forth

from home life into homelessness
I've reached:
 the end
 of all fetters.

Attain consummation
through heedfulness:
 That is my message.

So then, I'm about to
unbind.
I'm released

 everywhere.³

NOTES

1. On the development of goodwill as an unlimited attitude, see MN 21 and SN 42:8.
2. Noble silence = the second jhāna.
3. AN 3:77 and 3:78 use the analogy of a field to describe becoming, in which kamma is the field, craving the moisture, and consciousness the seed. The logic of the analogy suggests that if consciousness is not watered by craving, and does not land in any place (see SN 12:64), it is like a seed without moisture or a field. Therefore it will not sprout into further becoming. Poems in the Canon often describe the arahant as being “everywhere released” (sabbattha vimutto—see Dh 348) or “everywhere independent” (sabbattha anissito—see Sn 4:6), referring indirectly to this analogy. Translators, lacking a sense of the underlying image of the idiom, have tended to render it in more prosaic terms: “completely released in every respect,” “not dependent on anything,” “released from everything.” However, in light of the field analogy, the idiom means precisely what it says: The arahant is released from every possible “where,” whether fabricated or not—every possible spot for renewed becoming.

14:2 Godatta

Just as a fine, well-bred bull
 yoked to a load,
 enduring his load,
 crushed
 by the heavy burden,
 doesn't throw down his yoke;
so, too, those who are filled with discernment
 —as the ocean, with water—
 don't look down on others.

This is nobility among beings.

Having fallen in time
 under the sway of time,
having come under the sway

of becoming & not-,
people fall subject to pain
 & they grieve.

Elated by causes of pleasure,
cast down by causes of pain,
fools are destroyed
 by both,
 not seeing them
 for what they are.

While those who, in the midst of
 pleasure & pain
have gone past the seamstress—craving—,
stand firm
 like a boundary pillar,
 neither elated nor cast down.

Not to gain or loss
not to status or honor,
not to praise or blame,
not to pleasure or pain:
 Everywhere
they do not adhere—
 like a water bead
 on a lotus.
 Everywhere
they are happy, the enlightened,¹
 everywhere
 un-
 defeated.

No matter what
 the unrighteous gain
 or the righteous loss,
righteous loss is better
 than if there were unrighteous gain.

No matter what
 the status of the unaware
 or the lowliness of those who know,
the lowliness of those who know
 is better,
 not the status of those
 unaware.

No matter what

the praise from fools
or the censure from those who know,
the censure from those who know
is better
than if there were praise
from fools.

And as for the pleasure
from sensuality
and the pain from seclusion,
the pain from seclusion
is better
than if there were pleasure
from sensuality.

And as for living through unrighteousness
and dying for righteousness,
dying for righteousness
is better,
than if one were to live
through unrighteousness.

Those who've abandoned
sensuality & anger,
whose minds are calmed
from becoming & non-,
go through the world
unattached.

For them there is nothing
dear or undear.

Developing
the factors for awakening,
faculties,
& strengths,
attaining the foremost peace,
they, without effluent,
totally
unbind.

NOTE

1. Reading dhīrā with the Thai and Sinhalese editions. The PTS edition has vīrā, heroes.

15:2 Udāyin

In AN 6:43, Ven. Udāyin recites these verses spontaneously in the Buddha's presence after the

king's elephant (nāga) has passed by, and the Buddha defines the foremost nāga in these terms: "But, Udāyin, whoever in this world—with its devas, Māras, & Brahmās, its people with their contemplatives & brahmans, their royalty & commonfolk—does no misdeed in body, speech, or mind: That's whom I call a nāga." The Buddha's definition hints at a play on words: "Does no misdeed," in Pali, is āgum na karoti, which could be rephrased as na āgum karoti, yielding a play on the word nāga. In these verses, Ven. Udāyin shows that he has picked up on the hint by rephrasing it in precisely that way.

A human being, self-awakened,
his mind tamed, concentrated,
traveling along the Brahmā road,
delighting in the stilling of the mind:
He, having gone beyond all dhammas,¹
to whom human beings pay homage,
the devas pay homage as well—
so I have heard from the Worthy One
—to him, gone past all fetters,
gone from the forest to the clearing,²
delighting in the renunciation of sensuality,
released like gold from its ore.

He, the nāga outshining all others,
as the Himalayas, rocky hills:
Among all things named *nāga*,
he, unexcelled, is truly named.

I will praise the nāga to you—
for he does no misdeed.
Composure & harmlessness
are the nāga's two feet.
Austerity & celibacy
are the nāga's two other feet.
Conviction is the great nāga's trunk,
his hand;³
equanimity, his white tusks.
Mindfulness his neck; his head:
 discernment,
 discrimination,
 reflection on dhammas;
Dhamma the balanced heat of his digestion;
seclusion his tail.
He, in jhāna, delighting in assurance,
inwardly well-concentrated,
the nāga, when going, is concentrated,
when standing, the nāga is concentrated,

when reclining, the nāga is concentrated,
when sitting, the nāga is concentrated.
Everywhere he's restrained, the nāga:
That is the nāga's consummation.

He eats what is blameless;
doesn't eat what is not;
on gaining food & clothing,
doesn't store it up.
Having cut all bonds,
fetters tiny & large,
wherever he goes,
he goes without longing.
Like a white lotus, born & growing in the water,
but not smeared by the water
—fragrant, delightful—
even so the awakened one,
well-born in the world, lives in the world,
but is not smeared by the world,
like the lotus, by the water.

A great blazing fire
unnourished grows calm,
and though its embers exist⁴
is described as *unbound*.
Conveying an instructive meaning,
this image is taught by the observant.
Great nāgas will recognize
the nāga as taught by the nāga
as free from passion,
free from aversion,
free from delusion,
effluent-free.
His body discarded, the nāga
will, without effluent,
totally unbind.

NOTES

1. On the point that arahants have gone beyond all dhammas, see AN 3:137, note 1.
2. Clearing = nibbāna, which is here presented as a play on the word, vana, or forest.
3. In Pali, an elephant's trunk is called its "hand" (hattha). In fact, one of the words for "elephant" is hatthin, "one having a hand."
4. Angāresu ca santesu. The phrase is apparently meant as a play on words, in that santesu can be the locative either of santa, calm, or sant, existing. Either possibility fits into what seems to be point of this last

section of the poem, which is to provide an image to illustrate the difference between the sa-upādisesa-nibbāna of the living arahant—literally, unbinding with fuel remaining—and the anupādisesa-nibbāna of the arahant who has passed away—literally, unbinding with no fuel remaining. In other words, the unbinding of the living arahant is like a fire that has grown calm and whose embers are calm but still warm; the unbinding of the arahant after death is like a fire whose embers have grown totally cold.

Iti 44 describes the property of sa-upādisesa-nibbāna as follows: “His [the arahant’s] five sense faculties still remain and, owing to their being intact, he experiences the pleasing & the displeasing, and is sensitive to pleasure & pain. His ending of passion, aversion, & delusion is termed the unbinding property with fuel remaining.” Its description of the property of anupādisesa-nibbāna is: “For him, all that is sensed, being unrelished, will grow cold right here. This is termed the unbinding property with no fuel remaining.” For further discussion of this distinction, see *The Mind Like Fire Unbound*, chapter 1.

See also: MN 1; SN 12:51; AN 6:43; AN 9:7; AN 9:62; AN 10:81; Iti 44

16:1 *Adhimutta & the Bandits*

The bandit chief:

“Those who
 for the sake of sacrifice
 for the sake of wealth
we have killed in the past,
 against their will
 have trembled & babbled
 from fear.

But you—
 you show no fear;
 your complexion brightens.
Why don't you lament
in the face of what's greatly to be feared?”

Ven. Adhimutta:

“There are no painful mind-states, chieftain,
in one without longing.
In one whose fetters are ended,
all fears are overcome.
With the ending of [craving]
the guide to becoming,
when phenomena are seen
 for what they are,
then as in the laying down of a burden,
there's no fear in death.

I've lived well the holy life,
well-developed the path.
Death holds no fear for me.
It's like the end of a disease.

I've lived well the holy life,
 well-developed the path,
 seen states of becoming
as devoid of allure,
like poison spit out
after it's drunk.

One gone to the far shore
without clinging,
effluent-free,

his task completed,
welcomes the ending of life,
as if freed from a place of execution.
Having attained the supreme Rightness,
unconcerned with all the world,
as if released from a burning house,
he doesn't sorrow at death.

Whatever's compounded,
wherever a state of becoming's obtained,
all that has no one in charge:

So says the Great Seer.

Whoever discerns this,
as taught by the Awakened One,
would no more grasp hold
of any state of becoming
than he would
a hot iron ball.

I have no 'I was,'
no 'I will be.'

Fabrications will simply
go out of existence.

What's to lament there in that?

For one who sees, as it actually is,
the pure arising of phenomena,
the pure seriality of fabrications,
there's no fear.

When seeing the world,
with discernment,
as on a par
with grass & twigs,
finding no 'mine-ness,'
thinking, 'There's nothing of mine,'
he feels no sorrow.

Dissatisfied with this carcass,
I'm unconcerned with becoming.
This body will break up
and there will not be another.

Do as you like with this carcass.
From that I will feel
neither hatred nor love."

Hearing these awesome, hair-raising words,

the young men threw down their weapons & said:

“What have you done, sir,
or who have you taken as mentor?
Because of whose teachings
is this lack of sorrow acquired?”

Ven. Adhimutta:

“The all-knowing,
all-seeing conqueror:
He is my mentor.
Greatly compassionate teacher,
all the world’s healer,
this doctrine is his,
unexcelled, leading to ending.
Because of his teachings
is this lack of sorrow acquired.”

The bandits, hearing the good words of the seer,
threw down their swords & their weapons.
Some relinquished their life of crime,
some chose the Going-forth.
Having gone forth in the teachings
of the One Well-Gone,
developing the strengths
& factors for awakening,¹
wise, happy,
exultant in mind,
their faculties ripened,
they touched uncompounded unbinding.

NOTE

1. On the five strengths, see AN 5:2; on the seven factors for awakening, SN 46:51–52.

See also: AN 4:184; [Thig 14](#)

16:4 *Raṭṭhapāla*

The verses here fall into three sections, with the first two relating to Raṭṭhapāla’s story as told in MN 82. In the first, Raṭṭhapāla is addressing his father after the latter had tried to use wealth and Raṭṭhapāla’s former wives to lure Raṭṭhapāla into disrobing. In the second section, Raṭṭhapāla is talking to King Koravya, who had asked him why he had ordained when he was still young and healthy, and had suffered no loss of relatives or wealth.

The third section of verses here does not occur in MN 82.

Look at the image beautified,
a heap of festering wounds, shored up:
ill, but the object
 of many resolves,
where there is nothing
 lasting or sure.¹

Look at the form beautified
with earrings & gems:
 a skeleton wrapped in skin,
 made attractive with clothes.

Feet reddened with henna,
a face smeared with powder:
 enough to deceive a fool,
 but not a seeker for the further shore.

Hair plaited in eight pleats,
eyes smeared with unguent:
 enough to deceive a fool,
 but not a seeker for the further shore.

Like a newly painted unguent pot—
a putrid body adorned:
enough to deceive a fool,
but not a seeker for the further shore.

The hunter set out the snares,
but the deer didn't go near the trap.
Having eaten the bait,
 we go,
 leaving the hunters
 to weep.

The hunter's snares are broken;
the deer didn't go near the trap.
Having eaten the bait,
 we go,
leaving the hunters
 to grieve.²

* * *

I see in the world
 people with wealth
who, from delusion,
 don't make a gift

of the treasure they've gained.
Greedy, they stash it away,
hoping for even more
sensual pleasures.

A king who, by force,
has conquered the world
and rules over the earth
to the edge of the sea,
dissatisfied with the ocean's near shore,
longs for the ocean's
far shore as well.

Kings & others
—plenty of people—
go to death with craving
unabated. Unsated,
they leave the body behind,
having not had enough
of the world's sensual pleasures.

One's relatives weep
& pull out their hair.
'Oh woe, our loved one is dead,' they cry.
Carrying him off,
wrapped in a piece of cloth,
they place him
on a pyre,
then set him on fire.

So he burns, poked with sticks,
in just one piece of cloth,
leaving all his possessions behind.
They are not shelters for one who has died—
not relatives,
friends,
or companions.

Heirs take over his wealth,
while the being goes on,
in line with his kamma.
No wealth at all
follows the dead one—
not children, wives,
dominion, or riches.

Long life
can't be gotten with wealth,
nor aging
warded off with treasure.
The wise say this life
is next to nothing—
 impermanent,
 subject to change.

The rich & the poor
touch the touch of Death.
The foolish & wise
are touched by it, too.
But while fools lie as if slain by their folly,
the wise don't tremble
when touched by the touch.

Thus the discernment by which
one attains to mastery,
is better than wealth—
for those who haven't reached mastery
go from existence to existence,
 out of delusion,
 doing bad deeds.

One goes to a womb
& to the next world,
falling into the wandering on
 —one thing
 after another—
while those of weak discernment,
 trusting in one,
also go to a womb
& to the next world.

Just as an evil thief
caught at the break-in
 is destroyed
 by his own act,
so evil people
—after dying, in the next world—
 are destroyed
 by their own acts.

Sensual pleasures—

variegated,
enticing,
sweet—

in various ways disturb the mind.
Seeing the drawbacks in sensual objects:
that's why, O king, I went forth.

Just like fruits, people fall
—young & old—
at the break-up of the body.
Knowing this, O king,
I went forth.
The contemplative life is better
for sure.³

* * *

Out of conviction,
I went forth
equipped with the Victor's message.
Blameless⁴ was my going-forth:
Debtless I eat my food.
Seeing sensuality as burning,
gold as a knife,
pain in the entry into the womb
& great danger in hells—
seeing this peril, I was then dismayed—
pierced (with dismay),
then calmed
on attaining the end of the effluents.
The Teacher has been served by me;
the Awakened One's bidding,
done;
the heavy load, laid down;
the guide to becoming,⁵ uprooted.
And the goal for which I went forth
from home life into homelessness
I've reached:
the end
of all fetters.

NOTES

1. This verse = Dhp 147.
2. This verse is not contained in MN 82.

3. The verses in MN 82 end here.
4. Avajjā. The Burmese and Sinhalese editions of the Pali Canon read avañjhā, or “not barren.”
5. The guide to becoming is craving.

16:7 *Bhaddiya Kāligodhāyaputta*

These verses contain the Canon’s only complete list of the thirteen ascetic (dhutaṅga) practices. Bhaddiya’s story is told in Ud 2:10.

Whatever the fine clothes I wore
when astride the elephant’s neck,
whatever the fine rice I ate, the pure meat sauce,
today—fortunate, persevering,
delighting in whatever falls into his bowl,
Bhaddiya, son of Godhā,
does jhāna without clinging.

Wearing cast-off cloth, persevering,
delighting in whatever falls into his bowl,
Bhaddiya, son of Godhā,
does jhāna without clinging.

Going for alms, persevering,
delighting in whatever falls into his bowl,
Bhaddiya, son of Godhā,
does jhāna without clinging.

Wearing only one triple set of robes, persevering...

Bypassing no donors on his alms round, persevering...

Eating only one meal a day, persevering...

Eating from the bowl, persevering...

Refusing food brought afterwards, persevering...

Living in the wilderness, persevering...

Living at the foot of a tree, persevering...

Living in the open air, persevering...

Living in a cemetery, persevering...

Accepting whatever lodging he’s assigned, persevering,

Not lying down, persevering,
delighting in whatever falls into his bowl,
Bhaddiya, son of Godhā,
does jhāna without clinging.

Modest, persevering...

Content, persevering...

Secluded, persevering...

Unentangled, persevering...

Energy aroused, persevering,
delighting in whatever falls into his bowl,
Bhaddiya, son of Godhā,
does jhāna without clinging.

Abandoning a 100-carat bowl of bronze
and a 100-weight bowl of gold,
I took instead a bowl of clay:
That was my second consecration.

In the midst of high encircling walls,
strong battlements & gates,
guarded by men with swords in hand—
trembling
I used to live.

Today, fortunate, unafraid,
with fear & terror abandoned,
Bhaddiya, son of Godhā,
having plunged into the forest,
does jhāna.

Standing firm in the aggregate of virtue,
developing mindfulness & discernment,
step by step I attained
the ending of all fetters.

16:8 *Āṅgulimāla*

Āṅgulimāla's story is told in MN 86.

Āṅgulimāla:

“While walking, contemplative,
you say, ‘I have stopped.’
But when I have stopped
you say that I haven’t.
I ask you the meaning of this:
How have you stopped?
How haven’t I?”

The Buddha:

“I *have* stopped, Aṅgulimāla,
once & for all,
having cast off violence
toward all living beings.
You, though,
are unrestrained toward beings.
That’s how I’ve stopped
and you haven’t.”

Aṅgulimāla:

“At long last a greatly revered great seer
for my sake
has come to the great forest.
Having heard your verse
in line with the Dhamma,
I will go about
having abandoned evil.”

So saying, the bandit
hurled his sword & weapons
over a cliff
into a chasm,
a pit.

Then the bandit paid homage
to the feet of the One Well-Gone,
and right there requested the Going-forth.

The Awakened One,
the compassionate great seer,
the teacher of the world, along with its devas,
said to him then:

“Come, monk.”

That in itself
was monkhood for him.

* * *

Aṅgulimāla:

Who once was heedless,
but later is not,
brightens the world
like the moon set free from a cloud.¹
His evil-done deed
is replaced with skillfulness:

He brightens the world
like the moon set free from a cloud.²

Whatever young monk
devotes himself
to the Buddha's bidding:
He brightens the world
like the moon set free from a cloud.

May even my enemies
hear talk of the Dhamma.

May even my enemies
devote themselves
to the Buddha's bidding.

May even my enemies
associate with those people
who—peaceful, good—
get others to accept the Dhamma.

May even my enemies
hear the Dhamma time & again
from those who advise endurance,
forbearance,
who praise non-opposition,
and may they follow it.

For surely he wouldn't harm me,
or anyone else;
he would attain the foremost peace,
would protect the feeble & firm.

Irrigators guide the water.
Fletchers shape the arrow shaft.
Carpenters shape the wood.
The wise control
themselves.³

Some tame with a blunt stick,
with hooks, & with whips
But without blunt or bladed weapons
I was tamed by the one who is Such.

“Doer of No Harm” is my name,
but I used to be a doer of harm.
Today I am true to my name,
for I harm no one at all.

A bandit
I used to be,
renowned as Aṅgulimāla.
Swept along by a great flood,
I went to the Buddha as refuge.

Bloody-handed
I used to be,
renowned as Aṅgulimāla.
See my going for refuge!
Uprooted is [craving],
the guide to becoming.
Having done the type of kamma
that would lead to many
bad destinations,
touched by the fruit of [that] kamma,
unindebted, I eat my food.⁴

They're addicted to heedlessness
—dullards, fools—
while one who is wise
cherishes heedfulness
as his highest wealth.⁵

Don't give way to heedlessness
or to intimacy
with sensual delight—
for a heedful person,
absorbed in jhāna,
attains an abundant bliss.⁶

This⁷ has come well & not gone away,
it was not badly thought through for me.
From among well-analyzed qualities,
I have obtained
the best.

This has come well & not gone away,
it was not badly thought through for me.
The three knowledges
have been attained;
the Awakened One's bidding,
done.⁸

Where once I stayed here & there

with shuddering mind—
 in the wilderness,
 at the foot of a tree,
 in mountains,
 caves—

with ease I now lie down, I stand,
with ease I live my life.
O, the Teacher has shown me sympathy!

Before, I was of brahman stock,
on either side high-born.
Today I'm the son
of the One Well-Gone,
the Dhamma-king,
the Teacher.

Rid of craving, devoid of clinging,
sense-doors guarded, well-restrained,
having killed the root of evil,
I've reached the end of the effluents.

The Teacher has been served by me;
the Awakened One's bidding,
 done;
the guide to becoming, uprooted;
the heavy load, laid down.

NOTES

1. This verse = Dhp 172.

2. This verse = Dhp 173.

3. This verse = Dhp 80.

4. This verse illustrates the kammic principle stated in AN 3:101. This is one of the ways in which the Buddhist doctrine of kamma differed from that of the Jains. For them, a person could not reach arahantship without having suffered retribution for every kammic misdeed, a process that could take many lifetimes—in the course of which, one might create more bad kamma, delaying arahantship still further. But for the Buddhists, training in virtue, discernment, and the ability not to be overcome by pleasure or pain could take the mind to a state where the results of past bad kamma would “be experienced in the here-and-now, and for the most part would appear only for a moment.” In other words, in the Buddhist teaching, but not in the Jain, the state of the mind in the present plays a major role in how the effects of past kamma will be experienced.

5. This verse = Dhp 26.

6. This verse = Dhp 27. For a detailed discussion of “intimacy,” see SN 22:3.

7. “This” apparently refers to the abundant bliss mentioned in the previous verse.

8. The verses in MN 86 end here.

18 *Mahā Kassapa*

One shouldn't go about
surrounded, revered
by a company:

One gets distracted;
concentration
is hard to gain.

Fellowship with many people
is painful.

Seeing this,
one shouldn't approve
of a company.

A sage shouldn't visit families:
one gets distracted;
concentration
is hard to gain.

He's eager & greedy for flavors,
whoever misses the goal
that brings bliss.

They know it's a bog—
the reverence & veneration
of families—

a subtle arrow, hard to extract.

Offerings are hard for a worthless man
to let go.

* * *

Coming down from my dwelling place,
I entered the city for alms,
stood courteously next to a leper
eating his meal.

He, with his rotting hand,
tossed me a morsel of food,
and as the morsel was dropping,
a finger fell off
right there.

Sitting next to a wall,
I ate that morsel of food,
and neither while eating it,
nor having eaten,
did I feel

any disgust.¹

Whoever has mastered
left-over scraps for food,
smelly urine for medicine,
the foot of a tree for a dwelling,
cast-off rags for robes:

He is a man
of the four directions.

* * *

Where some are exhausted
climbing the mountain,
there²
the Awakened One's heir
—mindful, alert,
buoyed by his psychic power—
Kassapa climbs.

Returning from his alms round,
climbing the peak,
Kassapa does jhāna
with no clinging,
having abandoned terror
& fear.

Returning from his alms round,
climbing the peak,
Kassapa does jhāna
with no clinging,
unbound
among those who burn.

Returning from his alms round,
climbing the peak,
Kassapa does jhāna
with no clinging,
effluent-free,
his task done.

Spread with garlands of vines,
places delighting the mind,
resounding with elephants,
appealing:
Those rocky crags
refresh me.

The color of blue-dark clouds,
glistening,
cooled with the waters
of clear-flowing streams
covered with ladybugs:
 Those rocky crags
 refresh me.

Like the peaks of blue-dark clouds,
like excellent peaked-roof buildings,
resounding with tuskers,
appealing:
 Those rocky crags
 refresh me.

Their lovely surfaces wet with rain,
mountains frequented
 by seers
& echoing
 with peacocks:
 Those rocky crags
 refresh me.

This is enough for me—
 desiring to do jhāna,
 resolute, mindful;
enough for me—
 desiring the goal,
 resolute,
 a monk;
enough for me—
 desiring comfort,
 resolute,
 trained;³
enough for me—
 desiring my duty,
 resolute,
 Such.

Flax-flower blue,
 like the sky
covered over with clouds;
filled with flocks
of various birds:

Those rocky crags
refresh me.

Uncrowded
by householders,
frequented
by herds of deer
filled with flocks
of various birds:

Those rocky crags
refresh me.

With clear waters &
massive boulders,
frequented by monkeys &
deer,
covered with moss &
water weeds:

Those rocky crags
refresh me.

There is no such pleasure for me
in the music of a five-piece band
as there is when my mind
is at one,
seeing the Dhamma
aright.

* * *

One shouldn't do lots of work,
should avoid people,
shouldn't busy oneself.
He's eager & greedy for flavors,
whoever misses the goal
that brings bliss.

One shouldn't do lots of work,
should avoid
what doesn't lead to the goal.
The body gets wearied,
fatigued.
Aching, one finds
no tranquility.

* * *

Simply by flapping the mouth

one doesn't see
even oneself.
One goes around stiff-
necked,
thinking, 'I'm better
than they.'

Not better,
he thinks himself better,
the fool:
The wise don't praise him,
the stiff-necked man.

But whoever isn't stirred
by the modes of
 'I'm better,
 not better.
 I'm worse.
 I'm like that';
one who's discerning,
who acts as he says,
well-centered
in virtues,
committed to
tranquility of awareness, he
is the one
 the wise
 would praise.

One with no respect
for his fellows in the holy life,
is as far
 from true Dhamma
as the earth
 from the sky.

But those whose sense of shame
& compunction
are always rightly established: They
have flourished in the holy life.

For them
there's no further becoming.

A monk conceited & vain,
even though clad

in a robe of cast-off rags,
like a monkey in a lion's skin,
 doesn't shine because of it.

But a monk not conceited
 or vain,
 masterful,
his faculties restrained, shines
because of his robe of cast-off rags,
 like a lion
 in the cleft of a mountain.

* * *

These many devas,
powerful, prestigious
 —10,000 devas—
all of Brahmā's retinue,
stand with their hands over their hearts,
paying homage to Sāriputta,
the Dhamma-general,
 enlightened,⁴
 centered,
 great master of jhāna,
 [saying:]

'Homage to you, O thoroughbred man.
Homage to you, O superlative man—
of whom we have no direct knowledge
even of that
in dependence on which
 you do jhāna.

'How very amazing:
the awakened ones'
very own deep range—
of which we have no direct knowledge,
though we have come
as hair-splitting archers.'
Seeing Sāriputta,
a man worthy of worship,
worshipped by deva retinues,
Kappina
smiled.⁵

* * *

As far as this buddha-field⁶ extends
—except for the great sage himself—
I’m the one
outstanding
in ascetic qualities.
There’s no one else
like me.

The Teacher has been served by me;
the Awakened One’s bidding,
done;
the heavy load, laid down;
the guide to becoming, uprooted.

Neither to robe,
nor dwelling,
nor food
does he cling:
Gotama,
like a lotus unspotted
by water, inclining
to renunciation, detached
from the three planes of becoming.⁷

He,
the great sage,
has the establishings of mindfulness
as his neck,
conviction
as hands,
discernment
as head.⁸

Having great knowledge,
he goes about
always unbound.

NOTES

1. This passage has often been misread as saying that the leper’s finger fell into Mahā Kassapa’s bowl, and that Mahā Kassapa actually ate the finger. Nothing in the verse, though, indicates that this is so. It simply says that the finger fell off, and that Mahā Kassapa ate the food. Furthermore, there is a rule in the Mahāvagga—Mv.VI.23.9—that imposes a grave offense on any monk who eats human flesh. So it’s highly unlikely that Mahā Kassapa ate the leper’s finger.

2. Reading *tattha* with the Thai and Sinhalese editions.

3. Reading *sikkhato* with the Thai edition.

4. Reading *dhīraṃ* with the Thai and PTS editions. The Burmese and Sinhalese editions read *vīraṃ*, hero.

5. Ven. Sāriputta was foremost among the monks in terms of discernment (AN 1:183); Ven. Kappina, foremost among the monks in exhorting other monks (AN 1:231). The Buddha praises him at SN 21:11 for his attainment of psychic powers, and at SN 54:7 for the solidity of his concentration based on mindfulness of breathing.

6. This appears to be one of the earliest references to “buddha-field,” a concept that was to play a large role in the Apadāna literature and, through that, in the Mahāyāna concept of the Pure Land. Here it appears to mean the sphere of the current Buddha’s influence. In the Apadānas it takes on two other meanings: as (1) a field for producing merit, on the lines of the traditional image of the Saṅgha as the unexcelled field of merit; and (2) a heavenly realm where a particular Buddha dwells. These two meanings were influential in the early Mahāyāna sūtras that formed the basis for Pure Land practice.

7. The three planes of becoming are the sensual, form, and formlessness. See AN 3:77–78.

8. See [Thag 15:2](#).

See also: SN 1:10; AN 3:35; AN 4:28; AN 5:77–78; AN 5:98; AN 5:114; AN 6:42; AN 11:10; Ud 2:10; Ud 4:4; Sn 4:14

THERĪGĀTHĀ

Poems of the Elder Nuns

1:1 An Anonymous Nun

Sleep, little therī, sleep comfortably,
wrapped in the robe you've made,
for your passion is stilled—
 like a pot of pickled greens
 boiled dry.

1:3 Puṇṇā

Puṇṇā, grow full with good qualities
like the moon on the fifteenth day.
With discernment at total fullness, burst
 the mass
 of darkness.

1:11 Muttā

So freed! So thoroughly freed am I!—
from three crooked things set free:
 from mortar, pestle,
 & crooked old husband.
Having uprooted the craving
that leads to becoming,
I'm from aging & death set free.

See also: [Thag 1:43](#); [Thag 2:9](#)

1:17 Dhammā

Wandering for alms—
weak, leaning on a staff,¹
with trembling limbs—

I fell down right there on the ground.

Seeing the drawbacks of the body,
my mind was then
set free.

NOTE

1. Reading *daṇḍamolubbha* with the Burmese, Sinhalese, and PTS editions. The Thai edition has *daṇḍamādāya*, holding a staff.

2:3 *Sumaṅgala's Mother*

So freed! So freed!
So thoroughly freed am I—
from my pestle,
my shameless husband
& his sun-shade making,
my moldy old pot
with its water-snake smell.

Aversion & passion
I cut with a *chop*.
Having come to the foot of a tree,
I do *jhāna*, from the bliss thinking:
“What bliss!”

See also: [Thag 1:43](#)

2:4 *Addhkāsī*

All of the Kāsi countryside:
My fee was equal to that.
Having made that my price,
the town¹ set me as priceless in price.
But then I became disenchanted with my body,
and—disenchanted—dispassionate:
“May I not run again & again
through birth & the wandering-on.”
The three knowledges
have been realized.
The Buddha's bidding
done.

NOTE

1. Reading nigamo with the Thai edition. The Burmese and Sinhalese editions read negamo, the townspeople.

See also: AN 7:48

3:2 Uttamā

Four times, five, I ran amok from my dwelling,
having gained no peace of awareness,
my thoughts out of control.

So I went to a trustworthy nun.

She taught me the Dhamma:

aggregates, sense media, properties.¹

Hearing the Dhamma,
I did as she said.

For seven days I sat in one spot,
absorbed in rapture & bliss.

On the eighth, I stretched out my legs,
having burst the mass
of darkness.

NOTE

1. On the aggregates (khandha), see SN 22:59 and SN 22:79; on the sense media (āyatana), SN 35:28; on the properties (dhātu), MN 140. On the relationships among these frameworks for analyzing experience, see MN 28.

3:4 Dantikā & the Elephant

Coming out from my day's abiding
on Vulture Peak Mountain,
I saw on the bank of the river
an elephant
emerged from its plunge.

A man holding a hook requested:
“Give me your foot.”

The elephant
extended its foot.

The man
got up on the elephant.

Seeing what was untrained now tamed
brought under human control,

with that I centered my mind—
why I'd gone to the woods
in the first place.

3:5 *Ubbiri*

[Ubbiri recalls the Buddha's words:]

“Jīva, my daughter,
you cry in the woods.
Come to your senses, Ubbiri.
84,000
all named Jīva
have been burned in that charnel ground.
For which of them do you grieve?”

Pulling out
—completely out—
the arrow so hard to see,
embedded in my heart,
he expelled from me
—overcome with grief—
the grief
over my daughter.

Today—with arrow removed,
without hunger, entirely
unbound—
to the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha I go,
for refuge to
the Sage.

See also: SN 47:13; AN 5:49; Ud 5:1; Ud 8:8; Sn 3:8; [Thig 6:1](#)

5:2 *Vimalā, the Former Courtesan*

Intoxicated with my complexion
figure, beauty, & fame;
haughty with youth,
I despised other women.
Adorning this body
embellished to delude foolish men,
I stood at the door to the brothel:
a hunter with snare laid out.

I showed off my ornaments,
and revealed many a private part.
I worked my manifold magic,
laughing out loud at the crowd.
Today, wrapped in a double cloak,
my head shaven,
having wandered for alms,
I sit at the foot of a tree
and attain the state of no-thought.
All ties—human & divine—have been cut.
Having cast off all
effluents,
cooled am I. Unbound.

See also: AN 7:48; [Thag 6:9](#)

5:4 Nandā's Vision

“Sick, putrid, unclean:
look, Nandā, at this physical heap.
Through contemplation of the foul,
develop your mind,
make it one, well-centered.

As this [your body], so that.

As that, so this.

It gives off a foul stench,
the delight of fools.”

Considering it thus,
untiring, both day & night,
I, with my own discernment
dissecting it,
saw.

And as I, heedful,
examined it aptly,
this body—as it actually is—
was seen inside & out.

Then was I disenchanted with the body
& dispassionate within:
Heedful, detached,
calmed was I.

Unbound.

5:6 *Mittakālī*

Going forth through conviction
from home into homelessness,
I wandered this place & that,
greedy for tribute & gains.
Missing out on the foremost goal,
I pursued a lowly one.
Under the sway of defilements,
I didn't awaken¹ to the goal
of the contemplative life.

Then, sitting in my dwelling,
I suddenly came to my senses:

*I'm following a miserable path.
I'm under the sway of
craving.
Next to nothing, my life,
crushed
by aging & illness.
Before the body breaks apart,
I have no time
for heedlessness.*

After watching, as it actually was,
the arising-disbanding of aggregates,
I stood up with mind released,
the Awakened One's bidding
done.

NOTE

1. Reading na bujji'ham with the Burmese and Sinhalese editions.

See also: MN 29–30; SN 17:3; SN 17:5; SN 17:8

5:8 *Soṇā, Mother of Ten*

Ten children I bore
from this physical heap.
Then weak from that, aged,
I went to a nun.

She taught me the Dhamma:
 aggregates, sense media, & properties.
 Hearing her Dhamma,
 I cut off my hair & ordained.
 Having purified the divine eye
 while still a trainee,¹
 I know my previous lives,
 where I lived in the past.
 I develop the theme-less meditation,
 well-focused oneness.
 I gain the liberation of immediacy²—
 from lack of clinging, unbound.
 The five aggregates, comprehended,
 stand like a tree with its root cut through.
 I spit on wretched birth³
 old age.
 There is now no further becoming.

NOTES

1. Sikkhamānā: A candidate for full ordination as a nun first had to undergo a two-year period as a trainee, in which she undertook the ten precepts of a novice and had to observe the first six without break. If she broke any of those six, she had to go back and start the two-year period again.

2. This is apparently equivalent to the concentration of unmediated knowing, mentioned in Sn 2:1, and the concentration that is the fruit of gnosis, mentioned in AN 9:37.

3. This line plays with the word jamme, which can mean either “wretched” or “birth.”

See also: SN 48:41; [Thag 1:118](#)

5:10 Paṭācārā

[I thought:]

“Plowing the field with plows,
 sowing the ground with seed,
 supporting their wives & children,
 young men gather up wealth.

So why is it that I,
 consummate in virtue,
 a doer of the teacher’s bidding,
 don’t gain unbinding?
 I’m not lazy or proud.”
 Washing my feet, I noticed
 the

water.

And in watching it flow from high
to
low,
my heart was composed
like a fine thoroughbred steed.

Then taking a lamp, I entered the hut,
checked the bedding,
sat down on the bed.

And taking a pin, I pulled out the wick:
Like the flame's¹ unbinding
was the liberation
of awareness.

NOTE

1. Reading pajjotass'eva with the Thai edition.

See also: MN 72; SN 6:15; Ud 8:10

5:11 Paṭācārā's Thirty Students

[Paṭācārā taught:]

“Taking the pestle,
young men grind the corn.
Supporting their wives & children,
they gather up wealth.
Do the Awakened One's bidding,
which, having done,
you'll have no regret.
Intent on tranquility of awareness,
do the Awakened One's bidding.
Quickly:
Having washed your feet,
go sit to one side.”

Hearing these words,
Paṭācārā's bidding,
they washed their feet
and retired to one side.
Intent on tranquility of awareness,
they did the Awakened One's bidding.
In the first watch of the night,

they recollected their previous lives.
In the middle watch,
 purified the divine eye.
In the last,
 burst the mass of darkness.
Getting up, they bowed down to her feet.
“We have done your bidding.
Like the thirty devas honoring Indra,
unvanquished in battle,
we—
 endowed with the three knowledges,
 effluent-free—
will continue honoring you.”

5:12 Candā, the Beggar

Before, I had fallen on evil times:
 no husband, no children,
 no relatives, friends,
 no way to obtain clothing & food.
So, taking a staff & bowl in hand,
begging for alms from house to house,
feverish from the cold & heat,
I wandered for seven full years.
Then seeing a nun
obtaining food & drink,
I approached her & said:
 “Let me go forth
 into homelessness.”
She, Paṭācārā, from sympathy,
let me go forth;
then, exhorting me,
urged me on to the highest goal.
Hearing her words,
I did her bidding.
Her exhortation was not in vain.
 Endowed with the three knowledges,
 I’m effluent- free.

6:1 Paṭācārā’s 500 Students

[Paṭācārā recounts the Buddha's words:]

“You don't know
the path
of his coming or going,
that being who has come
from where?—
the one you lament as 'my son.'

But when you know
the path
of his coming or going,
you don't grieve after him,
for that is the nature
of beings.

Unmasked,
he came from there.
Without permission,
he went from here
—coming from where?—
having stayed a few days.
And coming one way from here,
he goes yet another
from there.
Dying in the human form,
he will go wandering on.
As he came, so he has gone—
so what is there
to lament?”

Pulling out
—completely out—
the arrow so hard to see,
embedded in my heart,
he [the Buddha] expelled from me
—overcome with grief—
the grief
over my son.

Today—with arrow removed,
without hunger, entirely
unbound—
to the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha I go,
for refuge to

the Sage.

See also: *SN* 47:13; *AN* 5:49; *Ud* 5:1; *Ud* 8:8; *Sn* 3:8; [Thig 3:5](#)

6:2 *Vāsīṭṭhī the Madwoman*

Overwhelmed with grief for my son—
naked, demented,
my hair disheveled
my mind deranged—

I went about here & there,¹
living along the side of the road,
in cemeteries & heaps of trash,
for three full years,
afflicted with hunger & thirst.

Then I saw
the One Well-Gone,
gone to the city of Mithilā:
tamer of those untamed,
Self-Awakened,
with nothing to fear
from anything, anywhere.

Regaining my mind,
paying him homage,
I sat myself down.
He, Gotama, from sympathy
taught me the Dhamma.
Hearing his Dhamma,
I went forth into homelessness.
Applying myself to the Teacher's words,
I realized the state of auspicious bliss.

All griefs have been cut off,
abandoned,
brought to this end,
for I've comprehended
the grounds from which griefs
come into play.

NOTE

1. Reading *tena tena vicāri'ham* with the Burmese, Sinhalese, and PTS editions. The Thai edition has *rodarṃ tena vicāri'ham*, I went there crying.

6:4 *Sujātā*

Ornamented, well-dressed,
garlanded, sprinkled with sandalwood,
covered all over with jewelry,
surrounded by a group of slave-women,
taking food & drink,
and not a little staple & non-staple food,
leaving the house,
I fetched myself to the pleasure garden.

Having enjoyed ourselves & played there,
we headed back to our home.

I saw in Sāketa a hall at the Añjana wood.

I entered.

Seeing the light of the world,
I, paying homage, sat nearby.

He, the One with Eyes,¹
from sympathy,
taught me the Dhamma.

Hearing the Great Seer, I
fully penetrated
the truth.

Right there I touched the Dhamma,
dustless, the deathless state.

Then, knowing the True Dhamma,
I went forth
into homelessness.

The three knowledges
are attained.

The Buddha's bidding
is not in vain.

NOTE

1. Since Vedic times, there has been a belief in India that the eyes of holy individuals were particularly powerful because they could see so deeply into reality. From this belief grew a further belief: that the eyes of such individuals were so powerful that their eyes could transmit some of that power to others. Thus, to be gazed on by such an individual, or to gaze into that individual's eyes, was considered to be very auspicious. Sujātā's reference to the Buddha as "the One with Eyes" carries all of these connotations. For more on this topic, see Sn 5:5 and DN 16, note 44.

6:5 *Anopamā, the Millionaire's Daughter*

Born in a high-ranking family
 with much property, great wealth,
 consummate in complexion & figure,
 I was the daughter of Majjha, the treasurer.
 Kings' sons sought for me,
 rich merchants' sons
 longed for me.
 One of them sent my father a messenger,
 saying, "Give me Anopamā.
 I will give in return
 eight times her weight
 in jewels & gold."
 But I, having seen
 the One Self-awakened,
 unsurpassed, excelling the world,
 paid homage to his feet,
 sat down to one side.
 He, Gotama, from sympathy,
 taught me the Dhamma.
 And as I sat in that very seat,
 I attained the third fruit
 [of non-return.]
 Then I cut off my hair,
 and went forth into homelessness.
 Today is the seventh day
 since I made craving
 wither away.

6:6 *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī*

Awakened! Hero! Homage to you,
 highest of all beings—
 you who've released me
 and many other people
 from suffering!
 I've comprehended all stress,
 dried up craving, the cause,
 developed the eightfold path,¹
 and touched cessation.
 Before I was mother, son,
 father, brother,

grandmother.
Not knowing things as they were,
I wandered on
without respite.
But now that I've seen the Blessed One,
this is my last body-heap.
Birth & wandering-on
are totally ended.
There is now
no further becoming.

I see the disciples gathered,
their persistence aroused,
resolute, constant
in strong exertion:

This is the worship of the Buddhas.²

Truly for the benefit of the many
did Māyā³ give birth to Gotama,
thrusting away the mass of pain
of those mired in illness & death.

NOTES

1. Reading bhavit'atthaṅgiko maggo with the Thai edition.
2. See DN 16 on the topic of how homage is best shown to the Buddha.
3. Mahāpajāpatī's sister, the Buddha's mother.

See also: AN 8:51; AN 8:53

6:7 *Guttā*

[The Buddha admonished me:]
Guttā, devote yourself to the goal
for which you went forth,
having discarded [hope]
for a dear son of your own.¹

Don't fall under the sway
of the mind.

Hoodwinked by mind,
beings in love with Māra's realm,
roam
through the many-birth wandering-on,
unknowing.

Abandoning these lower fetters, nun—
sensual desire, ill will,
self-identity views,
grasping at habits & practices,
and uncertainty as the fifth—
you won't come
to this again.

Forsaking passion, conceit,
ignorance, & restlessness
—cutting through [all] the fetters—
you will make an end
of suffering & stress.

Discarding birth & wandering-on,
comprehending further becoming,
free from hunger
in the right-here-&-now
you will go about
totally calmed.

NOTE

1. Reading *hitvā puttāṃ visuṃ piyaṃ* with the Burmese edition.

7:2 *Cālā*

In SN 5:8, verses similar to these are attributed to the nun Sīsūpacālā.

Cālā:

Having established mindfulness,
a nun with developed faculties,¹ I
penetrated the peaceful state:
stilling-of-fabrications bliss.²

Māra:

“For whose sake
have you shaved your head?
You look like a contemplative
but don't approve of a philosophy,
so why are you wandering here
confused?”

Cālā:

“Outside philosophers place
their confidence in views.

They don't know the Dhamma.³
They're not adept in the Dhamma.

But there is
the Awakened One,
born in the Sakyan clan,
a person without peer.⁴
He taught me the Dhamma
for the transcending of views:
stress,
the co-arising of stress,
the overcoming of stress,
& the noble eightfold path
leading to the stilling of stress.⁵

Having heard his words,
I dwell, delighting
in his bidding.

The three knowledges
are attained;
the Buddha's bidding,
done.

Everywhere enjoyment
is defeated;
the mass of darkness,
burst.

So know, Evil One,
that you have been,
End-maker,
struck down.

NOTES

1. This can mean that she has achieved restraint over her sense faculties, or that she has fully developed the faculties of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. See. SN 48:10 and AN 4:37.

2. This stanza does not occur in SN 5:8.

3. In SN 5:8, this line reads, "I don't approve of their teaching."

4. This is the last line that this poem has in common with SN 5:8. The remainder of SN 5:8 reads:

all-conquering,
Māra's subduer,
everywhere undefeated,
everywhere freed, independent;
endowed with an Eye

all-seeing, reaching the end of
all kamma—
with the ending of acquisitions,
released.

He, that Blessed One,
is my teacher.
It's in his Dhamma
that I delight.

5. For an example of how the four noble truths—right view—lead to the transcending of views, see AN 10:95.

7:3 *Upacālā*

In SN 5:6, verses similar to these are attributed to the nun Cālā.

Upacālā:

Having mindfulness, having an eye that sees,
a nun with developed faculties, I
penetrated the peaceful state
of which worthless people
don't partake.¹

Māra:

Why don't you approve of birth?
One who is born
enjoys sensual pleasures.
Enjoy sensual delight!
Don't later burn with regret.

Upacālā:

For one who is born
there's death,²
the cutting-off of hands & feet,
binding, flogging, torment.
One who's born incurs pain.
But there is
the Rightly Awakened One,
the undefeated one,
born in the Sakyan clan.
He taught me the Dhamma
for the transcending of birth:
stress,
the co-arising of stress,

the overcoming of stress,
& the noble eightfold path
leading to the stilling of stress.

Having heard his words,
I dwell, delighting
in his bidding.

The three knowledges
are attained;
the Buddha's bidding,
done.

Everywhere enjoyment
is defeated;
the mass of darkness,
burst.

So know, Evil One,
that you have been,
End-maker,
struck down.

NOTES

1. This stanza does not occur in SN 5:6.
2. This is the last line that this poem has in common with SN 5:6. The remainder of SN 5:6 reads:

One who is born
sees pain.
It's a binding, a flogging, a torment.
That's why one shouldn't approve
of birth.

The Awakened One taught me the Dhamma
—the overcoming of birth—
for the abandoning of all pain,
he established me in
the truth.

But beings who have come to form
& those with a share in the formless,
if they don't discern cessation,
return to becoming-again.

8 *Sīsūpacālā*

In SN 5:7, verses similar to these are attributed to the nun Upacālā.

Sīsūpacālā:

A nun, consummate in virtue,
her faculties well-restrained,
will reach the state of peace,
a nourishment
that never cloys.¹

Māra:

The devas of the Thirty-three,
the Hours, the Contented,
devas who delight in creation,
& devas in control:
Direct your mind there
where you lived before.²

Sīsūpacālā:

The devas of the Thirty-three,
the Hours, the Contented,
devas who delight in creation,
& devas in control:
Time & again,
from becoming to becoming,
surrounded by self-identity,
not having gone beyond self-identity,
they flow to birth & death.³

The whole world is burning.
The whole world is aflame.
The whole world is blazing.
The whole world is shaken.⁴

The unshaken, incomparable
—the Dhamma the Buddha taught to me,
of which people run-of-the-mill
don't partake—
that's where my heart
truly delights.
Having heard his words,
I dwell, delighting
in his bidding.

The three knowledges
are attained;
the Buddha's bidding,
done.
Everywhere enjoyment

is defeated;
the mass of darkness,
burst.
So know, Evil One,
that you have been,
End-maker,
struck down.

NOTES

1. This stanza does not occur in SN 5:7.
2. The parallel stanza in SN 5:7 reads:

The devas of the Thirty-three,
the Hours, the Contented,
devas who delight in creation,
& devas in control:

Direct your mind there
and it will enjoy
delight.

3. The parallel stanza in SN 5:7 reads:

The devas of the Thirty-three,
the Hours, the Contented,
devas who delight in creation,
& devas in control:

They are bound
with the bonds of sensuality;
they come again
under Māra's sway.

4. This is the last line that this poem has in common with SN 5:7. The remainder of SN 5:7 reads:

The unshaken, untrembling
—of which people run-of-the-mill
don't partake,
where Māra's
never been—
that's where my heart
truly delights.

9 *Vaddha's Mother*

Vaddha's Mother:

Vaddha, don't have any
underbrush-lust

ever, in the world, at all.
Don't, my little son,
have a share in suffering
 again & again.
For happy are sages, Vaḍḍha,
unperturbed, with doubt cut through.
Having become cool and self-controlled,
they dwell effluent-free.
Foster the path,
pursued by seers,
for the attainment of vision,
for the ending of stress.

Vaḍḍha:

Undaunted, mother,
you speak this matter to me.
I suspect that now in you
no underbrush
 is found.

Vaḍḍha's Mother:

Whatever fabrications
are lowly, middling, or exalted:
No underbrush for them in me
—not a bit, not the least little bit—
 is found.
All effluents are ended for me—
heedful, doing jhāna.
The three knowledges
 are attained;
the Buddha's bidding,
 done.

Vaḍḍha:

With what a vast goad
my mother poked me—
because of her sympathy—
verses connected to the ultimate goal.
Having heard her words—
 my mother's instruction—
Dhamma-*samvega* arose
for attaining rest from the yoke.
Resolute in exertion,
relentlessly, both day & night,

I, roused by my mother,
touched
the highest peace.

10 *Kīsā Gotamī*

Kīsā Gotamī has two of the most heart-rending stories in the Buddhist tradition associated with her name. The Commentary to this verse tells that when her young child had died, she refused to believe it was dead. After asking many people—in vain—for medicine that would revive the child, she was finally directed to the Buddha. When she told him her story, he offered to provide medicine for the child, but he would need some mustard seed—the cheapest Indian spice—obtained from a family in which no one had died. She went from house to house asking for mustard seed, and no one refused to give it to her. But when she asked if anyone had died in the family, the universal response was always, “Oh, yes, of course.” After a while, the message sunk in: Death is universal. On abandoning the child’s body to a charnel ground, she returned to the Buddha and asked to be ordained as a nun, and afterwards became an arahant.

The canonical verses associated with *Kīsā Gotamī*’s name, however, tell a different story, which is identical to the story that the Commentary attributes to *Paṭācārā*: Pregnant with her second child, she was returning to her parents’ home, along with her husband and young firstborn child, to give birth. Along the way, a great storm blew up, and she asked her husband to provide shelter for the family. As he was cutting grass and gathering sticks to build a shelter, a snake bit him and he died of the poison. Unsheltered, and wondering at her husband’s long absence, *Paṭācārā* gave birth and had to spend the night sheltering both her children against the rain and wind with nothing more than her body. The next morning, she found her husband dead. Distraught, she decided to return to her parents’ home. However, a river—swollen from the rain of the previous night—ran across her way. Unable to carry both children across the river in one trip, she left her first-born on the near bank and waded through the raging current carrying her baby. Placing the baby on the far bank, she turned back to fetch her first-born. A hawk, seeing the baby, took it for a piece of flesh, and swooped down on it. Seeing this, *Paṭācārā* raised her hands and tried to chase it away, but to no avail: The hawk picked up the baby and carried it off. Meanwhile, her first-born—seeing his mother raising her hands—took it for a signal to cross the river. Jumping into the raging current, he was carried off to his death. Overwhelmed with grief, *Paṭācārā* returned to her parents’ home, only to learn that it had burned down from a lightning strike in the previous night’s storm. Her parents and brother were at that moment being cremated on a single pyre. At this point, she went mad and began wandering around half-naked. Only on coming into the Buddha’s presence did she recover her senses. He taught her the Dhamma, and eventually she ordained and became an arahant.

Why this story is attributed to *Paṭācārā* in the Commentary when it is obviously *Kīsā Gotamī*’s in the Canon, is hard to tell. Some scholars have suggested that the tales in the Pāli commentaries were imported from other Buddhist traditions, such as the *Mūlasarvāstivādin*. Thus, the differences between the canonical verses and the commentarial tales stem from the fact that the different traditions attributed particular stories to different elder monks and nuns. For instance, the Pali Canon attributed the story of the woman whose family was destroyed in a single day to *Kīsā Gotamī*, while the tradition from which the Commentary drew attributed it to *Paṭācārā*. If that’s the case, it’s interesting to note how the commentators who adopted these tales nevertheless remained faithful to their Canon. Instead of trying to

change the Pali to fit with the commentarial source on which they drew, they allowed the discrepancies between the two sources to stand: one of many instances in which the discrepancies between the Canon and the commentaries suggest that the monks who handed down the Pali Canon tried to keep it intact even when they didn't agree with it.

Later Theravādin texts have tried to cover over the discrepancies between Kīsā Gotamī's verses and the Commentary to those verses by insisting that the passage in the verses beginning, "Going along, about to give birth," and ending, "my husband dead, I reached the deathless," is actually Paṭācārā speaking, but this seems unlikely: Why would one arahant butt in on another one's tale?

At any rate, regardless of which story is Paṭācārā's, and which Kīsā Gotamī's, both speak to the universality of death, and the power of the path of practice: that in the midst of this human world with all its sorrows, there is still a way to find that which is free from grieving, aging, and illness: the deathless.

Having admirable friends
has been praised by the Sage
with reference to the world.
Associating with an admirable friend
even a fool
becomes wise.
People of integrity
should be associated with.
In that way discernment grows.
Associating with people of integrity
one would be released from all suffering & stress,
would know stress,
the origination of stress,
cessation & the eightfold path:
the four noble truths.

Stressful, painful, is the woman's state:
So says the tamer of tamable people.
Being a co-wife is painful.
Some, on giving birth once,
slit their throats.
Others, of delicate constitution,
take poison.
In the midst of a breech-birth
both [mother & child] suffer destruction.

Going along, about to give birth,
I saw my husband dead.
Giving birth in the road,
I hadn't reached
my own home.
Two children deceased,

my husband dead in the road
—miserable me!
My mother, father, & brother
were burning on a single pyre.

“Your family all gone, miserable,
you’ve suffered pain without measure.
Your tears have flowed
for many thousands of lives.”¹

Then I saw,
in the midst of the charnel ground,²
the muscles of sons being chewed.

With family killed,
despised by all,
my husband dead,
I reached the deathless.
I’ve developed this path,
noble, eightfold,
going to the deathless.
Having realized unbinding,
I’ve gazed in the mirror of Dhamma.
I’ve extracted the arrow,³
put down the burden,
done the task.
I, Kīsā Gotamī Therī,
my heart well-released,
have said this.

NOTES

1. According to the Commentary, this was the Buddha’s message to Kīsā Gotamī. See SN 13:8 and [Thag 3:5](#).

2. Reading *passiṃ taṃ susāna-majjhe* with the Thai edition.

3. See Sn 4:15.

12 *Puṇṇikā & the Brahman*

Puṇṇikā:

I’m a water-carrier, cold,
always going down to the water
from fear of my mistresses’ beatings,
harassed by their anger & words.

But you, brahman,
 what do you fear
that you're always going down to the water
with shivering limbs, feeling great cold?

The Brahman:

Puṇṇikā, surely you know.
You're asking one doing skillful kamma
& warding off evil.
Whoever, young or old, does evil kamma
is, through water ablution,
from evil kamma set free.

Puṇṇikā:

Who taught you this
—the ignorant to the ignorant—
'One, through water ablution,
is from evil kamma set free?'
In that case, they'd all go to heaven:
 all the frogs, turtles,
 serpents,¹ crocodiles,
 & anything else that lives in the water.

Sheep-butchers, pork-butchers,
fishermen, trappers,
thieves, executioners,
& any other evil doers,
would, through water ablution,
be from evil kamma set free.

If these rivers could carry off
the evil kamma you've done in the past,
they'd carry off your merit as well,
and then you'd be
 completely deprived.

Whatever it is that you fear,
that you're always going down to the water,
 don't do it.

Don't let the cold hurt your skin."

The Brahman:

I've been following the miserable path, good lady,
and now you've brought me
 back to the noble.
I give you this robe for water-ablution.

Puṇṇikā:

Let the robe be yours. I don't need it.
If you're afraid of pain,
if you dislike pain,
then don't do any evil kamma,
in open, in secret.
But if you do or will do
any evil kamma,
you'll gain no freedom from pain,
even if you fly up & hurry away.
If you're afraid of pain,
if you dislike pain,
go to the Awakened One for refuge,
go to the Dhamma & Saṅgha.
Take on the precepts:
That will lead to your liberation.²

The Brahman:

I go to the Awakened One for refuge;
I go to the Dhamma & Saṅgha.
I take on the precepts:
That will lead to my liberation.³

* * *

Before, I was a kinsman to Brahmā;
now, truly a brahman.
I'm a three-knowledge man & safe,
consummate in knowledge,
washed clean.

NOTES

1. Reading *nāgā* with the Thai, Burmese, and PTS editions. The Sinhalese edition has *nakkā*, another word for crocodile.
2. Reading *mokkhāya* with the Thai edition. The other editions have *atthāya*, benefit.
3. This stanza is missing in the Thai edition.

13:1 *Ambapālī*

Black was my hair
—the color of bees—
& curled at the tips;
with age, it looked like coarse hemp.
The Truth-speaker's word

doesn't change.

Fragrant, like a perfumed basket
filled with flowers: my coiffure.

With age it smelled musty,
like animal fur.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Thick & lush, like a well-tended grove,
made splendid, the tips elaborate
with comb & pin.

With age, it grew thin
& bald here & there.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Adorned with gold & delicate pins,¹
it was splendid, ornamented with braids.

Now, with age,
that head has gone bald.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Curved, as if well-drawn by an artist,
my brows were once splendid.

With age, they droop down in folds.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Radiant, brilliant like jewels,
my eyes: elongated, black—deep black.

With age, they're no longer splendid.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Like a delicate peak, my nose
was splendid in the prime of my youth.

With age, it's like a long pepper.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Like bracelets—well-fashioned, well-finished—
my ears were once splendid.

With age, they droop down in folds.

The Truth-speaker's word

doesn't change.

Like plantain buds in their color,
my teeth were once splendid.

With age, they're broken & yellowed.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Like that of a cuckoo in the dense jungle,
flitting through deep forest thickets:
sweet was the tone of my voice.

With age, it cracks here & there.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Smooth²—like a conch shell well-polished—
my neck was once splendid.

With age, it's broken down, bent.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Like rounded door-bars—both of them—
my arms were once splendid.

With age, they're like dried up pāṭalī trees.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Adorned with gold & delicate rings,
my hands were once splendid.

With age, they're like onions & tubers.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Swelling, round, firm, & high,
both my breasts were once splendid.

In the drought of old age, they dangle

like empty old water bags.³

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Like a sheet of gold, well-burnished,
my body was splendid.

Now it's covered with very fine wrinkles.

The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Smooth in their lines, like an elephant's trunk,

both my thighs were once splendid.
With age, they're like knotted bamboo.
The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Adorned with gold & delicate anklets,
my calves were once splendid.
With age, they're like sesame sticks.
The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

As if they were stuffed with soft cotton,
both my feet were once splendid.
With age, they're shriveled & cracked.
The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Such was this physical heap,
now: decrepit, the home of pains, many pains.
A house with its plaster all fallen off.
The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

NOTES

1. Reading saṅha-kaṇḍaka.
2. Reading saṅha-kamburiva with the Burmese and Sinhalese editions.
3. Reading thevikīva with the Burmese and Sinhalese editions.

See also: DN 16; [Thag 1:118](#)

13:2 *Rohiṇī*

Rohiṇī's father:

You go to sleep saying,
“Contemplatives.”

You wake up,
“Contemplatives.”

You praise only
contemplatives.

No doubt you will be
a contemplative.

Abundant food & drink
you give to contemplatives.
Now, Rohiṇī, I ask you:

Why do you hold
contemplatives dear?

They don't like to work,
they're lazy,
living off what's given by others,
full of hankerings,
wanting delicious things:

Why do you hold
contemplatives dear?

Rohiṇī:

For a long time, father,
you've quizzed me
about contemplatives.

I'll praise to you
their
discernment,
virtue,
endeavor.

They do like to work,
they're not lazy.
They do the best work:
They abandon
passion & anger.
That's why I hold
contemplatives dear.

They rid themselves
of the three evil roots,¹
doing pure actions.

All their evil's
abandoned.
That's why I hold
contemplatives dear.

Clean
their bodily action,
so is
their verbal action.

Clean
their mental action:
That's why I hold
contemplatives dear.

Spotless, like mother of pearl,
pure within & without,
perfect in clear qualities:
That's why I hold
contemplatives dear.

Learned,
 maintaining the Dhamma,
noble,
 living the Dhamma,
they teach the goal
& the Dhamma:
That's why I hold
contemplatives dear.

Learned,
 maintaining the Dhamma,
noble,
 living the Dhamma,
with unified minds
& mindful:
That's why I hold
contemplatives dear.

Traveling far, mindful,
giving counsel unruffled,
they discern the end
of suffering:
That's why I hold
contemplatives dear.

When they leave any village
they don't turn to look back
at anything.
How free from concern
they go!
That's why I hold
contemplatives dear.

They don't store in a granary,
pot,
or basket.
They hunt [only]
for what's already cooked:
That's why I hold

contemplatives dear.

They take neither silver,
nor gold,
nor money.
They live off whatever is present:
That's why I hold
contemplatives dear.

Having gone forth
from different families
& from different countries,
still they hold
one another dear:
That's why I hold
contemplatives dear.

Rohiṇī's father:

Rohiṇī, truly for our benefit
were you born in our family.
You have conviction
in the Buddha & Dhamma,
and strong respect
for the Saṅgha.

You truly discern
this field of merit
unexcelled.
These contemplatives will receive
our offering, too,
for here we'll set up
our abundant sacrifice.

Rohiṇī:

If you're afraid of pain,
if you dislike pain,
go to the Buddha for refuge,
go to the Dhamma & Saṅgha.
Take on the precepts:
That will lead
to your benefit.

Rohiṇī's father:

I go to the Buddha for refuge;
I go to the Dhamma & Saṅgha.
I take on the precepts:

That will lead
to my benefit.

* * *

Before, I was a kinsman to Brahmā;
now, truly a brahman.
I'm a three-knowledge man & safe,
consummate in knowledge,
washed clean.

NOTE

1. The three unskillful roots are greed, aversion, and delusion. See DN 2, MN 9, and AN 3:66.

See also: SN 7:17; Sn 1:4

13:5 Subhā the Goldsmith's Daughter

“I was a child, with clean clothes,
when I first heard the Dhamma.
And within me, heedful,
was a break-through to the truth.
Then I arrived
at an enormous dissatisfaction
with all sensuality.
Seeing the danger
in self-identity,
I longed only
for renunciation.
Leaving my circle of relatives,
slaves, workers,
prosperous villages & fields,
delightful, enticing possessions,
I went forth,
abandoning not-insignificant wealth.
Having gone out through conviction
in the well-taught true Dhamma,
it wouldn't be proper for me—
aspiring to nothingness—
having cast off gold & silver
to take them back.
Gold & silver
don't buy awakening,
don't buy peace.

This [gold] isn't proper for contemplatives.
This isn't noble wealth.

This is
greediness, intoxication,
delusion, bondage to dust,
suspicion, many troubles.
There's no lasting stability here.
It's to this extent that many, many men
—heedless, their hearts defiled—
opposing one another, create
conflicts, murder, bondage,
calamity, loss, grief, & lamentation.
Many misfortunes are seen
for those head-over-heels in sensuality.

So, my relatives:
Why do you, like enemies,
try to bind me to sensuality?
You know I've gone forth,
seeing the danger in sensuality.
Gold coin & bullion
can't put an end to effluents.
Sensuality is an enemy,
a murderer,
hostile, arrows & bonds.

So, my relatives:
Why do you, like enemies,
try to bind me to sensuality?
You know I've gone forth
with shaven head, wrapped in a patchwork cloak.
Leftover alms-scrap, gleanings,
a robe made from cast-off cloth:

That's what's proper for me—
the requisites of one with no home.
The great seers have rejected sensuality,
both human & divine.
Released are they,
in the place of security.
Arrived are they,
in unshaken ease.

So may I not come into union
with sensuality, in which no shelter is found.
It's an enemy, a murderer

—sensuality—
painful, like a mass of flame.

Greed:

an obstacle,¹ fearful, threatened,
full of thorns,
very discordant,
a great cause of delusion.

Sensuality:

a frightening attack,
like a snake's head
in which fools delight—
blinded, run-of-the-mill.

Because many people in the world
are stuck in the mud of sensuality,
unknowing,
they don't realize the ending of birth & death.
Many people follow the path
to bad destinations
because of sensuality,
bringing disease on themselves.

Thus sensuality creates enemies.
It burns, is defiled.
It's the bait of the world,
constraining, the bondage of death,
maddening, deceptive, agitating the mind.
It's a net cast by Māra
for the defilement of living beings:
with endless drawbacks, much pain,
great poison,
giving little enjoyment, creating conflict,
drying up the good side [of the mind].

I, having cast off² much trouble like this
caused by sensuality,
will not return to it,
as I always delight in unbinding.
Doing battle with sensuality
in hopes of the cool state,
I will stay heedful, finding delight³
in the ending of fetters.
I follow the path—
eightfold, straight,

griefless, stainless, secure—
over which great seers
have crossed.”

See this Subhā, the goldsmith’s daughter,
standing firm in the Dhamma,
entering the imperturbable state,⁴
doing jhāna at the foot of a tree.
This is the eighth day of her going forth
confident, beautiful through the true Dhamma.
Trained by Uppalavaṇṇā,⁵
she’s a three-knowledge woman⁶
who’s left death behind;
freed from slavery, debtless,
a nun with developed faculties,⁷
set loose from all ties,
her task done,
effluent- free.

Sakka, lord of beings,
with his community of devas,
approaching her through supranormal power,
pays homage to her:

Subhā the goldsmith’s daughter.

NOTES

1. Reading *paripantho* with the Burmese, Sinhalese, and PTS editions. The Thai edition has *aparisuddho*, impure.
2. Reading *hitvā* with the Thai edition. The other editions have *katvā*, done.
3. Reading *ratā*, delighting, with the Thai edition. The Sinhalese and PTS read *tesarā*, so that the line means “in the ending of their fetters”; the Burmese edition reads *sabba-*, so that the line means, “in the ending of all fetters.”
4. See MN 106.
5. A student of the Buddha, declared by him to be the foremost nun in terms of her supranormal powers. See SN 5:5.
6. See [Thag 4:8, note 2](#).
7. This can mean that she has achieved restraint over her sense faculties, or that she has fully developed the faculties of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. See. SN 48:10 and AN 4:37.

See also: MN 13–14; MN 54

14 Subhā & the Libertine

As Subhā the nun was going through Jīvaka's delightful mango grove, a libertine (a goldsmith's son) blocked her path, so she said to him:

'What wrong have I done you
that you stand in my way?
It's not proper, my friend,
that a man should touch
a woman gone forth.
I respect the Master's message,
the training pointed out by the One Well-Gone.
I am pure, without blemish:

 Why do you stand in my way?
You—your mind agitated, impassioned;
I—unagitated, unimpassioned,
with a mind entirely freed:

 Why do you stand in my way?'

'You are young & not bad-looking,
what need do you have for going forth?
Throw off your ochre robe—

 Come, let's delight in the flowering grove.

A sweetness they exude everywhere,
the trees risen-up with their pollen.
The beginning of spring is a pleasant season—

 Come, let's delight in the flowering grove.

The trees with their blossoming tips
moan, as it were, in the breeze:
What delight will you have
if you plunge into the grove alone?
Frequented by herds of wild beasts,
disturbed by elephants rutting & aroused:
You want to go

 unaccompanied

into the great, lonely, frightening grove?

Like a doll made of gold, you will go about,
like a goddess in the gardens of heaven.

With delicate, smooth Kāsī fabrics,
you will shine, O beauty without compare.

I would gladly do your every bidding
if we were to dwell in the glade.

For there is no creature dearer to me

 than you, O nymph with the languid regard.

If you do as I ask, happy, come live in my house.

Dwelling in the calm of a palace,
have women wait on you,
wear delicate Kāśī fabrics,
adorn yourself with garlands & creams.

I will make you many & varied ornaments
of gold, jewels, & pearls.

Climb onto a costly bed,
scented with sandalwood carvings,
with a well-washed coverlet, beautiful,
spread with a woolen quilt, brand new.

Like a blue lotus rising from the water
where no human beings dwell,
you will go to old age with your limbs unseen,
if you stay as you are in the holy life.’

‘What do you assume of any essence,
here in this cemetery grower, filled with corpses,
this body destined to break up?
What do you see when you look at me,
you who are out of your mind?’

‘Your eyes are like those of a fawn,
like those of a sprite in the mountains.
Seeing your eyes, my sensual delight
grows all the more.

Like tips they are, of blue lotuses,
in your golden face
—spotless:

Seeing your eyes, my sensual delight
grows all the more.

Even if you should go far away,
I will think only of your pure,
long-lashed gaze,
for there is nothing dearer to me
than your eyes, O nymph with the languid regard.’

‘You want to stray from the road,
you want the moon as a plaything,
you want to jump over Mount Sineru,
you who have designs on one born of the Buddha.
For there is nothing anywhere at all
in the cosmos with its devas,
that would be an object of passion for me.

I don’t even know what that passion would be,

for it's been killed, root & all, by the path.
Like embers from a pit—scattered,
like a bowl of poison—evaporated,
I don't even see what that passion would be,
for it's been killed, root & all, by the path.
Try to seduce one who hasn't reflected on this,
or who has not followed the Master's teaching.
But try it with this one who knows
and you suffer.
For in the midst of praise & blame,
pleasure & pain,
my mindfulness stands firm.
Knowing the unattractiveness
of things compounded,
my mind cleaves to nothing at all.
I am a follower of the One Well-Gone,
riding the vehicle of the eightfold way:
My arrow removed, effluent-free,
I delight, having gone to an empty dwelling.
For I have seen well-painted puppets,
hitched up with sticks & strings,
made to dance in various ways.
When the sticks & strings are removed,
thrown away, scattered, shredded,
smashed into pieces, not to be found,
in what will the mind there make its home?
This body of mine, which is just like that,
when devoid of dhammas doesn't function.
When, devoid of dhammas, it doesn't function,
in what will the mind there make its home?

Like a mural you've seen, painted on a wall,
smeared with yellow orpiment,
there your vision has been distorted,
your perception¹ of a human being—pointless.
Like an evaporated mirage,
like a tree of gold in a dream,
like a magic show in the midst of a crowd—
you run blind after what is unreal.
Resembling a ball of sealing wax,
set in a hollow,
with a bubble in the middle

and bathed with tears,
eye secretions are born there too:
The parts of the eye
are rolled all together
in various ways.’

Plucking out her lovely eye,
with mind unattached
she felt no regret.

‘Here, take this eye. It’s yours.’

Straightaway she gave it to him.
Straightaway his passion faded right there,
and he begged her forgiveness:

‘Be well, follower of the holy life.

This sort of thing
won’t happen again.

Harming a person like you
is like embracing a blazing fire.
It’s as if I have seized a poisonous snake.
So may you be well. Forgive me.’

And released from there, the nun
went to the excellent Buddha’s presence.
When she saw the mark of his excellent merit,
her eye became
as it was before.

NOTE

1. Reading *saññā* with the Burmese and Sinhalese editions. The Thai and PTS editions read *paññā*, discernment.

See also: SN 5:5; AN 4:184; AN 5:75–76; [Thag 16:1](#)

Glossary

Arahant: A “worthy one” or “pure one”; a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus is not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples.

Āsava: Effluent; fermentation. Three tendencies—sensuality, becoming, and ignorance—that “flow out” of the mind and create the flood of the round of death and rebirth. In some texts, views are added as a fourth member of the list.

Āyatana: Sense medium. The six internal sense media are the eye, ear, nose, tongue, tongue, and intellect. The six external sense media are their corresponding objects: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas.

Bhava: Becoming. A sense of identity within a particular world of experience. The three levels of becoming are on the level of sensuality, form, and formlessness.

Brahmā: An inhabitant of the heavenly realms of form or formlessness.

Brahman: In common usage, a brahman is a member of the priestly caste, which claimed to be the highest caste in India, based on birth. In a specifically Buddhist usage, “brahman” can also mean an arahant, conveying the point that excellence is based, not on birth or race, but on the qualities attained in the mind.

Deva (devatā): Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the terrestrial or heavenly realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) *nibbāna* (although there are passages describing *nibbāna* as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *Dharma*.

Dhātu: Property; elementary potential that, when provoked, accounts for events on the physical and mental level. The six properties that underlie physical and mental conditions both within and without are earth, water, wind, fire, space, and consciousness.

Gotama: The Buddha’s clan name, although not all references to Gotama are to him. Some refer to his cousin, the monk Ānanda, and some to other monks.

Indra: King of a deva realm. Sakka is the indra of the heaven of the Thirty-three, one of the sensual heavenly realms.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. This term is derived from the verb *jhāyati*, which means to burn with a steady, still flame. The four *jhānas* corresponding to right concentration are described with the following formula: “There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality,

secluded from unskillful qualities—(1) enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. (2) With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. (3) With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’ (4) With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.”

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *Karma*.

Khandha: Aggregate; heap; physical and mental phenomena as they are directly experienced; the raw material for a sense of self: *rūpa*—physical form; *vedanā*—feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain; *saññā*—perception, mental label; *saṅkhāra*—fabrication, thought construct; and *viññāṇa*—sensory consciousness, the act of taking note of external sense media (see *Āyatana*) and aggregates as they occur. Sanskrit form: *Skandha*.

Māra: The personification of temptation and all forces, within and without, that create obstacles to release from *samsāra*.

Nāga: A term commonly used to refer to strong, stately, and heroic animals, such as elephants and magical serpents. By extension, it is also used to refer to arahants.

Nibbāna: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. “Total nibbāna” in some contexts denotes the experience of awakening; in others, the final passing away of an arahant. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa*.

Pāli: The oldest extant Canon of the Buddha’s teachings and—by extension—the language in which it was recorded.

Samsāra: The wandering-on; transmigration; the process of wandering through repeated states of becoming, with their attendant death and rebirth.

Samvega: A sense of dismay over the meaninglessness and futility of life as it is ordinarily lived, combined with a strong sense of urgency in looking for a way out.

Samyojana: Fetter. The ten fetters that bind the mind to the round of death and rebirth are (1) identity views, (2) uncertainty, (3) grasping at habits and practices, (4) sensual passion, (5) irritation, (6) passion for form, (7) passion for formlessness, (8) conceit, (9) restlessness, and (10) ignorance.

Saṅgha: On the conventional (*sammatti*) level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the ideal (*ariya*) level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least stream-entry.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *Sūtra*.

Tādin: “Such,” an adjective to describe one who has attained the goal. It indicates that the person’s state is indefinable but not subject to change or influences of any sort.

Tathāgata: Literally, “one who has become authentic (*tatha-āgata*) or is truly gone (*tathā-gata*)”: an epithet used in ancient India for a person who has attained the highest religious goal. In Buddhism, it usually denotes the Buddha, although occasionally it also denotes any of his arahant disciples.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline, whose rules and traditions comprise six volumes in printed text.

Abbreviations

<i>AN</i>	<i>Anguttara Nikāya</i>
<i>Dhp</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>Iti</i>	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
<i>Mv</i>	<i>Mahāvagga</i>
<i>PTS</i>	<i>Pali Text Society</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>Sn</i>	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>
<i>Thag</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
<i>Thig</i>	<i>Therīgāthā</i>
<i>Ud</i>	<i>Udāna</i>

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