

## Voices from the Yore: *Therigatha* Writings of the *Bhikkhunis*

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*What matters being a woman  
If with mind firmly set  
One grows in the knowledge  
Of the Right Law, with insight?  
(Sanyutta Nikaya)*

While women's writings have always been read as "women's writings", delimited in their concerns, there have been some texts by women which may be cited to refute such charges quite firmly for the simple reason that they are not limited by gender and its related concerns. India, having its own rich heritage, has many such voices to offer. *Therigatha*—the *gathas* or verses written by the elder nuns or *bhikkhuni*, happens to be one such body of writing coming from women and refreshingly free of any subaltern undertones. *Therigatha*, the ninth book of, the *Khuddaka Nikaya* consists of seventy three poems in which the early nuns recount their struggles and accomplishments along the road to arahantship. My paper proposes to give a glimpse of these great minds, some of whom are the likes of Mutta, Dhamma, Vimala and Ambapali, in order to establish that these nuns were the champions of feminist cause in olden times. Buddhism and feminism can be seen as particularly linked with each other. Both are concerned with emancipation, with broadening our self-view which would otherwise remain restricted. Both understand the importance of achieving emancipation by attempting to introduce changes in consciousness, hence negating the political philosophy that attaches paramount importance to external changes.

In response to Ananda's query about women's status in the cult, Buddha categorically stated that women were as capable of gaining enlightenment as men. In this sense Buddha may be regarded the first feminist who did not pay heed to the socio-cultural construct as far as women are concerned. He, rather, acknowledged their much denied potential for development. *Therigatha* becomes all the more valuable in terms of it being the record of these first women renunciants. For six centuries these pearls of ancient wisdom were circulated orally before being scripted in the 1 cent. B.C. The *gathas* as we have today comprise four verses or *padas* of eight syllables each. Dhammapala wrote the commentary on *therigatha* in Pali wherein he wove in the biographical sketches of the *bhikkhunis* with their verses. Thomas W. Rhys Davids got the Pali *tipitaka* transliterated in English and together with his wife Caroline became instrumental in making this text popular in the West. In 1909 the first translation came out followed by another one as late as 1971 by K.R.

Norman. Norman, however, raised doubts as to the authorship of these verses. The candid tone of these verses made him believe these were written by *theras*- monks---a view which does not hold true in view of the fact that in the Buddhist canons *theris* have been mentioned widely and also monks were not so women-friendly that they would credit the women with something they have composed. *Therigathas* are splendid records of women-experience in times when feminism was not even in the offing. This Buddhist text makes a point of how one world religion acknowledged since its very beginning the authority and equality of women in spiritual practice. *Therigatha* may be read as the oldest existing testament to the feminist experience of Buddhism.

Kathryn Blackstone has analyzed the 522 verses of *therigatha* in comparison with 1,279 verses of the *theragatha* in order to explore attitudinal differences in terms of social experiences of the male and female authors of Buddhist texts. In her exhaustive study Blackstone finds that being women writers impacts the *theris* to their advantage. In terms of content there is not much difference in the *therigatha* and *theragatha* but what makes the former outstanding is the verisimilitude of their voices. While the monks speak of liberation as an abstract ideal, for the nuns it is more of an internalized experience. This detachment from the experience on the part of the monks gives them a bias, not very pleasing in poetry. When contemplating the body nuns talk of their own old and decaying body while the monks speak of decaying corpses in the cemetery which are most often than not identified as female. For the nuns attainment of liberation is a great conquest which they could make after successfully accepting/ facing many challenges; but for the monks it is a stage wherein their glide was smooth under the tutelage of Buddha.

### I

A discerning study of its tenets brings forth Buddhism as a women-friendly religion by and large, though many a critics call it a 'viciously sexist religion' (*Patti Nakai*) on the basis of some verses quoted out of context. Diana Paul evaluated the Buddhist period as essentially misogynist. (Paul 1985: 3-59) Rita M. Gross, however, attributes this misconception to "androcentric record-keeping practices," (Gross 1993: 41) which led to the loss of important women-centric discourses. Before reaching a conclusion on Buddhism's view of women it would be better to take account of the position of women in Buddhism. It may be befitting here to take a brief look at the position of women in the time of Buddha, in order to analyze and assess its contribution towards their betterment. It may be helpful if one considers the fact that in ancient India the position of women was deemed as that of the *sudras*, the lowest of the four castes. The position of women under Hinduism is well-known; *Manu-smrithi*, popularly known as the "Laws of Manu", is the best known example of women's subversion. This work describes the duties of women as follows:

Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control.

Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. ( Buhler IX 2-3)

Women were prevented from performing religious rites, and even the knowledge of the Vedas was to be kept away from them:

For women no (sacramental) rite (is performed) with sacred texts, thus the law is settled; women (who are) destitute of strength and destitute of (the knowledge of) Vedic texts, (are as impure as) falsehood (itself), that is a fixed rule. (Buhler IX, 18).

The Brahminical religion of the Buddha's day, did not grant any parity to women. The primeval principle in the Vedic-*Upanishadic* philosophy which was dominant in the Buddha's time, was the male-principle (*purusha*). Women found an extremely marginal place in the patriarchy. This patriarchal attitude to women did not see much change even in Buddha's time. It was the Buddhist order only that shows progress in terms of including women in the religious order--a territory hitherto considered exclusively male. In the Theravada Buddhist cult, however, the place of a nun is much lower than that of a monk. This lack of inequality was due to the absence of a full ordination nuns' order in the cult. Janice Willis describes the plight of women in Buddha's times as this: "They were helpmates at best and burdens at worst, but always they were viewed as being inferior, second class citizens (Willis 1985: 61)."

Whatever be the position of women outside of the cult, one has to admit that they had more freedom, more respect and better living conditions in the order than anywhere else in the society. They had their own community headed by a woman. They were free from the claustrophobic stereotypical role of the caregiver. Buddha's mother Prajapati was the first woman to receive initiation and at a time when even the birth of a girl was supposed to be a curse on the parents. One has the tale of King Pasenadi of Kosala who lamented the birth of a daughter. It was Buddha who, in times equality of sexes was unheard of, declared that good daughters are as good as good sons. Buddha's initial hesitation at allowing his mother to be ordained was not a result of gender-bias but an act of political wisdom lest he may be charged with nepotism. Mahaprajapati, as the story goes : "...functions as a leader of women who parallels the Buddha's leadership of *bhikkhus*. Despite the Buddha's initial rejection of her request, Mahaprajapati, and her followers shave, don the yellow robes and follow the Buddha and his *sangha*. In defying the Buddha, Mahaprajapati, overturns the hierarchical scheme maintained throughout the *Vinaya*. She poses a direct challenge to the Buddha's authority." (Blackstone 1998) This *Bhikkuni* did not preach but practice Buddhism. Buddhism, in fact, emerged as a refuge for the underdogs and women's status in those times was little better than them. Women have been included in its fold since its inception because women were assimilated with the lower castes and the/oppressed classes in terms of their suffering.

## II

A very basic difference of perspectives may be seen between feminism and Buddhism. While feminism is rooted in the belief that women are victims; Buddhism believes that to identify oneself as victim is to incapacitate oneself in terms of taking initiative. Also a cult based on such a belief shall encourage hatred for the victimizer and hatred creates oppression which leads to suffering. In an interview in *Dakini*, a magazine for women Buddhists, *Sangharakshita* makes a distinction between feminism and Feminism. The first, he says, is the attitude that a woman, no less than a man, should be free to develop whatever capacities and interests she has and of Feminism (with a capital F) *Sangharakshita* says that it covers many other attitudes. One of these is the tendency to see woman as victim. To identify oneself as a victim is not helpful to one's development. Hence Feminism is conducive to the growth of women. Blackstone argues that both the *therigatha* and the *theragatha* are 'liberation manuals'. (1998 67) However, it is important to note here that for the monks freedom lies in escaping the world while the nuns take a stronger stand and they speak from their lived experience, of the challenges they face in their day to day life and also how they combat them.

The Buddhist tenet of emptiness itself disapproves the idea of dissimilarity. Emptiness is the lack of self or anything pertaining to a self in the internal and external sense media. Hence, body or sex does not matter at all. There is an interesting episode of Vimaladatta, an enlightened nun who was asked by a monk to strive to become a man so that her body matches her mind. Her answer to this is an eye opener for those who have any doubts regarding the equality of the women's order in Buddhism. She said: '...attaining Buddhahood does not depend on a man's body nor a woman's, because Buddhahood cannot be regarded as something attainable by a mind clinging to a body.' (Sunim 135) This is but one example of the sagacity of the early women in Buddhism. Such wisdom is scattered through the *therigatha* and that is precisely the focus of our discourse here.

From the poems of the enlightened nuns of the Buddha's time contemporary nuns and monks alike can receive a great deal of instruction, help and encouragement. These verses can assist one in developing morality, concentration and wisdom, the three sections of the path. With their aid one shall be able to work more effectively towards eliminating one's mental defilements and towards finding lasting peace and happiness. In some respects, the inspiration from these poems may be stronger for women than for men, since these are in fact women's voices that are speaking. These are ruminations revolving around and evolved from women-specific experiences and there are plenty of issues from which men are exempt.

These verses exhibit a wide range in terms of subject matter but the essential message remains the same i.e., suffering ends when all defilements are eliminated. *Nibbana* or enlightenment is attainable only through Buddhist teachings – the four noble truths and the eightfold path. *Vipassana* meditation under the supervision of a *guru* liberates

mind from all sorts of blindness, helping thus to see the perils of the body in as mundane an event as hurting ones forehead by tripping over a stone. Mind's old conditioning is based on ignorance, meditation helps in loosening the entrenched tendencies. Rita M. Gross calls these "songs of triumph." (1993: 17)

### III

The nun's verses were almost all spoken after the author had realized that rebirth and all its associated suffering had been brought to an end by the perfection of insight and total elimination of defilements. So virtually all the poems contain some form of "lion's roar," an exclamation that the author has become awakened:

Today my heart is healed, my yearning stayed,  
Perfected deliverance wrought in me.

I go for refuge to the Buddha, the Sangha, and the Dhamma. ( Norma 1991: 77)

The nun's order received its orientation from the monks initially but when monks' resentment and reluctance was sensed it was felt that the nuns' order needed to be redefined. Greater autonomy was granted to the *bhikkunis* then, and they were allowed to teach their own kinds. Therigatha is, in fact, a collection of the nuns' teachings to nuns. In this sense it is a sharing of their experiences with other women. Even *dukkha* could serve as motivation for initiation into the path leading to cessation of suffering. There are more than one *theris* who were initiated after the death of their children. Buddha made them see the impermanence of body by telling them that those who are grieving on the death of a single child have had to part with thousands of children in their past births. They, then saw the vastness of the *samsara* and wrote thus:

He has thrust away for me my grief for my daughter... I  
am without hunger, quenched. (vv. 51, 53)

She could see that our suffering is caused by our yearnings, hence to stop suffering it is imperative that craving must end. The example of Patacara is quite amazing. Having lost her husband, parents, two children, and brothers; she was drenched in sorrow. Buddha made her understand that she had been wasting herself too often in grieving for the death in many of her past lives. Patacara joined the nuns and was ordained soon. Later such an insignificant incident as the trickling away of water when she was washing her feet, enlightened her as to the fleeting nature of life. She not only became arahant but also she preached a group of five hundred grief-stricken mothers and helped them in their initiation. Kisa Gotami's search for mustard seeds is too well known to repeat here. Her wisdom (*panna*) shines in these verses:

No village law is this, no city law,  
No law for this clan, or for that alone;  
For the whole world---and for the gods too—

This is the law. All is impermanent. (Norman 1991: 108)

Many of these *theris* sing praises of the four noble truths, knowledge and understanding of which is compulsory to attain liberation. Ignorance and

delusion are at the root of all suffering and in order to attain liberation from ignorance and thereby from suffering; one has to ponder over these four truths:

- a) *dukkha* or suffering
- b) cause of suffering---craving or *tanha*
- c) cessation of suffering---*nibbana*
- d) eightfold path leading to *nibbana*.

The verses of the nuns are directed not only towards teaching wisdom but also proving that wisdom is meaningless without morality. *Therigatha* emphasizes the relevance of morality (*sila*) concentration (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*panna*) as these together lead to the attainment of *nibbana*. Though the *theris* like the *theras* were allowed to accept offerings from the laymen, they had to receive these with a pure heart. This was a condition not specific to the nuns, the Buddha attaches great importance to the purity of heart. Purity of heart lies in freedom from greed and other such defilements. Mittakali was another nun who wasted many long years in the pursuit of gains and honours and thereby delaying her attainment of the final goal. The *theris* were completely iconoclasts and their voices were more fiery than those of the *theras*. They were against all well entrenched beliefs as they were mainly designed by unthinking, unempathetic men. The major difference that Blackstone notes between the *therigatha* and the *theragatha* is that while the nuns' verses sprung from their experiences those of the monks are stony and are based on the Buddha's teachings. *Theris* declared categorically that gender does not matter, what is really important is merit, knowledge and an emancipated heart.

*Therigathas* are records of the societal perspectives of the gender differences. There are verses that do not acknowledge the basis of gender difference. *Soma*, in conversation with Mara---the evil one, says:

*Soma*: "What harm is it  
to be a woman  
when the mind is concentrated  
and the insight is clear?"

("If I asked myself:  
'Am I a woman  
or a man in this?'  
Then I would be speaking Mara's language.") (Norman  
1991: 158-159)

There are instances where men have been inspired and initiated by nuns. Subha changed the heart of a libertine who was lusting after her. She asked her as to what is it that he found attractive in her. When he sang praises of her eyes, she plucked out one of her eyes and offered it to him, "Here take this eye. It's yours." The man instantly bowed down before her in remorse.

In *Soma's* dialogue with Mara the *therigatha* becomes a brilliant record of the essential womanhood. She says that thinking, "Am I a

woman in these matter, or am I a man, or what not am I then?" is tantamount to coming under Mara's sway. The path of *Nibbana* must be pursued without worrying about the inequities women have to suffer on account of their sex. Self-purification must be the goal for all irrespective of their sex.

Many a times these nuns were initiated into the order by women who were their mothers or sisters. This order is probably the first where women were treated as a separate cadre and granted autonomy as well. In this sense the *theris* may be deemed to be mothers of feminism and *therigathas* are the Bible of feminist philosophy. Vaddha, a boy, was tempted to the path of truth by his mother who said:

Vaddha, may you not have craving for the world at any time. Child, do not be again and again a sharer in pain.

Happy, indeed, Vaddha, dwell the sages, free from lust, with doubts cut off, become cool, having attained self-taming, (being) without taints.

O Vaddha, devote yourself to the way practiced by seers for the attainment of insight, for the putting an end to pain.

(vv. 204-205)

Some of these verses take the reader onto a different plane. Vimala—a former courtesan, describes her state of ultimate calm in these words:

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. (vv. 72-76)

This is an experience coming straight from the heart, hence unparalleled.

Ambapali, having led the life of a much-coveted courtesan finally realized:

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

With age, they droop down in folds.

The truth of the Truth-speaker's words

doesn't change. (vv. 252-270)

Sumangala's mother and Mutta express their blissful state of freedom where they are not bowed by worries. It is the realization of supreme bliss that makes them burst thus:

So freed! So freed! So thoroughly freed am I ,

From three crooked things set free:

From mortar, pestle,

& crooked old husband respectively. (v. 11)

Much water has flown down since the *therigatha* in terms of feminist treatises; we are much advanced even beyond the third wave of feminism; records of women experience have been aplenty, but *therigatha* still holds its own as a document of woman's human experience, because it is

certainly not gender specific. Most of these verses tend to blur the lines that mark woman's experience as different from that of man's. We of the twentieth century who are seeking to attain liberation will find ourselves deeply grateful to these fully awakened Buddhist nuns of old for their profound assistance in breaking the shackles that bind us from within. Gross sums up the issue in: "Nevertheless the existence of the *Therigatha*, with its sympathetic portraits of women who took Buddhism's message fully to heart and achieved its goal of peace and release, stands as a challenge to all Buddhists of all times who would prefer women to do less."

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