

RESEARCH

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Women Buddhist Masters

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to two fold—first, to set forth a definition of "mastery" as it is understood across diverse Buddhist traditions. Secondly, using verses from the *Therigatha*, I argue that the first female monastics meet the criteria of Buddhist masters. My claim is based on evidence from the teachings of the historical Buddha and by citing examples from the elder female disciples, and finally, by illustrating that the embodied experience as women was central to their development of mastery.

The concept of mastery is an important one across Buddhist traditions. Masters are vital to Buddhist traditions and their practices because aspirants look to them for guidance and inspiration. Masters act as lineage holders who transmit what they have learned, exemplars of skillful behavior, and as guides along the path to enlightenment. A master is determined by various attributes: by her attainments, her understanding of the doctrines, her ethical standards, and by how seamlessly she has embodied her realizations. Generally, masters are recognized in one of the following ways: by the master or lineage who trained her, by the disciples who follow her, or by her reputation.

The *bhikkhunis* in the *Therigatha* fulfill the criteria for Buddhist mastery outlined above. As elder nuns (*theris*), these women maintain the monastic rules, live within the female community and, however diverse their backgrounds, they practice the dhamma together. Their mastery is designated in one of three ways: by the Buddha himself, by their *bhikkhuni* disciples, and by their reputation for possessing "powers beyond normal" and great wisdom. The last of these—wisdom—is born of their embodied experience as women living at the time of the Buddha. The very particular experiences of these practitioners as women, and the *bhikkhunis'* expression of those experiences, make up the most complex and compelling designations of mastery, as we will see the later. Beginning with the first category—mastery acknowledged by the teacher—we turn to the words of the Buddha in the suttas. In the *Anguttara Nikaya*,¹ the Buddha names those who are foremost among his monastic and lay followers. This is a select group; it includes the names of famous monks who are familiar to most Buddhists—Sariputta, Mahamoggallana, and Ananda, for example—and also the names of many other monks who are not known outside the *suttas*. In his lists of those who are foremost, the Buddha acknowledges individuals for their excellence in virtue, practice, and discipline. This elite list includes thirteen *bhikkhunis*, eleven of whom have verses in the *Therigatha*.²

In this paper, I discuss nine of the *bhikkhunis* who authored verses in the *Therigatha* and are also acknowledged by the Buddha as foremost (*Etadaggam*) among his nuns in

the *Anguttara Nikaya*. These include Mahapajapati, Khema, Uppalavanna, Patacara, Dhammadinna, Nanda, Sona, Sakula, and Bhadda Kundalakesa. The verses of the two *bhikkhunis* not discussed in detail here are those of Bhadda Kapilani, and Kisagotami.³ I also examine passages from the *Therigatha* that paint a picture of what it meant to be a woman Buddhist master at the time of the Buddha which offers us insight into the importance of female embodiment on the path to enlightenment.

Mastery acknowledged by the Buddha

Having been acknowledged as foremost in specific areas indicates that these *theris* achieved a level of mastery above all other nuns in the same category. In his essay on *Outstanding Bhikkhunis*, Venerable Analayo points out that the Buddha names *bhikkhunis* “foremost among others” or, more precisely, “foremost among several *bhikkhunis* that were of long standing.”⁴ This hierarchy indicates that the *bhikkhunis* who made the list were considered wise elders amongst many *bhikkhunis*.

The *bhikkhunis* that the Buddha acknowledges as “foremost” on his list of exceptional *bhikkhunis* can and should be understood as masters. This section is dedicated to a description of each of these foremost *bhikkhunis*, beginning with Mahapajapati Gotami, the first woman to request the ordination of women in Buddhism, and the first to become a *bhikkhuni*. Not surprisingly, Mahapajapati Gotami is listed as foremost in seniority and the first to become enlightened.⁵ One version of the controversial story of Mahapajapati gaining ordination for women tells that Ananda, the Buddha’s attendant, asked the Buddha whether women could become enlightened. This compelled the Buddha to acknowledge women’s capacity and finally agree to ordain her. Mahapajapati’s verse makes clear her capacity was realized:

Praise to you, hero among Buddhas, best of all beings,
you freed me from suffering, as you did so many other people.

.....

All suffering is known,
and cessation (*nirodho*) is reached.⁶

By using the word *nirodho*, the Pali word for cessation, which is often synonymous with *nibbana*, liberating enlightenment, Mahapajapati’s attainment has proven the Buddha’s acknowledgment that women’s spiritual potential was equal to men’s.

The Buddha designates Khema as foremost in wisdom among his female disciples. A story from the commentary tells us that Khema attained arahantship when she first met the Buddha and heard him recite a verse from the *Dhammapada*. Khema’s verse in the *Therigatha* is composed as a reply to Mara’s attempt to seduce her. She has abandoned conceit and rejects the illusory pleasures of the body, saying:

What you take as pleasures are not for me,
the mass of mental darkness (*tamokkhandho*) is split open.
Know this, evil one, you are defeated, you are finished.⁷

Khema’s verse indicates that her practice led her to deconstruct the mechanistic nature of the *khandhas*, the five psychophysical aggregates, which create and reify the identity of a self. Here, she tells us that her enlightenment included seeing that the self

is not a solid, independent entity but instead arises concomitant to the *khandhas*' process of creating and reifying.⁸

The Buddha acknowledges Uppalavanna's transformation into a meditation master when he named her as foremost among *bhikkhunis* in psychic powers.⁹ We will look more closely at psychic powers below. Here we want to note that within the *Therigatha*, the Buddha praises Uppalavanna and attributes's enlightenment to her. Speaking of Subha, the Buddha says,

...she has realized Dhamma.
taught by Uppalavanna, she knows
the three things (*tevijja*) that most don't know
and she has left death behind.¹⁰

Subha's enlightenment included the ability to know the three things (*tevijja*): the ability to know one's past lives; to know where and why other beings are reborn; and to know that one's defilements have been destroyed. About these, Hallisey writes, "to know the three things that most don't know is to know that one is enlightened and will not be reborn."¹¹

The Buddha named Sakula foremost among *bhikkhunis* in attaining the divine eye. She did not hear the teachings of the Buddha directly but from one of his monks and became enlightened just by hearing the teachings. She says:

I saw the dhamma perfectly, knew freedom (*nibbanam*), the eternal state.¹²

Sakula's verse gives a different twist on the embodied experience of a woman joining the *bhikkhuni* order, which we will explore below.

The Buddha named Bhadda Kundalakesa foremost among *bhikkhunis* in speed of attaining direct knowledge. In her verse she says that she was formerly a Jain nun, who engaged in debate, but when she heard about the Buddha she climbed Vultures Peak to see him and he ordained her on the spot. She says:

I bent my knees and worshiped,
facing him I joined my hands in honor,
He said to me, "Come, Bhadda."
That was my ordination.¹³

Bhadda tells us that after her enlightenment she spent fifty years as an alms mendicant and praises, in her verse, the merits of the laypeople who supported her.

The Buddha also named Sundarinanda foremost among *bhikkhunis* in meditation—she received direct teachings from the Buddha, which are best examined in our third section on embodied experience—and Sona as foremost among *bhikkhunis* who exerted effort.¹⁴ The Buddha lists effort (*viriyā*)¹⁵ as one of the ten *paramis* or perfections, which must be developed in order to become enlightened. In his translation of Dhammapala's *A Treatise on the Paramis*, Bhikkhu Bodhi, translates *viriyā* as *energy*, tells us, "*Energy* has the characteristic of striving; its function is to fortify; its manifestation is indefatigability; an occasion for the arousing of energy, or a sense of spiritual urgency, is its proximate cause."¹⁶

The Buddha acknowledged Dhammadinna's mastery when he named her foremost among *bhikkhunis* in teaching the dhamma.¹⁷ According to the *Majjhima Nikaya*, as a

bhikkhuni, Dhammadinna met with her former husband, Visakha, to answer questions and explain the Dhamma to him. Visakha then went to the Buddha and reported the full extent of their conversation. After the Buddha heard this account, he said, “Dhammadinna the nun is wise, Visakha, a woman of great discernment. If you had asked me those things, I would have answered you in the same way she did. That is the meaning of those things. That is how you should remember it.”¹⁸

Patacara’s story is not told in the *Therigatha* but is provided by the commentaries.¹⁹ It is the story of transforming intolerable human suffering into a life within the safety of the Buddha’s monastic sangha, a topic we will examine in our third category. We are told in the commentaries that when Patacara, mad with grief, first approached the Buddha, he gave her direct teachings. Hearing his words, she regained sanity and became a stream enterer, after which the Buddha himself ordained her and sent her to live in the nun’s community. The Buddha named Patacara as foremost among *bhikkhunis* in knowledge of the *Vinaya*.

All of these master *bhikkhunis* were acknowledged by the Buddha as such and realized mastery through their practice of the Buddha’s teaching. However, the Buddha’s acknowledgement is only one of the ways that these *bhikkhunis*’ mastery is designated. In the next section, I examine the ways their mastery was designated and acknowledged by their own disciples.

Mastery acknowledged by disciples of the *bhikkhunis*

Masters are given that identity by their disciples—students who have evaluated the master’s teachings and look to her for guidance. Six of the verses directly acknowledge the guidance a *bhikkhuni* received from a *theri*, a senior nun. For example, the poem by Uttama indicates that she left the monastery several times before seeking teachings from Patacara, a senior nun whom she trusted. Her respect for this nun is evident in her words: “I went to a *bhikkhuni* whom I trusted.”²⁰ In a subsequent verse, an unnamed nun makes the identical statement: “I went to a *bhikkhuni* whom I trusted.”²¹ In this case, the trusted *bhikkhuni* is said to be Dhammadina.²²

As the leader of the nuns’ community, Mahapajapati led the ordinations of many women who joined the *bhikkhuni sangha*, and she served as the preceptor for others. Although the number is a symbolic trope, Mahapajapati was said to have five hundred followers. She is mentioned repeatedly in verses throughout the *Therigatha*.

Patacara also had many disciples within the nuns’ community, one of whom was Canda. Before her ordination, Canda lived as a beggar for seven years after her brahmin family fell on hard times. Her verse begins with a description of her earlier destitution:

In the past, I was poor, a widow without children,
without friends or relatives, I did not get food or clothing.
Taking a bowl and stick, I went begging from family to family,
I wandered seven years, tormented by cold and heat.²³

Canda was on the street begging for food when she saw Patacara going on her alms round, collecting food and drink for the day. Describing their encounter, Canda says:

Approaching her, I said, “Make me go forth into homelessness.”
And she was sympathetic to me and [Patacara] made me go forth,

She gave me advice and pointed me toward the highest goal.²⁴

Following Patacara's instructions, Canda says that she "put into action her advice." She continues,

That excellent woman's advice was not empty
I know the three things (*tevijja*) that most don't know,
nothing fouls my heart.²⁵

Like Subha above, Canda describes her enlightenment as gaining insight into the three things that most don't know.²⁶

Dhammadinna is named in the commentaries as a teacher to many of the *therīs*. One of Dhammadinna's disciples was the *bhikkhuni* Sukha, whose teachings were said to so please a *devata* living in a nearby tree that he traveled into the town of Rajagaha praising Sukha and repeating the first two stanzas of her verse:

What happened to these men of Rajagaha?
They sit like they are drunk,
They do not sit near Sukha,
As she teaches what the Buddha taught.
I think those with wisdom drink something else,
Something that gives strength, is delicious and irresistible.
They drink like travelers who gulp rain,
Just fallen from a dark cloud.²⁷

It is significant that the *devatas* are portrayed as evaluating the teaching of the Sukha. Recollection of the *devas* is an important practice in the Pali canon, included in the list of *Ten Recollections* the Buddha taught as a means of training the mind.²⁸ In this verse, the *devata* praises Sukha's teachings, comparing them to a life-giving elixir, delicious and irresistible. With Dhammadinna as her teacher, Sukha's ability to teach others is not surprising.

We have seen the importance of the elder *bhikkhunis* to laywomen and to the younger nuns who go to them for guidance. Having overcome their own personal difficulties and made progress on the path to enlightenment, these elder nuns have been designated masters by those who approach them for help.

Having looked at two of the three categories which convey mastery, we will turn to the most significant and more complex topic: the mastery that is remarkably achieved in a female body. While the Buddha may have declared women capable of achieving enlightenment, the culture of the time gave them little opportunity to do so.

Mastery arising from women's embodied experience

Our third category—the cultivation of wisdom from the embodied lives of women—is rich with complexity. The examples below articulate the embodied experiences and the challenges these women faced at the time of the Buddha. They tell of the conditions of the women's lives that preceded and brought them to ordination. These women's lives were proscribed by cultural constraints, which cast them into subservient roles. It is through these verses that we hear about their transformation from ordinary women to Buddhist masters who, through strength, endurance, and courage, developed great

wisdom and “powers beyond normal.” In the following section I unpack the transformation particular to women.

Vanity

The cultural bias maintained that vanity is a downfall of women and in these verses it is often reported as an impediment the nuns had to overcome. Said to be both beautiful and vain, Sundarinanda received teachings directly from the Buddha. He taught her to perceive the body as an object, impermanent like all other objects. The Buddha is quoted in her verse as saying to her:

When you look at it [the body] in this way,
day and night, always intently,
someday you will see,
breaking through with your own wisdom.²⁹

Sundarinanda used this contemplation of the body as a method of cultivation, which led to her awakening. The final stanza of her verse reads:

This body was seen as it really is, inside and out,
as I examined it carefully and thoroughly.
I became tired of the body, inwardly disinterested,
diligent, released, at peace, free.³⁰

In the *Satipatthana Sutta*,³¹ the Buddha instructs the meditator to practice mindfulness of the body as the first foundation of awareness. Diligent practice of mindfulness of the body gives rise to seeing the body “as it really is,” that is, as an ever changing collection of parts. Described in the *Khuddhakapatha Sutta*, “this body has hairs of the head, hairs of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, bowels, stomach, excrement, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin grease, spittle, nasal mucus, oil of the joints, and urine.”³² Disciples are taught to perceive the body not as a solid object but as these relatively unattractive parts.

Like Sundarinanda, Khema was also beautiful and vain. She was a courtesan of King Bimbisara, who was a devout follower of the Buddha. She avoided meeting the Buddha, fearing his rebuke of her conceit. In one version of the story, she was forced to meet the Buddha; in another, she had a change of heart and went on her own. As she approached him, the Buddha, through his psychic abilities, created the illusion of a beautiful woman fanning him. Khema was mesmerized by the woman’s beauty and realized that she herself was far less beautiful than the vision she perceived. The Buddha then slowly changed the illusion he created from a young and beautiful woman to an old hag who was toothless, wrinkled, and grey, demonstrating the fleeting nature of worldly appearances.

Khema's verse attests to the efficacy of this vision. She says:

This foul body, sick, so easily broken, vexes and shames me,
my craving for sex has been rooted out.³³

This lesson was a change of heart for Khema and led her to the development of wisdom.

It is ironic that women's physical beauty creates their defect of vanity but when the Buddha confronts them, leads to their liberation.

Domestic Life

Many stories of Buddhist masters recount episodes in their lives that required endurance in overcoming obstacles and difficulties. This endurance indicates strength, determination, and authenticity—qualities that are also required in the pursuit of awakening. In the verses below, we hear of the great suffering that preceded the ordination of these women. Tragedy, insanity, and abuse transformed into great accomplishment.

We learn Patacara's backstory in the commentaries.³⁴ The death of her husband, children, and parents culminates in the loss of her own sanity—Patacara's is a cautionary tale on the uncertainty of life. Said to have come from the family of a merchant, Patacara ran off with one the servants of her house. She had a child and then became pregnant again and wanted to return home to give birth there. On the way there, she went into labor and, during a torrential downpour, ended up giving birth on the side of the road. Her husband went to find material to build a shelter for her and the children, but died of snakebite during his search. She decided to continue on to her parent's home, but misfortune struck and both children died as she attempted to cross a rising river. Alone and helpless, she decided to continue homeward, but misfortune struck again. She learned that her parent's home had collapsed in the storm and all her family members had died. Grief stricken, Patacara went mad. She lived on the streets and people avoided her. Finally, she heard the Buddha's teachings and she mastered her grief. From that point on, the Buddha trained her in meditation.

Her verse in the *Therīgāthā* is a chronology of her awakening—she begins by lamenting her lack of realization and exposing her doubts:

So why have I not experienced freedom,
when I am virtuous and do what the Teacher taught,
when I am not lazy and I am calm.³⁵

Patacara then uses an everyday experience in her monastic life as a theme for awakening. Just as her previous life was a story of personal loss, her awakening story is set in her private quarters. She says:

While washing my feet I made the water useful in another way,
by concentrating on it moving from the higher ground down.
Then I held back my mind,
as one would do with a thoroughbred horse,
and I took a lamp and went into the hut.
First I looked at the bed, then I sat on the couch,
I used a needle to pull out the lamp's wick,
just as the lamp went out, my mind was free.³⁶

There are no other verses in the *Therīgāthā* where a nun's bed is mentioned. Patacara's poem is intimate in the sense of bringing her audience into her personal space, both emotionally and physically.

The *Therigatha* contains many stories about the perils of domestic life, but Uppalavanna's poem is particularly vivid. It is a complex poem, moving through themes, voice and time. The first three verses describe the dangers that arise from "sexual urges." The verses begin with a description of her past when she was forced into a polygamous marriage with her mother. Beginning in a first person narrative, Uppalavanna recalls the past:

We were mother and daughter/but we shared one husband,
I was afraid of what had to come from that
It made my hair stand on end.³⁷

Her second stanza continues describing the "cursed" events of sharing a husband with her mother, saying "sexual urges...dirty, foul, dangerous."³⁸ In the third verse, the narrative voice turns to the third person, describing how these negative experiences compelled her to ordain:

Seeing the dangers in sexual urges
and looking at freedom from lust
from the standpoint of safety,
she went forth in Rajagaha,
from home into homelessness.³⁹

The fourth verse returns to a first person narrative and is set in the present. Given the subject matter, the reader assumes a considerable amount of time has passed. In this verse, Uppalavanna describes the extraordinary abilities that she has attained from her spiritual activities, which presumably took great effort over a period of years.

I know my previous lives
and the eye that can see the invisible is clear,
I know the ways of my heart, now I hear clearly.
Powers beyond normal I knew first hand
the depravities that ooze out from within have wasted away,
the six powers attained (*chalabhinna*),⁴⁰ the teaching of the Buddha is done.⁴¹

Uppalavanna has gone beyond the set descriptions of awakening we find in the verses—she has attained extraordinary psychic powers (*iddhiya*).⁴² When the *bhikkhunis* describe their awakening, they often mention the powers they acquire along the way, but Uppalavanna's abilities to manifest objects are "powers beyond normal":

With those powers, I produced from nothing
a chariot with four horses
I worshipped the feet of the Buddha,
the protector of the world like no other.⁴³

In the commentary, Dhammapala writes that Uppalavanna created the chariot so that she could go see the Buddha as he performed miracles. In *Outstanding Bhikkhunis*, Venerable Analayo includes the details recounted in the Agama version, which says that Uppalavanna "transformed herself into a universal monarch in order to move easily to the front of a large crowd and receive the Buddha."⁴⁴

Uppalavanna's attainments are many and versatile. Later in the poem, she takes on Mara when she goes into the forest alone and he tries to frighten her with the threat of rape. Uppalavanna's reply to Mara makes clear that she is not intimidated by his taunts; in fact, she ridicules him with her response:

Maybe I will just disappear
 or maybe I will get inside your belly,
 maybe I will stand between your eyebrows,
 but wherever it may be,
 you won't see
 where I am standing.⁴⁵

As a poem representing a female voice, Uppalavanna's retort has spurred much interest. She is admired and used as an example of both the vulnerabilities and the strength of being female. According to one commentary, the *bhikkhuni* Uppalavanna suffered sexual abuse as a co-wife married to the same man as her mother. In another version, a relative hid under her bed and raped her when she was alone.⁴⁶ With its references to sex and power, it is not surprising that authors of subsequent commentaries have created imaginary Uppalavannas for hundreds of years.⁴⁷ Complex though it is, Uppalavanna's poem in the *Therigatha* makes two very real points about the lives of women in ancient India that the commentaries seem to ignore: first, their sex made them vulnerable, and second, they had the capacity to develop tremendous meditative power.

It isn't clear how Bhadda Kundalakesa's early life relates to her development of mastery. In all versions from the commentaries, she is both a victim and a murderer. Hallisey recounts the Dhammapala commentary in which Bhadda, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, sees a thief named Sattuka being led away and she falls in love with him. Bhadda tells her father that she cannot live without this man and her father buys the convict's release, after which Bhadda marries him and becomes his devoted wife. Sattuka, a recalcitrant criminal, connives to steal her valuable jewelry. Bhadda learns of his scheme and kills him. Aware that, as a murderer, she must leave her home, she ordains as a Jain nun. Shaving her head, not bathing or cleaning her teeth, Bhadda wears the one robe that is allowed by Jain doctrine and walks throughout India debating religious views.

I once wandered with hair cut off,
 covered with dirt, wearing only one cloth,
 I thought there was a fault where there was none,
 and I saw no fault where there were.⁴⁸

After debating Sariputta and losing to him, he sends her to Vultures Peak to meet the Buddha.

The *Apadana* gives another version of Bhadda's going forth. While still a Jain nun, Bhadda was sitting outside reflecting on Jain philosophical doctrines when she saw a dog approach and drop from its jaws a mutilated human hand infested with maggots. Seeing this macabre sight provokes a deep spiritual shock in Bhadda. Intent on finding someone capable of explaining the significance of that event, she manages to meet the Buddha.⁴⁹

Bhadda's stories have a modern ring to them: she appears to make her own choices, albeit bad ones, until she meets the Buddha.

Sona is another woman who sought ordination as a way to overcome the suffering brought by the disappointments and pitfalls of domestic life. Her verse begins with a reflection on her life as a wife and mother that brought her to the Buddha's sangha.⁵⁰

It was after I gave birth to ten sons with this body
when I was weak and old that I approached a nun.⁵¹

The commentary provides details about her past, referring to her as "Sona with many children," and reports that earlier in her life, Sona's husband, an ardent follower of the Buddha, had left her and their children to become a monk. Sona raised their ten children alone and when they were finally grown, she gave them all of her land and possessions, keeping nothing for herself, assuming that they would look after her. But rather than support her in her old age, Sona's children began to see her as a burden. This betrayal embittered her, but ultimately spurred her to examine her life and pursue ordination. Subsequently, Sona realized that ordaining late in life, set in her ways, could be an obstacle to awakening. To overcome a lifetime of habits, she trained constantly, with diligence and determination. It is said that she spent day and night in rigorous meditations. Of her awakening, Sona says:

I cultivated a state of mind
That depends on nothing else and cannot be measured,
I became focused, collected.
I am free, and will always be completely free.⁵²

In contrast, Dhammadinna and Sakula represent women who chose to leave marriage and family in order to pursue the spiritual life. Their motivation did not arise from either desperation or despair. Both women left the relative safety and ease of domestic life in exchange for a life as alms mendicants.

As Dhammadinna's story goes, her husband, Visakha, heard the teachings of the Buddha and returned home determined to ordain as a monk. When he asked what she might do under the circumstances, Dhammadinna told him that she too wanted to ordain. As it turned out, Visakha changed his mind and remained a layman. Dhammadinna, on the other hand, joined the community of nuns and practiced diligently, becoming a meditation master. She writes,

She who has given rise to the wish for freedom
and is set on it, shall be clear in mind.⁵³

On the other hand, Sakula experienced a life-changing spiritual experience upon hearing the teachings of an enlightened Buddhist monk. She says,

I was living at home when I heard the Buddha's teaching from a monk,
and I saw the Dhamma perfectly, knew freedom, the eternal state (*nibbanam*).⁵⁴

Sakula reports that just by hearing the dhamma, she touched enlightenment (*nibbanam*). Her life was so radically changed by this that she was moved to leave behind her children, her home and her wealth.

Who I was then left behind son and daughter, wealth and grain,
after cutting off my hair, I went forth into homelessness.⁵⁵

In this verse, Sakula says that she now sees her past self as someone else—“who I was then.” Unlike Patacara, whose tragedies drove her to madness and then ordination, or Sona, who was abandoned by her children, Sakula’s seemingly affluent and ordinary life became untenable after her spiritual awakening. In a different twist on the transformation from domestic constraint to renunciate, Sakula was compelled to ordain not by tragedy but by spiritual desire. She expresses no regret about leaving her children; in fact, she describes not what she lost, but what she gained:

I ordained as a nun, I remembered former lives,
the eye that sees the invisible (*dibbacakkhum*) was clear, spotless, developed.⁵⁶

As a nun, Sakula developed the power of remembering past lives and, as mentioned earlier, the Buddha names her foremost in achieving the divine eye. While supernormal powers are not an end in themselves in Buddhism, they indicate that the practitioner has attained high levels of realization.

In the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the Buddha makes clear that these nine *bhikkhunis* were eminent among his disciples. And we have read the verses in which younger members of the monastic community acknowledge the elder *bhikkhunis* as masters to approach when needing guidance. Some are of these women were beautiful but vain, and others bore children whom they would love and lose. While some are given no choice in their marriages, others choose their spouses or choose to leave them. Clearly the authors of these verses exemplify the embodied life of women. What all these women have in common is that the single most important determining factor in their lives was their femaleness. The fact that these nuns were recognized for their mastery is remarkable in and of itself because of the position of women at the time of the Buddha. In other words, their reputations were heightened because of their femaleness and the singularity of their embodied experiences—experiences that they transformed into the motivating force toward awakening. What we learn from these verses is that these women used their female bodies as the means to enlightenment and became Buddhist masters.

Endnotes

¹*Anguttara Nikaya (AN)* (2012), I 235-247

²I am using Charles Hallisey's 2015 translations and commentary of the *Therigatha* (*Thi*) throughout although I am not using his spelling of the Pali names. For commentarial material from the Theri-Apadana and other commentaries, here I am using Nyanaponika and Hecker (2003).

³Recognized foremost for remembering past lives, Bhadda Kapilani's mentions briefly the downfall of conjugal life described in greater detail in the verses I examine in the section, Domestic Life. The verse of Kisagotami, who was recognized by the Buddha as foremost among nuns in wearing coarse robes, includes the story of Patacara to describe the madness brought on by grief. While Kisagotami's story is perhaps the better known, Patacara's tragic past was instrumental to her awakening, which transformed her into one of the most important teachers to the *bhikkhunis* of the *Therigatha*

⁴Analayo (2016) p 112

⁵AN I 235

⁶*Thi*, 157-158

⁷*Thi*, 142

⁸These five aggregates (*khandhas*) are form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness.

⁹AN I:237

¹⁰*Thi*, 366

¹¹Hallisey (279). . According to Hallisey, when the *bhikkhunis* proclaim knowledge of the three things, they are also going against the Brahmanical doctrine of their time, which claimed that no woman of any caste was capable of such an attainment.

¹²*Thi*, 97

¹³*Thi*, 107

¹⁴AN I:241

¹⁵*Viriya* is also translated as *strength* or *energy*.

¹⁶Bhikkhu Bodhi (2005)

¹⁷AN I.239

¹⁸*Majjima Nikaya (MN)* (1998, 2008) 44

¹⁹Nyanaponika & Hecker, p 293

²⁰*Thi*, 43

²¹*Thi*, 69

²²This nun is identified in the commentary as Dhammadina's student Vaddhesi.

²³*Thi*, 122-123

²⁴*Thi*, 124-126

²⁵*Thi*, 126

²⁶Canda came from a brahmin family and would have been aware of the doctrine claiming women's inability to become enlightened. See Hallisey, 279.

²⁷*Thi*, 54-57

²⁸AN I:296-305

²⁹*Thi*, 84.

³⁰*Thi*, 85-86.

³¹Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2008.

³²Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2005. In many Theravada monasteries, Buddhist monks and nuns still chant the traditional reflection on the thirty-two parts of the body daily.

³³*Thi*, 140

³⁴Nyanaponika and Hecker, 293.

³⁵*Thi*, 113

³⁶*Thi*, 114-116

³⁷*Thi*, 224

³⁸*Thi*, 225

³⁹*Thi*, 226

⁴⁰The six powers (*chalabhinna*) are possessing: 1) the divine eye, 2) the divine ear, 3) psychic powers, 4) knowledge of other people's thoughts, 5) recollections of former experiences, and 6) knowledge of the ending of the *asavas*, i.e., the destructive habits of mind.

⁴¹*Thi*, (227-228)

⁴²*Iddhiya* are supernormal powers that are achieved along the path of enlightenment. For context in the Pali canon, see Nyanaponika and Hecker, 88-96.

⁴³*Thi*, 229

⁴⁴Analayo, 101.

⁴⁵*Thi*, 232

⁴⁶This is said to be the reason why the Buddha created the rule that nuns should not travel alone or live in the forest.

⁴⁷Young (2007) gives a comprehensive listing of the many stories about Uppalavanna.

⁴⁸*Thi*, 107

⁴⁹Nyanaponika and Heckler, 271

⁵⁰AN I.241

⁵¹*Thi*, 102

⁵²*Thi*, 105

⁵³*Thi*, 12

⁵⁴*Thi*, 97

⁵⁵*Thi*, 96

⁵⁶*Thi*, 100

Competing interest

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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