

The Therigatha

The Therigatha are the songs of enlightenment uttered by nuns in the time of the Buddha. They are songs of celebration, of delight. They exult in the spiritual freedom the nuns have so recently gained. Stock phrases are often used to describe the moment of liberation: “the arrow is out”, “I have put my burden down” and “what had to be done has been done”. My favourite is “the great dark was torn apart.”

The edition in which I first read the Therigatha is The First Buddhist Women by Susan Murcott (Parallax, 1991). I had been practising intensively with Burmese Sayadaws for some years. I was fortunate – great teachers like Sayadaw U Pandita came here to teach. I will always be grateful to them. But I was hungry for female embodiments of the Dhamma. Gender is a fundamental descriptor of our conditioned identity – and that's what we bring to practice.

Murcott describes the discriminatory conditions of women's lives at the time of the Buddha. Many of the nuns were the wives of men who'd left to ordain, or they were widows or had lost their children. There are some heart-rending accounts by women who lost their children in shocking ways. At a time when women were defined by their marital and maternal status, these were even greater calamities than now.

The nun Canda wrote:

I was in a bad way,
a widow,
no children, no friends,

no relations to give me food and clothes.

Things are different today. Despite these differences, the female poets of the Therigatha are women I recognise. From Vimala's song:

Young,
intoxicated by my own
lovely skin,
my figure,
my gorgeous looks
.../.../...
Today,
head shaved,
robed,
alms-wanderer,
I, my same self,
sit at the tree's foot;
no thought.

Not all the women so readily entered a thought-free state. Vaddhesi had a difficult practice. 'I left home' in her poem refers to her entering a life of practice:

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

Finally, though, she has 'annihilated/all the obsessions of the mind.'

The formal teachings as we know them are often referred to: the Four Elements, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path – but these are rarely elucidated: the poems are not teachings so much as they are personal testaments of successful practice. Uttama sings:

The Buddha taught
Seven Factors of Enlightenment
They are ways to find peace
and I have developed them all.
I have found what is vast and empty,
the unborn.
It is what I've longed for.
I am a true daughter of the Buddha,
always finding joy
In peace.

The personal quality of the songs embodies the softness so necessary to mental and spiritual development. For the cultivation of this quality Dipa Ma by Amy Schmidt is a valuable resource. Dipa Ma (who died in 1989) was a Buddhist saint who emphasised the loving aspect of mindfulness.

I've spoken of the role of gender in our sense of self, but ultimately in the deep peace of practice, gender is irrelevant. Mara, a mythological embodiment of everything that distracts us from realisation, addressed Soma:

That place
that sages gain
is hard to reach.
A mere woman can't get there.

She replied:

If I asked myself:
“Am I a woman
or a man in this?”
then I would be speaking
Mara's language.

No one celebrates enlightenment like this nowadays. To do so would be considered sure proof of how far that person still had to go. Perhaps it's also a result of the lesser state of our practice compared to the abundantly successful meditation of those taught by the Buddha. The closest that comes to mind is the introduction to Eckhart Tolle's The Power of Now.

Much of our tradition has been used, to great benefit, in various therapies. Mindfulness is everywhere – from psychotherapies to weight loss programmes. This is clearly a good thing. It is, however, only part of the story. The mind can go further, to the great freedom the nuns celebrated.