



Lasting Inspiration

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A Look into the Guiding and Determining Mental and Emotional States of Liberated Arahant Women in Their Path of Practice and its Fulfillment as Expressed in the Sacred Biographies of the *Therī Apadāna*

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*Bhavā sabbe parikkhīṇā,
bhavā santi vimocitā;
Sabbāsavā ca no natthi,
ārocema mahāmune.*

Let us tell you, Great Sage,
Of how the entirety of all becoming has been cut off in us;
Of how we have become freed from becoming and come to peace,
And in us nothing of all the cankers and taints remains.

—Thousands of Bhikkhunīs Announcing their Awakening to the Buddha,
Yasavatī Pamukha Aṭṭhārasa Bhikkhunī Sahassa Apadāna, v. 1

Abstract

This article looks at the language and words used to express the decisive mental and emotional states of the awakened women disciples of the Buddha whose past life stories are remembered and recorded in the *Therī Apadāna* of the Pali Canon's *Khuddhaka Nikāya*—words which singularly and in sum might be seen as the Pali-text Tipitaka's equivalent to the arising, developing, maturing, and fulfilling of *bodhicitta*.¹ Words expressing the inspiration which led to these women's successful aspirations to awakening, the mental and emotional states supporting their aspiration and resolve, and the character of their intention itself are looked at in context with an eye to what we can learn from them.

Introduction

The *Therī Apadāna* (*Sacred Biographies of the Therīs*), companion to its male counterpart the *Thera Apadāna*, forms one book, or more properly a part of one of the major genres of the Pali Canon's *Khuddhaka Nikāya*. The *Apadānas*² are Theravada Buddhist texts considered to originate from the post-Ashokan second to first century B.C.E.,³ up to the beginnings of the Okkāka (Skt: Ikshvāku) dynasty. They are companion to and younger sibling or daughter of the related and earlier *Therīgāthā* (*Verses of the Women Elders*), also known as the “Psalms of the Sisters,” with its male counterpart the *Theraḡāthā*.⁴ Together, the *Therī Apadāna* and the *Therīgāthā*, the Epic Biographies and Enlightenment Verses of the Women Elders, are amongst our world's earliest known and preserved forms of women's religious poetry and biography. We will focus here on the *Therī Apadāna* for what it may reveal about women's inspiration, aspiration, resolution, and fulfillment of the spiritual Path.

The *Apadāna* genre is well known in Greek performance art as epic hero's biography, and the *Sacred Biographies of the Therīs* gather lore of the ancient Buddhist *arahatīs*' lives into an epic poetic style composed for inspiring and edifying performance at *mahas*, ancient religious festivals that in Buddhism became popularly associated with Buddhist religious shrines, whether a stupa or Bodhi tree.⁵ The mental and emotional states expressed within are meant to be instructive to their audience, to stimulate, support, and guide the aspiration of their audience along the Path in the years following the Buddha (Gotama)'s *Parinibbāna* (Skt: *Parinirvana*) in the span between one *Sammā-sambuddha* and the next. They place the cultivation of the Path, from first inspiration, to aspiration, to final fulfillment in the context of many lives occurring over vast time and space.

Their setting is one in which the practice of veneration of the Buddha's stupas and relics together with the Bodhi

tree as representative of the Buddha are actively practiced, while statuary images of the Buddha have not yet entered the culture. Related inscriptions do not yet name Buddhist sects. Buddhist monasteries for both *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* appear large and hopeful to remain well endowed and supported by Kṣatriya rulers, Brahmins, and strong Vaishya and growing *Seṭṭhi* merchant and trader classes, while remaining open and affirmative to the *Sudra* and *Dāsī* laboring and serving classes as well. Although the *Therī Apadāna* relates biographical legends of women monastic disciples of the Buddha who became *arahants*, due to the stories spanning many lives, the roles of both lay practitioner and monastic are supported and valued, the mental and emotional qualities highlighted, advocated, and appreciated being generally equally relevant, advocated, and appreciated for both man and woman, lay disciple and monastic.

It is known that during this time period, both within mainstream orthodox Brahmanism and the co-contemporary Jain religions, there arose serious negating challenges to the social and religious possibilities for women's practice and fulfillment of the spiritual Path—what could be considered a major heresy with regards to early fundamental Buddhist teachings.⁶ The *Therī Apadāna* illustrates the Buddha, in partnership with and via the ancient awakened *therīs*, repeatedly demonstrating the falsity of such claims.

The leading *therīs* are regularly compared favorably to then contemporary symbols of royal and natural power and awe: great trees bearing heartwood, she-elephants that have burst their bonds and now roam freely, and lionesses, with the Buddha asking them to roar their lion's roar by demonstrating their abilities and powers accrued in the fulfillment of their Path.

Mahato sāvāntassa, yathā rukkhassa tiṭṭhato . . .

Like a great tree standing, bearing heartwood . . .

—The Buddha, regarding his foster mother, Mahā Gotamī (*Gotamī Therī Apadāna*, v. 278)

*Thīna dhammābhisamaye,
ye bālā vimatiṃ gatā;
tesaṃ diṭṭhippahānatthaṃ,
iddhiṃ dasshehi gotamī.*

There are these fools who doubt
That women too can grasp the truth;
Gotamī, show your spiritual power
That they might give up their false views.

—The Buddha's direction to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī Therī (*Gotamī Therī Apadāna*, v. 178)

Sihova pañjaraṃ bhetvā . . .

[She will attain Bodhi] like a lion freed from its cage . . .

—The Buddha Padumuttara, to the future Buddha Gotama re: the future Yasodharā (*Gotamī Therī Apadāna*, v. 376)

*Iddhiñcāpi nidassehi,
mama sāsana-kārike;
parisānañca sabbāsaṃ,
kañkhaṃ chindassu yāvata.*

Demonstrate your spiritual potency
To those enacting my Sāsana;
Within all the Assemblies,
Cut off whatever doubts remain.

—The Buddha Gotama, to his former wife, Yasodharā Therī (*Yasodharā Apadāna*, v. 967)



Like a She-Elephant Having Broken Her Bonds. Tile fresco of the life story of Uppalavaṇṇā Therī, Foremost in Supernormal Powers.

*Iddhiñcāpi nidassehi,
mama sāsana-kārike;
cattaso parisā aḷja,
kañkhaṃ chindāhi yāvata.*

Demonstrate your spiritual power
To those enacting my Sāsana;
For the Fourfold Assembly now,
Cut off whatever doubts remain.

—The Buddha, to his spiritual daughter Uppalavaṇṇā Therī (*Uppalavaṇṇā Therī Apadāna*, v. 388)

The *Therī Apadāna* appears to employ skilful means regarding then contemporary social norms and trends,⁷ with large long-term impact. It does so by repeatedly placing its

chief and leading heroines' freedom and independence within the context of having developed over past lives in the Path of loving service to previous (male) buddhas and the bodhisattva himself. It is noteworthy that such beneficent supportive association with the bodhisattva and former buddhas is not only so in the biographies of the leading therīs, but appears in the theras' (the male elders') biographies as well. However, in the *Apadānas*, as this genre does not illustrate cross-gender rebirth as some other Buddhist texts do, none of the male elders are ever remembered as having served so intimately as female partners, wives, consorts, or women of the bodhisattva's "inner chambers," as large numbers⁸ of the therīs are recorded as having done in both their penultimate and past lives.

Let us now begin to look into what is revealed herein of key mental and emotional qualities in the development of the spiritual Path in these lives.

Fortunate Encounters

The vast majority of the women portrayed in the *Therī Apadāna* remember moments of a first inspiration. For many of these women, this first inspiration arose during a fortunate personal encounter with one of a whole number of previous buddhas, whether the very ancient Dīpaṅkara Buddha or Padumuttara Buddha, or those of this Fortunate Eon, the *Bhadda Kappa* (Skt: *Bhadra Kalpa*).

These encounters suggest to their audience the question of whether we too may have had a fortunate encounter with the Sakyan sage, the Buddha Gotama, and/or with another even more ancient buddha or buddhas immemorable, inviting us to consider this possibility in our part of this ongoing cosmic biography. They also suggest the possibility of our acts now, in appreciative connection with the Buddha's relics and stupas, Bodhi trees, and the monastic sangha, as well as our hearing (and reading) of the Dhamma, as potentially connecting to our coming into contact with the future Buddha Maitreya (Pali: *Metteya*), if such inspired aspiration arises in our hearts. The types of acts and mental and emotional states which might lead any of us to such are recounted in manifold ways, but all following similar discernible patterns.

As Sumedhā Therī remembers in the opening chapter of the *Therī Apadāna*, reflecting back on her fortunate encounter with the ancient Buddha Koṇāgamana and the gift of a vihara to his sangha, together with her practice of *sīla*, *dāna*, and *vatacariya*⁹ under another ancient Buddha Sikhī:

*So hetu ca so pabhavo,
tammūlaṃ sāsane khamam;¹⁰
Paṭhamaṃ taṃ samodhānaṃ,
taṃ dhammaratāya nibbānaṃ.*

This was the cause, this was the reason,
My acceptance of¹¹ the Teaching was rooted in this:
That was my first encounter;
That delight of mine in the Dhamma led to Nibbana.¹²

(Sumedhā Therī Apadāna, v. 16)

Not all of the fortunate encounters are with past buddhas, or past buddhas alone. Such significant meetings are also with leading male monastic disciples, and regularly with reliquary shrines and Bodhi trees representing a buddha.

For most of the women who became foremost leading disciples, or *etadagga sāvīkā*, of the Buddha Gotama, it was not only their meeting with a past buddha, but also their seeing the Buddha together with an awakened woman, a leading bhikkhunī disciple of the Buddha, that truly stimulated their inspiration and galvanized their aspiration.

Leading women elders Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā, Dhammadinnā, Bhadda Kundalakesī, Sakulā, and Kisa Gotamī all witnessed women—bhikkhunīs—being praised by a former buddha as being foremost amongst his leading female monastic disciples in some exemplary quality that was particularly inspiring to them.

*Upetvā taṃ mahāvīraṃ,
assosiṃ dhammadesanaṃ;
Tato jātappasādāhaṃ,
upemi saraṇaṃ jinaṃ.*

I went before him, that Hero of Great Virtue,
And heard the teaching of the Dhamma;
Then *pasāda* was born in me,
And I went for refuge in the Conqueror.

*Atikkante ca sattāhe,
mahāpaññānamuttamaṃ;
Bhikkhunīṃ etadaggamhi,
ṭhapesi naraśārathi.*

When seven days had passed,¹³
The Leader of Humankind placed
The one supreme of those with great wisdom
In the foremost position of the bhikkhunīs.

(Khemā Therī Apadāna, vv. 291 & 293)

Pasāda

For most all of these women, the outstanding and galvanizing quality first noticed and remembered is of *pasāda* (Vedic: *prasāda*). For many, such as therī Khemā above, *pasāda* arose while listening to the Dhamma being taught. *Pasāda* is a quality, group of qualities, or a mental

and emotional state and process of enormous depth and importance. *Pasāda* is defined variously in the Pali Text Society's *Pali-English Dictionary* as “a heart full of grace; to enter into and become established in faith, to be sanctified; to be or become clear, bright and pure; to be or become happy and gladdened; to be reconciled and pleased; to be and become believing and trusting; to be and become pious and virtuous; to be devoted; to be granting or receiving graces and gratification; and to be rendered calm and peaceful.” *Pasāda* is a close relative of *pasanna*, in which the qualities of “seeing” and “knowing” that serve as essential aspects of the insight knowledge of *vipassanā* are a fundamental part of the meaning.

There is a major shift that occurs with this seeing: a clearing and brightening of the heart and mind which gives rise to mental purity of a kind in which faith and trust grow and becomes established, together with happiness, joy, devotion, pious and virtuous dedication, calmness, and peacefulness. These are linking qualities between tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*), a fertile ground for the deepening of both. All of these qualities spring forth in a way that may be religiously characterized as an experience of grace, reconciliation, and even sanctification, that is, a primary first step in entering into the path of holiness.

In the *Bodhi Bojjhaṅgas*, or Factors of Awakening, *pasāda*, or *pasadi*, is one of the primary seven factors, closely linked on the one hand to the *pīti* (joy or rapture) and on the other to the *samādhi* and *upekkha* (equanimity) that balances, steadies, stabilizes, clears, and strengthens the mind. We can also see the connection here to the second awakening factor, *dhamma vicāya*, out of which in this case *pīti* and *pasadi* have arisen. These qualities together make the heart-mind beautiful, positive, and clear as well as balanced and stable, an ideal mind-ground for deep, effective cultivation of the path, and for awakening.

*Saṅghe pasādo yassatthi,
ujubhūtañca dassanaṃ;
Adaliddoti taṃ āhu,
amoghaṃ tassa jīvitanaṃ.*

For whom there is *pasāda* in the Sangha,
And whose vision has been set straight;
They say, “S/he is not impoverished,
And his or her life is not lived in vain.”

*Tasmā saddhañca sīlañca,
pasādaṃ dhammadassanaṃ;
Anuyujjetha medhāvī,
saraṃ buddhānusāsanaṃ.¹⁴*

Therefore, bearing in mind the Buddha's instruction,
A wise and sagacious person should apply herself
To faith and virtuous conduct,
To pasāda and seeing the Dhamma.

(*Singālamātu Therī Apadāna*, vv. 88–90)

Samvega & Samvigga

Together with *pasāda* or independently, *samvega* or *samvigga* often arise. *Samvega* is characterized as the emotion of religious awe or thrill, stimulation, and enthusiasm—a strong energetic movement in the body and mind which comes from seeing oneself and the world differently and gaining new knowledge, perspective, and clarity.

It is often translated as “spiritual urgency,” as time and the perception of impermanence and the rarity and preciousness of the opportunity found take on a new and urgent sense of meaning which completely changes the value system, priorities, and life direction of s/he who experiences them.

As therī Bhaddā Kāpilānī remembers occurring at the same time as was also happening independently for her husband, Mahā Kassapa, very shortly before both decided to go forth:

*Gharevāhaṃ tile jāte,
Disvānātapatāpane;
Kimi kākehi khajjante,
Samvegamaḥbhim tadā.*

While staying at home [I saw], born out of sesame seeds,
Lying drying under the hot sun,
[Live newborn] worms being eaten by crows;
And a sense of spiritual urgency overcame me.

(*Bhaddā Kāpilānī Therī Apadāna*, v. 303)



Remembering a Fortunate Meeting. Sākulā Therī, later to become Foremost of Those with the Divine Eye.

Abhayā Therī remembers how seeing a former buddha walking down the street with his order of bhikkhus changed her life:

*Buddhassa raṃsiṃ disvāna,
haṭṭhā samviggamānasā;
Dvāraṃ avāpuritvāna,
buddhaseṭṭhamapūjayiṃ.*

Seeing the radiant aura of the Buddha
My mind was elated and deeply stirred with *samvigga*,
And opening the door
I honored the Buddha, the Foremost One.

(*[Abhayā] Sattuppaladāyikā [Giver of the Seven Lotuses] Therī Apadāna*, v. 76)

Abhivādana

With the transformative arising of *pasāda* and *samvega*, for many of the women profiled, *abhivādana* then follows as the natural responsive unfolding of their hearts, their bodies, and their minds in the Path—they bowed down to the Buddha, his Teaching, and his Sangha with a natural and true heart of deep honor and the highest respect, reverence, and veneration (*abhivādana*), seeing the opportunity. They let go of the past and what they had been, released, opened their hearts, and entered into a state of open and receptive potentiality.

Kisā Gotamī remembers her heart's response:

*Kāraṃ katvāna buddhassa,
yathāsati yathābalaṃ.
Nīpacca munivaraṃ . . .*

Honoring and revering the Buddha
with all of my power¹⁵ and strength.
I bowed down in ready humility and service to the
Sage's way . . .

(*Kisā Gotamī Therī Apadāna*, vv. 59–60 [excerpted])

Muttā Therī (“She Who Was a Bridge”) expresses her heart's movement of reverence most dramatically, reminiscent of the Buddha himself upon entering the Bodhisattva Path as the rishi Sumedha when meeting Buddha Padumuttara:

*Gharato nikkhamitvāna,
avakujjā nipajjahaṃ;
Anukampako lokanātho,
sirasi akkamī mama.*

Coming forth from my house,
I lay down prostrate before him;

The Compassionate Lord of the World
stepped on the crown of my head.

(*Saṅkamanatthā [She Who Was a Bridge] Therī Apadāna*, v. 32)

Dāna

In their clean, clear, calm, and brightly reverential heart-minds, the next natural arising was of generosity. Most of them then wished to offer as great a *dāna* as they were able to in supportive appreciation of the Buddha and his Teaching. A full fourteen of the forty sacred biographies are actually named after the important acts of generosity of their heroines, some even when the generosity was so small as a single ladleful of food.¹⁶ Generosity is portrayed over and over again in its natural arising in the process, and in its successful enactment, as one of the main elements which sustained their Path over time and brought it to fulfillment. *Dāna* is one of the three fundamental practices to cultivate for all Buddhists, the first in the triad of *Dāna*, *Sīla* and *Bhavana*. It is also one of the main *Pāramīs* (Skt: *Pāramītas*),¹⁷ if not the foremost or the crowning, culminating *pāramī* in terms of spiritual maturity in the *Jātaka* tales, which appear historically to have been a genre, in part, contemporary or near-contemporary to the *Apadānas* and to share substantially in material content.¹⁸ The mind of *dāna* is one of both release and of wholesome opening to possibility. In the *Therī Apadāna*, the *dānacitta* (the heart and mind of generosity), when brought to life in concordant bodily action, is the wholesome ground in which the possibility for future awakening can be received and, like a seed, can germinate.

*Tadā muditacittāhaṃ,
taṃ ṭhānamabhikaṅkhinī;
Nimantetvā dasabalaṃ,
sasaṅghaṃ lokanāyakaṃ.*

Then, with my heart of *muditā*,
Longing for that attainment,
I made an invitation to the One of Ten Powers,
The Leader of the World together with the Sangha.

*Bhojayitvāna sattāhaṃ,
daditvāva ticivaraṃ;¹⁹
Nīpacca sirasā pāde,
idaṃ vacanamabravim.*

I offered food for seven days,
And *dāna* of the triple robes;²⁰
Then I bowed down humbly placing my head at his feet in
obedient service,
And spoke these words:

*Yā tayā vaṇṇitā vīra,
ito aṭṭhamake muni;
Tādisāhaṃ bhavissāmi,
yadi sijjhati nāyaka.*

Like she who was praised by you, O Valiant One,
Eight days ago, O Sage;
O, to become such like her—
If my aspiration could come to be fulfilled, O Guide.

(*Patācārā Therī Apadāna*, vv. 472–474)

Muditā

In this mind of clarity and vision, reverence, and generosity, *Muditā* is another key associated quality to arise. *Muditā* is widely known as the third of the Four Immeasurables, or the Four Boundless Qualities, which are also known as the Brahma Viharas or Divine Abidings. We have no exact parallel for the wholesome *muditā* in English but know it clearly by its opposites, the envy and jealousy that can also arise in the human heart when seeing someone else attain, achieve, experience, or receive a desirable condition. *Muditā* is a state of blessed and beneficent, empathetically shared happiness, joy, and appreciation in which the heart and mind are positively and fortunately attuned with the benefits and goodness of the state of the other—in this case, the awakened other.

Herein, *muditā* has a powerful galvanizing impact on the karmic processes of the individual involved, which begins to draw them toward and nearer to that state, linking them karmically with it. In the *Therī Apadāna*, desiring for oneself the state of the other for which there are feelings of *muditā* is not considered negative at this stage of the Path. Rather, we find the examples of this desire most often being voiced to the Buddha himself with ardent aspiration and reverence, with undoubtedly positive and affirmative response.

Returning to the *apadāna* of therī Khemā, the Buddha's female disciple Foremost in Wisdom, she here remembers her response after hearing an earlier buddha pronounce one of his leading bhikkhunī disciples foremost in wisdom long ago:

*Taṃ sutvā muditā hutvā,
puno tassa mahesino;
Kāraṃ katvāna taṃ ṭhānaṃ,
paṇipacca paṇīdahim.*

Having heard this, with having become full of *muditā*,
Having again offered reverential service to that great
sage;
And having bowed down before him,
I aspired to and resolved my heart upon that position.

*Tato mama jino āha,
 ‘sijjha²² taṃ paṇidhī tava;
 Sasaṅghe me kataṃ kāraṃ,
 appameyyaphalaṃ tayā.’*

Then the Victorious One said to me,
 “May your aspiration be achieved;
 For the reverential service you have offered to the Sangha
 and me,
 Will be of limitless fruit for you.”

(*Khemā Therī Apadāna*, vv. 294–295)

Cetanā Paṇidhāna

All important in the formation of affective karma, *cetana* is formative intention, the volitional direction of the heart-mind. *Paṇidhāna* (Skt: *praṇidhāna*), as we can see above in the last line of verse 294, is the direction of the mind toward that intent, the Goal. In the making of an effective aspiration and the formation of an effective resolution, *cetanā paṇidhi* is a crucially important step; one to be enacted over and over again by the *apadāna*’s heroines as a crucial turning point. As repeatedly affirmed and reaffirmed, it is *kammena sukatenā*, a fundamental step in the laying out of the morally virtuous karma, which will underlie and support the rest of the path and everything that follows and results from there, through to its final fruition.

Most of the *apadānas* contain very similar quatrains in this regard, with virtuous deeds leading the heroines to sojourn for some time in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven before coming to their final birth. As *therī* Patacarā remembers:

*Tehi kammehi sukatehi,
 cetanāpaṇidhihi ca.
 Jahitvā mānusaṃ dehaṃ,
 tāvatīṃsamagacchahaṃ.*

This was the result of those virtuous actions,
 And due to my aspiration and resolution;
 After abandoning my human body,
 I went to the Tāvatiṃsa [realm].

(*Patacarā Therī Apadāna*, v. 487)

Patthanā, Abhipatthanā & Thānamabhipatthanā

Not dallying in the heavens, but remaining intent with our heroines now in their stages of critical development, from the volitional direction of the mind, *patthanā* (Skt: *pra + ārthana*) had then arisen. *Patthanā* is the prayerful wish, the voiced aspiration, the expressed resolution. What

happened in the mind at the level of intention now appears and is expressed. The awakening women of the *Therī Apadāna* repeatedly relate their key moments of *abhipatthanā*, the higher aspiration and resolve awoken and come to active life in them. As in *Khemā Therī*’s verse 295 above, those who were to become the great leading *therīs* often speak of *thānam-abhipatthanā*—with determination, standing and knowing themselves as having become firmly established in the basis of their resolve.



Saying “No” to Proffer of All the Family Wealth. Dhammadinnā Therī, later to become Foremost in Dhamma Teaching

As *Nandā Therī*, the Buddha’s half sister, relates in her *apadāna*, after hearing the Buddha making known the highest good teaching the ambrosial Dhamma of the Deathless, making known the highest good, with clear and bright mind of *pasāda* she invited the Buddha and his sangha for a *mahā dāna*, and serving them with her own hands (vv. 173–174):

*Jhāyinīnaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ,
 Aggaṭṭhānamapattthayim;
 Nipacca sirasā dhīraṃ,
 Sasaṅghaṃ lokanāyakaṃ.*

I aspired to the position of the foremost
 Of the bhikkhunīs [skilled] in Jhāna;
 Bowing down my head in humble and ready willingness,
 Before the Leader of the World with his Sangha.

(*Nandā Therī Apadāna*, v. 175)

And Dhammadinnā Therī, after feeling tremendous joy to see a former Buddha recognize a bhikkhunī as foremost among speakers of the Dhamma, enacted and established her resolve thus:

*Nimantayitvā sugataṃ,
 sasaṅghaṃ lokanāyakaṃ;
 Mahādānaṃ daditvāna,
 taṃ thānamabhipattthayim.*

I invited the Well Come One,
The Leader of the World, together with his Sangha;
Having offered a great *dāna*,
I aspired to that position.

(*Dhammadinnā Therī Apadāna*, v. 102)

Anumodanā

In many cases²² their aspiring wish, which has been expressed either publicly or privately, is met and followed by the Buddha himself acknowledging, appreciating, and rejoicing in it. The aspiring recipient becomes beneficiary of the Buddha's personal *anumodanā*. The root word *modana* (or *modati*) is a very close and almost interchangeable relative of the empathetic joy above and, joined with the prefix *ānu*, meets and acts as a supportive companion, journeying together.

As Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesī remembers, after witnessing the ancient Buddha Padumuttara commend a bhikkhuni as foremost in speed to gain awakening, and experiencing the arising *pasāda* and *mudita* in her heart, her offering of *dāna* and *ṭhānamabhipatthana* and offering of herself in humble service prostrate before the Buddha, he rejoiced and blessed her with his *anumodanā*:

*Anumodi mahāvīro,
'bhadde yaṃ tebhipatthitaṃ;
Samijjhissati taṃ sabbam,
sukhinī hohi nibbutā.'*

The Great & Valiant One expressed his *anumodanā* to me,
saying:
"Good lady, all that you have resolved upon,
Will be successful [in time to come];
Be happy and peaceful."

(*Kuṇḍalakesā Therī Apadāna*, v. 6)

In this relational process, not only is the Buddha seen and known by and awakened within the heart of the person who is now both disciple and aspirant, but they too are seen and known, with joy and welcome receptivity by the Awakened One, who then blesses them with the ultimate encouragement and affirmation: their prediction to awakening, enlightenment.

This blessing and affirmative recognition is a completion in a way of this initial process, for there has been a mutual seeing and knowing, dedication and determination have arisen, and the destiny of the recipient is now sealed.

As is expressed so beautifully in the *apadāna* of Sonā,
Foremost in Ardent and Valiant Effort:

*Abhivādiya sambuddham,
ṭhānaṃ taṃ patthayiṃ tadā;
Anumodi mahāvīro,
'sijjhataṃ paṇidhī tava.'*

Bowing prostrate before the *Sambuddha*,
I then aspired to that position;
The Great Hero expressed his approval:
"Let your aspiration succeed."

(*Sonā Therī Apadāna*, v. 223)

Pamodati

But there is one more return, one more aspect to this process which then courses through the sealing and activates it, going beyond and moving into the life of the Path, not only the completion of the circle, but the turning of the Dhamma wheel in this woman's life—following upon receiving of the benediction. This is *pamodati* (*pra + modati*), the higher joy, delight, and rejoicing which then arises in the heart of the recipient in response to the Blessed One's recognition and affirmative *anumodanā*. In many of these stories, *pamodati* is linked with *sumana*, the wholesome, well, healthy, and virtuous heart and mind that is both elevated and joyful—what we would also simply and rightly call "the good heart" or "the well-faring heart."

Buddhassa vacanaṃ sutvā . . .

Hearing the [affirmative] words of the Awakened One . . .

*Pamoditāhaṃ sumanā,
patthe uttamamānasa;
Anāgatamhi addhāne,
īdisā homi nāyaka.*

I rejoiced, jubilant,
And in an exalted state of mind,
(I aspired): "In time to come,
Let me be such a one, O Guide."

(*Uppalavaṇṇā Therī Apadāna*, vv. 420 [excerpt] & 421)

Mettācittā Paricari & Parikari

These women have experienced *upaṭṭhita*: their heart of clarity and faith, reverence, generosity, and appreciative joy have together initiated a new kind of giving, *upaṭṭhita*, the reverential and fully ready and willing gift of themselves and their life to the Buddha's Way, the Path of Awakening. They have both drawn near and become intimately established in the base for awakening, and now stand in it themselves, transformed.

In Yasodharā's case, after lifetimes of offering innumerable physical services, it was only after realizing freedom from fear that she was able to truly and fully give her life.

*Nekakoṭisahassāni,
jīvitāni pariccajīṃ;
Bhayamokkhaṃ karissanti,
dadāmi mama jīvitam.*

Innumerable thousands of kotis
Of lives have been rendered in your service;
In freedom from fear,
I give you my life.

(Yasodharā Therī Apadāna, v. 351)

In other therī's stories as well, although with far less radical dedication recorded beforehand, we find them giving innumerable lifetimes to acts of service on behalf of significant others. Yet it is after these significant turning points involving clearing of the heart that they now express the rest of their life energy, until its end, has truly become one of dedicated *metta paricariyā*, a life of service arising out of and fully imbued with unbounded and altruistic love and kindness.



After a Lifetime of Service to Family, Now Free, Offering the Bhikkhunis' Water Fast Heated via the Fire Element. Sonā Therī, Foremost in Ardent & Valiant Effort.

*Taṃ sutvā muditā hutvā, yāvajīvaṃ tadā jinaṃ;
Mettacittā paricariṃ, paccayehi vināyakaṃ*²³

Joy arose in my heart hearing the Victorious One,
And then, for as long as life endured,
I offered requisite support to the Guide,
Serving with a heart of loving kindness.

(Sonā Therī Apadāna, v. 226)

Mettācitta paricari is defined and characterized by a kind of humility and reverential willingness to serve, to *paricari* or *parikari*, to walk the Path on foot (barefoot/in humility and effacement) in each one of its steps. It is the full willingness to lovingly and devotedly give and oneself attend upon whatever it takes to meet and engage with each step and stage of the Path with a mind imbued with *mettā*, *maitrī* or *agape*—altruistic and unlimited love and kindness, without aversion and without ill-will—a major unbinding and purification of heart.

*Atthe dhamme ca nerutte,
paṭibhāne ca vijjati;
Ñāṇaṃ amhaṃ mahāvīra,
uppannaṃ tava santike.*

There exists in us knowledge,
Of the meaning, the Dhamma, and language,
As well as of exposition. This has arisen,
O Great Hero, through association with you.

*Asmābhi pariciṇṇosi,
mettacittāhi nāyaka;
Anujānāhi sabbāsaṃ,
nibbānāya mahāmune.*

We've attended and offered service
With hearts of *mettā*, O Guide;
With your blessing to all of us,
We would attain [Pari]nibbana, Great Sage.

(Gotamī Therī Apadāna, vv. 229–230)

Kalyāṇamitta, Kalyāṇasāhāyikā & Uniting of Intention

One of the strongest and most outstanding examples of this type of loving service and generosity in the *Therī Apadāna* is of the Buddha's former wife and consort of many lifetimes, the therī Yasodharā (“Bearer of Glory”), also known in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* as Bhadda Kaccanā (“Auspicious Golden One”) and in the Pali-text *Vinaya* as Rahulamātā (“Rāhula's Mother”). Both her and therī Bhadda Kapilani's *apadānas* are unique in that their paths and destinies are deeply partnered with the Buddha's and his leading male disciple Mahā Kassapa's destinies, respectively. In Bhadda Kapilani's *apadāna*, she speaks of her and her former husband, Mahā Kassapa's, past and present life relationship of spiritual friendship, greatly extolling the virtue and value of such friendship in the Path over time.

*Na cireneva kālena,
arahattamaṇḍapūṇiṃ;
Aho kalyāṇamittattaṃ,
kassapassa sirīmato.*

After no long time,
I completely fulfilled the arahanta [path].
O, spiritual friendship!—
With Kassapa the Glorious.

(Bhaddā Kāpilānī Therī Apadāna, v. 306)

Her *apadāna* is special in that it is her own “*anumodanā*”—her affirmation and rejoicing—two times over with regards to Mahā Kassapa’s important gifts of robes that are recorded, rather than a buddha’s.

In Yasodharā’s *apadāna*, she serves as spiritual friend, partner, and supporter of the Bodhisattva’s Path to awakening over eons. In nearly forty of her verses she remembers how “I put forth vast alms for you (the *dāna* I offered for your sake was enormous). . . . Constant was my service.” In a full fifteen of her verses, she states her motivation as being *tuyhatthāya*, translated as “on your behalf” or “for your sake,” which even more specifically and literally means when one unites one’s intention, aspiration, and aim with that of another.

One of the two foremost leading women monastic disciples of the Buddha, Uppalavaṇṇā Therī’s path is also so linked to not only the Buddha in his past lives as bodhisattva and to his son, Rāhula, but also very significantly interlinked over many lives with six of her fellow bhikkhunīs: Patacarā, Khemā, Bhaddā Kundalakesī, Kīsagotamī, Dhammadinnā, and Visākhā. The seven of them, together with further *kalyāṇa-sāhāyikā*²⁴ (virtuous woman friends and companions) such as Sumedhā, supported one another in their development of the Path time and time again, until finally becoming the backbone and the core of the founding Bhikkhunī Sangha of most exemplary *arahatī* leading disciples and teachers as well as preeminent leading *upāsikā-sāvīkā* (leading lay woman disciple) Visākhā. In each of their *apadānas* they remember not only their *mudita*-ful support of one another in living the spiritual life at home unmarried, but in the same words, their linking of their destinies with the Buddha’s through collective unity in *buddhopatthana-nirata* (“unwearying service to the Buddha”).

*Komāribrahmacariyaṃ,
rājakañṇā sukhedhitā;
Buddhopaṭṭhānaniratā,
muditā satta dhītarō*

Practicing the holy life [at home] as maidens,
We royal ladies abounded in happiness and comfort;
Seven daughters joyful with *muditā*,
We delighted in service to the Buddha.

(Dhammadinnā Therī Apadāna, v. 306)



Exhorted by a Kālyāṇamitta to Meditate. Nandā Therī, later to become Foremost in Jhāna Meditation.

Clearly, in the *Therī Apadāna* text, one’s karma is not only one’s own, but is also effectively interlinked and interwoven with those one supports and those one chooses to dedicate oneself to as intimate companions and associates. For as we find in verse 7 of *Muttā Therī’s Apadāna*:

For whoever offers service by hand [together],
Be they women or men;
In a future lifetime,
All will come into one another’s presence [again].²⁵

Both having and being good *kalyāṇamitta* and *kalyāṇasāhāyikā* are deeply important. In fact, the very first *apadāna* of Sumedhā Therī, as well as four whole *apadānas* in the final two chapters of the *Therī Apadāna*, are devoted to the collective stories of women whose paths were deeply interrelated with fellow women as well as the Buddha/ bodhisattva as their *kalyāṇamittas* and *sāhāyikās*.

These are in addition to the seven *apadānas* of the seven sisters already mentioned,²⁶ and Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, whose *apadāna* contains within it the stories of five hundred women²⁷ who were her companions, developing the Path together over many lifetimes and fulfilling it together in their final life, even so much as entering *parinibbāna* (Skt: *parinirvana*) together.

In the *Therī Apadāna*’s final chapters, we find more than one hundred thousand women who realized awakening through their beneficent and longtime spiritual companionship, many in relationship not only to the Buddha,

but to two former queens who became leading bhikkhunīs, the therīs Yasodharā and Yasavatī.²⁸

Thus, it is not only generosity, *muditā*, giving rise to aspiration and dedicated loving service considered of high importance in this Way. Spiritual friendship, well wishes, supportiveness to fellow wayfarers, and beneficent sharing and uniting of intention are highlighted and shine brightly as important sustaining qualities for the long term on the Path.

Bodhatthāya & Sambodhi Abhipattha

In the midst of therī Yasodharā's forty or so verses on her lifetimes of generosity and devoted service to the bodhisattva who was to become the Buddha of our Fortunate Eon, past buddhas, former great disciples, etc., we find three special verses²⁹ that serve to define the entirety of this service and vast effort. These verses explicitly mention what was made as a conjoined wish, intention, aspiration, or aim for Bodhi—Awakening (Pali: *Bodhi + attha*, Skt: *bodhi + ārtha*). For Yasodharā, then named Sumittā (Skt: Sumitrā, the Good Friend), this aspiration arose when seeing the ancient Buddha Dīpaṅkara together with the rishi Sumedha. Her wish and her fate were sealed by her sharing of the gift of more than half her lotuses that she had brought to offer to the Buddha with the rishi, for his offering. It is her generosity in sharing and dedicating her gift for his awakening that brought on a prediction of her own future awakening as well. She and the bodhisattva Sumedha's destinies and paths then became intimately karmically interlinked, as explicitly stated by the Buddha Dīpaṅkara, for the entirety of his (their) bodhisattva career(s). For, as the ancient Buddha said, they were *samacitta* ("of like mind"), *samakamma* ("of like kamma/action"), and *samakari bhavisati* ("of like conduct and development").³⁰ And thus, not only he, but she too, was in those moments predicted "full of compassion . . . to fulfill the perfections (*pāramī/ta*s) and attain Bodhi."³¹ As the Buddha Padumuttara said to rishi Sumedha regarding Sumittā (Yasodharā):

*Yathāpi bhaṇḍasāmuggaṃ,
anurakkhati sāmīno;
Evaṃ kusaladhammānaṃ,
anurakkhissate ayaṃ.*

Just as [a wife] safeguards her husband's
Accumulation of wealth and goods,³²
So too she will be a protector
Of [your, the bodhisatta's] wholesome *dhammas*.

*Tassa te anukampantī,
pūrayissati pāramī;
Sīhova pañjaraṃ bhetvā,
pāpuṇissati bodhiyaṃ.*

Showing compassion for you,
She will fulfill the *pāramīs*;
Like a lion breaking out from a cage,
She will attain bodhi.

(*Yasodharā Therī Apadāna*, vv. 375–6)

But she was not the only one. In the verses representing by far the largest number of women of all, we find them too born into the greater family of the man to become that ancient buddha, coming together with the Hamsavati populace to offer support, aspiring to *sambodhi*, and receiving the great sage's benediction:

*Setuvihāre kāretvā,
nimantetvā vināyakaṃ;
Mahādānaṃ daditvāna,
sambodhiṃ abhipatthayim.*

We constructed a vihāra
And invited the Leader;
Offering it together with a great *dāna*,
We made the aspiration for sambodhi.

*Satasahassātikkante,
kappo hessati bhaddako;
Bhavābhavenubhotvāna,
pāpuṇissati bodhiyaṃ.*

One hundred thousand eons from now,
There will be an age called the Bhadda Kappa;
After your together entering the rounds of becoming
again and again,
Finally then, you will achieve bodhi.

(*Caturāsīti Bhikkhunī Sahassa [84,000 Bhikkhunīs] Apadāna*, vv. 41 & 43)

Warnings

Three warnings of setback emerge in the *Therī Apadāna*'s biographical verses. Amidst all of the tales of heavenly rewards, an earthly good life, and final enlightenment resulting from these excellent qualities mentioned herein above, there are three mental and emotional states which are warned against through example by those who have experienced them as degenerating their Path. All three are types of arrogance. These can be seen as important warnings for all, crossing the lay/monastic boundary.

The first warning is of the manifestation of pride and arrogance that is desire for and attachment to physical beauty. Physical beauty and a good, honored station in life are often portrayed as karmic rewards for certain types of beautiful and generous actions in the past. However, upon attaining these, some of our heroines sank in them and were challenged

to get out again. Some, although having great merit with the Buddha, even avoid seeing him, feeling threatened or unfavorably disposed towards him and his teaching due to his challenging take on ego-attachment to physical beauty.

*Tassāhaṃ suppiyā āsiṃ,
rūpake lāyane ratā;
Rūpānaṃ dosavādīti,
na upesiṃ mahādayaṃ.*

I was wonderfully dear to him [her husband, King
Bimbisāra],
Delighting in attachment to the body and form;
I did not approach the One of Great Benevolence,
As it was said he spoke negatively of physical beauty.

(Khemā Therī Apadāna, v. 327)



Still Attached to Beauty. The Life Story of Khemā Therī, later to become Foremost in Wisdom.

However, fortunately for all of those whose stories we have recorded, that is, all those who made it through this trap successfully, both loving enlightened kin and the Buddha himself intervened, removing the veil from their eyes—once again, saved by *kālyāṇamitta*. In these cases, once seeing the vanity and fallacy of this attachment, these meritorious women were completely enlightened very quickly, in the case of the leading therī Khema of Great Wisdom, becoming an arahant even before going forth into monastic life.

The second warning is of a type of arrogance leading to denigrating and disparaging one's accomplished associates and companions in the Holy Life, a type of aversion. This is portrayed as a mistake committed unwittingly by monastics and laity, even those monastics diligently training themselves in *Pāṭimokkha Sīla* and sense restraint—a further warning that one should not have pride in such. As the stories illustrate, such denigration is a karma that leads to dire consequences,

especially if it is denigration of arahants, landing the abuser either in hell or troubled human rebirth, often in the role that one mistakenly spoke of the other, i.e., being forced into prostitution after having abusively called another a prostitute.

*Tadāruṇapure ramme,
brāhmaṇṇakulasambhavā;
Vimuttacittaṃ kupitā,
bhikkhuniṃ abhisāpayiṃ.*

I was born into a Brāhman family in the delightful city of
Aruṇa;
[Where,] due to being shaken and enraged,
I reviled a bhikkhuni whose heart-mind was free.
Calling her a whore.

*Vesikāva anācārā,
jīnasāsanadūsikā;
Evaṃ akkosayitvāna,
tena pāpena kammunā.*

I abused the Dispensation of the Conqueror,
Doing what should not be done;
I was cursed in return
Because of that evil kamma.

*Dāruṇaṃ nirayaṃ gantvā,
mahādukkhasamappitā;
Tato cutā manussesu,
upapannā tapassinī.*

Having gone to a terrible hell,
I experienced great suffering;
Passing from that state and rearing amongst humankind,
I became an ascetic [of another religion] practicing
penances.

(Ambapāli Therī Apadāna, vv. 207–209)

Fortunately, although having sunk from their bad actions, ultimately all of our heroines, like Ambapāli, make it out of this bad way, often needing to make some form of karmic restitution. They are also supported by their bearing the inevitable good results of their former good actions that, remaining intact, rise again to the forefront as the results of the misdeeds are burnt off or overcome.

The third and last warning is of becoming arrogant due to one's accomplishments, even in wholesome qualities in the monastic life. This most often appears as cause of a fall for those who had gained eminence and fame as Dhamma speakers in previous buddhas' dispensations before becoming arahants, that is, while still subject to pride and delusion. Again, after a fall, the merit of the love for the Dhamma

and the merit of their real generosity in their sharing of the Dhamma prevails, and these great ladies rise once again to break through to *arahanta* in their final lives, become preeminent as Dhamma speakers, now beyond all delusions of pride and attachment.

Puṇṇikā Therī, who had gone forth under the former buddhas Vipassi, Sikhī, Vessabhu, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, and Kassapa and with whom she trained consummate in her practice of *sīla* and sense restraint (v. 184), recounts her path and pride in teaching, here in her second to last birth:

*Bahussutā dhammadharā,
dhammatthapaṭipucchikā;
Uggahetā ca dhammānaṃ,
sotā payirupāsītā.*



A Change of Heart: Emptying an Ancient Buddha's Almsbowl After Having Filled it with Mud. Bhaddā Kāpilānī Therī, later to become Foremost in Memory of Past Lives.

I was widely studied, a "Dhamma holder,"
One who asks questions about the Teaching and its
meaning;
I was learned in the Teachings,
And the learned ones were honored and attended to by
me.

*Desentī janamajjhehaṃ,
ahosiṃ jinasāsane;
Bāhusaccena tenāhaṃ,
pesalā atimaññisaṃ.*

I expounded the Conqueror's Dispensation
In the midst of the people of the district;
Due to my manifold expositions of the Truths,
I proudly considered myself pious and virtuous.

Puṇṇikā, having been reborn into a humble water-carrier slave family in the household of Anāthapiṇḍika, gone forth in the Buddha Gotama's dispensation, and at last fully awakened:

*Bhāvanāya mahāpaññā,
suteneva sutāvinī;
Mānena nīcakulajā,
na hi kammaṃ vinassati.*

I cultivated and developed great wisdom,
And became a learned woman of knowledge through what
I had heard;
Due to conceit [I was reborn] to humble family,
As that past kamma [of pride] was not yet destroyed.

*Atthadhammaniruttisu,
paṭibhāne tatheva ca;
Ñāṇaṃ me vimalaṃ suddhaṃ,
buddhaseṭṭhassa vāhasā.*

Through and owing to the Buddha, the Foremost One,
My insight knowledge [*nāṇaṃ*] is pure and clear;
The meaning, the Dhamma, language,
And exposition too are thus.³³

(Puṇṇikā Therī Apadāna, vv. 185–187 & 199–200)

Breakthrough

Although some realized complete awakening quickly, for many if not most of the women portrayed in the *apadāna* stories, their last life involved not only the merit of past lives that they brought to it, but large doses of becoming aware of suffering, *dukkha* (Skt: *duḥkha*). For Punnikā above, her birth in humble family and carrying water in cold weather to fill the



Newborn Carried Away by a Hawk, Young Son Soon to Drown in the River, Family Home Destroyed by Lightning. Patacārā Therī, later to become Foremost in Vinaya.

many water pots of the great household she was born in was all she needed, as she herself and her own good status were most dear to her. For therī Patacārā below, the scenario was very different.

For others, such as the Buddha’s bhikkhunī disciple Foremost in Vinaya, Patacārā, pictured above losing her whole family, the beloved and dearly identified with that was lost to impermanence was not so clearly themselves, but appeared as intimate others. Often the dukkha of seeing the loss of “all that was mine, beloved and pleasing to me,” of seeing the attainment of the good life fall apart—followed upon by once again meeting good *kālyāṇamitta*—was the final combination of factors needed to open their eyes to the Noble Truths, gain penetrative insight knowledge, and realize cessation.



Off the Cliff: Bidding Farewell to Her Beloved but Murderous Robber Husband. Bhaddā Kundalakesī Therī, later to become Foremost in Speed to Gain Awakening.

Conclusion

The mental and emotional qualities and states mentioned herein, along with their cultivation and associated practices, will be familiar to many as they are widely and ritually practiced in South and Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism still today just as they have been for more than two millennia. They originated in a transformative and transitional stage in Buddhism as a whole in which Mahayana thought was beginning to arise. Although *sambodhi abhipattha* (higher aspiration for bodhi), *bodhāttha* (aim for bodhi), and *bodhicitta* (the bodhi-mind) may be different words, a relationship and commonality may easily be perceived. With the patterns of the *Thera Apadāna* and the *Therī Apadāna* not being dissimilar, and the stories of this popular performance/recitation genre widely told, widely known,

and widely informative in Theravada Buddhism, it is easy to see how cultures of *dāna* and *anumodanā*, of loving kindness and service, of making dedicatory aspirations together with offerings, and deliberately linking one’s mind via the present reliquary stupas, Bodhi trees, and monastic sangha with spiritual friends, the goal of the Path, the future Sangha, and the future Buddha Maitreya (Pali: Metteya), became such widespread and popular practices in the Theravada world.

It may also be seen that the mental and emotional states and practices herein are ones that sustain and mature aspiration and resolve, whether in one life or over many lifetimes up to and until one is ready for the final drilling down into impermanence, into dukkha—its causes and its cessation—and non-self with regards to any and every conditioned phenomena. For all the epic verses of the *Therī Apadāna* but Mahā Gotamī’s end gloriously with these verses of freedom and completion:

*Kilesā jhāpitā mayhaṃ,
bhavā sabbe samūhatā;
nāgīva bandhanaṃ chetvā,
vihārāmi anāsavā.*

My defilements (*kilesas*) are burnt out,
All becoming has been uprooted in me;
Like a she-elephant who has broken her bonds,
I live free from the taints (*āsavas*).

*Svāgataṃ vata me āsi,
mama buddhaseṭṭhassa santike;
tisso vijjā anuppattā,
kataṃ buddhassa sāsanaṃ.*

Welcome indeed for me,
Was the presence of the Buddha, the Foremost One;
The three knowledges achieved,
The Buddha’s teaching has been done.

*Paṭisambhidā catasso,
vimokkhāpi ca aṭṭhime;
chaḷabhiññā sacchikatā,
kataṃ buddhassa sāsanaṃ.*

The four discriminatory knowledges
And the eight liberations are mine;
The six super powers manifest,
The Buddha’s teaching has been done.

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's Exhortation

Putte³⁴—
Child—

*Jarāvasānaṃ yobbaññaṃ,
rūpaṃ asucisammataṃ;
Rogantamapicārogyaṃ,
jīvitam maraṇantikam.*

Youth ends with aging,
Beautiful bodies also become unclean;
Good health ends in disease,
Life ends in death.

*Idampi te subhaṃ rūpaṃ,
sasikantaṃ manoharaṃ;
Bhūsanānaṃ alaṅkāraṃ,
sirisaṅghāṭasannibhaṃ.*

This pleasing body of yours,
Appears as a fantasmic confabulation of beauty;
With your jewelry and ornaments,
And all lustrous adornments and beautification.

*Na cireneva kālena,
jarā samadhisessati
Vihāya gehaṃ kāruṇṇe
cara dhammamanindite.*

In no long time,
Aging and decay will overtake all this;
Out of compassion, leave home,
To practice the blameless Dhamma.

—Gotamī Therī to her daughter Nandā (*Nandā Therī Apadāna*, vv. 189–193 [excerpt])

Mahā Gotamī addressing the Fourfold Assembly just before her
and her five hundred companions' *Parinibbāna*:

*Sace mayi dayā atthi,
yadi catthi kataññutā;
Saddhammaṭṭhitiyā sabbā,
karotha vīriyaṃ daḷhaṃ.*

If you all have love or sympathy for me,
And if you have gratitude,

Then, steadfast in the True Dhamma,
Make valiant effort.

(*Gotamī Therī Apadāna*, v. 127)

As the Blessed One, the Buddha, said of her in eulogy just after
the cremation of her body:

*Ayoghanahatasseva,
jalato jātavedassa;
Anupubbūpasantassa,
yathā na ñāyate gati.*

[Like something that sparks or flares]
When stuck by a piece of iron
In a fire that is blazing;
As it gradually becomes calm and cool,
It's destination is not known.³⁵

*Evaṃ sammā vimuttānaṃ,
kāma-bandhoghatāriṇaṃ;
Paññāpetuṃ gati natthi,
pattānaṃ acalaṃ sukhaṃ.*

So too for those who are completely liberated,
Who have crossed the flood and bondage of sense
pleasures,
Who have attained unshakeable bliss;
There is no destination to be pointed out.

He then continued, much as he was to later say before his own
final passing:

*Attadīpā tato hotha,
satipaṭṭhānagocarā;
Bhāvetvā satta-bojjhaṅge,
dukkhassantaṃ karissatha.*

Therefore, be islands unto yourselves,
With the Foundations of Mindfulness as your domain;
Cultivate the Seven Factors of Awakening,
And you will make an end to suffering.

(*Gotamī Therī Apadāna*, vv. 286–288)



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All photos herein are of the tile frescos of the Thirteen Foremost Bhikkhuni Disciples of the Buddha adorning the inside of the outer base of the Noppapolbhumisiri Chedi (aka “the Queen’s Chedi”), a stupa/pagoda constructed in honor of the great women in Buddhism at the highest point in Thailand, Doi Inthanon, courtesy of the photographic documentary dāna of Barry Flaming and Lawan Vongchindarak.

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My thanks to the venerable Suvijjānā Bhikkhunī, who asked the question to which this article was written in reply; to the Western Buddhist Monastic Conferences, which have been of great support to my monastic life since first returning to the U.S. as a novice years ago; to my mother and *puñña-sāhāyikā*, Dr. Patricia M. Buske-Zainal, during visiting whose home this article was conceived and who offered invaluable editorial suggestions; and to the venerable Ayyā Sobhanā Bhikkhunī and the community of Aranya Bodhi Hermitage together with the friends of the Dhammadharini Support Foundation and the Alliance for Bhikkhunis, who have generously together offered me the opportunity and support which has made this writing possible.

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Ayya Tathaaloka Bhikkhuni is an American-born member of the Buddhist Monastic Sangha with a background in Zen and Theravada Buddhism. Venerable Tathaaloka began her journey into monastic life nearly twenty-five years ago and was granted Higher Ordination by a multiethnic gathering of the Bhikkhu & Bhikkhuni Sanghas in Southern California in 1997. In 2005 she co-founded the North American Bhikkhuni Association, the Dhammadharini Support Foundation, and the first Theravada Buddhist women’s monastery in the Western United States. Following in the late Ayya Khema’s footsteps, in 2009 Ayya Tathaaloka became the second Western woman to be appointed a Bhikkhuni Preceptor in Theravada Buddhism, serving since in the going forth, training, and full ordinations of women in Australia, the U.S., and Thailand. Inspired by the Forest traditions in Buddhism, for the past five years she has been involved in developing a rustic, green, off-the-grid women’s monastic retreat on California’s Sonoma County coast named Aranya Bodhi, Awakening Forest Hermitage.

Endnotes

¹ Written for the 2012 Western Buddhist Monastic Conference on “How to Develop the Bodhi Resolve—with Joy—in Challenging Times” in response to the question of one of my Theravāda bhikkhunī peers, who asked of me, “Is there anything in the Therāvada equivalent to the *bodhicitta* of the Mahāyāna?”

² The related Sanskrit *Avadāna* literature is generally thought to postdate the *Apadānas* herein. In Sri Lanka the *Avadāna* genre was also later to become known as the *Avatāra*—the “Incarnation” Stories.

³ See Walters’ “Stupa, Story, and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Asokan India” in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, (pp. 170–171). In *Elder’s Verses II* (p. xxxii), K. R. Norman postulates a century earlier and later time frame, the third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., as the period of the development of the *Apadāna* literature.

⁴ The *Therī Apadāna* mentions the *Kathāvathu* and contains material from the *Therīgāthā* as well as the *Cariyāpiṭaka*, *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Dhammapāda*, but had developed before the first-century *Divyāvadāna* and *Lalitavistāra*. See Walters’ “Stupa, Story, and Empire” (pp. 164–165 & 169–172).

⁵ The ancient post-Mauryan Śunga and Sātavāhana Dynasty strata of stupa complexes of Andhra Pradesh including Amarāvati bear inscriptions in the language of the *Apadānas* epigraphically recording historical enactment of the ideas and practices within. See Walters, *ibid.* (pp. 164–165, 172 & 177).

⁶ According to N. Shanta in *The Unknown Pilgrims*, the Digambara Jains declared that a woman cannot be liberated as long as her *atman* resides in the female body (p. 62). The Digambara sect became schismatic from the Svetambaras, in part over the issue of *strimukti* (Pali: *ittimutti*)—the possibility of liberation for women—which was one of the main factors that split the Jaina community between the third century B.C.E. and the first century C.E. (p. 140). For the Jainas, this question was based in large part on the perceived impossibility of women practicing the perfect “sky-clad” (naked) discipline as well as a belief in their not equally being able to practice *jhāna* (Skt: *dhyāna*) meditation, both of which were considered essential for liberation by the Digambaras. In *Elder’s Verses II* (p. xxxii), K. R. Norman postulates this same period, that is, the third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., to be the period of the development of the Buddhist *Apadāna* literature.

⁷ In this case, validating and recognizing the efficacy of reverential service to one’s husband or master and their religious aim/s, or alternately to a religious teacher or deity (in this case the post-*parinibbāna* Buddha as *Lokanāha*—Lord of the World), as a major part, if not the entirety (as in the *Dharmashastras*), of a women’s spiritual path. The concession is limited, in that finally, in all *apadānas*, as an arahant, one becomes truly independent, as *therī Yasodharā* declares, “one’s own refuge.” The concession or recognition becomes gender neutral in that religious men can and do also undertake a life of such service.

⁸ An amazing one hundred thirty thousand arahant women are recorded as having lived in devoted service to the bodhisattva and in shared dedicated to his goal of *bodhi*, including the ten thousand bhikkhunis of the *Yasodharā Pamukha Dasa Bhikkhuni Sahassa Apadāna*, the eighteen thousand of the *Yasodharā Pamukha Aṭṭhārasa Bhikkhuni Sahassa Apadāna*, the eighteen thousand of the *Yasavatī Pamukha Aṭṭhārasa Bhikkhuni Sahassa Apadāna*, and the eighty-four thousand of the *Caturāsīti Bhikkhuni Sahassa Apadāna*.

⁹ In other verses these are spoken of as *komāribrahmacariya*, that is, the leading of a quasi-monastic celibate religious life while still living at home.

¹⁰ Other versions contain here instead *tammūlaṃ sā ca sāsane khanti (sī. pī. ka.)*.

¹¹ Or, rather than “my acceptance of the Sāsana,” “my patient endurance in the Sāsana,” according to the Pali-text in the footnote directly above.

¹² The Therīgāthā-Commentary explains: *Taṃ paṭhamasamodhānanti tadeva satthusāsanaadhammena paṭhamam samodhānam paṭhamo samāgamo, tadeva satthusāsanaadhamme abhiratāya pariyosāne nibbānanti phalūpacārena kāraṇam vadati*. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates thus: “That first encounter: that very first encounter with the Dhamma of the Master’s teaching, the first meeting. Just that, through delight in the Dhamma of the Master’s teaching, was in the end nibbāna.” He further notes: “She speaks of the cause metaphorically as the fruit” (personal correspondence 24 Nov 2012).

¹³ Her verse 272 (not included here) relates how she invited the Buddha and his disciples for *dāna* for these seven days.

¹⁴ I have opted for the Sri Lankan *buddhānusāsanaṃ* here, while the B° and S° have *buddhāna* and *buddhānam sāsanaṃ*, respectively.

¹⁵ Here, as pointed out by the venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi, the Pali *satti* equals the Sanskrit *śakti*, known in contemporary yogic traditions as “feminine spiritual power” or the “power of the divine feminine.”

¹⁶ The *Kaṭacchubhikkhādāyikā* (Giver of a Single Ladleful of Food) *Therī Apadāna*, also known as the *apadāna* of *Abhayāmata Therī*.

¹⁷ Per Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Pali also has *pāramitā*. In the *Buddhavaṃsa*, *pāramitā* occurs quite often. It seems that in Pali *pāramī* came to prevail over *pāramitā* at a later time, perhaps as a counterpoint to the Mahāyāna adoption of *pāramitā*. But the frequency of *boluomi* 波羅蜜 in Chinese translations of Sanskrit texts (as against 波羅蜜多 = *boluomiduo*) suggests that *pāramī* might also have occurred in Sanskrit” (per personal correspondence 24 Nov 2012). In the canonical Pali texts, a listing of seven *pāramitās* first occurs in the *Cariyapīṭaka* and a listing of ten *pāramitās* in the *Buddhavaṃsa*, both books of the *Khuddhaka Nikāya* collection.

¹⁸ See Walters, “Stupa, Story, and Empire,” pp. 163–165.

¹⁹ In the Thai edition: *daditvā pattacīvaraṃ*

²⁰ As in the footnote above: “gave *dāna* of bowl and robes.”

²¹ *Sijjhati* = Skt *sidhyate*, *saṃ* + *siddhi*.

²² There is an exception in the case of *Bhaddā Kāpilānī*’s verses, where in verse 272 it is she who gives *anumodanā* to her intimate, who is later to become the *thera Mahā Kassapa*.

²³ Other than in gender, *Sonā*’s verse here is virtually identical with *thera Mahā Kassapa*’s as it appears in *Bhaddā Kāpilānī*’s *apadāna* at verse 252: *Taṃ sutvā mudito hutvā, yāvajīvaṃ tadā jināṃ; mettacitto paricari, paccayehi vināyakaṃ.*

²⁴ The masculine form of *sāhāyikā* is *sāhāyaka*, and the plural *sāhāyā*. *Sāhāya* (companion) can be associated, as with the noun *mitta* (friend), with the prefixes *kalyāna* (beautiful/spiritual), *piya* (dear/loved), *dāna* (in generosity), *punna* (in virtue), or other prefixes. The feminine word *sākhī* is also found in the *Nāndā Therī Apadāna* expressing a female friend who can serve as a refuge.

²⁵ This verse from the *Therīgāthā* Commentary, the entire *Apadāna* of which is missing from our version of the *Therī Apadāna* itself, appears to be identical with verse 44 of the *Apadāna* of the 84,000 *Bhikkhunīs*: ‘*Kāci hatthaparikkammaṃ, katāvī naranāriyo; anāgatamhi addhāne, sabbā hessanti sammukhā.*’

²⁶ For more on the seven sisters, see Collett’s “Heuristics and

History in the Shared Narrative of the Seven Sisters in the *Therī Apadāna*.”

²⁷ The *Therīgāthā* also contains the *Pancasātā Pātācārā Gāthā*, the verses of the five hundred *therīs*, as well as the Verses of Thirty *Therīs*, in gratitude to their teacher and benefactress, the leading *Therī Pātācārā*, Foremost in *Vinaya*.

²⁸ In his forthcoming work “Wives of the Saints,” Jonathan Walters writes of these two as the same person, referencing the earlier work of Lilley with the Pali Text Society.

²⁹ Vv. 369, 370, 376.

³⁰ Verse 373 of *Yasodharā Therī Apadāna*

³¹ The Pali-text Commentaries distinguish various types of *bodhi*. In the *Madhurāthhāvilāsini*, the commentary on the *Buddhavaṃsa*, two different types of *bodhi* are mentioned, i.e., *arahant-bodhi* (the awakening of a *sāvaka arahant*) and *sabbābbu-bodhi* (the awakening of a *sammā-sambuddha*). Another name for the *bodhi* of the *sāvaka arahant* is *sāvaka-bodhi*, which is also found in the *Therīgāthā Commentary*. The Pali-text *Udāna Commentary* and *Therīgāthā Commentary* also speak of *sāvaka-bodhisattas* (aspirants to the *arahant* path) and *sāvaka-buddhas* (awakened *arahant* disciples). See the *Udāna Commentary* translated by Peter Masefield (PTS, 1994, v. 1, p. 94); *Therīgāthā Commentary*, (PTS, v. 1, p. 10), cited by Pruitt in *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, v. XXIX.

³² See the *Sigalovāda Sutta*, where the wife has the duty of protecting the wealth the husband brings home. This is also mentioned in some other *suttas*, in AN fives and eights.

³³ *Dhamma, attha, nirutti*, and *pañibhāna* are the four *Paṭisambhidās* (branches of analytic knowledge).

³⁴ It may be noted here, as on many other occasions in the Pali as well as in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit texts, *putta*, often translated as “son,” is being used explicitly with reference to a daughter, and thus may in many cases, in accordance with context, be better rendered as “child.”

³⁵ *Udāna Commentary* and *Dīghanikāya-ṭīkā* comment in almost the same way on the verse. This is from the *Dīghanikāya Mahāvagga-ṭīkā* (VRI 2.50): “This is what is meant: When something made of iron, or a bronze dish, etc., is being struck, hit, by a mass of iron—by an iron hammer or mallet, etc.—when the blazing fire gradually subsides (lit. ‘becomes tranquil’), its destination (the fire’s) is not discerned anywhere in the ten directions; because it has ceased without connection through the cessation of its conditions” (translation by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi via personal correspondence 24 Nov 2012).