VOICES OF EARLY BUDDHIST NUNS:
A DHARMALOGICAL APPROACH TO THE *THERĪGĀTHĀ*

A thesis by

Meg Doshin Gawler

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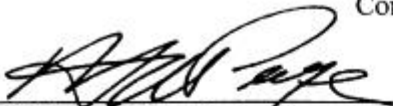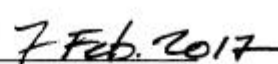in partial fulfillment of the
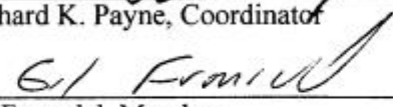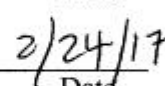
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_____   7 Feb. 2017
Richard K. Payne, Coordinator   Date

_____   2/7/17
Gil Fronsdal, Member   Date

_____   2/24/17
Jan Nattier, Member   Date

Abstract

The *Therīgāthā* is a celebration, with many different human faces, of women's personal experiences of Nibbāna. This thesis, in the field of Theravāda Buddhist Studies, examines the *Therīgāthā* from a dharmalogical perspective. I investigate the distinguishing characteristics of these early female voices transmitting the Buddha's teachings. I examine the religious, social, and literary context in which the poems were composed, and their textual history and content. I analyze the Pāli text for key words indicative of the relative dating of this text compared to others in the Pāli canon, and investigate the frequencies of stock phrases in the wider context of the *Sutta Piṭaka*. This analysis also reveals differences between the poems of the nuns compared to those of the monks in the *Theragāthā*.

I argue that the poems of the *Therīgāthā* can be used effectively by Dharma teachers today to inspire Buddhist practitioners, particularly in regard to the Third Noble Truth, the truth of freedom. This thesis explores a central message of the *Therīgāthā* that Nibbāna, complete release, is possible in this very lifetime, and that it is just as possible for women as for men.

With the variety of the testimonials of ultimate freedom found in these poems, this text can inspire, guide, and liberate practitioners regardless of their sex, culture, situation, background, or even their challenges. In exploring what the *Therīgāthā* depicts about how these venerable nuns train, I offer my interpretation, with illustrations from their poems, of a path of practice that can lead to liberation, and I discuss the role of insight and the goal of the training, Nibbāna. I investigate: 1) the foundations of practice: ethics, renunciation, meditation, friendship, and having a teacher one can trust; 2) wise effort; 3) the application of effort to: purifying the mind, courage, letting go of afflictive states, stilling desires, contentment, concentration, and open awareness; 4) insight; and 5) letting go. The thesis concludes with reflections on the fundamental message of the *Therīgāthā*, its potential to elicit joy, and how it can inspire practitioners today, not least by offering us a taste of Nibbāna.

This thesis is dedicated, with endless gratitude, to my teachers:

Shunryu Suzuki

Jack Kornfield

Gil Fronsdal

and to

all the dedicated and courageous women disciples of the Buddha

who, in the modern day, have become *bhikkhunī*s in the Theravāda tradition

in spite of enormous difficulties.

You inspire us all.

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Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya - The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*
Av	*Aṭṭhakavagga*
B.C.E.	Before the Common Era
C.E.	Common Era
CS	Myanmar *Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyanā* edition of the Pāli *tipiṭaka*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya - The Long Discourses of the Buddha*
DPR	Digital Pali Reader
KN	*Khuddaka Nikāya - Minor Collection*
lit.	literally
loc	location (a substitution for page numbers in Kindle texts)
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya - The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*
n	note
nn	notes
Nidd I	*Mahāniddesa* part I (commenting on the *Aṭṭhakavagga*)
Nikāya	volume, collection
PED	Pali-English Dictionary of the Pali Text Society
PTS	Pali Text Society
p	page
pp	pages
Pv	*Petavatthu*
Skt	Sanskrit
SN	*Saṃyutta Nikāya - The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*
Sn	*Sutta Nipāta*
Th	*Theragāthā*
Thī	*Therīgāthā*
Thī-a	*Therīgāthā-Aṭṭhakathā - Commentary on the Therīgāthā*
v	verse
vs.	versus
vv	verses
Vv	*Vimānavatthu*

1. Introduction

1.1. The *Therīgāthā*

The *Therīgāthā* (Thī), a collection of poems attributed to early female monastic disciples of the Buddha (therīs),[1] is the first known anthology of women's literature on earth. It is thought to be the only canonical text of one of the world's major religions attributed to women and focusing on women's religious experiences and teachings. These are poems of awakening in the form of inspired utterances and dialogues of varying lengths. The *Therīgāthā,* or *The Verses of the Elder Nuns*, offers personal testimonies of women from many different stations and walks of life, recounting their paths to freedom and celebrating their liberation. A parallel anthology is the *Theragāthā* (Th), *The Verses of the Elder Monks*.

'*Therīgāthā*' literally means the poems or songs of the wise and elder nuns. In Pāli, *therī* is the feminine form of *thera* meaning 'old' or 'venerable.' In the Theravāda monastic community, one is first ordained as a novice; then, having successfully completed the novice period, men take full ordination as a *bhikkhu* (monk) and women as a *bhikkhunī* (nun). After a certain degree of spiritual attainment or years of monastic seniority as a *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhunī* (commonly ten years), the monastic is accorded the title of *Thera* (*Therī* for women), an honorific meaning 'Elder' or 'Venerable.' According to the online Pali-English Dictionary of the Pali Text Society (PED), a *bhikkhu*, however junior, may be called *thera* on account of his wisdom, and at a very early date, this secondary meaning of 'distinguished' and 'wise' was tending to supplant the initial

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[1] *Therī*: an old woman or elder nun recognized as having wisdom.

designation of simply ten years of seniority.[2] In the *Therīgāthā* there is no mention of being distinguished because of one's seniority. However, what does distinguish the nuns of this anthology is their wisdom and their compassion.

The second word in the title, *gāthā*, means a verse or stanza of poetry. It is related to the verb *gāyati*, which means to sing or recite. It may well be that these poems were recited, chanted, or even sung or dramatically performed as a way of encapsulating and transmitting the experience and the teachings of their authors.

1.2. Purpose of the Text

As a whole, most of the poems of the *Therīgāthā* seek to communicate the experience of awakening of these nuns. They are testimonies of what we now know as the Third Noble Truth, the truth that liberation, the end of suffering – and which is possible in this lifetime. As such, these verses have inspired Buddhist practitioners for over two millennia. Dhammapāla, who is thought to have lived in the sixth century C.E., wrote erudite commentaries on both the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā*. He calls the therīs' poems *udāna* (inspired utterances), which are "verses consisting of knowledge about some situation accompanied by the euphoria that is felt there."[3] One of the main purposes of the *Therīgāthā* does seem to be the impetus of these enlightened women to share the joy of their liberation. Perhaps their hope was that their words could help others aspire to the freedom taught by the Buddha. Many of the therīs featured in this collection

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[2] The online DPR dictionary defines 'thera' as "an elder; a senior; a monk who has spent 10 years from his *upasampadā*." The online PED cites AN 4.22, where the Buddha explains why he does not pay homage to brahmins who are advanced in age: "These venerable ones do not know what an elder is or what the qualities that make one an elder are. … even though someone is young, a youth with black hair … if he speaks at a proper time, speaks what is truthful, … what is beneficial … speaks words that are worth recording … then he is reckoned as a wise elder." - Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 408-409.

[3] Charles Hallisey, trans., *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women (Murty Classical Library of India)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), vii.

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of poems recount their disappointment, hardship, struggle, grief, and even madness, and they find – for themselves – their way out of suffering, their way to complete release. In many cases, their stories are personal, vivid, and down to earth, and their delight is palpable. What this implies today for those who read the voices of these early women disciples, is that we too, in this very life, have the potential to become free and to rest in the unsurpassed safety of liberation.

1.3. Importance of the Text

The verses of both the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā* are thought to portray experiences of awakening and/or essential teachings of early Buddhist monastics. According to Kathryn Blackstone, these poems "constitute the records of the experiences of the Buddha's first followers, all of whom realized liberation."[4] My analysis of the poems, however, shows that it is unlikely that all the therīs featured in the *Therīgāthā* were among the Buddha's first followers, and while most of them are depicted as having realized liberation, this is not true for all of them.[5] Many of these poems give us an intriguing glimpse of the therīs' spiritual journeys. Of all the texts in the Pāli canon, it is the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā* that focus most on conveying the personal experiences of early Buddhist monastics, struggling with the causes of suffering and eventually gaining liberation. Thus, these texts can provide insights from early Buddhist practitioners of their path to ultimate spiritual realization.

We are fortunate today that the poems of these early Buddhist monastics were so valued that they continued to be transmitted orally, were collected into these anthologies, and ultimately written down. This is especially true for the verses of the nuns. It is

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[4] Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 6.
[5] For example, many of the one verse poems are admonitions to practice for awakening.

remarkable that, even in a society that was becoming increasingly patriarchal,[6] the poems of these early Buddhist nuns have been preserved for over two millennia, even after the order of Theravāda nuns died out in the eleventh century C.E. This is a testimony to the freshness and power of these women's voices.

Concerning the *Verses of the Elder Monks*, Bhikkhu Sujato writes, "Most of the verses in the *Theragāthā* are, like the bulk of the early texts, straightforward and didactic. Though formally cast as verse, their concern is not primarily with poetic style, but with meaning. They employed their literary forms solely in order to create an understanding in the listener, an understanding that leads to the letting go of suffering."[7] I agree with Bhikkhu Sujato and would argue that, beyond their literary merit, the purpose of these texts is to inspire the practitioner on the path to liberation. It is for this reason that I have undertaken a dharmalogical analysis of the *Therīgāthā*.

1.4. Dharmalogy

'Dharmalogy' (also spelled 'dharmology') is a neologism, which has been used to denote specifically Buddhist approaches to studying the theories and practices of Buddhism. Roger Corless notes that he first came across the term in Alfred Bloom's translation of *Shoshinge*,[8] where it appears in the form 'dharmalogically.' He reports that Bloom got the term from Taitetsu Unno, who spelled it 'dharmology,' but changed it to

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[6] Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender* ed. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 12-13.

[7] Bhikkhu Sujato, trans., *The Verses of the Senior Monks: an approachable translation of the Theragatha*, SuttaCentral, 2016, accessed September 8, 2016, https://sujato.wordpress.com/2014/09/09/the-verses-of-the-senior-monks-an-approachable-translation-of-the-theragatha/.

[8] Alfred Bloom, *Shoshinge: The Heart of Shin Buddhism* (Honolulu: Buddhist Study Center Press, 1986), 20.

the "apparently more correct 'dharmalogy.'"[9] Rita Gross, a self-identified Buddhist theologian, suggests that the work of Buddhist theologians involves the discipline and the practice of studying and commenting on the Dharma[10] (a time-honored practice in Buddhism), and coming up with dharmic solutions to contemporary issues. She suggests that one could call this discipline 'dharmalogy,' and that this is a more accurate term than either 'theology' or 'buddhology.'[11] Dharmalogy, however, is often associated with Buddhist theology, a term that not all Buddhist scholars are comfortable with.

At first blush, the concept of 'Buddhist theology' seems an oxymoron, and some scholars argue that the term is inappropriate for a non-theistic religion such as Buddhism.[12] However, a number of contemporary Buddhist academics find the concept of 'Buddhist theology' useful. Roger Jackson argues that 'theology' need not imply belief in gods of any sort, as long as the tradition conceives some notion of ultimate reality.[13] Likewise, David Tracy finds that "to speak of 'theology' is a ... useful way to indicate the more strictly intellectual interpretations of any tradition, whether that tradition is theistic or not."[14] Jackson, arguing for a broader definition of 'theology' as reflection within a religious tradition, concludes that "right from its inception, Buddhism has been deeply

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[9] Roger Corless, "Hermeneutics and Dharmology: Finding an American Buddhist Voice," in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky (Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 2000), 105.

[10] *Dhamma* in Pāli. As the Sanskrit form, 'Dharma,' has made its way into the English language, at least in Buddhist circles, I generally use this more familiar version of the same term.

[11] Rita M. Gross, "Buddhist Theology?" in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky (Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 2000), 58.

[12] Richard K. Payne, "Why "Buddhist Theology" is not a Good Idea." *The Pure Land: Journal of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies* (2017, in press).

[13] Roger R. Jackson, "Buddhist Theology: Its Historical Context," in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, eds. Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky (Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 2000), 1.

[14] David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 447.

involved in 'theological' activity."[15] In 'Buddhist theology,' the term 'theology' is clearly meant in its broader sense. The value of a theological or dharmalogical approach is that it allows Buddhist scholars "not merely to describe their tradition at a distance (from the bracketed, 'value neutral' position of religious studies), but precisely to clarify the truth and value of their tradition from a critical perspective located within it."[16] José Cabezón characterizes Buddhist theology as the attempt to balance theory and practice, and argues that "the conceptual study of doctrine and its internalization in meditation serves as a continual reminder that the Buddhist theological task must take both [theory and practice] into account, and that it can be reduced to neither."[17] For the sake of clarity, I will use 'dharmalogy' to include what many contemporary scholars refer to as Buddhist theology.

In examining the *Therīgāthā* from a dharmalogical perspective, I explore how these poems might be used in teaching the Dharma today. I investigate the *Therīgāthā* as a dharmalogical sourcebook, studying its teachings on the ultimate Buddhist goal, Nibbāna.[18] In Pāli, *nibbāna* literally means 'cooling,' 'quenching,' 'extinction [of a fire].' It is the result of the complete dying out of the threefold fire of lust, hatred, and delusion (*rāga*, *dosa*, and *moha*).[19] The Buddha refers to Nibbāna as "the unborn … unageing … unailing … deathless … sorrowless … undefiled supreme security from bondage,[20]

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[15] Jackson, "Buddhist Theology: Its Historical Context," 2.

[16] John J. Makransky, "Contemporary Academic Buddhist Theology: Its Emergence and Rationale," in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky (Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 2000), 14.

[17] José Ignacio Cabezón, "Buddhist Theology in the Academy," in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky (Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 2000), 34.

[18] Sanskrit: *Nirvana*.

[19] The Buddha's disciple Sāriputta puts it clearly: "The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion: this, friend, is called Nibbāna." (SN 38:1) - Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya; Translated from the Pāli,* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1294.

[20] "Supreme security from bondage" is a translation of *anuttara yogakkhema.*

Nibbāna."[21] It is the freedom from suffering caused by clinging. The influential twentieth

century Sri Lankan meditation master, scholar, and forest monk, Matara Sri Ñāṇārāma,

explains Nibbāna as follows,

> The purpose of living the holy life ... is nothing but the complete extinction of all defilements without any kind of grasping ... Nibbāna. A meditator has to pay attention to the application of mindfulness at all times ... The main impediment is the personality view ... Nibbāna is free from the impediment of views ... It is free from all the impediments brought about by the defilements ... Compounded things are liable to decay and death. In the uncompounded there is no decay and death.[22]

Nibbāna is associated with the Buddhist concept of emptiness (*suññatā*), a state of

mind into which the mature practitioner can enter and abide. Gil Fronsdal explains that

Buddhist practice can be seen as a process of emptying ourselves of the concepts,

projections, and attachments that we overlay on our experience.[23]

1.5. The *Therīgāthā* as a Foundation for Buddhist Teachings

Obviously, most of the poems of the *Therīgāthā* are not directly the teachings of

the Buddha, but rather they present stories purporting to show how his teachings were

realized by some of his early female disciples. As a foundation for studying the teachings

of the Buddha, these poems, which focus on the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice –

liberation – provide glimpses of these women's paths to and experiences of awakening.

They represent the understanding of women participating in the goal of the Buddhist

path. And they explore what constitutes wisdom, how one can go astray, and how one

might address hardship and difficulty along the way.

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[21] MN 26:18 - Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, 4th ed., (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009), 259-260.
[22] Matara Sri Ñāṇārāma, *The Seven Stages of Purification & The Insight Knowledges: A Guide to the Progressive Stages of Buddhist Meditation* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1983), 15, 33, 108-110. Accessed September 25, 2016. http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/bm7insight.pdf.
[23] Gil Fronsdal, "Empty, Emptying and Emptiness in the Pali Suttas," (Berkeley CA: Institute of Buddhist Studies course handout, 2016), 5.

1.6. Thesis Statement and Overall Dharmalogical Interpretation

The poems of awakening attributed to the Buddha's elder women disciples and collected in the *Therīgāthā*, offer testimonies celebrating liberation. My hypothesis is that the poems of the *Therīgāthā* can be used effectively by Dharma teachers today to inspire Buddhist practitioners, particularly in regard to the Third Noble Truth, the truth of freedom. These poems encourage us by their example that Nibbāna, complete release, is possible in this very lifetime. These poems give the modern practitioner a taste of freedom, inviting us into the therīs' world of whole-hearted practice and realization. Especially relevant today is the great diversity of the testimonials of ultimate freedom found in the *Therīgāthā*, which have the potential to motivate a wide range of practitioners, regardless of their current situation, their background, and their challenges.

The *Therīgāthā* offers examples of these early women practitioners conquering their difficulties and overcoming their suffering to attain complete freedom. It can be encouraging to hear these accounts of how the therīs vanquish their wild minds, debilitating grief, insanity, poverty, rejection, *āsava*s (the 'taints' of sense desire, craving for existence and ignorance), and despair. Another essential aspect of the message of these early female arahants is that the goal is reflected in the path – that the practitioner's path towards complete release already embodies qualities of freedom. And the path is often more a spiral than a straight line. My interpretation is that on the Buddhist path of practice one takes countless small steps of letting go, coming back again and again to revisit areas of contraction or resistance, and each time, letting go a bit more. In this way, step by step, the practitioner finds her way to becoming progressively established in liberation. And just as the poems of the *Therīgāthā* give the listener a taste of Nibbāna, so too do the practitioner's small steps of letting go of greed, hate, and delusion give him or

her a taste of freedom. I argue that these tastes are valuable and transformative: when one inclines the mind towards Nibbāna, little by little the path becomes the fruit.

This thesis, in the field of Theravāda Buddhist Studies, examines the *Therīgāthā* from a dharmalogical perspective. I investigate and document the distinguishing characteristics of these examples of the earliest known female voices transmitting the Buddha's teachings, and explore how these poems be used in teaching the Dharma today. I suggest ways in which these ancient, distinctly female voices offer insights that could prove useful in the evolving landscape of contemporary Buddhist teachings. As poetry, these texts invite the reader to go beyond discursive thought, and to engage with their teachings through more direct, personal insight. I believe that an exploration of the *Therīgāthā* can make an important contribution to the pedagogy of transmitting the Buddha's teachings in the twenty-first century.

1.7. Overview of the Thesis

The chapters of this thesis are organized as follows:
1. Introduction
2. Challenges, Approach, and Methodology
3. Religious, Social, and Literary Context
4. Textual History and Content of the *Therīgāthā*
5. A Dharmalogical Approach to the *Therīgāthā*
6. Conclusion
7. Bibliography
8. Appendices.

Abbreviations are found on page vi, and a glossary in Appendix 1 (pp 101-102).

Chapter 5 is the most important chapter, presenting findings from examining the *Therīgāthā* through the lens of dharmalogy. In analyzing and interpreting the text to

support contemporary Buddhist practitioners, this chapter discusses:

- the potential of every heart to be free
- the training and practices that lead to liberation
- the goal, Nibbāna.

In the Conclusion I discuss the fundamental message of the *Therīgāthā*, its potential to elicit joy, and how it can inspire practitioners today.

2. Challenges, Approach, and Methodology

2.1. Presuppositions, Potential Biases, and Motivations

There are a number of challenging issues to consider when researching a text such as the *Therīgāthā*. One such challenge is that the researcher who formulates the question has already in some way influenced the answer(s). For example, Salgado, in her chapter on "Decolonizing Female Renunciation," cautions modern scholars studying Buddhist nuns against framing the question in liberal feminist thinking and not taking into account the conditions in which the female renunciants actually live and practice, particularly in Asia.[24] I am motivated to understand these poems as they might have been understood by those women who composed them, and by those who heard them spoken, performed, or sung, because I believe that a good understanding of these ancient teachings of the *Therīgāthā* as they may have been taught is important to provide a sound basis for a dharmalogical interpretation. Therefore, I have endeavored to clarify my own presuppositions and potential biases as a fledgling Buddhist scholar, coming from a very different social and educational context than the one in which these poems were composed, and as a Buddhist practitioner immersed in the teachings of Buddhism as it

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[24] Nirmala S. Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: in Search of the Female Renunciant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 47.

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has evolved during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the West.

Whereas questions about what constitutes authentic transcendent knowledge, truth, and transformative experiences have tended to be bracketed in traditional religious studies, these questions come to the forefront in dharmalogy. Makransky, however, observes that the domains of religious studies and theological studies are becoming less and less mutually exclusive.[25] As a Buddhist teacher, I hope to explore the intersection between traditional academic Buddhist studies and Buddhist theology / dharmalogy, as it is emerging today. The kind of scholarship that I aim to present in this thesis is informed by a long commitment to Buddhist practice.

2.2. Authorial Community

The therīs featured in the *Therīgāthā* are depicted as coming from different stations and walks of life. In addition, they and the poems attributed to them may come from different time periods and different social, cultural, and literary settings. The *Therīgāthā* is a heterogeneous collection in terms of the complexity of the poems, the backgrounds of the various attributed authors, the circumstances under which the poems were written, the genres they reflect, and the stories they tell. The anthology is ascribed to a wide variety of nuns, whose compositions naturally differ in content, poetic style, artistic sophistication, and dharmalogical interest.

Given this intrinsic heterogeneity, the authorial community of most of the *Therīgāthā* can still perhaps be seen as homogeneous in the sense that almost all of the ascribed authors are depicted as having experienced ultimate freedom. They see things as they really are, and have been inspired to put their experience and their understanding

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[25] Makransky, "Contemporary Academic Buddhist Theology," 15-16.

into verse. I posit that it is the universality of Nibbāna that allows this text to be treated as a whole. I believe that, despite the heterogeneous composition of the *Therīgāthā*, since the focus of the poems, and therefore of the authors, editors and redactors, is to convey the experience of the nuns in ending their suffering, one can approach the *Therīgāthā* as reflecting an authorial community unified by its knowledge of liberation. The same could be said for the *Verses of the Elder Monks*. Complications in the last four poems of the *Therīgāthā*, attributed to Subhā Kammāradhītu, Subhā Jīvakambavanikā, Isidāsī, and Sumedhā, will be discussed further in a later chapter under "Genres of Poems."

2.3. Literary Approach

The literary approach that I find most relevant for the *Therīgāthā* is feminist criticism, since the culture in which these poems were composed – like the various cultures in which Buddhism is practiced today – was, and often remains, patriarchal, and therefore profoundly sexist. Feminists recognize that women are oppressed by patriarchy, and that in cultures where patriarchy reigns, women are objectified, marginalized, and seen as less capable than men. The goal of feminist theory and literary criticism is to see through and go beyond pervasive and deeply rooted patriarchal ideologies and to promote women's equality. Feminists see that, while biology determines one's sex (female or male), culture determines one's gender (feminine or masculine). Thus, the traits we associate with feminine or masculine are not inborn, but rather are socially constructed and learned.[26] Whereas a patriarchial stance encourages one to claim that he or she is objective, feminism stresses the importance of recognizing our subjectivity in how we view ourselves and others. My own upbringing taught me to internalize the norms and

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[26] Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 92.

values of patriarchy and encouraged me to become a "patriarchal woman," tending to unconsciously see men as more capable, even though intellectually this was certainly not what I believed. In terms of my sexual orientation, I discovered in my twenties that I am bisexual, and this opened many doors for me in my thinking about gender roles.

Julia Kristeva, a French psychoanalytic feminist, posits that language consists of two dimensions: the symbolic and the 'semiotic.' The symbolic, which we are all familiar with, is where words operate and are attributed meaning. The semiotic dimension of language is the *way* we speak, the meaning that is conveyed in our intonation, rhythm, and body language. Kristeva maintains that scientific language stresses the symbolic and minimizes the semiotic component, whereas in poetry, the semiotic tends to gain the upper hand. She points out that, "in any poetic language ... the rhythmic constraints ... perform an organizing function that could ... violate certain grammatical rules."[27] As explained below in Section 3.3.3 on the poetry of the *Therīgāthā*, we see exactly this in the Pāli canon: in the poetic texts, the poetic meter is primary and will twist the grammar if necessary. Lois Tyson explains that we remain in contact with our precognitive, preverbal experience through this semiotic aspect of language. While symbolic language is in the domain of patriarchy, the semiotic remains beyond patriarchal programming – and Kristeva suggests that we can, and should, via creative means, access that part of our unconscious where the semiotic resides, for "these are the vehicles that allow us a new way to relate to language and to thereby overcome the stranglehold patriarchy has on the way women and men think." Kristeva suggests art and literature as creative means

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[27] "Dans tout langage poétique, les contraintes rythmiques … joue un rôle organisateur qui peut aller jusqu'à enfreindre certaines règles grammaticales … et souvent néglige l'importance du message idéatoire" - Julia Kristeva, "D'une identité à l'autre," in *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 158-160.

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through which we can access our preverbal semiotic language.[28] I believe that meditation could be an avenue as well. For a practitioner of meditation, some insights take the form of words or symbolic language, whereas other insights – when the mind is calm, concentrated, and open – seem to occur without being tied to thoughts or words, perhaps in a way similar to semiotics.

Analyzing the *Therīgāthā* from the point of view of feminist theory raises questions that would include: 1) What does the *Therīgāthā* reveal about the operations of patriarchy at the time? 2) How are women portrayed? 3) Does the text reinforce or does it undermine patriarchal ideology? 4) Does the text suggest that there are genders other than masculine and feminine? 5) Do the voices of the wise women of the *Therīgāthā* add a dimension to Buddhist teachings that may be underappreciated?

2.4. Dharmalogical Approach

While a dharmalogical approach by necessity involves some degree of interpretation, my goal is to develop this analysis in the light of what we know about the religious, social, and literary context at the time, steeping myself in the therīs' traditions to the extent possible, and investigating and making use of their cultural and intellectual categories. In doing so, I appreciate the difficulty of analyzing texts from a very different culture, which began not as a written, but as an oral tradition over two millennia ago.

Many characteristics of early Buddhist teachings are as relevant today as they were during the lifetime of the Buddha. For example, contemporary scholarship values reading critically and thinking critically. Similarly, the Buddha stressed *dhammavicaya* (investigation as a factor of enlightenment) – observing one's experience precisely and

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[28] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 104.

intimately, so as to be able to see for oneself things as they really are. Both scholarship and Buddhist practice are based on careful attention to the specificity and details of what one is studying. Both attempt to put aside preconceived ideas so that one can see clearly. My hope is to bring this same quality of critical investigation, which is such an integral part of Buddhist practice in general, to this study of the *Therīgāthā*.

Another lens is that of *anattā* (not-self). Unfortunately, academic scholarship can easily trap the researcher in the need to establish or assert an identity as a scholar – to be someone – and with that, the need to compete with, and hopefully outshine, the work of others. Such attitudes are not difficult to find in academia, even among scholars who have already garnered a solid reputation in their fields, and even in Buddhist studies. So I ask myself, how can I approach this work without falling into the trap of attachment to ideas of self? How could my research be improved by approaching my sources from a position of empathy,[29] allowing the divide between self and other to gently soften?

The findings of this thesis are examined primarily through the lens of "dharmalogy." Corless explains that for an investigation to be dharmalogical, the mind "must be properly trained, and that this training does not consist in stuffing the mind with information, but in sharpening, clearing and transforming it through the triple practice of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *prajñā*."[30] As a long-time Buddhist practitioner, I have hoped to bring such a mind to this study. The poems of the *Therīgāthā* invite the reader or the listener to glimpse the truth of the way things are – truth that is obscured when one is caught by even subtle forms of desire, aversion, or delusion. My effort has been to approach these texts with an open mind, as uncluttered as possible with preconceived ideas, and to

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[29] Eric M. Gurevitch, "Empathetic Criticism," *Public Books* (June 4, 2105), accessed September 5, 2016, http://www.publicbooks.org/blog/empathetic-criticism.
[30] Corless, "Hermeneutics and Dharmology," 104.

follow the invitation that often introduces the Buddha's teachings: to "come and see" (*ehipassika*) whether the teachings are true for us.

2.5. Methodology

Throughout this thesis, my baseline for the text is the Myanmar *Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyanā* (CS) edition of the Pāli *tipiṭaka* using the Digital Pali Reader (DPR).[31] In translations of the text, verse numbers can differ slightly (see Appendix 2, p 102). Throughout this thesis, my reference for verse numbers in the *Therīgāthā* is the Pāli text as published by the DPR. When referring to a therī, I indicate the DPR verse numbers of her poem in parentheses after her name. Table 8 in Appendix 2 can be used to find the equivalent verse numbers in the two full translations by K. R. Norman (2nd ed.)[32] and Charles Hallisey.[33]

The first step in my research is to read carefully through the entire text of the *Therīgāthā*, analyzing each poem and each verse in light of the meaning of key concepts in Pāli. My approach is to read the Pāli original together with Norman's translation, and to supplement this with the translations by Hallisey, Susan Murcott,[34] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu,[35] and others.

For each poem, I note: the verse numbers; the therī to whom the poem is attributed; the major theme(s) of the poem in English and in Pāli; how she became enlightened; the meaning of her name, if known; any biographical information contained

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[31] The Digital Pali Reader is a plug-in for Mozilla Firefox, which accesses several databases of the Pāli *tipiṭika*. It can be downloaded at: http://pali.sirimangalo.org/.

[32] K. R. Norman, trans., *The Elders' Verses I: Theragāthā*, 2nd ed. (Lancaster: Pali Text Society, 2007).

[33] Hallisey, *Therigatha*.

[34] Susan Murcott, *First Buddhist Women: Poems and Stories of Awakening* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2006).

[35] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, trans., *Poems of the Elders: An Anthology from the Theragāthā & Therīgāthā* (Valley Center CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2015).

in the poems. For each verse, I record: who is speaking to whom; key word(s) in Pāli and English; and stock phrases in Pāli and English, with connections among different poems in which the phrases are repeated.

I also analyze the literary or dharmic choices of six translators who have published partial versions of the *Therīgāthā*: Murcott, Ṭhānissaro, Schelling and Waldman,[36] Jayasura,[37] Booth,[38] and Jootla.[39] The results are presented in Appendix 3 (p 103). This appendix also allows the reader to find the page numbers of all the English translations to date in addition to the two full translations of Norman and Hallisey.

A second step is to consult information on the therīs from the commentary[40] and other sources.[41] I limit my research, however, to the lifetime in which the therīs are depicted as composing their poems and do not include exploring the stories of the past lives of the nuns in the *Therī-Apadāna*, which some scholars consider to provide the karmic back story that allowed the nun to achieve awakening.[42]

Some specific methodological issues are discussed in the chapter below on the textual history and content of the *Therīgāthā*.

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[36] Andrew Schelling and Anne Waldman, trans., *Songs of the Sons and Daughters of Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996).

[37] Edmund Jayasuriya, trans., *Thera-Therī Gāthā: Inspired Utterances of Buddhist Monks and Nuns* (Dehiwela: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1999), 49-95.

[38] Francis Booth, trans., *Songs of the Elder Sisters* (self-published, 2012), Kindle.

[39] Susan Elbaum Jootla, *Inspiration from Enlightened Nuns* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1988). Jootla uses the translations of Rhys Davids and Norman in a discussion of how modern practitioners might be inspired by these ancient nuns.

[40] E. Müller, ed., *Paramatthadīpanī: Dhammapāla's Commentary on the Therīgāthā* (Miami FL: Hardpress Publishing, 2012) and William Pruitt, trans., *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1998).

[41] G. P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007).

[42] Sally Mellick Cutler, "The Pāli Apadāna Collection," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* XX (1994): 24.

3. Religious, Social, and Literary Context

3.1. Religious Context

The dominant religion in the region where the Buddha taught was Brahmanism, which later developed into the religion now known as Hinduism.[43] The first generations of Indian Buddhists lived in a culture strongly defined by the religious beliefs, practices, and values of brahmins and renunciants (*samaṇa*s). The Buddha and his disciples, as well as other *samaṇa* movements such as the Jains, challenged the authority and orthodoxy of Vedic scriptures, cosmogony, rituals, and social classes. In particular, the Buddha challenged the Vedic concept of *ātman*[44] (the Self), central to that religion. In addition, unlike the teachings in the Upanishads, those of the Buddha do not reify consciousness, and they identify *viññāṇa*, consciousness (one of the five aggregates, or *khandha*s),[45] as a process, not a thing.[46] Like each of the five *khandha*s, consciousness is dependently originated. Likewise, the Buddha's definition of karma[47] as intention was his answer to Brahmanic ritualism.[48] As shown in Table 1 below (p 24), fully one fourth of the therīs in the *Therīgāthā* are considered to be of brahmin social origin. Puṇṇā's poem (236-251)[49] is an extraordinary example of a former slave who teaches, converts and enlightens a Brahmin, pointing out the futility of his ritualism. Not only a woman, but also a slave teaching a Brahmin would have been unthinkable in Brahmanic circles at the time.

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[43] Peter Harvey, "The Buddha and his Indian Context," in *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, History and Practices*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8-9.

[44] *Attan* or *atta* in Pāli.

[45] *Khandha* (Skt: *skandha*): often translated as 'aggregate.' The applied meaning according to the online PED is "all that is comprised under; constituent element, factor." In the plural: "the elements or substrata of sensory existence, sensorial aggregates which condition the appearance of life in any form."

[46] Richard F. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routlege, 2006), 43.

[47] *Kamma* in Pāli.

[48] Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*, 51, citing AN 3:415.

[49] Throughout this thesis, the DPR verse numbers of the therīs' poems are given after their names.

The followers of the Buddha became part of the *samaṇa* culture: homeless, depending on alms, and engaging in religious debates. Diana Clark explains that, unlike the brahmins, the *samaṇa*s generally severed ties with their families and lived by collecting alms. In pursuit of their spiritual goals, they wandered from place to place to meditate, to meet distinguished teachers, and to enter into philosophical debates. [50] According to the commentary, Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā (107-111) is an example of a *samaṇa*, who wanders from village to village challenging the wisest teachers to debate.[51]

In terms of the experience of awakening, Alexander Wynne cites the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (MN 26, The Noble Search) as the oldest account of the Buddha's awakening and posits that the simplicity of this account suggests a description of liberating insight: an immediate verbalization of an actual experience. He stresses that, "If any trace of the original account of the Buddha's awakening is to be found in the early Buddhist sources, we should expect to find it in a simple description, and not a complex theory."[52] Many of the songs of awakening in the *Therīgāthā* express such a simple and direct verbalization of the therī's actual experience.

The religious context also includes contradictory views towards women within the Theravāda tradition. Key suttas in the Pāli canon, such as the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, present divergent views towards women, but they do esteem not only nuns, but also laywomen as "bearers of the Dhamma."[53] Other scriptures are profoundly androcentric, and even misogynistic, particularly the well-known *Cūḷavagga*, which recounts the

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[50] Diana L. Clark, "The Ambaṭṭa Sutta of the Buddhist Pali Canon: Its socio-historical and literary context" (MA thesis, Graduate Theological Union, 2014), 17.
[51] Pruitt, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs*, 135.
[52] Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism)* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3 and 9-26.
[53] DN 16: 3.8. - Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, 247.

Buddha's great reluctance to establish the order of nuns,[54] as well as the *Vinaya* rules for nuns, which require their formal subordination to monks in every aspect of monastic life.[55] However, as discussed below in Chapter 5, the women featured in the *Therīgāthā* are portrayed as fully liberated from all patriarchal constraints.

3.2. Social Context

The social context in which the Buddha taught was strongly influenced by the religious context, and the course of one's life was largely determined by one's birth. The hereditary status groups (*varṇa*s) of Vedic culture were: priests (*brāhmaṇa*s, i.e., brahmins),[56] who preserved the Vedic truth via their texts, and who performed sacrifices; rulers and warriors (*kṣatriya*s); pastoralists and farmers (*vaiśya*s); and those serving these first three orders (*śūdra*s).[57] The higher groups were considered 'purer' than the lower groups. In addition to these four hereditary groups, there were also outcastes, who lived apart and who could participate in society only in certain degraded roles.[58] Gombrich points out one glaringly misogynistic view of the time, that "a menstruating woman and a corpse are both impure, so those who professionally handle garments stained by menstrual blood or dispose of corpses are permanently impure, and their children inherit that impurity."[59] In Brahmanism, the householder – the married man who is economically and sexually active – was the foundation of society, and the birth of a son was essential. In contrast to the desirability of a son, there were rituals to prevent the birth of a girl.

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[54] I. B. Horner, trans., *The Book of the Discipline,* ed. Bhikkhu Sujato (SuttaCentral, n.d.), 2338-2344, accessed August 18, 2106, https://suttacentral.net/files/Book_of_the_Discipline.pdf.

[55] Horner, *The Book of the Discipline,* 1049-1336.

[56] Members of the brahmin caste could also work as teachers, and even agriculturalists, etc. if they didn't manage to become priests.

[57] *Vaṇṇa*, *brāhmaṇa*, *khattiya*, *vessa*, and *sudda* in Pāli.

[58] Richard F. Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, 2ⁿᵈ ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 38-39.

[59] Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 40.

Daughters tended to be seen as an unwelcome burden until they were married, which was their duty.[60]

Gombrich points out that the Buddha's birthplace, Kapilavatthu, "is sufficiently far from anywhere mentioned in [Brahmanic] texts of that period to make one wonder whether Vedic civilization can have penetrated at all to where he was born and grew up ... Certainly, when he walked southeast into central Bihar, the scene of his Enlightenment, he encountered [Brahmanic] culture with the critical eye of someone who had not been brought up to take its presuppositions for granted." His native community, the Sākyas, seems not to have had hereditary status groups such as the [Brahmanic] *varṇa*, although they did have servants. The civil order in which he grew up may have presented the Buddha with a model of how a casteless society could function – and the Buddha then modeled the organization of his Saṅgha on communities such as his own.[61]

The time of the Buddha was one of profound social change: urbanization, urban kingship, the replacement of pastoralists by agriculturalists, the first use of money, and the beginnings of organized trade.[62] The creation of new mercantile and artisan classes began to undermine the traditional social order of the Brahmanic *varṇa* system. This social transformation also opened up new roles and unprecedented opportunities for women. Sponberg notes that, seen in this light, the prominence of women among the Buddha's early followers is less surprising, although no less revolutionary.[63] L. S. Dewaraja describes the changing social context for women at the time of the Buddha:

In ancient India, it is clear from the evidence in the Rigveda ... that women

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[60] Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 355.

[61] Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 49-50.

[62] Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 50-53.

[63] Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," 5.

held an honourable place in early Indian society. ... Later when the priestly caste of Brahmins dominated society ... we see a downward trend in the position accorded to women. … Sudras, slaves and women were prohibited from reading the Vedas. A woman could not attain heaven through any merit of her own. She could not worship or perform a sacrifice by herself. She could reach heaven only through implicit obedience to her husband, be he debauched or devoid of all virtues.[64]

Dewaraja concludes that, in comparison to the stigmas inherent in Brahmanic culture, Buddhism "saved the daughter from indignity, elevated the wife to a position approximating to equality and retrieved the widow from abject misery."[65] What Dewaraja does not mention is that early Buddhist women had to fight not only traditional Brahmanic attitudes, but also – and perhaps even more so – the conceptions of women that developed in the context of Buddhism's male-dominated ecclesiastical hierarchy.[66] As a corrective to overly romanticizing attitudes towards women in the early Theravāda tradition, Karen Lang points to the androcentric context faced by early Buddhist women:

Women were of secondary importance in the Hindu and Buddhist societies of the sixth to third centuries, B.C.E. Both communities supported male ascetics over female ascetics. Despite this lack of support, even from their own community, Buddhist women were active participants in early Buddhist history. Their verses express a concern and compassion for others that lie at the root of Buddhist practice. But because the gradual patriarchalization of early Buddhism tended to obscure their achievements, we need to reclaim these long-dead women as part of our own human history.[67]

While the Pāli canon is by no means univocal with respect to attitudes towards women, it is clear from numerous passages that women in early Buddhism were held in

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[64] L. S. Dewaraja, "The Position of Women in Buddhism," *The Wheel Publication* 280 (2009): 4, accessed September 29, 2016, http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh280.pdf.

[65] Dewaraja, "The Position of Women in Buddhism," 9.

[66] Jonathan S. Walters, "*A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha's Mother's Story,"* History of Religions* 33, no. 4 (1994): 361.

[67] Karen Christina Lang, "Lord Death's Snare: Gender-related Imagery in the Theragāthā-Therīgāthā," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 79.

high esteem as practitioners, teachers, and fully realized arahants.[68] Sponberg explains that, "Whereas women were initially granted a religious role that remained virtually without parallel in the Indian tradition for some time, the door was still left open to speculation about the limitations of the 'female nature,' a theme prominent in the androcentric and misogynist views that were to become increasingly characteristic of the tradition as the monastic order became more institutionalized and male dominated in the first several centuries following Sākyamuni's death."[69] So we see in early Buddhism a wide range of attitudes towards women: sometimes egalitarian, sometimes androcentric, and occasionally misogynistic.

Interestingly, two scholars have used Dhammapāla's commentaries on the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā* to attempt to reconstruct the social composition of the early Buddhist Saṅgha. These commentaries provide biographical details, which some scholars consider to be plausible data, of the monks and nuns – the ascribed authors – of the poems of these two anthologies. B. G. Gokhale's analysis shows that, of the 328 early monastics for whom data are available in the commentaries, two-thirds of them came from large towns, and nearly half from wealthy or powerful households. In terms of the *varṇa* of these monastics: forty-one percent were brahmin; twenty-three percent *kṣatriya*; thirty percent *vaiśya*; three percent *śūdra*; and three percent outcastes.[70] Unlike the Brahmanic tradition in which the *śūdra*, the outcastes, and women were not supposed to even hear the Vedas, the Buddha's monastic community was open to everyone,

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[68] See for example, the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN 16), the *Mahāpajāpati-gotamī-therī-apadāna* (KN 11.17), the *Kosalasaṃyutta* (SN 3:408).

[69] Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," 12-13.

[70] B. G. Gokhale, "The Early Buddhist Elite," *Journal of Indian History* XLII, part II (1965): 391-402; and B. G. Gokhale, "Early Buddhism and the Brahmins," in *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, ed. A. K. Narain (New Delhi: D.K. Publishers, 1980), 68-80.

regardless of their social status or even their sex.

As shown in the following table, Kumkum Roy makes a similar, but more in-depth, analysis of the attributed authors' social classes as presented in the commentaries, which identify the social origins of seventy-two out of seventy-three of the nuns in the *Therīgāthā*, and of 248 out of 264 of the monks in the *Theragāthā*:

Table 1. Social Origins Attributed to Therīs and Theras in the Commentaries[71]

Social Origin	Therīgāthā (% of the therīs)	Theragāthā (% of the theras)[72]
Brahmin	25	41
Oligarchic clans (Sākyas, Licchavis, Mallas)	25	13
Ruling groups (*khattiya*, *rājā*, officials)	7	17
'Good' families (*kulas*)	15	11
Commercial groups, e.g., traders/bankers (*seṭṭhis*) and caravan leaders (*sāttavāhas*)	15	8
Courtesans	5	-
Poor / slaves	4	5
Other	3	6

Roy concludes that, taken together, nearly eighty-eight percent of the therīs and ninety percent of the theras were ascribed relatively high origins, whereas only four or five percent were recorded as having poor or slave origins. It is noteworthy that while brahmin identity was predominant for both the nuns and the monks, this was far more marked in the case of the monks. Furthermore, for the theras, since the worldly bondage they had renounced was typified by their wife and children, marriage and the birth of children were regarded as legitimate reasons for renunciation. On the other hand, for women, the birth of children was not seen as an occasion for renunciation, and for them, issues of marriage were more complicated.[73] Women wishing to join the monastic order generally needed the permission of their spouses in order to renounce, whereas this was

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[71] Kumkum Roy, *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power: Explorations in Early Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23.

[72] The numbers in this column are revised to correct a calculation mistake in Roy's table.

[73] Roy, *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power*, 24-25.

not the case for men desiring to ordain. And if a woman was unmarried, she needed the

permission of her parents in order to 'go forth' (i.e., to ordain).[74]

3.3. Literary Context

3.3.1 Orality

There is no certain evidence of writing in India before the reign of Emperor

Asoka in the third century B.C.E. The scholarly consensus is that the earliest

Buddhist 'texts' were oral, and that both the *Tipiṭaka* and the commentary were

written down in the first century B.C.E.[75] Gombrich points out that "one cannot

assume that the oral transmission was unreliable. Far from it: the [Brahmins] had

already devised a system of transmitting the Veda orally ... which can be proved to

have transmitted long and complex texts for many centuries with very little

variation."[76]

Steven Collins maintains that despite the existence of written texts, the Buddhist

tradition also remains an oral/aural one, and stresses "the continuing importance of the

oral/aural aspects of Pāli literature, both as a means of preservation and as a facet of the

lived experience, the 'sensual dimension', of Buddhist 'scriptures'."[77] According to

Walter Ong, arguing that writing restructures consciousness, the transition from orality to

literacy transforms human thought from a world of sound to a world of sight. He points

out that the spoken word exists "in a context of give-and-take between real persons."[78] It

is interesting that this give-and-take occurs in the *Sutta Piṭaka* in that most of the

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[74] To "go forth" (*pabbajati*) is a Pāli idiom meaning to take monastic ordination; it implies leaving home to go out into the homeless state.

[75] Steven Collins, "Notes on Some Oral Aspects of Pali Literature," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 35, no. 2–3 (1992): 121.

[76] Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 20.

[77] Collins, "Notes on Some Oral Aspects of Pali Literature," 121 and 129.

[78] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 78.

Buddha's discourses are in fact responses to specific individuals or situations, and the responses of the listeners are often recorded at the end.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu explains that some scholars have proposed that the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā* were compiled to support early Buddhism "with dramatic stage pieces as a way of making the teaching attractive to the masses. … In formal terms, many of the poems in the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* would seem to bear this theory out." The poems of Vaḍḍha-mātu (204-212), Puṇṇā (236-251), and Ambapālī (252-270) read like dramatic dialogues. The longer poem by Sundarī (313-338), with its rich cast of characters, seems designed to be a theatrical text. Furthermore, the poems of Cālā (182-188), Upacālā (189-195), and Sīsūpacālā (196-203), which have parallels in the *Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta* (SN 5), differ from those parallels in that the *Therīgāthā* versions begin with a stanza that would serve well as a dramatic introduction on stage.[79] Given the oral recitation and transmission of these poems over several centuries, it would not be surprising if dramatic effects were cultivated. Since the Pāli *gāthā* evokes the verb *gāyati* (to sing), the very name of the *Therīgāthā* suggests a performative context in which the verses may have been sung.

In a vein similar to the semiotics of Kristeva, Albert Mehrabian documents his well-known and often cited "7-38-55" formula that parses what a listener actually receives in response to a face-to-face communication of emotions or attitudes: the message that is 'heard' (in Mehrabian's experimental context) is based primarily on cues of body language, often facial expressions (fifty-five percent) and tone of voice (thirty-eight percent), especially when the situation is ambiguous; astonishingly, only seven

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[79] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Poems of the Elders*, 8-9.

percent of what the listener hears is based the speaker's words.[80] The import of

Mehrabian's formula is not the numbers (which many subsequent scholars have

questioned), but rather the fundamental importance that, when transmitting any oral

communication, one's body language and tone of voice must be congruent with and

supportive of one's words. Michael Argyle also finds that in communicating to others,

there are many nonverbal cues, such as gaze, posture, proximity, and facial expressions,

which are at least as important as the words spoken.[81]

     As William Graham points out, "scriptural words that are spoken, sung, or

chanted have an impact different from that of the written text."[82] In a situation such the

recitation of the *Therīgiāthā*, the speaker's words will not have the intended impact

unless the same message is also conveyed in their body language and the music of their

speech. In the same way, a Dharma teacher's semiotic non-verbal language is just as

important – or even more important – than his or her words.

     Orality and semiotics have important dharmalogical implications for how one

teaches profound and transformative Buddhist concepts, and especially poetic teachings

such as those found in the *Therīgāthā*. Theravāda meditation teachers nowadays typically

do not ask their disciples to read something from the Pāli canon. Instead, they give a

Dharma talk; the students listen, ideally in a meditation posture, and can often ask

questions. The learning experience is completely different when it is active, sound-based,

and involves reciprocal give-and-take between real persons than when it is based on

reading a text.

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[80] Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1972).
[81] Michael Argyle, *Bodily Communication*, 2nd ed. (Madison, CT: Intl Universities Press, Inc., 1990).
[82] William Albert Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 163.

Collins notes that when reciting or reflecting on what has been heard, "the oral/aural dimension of Buddhist texts is not only a matter of learning and public performance: it plays a role in meditation also." Verbal recitation is done so that the text is familiar; familiarity is a condition for mental recitation; and mental recitation is necessary for full understanding.[83] The importance today of the oral and aural aspects of these early texts is that orality provides a lived experience that is particularly conducive to assimilating Buddhist teachings.

3.3.2 Rasa

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu introduces his partial translation of the *Poems of the Elders* with a discussion of the Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa*, asserting that "The central concept in ancient Indian aesthetic theory was that every artistic text should have rasa, or 'savor.'"[84] He then goes on to explore how *rasa* is expressed in specific poems of the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*. The theory of *rasa* was developed over many centuries in the context of Indian dramaturgy. The eight *rasas* established in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (*Treatise on Drama*), ascribed to the sage Bharata, were: sensitivity, comedy, compassion, fury, heroism, apprehension, horror, and wonder. A ninth *rasa* – calm (in response to peace) – was added later.

In my view, the validity of applying *rasa* theory to the *Therīgāthā* suffers from historical contradictions between when these poems may have been composed and anthologized, and what scholars have come to understand about the development of the aesthetic of *rasa* in different forms of Indian art. It is likely that the earliest of these poems of the Elders may have been uttered from about the mid-fifth century B.C.E.

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[83] Collins, "Notes on Some Oral Aspects of Pali Literature," 126-127.
[84] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Poems of the Elders*, 2.

onwards, and that they were then anthologized several hundred years later. However, according to Sheldon Pollock, the first text on the aesthetic theory of *rasa*, Bharata's *Treatise on Drama*, is thought to have been originally composed in the first centuries C.E.[85] Thus, to argue that the poems of the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā* were composed with reference to the aesthetic theory of *rasa* is historically problematic.

3.3.3 The Poetry of the Therīgāthā

Fronsdal points out that poetry, particularly valued by early Buddhists, was used to preserve, learn, and disseminate important teachings. As compared to prose, poetry can enhance the aesthetic experience of a text through the impact of meter, metaphors, dialogues, and performance.[86] In Pāli the poems of the *Therīgāthā* are very rhythmic and regular in their meter. Each verse consists of four '*pādā*' (lit. 'feet') of eight syllables each. The first and second of these pādā form one line, divided by a caesura, followed by the second line, which consists of the third and fourth pādā.[87] Siegfried Lienhard's analysis of the poetry of the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā* demonstrates that the most frequent poetic styles in the two anthologies are based on various kinds of repetition: of sound, of sense, of meaning, and anaphora. The principal structure of the verses is built on contrast and tension. This contrast is expressed in a feature characteristic of many of the verses, with the first, introductory pāda being elaborate, poetic, and descriptive, and the second, concluding pāda being simpler, more 'canonical,' and devoid of

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[85] Sheldon Pollock, "An Intellectual History of Rasa," introduction to *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics* (Historical Sourcebooks in Classical Indian Thought), ed. Sheldon Pollock (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 7.

[86] Gil Fronsdal, *The Buddha before Buddhism: Wisdom from the Early Teachings* (Boulder CO: Shambala, 2016), 5-6 and 31.

[87] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 17.

ornamentation.[88] Similarly, Blackstone notes that many of the poems begin with a more concrete poetic description and end with a recitation of one or more stock phrases, what she calls a "liberation refrain."[89]

According to A. K. Warder, in Pāli verse the meter is determined purely by the lengths of the syllables with the effect of any stress being negligible. This metrical form, allowing the author to place words in rhythmically prominent positions, provides special possibilities for emphasis. One of the main features of Pāli verse is the use of poetic license in order to conform the text to the meter. This is most noticeable in unexpected choices of word order for the purpose of emphasis. Meter also influences the choice of vocabulary, resulting in the use of unusual or rare words. In addition, superfluous words may be inserted to fill up lines. Also, prefixes or suffixes may be added or dropped, or lengthened or shortened. In addition, poetic license can be taken with the grammar in favor of metrical requirements, for example: in the making of *sandhi* (junctions in compound words); by lengthening or shortening junctions between roots and their prefixes or suffixes; or by lengthening or shortening other syllables.[90] This flexible grammar and word order makes Pāli poetry challenging to translate, and different translators will sometimes produce wildly different interpretations.

The verses of the *Therīgāthā* (and the *Theragāthā*) hold an important place in the history of Indian poetry. According to Oskar von Hinüber, they "allow a unique glimpse at very early Indian poetry otherwise completely lost," and "poetical figures … known from much later poetry are found here for the first time." He goes on to say that, with

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[88] Siegfried Lienhard, "Sur la structure poétique des *TheraTherīgāthā*," *Journal Asiatique* 263 (1975): 377,-378, 389, and 396.
[89] Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, 16.
[90] A. K. Warder, *Introduction to Pali*, 3rd ed. (Bristol, UK: Pali Text Society, 2010), 354-356.

respect to the *Therīgāthā,* "the poetically excellent quality of these verses is not matched by Indian poetesses of later periods."[91]

4. Textual History and Content of the *Therīgāthā*

The *Therīgāthā* is found as the ninth text out of twenty-one in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (KN), the Minor Collection, the last *Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka* in the Pāli canon. The *Therīgāthā* consists of seventy-three poems of varying lengths. Like some other anthologies in the Pāli canon, the *Therīgāthā* is organized into sections (*nipāta*s) according to the number of verses in each poem, from the shortest and simplest (one verse) to the longest and most complex, the "Great Chapter" (*mahānipāto*) with seventy-five verses. Hallisey notes that under this surface arrangement, other rationales for the placement of the poems sometimes seem to be at work, for example: commonality of experience, teaching themes, and relationships among the therīs (friends, sisters, teachers, and disciples).[92]

Some poems repeat verses or themes found in others. I analyzed six partial translations of the *Therīgāthā* to get a sense of the translators' literary and dharmic choices. As shown in Appendix 3 (pp 103-107), the poems that seem to resonate most widely are those of Paṭācārā and Kisāgotamī, selected by all six of these translators, and those of Ubbirī, Vimalā, Vāseṭṭī, Ambapālī, and Subhā Jīvakambavanikā, chosen by five out of six of them. At the other end of the spectrum are the poems not selected: seventeen that were left out by five out of the six translators, and six that were omitted by all of them. Often the poems that tend not to be included are ones that contain repetitions found

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[91] Hinüber, Oskar von, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, *Indian Philology and South Asian Studies*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 53-54.
[92] Hallisey, *Therigatha*, xxviii.

in other poems of the collection.

4.1. Dating the *Therīgāthā*

According to Collins, the *Therīgāthā* was recited at the first council, held soon after the Buddha's death.[93] On the other hand, Oskar von Hinüber, who considers that the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā* form a unit in the literature of the Pāli canon, states,

> The sources from which Th/Thī has been compiled are not known. Probably both collections have been growing over a long period, slowly absorbing verses commemorating monks or nuns living at quite different times … [with] verses … much younger … added on the occasion of the second council … or still later at the time of the third council under Aśoka. So far the chronology of Th/Thī has not attracted much attention.[94]

Although traditional Theravāda sources accept Gotama's dates as 623-543 B.C.E.,[95] these early timeframes are not congruent with recent scholarship dating the historical Buddha. To explore the evidence and views of a number of different scholars on dating the Buddha, workshops were held in 1988[96] and 1990,[97] without reaching a consensus.[98] While exact dating of the Buddha's life is not possible, Bechert asserts that "it is safe to suppose that the Buddha passed away sometime between 420 and 350 B.C.E at the age of about eighty years."[99] Gombrich gives the most likely dates for the Buddha's

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[93] Steven Collins, introduction to *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (Therīgāthā)*, translated by C. A. F. Rhys Davids and K. R. Norman (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2009), vii.

[94] Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 51-53.

[95] Harvey, "The Buddha and his Indian Context," 8.

[96] Heinz Bechert, ed., *The Dating of the Historical Buddha* (Göttigen, Germany: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1991).

[97] A. K. Narain, ed., *BJK Institute Workshop Series*, vol. 21, *The Date of the Historical Śākyamuni Buddha* (Delhi: B.R. Pub. Corp., 2003).

[98] A. K. Narain, review of *The Dating of the Historical Buddha*, part 1, ed. Heinz Bechert, *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 16, no. 1 (1993): 187-201, accessed January 3, 2017, https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/jiabs/article/viewFile/8810/2717.

[99] Heinz Bechert, "Buddha, Life of the," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 82.

lifetime as 484-404 B.C.E.[100] In his paper, which explores research on the dating of the

historical Buddha in great detail, Charles Prebish concludes that most of the workshop

participants "suggested that the Buddha died within approximately a few decades on either

side of 400 B.C.E."[101] For a working hypothesis I will take the date of the Buddha's death

to be around 400 B.C.E and the period of his teaching around 445-400 B.C.E. Under this

hypothesis, some of the poems of the *Therīgāthā* might have first been uttered sometime

in the mid- to late-fifth century B.C.E. However, as suggested by my analysis below, the

Therīgāthā, in the form that has come down to us today, would seem to belong to an

intermediate stratum of texts within the Pāli canon.

It is possible that the *Therīgāthā* was anthologized more than once, and that its

final form is quite late. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu notes the placement in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*

of the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā* after the *Vimānavatthu* (Vv) and the

Petavatthu (Pv), both of which are generally regarded as late. Because of this, he

reasons that the *Therīgāthā* was also compiled at a relatively late date, even though it

may contain some earlier material.[102] Johnathan Walters, on the other hand, believes

that the *Therīgāthā* is not later than about the third century B.C.E.[103]

Although suggesting absolute dates for these texts is outside the scope of this

work, in the interest of exploring Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's theory on the relative dating of

the *Therīgāthā*, I have undertaken a content analysis to compare it with four other texts of

the *Khuddaka Nikāya*: the *Aṭṭhakavagga* (Av), *Vimānavatthu*, *Petavatthu*, and

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[100] Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 32.

[101] Charles S. Prebish, "Cooking the Buddhist Books: The Implications of the New Dating of the Buddha for the History of Early Indian Buddhism," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 15 (2008): 2, accessed January 6, 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20120128200109/http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2010/05/prebish-article.pdf.

[102] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Poems of the Elders*, 8.

[103] Walters, "A Voice from the Silence," 364.

Mahāniddesa (Nidd I). In terms of their order in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, the

Aṭṭhakavagga is in the *Sutta Nipāta*, the fifth book of the collection, and the

Vimānavatthu, *Petavatthu*, *Therīgāthā*, and *Mahāniddesa* are the sixth, seventh, ninth,

and sixteenth books respectively. The *Aṭṭhakavagga* makes for a good starting point

since it is widely accepted as one of the very earliest Buddhist texts.[104] As compared to

later Buddhist texts, it is remarkable in terms of the simplicity, immediacy, and directness

of what is taught as the path to liberation. I have based my content analysis on key Pāli

terms that Fronsdal highlights as being conspicuously absent in the *Aṭṭhakavagga*:

systematized, numerical lists; supernormal powers such as the divine eye;[105]

transcendental realities removed from ordinary human existence; and future lives or

rebirth.[106] I selected key searchable Pāli words relative to these concepts, and looked for

their inclusion in these five different texts of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, using the search

function of the Digital Pali Reader.[107] I also analyzed the last four poems of the

Therīgāthā separately in order to see if the relative frequency of these later terms is more

pronounced in these poems than in the rest of the text. Because the texts are of different

lengths, one cannot simply compare the number of occurrences in each. Hence, I

calculated the relative frequency of the terms in each of the texts, expressed as the

percentage of those poems or suttas in the text containing the key word(s). The following

table gives the results, listed in order of the total number of occurrences for each term in

all five texts combined. As shown below, only the first two key words occur in the

Aṭṭhakavagga, while many of these terms are included in the much later *Mahāniddesa*

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[104] Fronsdal, *The Buddha before Buddhism*, 5, 138.
[105] The divine eye, *dibbacakkhu*, is one of the three knowledges (*tevijjā*) and one of the six supernormal powers (*abhiññā*). The divine eye is the ability to know the karmic destinations of other beings.
[106] Fronsdal, *The Buddha before Buddhism*, 9, 17, 146.
[107] In general, I searched for the stem of the word so as to include the various inflections.

(Part I), which is a commentary on the *Aṭṭhakavagga*. The results give a rough snapshot

of when these particular texts of the *Khuddaka Nikāyā* might have been composed

relative to each other.

Table 2. Content Analysis indicating Relative Dating of the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, *Vimānavatthu*, *Petavatthu*, *Therīgāthā*, and *Mahāniddesa*

The figures in this table are the percent relative frequency of the key word(s) in each text. In the *Therīgāthā* the last four (presumably later) poems of the text are treated separately from the first sixty-nine poems. The relative frequency is calculated as the number of poems or suttas containing these later terms, divided by the number of poems or suttas in the text, multiplied by one hundred, and rounded off to the nearest whole number.

Key Word (Pāli) indicative of a later text	Key Word (English translation)	Av	Vv	Pv	Thī 1-69	Thī 70-73	Nidd I
kamma	action, deed	19	93	69	3	50	81
puñña	merit	6	60	37	4	25	56
tisso vijjā / tevijjā	the three knowledges			2	23	50	13
tathāgata	"the One Who Is Thus"		6	6			81
punabbhava	renewed existence				7		75
anāsava	without contaminants		1	2	9	50	19
satipaṭṭhāna	Four Foundations of Mindfulness						75
arahant	arahant		2	4			50
dibbacakkhu	divine eye				12		25
ariyasaccāni	Noble Truth(s)		9		3	25	0
sakadāgāmin	once-returner		4				44
satta bojjhaṅgā	Seven Factors of Awakening				3		44
bhagavant	"the Blessed One"						50
ariyamagga	Noble Path				1		44
paññindriya	Five Faculties						44
paṭiccasamuppāda	dependent origination						38
sotāpanna	stream-enterer		2				25
chaḷabhiññā	the six supernormal knowledges				3		13
pañcakkhandhā	Five Aggregates				1		
tisaraṇa	Three Refuges						
tilakkhaṇa	Three Characteristics						
paṭhamajhāna	first *jhāna* (level of meditative absorption)						
Average Relative Frequency of Key Words for Each Text as a Whole (%)		**1.1**	**8.1**	**5.4**	**3.2**	**9.1**	**35.2**
Nº Suttas or Poems in the Text		16	85	51	69	4	16

The average relative frequency for these later terms in each text, as shown in the

table above, would seem to indicate that the *Therīgāthā* is not as early as the

Aṭṭhakavagga, nor as late as the *Mahāniddesa*. In addition, the relative frequency of

these terms is indeed greater in the last four (supposedly later) poems of the
Therīgāthā than in the rest of the anthology.

The subject matter of the *Therīgāthā* indicates that many poems may well be
among the early compositions, even if they were anthologized only much later.
"Buddhism, in its origins, above all else was a pragmatic soteriology, a theory of
liberation that sought to free humanity from suffering."[108] Only later do we see
hagiographic texts extolling the Buddha and texts encouraging acts of merit for attaining
enlightenment not in this lifetime, but in future lives. Such concerns are notably absent in
the *Therīgāthā*. One interesting finding in the content analysis above is the number of
occurrences of "*puñña*" (merit) in the five texts: only one occurrence in the *Aṭṭhakavagga*
(and then only as a concept to be left behind), of only minor importance in the
Therīgāthā, and then developing into a frequently mentioned concept in the *Petavatthu*,
Mahāniddesa, and especially the *Vimānavatthu.*

In his 1967 monograph, *Pali Metre*,[109] Warder presents research on the
development of Pāli meter against its historical background and uses the meter of
poetic texts to date different collections within the Pāli canon. In his summary table
at the end (reproduced here in Appendix 4 (p 108), "The Historical Transition of
Metrics in the Pāli Canon"), he presents the periods of the historical transition of metrics
in the Pāli canon and documents the type of meter used in a selection of canonical texts,
including the *Therīgāthā*.[110] Warder's metric analysis situates parts of the *Therīgāthā*

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[108] Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," 8.
[109] Ānandajoti Bhikkhu, *An Outline of the Metres in the Pāli Canon*, Version 3.6, September 2013, 65,
accessed October 26, 2016, http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Textual-Studies/Outline/Outline-of-the-
Metres.pdf. Ānandajoti Bhikkhu recognizes Warder's *Pali Metre* as "the most comprehensive book on
the subject studying the development of Pāli metre."
[110] A. K. Warder, *Pali Metre: A Contribution to the History of Indian Literature* (London: Pali Text
Society, 1967), 225. According to Warder: "Although there are no hard and fast boundaries between the

squarely within the second period (300-200 B.C.E.) based on measure meters and bar

meters. The most prevalent meter in canonical Pāli poetry is the *vatta* meter,[111] which

normally consists of four lines with eight syllables to the line, organized in dissimilar

pairs. As shown in Appendix 4, Warder's analysis of the *vatta* meters places segments of

the *Therīgāthā* in the very earliest period together with the earliest parts of the *Sutta*

Nipāta, i.e., the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and the *Pārāyana*.[112] At the same time, other *vatta* meters

situate parts of the *Therīgāthā* in the last part of the second period (around 200 B.C.E.)

before the transition to the period that Warder describes as literary 'decline.' Warder's

table suggests that the *Therīgāthā* developed over several centuries, with some

poems being extremely early, others perhaps 150 years after the death of the Buddha,

and still others perhaps 250 years after the time of the Buddha. Furthermore, Warder's

data on measure meters clearly places the *Petavatthu* and most of the *Vimānavatthu* in

the period of literary decline starting from about 100 B.C.E.[113]

Thus, the results of two entirely different methods – analysis of poetic meter

by Warder[114] and my content analysis of a selection of texts of the *Khuddaka Nikāyā*

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periods or phases of Pali literature ... and most of the Canonical collections overlap at least two of them ... it might be useful to assume three phases: (i) An earlier period, during which mattāchandas and gaṇacchandas first appeared, represented by most of the Suttanipāta; (ii) A later period, during which both new classes of metre became markedly transformed in structure in accordance with the tendency to Apabhraṃśa rhythms, and new metres of the fixed classical type appeared in increasing numbers; represented by a large part of the Therīgāthā, part of the Theragāthā, and the Lakkhaṇa Sutta; (iii) A period of decline in literary creation, represented by most or all of the Petavatthu and the whole of the Cariyāpiṭaka. This ... coincides roughly with the 2nd century B.C." *Mattāchandas* are measure meters, derived under the influence of musical structures. In the measure metres the syllables may vary in amount, but the total amount of measures should remain fixed. A short syllable = 1 measure; a long syllable = 2 measures. *Gaṇacchandas*: bar meters (which also seem to be derived from a musical structure); lines are organized into bars, or *gaṇas*, normally having 4 measures to the bar. *Apabhraṃśa* (Skt): *Avahansa* in Prakrit is a Middle Indo-Aryan vernacular of North India spoken as late as the 4th to 8th centuries C.E.
[111] For *vatta* meter, Ānandajoti Bhikkhu now prefers *siloka*, the term used by the Buddha himself in *Mahāsamayasuttanta* (DN. 20).
[112] Warder, *Pali Metre*, 15.
[113] Warder, *Pali Metre*, 225.
[114] Warder, *Pali Metre*, 225 + Appendix 4 herein.

of key words that tend to be indicative of later texts[115] – suggest the same relative dating, with the *Aṭṭhakavagga* among the very earliest texts; the *Therīgāthā* from an intermediate period; and the *Petavatthu* and *Vimānavatthu* from a later literary period. Warder's and my results do not support Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's suggestion that the placement in the *Khuddhaka Nikāya* of the *Therīgāthā* after the *Vimānavatthu* and the *Petavatthu* would be indicative of the relative dating of these texts. I return to the discussion of dating the *Therīgāthā* in section 4.6 below on the use of stock phrases.

4.2. Genres of Poems

I suggest that the poems of the *Therīgāthā* can be seen as essentially belonging to one of six genres:

- Words of the Buddha: poems said to have been first spoken to the therī by the Buddha to praise, instruct, or exhort her
- Soliloquies:[116] where a nun gives voice to her thoughts; these comprise by far the greatest number of the poems in the *Therīgāthā*
- Dialogues: there are seven dialogues with Māra, a Buddhist demon who personifies the forces antagonistic to awakening; Māra is also known as the lord of death. In these poems Māra is addressed not by name, but by his epithet, *pāpima* ('evil one');[117] in addition to the dialogues with Māra, there are six other, quite varied dialogue poems, many of which have remarkable dramatic interest
- Paired soliloquies, which feature two speakers, but read less like dialogues than like independent, successive soliloquies; these are poems in which the Buddha's teachings are realized, where the teacher speaks first, and then the therī proclaims her experience of liberation
- A complex theatrical poem, that of Sundarī, with a cast of eight characters

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[115] See Table 2 above (p 35).
[116] A dramatic speech to oneself, to give voice to one's reflections.
[117] According to the PED, *pāpimant* (*pāpima*) is especially used as an epithet of Māra.

plus a narrator (313-338)

- Long narratives, with elements of the supernatural – outliers, which seem to have been composed much later (the last four poems of the text).

The poems contained in these six genres are described at length in Appendix 5 (pp 109-112), but here I will discuss some of the difficulties with the last four poems, the long narratives by the two Subhās, Isidāsī, and Sumedhā. It is said that each of these four therīs came from very privileged families and attained arahantship without difficulty very shortly after full ordination, or even while still in training. With reference to the rest of the *Therīgāthā*, these four poems are doctrinal outliers in two ways: 1) their emphasis on miracles and the supernatural, and 2) the determining role in the path to enlightenment of previous lives rather than that of assiduous effort, calming the mind, and gaining insight. It is well documented that the notion of karmic trajectory becomes more prevalent in the later canon and commentaries.[118]

Norman thinks, and I agree, that the last verses of the two Subhās' poems, recounting supernormal powers, may well be later additions by the *saṅgītikāra*s, the redactors (editors or anthologizers) of the holy scriptures.[119] He also believes that Sumedhā's long poem, which is told in the third person with dialogue inserted, was from the outset a literary production and was never spoken as a whole by the therī.[120] Similarly, Murcott did not include the two last poems, attributed to Isidāsī and Sumedhā,

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[118] Alice Collett, *Lives of Early Buddhist Nuns: Biographies as History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), xxix.
[119] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 1st ed., xxi, xxiii. Verse 367 (according to KRN), the last of Subhā Kammāradhītā's poem, states, "Sakka, the lord of beings, approaching by supernormal powers with a group of devas, reveres that Subhā, the smith's daughter." KRN verse 399, the last of Subhā Jīvakambavanikā's poem, reads, "And then that bhikkhunī, released, went to the presence of the excellent Buddha. Having seen the one possessing the marks of excellent merit, (her) eye was as before."
[120] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 1st ed., xxv.

in her translation, "because they are generally held to be later poems."[121]

Furthermore, the argument that these poems are later than the other poems of the *Therīgāthā* is strengthened by Warder's identification of the last three as belonging to the latest period together with the *Lakkhaṇa Sutta* (see Appendix 4, p 108),[122] as well as by my content analysis in Table 2 above (p 35). In addition, Walters comments that the last pages of the *Therīgāthā* are virtually indistinguishable from the early pages of the *Therī-Apadāna*,[123] composed in the same late period of literary 'decline' as the *Vimānavatthu* and the *Petavatthu*. Because of the doctrinal differences in these last four poems compared to the rest of the *Therīgāthā*, by necessity they will not serve the same dharmalogical purposes as the other poems in the collection. Nevertheless, these four long poems do contain some valuable teachings, which will be discussed below.

4.3. Who were the Therīs of the *Therīgāthā*?

For the purpose of this study, I take the sex of the authors at face value: that the poems of the *Therīgāthā*, attributed to nuns, reflect the voices of women (and those of the *Theragāthā*, attributed to monks, reflect the voices of men). If both anthologies had been composed by monks, one would perhaps not expect to find such striking differences in the themes addressed in these two different collections.[124] Early Buddhist nuns were functioning in a patriarchal socio-religious milieu, and this context makes the *Therīgāthā*'s claim to female authorship all the more remarkable.[125] This said, it would be simplistic to imagine that these verses provide us with direct access to women's voices. The contexts in which they circulated orally for centuries must have shaped both

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121 Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 21.
122 Warder, *Pali Metre*, 225-226.
123 Walters, "A Voice from the Silence": 365.
124 See section 4.5 below (pp 47-49), "Contrast with the *Theragāthā*."
125 Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, 10.

the form and the content. So while these poems give us images, sometimes vivid, of early Buddhist nuns, they were drawn and assembled from diverse traditions.[126] The literature of the *Therīgāthā* recounts stories of the paths to liberation – sometimes swift, sometimes long and torturous – attributed to women from many different stations and walks of life. We don't know if the authors were historical figures, or literary characters, or a combination of the two.

Murcott explains that some of the poems from the *Therīgāthā* are repeated in the *Therī-Apadāna*, a canonical text of life history legends of forty therīs. However, in seventeen of these poems, the names of the therīs to whom the poems are ascribed do not correspond. Murcott concludes that while some of the therīs are indeed elusive historically, there is no need to doubt the existence of a considerable number of them.[127]

In support of this idea of the historicity of some, the following table provides references for the twenty nuns of the *Therīgāthā* who are also featured elsewhere in the suttas.

Table 3. Therīs featured elsewhere in the *Sutta Piṭaka*

Therīs[128] in the *Therīgāthā*	Verse Nº (DPR)	*Dīgha*[129]	*Majjhima*[130]	*Saṃyutta*[131]	*Aṅguttara*[132]	*Khuddaka*[133]
Ambapālī	252-270	16:2.14				
Bhaddā Kāpilānī[134]	63-66			1:245	1:244	
Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā[135]	107-111				1:243	

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126 Roy, *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power*, 20.
127 Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 20.
128 Therīs' names are given according to those in the Digital Pali Reader.
129 Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*.
130 Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha.*
131 Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*.
132 Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*.
133 Verse numbers according to DPR.
134 Bhaddā Kāpilānī is foremost in the *bhikkunī saṅgha* among those who recollect past lives. She had been the wife of Mahākassapa.
135 Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā is foremost among those who quickly attain direct knowledge. She had been a wandering ascetic and debater before she met the Buddha.

Therīs[128] in the Therīgāthā	Verse N° (DPR)	Dīgha[129]	Majjhima[130]	Saṃyutta[131]	Aṅguttara[132]	Khuddaka[133]
Cālā	182-188			5:6; 5:10		12:6; 12:20
Dhammadinnā[136]	12		44		1:239	11:18-23; 11:30; 12:15
Khemā[137]	139-144			17:24; 44:1	1:236; 2:131; 4:176	10:491; 11:18-23; 12:2-27; 15:549
Kisāgotamī[138]	213-223			5:3	1:246	11:18-22; 12:19-20
Mahāpajāpati Gotamī[139]	157-162		142:2; 146:2		1:235; 8:51-53	8:233; 11:17; 11:28-30; Mil 5:1:2
Paṭācārā[140]	112-116				1:238	11:18-23
Sakulā[141]	97-101				1:242	11:24; 11:30
Selā (also called Āḷavikā)	57-59			5:1; 5:9; 5:10		
Sīsūpacālā[142]	196-203			5:8; 5:10		
Somā	60-62			5:2; 5:10		
Soṇā[143]	102-106				1:241	11:26
Sujātā[144]	145-150				1:258	12:15
Sundarīnandā[145]	82-86			55:8	1:240	
Upacālā	189-195			5:7; 5:10		12:6; 12:20
Uppalavaṇṇā[146]	224-235			5:5; 5:10 17:24	1:237; 2:131; 4:176	10:491; 11:18-23; 12:2-27
Vijayā	169-174			5:4; 5:10		
Visākhā	13					12:15

Of the ten *bhikkhunī*s featured in the *Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta* (SN 5),[147] nine also have

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[136] Dhammadinnā is foremost among speakers on the Dhamma.
[137] Khemā is foremost among those with great wisdom. She had been a beautiful consort of King Bimbisāra. Together with Uppalavaṇṇā, she was held up as a model for other nuns.
[138] Kisāgotamī is foremost among those who wear coarse robes.
[139] Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, the Buddha's foster mother, is foremost among nuns in seniority.
[140] Paṭācārā is foremost among those who uphold the discipline.
[141] Sakulā is foremost among those with the divine eye.
[142] Also spelled 'Sīsupacālā.'
[143] Soṇā is foremost among those who arouse energy.
[144] Sujātā is foremost among female lay followers as the first to go for refuge.
[145] Sundarīnandā is foremost among meditators.
[146] Uppalavaṇṇā is foremost among those with psychic powers. Together with Khemā, she was held up as a model for other *bhikkhunī*s.

verses in the *Therīgāthā*: Āḷavikā,[148] Somā, Kisāgotamī, Vijayā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Cālā, Upacālā, Sīsūpacālā, and Selā. Nevertheless, the parallel verses between the nuns in the two texts are not always straightforward. Selā was also said to be called Āḷavikā because she was the daughter of King Āḷavaka,[149] but Bhikkhu Bodhi doubts whether Selā is the same *bhikkhunī* as Āḷavaka.[150] However, two of the verses attributed to Āḷavikā (SN 5:519 and 5:521) are found ascribed in the *Therīgāthā* to Selā (57-58). With respect to Somā's poem in the *Therīgāthā* (60-62), the first two verses are also attributed to Somā in the *Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta*, where she sets Māra straight about a woman's ability to become fully enlightened, but the third verse differs in the two texts. Uppalavaṇṇā's verse in the *Therīgāthā* (235) is repeated exactly in the *Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta*, but there it is attributed to Āḷavikā (SN 5:521). Similarly, two of Khemā's verses in the *Therīgāthā* (139 and 140) are spoken by her disciple, Vajirā in the *Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta* (SN 5:528 and 530) with minor differences. The poems of the three younger sisters of Sāriputta – Cālā, Upacālā, and Sīsūpacālā – are featured in both the *Therīgāthā* and the *Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta*, but the correspondence is fragmentary, and the authorship is different in the two texts. Furthermore, in the *Therīgāthā* some couplets are uttered by a number of different therīs. For example,

> Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed, the great dark[151] is torn apart, and Death, you too are destroyed[152]

is spoken in the *Therīgāthā* by Selā (59), Somā (62), Khemā (142), Cālā (188), Upacāla (195), Sīsūpacālā (203), and Uppalavaṇṇā (235). This same verse also occurs in the

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[147] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 221-230.
[148] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha,* 424 (n 331).
[149] Pruitt, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs*, 83.
[150] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 429.
[151] The 'great dark' (Pāli: *tamokhanda*) is a metaphor for ignorance.
[152] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 175.

Therī-Apadāna, ascribed to Uppalavaṇṇā (KN 11:19:460). However, in the *Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta* it is attributed to Kisāgotamī (5:527). This is just one example of the parallels and overlaps in the verses of these poems, and the fluidity of their ascriptions. Thus, it seems that the boundaries between some of the therīs tended to become blurred as a result of centuries of oral repetition and transmission.

Since only twenty of the therīs featured in the *Therīgāthā* (Table 3 above, pp 41-42) are mentioned elsewhere in the suttas, this raises the question about the historicity of the other fifty-three. Clearly, some of the nuns of the *Therīgāthā*, especially those who are referred to elsewhere in the Pāli canon, are undoubtedly good candidates to be considered historical figures. It is possible that the therīs of the *Therīgāthā* were initially inspired by an historical figure and then transformed into a more literary or mythic character during the long period of oral transmission. This evolution into a literary character may have continued further, when the monastic who was transcribing the oral song or poem into a written text perhaps adapted it to express his or her dharmalogical understanding of the process of liberation. Further transformations may have ensued at the hand of the monastic(s) who redacted the poems into the anthology that is now included in the Pāli canon.

I conclude that, since the poems were most likely modified for centuries after their original composition, it is difficult to attribute any specific historical accuracy to the words of these women. We cannot be certain that a given poem of the *Therīgāthā* ascribed to a given author was actually composed by that person. In spite of the difficulties of knowing how accurately these poems represent the words of historical people, my approach is nevertheless to read these poems as they purport to be: literary texts

representing experiences of awakening of early female practitioners.

In addition to connections among the therīs, there are also relationships among the verses of the *Therīgāthā*. According to Norman, verses can be linked by: subject, a refrain, a "catch-word," puns on the names of the attributed authors, similar syntactical structure, a similar *pāda* in common, a verse in common, or a common theme. Others verses are linked by some kind of relationship between the speakers, or the speakers may share the same name.[153] Of the seventy-three poems in the Therīgāthā, sixteen are attributed to nuns who have the same name as another: Muttā (2, 11); Puṇṇā (3, 236-251); Tissā (4, 5); Sumanā (14, 16); Nandā (19-20, 82-86); Sāmā (37-38, 39-41); Uttamā (42-44, 45-47); Bhaddā (63-66, 107-111); Subhā (339-367, 368-401). Some of them (Sumanā, Nandā, Bhaddā, and Subhā) have epithets to indicate that they are different people. For others, such as Tissā, the name of the second one to occur in the anthology is preceded by *Aññararā* ('a certain') or by *Aparā* ('another'), as is the case for Sāmā and Uttamā. Two of the pairs of nuns are not distinguished from each other in their names (Muttā and Puṇṇā), but the commentary by Dhammapāla presents them as different people, and this is reflected in their verses. In addition, the authors of two of the poems are anonymous (1, 67-71), referred to as *Aññararā therī* ("a certain [unknown] therī").

Another complication, as Norman points out, is that verses were recited as they were remembered, no distinction being made between "verses by" and "verses to." And some poems, such as Sundarī's (313-338), seem more likely to have been recited about her than by her. Furthermore, some verses (e.g. 367, the last verse of Subhā Kammāradhītā) seem to have been added much later by the *saṅgītikārā*.[154]

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[153] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 1st ed., xxiv.
[154] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 1st ed., xxiii-xxv.

A peculiarity of the *Therīgāthā* are the vocatives in some of the verses, when the therī is either addressed by someone, or she addresses herself – and one cannot tell which of these is the case.[155] Some of the poems are spoken in the second person when the therī is addressing her recalcitrant mind, which is resisting letting go, and she is exhorting herself to find peace. In other cases, such as in many of the one-verse poems, the speaker (according to the commentary) is said to be the Buddha addressing the nun, and in so doing leading her to enlightenment. It is said that these verses become the therīs' own when they meditate on them and attain Nibbāna. In these poems, the verse becomes the therī's own voice, although it had been given to her by the Buddha. There are many examples throughout the Pāli canon of disciples, both male and female, becoming enlightened upon hearing the Dharma. If we envisage a practitioner becoming liberated when the catalyst is hearing the Dharma, it is easy to imagine that those words would henceforth be seared into the disciple's mind. Since these therīs, upon hearing the instructions of the Buddha, adopt his words as their own, I believe it is justified to include these verses among the 'female' voices, and even more so because in most of these cases, the commentaries state that the Buddha appears to the therī, not in person, but in a vision. Unless one believes in miracles, words heard in a vision could be said to originate in the mind of the beholder.

In the dialogue poems, it is not always noted who is speaking, and this has to be deduced. For example, in Selā's poem (57-59) it seems to be Māra who is speaking in the first verse,[156] and then Selā replies to him in the second and third verses. In the third verse, she directly addresses her challenger by his epithet, *pāpima* (evil one).[157] In other

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[155] Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 52.
[156] Pruitt, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs*, 85-86.
[157] Māra also figures in certain lines of the poems of a number of other therīs, e.g., Somā, Khemā, Cālā, Upacālā, Sīsūpacālā, and Uppalavaṇṇā.

dialogues between the therī and for example, her son, her parents, a Brahmin, et al., sometimes the speaker of particular verses is not noted in the written text, but can be readily deduced from the conversation. One can imagine that in a performative context, determining the speaker of different verses would not have been an issue, since the person reciting would have changed their tone of voice and demeanor to personify the character whose verses they were performing.

4.5. Contrast with the *Theragāthā*

In this section, I draw on the work of Kathryn Blackstone, who argues that, although the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā* are identical in form, structure, and style, they nonetheless exhibit consistent gender differentiation in their religious expressions. She finds differences between the monks and the nuns in terms of: the authors' attitudes towards relationships; their degree of personalization or abstraction; and their experiences of, and responses to, conflict. In terms of the subject matter of the two anthologies, Blackstone's findings (expressed as the percentage of poems in each text) on the fundamental differences between the two texts are summarized in the following table:[158]

Table 4. Some Differences between the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā*

Textual Subject Matter	% Frequency *Thī*	% Frequency *Th*
Ascribed to authors speaking of their own awakening	77	37
Monastics describing their previous lifestyles	34	9.5
Accounts of conversion	23	5
Verses that describe overt conflict	35	0.5

Blackstone notes that, while many of the poems in the two texts are clearly in the voice of the attributed author, other poems are not about the author's experience, but rather refer to the awakening of others, or to hypothetical situations. Interestingly, in the *Therīgāthā*, seventy-seven percent of the poems refer to the author's own experience of

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[158] Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, 108.

liberation, whereas only thirty-seven percent of the poems of the *Theragāthā* do so. Blackstone concludes that the *Therīgāthā* is much more "author-oriented" and concerned with the nuns' own experiences. In contrast, the *Theragāthā* shows a predilection of the monks to refer to the experiences of others, or to themselves in imperative or future tenses. Another dissimilarity is that, while the nuns are more "author-oriented," they are also more "other-oriented" in that they refer frequently to the religious attainments of individuals they know well. In the *Theragāthā*, on the other hand, the majority of references to 'others' are abstract, idealized, or hypothetical characterizations. Likewise, both texts contrast the state of unenlightened fools with that of liberated individuals, but the fools in the *Therīgāthā* are portrayed as concrete, whereas they tend to remain abstract in the *Theragāthā.* The poems of the *Therīgāthā* – more down to earth – also exhibit "a greater concern with samsaric existence – with the suffering, passion, and disillusionment that characterize the existential conditions of ordinary individuals."[159]

Yet another salient difference between the two texts is found in the descriptions of the lifestyles of the ascribed authors before they ordain. Of the poems in the *Therīgāthā*, thirty-four percent provide some kind of previous history, whereas fewer than ten percent of the monks' poems do so. In addition, many of the stories of the therīs' lives are told in vivid detail, whereas descriptions of the monks' lives as householders tend to be oblique, dry, or extremely brief. In addition, the monks' accounts are practically devoid of emotion and of relationships, whereas many of the nuns' stories are filled with poignant details of their families, friends, and losses. Renouncing home and family seems to represent a more radical breach for the nuns than for the monks, and this may help

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[159] Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, 108, 28-29, 104.

explain the marked difference in the proportion of poems that discuss the process of conversion (twenty-three percent for the nuns vs. five percent for the monks).[160]

Blackstone also explores the differing perspectives towards the human body in the two anthologies. In early Buddhism attachment to the body is seen as a powerful obstacle to liberation, and both texts reflect this and contain meditations on decomposing corpses. However, whereas the nuns visualize the decomposition and putrefaction of their own bodies, the monks generally visualize the disgusting nature of bodies other than their own, specifically women's bodies. While the nuns see their own bodies as impure, the monks tend to project impurity onto others, especially women. In the *Therīgāthā* the problem of the body is seen as an attachment to self, which is to be abandoned, whereas in the *Theragāthā* the problem of attachment is seen as desire for the female other, which is to be overcome by projecting onto them images of the body as disgusting.[161]

4.6. Stock Phrases

While the *Therīgāthā* features many unique testimonials of awakening, it also contains stock phrases, such as "The Buddha's teaching has been done," as well as simple repetitions of phrases, e.g., "having conquered Māra." In this section, I analyze the frequencies of stock phrases – in their exact grammatical form as they appear in the *Therīgāthā*, but leaving off the final inflections – to explore further differences between the anthology of the nuns compared to that of the monks. In addition, I examine these phrases in the wider context of the *Sutta Piṭaka* by analyzing their frequency in the suttas and in the other books of the *Khuddaka Nikāyā*. My analysis begins with the identification of the most important stock phrases in the *Therīgāthā*, determining how

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[160] Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, 40-47, 108-110.
[161] Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, 59-74, and 81.

often they occur, using the search function of the Digital Pali Reader.

Table 5. Relative Frequencies[162] of Stock Phrases in the *Therīgāthā*, *Theragāthā* and the *Dīgha*, *Majjhima*, *Saṃyutta*, and *Aṅguttara Nikāyā*s

(The **bold** text in the stock phrases indicates the actual search elements.)

Stock Phrases and Repetitions (Pāli)	Stock Phrase and Repetitions (English)	Thī (%)	Th (%)	DN (%)	MN (%)	SN (%)	AN (%)
kataṃ buddhassa sāsanan / sāsanaṃ	The Buddha's teaching has been done.	20.5	11.7				
tamokhandaṃ padāliyā / tamokhandho padālito	The mass of darkness is split apart.	16.4	0.8				
me dhammamadesesi	taught me the Dharma	12.3	0.4				
citte avasavattinī	no control over my mind	6.8					
natthi dāni punabbhavo	There is no renewed existence.	5.5	6.1	2.9	1.3	0.31	0.18
dhārehi **antimaṃ dehaṃ**	Bear your last body.	5.5	1.1			0.10	0.03
jetvā māraṃ	having conquered Māra	5.5	0.8			0.10	0.03
sattisūlūpamā	like swords and stakes	5.5			0.66	0.03	0.03
cittaṃ vimucci me	My mind / heart was set free.	5.5	3.0				
cittaṃ vimuccati	The mind / heart is set free.		0.4	8.8	14.5	0.17	0.41
dhanaṃ vindanti māṇavā	Young men find wealth.	4.1					
khippaṃ pādāni dhovitvā, ekamante nisīdathā	Wash your feet quickly and sit down to one side.	4.1					
me dhammamadesesi **khandhāyatanadhāt**uyo	taught me the Dharma: the aggregates, the sense spheres, and the elements	4.1				0.03	
nihato tvamasi antakā	Death, you are defeated.	4.1				0.17	
me āsavakkhayo	I have destroyed the contaminants.	2.7	3.0				
samūlaṃ taṇhamabbuyha	pulled out craving down to the root	2.7	0.8				
animittañca bhāvehi	Cultivate the signless.	2.7	0.4				
antimoyaṃ samussayo	This is the last body.	2.7	0.4			0.03	
chaḷabhiññā sacchikatā, kataṃ buddhassa sāsanan / ṃ	realized the six supernormal knowledges[163]	2.7				0.03	
abbūḷhasallāhaṃ	I have my dart plucked out.	2.7					
pāde pasāresiṃ	I stretched out my feet.	2.7					
satthusāsanakārikā	doing the teacher's teaching	2.7					

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[162] An estimate of the relative frequency of a word or expression is calculated as the number of poems in which the word or phrase occurs divided by the number of poems in that text, and expressed as a percentage. So in the *Therīgāthā*, the number of poems in which the phrase occurs is divided by 73 and in the *Theragāthā* by 264. For the *Nikāyā*s the number of occurrences is divided by number of discourses in that *Nikāyā*: 34 (DN), 152 (MN), 2904 (SN) and 3872 (AN). For the SN and AN, I have used Bhikkhu Bodhi's numbers given in his introductions to the translations (pp 25 and 19 respectively).

[163] In DN 2:87-97, the Buddha describes the six supernormal powers as follows: 1) various powers such as passing through walls, walking on water, flying cross-legged; 2) the divine ear, able to hear sounds both divine and human, near and far; 3) knowledge of others' minds; 4) ability to remember previous existences; 5) the divine eye, seeing beings passing away and arising; 6) knowledge of the destructions of the corruptions, and knowing as it really is: "This is suffering; this is the origin of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering." - Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 105-107.

The table above presents the relative frequency of these phrases in the *Therīgāthā* compared to their frequency in the *Theragāthā* and in the *Dīgha*, *Majjhima*, *Saṃyutta*, and *Aṅguttara Nikāyā*s. In this table, shading in the stock phrase translations indicates those that occur over twice as often in the Thī than in the Th. Dark shading under **Thī** indicates those phrases that, in this grammatical form, occur nowhere else in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. As this analysis shows, only two of these phrases occur in at least one percent of the suttas in the DN, MN, SN, or AN, namely: "There is no renewed existence" and "The mind / heart is set free." Even more noteworthy is that six of the stock phrases in the *Therīgāthā* occur nowhere else at all in these grammatical forms in the entire *Sutta Piṭaka*, including the *Khuddaka Nikāyā*:

- no control over my mind
- young men find wealth
- wash your feet quickly and sit down to one side
- I have my dart plucked out
- I stretched out my feet
- (and except in the *Therī-Apadāna*) doing the teacher's teaching.

This table also shows some interesting comparisons between the poems of the nuns and the monks. Fully seventeen out of these twenty-two phrases (shaded in the above table) occur relatively at least twice as often in the *Therīgāthā* as in the *Theragāthā*. For example, the therīs are far more apt than the monks to exclaim, "The mass of darkness is split open," and to acknowledge that someone taught them the Dharma. And in addition to the phrases listed above occurring nowhere else in the canon except in the *Theragāthā*, two more phrases are spoken by the nuns but not at all by the monks: sensual pleasures "like swords and stakes," and having been taught the Dharma through "the aggregates, the sense spheres, and the elements."

With respect to the most widely used stock phrase in the *Therīgāthā*, "the Buddha's teaching has been done," exclaimed by over one fifth of the therīs, it is this phrase that is taken up much later in not only the nuns' *Therī-Apadāna*, but also in the monks' *Thera-Apadāna*, as the signature phrase in the last verse of each and every one of the poems in these two collections.

Since none of these twenty-two stock phrases identified in the *Therīgāthā* are found in the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, it seems unlikely that any of them were part of the common lexicon of poetic and religious discourse during the very early teaching career of the Buddha. One theory regarding the use of stock phrases might be that they give a certain authority to those therīs' descriptions of their awakening in a way that would have been instantly recognizable in the Buddhist culture of the day. Another possibility is that frequent use of stock phrases reinforced the Buddhist identity or sense of belonging for a community (women) that was sometimes marginalized. Or it may be that many of these stock phrases were added later by those reciting the verses, or by the editors and redactors seeking to standardize the teachings for transmission and preservation.

The effect on the modern reader of many of these stock phrases is, however, not always positive. For example, translators Schelling and Waldman refer to them as "formulaic stuffing," and they recount that Rhys Davids suggested that some poems suffered from the "sententious, and repetitious formulas that so often conclude a wildly enchanting poetic performance."[164] For the purpose of learning from these poems, I believe it is important not to force them into the mold of what appeals to us today as "good poetry." Rather, if we can go beyond our modern day short attention spans and our instinctive dislike of repetition, and if we can approach these poems with curiosity and a

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[164] Schelling and Waldman, *Songs of the Sons and Daughters of Buddha*, xii-xiii.

sense of openness to the culture at the time, then we are in a better position to explore what functions these stock phrases might have served for the composers, performers, and anthologizers of the poems, and for the listener at the time the verses were spoken, recited, chanted, sung, or performed.

4.7. The Theravāda Commentary on the *Therīgāthā*

It seems that the sixth-century scholar-poet, Dhammapāla, approximately a thousand years after the teaching of the Buddha, drew on traditional stories circulating in the Theravāda Buddhist world to create anecdotal narratives in order to enhance the hagiography and staging of the poems of the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā*. Walters points out that the prose narrative of Dhammapāla is "clearly based on the *Apadāna* recensions of the hagiographies," which Dhammapāla usually quotes. Walters believes that the hagiographical poems of the *Therī-Apadāna*, composed during the second or first century B.C.E., are literal continuations of the poems of the *Therīgāthā*.[165]

Collins considers the first commentaries on the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā* to have been preserved orally until the second half of the first century B.C.E., when both the texts and the early commentaries were written down for the first time. Regarding Dhammapāla's commentaries, Collins speculates that there is "no reason to doubt that he has preserved material from much earlier times."[166] The commentarial accounts provide narratives, which contextualize the poems, giving the name, social background, and biographical stories about the ascribed authors. Roy points out that the stories in the prose account of the commentaries were likely transmitted together with the verses for generations, and they provide a narrative pool from which the raconteurs at the time

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[165] Walters, "A Voice from the Silence," 364-365.
[166] Collins, introduction to *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, viii.

could choose different poems and stories for different circumstances. Roy believes that the commentaries "rescue the *gāthās* from anonymity, and provide a means of constituting gendered identities" for the nuns and monks of the two anthologies.[167]

In her demonstration of the differences between canonical and commentarial literature, Alice Collett shows that whereas the commentaries are more negative about women, the canon "offers a rare insight into the position of women in ancient India, and there is a great deal in it that is very positive about women, which is noteworthy for a textual corpus from a traditional society."[168] It is indeed remarkable that the poems of the *Therīgāthā* were preserved throughout centuries of increasingly patriarchal trends in Theravāda Buddhism, which resulted in the Theravāda order of nuns completely dying out from the eleventh to the twentieth centuries C.E. Now in the early twenty-first century, the revival of *bhikkhunī* ordination has become a salient development in Theravāda Buddhism,[169] though still controversial in some quarters.

The poems of the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā* are, of course, canonical, but the commentary is not. Robert Bracey criticizes all of the English translations of the *Therīgāthā* for an over-reliance on the commentary by Dhammapāla.[170] The commentary, by necessity, speaks to a set of concerns of Theravāda Buddhism, which had evolved for perhaps a millennium after the utterances of the Buddha's earliest disciples. Hence, while Dhammapāla's commentary sheds light on the meaning of the *Therī-* and *Theragāthā* for the Theravāda tradition as it had evolved in the mid-sixth century C.E., I do not believe that

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[167] Roy, *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power*, 18.
[168] Collett, *Lives of Early Buddhist Nuns*, xxxi.
[169] Anālayo, "The Four Assemblies and Theravāda Buddhism," *Insight Journal* (2015), accessed August 18, 2016, https://www.bcbsdharma.org/article/the-four-assemblies-and-theravada-buddhism/.
[170] Robert Bracey, "Review of *Therigatha: Poems of First Buddhist Women*," *The Indian Classics Blog Review* (December 2015), accessed September 7, 2016, http://www.academia.edu/16649274/The_Indian_Classics_Blog_Review.

it would be wise to count on it to provide genuine historical information about the monastics to whom the verses in these anthologies are attributed. While Dhammapāla's commentaries certainly enhance the stories behind the various poems and presumed authors in the two anthologies, it should not be conflated with the canonical teachings in the original texts. In my analysis, I strive to focus first and foremost on the texts themselves, and to distinguish what one can learn from the poems and what is derived from the commentaries.

5. A Dharmalogical Interpretation of the *Therīgāthā*

The *Therīgāthā* is a celebration, with many different human faces, of examples of personal experiences of Nibbāna. Notably absent is any doctrinal argument or discussion of any kind, including what constitutes Nibbāna, or specific instructions on how one should train. In this chapter I discuss how the *Therīgāthā* might be used as a dharmalogical sourcebook in transmitting Buddhist teachings. In particular, I explore what I see as the fundamental message of the *Therīgāthā* taken as a whole, namely that Nibbāna, complete release, is possible in this very lifetime, and that it is possible for women as well as for men.

Not only this, but with the variety of the testimonials of ultimate freedom found in these poems, this text can serve as a big and welcoming tent, which can inspire, guide, and liberate practitioners of every stripe regardless of their current situation, background, or challenges. I then explore what the *Therīgāthā* depicts about how the nuns train and the liberating result of this training. I offer my understanding of a path of practice using illustrations from the poems, and then discuss the role of insight and the goal of the training, liberation. In the final chapter I conclude with reflections on how these poems

can inspire practitioners today, not least offering an indirect taste of Nibbāna.

5.1. The Potential of Every Heart to be Free

In analyzing how women are portrayed in the *Therīgāthā*, I return here to the first four questions posed above (p 14) on analyzing the *Therīgāthā* from the point of view of feminist theory, and will address the fifth of those questions in the Conclusion. Again, I wish to underscore the importance of examining gender issues in their cultural context. The *Therīgāthā* reveals that, although women enjoyed a certain degree of freedom, the socio-religious milieu in which early Buddhism developed was profoundly patriarchal (and in many ways, remains so today in parts of Asia). Women's lives tended to be controlled by men – their fathers, husbands, and so on. For young women, their husbands are chosen by their fathers, who negotiate a certain bride price. In order to ordain, unmarried women need the permission of their parents. To go forth, married women need the permission of their husbands, though men do not need the permission of their wives.

It is remarkable, however, that once they are ordained, women are depicted in the *Therīgāthā* as completely free from all these patriarchal constraints. There are many therīs whom we can view as heroes (*vīrā*): going against the social norms of their time and devoting themselves to a life of renunciation; persevering in the face of despair; descending from grief into madness and then taming their minds; practicing wholeheartedly while dealing with rejection, poverty, emaciation, or old age. One of the therīs is actually named Vīrā (7).[171] In her poem, the Buddha praises her "firm mental

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[171] The DPR verse numbers of the therīs' poems are given in parentheses after the therīs' names. When selecting poems for this chapter, I chose the translation that seemed most accessible while remaining faithful to the Pāḷi original. In reproducing these poems in English, I transcribe the translator's words, but keep the line breaks as close as possible to those in the original Pāḷi, as documented in the DPR.

states," and her "having conquered Māra and his mount."[172] In another example,

Upasamā (10) is instructed by the Buddha to "cross the flood, the realm of death which is

very hard to cross."[173] Other examples of heroic nuns would include Cittā (27-28),

Mettikā (29-30), and Subhā Jīvakambavanikā (368-401). We sense the heroism of these

therīs when they are called conquerors: they conquer ignorance ("the mass of darkness is

split open"); they conquer difficult, unsubmissive minds, grief, *āsava*s, and even Māra.

Whereas elsewhere in the Pāli canon, women are sometimes dismissed as incapable,[174]

the women portrayed in the *Therīgāthā* are depicted as dedicated practitioners, meeting

adversity with courage, and defeating temptations with lucid insight. The *Therīgāthā*

offers a convincing answer from a canonical Theravāda text to any question about a

woman's ability to reach the highest Buddhist goal.

One example, Somā's verse (60-62), begins with a challenge from Māra as she is

meditating: "That place, hard to gain, which is to be attained by the seers, cannot be

attained by a woman with two-finger-intelligence." However, Somā, fully confident of

her realization, not missing a beat, replies to Māra,

> What harm could the woman's state do to us, when the mind is well
> concentrated, when knowledge exists for someone rightly having
> insight into the doctrine?
> Everywhere enjoyment of pleasure is defeated; the mass of darkness is
> torn asunder; in this way know, evil one, you are defeated, death."[175]

According to the commentary, women cannot gain arahantship because of their

"two-finger intelligence" (i.e., inferior wisdom); the meaning of this expression is that

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[172] Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2nd ed., 165.

[173] Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2nd ed., 166.

[174] For example, in AN 1.279, the Buddha states, "It is impossible and inconceivable, bhikkhus, that a woman could be an arahant who is a perfectly enlightened Buddha." In AN 4.80, the Buddha explains that women do not sit in council because they are "prone to anger … envious … miserly … unwise." - Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 114 and 465. A text virtually identical to AN 1.279 also occurs in MN 115.

[175] Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2nd ed., 173.

"starting at the age of seven or eight, women are always cooking boiled rice," and to know if the rice is done, they take some out, "press it between two fingers, and then they know."[176] Whereas this type of experiential knowledge, identified by Māra as feminine, and corresponding to the semiotic dimension of body language, is dismissed in the later commentary as 'inferior' and thus inadequate for gaining Nibbāna, I would argue that it is in fact – when applied with a concentrated mind – exactly what the Buddha refers to in "seeing things as they are," one of the pre-conditions for the realization of abiding peace. Paṭācārā's poem (112-116) is an excellent example of this experiential knowledge functioning as a catalyst for Nibbāna.

Moreover, in the poems of the *Therīgāthā* we encounter many nuns who served as skillful teachers, leading their disciples, their parents, their children, strangers, and even Brahmins to the Buddhist path and to awakening. Thus, in giving life to the message of liberation as transmitted by the Buddha, the *Therīgāthā* provides an unambiguous rebuttal to the patriarchal norms of its time, and it offers the promise of freedom to all sincere practitioners, whether male or female or in between. Given the second-class status that women suffered in the Brahmanical culture at the time of the Buddha, and even more so in the later Theravāda tradition, the inclusiveness expressed in the *Therīgāthā* is nothing short of revolutionary.

Furthermore, whereas queer and transgender theorists today face great hurdles when they call into question the tyranny of the binary two-sex, two-gender system operative in the West and in much of the developing world, the *Therīgāthā* gives a glimpse that at this time in India, intersexed people may have been acknowledged as members of a third sex, somewhere between male and female. In the *Therīgāthā* the

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[176] Pruitt, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs*, 88-89.

possibility of intersexuality is acknowledged in the poem of Isidāsī (402-449), when she recounts a former life in which she "was born of a household-slave in the street, as neither a woman nor a man."[177]

The *Therīgāthā* makes it plain that liberation is feasible for women from wealthy families or poor; for those from every class of society, including slaves; for those of different walks of life, from the princess to the prostitute; for the old or the young; for those gifted in meditation or those with wild minds unable to concentrate; and for those who are lost in despair, grief, or even madness. This uncompromising commitment to diversity is a powerful message of the text as a whole, which resonates with readers and listeners today.

According to the text itself, a number of therīs attain some stage of enlightenment first as laywomen and then ordain. Of the seventy-three nuns featured in the *Therīgāthā*, three – Ubbirī (51-53),[178] Sujātā (145-150),[179] and Kisāgotamī (213-223)[180] – realize arahantship as laywomen and then ordain afterwards. Anopamā (151-156)[181] attains the third stage of awakening as a laywoman. Subhā Kammāradhītu (339-367) is said to become a stream-winner (the first stage of enlightenment) as a young adult hearing the Buddha preach.[182] Likewise, Rohinī (271-291), as a young woman, attains stream-entry, and with great wisdom converts her father, a Brahmin, and then requests permission to go forth.[183] Sakulā (97-101), as a wife and mother, hears a monk preach the Dharma, and she sees "the stainless doctrine, quenching, the unshaken state;" she immediately goes forth

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[177] Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2nd ed., 214.
[178] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 93-94.
[179] Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2nd ed., 182-183.
[180] Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2nd ed., 190-191.
[181] Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2nd ed., 183.
[182] Hallisey, *Therigatha*, 271, n 31.
[183] Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2nd ed., 198-199.

and soon realizes full awakening.[184] When Sundarī (313-338) ordains as a young woman, she quickly attains arahantship as a novice and roars her "lion's roar in the presence of the excellent Buddha."[185]

According to the commentary,

Some therīs attain liberation quickly; some take a long time. The path is different depending on the practitioner and her background, but the fruit is the same.

In addition to its convincing testimonies depicting women as just as capable as men of realizing complete release, the *Therīgāthā* also explores what needs to be done for awakening to occur, and this too applies to a wide range of what holds practitioners back. Some of the therīs are depicted as already highly advanced on the path to liberation. In the story of Subhā Jīvakambavanikā (368-401), we encounter a courageous and compassionate nun, who is already firm in her awakening, and able to convince her would-be seducer of the error of his ways, all the while bringing him towards the Dharma. The sisters Cālā and Upacālā (182-188 and 189-195 respectively) are said to be mindful, with well-developed faculties. Having "pierced the peaceful state," they conquer Māra, overcome ignorance, and dwell "delighting in [the Buddha's] teaching."[186] Another example is the couple, Bhaddā Kāpilānī (63-66) and Mahākassapa, who decide together to go forth as a nun and monk respectively rather than consummate their marriage; both become among the most eminent of the Buddha's disciples.

At the other end of the spectrum is Cāpā (292-312), who tries to prevent her husband from going forth, offering to be his beautiful slave; and when that doesn't work,

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[184] Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2nd ed., 177.
[185] Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2nd ed., 203.
[186] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 186-187.

threatening to harm their son, "with a stick! with a knife!" if he leaves her.[187] Cāpā's

poem portrays her as deluded, selfish, scheming, and capable of threatening violence to

her own child, and it does not provide any evidence of her awakening, or even of her

going forth. In between these two extremes of many fully awakened therīs and this

deluded laywoman who (according to the commentary) eventually does become a nun,

we encounter in the *Therīgāthā* examples of practitioners confronting a wide range of

obstacles.

Guttā's poem (163-168) is another one that does not read as a testimony of her

enlightenment, but rather as instructions to her, presumably from the Buddha, promising

her supreme peace once she has seen through the temptations of Māra and given up

desire for sensual pleasures, malevolence, the false view of self, pride, ignorance, conceit,

and renewed existence.[188] One gets the impression that Guttā still has work to do.

As shown in Table 11 (Appendix 6, pp 112-113), twenty-nine of the therīs were

taught by the Buddha himself or interacted directly with him.

5.2. The Training and Practices that Lead to Liberation

In that specific training techniques or practices are rarely mentioned in the

Therīgāthā, it bears some resemblance to the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, where rather than being

given concrete instructions, the practitioner is encouraged to simply *be* like an awakened

one; or as Fronsdal states in his discussion of the text, "One trains by being what one is to

become."[189] In the case of the *Therīgāthā*, one might say that, with Nibbāna as the goal of

the Buddhist path, the essential practice is to incline the mind in the direction of Nibbāna,

that is, towards deep, abiding peace. Therefore, to attain peace, one lives peacefully, by

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[187] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 123.

[188] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 184.

[189] Fronsdal, *The Buddha before Buddhism*, 20.

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putting into practice non-harming, mindfulness, and letting go. As shown above in Table 5 (p 50), the most common laudatory phrase for a therī is simply that she has "done the Buddha's teaching." However, as discussed in the sections that follow, before one can train by simply *being* what one is to become, there are fundamental practices that need to be put in place.

Thus, although specific training instructions are uncommon in the text, nevertheless the *Therīgāthā* offers insight on what needs to be done for awakening to occur, traps that can lead one astray, and how, in a multitude of situations, one might address difficulties, challenges, and hardships along the way. A careful reading of the text reveals the therīs' understanding of the training that leads to seeing clearly, letting go, and liberation. For example, many poems highlight a sense of urgency, persevering in the face of great difficulty, practicing restraint, cultivating *samādhi* (concentration), or focusing on the experience at hand. The therīs' diverse accounts demonstrate that different practitioners face very different challenges along the path to full release, and naturally the emphasis in their practice will vary accordingly – many paths, one fruit.

In this section I offer my interpretation, with illustrations from the poems of these venerable nuns, of a path of practice that can lead to Nibbāna. In discussing the training, I describe: 1) the foundations of practice: ethics, renunciation, meditation, friendship, and having a teacher one can trust; 2) wise effort; 3) the application of effort to: purifying the mind, courage, letting go of afflictive states, stilling desires, contentment, *samādhi*, and open awareness; 4) insight; and 5) letting go.

5.2.1. The Foundations of Practice

The path of practice begins with putting in place the conditions that make liberation possible. Traditionally a Buddhist practitioner will first cultivate generosity and

ethics, and with this basis she or he will then undertake meditation practices of mindfulness and concentration, leading to insight. There are many references in the Pāli canon to progressive instruction beginning with giving and virtue.[190] For Buddhist monastics, ordination involves a profound commitment to the highest standards of ethical behavior. For lay Buddhists, the Pāli canon sets forth five fundamental precepts of non-harming, and as a supplement, lay practitioners may occasionally take additional monastic precepts such as not eating between noon and sunrise the next day. The vows to live ethically at all times constitute the unstated bedrock of Theravāda Buddhist training.

A key theme in the *Therīgāthā* is renunciation, as this is what needs to be done – again and again – for awakening to occur. The path of practice is not a straight line, but rather one of an ever-deepening spiral, where the practitioner continually revisits renunciation and letting go at increasingly subtle (and sometimes tenacious) levels of attachment. And so letting go is a challenge at every stage of the path. The therīs speak eloquently of giving up all that is dear, including family, home, and children; giving up the pursuit of sensual pleasures, attachment to their beauty and to their bodies; and giving up renewed existence.

Some therīs go forth to escape an unhappy home life, and are "well released" and delight in their freedom. For example, Muttā (11) celebrates being free of her "crooked husband" and the drudgery of her wifely duties.[191] Likewise, Sumaṅgala-mātā (23-24) relishes being "well released ... from the pestle [domestic duties]."[192] Even the great Uppalavaṇṇā (224-235) escapes an unhealthy home situation in which her husband's co-

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[190] For example, "Then the Blessed One gave the householder Upāli progressive instruction, that is talk on giving, talk on virtue …" (MN 56.18) - Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 485.

[191] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 166.

[192] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 168.

wives were mother and daughter, but she then goes on to gain mastery over her mind.[193]

Other therīs, for example Saṅghā (18), renounce a happy family life to become

completely free:

> Giving up my house, gone forth, giving up son, cattle, and whatever was dear to me, giving up desire and hatred, and discarding ignorance, plucking out craving root and all, I have become stilled, quenched.[194]

Although it is not always obvious, I believe one can presume that the therīs all

practice meditation. Three poems contain explicit instructions to the therī to "Do the

Buddha's teaching … and sit down on one side" to listen to the teacings (*ekamante*

nisīdatha: 13, 118, 176). In another five, there are direct references to meditation (*jhāyati*,

or *jhāna* – meditative absorption):

- Sumaṅgala-mātā (23-24) rejoices:

  I destroy desire and hatred with a sizzling sound. Going up to the foot of a tree, [thinking] "O the happiness", I meditate upon it as happiness.[195]

- Vaḍḍha-mātu (204-212) points to the key role of meditation in preparing for her awakening:

  All my *āsava*s have been annihilated as I meditate, vigilant. I have obtained the three knowledges. I have done the Buddha's teaching.[196]

- Subhā Kammāradhītu (339-367), a freed slave, is praised by the Buddha:

  Look at Subhā, the metalworker's daughter, she has become calm, she meditates at the foot of a tree.[197]

- In Isidāsī's poem (v 403) a narrator praises her as possessing virtue, delighting in meditation, and having shaken off the defilements.[198]

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[193] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 192-193.
[194] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 167.
[195] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 168.
[196] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 189.
[197] Hallisey, *Therigatha*, 181.
[198] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 211.

- Sumedhā (450-524), determined to convince her parents to let her go forth even though they had already promised her in marriage to a king, sits down in meditation just as the king is arriving to ask for her hand:

> Then Sumedhā cut her black, thick, soft hair with a knife,
> closed the palace door, and entered on the first meditation [*jhāna*].[199]

Three of these poems evoke a context of seclusion, with the nuns, following the Buddha's example, meditating at the foot of a tree (*rukkhamūla*), and another with Sumedhā closing the palace door. In three others, the nun goes into the forest (*vana*: 50, 147, 368). Seclusion is essential for practicing the *jhāna*s, but some degree of seclusion is also important for meditation practice at any level. On the path of practice, finding or creating a spot conducive to meditation is one of the first conditions the practitioner puts into place. In these poems, we also see some of the states of mind important for the therīs on their path: renunciation; greed and hate destroyed; *āsava*s destroyed; defilements shaken off; vigilance; calm; happiness; and *samādhi*.

We saw in section 4.5 (pp 47-48) the emphasis in the *Therīgāthā* on relationships, and in particular on friendship. Therīs whose poems commend friendship include: Mittā (2), Kisāgotamī (213-223), and Rohinī (271-291). As Kisāgotamī expounds:

> The state of having noble friends has been praised by the sage with
> reference to the world; if he resorted to noble friends, even a fool
> would be wise.[200]

Hallisey too notes that the nuns of the *Therīgāthā* are "bound together by shared experiences and relationships of care and intimacy with one another."[201] The importance of spiritual friendship is highlighted in the well-known story in which the Buddha's close disciple, Ānanda, says to him, "Venerable sir, this is half the holy life, that is: good

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[199] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 219.
[200] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 190.
[201] Hallisey, *Therigatha*, xviii-xxix.

friendship," to which the Buddha replies, "Not so Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship."[202] And this is true today not only for the monastic Saṅgha, but also for lay practitioners. Many Dharma teachers, myself included, having seen how fruitful good friendships and collaboration can be, create and nurture opportunities for practitioners to share insights with other spiritual friends.

For many practitioners, their ultimate spiritual friend is their teacher. Buddhist practitioners are encouraged to experience the truth directly for themselves, so that the foundation of their religious life is their own experience, not the teachings of someone else. Nevertheless, while the goal is to become independent in one's practice, guidance from a teacher one can trust can be invaluable in the formative period of Buddhist practice. Here again, we have seen a striking difference between the poems of the monks and the nuns. As shown in Table 5 above (p 50) on the use of stock phrases in the two anthologies: the relative frequency of "taught me the Dharma" is thirty times greater among the poems of the nuns that those of the monks. This, I believe, is related to the fact that the therīs are much more willing to talk about their struggles than are the monks. For these women, their teacher plays a critical role in guiding them towards freedom: "I approached a nun I thought I could trust; I took her advice; She taught me the Dharma."[203]

5.2.2. Wise Effort

With this foundation of ethics, renunciation, meditation, friendship, and the support of a teacher, the practitioner's ongoing challenge is to ascertain what, for them, constitutes wise effort. In some cases, strenuous effort is needed. Sundarī Nandā (82-86)

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[202] SN 45:2. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*), 1524.
[203] E.g., Anonymous (69); Soṇā (103); Vāseṭṭhī (136).

relates how vigilance and vigorous effort can bear fruit as insight:

> Not relaxing day or night, then analysing it by my own wisdom, I saw.
> Vigilant, reflecting in a reasoned manner, I saw this body as it really
> was, inside and out.[204]

A beautiful stock phrase in the *Therīgāthā*, which conveys a sense of urgency, and which occurs nowhere else in *the Sutta Piṭaka* is, "Wash your feet quickly and sit down to one side" (*ekamante nisīdatha*: 13, 118, 176). In another way, this sense of urgency is exquisitely expressed in Mittākālī's poem (92-96):

> I have entered upon the wrong road:
> I have come under the mastery of craving.
> My life is short. Old age and sickness are destroying it.
> There is no time for me to be careless before this body is broken.[205]

From another perspective, what constitutes right effort will also depend on which of the five hindrances may be active: desire, aversion, lethargy, agitation, or doubt.[206] For someone who is lazy or unengaged, what is needed is to arouse energy and to apply more sustained effort.

In Tissā's poem (4), the Buddha enjoins her to train assiduously:

> Tissā, train yourself strictly,
> don't let what can hold you back overwhelm you.
> When you are free from everything that holds you back
> you can live in the world without the depravities ...[207]

While ardent effort and perseverance are necessary in many stages of practice, there comes a time when wise effort entails relaxation rather than exertion. In fact, one of the ways in which Nibbāna is described in the *Therīgāthā* is "freedom from exertion." For example, the Buddha instructs Dhīrā (6) to "gain quenching, unsurpassed rest-from-

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[204] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 176.
[205] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 177.
[206] In Pāli: *kāmacchanda*, *vyāpāda*, *thīna-middha*, *uddhacca-kukkucca*, and *vicikicchā* respectively.
[207] Hallisey, *Therigatha*, 5.

exertion."[208] This will be discussed further in the next section on the application of effort.

5.2.3. The Application of Effort

As discussed earlier, specific training techniques or practices are rarely mentioned in the *Therīgāthā*, as is the case in many early Theravāda texts. For this reason, I will put forward in this and the following sections my own suggestion of how wise effort can be applied in a path of practice, drawing on my own experience and my understanding of other texts, and then illustrating various elements of the path with examples from the *Therīgāthā*. I explore the application of effort to: 1) letting go of afflictive states; 2) purifying the mind, including stilling desires and craving; 3) summoning courage; and 4) the practices of mindfulness, contentment, and *samādhi*.

<u>Letting go of Afflictive States</u>

A major theme in the *Therīgāthā*, which is not as prominent in the poems of the monks, is that of afflictive states such as struggle and grief. Several therīs speak of their wild minds, "no peace in my heart, no control over my mind." They struggle, practicing for many years before letting go of their suffering, and the accounts of their despair are as touching for practitioners today as they were two millennia ago. Some became nuns in reaction to intensely unhappy marriages. Still others were devastated by grief following the loss of a child, and in some cases, they were driven completely mad by their anguish. Even these women, grappling with insanity, eventually managed to let go of their pain and attain complete freedom.

As a laywoman, Ubbirī (51-53), distraught following the death of her daughter, Jīvā, is freed from her grief when the Buddha points out the inevitability of death,

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[208] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 165.

suggesting that she has already cremated eighty-four thousand daughters.[209] Elements of Ubbirī's poem are repeated by the five hundred[210] disciples of Paṭācārā (127-132), all of whom had lost a child. In the first four verses, their teacher, Paṭācārā, evoking *saṃvega* (religious emotion), challenges them by pointing out the inevitability of impermanence and the uselessness of grief, and then asking, "What lamentation is there in that?" With this, her many disciples, all mourning the loss of their children, relinquish the grief that had tormented them so:

> Truly she has plucked out my dart, hard to see, nestling in my heart,
> who [has] dispelled my grief for my son,
> when I was overcome by grief.
> Today I have plucked my dart out; I am without hunger, quenched.[211]

Kisāgotamī (213-223) recounts the tragedy of losing her husband, then her newborn, and then her young son on the way to her parents' house, and upon arrival there finding her mother, father, and brother burning on a funeral pyre.[212] In the next line, we hear the Buddha's [according to the commentary] compassionate words to her, "Miserable woman, with family annihilated, you have suffered immeasurable pain; and you have shed tears for many thousands of births." Kisāgotamī then relates her breakthrough in the cemetery, having lost her entire family and witnessing the flesh of her sons being eaten: "I attained the death-free ... I have realized quenching; I have looked at the doctrine as a mirror. I have my dart cut out, my burden laid down ... with mind completely released."[213] In Kisāgotamī's case, her debilitating grief is her unbearable burden – and it is also the doorway to her awakening. Her dart is removed

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[209] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 172.
[210] In Pāli, 'five hundred' (*pañcasatamattā*) is a convention for 'many.'
[211] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 181.
[212] Canonically this is Kisāgotamī's story, but in the commentary, this story is attributed to Paṭācārā.
[213] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 190-191.

when she sees herself in the mirror of the Dharma and penetrates the truth of suffering, the origin of suffering, the end of suffering, and the noble path to complete release.

For some therīs, such as Vāseṭṭhī (133-138), grief takes them into madness:

> Afflicted by grief for my son, with mind deranged, out of my senses, naked, and with dishevelled hair, I wandered here and there.
> I dwelt on rubbish heaps in the streets, in a cemetery, and on highways; I wandered for three years, consigned to hunger and thirst.
> Then I saw … the tamer of the untamed, the awakened one, who has no fear from any quarter.
> Regaining my mind, I paid homage to him and sat down …
> Applying myself to the teacher's utterance, I realized the blissful state.
> All griefs have been cut out, eliminated … for I have comprehended the ground from which is the origin of griefs.[214]

It is by seeing clearly and thoroughly penetrating the origin of her grief that Vāseṭṭhī realizes the bliss of Nibbāna. Through poems such as these, the practitioner can appreciate that what seems impossible – recovering from such intense grief – is actually not only possible, but can lead to liberation.

For other therīs it is not grief, but a wild mind, that needs to be overcome. This too is a theme that is much less emphasized in the poems of the monks compared to those of the nuns. The two therīs named Sāmā (37-38 and 39-41) both speak about their unsubmissive minds. The second Sāmā confides,

> Twenty-five years have passed since I went forth. I am not aware of having obtained peace of mind at any time ... remembering the teaching of the conqueror ... I have obtained the annihilation of craving. I have done the Buddha's teaching."[215]

Similarly, an anonymous nun (67-71) suffers a wild mind during twenty-five years of dedicated practice. Drenched with desire for sensual pleasures, she asks a wise

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214 Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 181.
215 Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 171.

friend[216] for help; then practicing her teachings, she realizes the six supernormal

knowledges – an unusual feat, even for an arahant:[217]

> It is twenty-five years since I went forth. Not even for the duration of a
> snap of the fingers have I obtained stilling of the mind. …
> I went up to a bhikkhunī who was fit to be trusted by me. She taught
> me the doctrine, the elements of existence, the sense bases …
> I heard the doctrine from her and sat down on one side. …
> I have realized these six supernormal knowledges; I have done the
> Buddha's teaching.[218]

In the case of Sīhā (77-81), after seven years sincerely following the Buddhist

path without any peace of mind, her despair is such that she decides to kill herself:

> Obsessed by sensuality I never got to the origin, but was agitated,
> my mind beyond control.
> I dreamed of a great happiness. I was passionate but had no peace.
> Pale and thin I wandered seven years, unhappy day and night.
> Then, I took a rope into the forest and thought
> > I'd rather hang than go back to that narrow life.
> I tied a strong noose to the branch of a tree
> > and put it round my neck – just then my heart was set free![219]

These stories suggest that such afflictive states can be difficult to let go of,

perhaps because of the habitual patterns of having been caught in them for so long. But

eventually, with dedicated training, insight can arise, and the practitioner recognizes the

unskillful state as not beneficial, and more importantly as not necessary – at which point,

the mind opens, and a deep release can occur. As we have seen from the stories of the

therīs, for some, this may occur relatively quickly, but for many it can be a long road.

Purifying the Mind and Stilling Desires

In the *Dhammapada* the Buddha's teaching is summarized as: "Doing no evil,

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[216] Said to be Dhammadinnā - Pruitt, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs*, 99.
[217] The only other person in the *Therīgāthā* said to have realized the six supernormal knowledges is Uppalavaṇṇā.
[218] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 175.
[219] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 66.

engaging in what's skillful, and purifying one's mind: This is the teaching of the buddhas."[220] Here, the path of practice is essentially the foundation of ethics, the application of wise effort, and purifying the mind – but of what? In addition to purifying the mind of greed and hatred, what may be implied here is the task to progressively purify the mind of our concepts and projections so that we can see things as they really are. The emphasis is not on defining a doctrine or a view of reality, but rather on exploring the delusional overlay of our own perceptions. Fronsdal describes perception as "the narrow neck of the hour glass between the inner world and the outer world."[221] As narrated in the *Bāhiya Sutta*, purifying the mind requires a radical simplification of how we perceive reality. When Bāhiya asks the Buddha to teach him the Dharma, the Buddha replies:

> You should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, … there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, … This, just this, is the end of stress [*dukkha*].[222]

Here the training is described as simply seeing things as they are, not as we might like them to be, purified of self-referential concepts, preconceptions, and judgments. When a practitioner sees clearly in this way, her cognitive faculties are well developed (*bhāvitindriyā*). In the *Therīgāthā*, Dhīrā, for example, is instructed [by the Buddha, according to the commentary]: "Know these for yourself: cessation, the stilling of

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[220] Dhp 183 - Gil Fronsdal, trans., *The Dhammapada: A New Translation of the Buddhist Classic with Annotations* (Boston: Shambhala, 2006), 49.
[221] Gil Fronsdal, personal communication, February 16, 2016.
[222] Ṭhānissaro Bikkhu, "Bāhiya Sutta" (Ud 1.10), *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)* (November 2013), accessed September 10, 2016, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.1.10.than.html.

projections [*saññāvūpasamaṃ*], happiness."[223]

The former prostitute, Vimalā (72-76), articulates this freedom from concepts during her meditation:

> Today, head shaved, robed, alms-wanderer,
> I, my same self, sit at the tree's foot, no thought [*avitakka*].[224]

Avitakka, a characteristic of the second *jhāna*, is translated by the online PED as "free from thought," "where reasonings cease," "free from the working of conception."

Another aspect of purifying the mind is the stilling of desires. Both the anonymous nun and Sīhā, cited above (pp 70-71), attribute their wild minds to obsession with sensual pleasures. And in fact, abandoning one's attachment to sensual desire is one of the primary themes of the *Therīgāthā*. A fundamental Buddhist teaching is the necessity of letting go of *all* clinging; as long as one is entangled with anything in this world, one cannot be free. Many of the poems of the *Therīgāthā* celebrate the therī's independence from being trapped in sensuality. Like Sihā and the anonymous nun above, many therīs struggle with desire for sensual pleasures, and this is often depicted as temptation by Māra. Even Khemā (139-144), foremost in wisdom, has to overcome her love of pleasure. She recounts how abandoning her attachment to pleasure led, not to diminished happiness, but to complete freedom from suffering. Her poem begins with an invitation from Māra to delight together in sensual pleasures. She replies,

> … Pleasures of the senses are swords and stakes …
> Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed, the great dark is torn
> apart, and Death, you too are destroyed.
> Fools, who don't know things as they really are, revere the mansions
> of the moon and tend the fire in the wood thinking this is purity.
> But for myself, I honor the Enlightened One, the best of all and,
> practicing his teaching, am completely freed from suffering.[225]

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[223] Hallisey, *Therigatha*, 7.
[224] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 140.

Typically, the therī refutes Māra saying, "Pleasures of the senses are swords and stakes (*sattisūlūpamā kāmā*) ... What you call delight holds no thrill for me (*yaṃ tvaṃ 'kāmaratiṃ' brūsi, 'aratī' dāni sā mama*)."[226] These words are spoken by Selā, Khemā, and Uppalavaṇṇā (58, 141, and 234 respectively). Sumedhā (493) also identifies sensual pleasures as swords and stakes; however, this not in a combat with Māra, but rather in conversation with her parents and the king to whom she is betrothed, as she strives to convince them of her calling to go forth as a nun. For a monastic, the choice is clear: celibacy. However, for a lay Buddhist practitioner, the threat is not so much sensual pleasures per se, but rather *attachment* to them; and this may be a more subtle and challenging path to negotiate. Giving up attachment to pleasure is illustrated by Sujātā's poem (145-150). She is depicted as a beautiful and wealthy woman, who, hearing the Buddha teach, awakens to arahantship as a laywoman:

> Ornamented, well-dressed, garlanded, sprinkled with sandalwood covered all over with jewelry, surrounded by a group of slave-women, … I fetched myself to the pleasure garden. Having enjoyed ourselves & played there, we headed back to our home. …
> Seeing the light of the world, I, paying homage, sat nearby.
> He, the One with Eyes, from sympathy, taught me the Dhamma. …
> Right there I touched the Dhamma, dustless, the deathless state.[227]

Similarly, Nanduttarā's challenge (87-91), as she describes it, is,

> Delighting in ornament and decoration ... I ministered to this body, afflicted by desire for sensual pleasure. Then obtaining faith I went forth into the houseless state, seeing the body as it really was. I have rooted out desires for sensual pleasures. I have cut out all existences, and wishes and longings too. Unfettered from all ties, I have attained peace of mind.[228]

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[225] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 79-80.
[226] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 176.
[227] Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Poems of the Elders*, 102-103.
[228] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 176-177.

This poem highlights the links among attachment to the body, desire for sensual pleasure, and longing for existence. These are the ties that need to be let go, in order to dwell in peace. Nanduttarā's path is similar to Khemā's, in which defeating attachment to pleasure is a central element in conquering ignorance, tearing apart the mass of darkness.

<u>Courage</u>

In the poems where the therī is challenged by Māra, she sees him for who he is, and this clear seeing defeats him. But in addition to seeing clearly, sometimes the practitioner needs to make skillful effort to summon courage. As shown by Uppalavaṇṇā (230-231), when Māra tries to sow fear in her heart, wise effort takes the form of an active, fearless, and determined stance:

> [Māra]: Going up to a tree with well-flowered top, you stand there alone at the foot of the tree; you do not even have a companion; child, are you not afraid of rogues?
> [Uppalavaṇṇā]: Even if a hundred thousand rogues like you were to come together, I should not move a hair's breadth, I should not even shake. What will you alone do to me, Māra?[229]

In other situations, such as when the practitioner is dealing with afflictive states like grief, despair, or discouragement, right effort is expressed as opening the heart. Meditation teacher, Jack Kornfield, explains,

> Most often, opening the heart begins by opening to a lifetime's accumulation of unacknowledged sorrow, both our personal sorrows and the universal sorrows of warfare, hunger, old age, illness, and death. At times we may experience this sorrow physically, as contractions and barriers around our heart, but more often we feel the depth of our wounds, our abandonment, our pain, as unshed tears. The Buddhists describe this as an ocean of human tears larger than the four great oceans.[230]

Opening the heart involves courage, but it also requires patience and practice. One

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229 Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 192.
230 Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 46.

example of this in the *Therīgāthā* is the poem by the anonymous therī (67-71), in which she shares her story of practicing as a nun for twenty-five years without a moment's peace. In the depth of her despair, she confides, "Uneasy at heart, steeped in longing for pleasure, I held out my arms and cried out as I entered the monastery."[231] A cry of despair like this, when the practitioner has reached rock bottom, can also be a courageous opening of the heart. When this unnamed nun then asks an esteemed therī to teach her the Dharma and she assiduously puts the teaching into practice, her heart is completely freed.

<u>Contentment, Concentration and Mindfulness</u>

Aroused persistence and sustained effort are necessary for many therīs until they reach the point of completely letting go.[232] On the other hand, for someone who is restless, or who tends to strive too much, skillful effort might be to just relax – to find that place where no straining is involved. The fruit of this non-striving is illustrated in the poems of Dhīrā (6), Mittā (8), Bhadrā (9), and Vaḍḍha-mātu (211), where the Buddha describes Nibbāna as "rest from exertion [*yogakkhema*]." For those whose practice is more developed, wise effort may consist of receiving rather than doing: having put into place the conditions conducive to awakening, one simply opens to it.

For a number of therīs, perhaps further along the path, wise effort is expressed in the simple practice of contentment, for example:[233]

- Muttā (2): "With a free mind, in no debt, enjoy what has been given to you, this almsfood."

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[231] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 40.
[232] For example, the two Tissās (4 and 5), Mittā (8), Bhadrā (9), Upasamā (10), Dhammadinnā (12), Visākhā (13), Dhammā (17), Jentā (21-22), Cittā (27-28), Mittā (31-32), the two Sāmās (37-38 and 39-41), Uttamā (42-44), an anonymous therī (67-71), Sīhā (77-81), Mahāpajāpati Gotamī (157-162), Vaḍḍha-mātu (204-212), Rohinī (271-291), and Sumedhā (450-524).
[233] Except for that of Muttā, which is from Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 181, the following citations are from Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed.: 165, 169, and 178, respectively.

- Anonymous (1): "Sleep happily, little therī ..."
- Mittā (31-32): "Today with a single meal each day ... I have removed the fear in my heart."
- Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā (107-111): "For fifty years without debt I have enjoyed the alms of the kingdoms."

Contentment is also the fruit of these nuns' practice. This is particularly clear in the case of Vuḍḍhapabbajita Sumanā (16): "Lie down happily, old lady ... for your desire is stilled."[234]

Another expressive image of contentment is that of the therī Uttamā (42-44) sitting in *jhāna* for seven days, then letting go of any self-conscious effort, stretching out her feet and realizing awakening:

> I heard what she said and sat cross-legged, seven full days of joy.
> When on the eighth I stretched my feet out,
> the great dark was torn apart.[235]

In a similar vein, Vijayā (169-174) relates,

> In the last watch of the night, I tore apart the great dark.
> Then I lived with joy and happiness filling my whole body and after
> seven days I stretched out my feet, having torn apart the great dark.[236]

This points to the idea that there is a deep happiness that comes with letting go. Sumaṅgala-mātā (23-24), reveling in her meditation, exclaims: "I am well released … O the happiness."[237]

Once the practitioner has abandoned the hindrances and feels inspired, an effortless process is set in motion: from gladness, to joy, to tranquility, to happiness, to concentration. This natural unfolding from gladness to *samādhi* appears in the Pāli canon

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[234] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 167.
[235] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 50.
[236] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 160.
[237] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 168 (identified by Norman as "A certain unknown bhikkhunī").

in forty-three different discourses, [238] for example: "For a virtuous person … it is natural

that non-regret arises … for one without regret, no volition need be exerted … It is

natural that joy [*pāmojja*] arises … that rapture [*pīti*] arises … that the … mind is tranquil

[*passaddha*] … that one … feels pleasure [*sukha*] … that the … mind is concentrated

[*samādhiyati*]."[239] Whereas the early stages of the path are often an uphill climb requiring

tremendous personal effort, once the hindrances have been removed and the right

conditions put into place, in this unfolding from gladness to *samādhi*, the path of practice

flows naturally toward liberation like water flowing downhill. Personal agency is no

longer required, except perhaps in staying out of the way of the flow. At this point, the

path to awakening becomes a natural process, empty of self.

It is often said that the practice of meditation involves a balanced cultivation of

both concentration (*samādhi*) and mindfulness (*sati*), which ideally work together.

Bhikkhu Anālayo explains,

> While concentration corresponds to … the selective function of mind
> by way of restricting the breadth of attention, *sati* [enhances] the
> recollective function by way of expanding the breadth of attention. …
> Once … the mind has been calmed, one can return to an "undirected"
> mode of meditation. … these two modes of meditation … can be
> interrelated and [they] support each other. … Concentration, however,
> … excludes a broader awareness … [that is] essential … [for]
> awakening. In this context, the broadly receptive quality of *sati* is
> particularly important.[240]

The clear seeing that leads to liberation is supported by concentration and

mindfulness working together, i.e., by the practice of both *samatha* (tranquility) and

vipassanā (insight) meditation, since *samatha* counters craving, while *vipassanā* counters

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[238] Gil Fronsdal, "Flowing to Liberation" (Berkeley CA: Institute of Buddhist Studies course handout, 2016), 3.

[239] AN 10.2 vv 1-7 - Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1340-1341.

[240] Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: the Direct Path to Realization* (Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2003), 63-64.

ignorance.[241] As expounded in the "Sutta on Volition," for one who is concentrated, no effort is needed to know and see things as they really are.[242]

We may be able to detect such a perspective in what is perhaps the most eloquent poem in the *Therīgāthā* capturing the moment of awakening, that of Paṭācārā (112-116), who describes the clear mindfulness she has as she bathes her feet and sees the water flow downhill. As she watches the water, with thoughts and desires receding, her mind becomes concentrated. Then with the mind concentrated and fully aware, she relaxes into the simplicity of getting ready for bed. When she extinguishes her lamp, complete release is finally hers:

> … I've done everything right and followed the rule of my teacher.
> I'm not lazy or proud. Why haven't I found peace?
> Bathing my feet, I watched the bathwater spill down the slope.
> I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse.
> Then I took a lamp and went into my cell,
> checked the bed, and sat down on it.
> I took a needle and pushed the wick down.
> When the lamp went out my mind was freed.[243]

I argue above (pp 62 and 64-65) that, as taught in the Pāli canon, meditation is a key element of the path that leads to awakening, and that this is reflected in the *Therīgāthā*. Given this foundation, one implication that appears repeatedly in the poems of these nuns is that release is possible in any moment, and it is not restricted only to deep meditative experience. We see Sīhā (77-81) wake up the moment she puts the rope around her neck to hang herself (p 71). Similarly, it is when Dhammā (17) falls down that her heart is freed:

> Wandering about for alms, but weak, leaning on a stick
> with limbs shaking, I fell to the ground right there,

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[241] Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, nn 88-89.
[242] AN 10:2 - Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1341.
[243] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 45-46.

and seeing the danger in the body, my heart was freed.[244]

Another example of the practitioner's lived experience triggering awakening is that of Cittā (27-28), who attains complete release when she leans on a rock:

> Though I am thin, sick, and lean on a stick,
> I have climbed up Vulture Peak.
> Robe thrown down, bowl turned over,
> leaned on a rock, then great darkness opened.[245]

Accounts such as these of Paṭācārā, Dhammā, and Cittā give meaning, I believe, to the hypothesis proposed above (p 14), that when the mind is calm, concentrated and open, insights can occur in a realm mirroring the semiotic, where experience is not tied to thoughts, concepts, or words. The natural sequence described above leading effortlessly from gladness to *samādhi* creates the condition in which insight can arise: "It is natural that one who is concentrated knows and sees things as they really are."[246]

5.2.4. Insight

Insight – seeing clearly exactly what is happening as it happens – is a precondition for letting go completely.[247] Vaḍḍha-mātu (204-212) instructs her son,

> Vaḍḍa, devote yourself to the way practiced by those seers
> for the attainment of insight, for the putting of an end to pain.[248]

We see in the *Therīgāthā* examples of the therīs finally setting aside the ideas, stories and the emotional states associated with them, which had kept them chained to the suffering of *saṃsāra*, the cyclic, endless wandering through existence(s):

- Cāpā (292-312) finally lets go of her selfishness when her husband goes forth, and she asks him to transmit her gift to the Buddha.

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[244] Hallisey, *Therigatha*, 15.
[245] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 131.
[246] *Vipassanā*: AN 10.2 vv 8 - Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1341.
[247] AN 10.2 vv 9-10 - Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1341.
[248] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 189.

- Ubbirī (51-53), the five hundred disciples of Paṭācārā (127-132), Kisāgotamī (213-223), Sundarī (313-338), and Vāseṭṭhī (133-138) all see through and lay down the burden of buying into their unbearable grief, and they find freedom.

- The two Sāmās (37-38 and 39-41), Uttamā (42-44), Dantikā (48-50), an anonymous nun (67-71), and Vijayā (169-174) all finally manage to drop the agitation, ideas, and desires that fed their wild minds, sometimes only after decades of torment.

- Sīhā (77-81) finally gives up her discouragement and despair just as she is about to hang herself.

- Abhirūpa Nandā (19-20) and Ambapālī (252-270) drop the latent tendency to conceit, the deep-seated delusion of the concept of self.

This clear seeing entails letting go of the concepts, projections and filters, which color one's perceptions and desires and lead to afflictive states. For *vipassanā* practitioners, insight into the Three Characteristics of existence – impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anattā*) – is especially important. In an introductory book on mindfulness practice, Gil Fronsdal explains,

> As the non-discursive investigation of mindfulness becomes stronger, our vision is less and less filtered through our ideas. We begin to see things more clearly for what they are. As mindfulness becomes more penetrating, we see the three universal characteristics of experience: all experiences are impermanent, none are satisfactory refuges of lasting happiness, and no experience or thing known through awareness can qualify as a stable self.[249]

These Three Characteristics were not formalized using the term for the three together, *tilakkhaṇa*, until very late. In the content analysis above (Table 2, p 35), '*tilakkhaṇa*' does not occur in any of the texts investigated. A further search reveals that it also does not occur in any of the major canonical texts: the *Dīgha*, *Majjhima*,

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[249] Gil Fronsdal, *The Issue at Hand: Essays On Buddhist Mindfulness Practice*, 4th ed. (Redwood City CA: Insight Meditation Center, 2008), 96.

Aṅguttara, or *Saṃyutta Nikāya*s. However, each of the three characteristics features prominently throughout the discourses of the Buddha, and they are clearly set forth an important early text, the *Dhammapada*:

> "All created things are impermanent." ...
> "All created things are suffering." ...
> "All things are not-self."
> Seeing this with insight, / One becomes disenchanted with suffering.
> This is the path to purity.[250]

The first two of these verses begin, "*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā,*" and "*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*" – all created or compounded things are impermanent and are suffering or unsatisfactory. The third verse, however, begins, "*sabbe dhammā anattā,*" and the use of *dhammā* here instead of *saṅkhāra* means that all things – including the unconditional – are without self. In this third mark of existence, that all things are without self, the term *dhammā* (plural) includes Nibbāna.[251]

According to the discourses, not seeing impermanence is simply ignorance, while regarding all phenomena as impermanent leads to wisdom. The other two characteristics (unsatisfactoriness and not-self) become evident as a result of directly experiencing the truth of impermanence.[252] It is said that the way in which Nibbāna is apprehended depends on the insight into which one of the Three Characteristics was instrumental in the practitioner's awakening. Moreover, the cultivation of insight into the Three Characteristics is also important all along the path of practice.[253] Because of the importance of insight into the Three Characteristics in the Theravada tradition, I will highlight how I see these characteristics in the verses of the therīs. The following table

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[250] Dhp 277-279 - Fronsdal, *The Dhammapada*, 72.
[251] Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 31.
[252] Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 103.
[253] Fronsdal, *The Issue at Hand*, 96.

presents my analysis of poems where insight into one of these three characteristics preceded the therī's awakening. A Dharma teacher wishing to draw on the *Therīgāthā* as a sourcebook could use this text to select poems to encourage meditators depending on which of the Three Characteristics (*anicca*, *dukkha*, or *anattā*) they wish to illustrate.

Table 6. Examples of Therīs' Insights into the Three Characteristics

Insight	Nº Poems	Verse Nº	Therī
Anicca	7	17, 35-36, 92-96, 139-144, 252-270, 368-401, 450-524	Dhammā, Abhayā, Mittākāḷī, Khemā, Ambapālī, Subhā Jīvakambavanikā, Sumedhā
Dukkha	9	14, 51-53, 77-81, 122-126, 127-132, 133-138, 157-162, 213-223, 313-338	Sumanā, Ubbirī, Sīhā, Candā, pañcasatamattā, Vāseṭṭhī, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, Kisāgotamī, Sundarī
Anattā	6	19-20, 82-86, 97-101, 102-106, 175-181, 196-203	Abhirūpa Nandā, Sundarī Nandā, Sakulā, Soṇā, Uttarā, Sīsūpacālā

In Mittākāḷī's wonderful poem (92-96), she talks about going forth and still being greedy for gain and honor, caught up in the defilements, and not even knowing the goal of the path. Finally she realizes that she has been on the wrong path, becomes keenly aware of a sense of urgency, and then seeing impermanence, is completely freed:

> … My life is short. Old age and sickness are destroying it.
> There is no time for me to be careless before this body is broken.
> Looking at the arising and passing away of the elements of existence
> as they really are, I stood up with my mind completely released.[254]

Some of the poems, such as Ubbirī's (51-53), evoke all three of these characteristics; however, one seems predominant in leading her to complete liberation. The poem begins with the Buddha finding Ubbirī crying, distraught with grief at the death of her young daughter. And she is set free when the Buddha's teaching takes out the dart of grief (i.e., *dukkha*) deep in her heart:

> [Buddha:] Mother, you cry out "O Jīvā" in the woods. Come to yourself, Ubbirī.
> Eighty-four thousand daughters, all with the name Jīvā
> have burned in the funeral fire. For which one do you grieve?
> [Ubbirī:] I had an arrow hidden in my heart

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[254] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 177.

and he took it out – that grief for my daughter.
The arrow is out, the heart healed of hunger.
I take refuge in the Buddha-sage, the Dharma, the Sangha.[255]

Likewise, for Sumanā (14), it is insight into *dukkha* that allows her to let go of her

desire for existence and to attain release:

> Seeing the elements as pain, don't come back to be born.
> When you throw away your longing to be, you will live in peace.[256]

Uttarā's awakening (175-181) follows insight into not-self. The poem begins with

instructions to her from her teacher, Paṭācārā, who advises her, "Consider the constituent

elements as other, not as self." Then Uttarā says, "Having heard her utterance ... I sat

down on one side ... in the last watch of the night I tore asunder the mass of darkness ...

Your advice has been taken."[257]

Sīsūpacālā (196-203) also evokes the truth of not-self in response to Māra, who

tries to knock her off the path by suggesting that she go back to the pleasurable heavenly

realms where she had lived before. She is not the least bit tempted, and replies to Māra

that the deities in these realms,

> again and again, from existence to existence, are exposed to
> individuality, not passing beyond individuality, going to birth and
> death. The whole world is ablaze ... The Buddha taught me his
> doctrine ... and I dwelt delighting in his teaching ... Everywhere the
> enjoyment of pleasure is defeated ... In this way, know, evil one, you
> are defeated, death."[258]

5.2.5. Letting Go

For lay practitioners from a twenty-first century Western culture, the image of

leaving behind one's spouse and children in order to devote oneself to the Dharma is not

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[255] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 94.
[256] Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 37.
[257] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 186.
[258] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 188.

an idea that is likely to resonate. Although it is clear that for lay Buddhists, family will come first, what could be useful for lay practitioners today in poems espousing renunciation is seeing the danger of being *overly* attached to one's family. Poems such as these, which provide testimony that one's highest happiness does not depend on having a family, might in some circumstances offer solace to practitioners who are lonely, or who have lost their families through divorce or a tragic accident – as long as the person suffering the loss has advanced sufficiently in working with their pain so as not to undercut the legitimate and necessary process of grieving.

The commitment to a meditation practice also involves renunciation. On the most basic level, one gives up other, perhaps more seductive activities to devote oneself to training the mind. Moreover, the path of practice is one of continually letting go. At first the practitioner renounces little things that keep him or her chained to suffering. And gradually one gains confidence and learns to let go of deeper and deeper levels of attachment. In this way, renunciation, in the sense of investigating how one gets caught and relinquishing what needs to be abandoned, is a fundamental part of the entire path.

The Buddha often teaches that the source of suffering is clinging, and the end of suffering is found by abandoning clinging. Thus, for a Buddhist practitioner, the essential training is that of continually letting go. When the Buddha is asked how one is liberated, he replies that nothing is worth adhering to:

> When one has heard that nothing is worth adhering to, one directly knows everything; having directly known everything, one fully understands everything …
> Contemplating thus, one does not cling to anything in the world. When one does not cling, one is not agitated. When one is not agitated, one personally attains Nibbāna.[259]

In short, the teaching is: whatever arises, don't cling to it. Let go of afflictive

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[259] MN 37:3 - Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 344.

states, of struggle, grief, and discouragement; let go of concepts and projections overlaid onto one's experience; let go of attachment to sensual pleasure, stilling desires and craving, and practicing restraint; let go of attachment to the body, to the self, to desire for existence – i.e., let go of clinging to anything in this world. As Vaḍḍha-mātu (204-212) explains to her son, she gives up *all* craving, no matter how minute:

> Whatever constituent elements, Vaḍḍha, are low, high, or middle,
> no craving, even minute, even of minute size … is found in me ... I
> have done the Buddha's teaching.[260]

Jack Kornfield describes the spirit of the practice of the great Thai master, Ajahn Chah as: "Whatever resists is the sense of "I" or ego or self, and you have to work with that until it dies."[261] In a similar vein, Ajahn Amaro points out, "In that abandonment of self, time, and place, all questions are resolved."[262] The poems of the *Therīgāthā* intimate that it is especially the letting go of attachment to self that allows liberation to unfold naturally. There comes a point on the path of practice when there is no need for the practitioner to do anything. What is called for is effortless effort – *wu wei* as the Taoists call it. There is no need for any agency involving the self. As the second Uttamā (45-47) relates in her poem, this is the freedom that comes from the great letting go, from completely cutting out sensual pleasures and renewed existence, and ending "the hunger of gods and humans," finding one's home in the vast emptiness of the unborn:

> I have found what is vast and empty in the unborn. It is what I've
> longed for.
> I am a true daughter of the Buddha, always finding joy in peace.[263]

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[260] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 189.

[261] Jack Kornfield, "Natural Freedom of the Heart: The Teachings of Ajahn Chah," in *Voices of Insight*, ed. Sharon Salzberg (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 33.

[262] Amaro Bhikkhu, *Small Boat, Great Mountain: Theravādan Reflections on the Natural, Great Perfection* (Redwood Valley CA: Abhayagiri Monastery, 2003), 17.

[263] Lit. "finding delight in Nibbāna": *nibbānābhirata* - Murcott, *First Buddhist Women*, 67.

In some poems, this great letting go is sparked by a trivial event, heightened by intense mindfulness. We have seen examples of this, including Paṭācārā's (112-116), who carefully notices the water she had used to wash her feet flow downhill, and then, her mind concentrated, turns out the flame of her lamp and is completely freed.

5.3. Liberation

5.3.1. What Is Nibbāna?

Perhaps the most important theme of the *Therīgāthā* is the experience of awakening. The therīs speak of: the ending of suffering; cessation; becoming unfettered from all ties, well released, completely freed; and notably, becoming cooled, quenched. In the Theravāda tradition, the ultimate Buddhist goal of Nibbāna is "the supreme noble peace."[264] The Buddha describes liberation as, "This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna."[265]

In his book on the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, Fronsdal translates *nibbāna* as 'full release,' in part to avoid later Buddhist notions of Nibbāna as transcendent reality, and also to reinforce the idea that "release is peace."[266] As a verbal noun, *nibbāna* is more like a process that unfolds than a state that is attained. To provide an alternative to 'extinction,' which implies some form of non-existence, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu translates *nibbāna* as 'unbinding.'[267] Gombrich points out that in Pāli, *nibbāna* is intransitive: the fires of greed, hate, and delusion "must go out, but the term does not imply an agent who

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[264] MN 140:28 - Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 1094.

[265] AN 3:32 - Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 228-229.

[266] Fronsdal, *The Buddha before Buddhism*, 123.

[267] Patrick Kearney, "Ṭhānissaro's Interpretative Framework," (August 3, 2005): 3, accessed November 28, 2016, http://www.dharmasalon.net/Writings/Awakening/files/01_Interpretation.pdf.

extinguishes them."[268] As we have seen earlier, *nibbāna* literally means 'cooling,' 'quenching,' or 'extinction [of a fire]' – the complete dying out of greed, hate, and delusion. We have also seen that in his discourse on "The Noble Search," the Buddha refers to Nibbāna as "the supreme security from bondage,"[269] the complete freedom from suffering born of clinging. This supreme security, however, is not tied to anything.

5.3.2. How the Therīs Express Nibbāna

Following on from the types of insight that can spur awakening in section 5.2.4 above on insight (pp 80-84), I have also investigated how different nuns describe what liberation might look like to someone who has realized it. The following table documents the phrases most used by the therīs to communicate their fulfillment of Nibbāna.

Table 7. Examples of how Therīs Convey their Realization of Nibbāna

Nibbāna as	Nº of Poems	Example(s)	Verse Nº	Therī
The Buddha's teaching is done	16	The Buddha's teaching is done (*buddhassa sāsanan*)	26, 30, 36, 38, 41, 71, 96, 119, 187, 194, 202, 233	Aḍḍhakāsī, Mettikā, Abhayā, Sāmā, another Sāmā, anonymous, Mittākāḷī, tiṃsamattā, Cālā, Upacālā, Sīsūpacālā, Uppalavaṇṇā
		Doing the teacher's teaching (*satthusāsanakārikā*)	144	Khemā
		The Buddha's teaching was not in vain (*amoghaṃ buddhasāsanan*)	150	Sujātā
		Her task done (*katakiccā*)	335, 366	Sundarī, Subhā Kammāradhītu
Cool, quenched	12	I have become cool, quenched (*sītibhūtāmhi nibbutā upasantāmhi nibbutā*)	15, 16, 18, 34, 53, 66, 76, 86, 101	Uttarā, Vuḍḍhapabbajita Sumanā, Saṅghā, Abhayamātu, Ubbirī, Bhaddā Kāpilānī, Vimalā, Sundarī Nandā, Sakulā
		I have become quenched without clinging (*anupādāya nibbutā*)	105	Soṇā
		I am without hunger, quenched (*nicchātā parinibbutā*)	132	pañcasatamattā
		I have realized nibbāna (*nibbānaṃ sacchikataṃ*)	222	Kisāgotamī

[268] Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*, xv.
[269] MN 26:18 - Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 259.

Nibbāna as	Nº of Poems	Example(s)	Verse Nº	Therī
End to renewed existence	11	Bear your last body (*dhārehi antimaṃ dehaṃ*)	7, 10, 56	Vīrā, Upasamā, Sukkā
		This is the last body (*antimoyaṃ samussayo*)	160	Mahāpajāpati Gotamī
		The craving for rebirth has been rooted out (*bhavanetti samūhatā*)	11	another Muttā
		I have cut out all existences (*sabbe bhavā samucchinnā*)	91	Nanduttarā
		There is no renewed existence (*natthi dāni punabbhavo*)	22, 47, 106, 160	Jentā, another Uttamā, Soṇā, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī
		I do not wish for rebirth in the world of deities (*devakāyaṃ na patthehaṃ*)	32	Mittā
End to ignorance	10	The mass of darkness is torn apart (*tamokhandaṃ padālayā*)	28, 44, 59, 62, 120, 180, 188, 195, 203, 235	Cittā, Uttamā, Selā, Somā, tiṃsamattā, Uttarā, Cālā, Upacālā, Sīsūpacālā, Uppalavaṇṇā
Three knowledges	10	The three knowledges are obtained. (*tisso vijjā anuppattā*)	26, 30, 121, 126, 150, 180, 187, 194, 202, 363	Aḍḍhakāsī, Mettikā, tiṃsamattā, Candā, Sujātā, Uttarā, Cālā, Upacālā, Sīsūpacālā, Subhā Kammāradhītu
Free	9	Completely released (*vippamuttaṃ*)	335	Sundarī
		Mind completely freed (*vippamutttena cittena*)	2	Muttā
		My heart was freed (*atha cittaṃ vimucci me*)	17	Dhammā
		My mind was completely released (*cittaṃ vimucci me*; *vimuttacittā*; *vimuttacittā*)	81, 96, 223	Sīhā, Mittākāḷī, Kisāgotamī
		My mind was freed (*vimokkho ahu cetaso*)	116	Paṭācārā
		Freed from all bonds (*vippamuttāya sabbaganthehī*)	111	Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā
		Unfettered from all ties (*sabbayogavisaṃyuttā*)	366	Subhā Kammāradhītu
Māra defeated	9	Having conquered Māra (*jetvā māraṃ savāhinin*)	7, 10, 56	Vīrā, Upasamā, Sukkā
		Evil one, you are defeated (*evaṃ jānāhi pāpima*)	59, 62, 188, 195, 203, 235	Selā, Somā, Cālā, Upacālā, Sīsūpacālā, Uppalavaṇṇā
*Āsava*s	9	Without *āsavas*[270] (*anāsavā*)	121, 126, 181, 335, 366	tiṃsamattā, Candā, Uttarā, Sundarī, Subhā Kammāradhītu
		Live in the world without *āsava*s (*cara loke anāsavā*)	4	Tissā
		With *āsava*s anihilated	66, 76	Bhaddā Kāpilānī, Vimalā

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[270] Mental contaminants; obsessions.

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Nibbāna as	Nº of Poems	Example(s)	Verse Nº	Therī
		(*tyamha khīṇāsavā dantā*)		
		I eliminated all *āsava*s (*pahāsiṃ āsave sabbe*)	101	Sakulā
Supernormal powers	5	Knowing one's former lives; having the divine eye; knowing the minds of others; having purified the ear element; supernormal powers;	71, 120, 179, 233, 518	anonymous, tiṃsamattā, Uttarā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Sumedhā
Letting go of all clinging	3	(Unsurpassed) release from attachments (*yogakkhemamanuttaran, yogakkhemassa pattiyā*)	6, 8, 9,	Dhīrā, Mittā, Bhadrā
Supreme peace	2	You walk in peace (*upasantā carissasī*)	14, 20	Sumanā, Abhirūpa Nandā
End to suffering	2	All sorrows are cut out (*sabbe sokā samucchinnā*)	138	Vāseṭṭhī
		I am completely released from all pains (*pamuttā sabbadukkhehi*)	144	Khemā
Child of the Buddha	2	I am the true daughter of the Buddha (*orasā dhītā buddhassa*)	46	another Uttamā
		I am your daughter (*tuyhaṃ dhītāmhi*)	337	Sundarī
Supernormal knowledges	2	I have realized the six supernormal knowledges (*chaḷabhiññā sacchikatā*)	71, 233	anonymous, Uppalavaṇṇā
Insight into impermanence	1	[19 times, after each insight into impermanence, she repeats]: Not false is the utterance of the speaker of truth (*saccavādivacanaṃ anaññathā*)	252-270	Ambapālī
Wisdom	1	Completely, perfectly, full of wisdom (*paripuṇṇāya paññāya*)	3	Puṇṇā
End of fear	1	I have removed the fear in my heart (*vineyya hadaye daran*)	32	Mittā
Delight	1	Delighting in nibbāna (*nibbānābhiratā sadā*)	46	another Uttamā
Mastery	1	I have mastery over my mind (*cittamhi vasībhūtāhaṃ*)	233	Uppalavaṇṇā

We can see that some of the most often used phrases are simply: the Buddha's teaching is done; being cool, quenched; no renewed existence. We also find more formulaic stock phrases such as "The mass of darkness is torn apart," evoking the end of delusion. Another stock phrase is "possessing the three knowledges" (*tevijjā*). This refers to knowing one's past lives, knowing how other beings are reborn, and knowing when all

of one's fetters have been eliminated – that is, knowing that one has attained Nibbāna. Hallisey points out that "the notion of *tevijjā* in early Buddhism explicitly triggers association with ideas in Brahmanical Hinduism about *trayī vidyā*, knowledge of the three Vedas." So when the therīs know these three things, "they are not only making a joyful affirmation of attainment, they are rejecting Brahmanical assumptions that no woman of any caste was capable of attaining 'the three knowledges.'"[271]

Guttā's poem (163-168) ends with the prediction of her wandering "in the world of phenomena, without hunger, stilled." As in many of the poems of the *Therīgāthā*, Nibbāna is not depicted here as an ultimate reality beyond the human realm, but rather as complete release within this very existence, "in the world of phenomena."[272]

All of these poems could be seen as a reflection of the Buddha's teaching of the Third Noble Truth – the truth of the end of suffering – the truth that freedom is actually possible in this lifetime. This is why these poems can still speak to practitioners today over two millennia later, regardless of their culture, circumstances, or gender.

Poems such as these from Sīhā, Dhammā, Cittā, Dantikā, and Paṭācārā give the listener a taste of freedom, inviting her into what I see as the therīs' world of direct knowing[273] and concentrated mindfulness, unhindered by concepts, views, or desires. In these poems, we can also see that deeper states of release are not orchestrated by the practitioner herself. These therīs show us that complete release is not something that one actively makes happen. This is because doing something with any concept of self, by necessity, involves clinging, which keeps one attached to one's suffering.

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[271] Hallisey, *Therigatha*, xxx.
[272] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed., 184.
[273] In Pāli *abhijānāti*.

6. Conclusion

There are many ways in which the voices of these early Buddhist nuns can inspire practitioners today. First, they provide a wealth of teachings demonstrating not only that liberation is possible, but moreover that it is accessible to those who see the value of the Dharma and practice sincerely, regardless of one's mental defilements or psychological challenges. The concrete and varied examples of these therīs offer a promise to practitioners today that we too can find freedom.

Also inspiring is that, even as long ago as two millennia, the *Therīgāthā* completely undermines the patriarchal ideology operative at the time, and gives witness that in terms of ultimate spiritual realization and teaching, there is nothing women cannot do. Most notably, the voices of these ancient wise women add a dimension to Buddhist teachings that may still be underappreciated today, especially in those traditional Theravāda cultures where women, even in the twenty-first century, are still not granted bhikkhunī ordination.

The *Therīgāthā* can also inspire practitioners by its rich inventory of responses to obstacles that can challenge even the most ardent: the suffering of an unhappy family situation, grief and even madness following the death of a child, a wild mind that resists years of effort to calm down, discouragement and despair along the path of practice, innate desire for sensual pleasures, and the deep-seated attachment to the body, to a sense of self, and to existence.

Concerning the path to liberation, the therīs' stories highlight the crucial importance of seeing the truth for oneself. The Buddha's emphasis is on experience: his own experience and the experience he makes available to others as well. He stresses that

"what gives him the right to preach his doctrine as the truth is that he had *experienced* its truth for himself, not just learned it from others or even just reasoned it out."[274] The Buddha underscores that the Dharma "is visible here and now, immediately effective, inviting inspection, onward leading, to be experienced by the wise for themselves."[275] What is wonderful about the *Therīgāthā* is that many of the poems give the listener a real taste of the therīs' experience of the Dharma, visible here and now, and inviting our investigation – a taste of the blissful freedom enjoyed by these nuns.

It is difficult not to be inspired by these poems. As the listener or the reader opens to the possibility that Nibbāna is within his or her grasp in this lifetime, and as he or she enjoys the taste of liberation conveyed by the poetry of these wise Sisters, the heart is moved, and delight or gladness (*pāmojja*) is naturally aroused. As seen in the discussion above on contentment (pp 74-76), this onward-leading process flows naturally from gladness, to joy, to tranquility, to happiness, to *samādhi*. For meditators, this progression, beginning with gladness and leading to steadying the mind, prepares one for release.

In this thesis, I have interpreted the fundamental message of these early Buddhist nuns, which is that complete release is possible – and moreover, it is possible for sincere practitioners of all sorts, regardless of who they are. In closing, I would like to take this idea one step further, and suggest that another essential message which I find in the *Therīgāthā* is that the goal is mirrored in the practice. As the therīs demonstrate so eloquently, there is safety in letting go. Their stories provide diverse and convincing examples that a practitioner can trust this process of progressive release. One of the messages conveyed in this collection of personal accounts is how the simple activity of

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[274] Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*, 5. Citing DN 1:12.
[275] MN 7:6 - Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 119.

quieting the mind and being present for whatever the moment offers can open the door to liberation. By not getting caught up in mental formations, and by cultivating *samādhi* and open awareness, little by little the practitioner finds her or his way to becoming progressively established in liberation. Just as the poems of the *Therīgāthā* give the listener a taste of Nibbāna, so too do the practitioner's small steps of letting go of greed, hate, and delusion give him or her a taste, however slight, of the truth of freedom. When one inclines the mind towards Nibbāna, little by little the path becomes the fruit.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Glossary

Italicized words are in Pāli, except where otherwise indicated. In some cases, the Pāli spelling is the same as the Sanskrit.

abhiññā	see 'six supernormal powers'
anattā	not-self
anicca	impermanence
arahant	in Theravāda Budhism: one who has attained Nibbāna
āsava	mental contaminant or obsession; outflow
ātman (Skt)	the Self; *atta* in Pāli
bhāvitindriya	with well-developed cognitive faculties
bhikkhu	a Buddhist monk
bhikkhunī	a Buddhist nun
brāhmaṇa (brahmin)	in Hinduism, a *varṇa* (caste), which includes priests associated with the Brāhmaṇa text, teachers, protectors of the sacred. Some of the brahmin caste also work as agriculturalists, etc.
Brahmanic	pertaining to Brahmanism
Brahmanism	the historic Vedic religion
Brahmin	a priest of Brahmanism; a *Brāhmaṇa*
dhammavicaya	investigation as a factor of enlightenment
dharmalogical approach	an approach used by Buddhist scholars to study their tradition from a critical perspective located within it
Dharma *dhamma*	the teachings of the Buddha; the truth of the way things really are
dharmalogy	Buddhist theology; specifically, Buddhist approaches to studying the theories and practices of Buddhism
divine eye (*dibbacakkhu*)	the ability to know the karmic destinations of other beings
dukkha	suffering, unsatisfactoriness
ehipassika	"come and see," an exhortation of the Buddha to experience the truth for oneself
five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*)	desire (*kāmacchanda*), aversion (*vyāpāda*), sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*), restlessness (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), skeptical doubt (*vicikicchā*)
gāthā	a verse or stanza of poetry (related to the verb *gāyati*, which means to sing or recite)
go forth *pabbajati*	to take monastic ordination; it implies leaving home to go out into the homeless state
great dark (*tamokhanda*)	a metaphor for ignorance (lit. mass of darkness in Pāli)
jhāna	meditative state of deep stillness, concentration, and absorption
kamma (Skt: *karma*)	literally: action, work, deed
khandha	'aggregate;' constituent element, factor
kṣatriya (Skt) (Pāli: *khattiya*)	ruler / warrior caste in Vedic culture
Māra	the lord of death, the personification of the forces antagonistic to awakening and keeping practitioners chained to their suffering
Nibbāna	lit. cooling, quenching, extinction [of a fire]; the complete release resulting from the dying out of the threefold fire of lust, hatred, and delusion (*rāga*, *dosa*, and *moha*)
nipāta	section
pāda	lit: foot; a unit of Pāli poetry. Each verse of the *Therīgāthā* consists of four *pāda* of eight syllables each.

pāmojja	gladness, joy
pañña	wisdom
pāpima	'evil one,' an epithet for Māra
rasa	lit.: savor; in Indian aesthetics: a primary feeling that is evoked by a work of art
samādhi	a deep meditative state of unification; concentration
samaṇa	renunciant
samatha	the practice of the calming of the mind and its 'formations' (saṅkhāra).
saṃsāra	lit. 'faring on;' the cyclic and endless wandering through existence(s)
saṃvega	religious emotion (caused by contemplation of the miseries of this world); agitation, fear, anxiety, thrill
sandhi	junction in Pāli compound words
Saṅgha	the Buddhist monastic community of *bhikkhu*s (monks) and *bhikkhunī*s (nuns)
saṅgītikāra	the redactor (editors or anthologizers), of the Pāli canon
sati	mindfulness, intentness of mind (lit. memory)
semiotic	the dimension of language beyond words comprising the *way* one speaks: the meaning that is conveyed by intonation, rhythm, and body language.
sīla	ethics, virtue
six supernormal powers (*abhiñña*)	1) various magical powers such as passing through walls; 2) the divine ear, able to hear sounds both divine and human, near and far; 3) knowledge of others' minds; 4) ability to remember previous existences; 5) the divine eye, seeing beings passing away and arising; 6) knowledge of the destructions of the corruptions, knowing the Four Noble Truths as they really are.
śūdra (Skt) (Pāli: *sudda*)	servant caste in Vedic culture
sutta	a chapter of the Pāli scriptures, a text or discourse
Sutta Piṭaka	the second of the three divisions of the Pāli canon, containing more than 10,000 teachings attributed to the Buddha or his close disciples
tamokhanda	see 'great dark'
tevijjā	see three knowledges
three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*)	impermanence, suffering or unsatisfactoriness, and not-self (*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* respectively)
three knowledges (*tevijjā*)	Possessing the three knowledges is an expression of complete awakening: remembering one's previous lives (*pubbe-nivāsanussati*); knowing the karmic destinations of other beings (*dibbacakkhu*, the divine eye); and completely extinguishing mental contaminants (*āsavakkhaya*).
thera	an old man or elder monk recognized as having wisdom
therī	an old woman or elder nun recognized as having wisdom
tilakkhaṇa	see three characteristics
tipiṭaka	the 'three baskets' (divisions) of the Pāli canon
udāna	inspired utterances
upasampadā	higher ordination of a Buddhist monastic
vaiśya (Skt) (Pāli: *vessa*)	pastoralist / farmer caste in Vedic culture, which later included merchants
varṇa (Skt) (Pāli: *vaṇṇa*)	hereditary status group in Vedic culture, caste
viññāṇa	consciousness
vipassanā	insight into the true nature of reality
vīra	hero

Appendix 2 – Verse Number Equivalents in Different Versions of the *Therīgāthā*

It is useful to clarify verse number equivalents because different translators may base their work on different originals with slightly different verse numbers. In this thesis, my baseline for verse numbers in the *Therīgāthā* is the Pāli text as published by Digital Pali Reader (DPR).[276] The verse numbers of K. R. Norman's translations of the *Therīgāthā* match those of the DPR from verses 1 to 287. But then Norman uses two verses (288 and 289) for text contained in a single verse according to the DPR (288) and Hallisey. So for the DPR's verses 290 to 341, the corresponding verses in Norman are 289 to 340. Then Norman again combines two of the DPR verses (342-343) into one: 341. From this point until the end of the text, the verse numbers in Norman are two less than those in the DPR. For verses 1 to 307, Hallisey's verses correspond exactly with the verse numbers recorded in the DPR. But then Hallisey divides the verses a little differently than does the DPR in his verses 308-310. Then after this, 311 in Hallisey corresponds to 310 in the DPR, and this continues until the end of the text, when 525 in Hallisey matches 524 in the DPR. The following table summarizes the verse equivalents between the DPR and these two English translations.

Table 8. Verse Number Equivalents in the *Therīgāthā*

K. R. Norman compared to the Digital Pali Reader	Verses as recorded in the Digital Pali Reader	Charles Hallisey compared to the Digital Pali Reader
Same: 1-287	1-287	Same: 1-307
Combined ➔ 288	288-289	
One less verse ➔ 289-340	290-307	
	308-309	Differences of one line
	309-341	
Combined ➔ 341	342-343	One more verse ➔ 310-525
Two fewer verses ➔ 342-522	344-524	

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[276] http://pali.sirimangalo.org/.

Appendix 3 – Selections of Different Translators

The table below summarizes the poems of the *Therīgāthā* documenting the frequency of their occurrence in translations by those translators who have published partial versions of the text: Murcott,[277] Ṭhānissaro,[278] Schelling and Waldman,[279] Jayasura,[280] Booth,[281] and Jootla.[282] Not included are the complete translations of Rhys Davids,[283] Norman,[284] and Hallisey.[285] The second column gives the number of translators who have selected that poem. The numbers in the columns below the names of the translators refer to the page numbers in their text (or in the case of Booth to the Kindle locations since his translation does not seem to exist in hard copy).

Table 9. Literary and Dharmic Choices of Various Translators

Verses (DPR)	Nº of Selections	Therī (DPR)	Murcott (pp)	Ṭhānissaro (pp)	Schelling &Waldman (pp)	Jayasura (pp)	Booth (pp)	Jootla (pp)
1	3	(aññatarā)	118	91		49		
2	3	Muttā	181		49		loc 112-117	
3	4	Puṇṇā	181-182	91			loc 108-111	23-25
4	2	Tissā	36		61			

[277] Susan Murcott, *First Buddhist Women: Poems and Stories of Awakening* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2006).

[278] Ṭhānissaro Bikkhu, trans., *Poems of the Elders: An Anthology from the Theragāthā & Therīgāthā* (Valley Center CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2015), 91-134.

[279] Andrew Schelling and Anne Waldman, trans., *Songs of the Sons and Daughters of Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996).

[280] Edmund Jayasuriya, trans., *Thera-Therī Gāthā: Inspired Utterances of Buddhist Monks and Nuns* (Dehiwela: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1999), 49-95.

[281] Francis Booth, trans., *Songs of the Elder Sisters* (self-published, 2012), Kindle.

[282] Jootla, *Inspiration from Enlightened Nuns*.

[283] C. A. F. Rhys Davids, trans., *Psalms of the Sisters* (revised version), in *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (Therīgāthā)* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2009).

[284] Norman, *The Elders' Verses II*, 2nd ed.

[285] Hallisey, *Therigatha*.

Verses (DPR)	Nº of Selections	Therī (DPR)	Murcott (pp)	Ṭhānissaro (pp)	Schelling &Waldman (pp)	Jayasura (pp)	Booth (pp)	Jootla (pp)
5	0	Another Tissā						
6	0	Dhīrā						
7	0	Vīrā						
8	1	Mittā	37					
9	0	Bhadrā						
10	1	Upasamā	37					
11	4	[another] Muttā	117	91	50	49		
12	1	Dhammadinnā	75-77					
13	3	Visākhā	37			49-50		46-49
14	2	Sumanā	37			50		
15	1	Uttarā	37					
16	1	Vuḍḍhapabbajita Sumanā	132					
17	4	Dhammā	130-131	92		50		12-Nov
18	3	Saṅghā	38		60	51		
19-20	1	Abhirūpanandā	149-151					
21-21	1	Jentā	151					
23-24	4	Sumaṅgala-mātā	118-119	92	51	51		
25-26	4	Aḍḍhakāsī	141-142	92-93	46	52		
27-27	3	Cittā	131		45			20
29-30	2	Mettikā				52-53	loc 129-133	
31-32	2	Mittā	32-33			53		
33-34	1	Abhayamātu	142-143 (Padumavati)					
35-36	1	Abhayā	157-159					
37-38	1	Sāmā						
39-41	0	Aparā Sāmā	155-157					
42-44	2	Uttamā	49-50	93				
45-47	1	Aparā Uttamā	67					
48-50	4	Dantikā	62-63	93-94	90	54		
51-53	5	Ubbirī (Ubbirī)	93-94	94	64-65	54-55		13-Dec
54-56	2	Sukkā	176-178		57-58			

Verses (DPR)	Nº of Selections	Therī (DPR)	Murcott (pp)	Ṭhānissaro (pp)	Schelling &Waldman (pp)	Jayasura (pp)	Booth (pp)	Jootla (pp)
57-59	4	Selā	175-176			55-56	loc 135-143	38; 39-43
60-62	3	Somā	174-175				loc 144-152	43-45
63-66	1	Bhaddā Kāpilānī	114-116					
67-71	2	(aññatarā)	39-41 (Vaddhesi)		89			
72-76	5	Vimalā	137-140	95	52-53	56-57	loc 71-81	
77-81	3	Sīhā	65-66		66	57-58		
82-86	2	Sundarī Nandā	38-39	95-96				
87-91	3	Nanduttarā	61-62		71	58-59		
92-96	4	Mittākāḷī	67-69	96-97		59-60		20-23
97-101	2	Sakulā	63-65					39
102-106	1	Soṇā		97-98				
107-111	3	Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā	59-61		91-94	60-61		
112-116	6	Paṭācārā	43-46	98	58-59	62-63	loc 118-128	13-14
117-121	2	30 (nuns) (tiṃsamattā)	46-48	99				
122-126	3	Candā	48-49	100 (the beggar)		63-64		
127-132	4	500 (nuns) (pañcasatamattā)	94-96	100-101		64-65		14-16
133-138	5	Vāseṭṭhī	93 + 96-97	101-102	133 [partial]	65-66	loc 100-103	
139-144	3	Khemā	77-80				loc 153-160	35-37
145-150	2	Sujātā		102-103		66-67		
151-156	4	Anopamā	148-149	103-104		68-69	loc 60-70	
157-162	3	Mahāpajāpati Gotamī	25-31	104-105				18-19
163-168	1	Guttā		105-106				
169-174	1	Vijayā	159-161					
175-181	0	Uttarā						
182-188	3	Cālā	161-164	106-108				38-39
189-195	2	Upacālā	164-165	108-110				
196-203	3	Sīsūpacālā	165-166	110-112	95-96			

Verses (DPR)	Nº of Selections	Therī (DPR)	Murcott (pp)	Ṭhānissaro (pp)	Schelling &Waldman (pp)	Jayasura (pp)	Booth (pp)	Jootla (pp)
204-212	3	Vaḍḍha-mātu		112-114		71-73		45-46
213-223	6	Kisāgotamī	92-102	114-117	68-70	69-71	loc 85-93	16-18
224-235	4	Uppalavaṇṇā	80-85		47-48 [partial]	73-76	loc 161-224	
236-251	4	Puṇṇā	190-193	117-119	62-63			23-25
252-270	5	Ambapālī	143-148	119-122	54-57		loc 25-54	33-34
271-291	2	Rohinī		122-126				25-28
292-312	2	Cāpā	119-124			76-80		
313-338	1	Sundarī	199-205					
339-367	2	Subhā Kammāradhītu		126-130				31-33
368-401	5	Subhā Jīvakambavanikā	193-199	130-134	72-76	80-86	loc 173-224	
402-449	4	Isidāsī	106-107		79-88	86-95		49-51
450-524	1	Sumedhā						5-6;[286] 29-30

[286] (=DPR 497-499)

Appendix 4 – The Historical Transition of Metrics in the Pāli Canon according to A. K. Warder

Key (from top to bottom): Sn: *Sutta-Nipāta*, Th II: *Therīgāthā*; J: *Jātaka*; M: *Majjhima Nikāyā*; Dh: *Dhammapada*; U: *Udāna*; AM: *Ardhamāgadhī*; Th I: *Theragāthā*; S I: *Saṃyuta Nikāyā*, part 1; Vv: *Vimānavatthu*; Bv: *Buddhavaṃsa*; Pv: *Petavatthu*; Ap: *Apadāna*; Cp: *Cariyāpiṭaka*; BHS: Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. Source: A. K. Warder, *Pali Metre*, 225.

Approximate date	Period	*Mattāchandas*	*Gaṇacchandas*	*Vatta*	*Tuṭṭhubha*	*Akkharacchandas*
	o			earliest Sn (65%) [1] and earliest Th II *Cūḷavagga* (72%)	most of Sn ?	
	i	Sn 1–34, 83–90, 359–75 most of J	Sn, M	most of *Uragavagga* and *Mahāvagga* (77–8%) (*Kaṭha*)		
300 B.C.	i a	Dh, U part of J (AM : *Sūyagaḍaṃ*)			*Munisutta* ? (Early Epic ?) Dh ?	
Moriyan Period	ii	Sn *vegavatī* poem ? Th II part of Th I S I	Th II, J	Dh (80%), later Sn and Th II (> 83%)	S I ? part of J and M Sn 679–98	part of Th I, S I part of J and M Sn 679–98
200 B.C.	ii a	*Lakkhaṇa* part of Vv	*Lakkhaṇa*	latest Th II (85%)	*Lakkhaṇa* Bv	*Lakkhaṇa* Bv
100 B.C.	iii	most of Vv, Pv, Ap, Cp	Ap	(Epic average 87–8%) (*Rāmāyaṇa*)	(Late Epic)	(BHS: *Mahāvastu*)

[1] % of *pathyā*.

Conclusion

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Appendix 5 – Genres of Poems in the *Therīgāthā*

As shown in the table below, the *Therīgāthā* includes a number of genres of poems, differing in content, style, and meter, and likely composed during different literary periods.

Table 10 – Genres of Poems in the *Therīgāthā*

#	Genre	Nº Poems in Thī	DPR Verse Nº	Notes
1	Instructions to or praise for the therī	13	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 19-20, 163-168	1a) by the Buddha
			54-56	1b) by deities
2	Soliloquies	37	11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21-22, 23-24, 25-26, 27-28, 29-30, 31-32, 37-38, 39-41, 42-44, 45-47, 48-50, 63-66, 67-71, 72-76, 77-81, 87-91, 92-96, 97-101, 102-106, 107-111, 112-116, 122-126, 133-138, 145-150, 151-156, 157-162, 169-174, 213-223, 252-270	A dramatic speech to oneself, to give voice to one's reflections
3	Dialogues	13	57-59, 60-62, 139-144, 182-188, 189-195, 196-203, 224-235	3a) Dialogues with Māra
			33-34, 204-212, 236-251, 271-291, 292-312	3b) Other dialogues
			117-121	3c) Dialogue + narrator
4	Paired Soliloquies	5	35-36, 51-53, 82-86, 127-132, 175-181	Poems in which the Buddha's instructions are realized, where the teacher speaks first, then the therī(s) proclaim(s) their experience
5	Theatrical	1	313-338	Many characters
6	Long Narratives	4	339-367, 368-401, 402-449, 450-524	With elements of the supernatural

One genre is the shorter poems, which – according to the commentary – are spoken to the therī by the Buddha to praise, instruct, or exhort her. She is said to then repeat those words to herself, making them her own. The poems that fall into this genre include: the first ten one-verse poems (1-10); Abhirūpa Nandā's two-verse poem (19-20); two poems that might also be classified as brief dialogues: Ubbirī's poem of three verses

(51-53), and Sundarī Nandā's poem in which the first two verses are spoken to her by the Buddha (82-83), and the last three are her own, proclaiming her awakening; and then Guttā's poem (163-167), spoken to her by the Buddha. An additional poem in this genre is Sukkā's (54-56), said to be spoken by deities praising her after listening to her preach.

A second genre, which includes by far the lion's share of the poems of the *Therīgāthā*, are the soliloquies.

A third genre would be the dialogues. There are seven dialogues between the therī and Māra, the evil tempter trying to throw her off the path, as he did to the Buddha as well on the eve of his awakening. Dialogues with Māra (addressed as *pāpima*, "evil one" by the nun) are found in the poems of Selā (57-59), Somā (60-62), Khemā (139-144), Cālā (182-188), Upacālā (189-195), Sīsūpacālā (196-203), and Uppalavaṇṇā (224-235). In addition, there are six other very different dialogue poems, many of which have tremendous dramatic interest (explanations are from the commentary):

- Abhaya Mātu's poem (33-34), in which her son, a monk, instructs her, upon which she becomes enlightened;
- the poem of Paṭācārā's 500 disciples, all of whom had lost a child, where Paṭācārā instructs them in the first three verses, and in the last two, they proclaim their freedom from grief, and, quenched, take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha;
- Puṇṇā's remarkable poem (236-251) where she – formerly a slave – corrects and instructs a Brahmin, leading him to awakening;
- Rohinī's twenty-verse poem (271-291) in which she recalls, as a young woman, having converted her father, a rich Brahmin, when she had just become a stream-winner prior to her ordination;
- Cāpā's poem (292-312), which recounts a conversation with her husband in which she behaved like a shrew, and he decided to leave her to ordain with the Buddha.

- a dialogue poem which includes a narrator, that of the thirty bhikkhunīs (117-121) where their teacher, Paṭācārā, exhorts them in the first two verses, then a narrator explains how they take in her teaching, meditate on it, and become fully enlightened, and then in the last verse the thirty bhikkhunīs proclaim their awakening.

A fourth genre includes five paired soliloquies: poems in which the Buddha's instructions are realized, where the teacher speaks first, then the therī(s) proclaim their experience. These are the poems of Abhayā (35-36), Ubbirī (51-53), Sundarī Nanda (82-86), Paṭācārā's five hundred disciples (127-132), and Uttarā (175-181).

Sundarī's unique poem (313-338) deserves a genre of its own, as it functions as a drama with a cast of eight characters plus a narrator.

A final genre would be the last four poems, those of Subhā Kammāradhītu (339-367), Subhā Jīvakambavanikā (368-401), Isidāsī (402-449), and Sumedhā (450-524). In the first of these, Subhā the goldsmith's daughter, having gone forth, scolds her family at length for trying to entice her to return home. In the end, she is said to be completely enlightened, and the poem ends with the miraculous story of the Lord of Beings approaching her with supernormal powers and a group of deities revering her.

Subhā of the Jīvakamba grove, goes to the forest to meditate, where she is accosted by a rogue. This beautiful poem takes the form of a dialogue between the two, with a couple of verses by a narrator at the end. Subhā scolds the young man for trying to seduce a woman who has gone forth. She tells him he's out of his mind, and asks him what he sees of value that makes him stare at her. When he replies at length about the beauty of her eyes, she plucks out her eye and offers it to him. Shocked, he asks her forgiveness, and she returns to the Buddha, who in one of the few miracles attributed to

him, restores her eye.

In Isidāsī's long poem, she tells her friend and fellow bhikkhunī how she went forth: although a virtuous young woman, she is rejected by three successive husbands even though she serves them honorably "like a slave girl." Desperate, she ordains, and in the rest of the poem, she explains her difficult and unhappy marriages as the result of bad karma, the fruit of evil actions in seven previous lifetimes. There is no claim to awakening.

In the final "Great Chapter," Sumedhā, the daughter of a king, recounts at great length how uninterested she is in sensual pleasures, and asks permission of her parents to go forth. But her parents want her to marry. The neighboring king to whom she is betrothed arrives and tries to convince her. Again, she describes at length the dangers of sensual pleasures and, resolute, says she will either die or go forth, but will not marry. Hearing her sincerity and determination, her suitor agrees that she should ordain and her parents give their consent. The narrator then recounts that she becomes an arahant and realizes the six supernormal powers while still in training. Sumedhā then explains her awakening as the fruit of her previous lives.

Appendix 6 – Therīs Who Were Taught by or Interacted with the Buddha Himself

As shown in the table below, thirteen of the therīs are taught by the Buddha himself or interact with him directly, as explicitly documented in the *Therīgāthā*. In another sixteen poems of the *Therīgāthā*, the text refers to the therī being instructed or exhorted, and it is the commentary that identifies this as being done by the Buddha.

The commentary also recounts stories of yet another fourteen nuns who are instructed by the Buddha, often when they are laywomen.[287] However, this is not reflected in the text of the *Therīgāthā*.

Table 11 – Therīs Who Were Taught by or Interacted with the Buddha Himself

Verse(s)	Therī	Source	Notes
21-22	Jentā	*Therīgāthā*	"I have indeed seen that blessed one; this is the last body."
51	Ubbirī	*Therīgāthā*	Hearing the Buddha's teaching, attains arahantship as a laywoman
108-109	Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā	*Therīgāthā*	Ordained by the Buddha himself: "Come Bhaddā."
135-137	Vāseṭṭhī	*Therīgāthā*	Overcomes her insanity seeing the awakened and fearless Buddha
148-149	Sujātā	*Therīgāthā*	Hearing the Buddha's teaching, attains arahantship as a laywoman
154-155	Anopamā	*Therīgāthā*	Becomes a non-returner as a laywoman
157, 160	Mahāpajāpati Gotamī	*Therīgāthā*	The poem is addressed to the Buddha, her adopted son and teacher.
185-187	Cālā	*Therīgāthā*	"The Buddha … taught me the doctrine."
192-194	Upacālā	*Therīgāthā*	Idem
201-202	Sisūpacālā	*Therīgāthā*	Idem
229	Uppalavaṇṇā	*Therīgāthā*	As an arahant, she uses supernormal powers to go visit and pay homage to the Buddha
333-338	Sundarī	*Therīgāthā*	As an arahant, she goes to the Buddha to roar her lion's roar, and he praises her
401	Subhā Jīvakambavanikā	*Therīgāthā*	The Buddha restores her eye after she had plucked it out.
1	Aññatarā (a certain unknown)	Commentary + text	Said (in the commentary) to realize Nibbāna upon hearing the Buddha's

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[287] Pruitt, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs.*

			words
2	Muttā	Commentary + text	Idem
3	Puṇṇā	Commentary + text	Idem
4	Tissā	Commentary + text	Idem
5	Aññatarā Tissā	Commentary + text	Idem
6	Dhīrā	Commentary + text	Idem
7	Vīrā	Commentary + text	Idem
8	Mittā	Commentary + text	Idem
9	Bhadrā	Commentary + text	Idem
10	Upasamā	Commentary + text	Idem
16	Vuḍḍhapabbajita Sumanā	Commentary + text	Praised for having realized Nibbāna
19-20	Abhirūpa-Nandā	Commentary + text	Said (in the commentary) to realize Nibbāna upon hearing the Buddha's words
35	Abhayā	Commentary + text	Hearing the Buddha's words, she realizes Nibbāna
82-83	Sundarī Nandā	Commentary + text	Idem (the Buddha's half-sister)
163-168	Guttā	Commentary + text	Said (in the commentary) to realize Nibbāna upon hearing the Buddha's words
220	Kisāgotamī	Commentary + text	Hearing the Buddha's teaching, attains arahantship as a laywoman
364-366	Subhā Kammāradhītu	Commentary + text	Becomes a follower of the Buddha and a stream-enterer as a young laywoman; in her poem, the Buddha praises her realization of Nibbāna.
37-38	Sāmā	Commentary	Pruitt,[288] p 53
45-47	Aparā Uttamā	Commentary	Pruitt, p 69
48-50	Dantikā	Commentary	Pruitt, p 71 (as a laywoman)
54	Sukkā	Commentary	Pruitt, p 78
58-59	Selā	Commentary	Pruitt, p 84 (as a laywoman)
61-62	Somā	Commentary	Pruitt, p 88 (as a laywoman)
77-80	Sīhā	Commentary	Pruitt, p 104 (as a laywoman)
92-96	Mittākāḷī	Commentary	Pruitt, p 117 (as a laywoman)
97-101	Sakulā	Commentary	Pruitt, p 121 (as a laywoman)
112-116	Paṭācārā	Commentary	Pruitt, p 148 (as a laywoman)
139-144	Khemā	Commentary	Pruitt, p 166-167 (as a laywoman)
236-251	Puṇṇā	Commentary	Pruitt, p 252 (as a laywoman)
252-270	Ambapālī	Commentary	Pruitt, p 260 (as a laywoman)
271-291	Rohinī	Commentary	Pruitt, p 269 (as a laywoman)

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[288] William Pruitt, trans., *The Commentary on the Verses of the Theris* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1998).