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POWER of gender
& the GENDER of
Power

EXPLORATIONS IN EARLY INDIAN HISTORY

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CHAPTER 1

Of *Theras* and *Therīs*

*Visions of Liberation in the Early Buddhist Tradition**

GENDERED VOICES? THE TEXTS AND TRANSMISSIONS

The *Thera* and *Therīgāthā* have been available to modern scholars for over a century, when they were ‘recovered’ from Burmese and Sinhalese manuscripts, published (in 1883) and subsequently translated. The first translation was in German.¹ This was followed by the classic English version of Rhys Davids,² and, more recently, those of K.R. Norman and Susan Murcott.³

The word *thera* (masculine) literally means elder, and the texts are collections of verses attributed to respected monks and nuns. Technically, the *gāthās* (literally songs) were supposed to have been uttered by their ‘authors’ to mark the attainment of enlightenment or liberation. These were recognized within the Buddhist tradition as part of the canon, and were incorporated within the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, itself an appendage of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, one of the three Piṭakas or canonical works of early Buddhism. Both the composition and the compilation were long-drawn processes that probably spanned at least three centuries. While many of the elders were contemporaries of the Buddha, others were recognized within the tradition as being late entrants into the community.⁴

In some manuscripts, the *gāthās* are found embedded in a prose commentary. Known as the *Paramatthadīpanī*, this commentary is

* This chapter was originally published in Vijaya Ramaswamy (ed.), 2003, *Re-searching Indian Women*, New Delhi: Manohar, pp. 75–95.

attributed to Dhammapāla, a monk who lived in Kanchipuram in the sixth century AD. Dhammapāla refers to the works of at least three predecessors, suggesting that the tradition of recording comments on the gāthās was fairly old. The extant commentary has two components: one, an explanation of difficult or unusual terms, and second, and more interestingly, a short biography of the 'author' of a specific gāthā or set of gāthās.

The arrangement of the gāthās and the commentary provide certain broad parallels with the structure of the more well-known compilation of the *Jātakas*. In both cases, the shortest compositions, consisting of a single gāthā, are grouped together, followed by an arrangement in ascending order. However, while the longest compositions in the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā* contain around seventy verses, the longest *Jātakas* run into hundreds of verses. Within each text, moreover, the number of smaller compositions is generally much higher than the longer ones (see Table 1.1 for details).

As in the case of the *Jātakas*, the commentary on the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā* provides a narrative which contextualizes the verse, and is particularly valuable in the case of the shortest compositions.⁵ The basic constituents of the narrative include the name and the social background of the 'author'. This is followed by a description of the occasion on which he or she either accepted Buddhism or/and joined the *samgha*. This could mark a more or less dramatic turning point. This culminates in an expression of the experience of *nibbāna*. Each of these components could be, and often was more or less embellished. Such embellishments cannot be dismissed as extraneous or superfluous. They rescue the gāthās from anonymity, and provide a means of constituting gendered identities, among other things.

The prose narrative is also a reminder that the verses and the stories with which they were more or less connected were circulated and transmitted for generations amongst communities of actual or potential believers, consisting of monks and nuns, lay women and men. One can then visualize a situation where the corpus served as a narrative pool as it were, from which narrators could retrieve and recast a specific version they felt would be appropriate on the particular occasion. Such occasions may have been associated with rituals around *stūpas* or in monasteries or nunneries. Besides, lay women and men probably organized religious events (including narrations) within the domestic setting. What to narrate and how, would have been conditioned by such circumstances.

Varied narrative contexts probably account for a certain fluidity, which is evident within the text. In spite of its explicitly canonical character, verses found in the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā* are by no means unique to them. Some of these occur in the *Jātakas*, as well as in the *Dhammapada*, occasionally ascribed to different 'authors';⁶ others have resonances with texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā*, or aphoristic collections such as the *Subhāsitas*. Besides, verses attributed to our 'authors' occasionally occur in other Buddhist works but are not found within the compilation of the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā*.⁷ In other words, many gāthās were drawn from and fed into a range of Buddhist and alternative compositions.

TABLE 1.1 Distribution of 'Authors' in Each Book or *Nipāta*

<i>Book</i>	<i>Therīgāthā</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
I	18 (24.66)	120 (45.45)
II	10 (13.70)	49 (18.56)
III	8 (10.96)	16 (6.06)
IV	1 (1.37)	12 (4.5)
V	12 (16.44)	12 (4.5)
VI	8 (10.96)	14 (5.3)
VII	3 (4.11)	5 (1.89)
VIII	1 (1.37)	3 (1.14)
IX	1 (1.37)	1 (0.38)
X	1 (1.37)	7 (2.65)
XI	1 (1.37)	1 (0.38)
XII	1 (1.37)	2 (0.76)
XIII	5 (6.85)	1 (0.38)
XIV	1 (1.37)	2 (0.76)
XV	1 (1.37)	2 (0.76)
XVI	1 (1.37)	10 (3.79)
XVII		3 (1.14)
XVIII		1 (0.38)
XIX		1 (0.38)
XX		1 (0.38)
XXI		1 (0.38)

Source: Based on data from the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā*.

Note: Figures in brackets indicate the percentage of authors in each segment, calculated in terms of the total number of *theris* (73) and *theras* (264).

It is in this context that questions of image and self-image become complicated. To an extent, this is reflected in the history of the treatment

of the *Therīgāthā*. Neumann, one of the earliest translators of the text, and a man, had no doubt that although the verses were ascribed to women, their real authors were men. Rhys Davids, a woman scholar, who produced the first English translation in 1909, energetically refuted Neumann⁸ pointing to differences in style and content between the *Thera* and *Therīgāthā*, apart from highlighting the obvious bias in attributing any and every literary composition to men.

Since then the *Therīgāthā* has been hailed, to a greater or lesser degree, with occasionally uncritical enthusiasm, as a text containing 'women's voices'. As someone who has shared this enthusiasm, I must point out that it is not entirely misplaced. A recent student of the text, Blackstone⁹ observes: 'The *Therīgāthā* is an exciting and provocative text. As far as I know it is the only canonical text in the world's religions that is attributed to female authorship and that focuses exclusively on women's religious experiences.'

Yet, it is simplistic to suggest, as we have occasionally done, that the *gāthās* as they stand provide us with direct access to women's voices. The contexts within which the *gāthā* circulated through centuries have shaped both form and content in ways that may not be immediately apparent. So, it is worth bearing in mind that while we can pull out images of women (and men) from both *gāthā* and commentary, these are images which were drawn and assembled from diverse traditions and incorporated within the canonical framework.

Within this framework, the lives of *theras* and *therīs* were constructed along a fairly consistent threefold pattern, as noted earlier. Yet, there was scope for considerable variation within this structure. I will explore some elements of these variations in terms of the images of men and women. I will also examine the extent to which the process of liberation was envisaged as transformatory as far as gendered images were concerned.

ENGENDERING MARKERS OF IDENTITY

The *Paramatthadīpanī* almost invariably ascribes compositions to named *therīs* and *theras* (see Table 1.2, columns I a and b). Clearly, such names constituted a crucial element in assigning authorship, and in defining each composition as unique. Given their importance, it is intriguing to note that the mention of names within the *gāthās* themselves is relatively infrequent (Table 1.2, columns II a and b).

A closer examination of the data indicates that the use of names in the *gāthās* occurs in certain specific contexts. First, they occur in verses which are attributed to a different author. In many cases, we are told that

TABLE 1.2. Distribution of Named Authors in the Commentary and Text

Book	Names in Cmy (Ia)	Therigāthā Names in Text (IIa)	Per cent	Names in Cmy (Ib)	Theragāthā Names in Text (IIb)	Per cent
I	18	11	61.11	120	17	14.17
II	10	1	10	49	3	6.12
III	8	1	25	16	1	6.25
IV	1	2	100	12	2	16.67
V	11	1	9.09	12	1	8.33
VI	8	3	37.5	14	2	14.29
VII	3	—	—	5	4	80
VIII	1	—	—	3	—	—
IX	1	—	—	1	—	—
X	1	—	—	7	1	14.29
XI	1	—	—	1	—	—
XII	1	1	100	12	—	—
XIII	5	4	80	1	—	—
XIV	1	1	100	2	—	—
XV	1	1	100	2	1	50
XVI	1	1	100	10	5	50
XVII	—	—	—	3	1	33.33
XVIII	—	—	—	1	—	—
XIX	—	—	—	1	—	—
XX	—	—	—	1	1	100
XXI	—	—	—	1	1	100

Source: Based on the *Theragāthā* and the *Therigāthā*.

Note: All percentages are calculated in terms of the number of authors attributed to each book.

when a particular verse was uttered by the Buddha¹⁰ to either reprimand or praise the named bhikkhu or bhikkhunī, such a verse 'becomes' his or hers when s/he meditates on it in order to attain nibbāna.

A second situation where names occur within verses is where bhikkhus or bhikkhunis had what has been approximately designated as nicknames.¹¹ Such names were derived from physical appearance, from one's past or present lifestyle, or less tangible attributes such as virtue. Invoking these names could be (and often was) connected with foregrounding gendered identities.

This seems to be especially true in the case of the therīs, whose physical beauty was often noted and condemned on account of its presumed

transience or superficiality. Such condemnations are typical of the gāthās addressed to Abhirūpā Nandā¹² and Sundarī Nandā,¹³ whose very names were suggestive of their apparently delightful forms. The use of the names in this context thus became a means for contesting preoccupations with physicality, which was represented in terms of feminine beauty.

By contrast, where bhikkhus are named after their physical attributes, the focus is on external deformities combined with less tangible skills. So we find mention of Khujja (hunch-backed) Sobhita¹⁴ renowned for his learning, and Lakuṇṭaka (dwarf) Bhaddiya¹⁵ with an enchanting voice. As in the case of the women mentioned above, the use of these names was also suggestive of an attempt to transcend the physical, but from an entirely different perspective.

There is a related context within which women's names figure. These are names which signify certain qualities, for example, Puṇṇā or full¹⁶ who is compared to the full moon, 'Dhīrā or firm¹⁷ who is implicitly advised to live up to her name, Mittā, the friend¹⁸ who is advised to be friendly and so on. Here we have, as in earlier instances, a play on names, but what is different is the focus on intrinsic rather than extrinsic qualities, and the consequent valorization of the name.

The use of nicknames to focus on unique lifestyles is confined exclusively to theras. We find, for instance, Gaṅgātīriya¹⁹ living on the banks of the Gaṅga, or Kappatakura²⁰ living on rags and substandard rice, as also *kuṭivihārins*²¹ who lived in huts. The absence of parallels in the case of therīs may indicate that such individualistic options were less accessible to women.²² Alternatively, or additionally, one can argue that women who adopted such strategies may not have been accorded canonical recognition.

The third, but rather rare context in which names occur within the gāthās is one I would classify as celebratory. This is common to both theras and therīs. We have, for example, Sumaṅgala, a poor farmer, who celebrates his liberation from his crooked plough, spade, and sickle²³ as well as Bhaddā Kapālinī, the wife of a *brāhmaṇa*, who proclaims the attainment of the cool bliss of nibbāna by both herself and her husband.²⁴

Overall, if one compares the relative frequency with which names occur in gāthās (Table 1.2, column III), two patterns emerge. The first names are mentioned more often in the *Therīgāthā* than in the *Theragāthā*. This has to do with the relative preponderance of verses of advice or instruction attributed to the Buddha. One can take such attributions as being a literal representation of an event or fact. Alternatively, the

use of the second person as a stylistic device to structure the song in the form of a dialogue with the self may have been more typical of therīs. In that case, attributing such verses to the Buddha may have been a commentarial strategy to flatten out and homogenize a more distinctive text.

The other pattern is more uniform in both texts. We find that as the compositions grow longer, the percentage of works that mention the name of the author increases sharply. It is obvious that in lengthy poems running into dozens of verses there was greater scope for both mentioning and occasionally elaborating on biographical details.

The second element which is mentioned almost invariably in the commentary is the natal family ascribed to the thera/therī. This is mentioned in the case of seventy-two of the seventy-three therīs and 248 of the 264 theras (see Table 1.3). What is obvious is that the family of birth was regarded as a significant marker of identity for both categories.

There are certain broad similarities between the social origins attributed to theras and therīs. By far the largest number of theras (and to a lesser extent therīs) were identified as brāhmaṇas. Others were identified as belonging to 'good' families (*kulas*), often qualified as being wealthy, prosperous, or landowning. Other possibilities which were recognized included birth in the oligarchic clans, the Sākya (associated with the Buddha) in particular, but also the Licchavis and Mallas. Origins within commercial groups such as *setṭhis* (traders/bankers) and *sāttavāhas* (caravan leaders) were also recognized, as were those within ruling groups, including *rājās*, provincial officials, and miscellaneous

TABLE 1.3 Social Origins Attributed to Therīs and Theras

<i>Category</i>	<i>Therīgāthā</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
Brāhmaṇas	18(24.66)	101(38.4)
Oligarchic clans	18(24.6)	31(12.5)
Khattiya/rājā/officials	5(6.85)	41(15.53)
'Good' families	11(15.07)	27(10.23)
Setṭhi/sāttavāhas	11(15.07)	20
Courtesans	4(5.48)	—
Poor/slaves	3(4.11)	13(4.92)
Other	2(2.74)	14(5.30)

Source: Based on the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā*.

Note: Figures in brackets indicate the percentages, calculated in terms of the total number of therīs (73) and theras (264).

ministers. Taken together, nearly 90 per cent of the *theras* and 88 per cent of the *therīs* were ascribed relatively 'high' origins. As opposed to this, only four to five per cent were recorded as belonging to poor or slave origins.

Yet, there are subtle differences as well. While *brāhmaṇa* identity was regarded as predominant for both *theras* and *therīs*, it was far more marked in the case of the former. What is more, the identity of the *brāhmaṇa* is at least occasionally problematized and redefined in the *Theragāthā* (details are given later in this chapter).

If one goes by the number of recorded cases, identities based on membership of oligarchic clans was as important as the mention of *brāhmaṇa* origins in the case of the *therīs*. This contrasts sharply with the use of such categories for identifying *theras*. As will be evident from Table 1.3, *theras* identified as belonging to such clans are far fewer than *brāhmaṇas*.

A similar contrast is evident if we compare the figures for men and women who were attributed *seṭṭhi* or *sāthavāha* origins. Once again, there are proportionately more women than men. This is true for the category of 'good' families as well. It is only in the category of ruling groups that we find these proportions reversed, with more references to men than to women.

To some extent, the difference between the social origins attributed to *theras* and *therīs* is reinforced by the third regular component of the commentary—mention of the place of origin. This is stated in the case of fifty of the seventy-three *therīs* and 213 of the 264 *theras*. Without going into the details of localizing these places, I have broadly classified them into settlements located within kingdoms and those located within oligarchies. Approximately one-third of the *therīs* were ascribed residence in oligarchies as opposed to one-fourth of the *theras*. Social stratification in the kingdoms was probably sharper and more complex than that in the oligarchies.²⁵ More specifically, gendered identities were probably somewhat differently constituted in each of these socio-political situations.

There is, moreover, the category of the courtesan, which is, for obvious reasons, exclusive to the *therīs*. As in the case of the women named for their beauty, the verses attributed or addressed to the ex-courtesan or *therī* occasionally dwell on the illusory nature of the female body.

What emerges then is a situation where the natal identities ascribed to the *theras* show greater affinity with (though not complete correspondence to) the *varṇa* framework, whereas those of the *therīs* diverge

substantially if not significantly. This may reflect an actual historical situation, where men and women who joined the order came from many and different social groups. Additionally, one can argue that preserving the memories of such diversities was necessary where both commentary and *gāthā* were directed towards a range of audiences or narrative situations.

**REINFORCING/TRANSCENDING GENDER:
RENUNCIATORY REMARKS**

In the commentary, the move from home to homelessness (from *āgāra* to *anāgariya*) is attributed, more often than not, to hearing or seeing the Buddha. Not surprisingly, this is more common in the case of theras than therīs, and as has been suggested fairly often, this may be connected with the relative ease and acceptability of establishing contact with the Buddha. Other alternatives mentioned include hearing or meeting a renowned teacher. Almost invariably, both teacher and taught are represented as belonging to the same sex.

In the case of the theras, a desire to escape from the bonds of the world was recognized as a major reason or occasion for the transition to homelessness. As may be expected, such bonds were typified by the wife and/or the son.²⁶ So marriage (either intended or actual) and/or the birth of children were regarded as legitimate reasons for renunciation.

For therīs, on the other hand, the birth of children is virtually never projected as an occasion for renunciation, and the treatment of marriage is also relatively more complicated. Perhaps the point can be best illustrated by a comparison of the stories of Mahākassapa²⁷ and Sumedhā²⁸. In the first case, both Mahākassapa and his wife to be, Bhaddā, unknown to one another, resolve not to marry but to seek enlightenment instead. A series of coincidences results in a ritual union, but husband and wife sleep separated by a garland and a stick. When Mahākassapa's parents die, the couple cuts each other's hair and undertakes a life of wandering. However, and perhaps predictably, the husband insists that they go their separate ways in deference to public opinion. Here the separation is represented as necessary but virtually painless.

Sumedhā, like Mahākassapa, is depicted as deciding against marriage and domesticity.²⁹ Her father resolves otherwise, and invites a royal suitor. Sumedhā harangues them on the 'evils' of bodily desire and cuts off her hair with a sword,³⁰ lays down her tresses at her suitor's feet³¹, and ultimately gets her way. In other words, the choice between renunciation and marriage is constructed as a dramatic conflict.

The dramatization of the contrast between marriage and renunciation is even more sharply drawn in the song of Isīdāsī.³² The *gāthā* is almost entirely biographical, spanning several births. The starting point is when Isīdāsī was a man, a goldsmith intoxicated with his youth, who assaulted the wives of other men. Consequently, he was reborn as a monkey, goat, and calf, all of whom were duly castrated. In due course he was reborn as a woman who tried to displace her more virtuous co-wife. The consequences of these acts pursued her into the present birth, where she was thrice given in marriage by her father, who loved her dearly, and rejected each time, in spite of her virtuous conduct. Ultimately, she asked for and was granted permission to renounce the world under the guidance of Jinadattā, who was described as learned (*bahussutā*), an epithet which is used by or for Isīdāsī as well.³³

Although the story invokes *kamma* or one's past actions as the major causative force, Isīdāsī's story can and has been treated as a more or less realistic representation of the travails of married women. While this is plausible, I would suggest that what is also involved is an understanding of the relationship between marriage and renunciation. For the *theras*, this was represented as a relationship of unproblematic opposition or alternatives. For the *therīs*, on the other hand, renunciation was constructed as an alternative, which had to be achieved rather than assumed as an automatic possibility.

One renunciatory situation seems to have been exclusive to *theras*. This is the case of what I would call the child prodigy, who renounces the world typically at the age of seven, and more often than not with his parents' consent.³⁴ We had noted the relative importance of *brāhmaṇas* as 'authors' of the *Theragāthā*, and I had suggested in that context that *brāhmaṇa* identity was both acknowledged and redefined within early Buddhism. This redefinition was attempted, if not achieved, through a variety of strategies, by offering a range of alternative definitions of rituals, practices, and lifestyles. In this case, we can see a partial parallel between the image of the precocious ascetic who joined the Buddhist order, and the Brahmanical ritual of the *upanayana* or initiation of the young boy. What distinguished the young monk's case was the fact that his decision was recognized as a conscious, enlightened one, and was marked with minimal ritual activity.

If the child prodigy is represented as a uniquely male figure, the bereaved and grieving parent is almost as invariably female. And, within the tradition of the *Therīgāthā*, she is consistently depicted as finding refuge within the *saṃgha* and thus overcoming her overwhelming grief.

Some of the most powerful and stark imagery of the texts centres around these mourning women. The story of Paṭācārā,³⁵ one of the most well-known teachers, is an example. She was supposed to have married well below her status, and through a bizarre series of coincidences, lost her two sons, her husband, parents, and brother. Literally mad with grief, she apparently wandered alone, wearing a single piece of cloth (hence her name), till she met the Buddha and was pacified. In another instance, Kisā Gotamī is represented as describing how she saw her dead son's flesh being eaten in the cremation ground, but although she had lost her family (*hatakulikā*) was despised by all (*sabbagarahitā*) and a widow (*matapatikā*) she attained immortality.³⁶ Yet another woman wandered restlessly, naked, with dishevelled hair, starving herself, till she was placated by the Buddha.³⁷

The teaching attributed to the Buddha (and Paṭācārā) on such occasions is deceptively simple. To the woman who mourns the death of her daughter, the question is which one, the one in this birth or her numerous daughters of previous births.³⁸ Similarly, Paṭācārā is supposed to have pointed out the futility of referring to a particular man as 'my son'.³⁹ The reality of death is not denied, but it is located in a near timeless sequence of births and deaths, whereby the particular event loses its sting (or thorn, *salla*).⁴⁰

If the transition from grief to enlightenment was a path that was envisaged as primarily feminine, that of experimenting with alternative systems of beliefs and practice was defined as a more masculine possibility. Also, and explicable in terms of the recognition accorded to brāhmaṇa origins, we find at least occasional reference to the contrast between Brahmanical ritual practices and the path of the Buddha, between the worship of fire, and alternative methods of purification.⁴¹

The gāthās also testify to more direct attempts to contest, transform, and appropriate definitions of brāhmaṇahood. It is suggested for instance, that brāhmaṇas should be distinguished by inner 'colour' or quality (*antahvanna*) as opposed to outer appearance (*bahivanna*).⁴² Elsewhere, the contrast is expressed in terms of physical versus spiritual birth. The notorious Angulimāla, so-called for the string of human fingers he was collecting, claims to have been born a brāhmaṇa (*brahmajacca*) but was transformed into the Buddha's own son (*sugatassa putta*⁴³). Less dramatic changes are also recorded, as in the case of those who begin as *brahmabandhus* (that is, as kinsmen of brāhmaṇas and, by extension, brāhmaṇas merely by birth⁴⁴ and then become 'true' brāhmaṇas through the attainment of enlightenment.

As interesting is the story of the flower sweeper (*puppha chaddaka*⁴⁵), a category recognized as particularly low within the Buddhist tradition. He refers to himself as poor (*dalidda*), hungry (*appabhojana*), born in a low family (*nicakula*), and engaged in a despicable occupation (*hinakamma*⁴⁶). Once he attains enlightenment, we are told that the deities praise him⁴⁷ as does the Buddha, who reputedly describes him as the best of brāhmaṇas (*brāhmaṇāmuttamam*) on account of his austerities (*tapas*), brahmacarya, and self-control (*samyama*).

It is evident that the transition to homelessness, envisaged as a necessary first step in the quest for nibbāna, was constructed, to an extent, as a gendered process within the early Buddhist tradition. The break from the world was represented as more dramatic in the case of women. Also, it was often envisaged as being triggered off by traumatic experiences, personal tragedies which were ideally universalized and then transcended.

In the case of men, the transition is depicted as sharp but less dramatic. What is more, in some cases, older available identities, including and especially those of the brāhmaṇa, seem to be reworked rather than abandoned.

As has been suggested fairly often, these differences may reflect the diverse paths to renunciation actually adopted by women and men. Besides, as I have argued earlier, the fact that such alternatives were accorded canonical recognition may have reinforced the understanding that some alternatives were more legitimate than others. In other words the divergent images of the journey towards nibbāna, which were preserved, both reflected and shaped the choices open to women and men.

VISUALIZING TRANSCENDENCE

Descriptions of nibbāna are amongst the most formalized parts of the gāthā. Many of these are common to men and women. These include attaining what has been defined as the cool bliss of nibbāna,⁴⁸ divine insight (*dibbacakkhu*)⁴⁹ and liberation (*vimuccī*).⁵⁰

Nibbāna was also envisaged as freedom from rebirth (*punabbhava*),⁵¹ from bondage (*gantha*)⁵² and the *āsavas* (ideas which trapped the mind).⁵³ It also involved the cessation of desire (*rāga*),⁵⁴ or, more typically, thirst (*tanhā*).⁵⁵

The transformation attendant on nibbāna was occasionally defined in terms of attaining kinship with the Buddha. Those who achieved this status could be described as heirs (*dāyāda*),⁵⁶ or, more vividly, as his

orasaputta (literally born from the breast).⁵⁷ While such terms were used by or attributed to those who belonged to the Buddha's clan, the Sākya, including his son Rāhula,⁵⁸ they were also extended to brāhmaṇas.⁵⁹

In the case of therīs, such claims are few and far between. This may appear somewhat paradoxical, given the relative preponderance of the Buddha's kinswomen within the bhikkhunī saṃgha. It is a pointer to the disjuncture between social and spiritual kinship, and to the relative valorization of the latter. The use of the idiom of kinship in this context indicates that what was envisaged was not simply a denial of the existing social order, but its replacement by an alternative. While this was technically asexual, the fact that kinship terminology was selectively deployed meant that the definition of nibbāna as universally accessible was effectively and implicitly gendered, and thus deflected.

Further, the attainment was occasionally proclaimed through the *sthanāda* (literally the lion's roar). The imagery invoked is one of power and pride. There is only one therī, Sundarī⁶⁰ whose verse is characterized in such terms, whereas such attributions are fairly common in the case of theras.⁶¹

An implicitly gendered definition on nibbāna is also evident in the depictions of the means or processes whereby it was attained. At one level, the cultivation of the *śilas* or virtues⁶², adherence to the eightfold path (*aṭṭhāṅgikam*),⁶³ and the acquisition of the threefold learning (*tevijjā*)⁶⁴ were recognized as necessary for both therīs and theras en route to nibbāna. However, in the case of the theras, there is an occasional mention of valour (*viriyaparākkamaṃ*)⁶⁵ as a possible aid in the quest. Such imagery is rather infrequent in the *Therīgāthā*. We have one instance of a therī engaged in battle with desire,⁶⁶ but this is exceptional.

Besides, there is much greater emphasis on brahmacarya as a desirable attribute for theras.⁶⁷ Although brahmacarya is not unknown in the *Therīgāthā*,⁶⁸ it is relatively marginal. The focus on brahmacarya in the case of the theras can be understood in terms of the preoccupation with brahmanism, mentioned earlier. While Brahmanical brahmacarya was a stage of life marked by celibacy and the study of the Vedas, it was probably defined exclusively in terms of the former attribute in the context of the Buddhist monastic order. As such, it would have reinforced the notion that the attainment of nibbāna depended on the cultivation of asexual, if not antisexual, attitudes.

In this context, the body was envisaged as one of the greatest obstacles to the attainment of nibbāna. The condemnation of the body (*kāya*)

in the *gāthās* is therefore routine and somewhat dreary. Typically, it is described as being full of filth, rotten, serpent-like, the root of rebirth and illusion.⁶⁹

The body was more often than not particularized, and almost invariably conceptualized as feminine. The female body was envisaged as foul-smelling and dripping with excretions.⁷⁰ At the same time it was represented as exemplifying the noose of death (*maccupāsa*)⁷¹ on account of what was perceived to be its apparent, skin-deep attractiveness, which was enhanced by the use of jewellery, fine clothes, and fragrances.⁷² This literally fatal attraction was viewed as extending, in extreme cases, to the female corpse.⁷³

The deadly qualities attributed to the female form stemmed from the understanding that it was the embodiment of desire.⁷⁴ The mechanisms devised to overcome this 'trap' included representing the female body as being subject to aging when alive⁷⁵ and being eaten by worms when dead.⁷⁶

Such imagery is fairly stereotypical, and much of it is echoed in the *Therīgāthā* as well. As such, one looks in vain for an alternative definition of the female form in the text. Nevertheless, the *gāthās* occasionally incorporate representations which shift the emphasis subtly, if only slightly. Perhaps the best example of this is provided by the composition attributed to Subhā,⁷⁷ which is structured in the form of a dialogue between the *therī* and a male protagonist. The action begins when Subhā goes to meditate in a forest, but is confronted by a seducer, a young man who tempts her to return to the pleasures of the world. He is particularly fascinated by her lovely eyes.⁷⁸ After a long discourse on the futility of desire and the illusory nature of the body, Subhā plucks out her eye, and hands it to him.⁷⁹ Needless to say, he is immediately contrite, and the eye is miraculously restored when the *bhikkhunī* enters the presence of the Buddha.⁸⁰

What is interesting here is the complete role reversal. The conventional temptress takes on the role of redeemer. What is more, redemption is achieved through the giving of the eye. Apart from being symbolic of insight, this was recognized within the Buddhist tradition as the ultimate act of generosity, typically ascribed to certain Bodhisattas. The appropriation of the motif in the present context would have probably undermined the equation of the feminine with evil for those who heard the vivid and dramatic song. As such, while the *gāthā* did not provide an overt contestation of canonical definitions of femininity, it suggested and opened up alternative possibilities.

The image of the aging female body, frequently invoked as symbolic of the transience of worldly pleasures, and one of the recommended objects of contemplation for bhikkhus, is reworked in another instance. This is undertaken in the gāthā attributed to the renowned ex-courtesan Ambapālī.⁸¹ The gāthā is cast as a monologue, almost a lamentation, in which the courtesan contrasts her past glory with her present state. This is achieved by juxtaposing the stereotypes of Sanskrit (and Prakrit) *kāvya* with a more sombre reality. Thus, her hair, which was like a swarm of black bees, now resembles hemp⁸², her eyes which sparkled like jewels have lost their lustre, her breasts sag, and her feet are cracked.⁸³ Once again, the overarching symbolic codes remain unchallenged, but there is a shift from a superficial representation of the female body as horrific to a more resigned acceptance of aging and decay.

While conventional definitions of femininity were only partly modified through such strategies, masculinity was more open to redefinition. In one instance,⁸⁴ the man (*nara*) who was renowned in all directions was defined as one who survived on alms, wore rags, and lived under trees. Such definitions called into question conventional symbols of worldly prosperity, such as good food, fine clothes, and a palatial residence. Simultaneously, the less visible power of an ascetic lifestyle was valorized.

In other situations, nibbāna was conceptualized as leading to (amongst other things) a bodily transformation. This was envisaged in one case as a state of weightlessness or lightness, the result of being touched by immense bliss.⁸⁵ Elsewhere, the limbs and organs acquire new meaning. For Mahākassapa, one of the most famous monks in the tradition, the neck becomes the source of mindfulness, the hands symbolize faith, while the head represents insight.⁸⁶ In this context, the body no longer symbolizes transience or temptation (and hence an obstacle to be overcome). It is regarded, instead, as an instrument for both attaining and experiencing the ultimate goal.

In fact, some of the most beautiful imagery is deployed to represent the Buddha's form. This was envisaged as luminous,⁸⁷ comparable to the sun,⁸⁸ glowing like gold.⁸⁹ His body is envisaged as most complete⁹⁰ with all the signs of a great man,⁹¹ attractive, with beautiful teeth, happy eyes and face,⁹² in short, incomparable.⁹³

Comparisons are nevertheless made, especially with majestic animals such as the elephant⁹⁴ and the lion.⁹⁵ Elsewhere,⁹⁶ we are told that the ocean, earth, and mountains are incapable of providing similes for describing the Buddha. Other epithets used to characterize the Buddha

include *bhagavan*,⁹⁷ *satthā*,⁹⁸ *mahāvira*,⁹⁹ *akutobhaya* (fearless),¹⁰⁰ *brāhmaṇa*,¹⁰¹ *vināyaka*,¹⁰² *dhammarāja*,¹⁰³ *punṇakhetta*¹⁰⁴ and *cakkavatti rāja*.¹⁰⁵ Small wonder then that seeing him was supposed to make the hair stand on end.¹⁰⁶

One can see certain parallels between the treatment of the male body and that of the *brāhmaṇa*. As in the case of the *brāhmaṇa*, the existence and importance of the male body is not denied. What we have instead is an acceptance and a redefinition. This culminates, moreover, in a somewhat paradoxical situation, where the luminous form of the Buddha becomes the ultimate symbol of the realization of *nibbāna* or extinction. The use of the image of the female body, on the other hand, remains confined to situations of entrapment. It was thus represented as something to be transcended rather than transformed.

GENDERED NARRATIVES

There is one major intangible, but nonetheless perceptible difference between the *Therīgāthā* and *Theragāthā*. Overall, the tone of the latter is far more impersonal, didactic if not pedantic. Moreover, as we have seen, the gender imagery available in the *Theragāthā* tends to be stereotyped and somewhat superficial.

In the *Therīgāthā*, on the other hand, there is far more specificity and immediacy. The *gāthās* attributed to *Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesī*¹⁰⁷ and *Punnā*¹⁰⁸ are illustrative of this. *Bhaddā* is one of the few women represented as experimenting with alternative traditions and practices before adopting Buddhism. Her history, as collated in the commentary, is an amalgam of folk tales. She was born into a rich family but fell in love with a robber and married him. The robber wanted to make off with her jewels, but she foiled this attempt by simply knocking him down a cliff. Unable to return home after this, she took to a life of wandering, and became a famous debater, who literally staked her claim by planting a branch outside the city gates, inviting challengers to pull it down. She was ultimately out-talked by the eminent monk *Sāriputa*.¹⁰⁹

Punnā,¹¹⁰ figures as a slave woman who goes to draw water from the river as she is afraid of being beaten by her mistress.¹¹¹ Her *gāthā* is constructed as a dialogue with a *brāhmaṇa*, who shivers as he takes a dip in the river to wash away his sins. *Punnā* tries to dissuade him by using commonsensical arguments. She wonders whether fish and tortoise are redeemed, for example, and whether the water will not wash away his merits as well. Ultimately, the *brāhmaṇa* is convinced, declares that he was merely a *brahmabandhu*, and now become a true *brāhmaṇa*.

The question of the literal truth or accuracy of such stories is obviously not the point. What is clear is that, whether narrated in prose or verse (or both), they had the basic elements of a good narrative. They achieved and maintained the delicate balance between the plausible and the unusual, and would have attracted audiences.

It is in this context that the question of narrative situations becomes important. Here, what I can offer are tentative and speculative possibilities. Can we suggest that the more standardized *Theragāthā* was primarily directed towards monastic audiences? For such an audience, a stereotypical, shorthand allusion to a situation or state may have been considered sufficient. This was probably more in the nature of preaching to the converted—a mere reference to a threat or possibility could be used as an adequate communicative device.

It is also likely that the *Theragāthā* was shaped by the interaction between Brahmanical conventions and Buddhist values to a greater extent than the *Therīgāthā*. As we have seen, this is evident in the reworking of Brahmanical ideas. Besides, it is likely that certain strategies of the Brahmanical tradition, including standardization and repetition to the point of generating redundancy, may have been adopted within the Buddhist canon.

This is not to suggest that the *Therīgāthā* was entirely free of such devices. They occur often enough in the descriptions of nibbāna. And such similarities are only to be expected in compilations which were explicitly part of the canon. If, nevertheless, the images of women in the *Therīgāthā* strike us as somewhat different, this may be because the text was directed less towards monks (for whom references to the horrors of the female body may have sufficed) but more towards lay men and women, including potential believers. To be successful with such an audience, the monotony of the stereotype probably had to be broken and replaced with the variety and individuality which characterizes the *Therīgāthā*. This may also explain the preoccupation with the turning points and crises of lay existence, including marriage, and, especially, the death of children.

Some of us have emphasized the fact that the early Buddhist tradition provided women (and men) with an opportunity for self-expression. What I would now suggest is that this is only partly true. The gāthās may represent the voices of individual men and women. They also represent the interests and views of those who heard them. As such, we cannot maintain a water-tight distinction between image and self-image in this (and possibly other) context(s).

It is also worth pointing out that insofar as distinctive (as opposed to negative, stereotypical) images of women were preserved, this seems to have been achieved less in an exclusively monastic setting, than in situations of interaction between the laity and renouncers. It is obvious that the latter context was less closely structured. It is this factor which probably provided the spaces for generating, disseminating, and preserving a range of images. While these did not lead to the overthrow of monastic misogyny, they evidently had a widespread appeal, which ensured their accommodation within the canon. It is true that the female form was not used to signify nibbanic bliss. But representations of women in less exalted situations, which were both more commonplace and varied, could at least occasionally develop beyond the stereotype of the transient temptress.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. K.E. Neumann, 1899, *Die Lieder der Monche und Nonnen Gotama Buddhos*, Berlin: E. Hoffman & Co.

2. C.A.F. Rhys Davids (tr.), 1964, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*. London: Pali Text Society (first editions 1909, 1913).

3. K.R. Norman (tr.), 1969–71, *Elders' Verses*. 2 vols. London: Pali Text Society; Susan Murcott, 1991, *The First Buddhist Women*. Berkeley: Parallax Press. The focus in the present discussion is on the 'original' Pali version of the text.

4. K.R. Norman, 1983, *Pali Literature*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, pp. 73–4.

5. There is no direct correlation between the length of the commentary and that of the composition. In fact, single, short gāthās probably required greater prose elaboration or explanation than the longer compositions, which were often relatively self-explanatory.

6. Norman (1983: 73).

7. H. Oldenberg and Richard Pischel (ed.), 1966, *The Thera and Therigatha* (second edition, with appendices by K.R. Norman and L. Alsdorf). London: Pali Text Society (first edition, 1883), p. xi.

8. Rhys Davids (1909: xxi).

9. Kathryn Blackstone, 1998, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha The struggle for liberation in the Therigatha*. Surrey: Curzon, p. 1.

10. For example, *Theragāthā* (Tag) 1.29. Unless otherwise mentioned, all references are to Oldenberg and Pischel's (1883) edition of the text. In all citations, the first number refers to the book or nipāta, the second to the author, and the third to the verse. All three, that is, books or sections, authors, and verses are numbered consecutively.

11. Norman (1983: 73).

12. *Therigāthā* (Tg) II.19.

13. Tg V.41.

14. Tag III.175.

15. *Ibid.*, VII.225.

16. Tg I.3.
17. Ibid., I.7.
18. Ibid., I.8.
19. Ibid., II.124.
20. Ibid., II.160.
21. Ibid., I.56, 57.
22. Blackstone (1998).
23. Tag I.43.
24. Tg IV.37.
25. Uma Chakravarti, 1996, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
26. For example, Tag I.8 Commentary (cmy), I.10 cmy, I.34 cmy.
27. Tag XVIII.261 cmy.
28. Tg XVI.73.
29. *Gahattha*, Tg XVI.73.460.
30. Ibid., 480.
31. Ibid., 514
32. Tg XV.72.
33. Ibid., 401
34. For example, Tag I.73, Tag XI.240 cmy.
35. Tg V.47.
36. Ibid., X.63.221.
37. Ibid., VI.51.
38. Ibid., III.33.51.
39. Ibid., VI.50.127.
40. For example, Ibid., VI.50.131.
41. For instance, Tag III.170.219
42. Ibid., II.130.140.
43. Ibid., XVI.225.899.
44. For example, Ibid., III.170.221.
45. Ibid., XII.242.
46. Ibid., 620.
47. Ibid., 629.
48. For example, Tag I.79, Tg II.26.34, *sitibhūtolā asmi nibbutolā*.
49. For example, Tag VIII.231.516, Tg V.44.100.
50. Tag IV.186.270; Tg V.43.96.
51. Ibid., V.45.106; Tag I.67.
52. Ibid., I.89.
53. Tg XIII.73.364; Tag I.116.
54. Ibid., I.12.
55. Tg I.18; Tag II.14.161. For a detailed account of the relative importance of such definitions for theras and therīs, see Blackstone (1998).
56. Ibid., I.18.
57. Ibid., II.147.174.
58. Ibid., IV.193.295.
59. For example, Ibid., V.204.348.
60. Tg XIII.69.332.
61. For example, Tag I.20, II.126.

62. For example, Tag III.177.240.
63. Ibid., I.35.
64. For example, Tg XIII.70.363. This involved the development of *sila* (virtue), *citta* (mental ability), and *panna* (insight). The reference to *tevijjā*, three-fold learning, would also have resonances with the Brahmanical tradition, which defined learning in terms of the three Vedas. The use of a more or less identical term while redefining its meaning would tie in with the strategies for dealing with *brāhmaṇas/* brahmanism mentioned earlier.
65. Tag III.171.244.
66. Tg XIII.70.360.
67. For example, Tag III.175.236.
68. See, for instance, Tg XVI.73.
69. For example, Tag X.237.567 ff; Tg V.41.82.
70. For example, Tag IV.189.279.
71. For example, Ibid., IV.194.299.
72. For example, Ibid., IV.186.267–68.
73. Ibid., V.198.
74. For example, Ibid., VI.223.455, where the *itthirūpa* is equated with the *pañcakāmaguna*.
75. For example, Ibid., I.118.
76. Ibid., VI.213.393.
77. Tg XIV.71.
78. Ibid., 375.
79. Ibid., 396.
80. Ibid., 397–99.
81. Tg XIII.66.
82. Ibid., 252.
83. Ibid., 257, 265, 269.
84. Tag XVIII.281.1057.
85. *Labuko vata me kāyo phutto ca pītisukhena vipulena*, Tag I.104.
86. Ibid., XVIII.261.1090.
87. For example, *mahappabham*, *mahajutim*, Tag IV.191.288.
88. *Adiccabandhu*, Tag VI.217.417.
89. *Hemavanna*, Tg XIII.69.333, *suvannavanna*, Tag XVI.25.818.
90. *Paripunnakāya*, Tag XVI.25.818.
91. *Mahāpurisalakkhana*, Ibid., 819.
92. Ibid., 818–20.
93. *Atuladassana*, Tag IV.191.288.
94. Ibid., 289.
95. Tag V.208.367.
96. Ibid., XVII.259.1013.
97. Ibid., I.86.
98. Ibid.
99. Tag I.66 38.
100. Ibid., IV.191.289.
101. Ibid., II.15.182.
102. Ibid., IV.191.288.
103. Ibid., VI.217.389.

104. Ibid., X.236.566.

105. Ibid., XXI.264.1235.

106. Ibid., VI.210.376.

107. Tg V.46.

108. Ibid., XII.65.

109. The gāthās ascribed to her, mention her wandering as a Jaina ascetic (Tg V.46.107)—shaven, dirty, and with a single cloth, through the realms of Aṅga, Magadha, Vajji, Kasi, and Kosala (present-day Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh).

110. Tg XII.6.

111. *Ayyānam daṇḍabhayabhitā*, Tg XII.65.236.