

Images of the Female Body in the Theragāthā and the Therīgāthā

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Buddhist images of the body, and in particular the female body, as expressed in the Theragāthā and the Therīgāthā. In 1930 I. B. Horner argued that Buddhism brought women a level of equality, autonomy and respect unprecedented in pre-Buddhist India. Women gained control over their own lives and were no longer seen as chattel that could only live through and on a man. In Horner's words, Buddhism not only challenged the caste system, "but also attempted to promote the cause of rights for women."¹ While it is probably true that Buddhism offered women an outlet for self-expression which they otherwise would have found hard to find² it would be an exaggeration to claim that Buddhism championed women rights. From the beginning, the eight special rules for bhikkhunīs guaranteed that they would remain under the power of the bhikkhus.³ Furthermore, more recent research on women in Buddhism has highlighted that the Buddhist position toward women was both ambiguous and at times contradictory. On the one hand, women were seen as a danger to a man's spiritual progress because of their perceived association with sensuality and procreation. On the other hand, Buddhism acknowledged that women were just as capable of achieving enlightenment as their male counterparts.⁴ The result was an attitude toward women which, while spiritually accepting, was at the same time infused with patriarchy and a male distrust of the feminine. Moreover, what the Theragāthā and the Therīgāthā suggest is that patriarchy was so pervasive in early Buddhism that the bhikkhunīs effectively adopted and internalized bhikkhus' attitudes toward the female body.

Introduction

Buddhism is a religion that emphasizes the importance of meditation. Throughout its history it has developed numerous techniques to focus and relax the mind so that humans can sever their attachments to the unsatisfactory things of this world. However, a reading of the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā* reveals that even this most quintessential of Buddhist practices were shaped by patriarchy. Buddhist meditation distinguished itself from other forms of meditation by the extent to which it linked meditation on death and transience with spiritual progress. Bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs were encouraged to contemplate human corpses in all their decaying and putrefying glory so that they could fully realize the impermanence of existence and break out of the cycle of samsara. What is noteworthy, however, is that the object of meditation was usually a female corpse rather than a male corpse. Bhikkhus distracted by sexual desires were told to imagine a decomposing female body eaten by worms and riddled with corruption. No such advice was given to bhikkhunīs regarding the male body. Women became objects of meditation for the edification of male subjects, but men were not objects of meditation for the edification of female subjects.⁵ Instead, bhikkhunīs used themselves as objects of meditation, thus internalizing the male objectification of the female. As Liz Wilson points out, the bhikkhunīs accepted the male view as normative for all genders:

Cataloguing the deterioration of their own bodies...these nuns may be said to regard the female body from the perspective of a male subject. Their

meditation experiences do not constitute a female equivalent of what monks do in charnel fields. These women, like their male mentor..., contemplate only female bodies, not the decaying bodies of men....⁶

For Wilson this ultimately reinforced the message of female subservience, since it strongly suggested that the male viewpoint was normative for all.⁷

The *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā*

The *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā* form a small part of the Pali Canon. The former is a collection of verses attributed to bhikkhus, while the latter contains poems that are attributed to bhikkhunīs. Although both were only committed to writing in the first century B.C.E. in Sri Lanka, they are believed to have originated from the time of the Buddha, albeit with considerable changes and additions. In his dating of these texts, K. R. Norman argues that the traditional, historical, doctrinal, metrical and linguistic evidence points to a development period of about 300 years, from the end of the 6th century B.C.E. to the end of 3rd century B.C.E.⁸ Of these two texts, the *Therīgāthā* is of particular interest, for it appears to be the only canonical text in any of the world's religions that is attributed to women and that focuses on women's religious experiences.⁹ It probably traces back to friends, relatives and contemporaries of the Buddha, although it was definitely shaped by a subsequent long oral transmission which makes it impossible to know with certainty the text's date, authors or place of compilation. Like the *Theragāthā*, it consists of *gathas* ("songs"), which were constructed according to strict rules for chanting. Nevertheless, some of the lines in these *gathas* originally may have been sayings, and were converted from prose to metric form to facilitate memorization. Since Buddhism took great pains to maintain and pass down its oral traditions, it is quite possible that both the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā* contain within them information about the lives and beliefs of individuals who lived during or shortly after the Buddha.¹⁰

A comparative reading between the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā* supports the hypothesis that the latter was predominately compiled by women. There are subtle differences between the two texts that point to different gender perspectives:

1. In the *Theragāthā* bhikkhus cease to experience conflict with others once they achieve liberation. Liberation marks the end of the struggle. In the *Therīgāthā*, even liberated bhikkhunīs continue to experience conflict and continue to struggle, all that has changed is how they respond to it.¹¹
2. The *Therīgāthā* contains more descriptions of the bhikkhunīs' lives prior to joining the sangha, with moving expressions of deep personal grief and negative social situations. In the *Theragāthā* the bhikkhus only refer obliquely and abstractly to their past experiences, and there is little reference to pain and social problems. Furthermore, the *Therīgāthā* emphasizes the social and personal relationships the women experienced before becoming bhikkhunīs; the world the bhikkhus renounce in the *Theragāthā* is remarkably asocial.¹²
3. In the *Therīgāthā* women have considerably more difficulties gaining permission to join the sangha. They must overcome opposition from spouse and family. Sometimes the women only enter the monastic life

after family or worldly life is no longer possible. In contrast, in the *Theragāthā* a man's decision to become a bhikku is usually welcomed by all concerned. This appears to suggest that the authors of the *Therīgāthā* were women who lived within a patriarchal environment that expected them to conform to the social roles of wives and mothers.¹³

4. While the *Theragāthā* often portrays the bhikkhus as dwelling in the wilderness, only rarely is the wilderness mentioned in the *Therīgāthā*. Unlike their male counterparts, the bhikkhunīs do not praise solitude nor do they condemn social interaction. The two texts also understand renunciation differently: in the *Theragāthā* renunciation implies a complete separation from society, in the *Therīgāthā* renunciation includes a continuing emphasis on relationships. One of the reasons for this difference may have been that by the time of the *Therīgāthā*'s composition, bhikkhunīs were no longer allowed to live in the forest.¹⁴

While these differences do not necessarily prove female authorship, they lend credibility to the traditional belief that the *Therīgāthā* originated in the bhikkunī sangha.¹⁵ It is, therefore, likely that the *Therīgāthā* can offer insights into how bhikkhunīs viewed the female body.¹⁶

The Female Body in the Theragāthā

Bhikkhus viewed the female body with considerably more disgust than the male body.¹⁷ In the *Theragāthā* there are numerous revolting descriptions of the body's true nature that are meant to break the meditator's attachment to physical beauty. What is noteworthy is that it is the female body that is singled out for particular loathing. Women are seen as a threat, and this threat must be neutralized through negative imagery. Take for instance the case of the bhikku Nāgasamāla:

Ornamented, well-dressed, wearing a garland, anointed with sandal, in the middle of the main road a dancing girl dances to music.

I entered for alms. As I was going along I saw her ornamented, well-dressed, like a snare of death spread out.

Then reasoned thinking arose in me; the peril became clear; disgust with the world was established.

Then my mind was released, see the essential rightness of the doctrine. The three knowledges have been obtained, the Buddha's teaching has been done.¹⁸

In this particular bhikku's case it is the awareness of the female body's seductiveness that leads to the realization that the world is disgusting. Through this fear and cultivation of disgust liberation is attained. Another bhikku, Kulla, concentrates on a woman's rotting corpse in order to realize the foolishness of sexual desires:

I, Kulla, going to a burial ground, saw a woman cast away, thrown away in the cemetery, being eaten, full of worms.

See the body, Kulla, diseased, impure, rotten, oozing, trickling, the delight of fools.

Taking the doctrine as a mirror for the attainment of knowledge and insight, I considered this body, empty inside and out.¹⁹

In a similar manner, the bhikku Sabbakāma highlights women's disgusting nature:

This two-legged, impure, evil-smelling (body), full of various corpses, oozing here and there, is cherished.

As lurking deer with a snare, as fish with a hook, as a monkey with pitch, so they trap an ordinary individual.

Those ordinary individuals who with impassioned minds pursue them (i.e. women), fill up the terrible cemetery. They heap up renewed existence.

But he who avoids them as one avoids a snake's head with one's foot, he being mindful overcomes this attachment to the world.²⁰

Repeatedly in the *Theragāthā* bhikkhus are warned of the seductiveness of the female figure and how it will lead them away from the path to liberation. They are told to remind themselves of the true disgusting nature of the female body, both living and dead.²¹

Similar descriptions of the male body cannot be found in the *Theragāthā*. Although the text does contain general comments on the foulness of the human body, these passages do not specify gender. Nandaka, for instance, offers the following diatribe against the body:

A curse upon bodies, evil-smelling, on Māra's side, oozing; there are nine streams in your body which flow all the time.

Do not think much of bodies; do not offend the Tathāgatas.²²

These bodies could be either male or female. This vagueness is echoed by Kappa:

Full of stains of different sorts, a great producer of excrement, like a stagnant pool, a great tumour, a great wound,

full of pus and blood, immersed in a privy, trickling with water, the body always oozes foully.

The blind ordinary individuals who cherish this body fill up the terrible cemetery; they take on renewed existence.

Those who avoid this body like a dung-smeared snake, having spurned the root of existence, will be quenched without āsavas.²³

These descriptions can be read to refer to both male and female bodies, but what is noteworthy is that nowhere in the *Theragāthā* are such descriptions applied clearly and specifically to the male body. Indeed, when the *Theragāthā* refers specifically to a male body, the foulness/corpse motif is avoided. Jenta is intoxicated by his own physical attractiveness:

Intoxicated by pride of birth, and by wealth and position, I wandered intoxicated by the colour and form of my body.²⁴

However, the answer to Jenta's dilemma is not to concentrate on his body's disgusting fluids and eventual decay, but to enter into the Buddha's overwhelming presence:

Having seen the supreme leader, best and foremost of charioteers, like a blazing sun, revered by the Order of bhikkhus, having cast away pride and intoxication, with settled mind, with my head I saluted respectfully the best of all creatures.²⁵

Likewise, when the Buddha is asked by Sela why he is an ascetic when his beautiful body would make him a king, his response does not mention the body's disgusting character. Instead, the Buddha states that he is already king of a far superior doctrine.²⁶

What the *Theragāthā* reveals is that bhikkhus viewed women as a threat to their spiritual development and liberation. They were described as razor blades coated with honey.²⁷ The female body was clearly seductive and a terrible distraction for them. In order to overcome this dilemma they objectified the female, trying to convince themselves that it was a disgusting object full of puss and decay which had no real attraction. At no stage did the bhikkhus in the *Theragāthā* regard the male body in the same light. While they acknowledged that all bodies, whether male or female, were subject to corruption, they do not seem to have applied this knowledge directly to their own bodies. Nowhere does a bhikku contemplate his own body's disgusting nature and eventual decay. Rather, bhikkhus projected this view onto other bodies, with particular emphasis on the female form.

The Female Body in the Therīgāthā

The *Therīgāthā* does not mention bhikkhunīs being distracted by men's bodies nor does it suggest that the bhikkhunīs spent a lot of time thinking about sex. Instead, their fascination appears to have focused on their own physical appearances. While in the *Theragāthā* a number of bhikkhus attain liberation as a direct result of struggling with their physical desires for women, none of the bhikkhunīs in the *Therīgāthā* achieve enlightenment by wrestling with similar desires for men. However, there is a telling similarity between the two texts: the bhikkhunīs use exactly the same technique the bhikkhus use to overcome attachment to the world: they teach themselves to view the female body (i.e. their own bodies) with disgust.²⁸ The difference is that the bhikkhunīs internalize their disgust, while the bhikkhus keep it external. Addhakāsī, for instance, speaks of how she learned to view her own figure with loathing:

My wages (of prostitution) were as large as the (revenue of the) country of Kāsi; having fixed that price the townspeople made me priceless in price.

Then I became disgusted with my figure, and being disgusted I was disinterested (in it)... The Buddha's teaching has been done.²⁹

Addhakāsī achieves enlightenment not by contemplating the disgusting nature of men's bodies, but by rejecting the beauty of her own body. Nanduttarā also achieves liberation by realizing her own body's ugliness:

Delighting in ornament and decoration, by means of bathing and anointing indeed, I ministered 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. Desire for sensual pleasures has been rooted out.³⁰

In the *Therīgāthā* the bhikkhunīs' use their own bodies to teach the fundamental Buddhist lesson of physical impermanence and the foolishness of admiring and desiring beauty. Ambapāli describes how her own once beautiful body has been ravaged by age:

Formerly my body looked beautiful, like a well-polished sheet of gold; (now) it is covered with very fine wrinkles; not otherwise is the utterance of the speaker of truth.

Such was this body; (now) it is decrepit, the abode of many pains; an old house, with its plaster fallen off; not otherwise is the utterance of the speaker of truth.³¹

Sumedhā gives a particularly disgusting description of her own body in order to convince her family to allow her to enter the sangha.³² Such examples of introspection abound in the *Therīgāthā*. In contrast, nowhere in the *Theragāthā* do bhikkhus draw on their own bodies to illustrate fundamental Buddhist teachings. For Kathryn R. Blackstone it is clear that

The *therīs* view the problem of the body as an attachment to self that is to be overcome by examining their own life-histories and biological processes. The *theras* view the problem of attachment as desire for other which is to be overcome by projecting images of the true nature of the body as disgustingly impure onto others.³³

It appears that the bhikkhunīs in the *Therīgāthā* internalized the bhikkhus' view of women's bodies, pantomiming their male counterpart's statements about the disgusting character of the female body. In effect, the bhikkhunīs learned to make their own bodies, but never the men's bodies, into instruments of instruction.³⁴

When bhikkhunīs are confronted with sexual urges in the *Therīgāthā*, they are never their own but rather those of a male admirer. It appears that the bhikkhunīs were not overly concerned with or distracted by the male body. Nowhere in the *Therīgāthā* does one find women struggling with physical arousal brought on by the sight of a good looking man. Instead, there is the example of the bhikkunī Subhā, who has to fend off the advances of a man. Unlike her male counterparts, she does not neutralize this man's desires by pointing out the disgusting character of the male body or the body in general. Instead, she describes the loathsomeness of her own body in order to cool the man's flames of passion:

What is approved of as essence by you here in the body, which is full of corpses, filling the cemetery, of a breaking nature, which (essence) having seen you look at me, being out of your mind?³⁵

Her disgusting self-description culminates in her plucking out her eye and giving it to her admirer. Stunned and shocked by this gesture, the man's desires are quickly quenched and he recognizes the futility of pursuing sensual pleasures.³⁶

What is most noteworthy about the Subhā story is not her self-denigration and self-mutilation, but that she engages in these acts in order to teach a man the error of his ways. This willingness to convert the opposite sex cannot be found in the

Theragāthā: the bhikkhus never try to convert a woman they find attractive, but rather hurl abuse at her, accusing her of being unenlightened because she induces desires in men.³⁷ In short, the *Theragāthā* blames women for men's sexual desires. The irony is that *Therīgāthā* does exactly the same thing. When Subhā neutralizes the man's desires by describing the disgusting nature of her body, she is implicitly acknowledging that it is her body that is responsible for the man's emotions, not the man himself. What the *Therīgāthā* reveals is that the bhikkhunīs internalized the bhikkhus' view of the female body, seeing their bodies not through their own feminine eyes, but through the eyes of men.³⁸

Conclusion

A reading of the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā* reveals that already during its formative stages Buddhism contained attitudes toward women that made them subservient toward men and which required women to adopt patriarchal thought structures. While Buddhism recognized that women were just as capable of achieving enlightenment as men, it also saw women as a sexual threat which had to be neutralized through powerful negative female imagery. Women were to be regarded as disgusting, fluid oozing figures, and bhikkhus were encouraged to imagine female bodies rotting in the cemetery. It does not seem to have crossed Buddhism's mind that bhikkhunīs could benefit from projecting the same loathsome imagery onto the male body. Instead, the bhikkhunīs adopted and internalized the male view of the feminine, seeing themselves as ugly and as responsible for male sexual desires. Nevertheless, the *Therīgāthā* stands as a challenge to statements in other parts of the Pali Canon that argue that women are consumed by insatiable sexual urges.³⁹ The bhikkhunīs in the *Therīgāthā* do not seem to have had much difficulty with their own sexual desires, but rather find the problem to be men's sexual aggression.⁴⁰ Indeed, the *Theragāthā*'s constant reference to women's physical charms proves that it was men, not women, who struggled with insatiable sexual desires. The patriarchy of Buddhism, however, ensured that women, rather than men, were blamed for this situation. Although women were the victims of male lust, they were portrayed as the perpetrators.

Notes

¹ Horner, I. B., *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Lay Women and Alms Women* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930), 3, 113, 117.

² Murcott, Susan, *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therīgāthā* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1991), 31.

³ The Eight Rules were as follows: (1) A bhikkunī of even one hundred years standing had to rise up and bow to a bhikkhu ordained even a day; (2) a bhikkunī could not spend the rainy season in a district where there was no bhikkhu; (3) bhikkunīs had to await from the bhikkhus the date of the *Uposatha* ceremony and the time the bhikkhus would come to give teaching; (4) bhikkunīs had to hold the *Pavarana* before both bhikkunīs and bhikkhus; (5) a bhikkunī guilty of a serious offense had to undergo the *manatta* discipline before both bhikkunīs and bhikkhus; (6) a female novice had to seek ordination from both bhikkunīs and bhikkhus; (7) a bhikkunī was not to revile or abuse a bhikkhu under any circumstances; and (8) a bhikkunī could not admonish a bhikkhu but a bhikkhu could admonish a bhikkunī. *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴ Paul, Diana Y., *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition* (2nd ed.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) xv, xxiii. Trainor, Kevin, "In the Eye of

the Beholder: Nonattachment and the Body in Subhā's Verse (*Therīgāthā* 71)," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 1 (1993): 72.

⁵ Wilson, Liz, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2-4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Norman, K. R., "Introduction," in *The Elders' Verses I: Theragāthā*, trans. K. R. Norman, Pali Text Society Translation Series, no. 38 (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990), xxix. Norman, K. R., "Introduction," in *The Elders' Verses II: Therīgāthā*, trans. K. R. Norman, Pali Text Society Translation Series, no. 40 (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1991), xxviii-xxxii.

⁹ Blackstone, Kathryn R., *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (1998; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-5. Murcott, 5-6.

¹¹ Blackstone, 27, 30, 33-34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40, 42, 44-45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 45-48. Paul, 82.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56-57, 84, 96, 99. Murcott, 49.

¹⁵ Blackstone, 113-114.

¹⁶ Cf. Mylius, Klaus, *Geschichte der altindischen Literatur* (Berlin, 1988), 312-313.

¹⁷ Blackstone, 68.

¹⁸ *Elders' Verses I: Theragāthā*, verses 267-270.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, verses 393-395.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, verses 453, 454, 456, 457.

²¹ *Ibid.*, verses 459-464, 736-738, 769-773, 1151-1152

²² *Ibid.*, verses 279-280.

²³ *Ibid.*, verses 567-568, 575-576.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, verse 423.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, verses 426-427.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, verses 818-841.

²⁷ Wilson, 71.

²⁸ Blackstone, 62-63, 77-78.

²⁹ *The Elders' Verses: Therīgāthā*, verses 25-26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, verses 89-90.

³¹ *Ibid.*, verses 266, 270

³² See also *ibid.*, verses 466-468, 470-471, 478, 501-502, 522.

³³ Blackstone, 81.

³⁴ Wilson, 184.

³⁵ *The Elders' Verses II: Therīgāthā*, verse 380.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, verses 381-398.

³⁷ Blackstone, 109. See for instance *Theragāthā*, verses 459-465, 769-775.

³⁸ Wilson, 183.

³⁹ Harris, Elizabeth J, "The Female in Buddhism," in *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 50.

⁴⁰ Murcott, 121-122. Men's strong and often insatiable sexual urges still create problems for bhikkunīs. See Sid Brown, *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 12

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