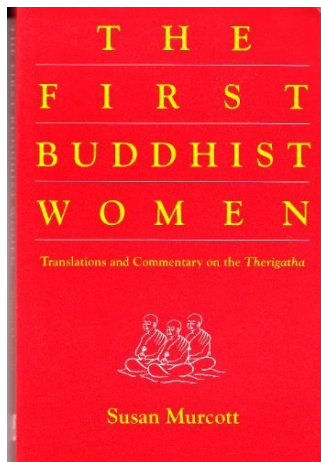


The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therigatha by Susan Murcott



Review By George-Thérèse Dickenson  
Summer 1992

The First Buddhist Women, Susan Murcott's translations and commentary on the Therigatha, is a compelling and poignant record of the poems of the Therigatha. (Literally, Therigatha is "verses of old women," but Murcott suggests that *theri* here translates not simply as "an old woman" but as a woman "distinguished for her character and wisdom.") These energetic and vividly detailed poems of women on the road to enlightenment and independence are free of self-pity and blame. These women, even when grieving over a lost child or chronicling a failed marriage, do not see themselves as victims. Instead, they turn their tragedies into steps toward spiritual understanding and freedom. Vasetthi, for example, was so tormented over the loss of her son that she:

wandered the streets  
naked with wild hair  
and

lived on trash heaps, in a graveyard,  
and by the highways.

But by the end of the poem, she has "realized great joy" by "putting [the Buddha's] teachings into practice."

Many issues tackled by these women are as vital today as they were twenty-five hundred years ago. Women speak of growing old, of depression, motherhood, childlessness and menopause, of temptation and of loss. They reject materialism and celebrate friendship and community. The spirit that permeates their poems is fiercely antihierarchical:

Get rid of the tendency

to judge yourself  
above, below or  
equal to others.  
—Nanda

They speak with self-confidence even as they reveal the most painful and private parts of their lives:

I was in a bad way  
a widow  
no children, no friends,  
no relations to give me food and  
clothes  
—Canda

And:

Uneasy at heart,  
steeped in longing for pleasure,  
I held out my arms and cried out.  
—Vaddhesi

Their voices are, by turns, calm and meditative, biting and feisty, the poems resplendent with images of great beauty and horrifying decay. Unexpected transitions keep the reader on her toes, as in this section of the poem by the former prostitute Vimala:

Dressed to kill  
at the whorehouse door,  
I was a hunter  
And spread my snare for fools.

And when I stripped for them  
I was the woman of their dreams;  
I laughed as I teased them.

Today,  
head shaved,  
robed,  
alms-wanderer  
I, my same self,  
sit at the tree's foot;  
no thought.

I have cut men and gods

out of my life.

For all the compelling language and power of some of these poems, others seem more like aphorisms, stories, or religious instruction than poetry. Stock phrases and even stock stanzas appear again and again. In Murcott's introduction, she suggests that "some lines originally may have been sayings that were converted from prose to metric form to facilitate recollection." She explains that the poems were composed orally in the Magadhi language around the time of the Buddha (thought to be between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.E.) and were passed on orally until about 80 B.C.E., when they were written down in the "literary language" of Pali.

Regarding the repetition of similar phrases and "type poems," Murcott writes, "Imitation is not considered a lack of individual creativity or imagination, but good practice." She says that Indians didn't even have "the concept of ownership of particular words or poems."

For the most part, however, the poems of the Therigatha that have the most resonance for today's readers are those in which the language of the poem breaks through the boundaries of the message the author is attempting to communicate—especially in works dealing with sexuality, passion, and beauty. Can Khema really be "completely freed from suffering" when she says

I'm disgusted by this body. It's foul and diseased. It torments me.

And is it true that Subha's "passion is gone"? That she doesn't "even know about desire"? How can she ask, "What is it [desire]" when she puts the following words in the mouth of the man who is trying to seduce her?

Come! Enjoy the flowering woods. Sweetness falls from the tall trees. Flower pollen whirls all around. The beginning of spring is a time of joy. Come! Enjoy the flowering woods. The treetops are in blossom and they call out when the wind shakes them.

These are instances in which the poem is asserting itself despite the intention of the poet. It is language coming to fullness, actualizing itself behind the speaker's back.

It is not only poetry that Murcott is concerned with here. The book is a "record of her discovery" of a system of faith in which "women could understand and attain the highest religious truths" and whose "institutional structures. . . gave women equal opportunity to manifest spiritual authority in any and all religious roles and offices."

The book is organized into chapters arranged according to the roles of the women of the Therigatha and is, as well, the story of the development of women's status and contributions to early Buddhism. In the first chapter, we meet Siddhartha Gautama's foster mother, the bold and compassionate Pajapati. Through Murcott's commentary, we learn that Pajapati established the first order of Buddhist nuns and pressed the Buddha for equality among women and men. When, after a protracted struggle, Pajapati obtained permission for women to "enter

into homelessness” if they obeyed the Eight Special Rules, rather than humbly thanking the Buddha and passively accepting the conditions under which women could achieve this new power, Pajapati audaciously denounced the first Rule and attempted to change it. She lost this battle, but later she successfully challenged the monastic regulation that a monk could not visit a sick nun. The Buddha himself came to her side as she was dying. We learn the details of Pajapati’s life from Murcott’s commentary, but Pajapati’s strong iconoclastic spirit is evidenced in her poem. It begins with homage to Buddha, but ends by paying homage to a woman—Siddhartha’s biological mother, whom Pajapati credits with having driven back “the pain of the sick and the dying.”