

ABSTRACT

How do we interpret in ways that elevate justice? This is a question posed by Buddhist studies scholar Karen Derris in her article responding to recent scholarship by Reiko Ohnuma; in her book, Ohnuma uses particularly misogynistic Buddhist narrative material to make a case for Buddhism's widespread denigration and devaluation of mothers.¹ Derris, troubled by the conclusions and implications of this work, suggests a new style of interpretation: the feminist-ethical hermeneutic. The feminist-ethical hermeneutic holds that Buddhist narrative tradition includes a vast array of material across cultures, languages, and times. Misogynistic material does exist, but so does material which elevates women and lauds their achievements. Derris suggests scholars have an ethical responsibility to interpret in ways that elevate justice—in ways that pay attention to the current status of women in Buddhism where women in the Tibetan tradition, for example, are denied monastic ordination at the highest levels. Derris invites scholars to see the implications of their interpretive work and recognize those whom it affects. She concludes her article with an aspiration that the feminist-ethical hermeneutic will “contribute to the diminishing of suffering.”

My thesis holds as its foundation Derris' feminist-ethical hermeneutic. I apply this hermeneutical style to my study of two collections of Buddhist verse—the *Therīgatha* and the *Therī-Apadana*—preserved in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pali Canon of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. These texts, composed from the 6th-3rd centuries BCE and 2nd-1st centuries BCE, respectively, both claim female authorship and take as their subjects the lives of early Buddhist nuns—their past lives, their challenges, and their paths to enlightenment.

My analysis presents the founder of the women's monastic order as a determined woman with a desire for enlightenment (*nibbana*). Even when she alone is offered ordination, she refuses until all women may ordain. I further suggest that these texts show the creative ways in which women firmly stake a claim for their role in Buddhism going back aeons and assert their spiritual achievements. Finally, I make a case for the lived experience of these nuns, which often includes the tragic loss of children and the threat of sexual predation. I argue that the women's order is a community in which women learn from and teach one another, heal from trauma, and foster vital friendships—friendships that carry them all the way to enlightenment.

¹ Karen Derris, “Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 61-79. Reiko Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

“SHE SEEMED LIKE SOMEONE I COULD TRUST”:
REIMAGINING THE FIRST BUDDHIST NUNS’ ORDER

by

Jacqueline McIntosh-DeCiancio

Advisor: Susanne Mrozik

An undergraduate thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Religion

Mount Holyoke College

April 28, 2020

Acknowledgements

I am eternally grateful to many people whose support and collaboration were essential as I formulated this thesis over the last year.

To my thesis advisor and academic advisor, Susanne Mrozik: Thank you for your mentorship over the last four years. Your course “All About Love” was my college introduction to religious studies and fundamentally influenced the route I would ultimately take at Mount Holyoke. Our weekly meetings over the last year helped shape this thesis in ways I could not have imagined when we began. You have always encouraged me to learn more, pursue my interests, and think in new ways. I am very fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from you; your passion for teaching is an inspiration to me as I continue my own journey in Buddhist Studies. You have left an indelible mark on my life.

To my thesis defense panelists, Susanne Mrozik, Amina Steinfelds, & Felicity Aulino: Thank you for your thought-provoking questions and conversation. You offered new insights for ways I might continue this project beyond the gates of Mount Holyoke.

To Ani Karma Sonam Palmo: Our discussions about women in Buddhism over afternoon tea in Sarnath made me all the more passionate about this project. Those conversations helped me see the real value of these texts for Buddhist women.

To Venerable Kundasale Subhagya: Thank you for many insightful exchanges—at the University of Peradeniya, while visiting the bodhi tree and Ruwanwelisaya stupa in Anuradhapura, and even hiking Sigiriya. I learned so much from you and it was these conversations that laid much of the groundwork for this thesis.

I am also grateful to my Sri Lankan Amma, Bimba Bandara, for welcoming me into her home. It was our many trips all around the Central Province—to visit family and temples—that enabled me to immerse myself in Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. You have consistently been at the back of my mind as I wrote this thesis.

To Honami: I am so thankful for four wonderful years of friendship—and many more! You are my rock and my best friend, and your enthusiasm for this thesis and encouragement of me has meant the world.

Finally, to my Mom & Dad: Thank you for supporting me as I moved across the country to attend Mount Holyoke. I would not be where I am today without you. I am grateful to you for reading iterations of this thesis as it progressed. I was repeatedly inspired by our conversations, which always left me with renewed motivation—from the research process through the defense.

Thank you all.

Table of Contents

Theoretical Foundations: The Feminist-Ethical Hermeneutic	1
Mahapajapati Gotami: The Feminist-Ethical Hermeneutic in Practice	11
Gendered Parallelism in the <i>Therigatha</i> and <i>Theri-Apadana</i>	36
A Woman's Experience of Buddhism	61
Concluding Remarks	88
Bibliography	91

Theoretical Foundations: The Feminist-Ethical Hermeneutic

In her 2014 article, “Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering,” Buddhist studies scholar Karen Derris proposes a new hermeneutical approach to Buddhist studies which she calls the “feminist-ethical hermeneutic.”¹ Responding to scholarship by Reiko Ohnuma that emphasizes only Buddhism’s negative portrayals of mothers, Derris argues for “justice as a valid criterion for making interpretive choices and for defining ethical scholarship.”² She notes two elements that feminist-ethical hermeneutic approaches must take into consideration: the historical and cultural context of Buddhist texts and the position of Buddhist texts within “living traditions with futures that may be shaped by interpretations.”³ The feminist-ethical hermeneutic acknowledges that both negative and positive portrayals of women exist in the Buddhist corpus, but attunes its interpretations toward the present and future—a future in which scholarly endeavors that emphasize only negative material have serious implications for women who live Buddhism.

Derris draws on Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s 1987 proposition for engaged and purposeful interpretations in the field of Biblical studies. Schüssler Fiorenza criticizes the historical emphasis on “value-free detached inquiry” which necessitated “radical detachment, emotional, intellectual, and political distancing.”⁴ This preoccupation with detached analysis forces feminist scholars to “deny...feminist engagement for the sake of scholarly acceptance.”⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza argues instead for recovery of responsibility and ethical considerations in biblical scholarship. She says: “I am interested in decentering the dominant scientist ethos of biblical scholarship by recentering it in a critical interpretive praxis for liberation.”⁶ She concludes her address with an eye toward the future:

[I]f [scholars] were to engage in a disciplined reflection on the public dimensions and ethical implications of our scholarly work, it would constitute a responsible scholarly citizenship that could be a significant participant in the global discourse seeking justice and well-being

¹ Karen Derris, “Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 61-79.

² Derris, “Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering,” 61.

³ Derris, “Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering,” 61.

⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (March 1988): 10-11.

⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” 8.

⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” 8.

for all. The implications of such a repositioning of the task and aim of biblical scholarship would be far-reaching and invigorating.⁷

Rather than deny the interconnectedness of scholarship and lived experience for the sake of outdated objectivity, Schüssler Fiorenza invites biblical studies scholars to integrate their work into a larger framework—to engage in interpretive work that “involves interests, values and visions.”⁸

Derris adopts similar views as she develops the feminist-ethical hermeneutic for Buddhist studies. She is also heavily influenced by Buddhist studies scholar Janet Gyatso’s call for ethical scholarship. According to Gyatso,

each person...has responsibility for the positions he or she articulates, whether presenting historical analysis or normative claims for the future. In doing so, Gyatso says, “what is most important in that is for all of us to summon our most ethical selves, to summon a vision of a future that is for the most good of all, a vision that takes into account as best as possible the various constituencies and their needs.”⁹

Of course, such calls for shift in scholarly practice and awareness are not conceived of in a vacuum. Derris’ voice adds to a long history of hermeneutical approaches to Buddhist studies. Alice Collett draws our attention to the history of Buddhist studies, particularly projects concerning gender. She argues that the first research on Buddhism and gender, while making important contributions to the field, set in place certain methodological fallacies that have continued to negatively impact research today. These inaugural scholars, Isaline Blew (I.B.) Horner, Caroline Rhys Davids, and Mabel Bode wrote during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and “paved the way for textual study on women in early Indian Buddhism.”¹⁰ Collett writes of these three scholars as “outstanding, both in their individual theorizations and through the sheer fact of the inauguration of and contributions to the Buddhism and gender debate in Western scholarship during the Victorian era” but states that their works interpreted Buddhist women “through a veil of Western assumptions.”¹¹ She focuses in particular on Rhys Davids, whose personal views greatly impacted her textual interpretation. Collett says:

⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” 17.

⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” 17.

⁹ Derris, “Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering,” 62-63.

¹⁰ Alice Collett, “Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 56.

¹¹ Collett, “Buddhism and Gender,” 70.

Rhys Davids likely felt a personal resonance with these ancient Asian women who renounced the domestic roles expected of them by family and society at large in favor of a life pursuit of religious freedom. Thus, in seeking to construct these women as rational, intelligent, and autonomous she was in effect constructing them in her own image.¹²

Also relevant to Rhys Davids, Horner, and Bode's methodologies and understandings of Buddhism was their positioning of the Buddha as a feminist and the women's order as fundamentally feminist itself.¹³ Collett even traces Rhys Davids' views on Buddhism and gender throughout her life and notes that as Rhys Davids' own views changed, so did her interpretations of Buddhist women and nuns. In her early life, Rhys Davids—then Caroline Foley—imagined renunciant women fashioned after feminist icons of her day. She read in their stories the bold renunciation of domestic roles as wives and mothers in order to stand as the intellectual equals of men. She wrote of one renouncer: “she...laid down all social prestige, all domestic success, as a mother, wife, daughter, queen, or housekeeper, and gained the austerer joys of an asexual rational being, walking with wise men in recognized intellectual equality on higher levels of thought.”¹⁴ Collett notes a shift once Rhys Davids had been married for many years and had three children: “Marriage, it appears, rather blunted and dulled her earlier feminist instincts and, by the time she wrote the introduction to her translation of the *Therigatha*, she almost appeared to be apologizing for publishing it prior to publishing the verses of the elder monks.”¹⁵ It is at this point that scholarship in Buddhism wanes.

Second-wave feminism reinvigorated the study of Buddhism after a twenty-six year hiatus. Collett identifies the work of Bimala Churn Law which exemplifies the scholarship of the era. Law “mined certain Buddhist texts and recorded (all) the negative comments made about women he found there. From this, he created a picture of women as despicable creatures.”¹⁶ Certainly, negative depictions of women do exist in Buddhist texts, but “Law took comments out of context and used them carelessly to build up a one-sided view of women.”¹⁷ He ignored positive valuations of women

¹² Collett, “Buddhism and Gender,” 73.

¹³ Collett, “Buddhism and Gender,” 74.

¹⁴ Foley, “Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation,” 348 quoted in Collett, “Buddhism and Gender,” 72.

¹⁵ Collett, “Buddhism and Gender,” 77.

¹⁶ Collett, “Buddhism and Gender,” 70.

¹⁷ Collett, “Buddhism and Gender,” 78.

in favor of misogynistic material. More of the same work followed, renewing interest in Buddhism but maintaining the same “textual dynamic...[and] status quo.”¹⁸

Collett suggests that books like Liz Wilson’s *Charming Cadavers* participate in a similar project. While she lauds the work as a piece of deft scholarship, Collett also notes that it “overemphasizes the negative portrayals of women she finds and essentially extrapolates from her sources to construct an overarching view of women in early and medieval Buddhism that is one-sided and unbalanced.”¹⁹ Negative portrayals of women certainly exist in Buddhism and can be discussed in scholarly work, but such interpretations should not be presented as if they apply broadly to the entire tradition. Such an approach simplistically reduces and denies the diversity of Buddhist material. Perhaps in an effort to draw attention to misogynistic elements of Buddhist texts, scholars ultimately reinscribe these elements as prevalent, integral parts of Buddhist history, thus ignoring equally prevalent material that rejects such misogynistic conclusions.

Collett cautions scholars against essentializing a vast and diverse corpus of material. She argues for the importance of situating a text, and thus an interpretation, historically and culturally—such that one interpretation cannot come to speak for the entirety of Buddhist tradition. Derris suggests another vital element to interpretive work is a vision for the future and an awareness of the implications of one’s scholarship. Derris reaches this conclusion in her response to Ohnuma’s influential, but problematic, scholarship on Buddhist perspectives concerning mothers and mothering.²⁰ Ohnuma’s scholarship draws on a wide range of texts across traditions, languages, cultures, and times to ultimately make a case that Buddhism, broadly, understood mothers in a uniformly negative way. Through analysis of the Buddha’s two mothers—his biological mother, Maya, and Mahapajapati, his aunt who raised him—Ohnuma concludes that Mahapajapati is the bad mother to Maya’s good mother. Maya is the good mother because she dies early in the Buddha’s life which prevents him accruing debt to her, while Mahapajapati lives a long life during which the Buddha accrues much debt for her care. Ohnuma argues that this debt to the mother creates problems

¹⁸ Collett, “Buddhism and Gender,” 80.

¹⁹ Collett, “Buddhism and Gender,” 82.

²⁰ Reiko Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

for the Buddha in his capacity as a religious teacher; it prevents him from establishing the monastic order as he would have liked and influences how he conducts himself in relation to his religious community. Ohnuma ignores material that elevates the mother in favor of material that denigrates; the implications of this interpretive choice are evident. Derris writes “we are driven to a misogynistic conclusion of harrowing proportions: the best thing a mother can do for her child’s spiritual future is die.”²¹ In so explicitly spelling out the conclusion Ohnuma draws, Derris invites us to question whether this is a world we would like to inhabit, where a mother’s value to her child is greatest when she is dead. I will return to this line of inquiry in the final chapter of this thesis. In order to avoid such harrowing conclusions, Derris asks us to “summon our most ethical selves” to foster “global discourse seeking justice and well-being for all” through interpretative work using the feminist-ethical hermeneutic.²²

The Texts

In this thesis, I work primarily with two relevant texts in the Pali Canon of the Theravada Tradition, the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana*. They go alongside the *Theragatha* and *Thera-Apadana*, the complementary texts for monks. These texts are all preserved in the fifth subsection of the Sutta Pitaka, the *Khuddaka-nikaya*. We may understand the *Khuddaka-nikaya* as a collection of miscellaneous texts that did not otherwise fit into the preceding four nikayas of the Pali Canon. Walters suggests that the *Khuddaka-nikaya* is the final addition to the Pali Canon.²³ It thus comprises both older and newer texts. The first text I treat here—and the most well-known—is the *Therigatha*²⁴ (verses of the *theris*, or elder nuns). It is generally agreed upon that the *Therigatha* verses were composed over many centuries, beginning at the end of the sixth century until the third century BCE, and were committed to writing around the first century BCE. Within the *Therigatha* are seventy-three poems, or *gathas*, attributed to seventy-one individual nuns. They range in length from a single verse to a final “great chapter” of seventy-five verses.

²¹ Derris, “Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering,” 76.

²² Derris, “Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering,” 63.

²³ Jonathan Walters, “Wives of the Saints: Marriage and Kamma in the Path to Arahantship,” in *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*, ed. Alice Collett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 166.

²⁴ I use Hallisey’s translation. Charles Hallisey, trans., *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

The *Theri-Apadana*, the lesser known and later of the two texts, contains the *apadanas*, or past-life narratives, of forty *theris*. John Strong suggests we understand them as karmic biographies which chart the trajectory of karma from one lifetime to the next.²⁵ Walters argues that the *Theri-Apadana*, composed in the post-Aśokan era around the second to first centuries BCE, responded to a need for new soteriological paradigms.²⁶ Buddhism at the time was shifting from a renunciant religion to a universal religion comprised of both renunciants and laity, but relevant texts held as their audiences only those who had renounced and were near the end of the spiritual path; the *Apadanas*, however, in sharing the past lives of prominent nuns and monks, provided insight for those just beginning the path to enlightenment. They were paradigms the laity could emulate—paradigms which suggested even relatively minor acts like donating robes could begin karmic journeys that concluded as renowned monastics. The *Theri-Apadana* achieved this feat by weaving the verses from the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha* “into elaborated stories about the monks and nuns who are believed to have uttered them.”²⁷

While the *Apadana* collection has been studied sparingly, it was only recently translated in its entirety in 2017 by Walters.²⁸ The *Therigatha*, on the other hand, has been widely studied and translated. While some scholars laud the *Therigatha* as a work of feminism, others object to the use of this term to describe the collection of nuns’ verses. Bhikkhu Analayo warns that feminist scholars have a tendency to sing the praises of the *Therigatha* and ascribe inaccurate qualities (such as radical feminism) onto them.²⁹ He agrees with Bernard Faure that such an approach is culturally blind and tends to side with Nona Olivia, who writes that analysis of the *Therigatha* often over-emphasizes gender-related issues and runs “the risk of ignoring the doctrinal points the stanzas intend to convey.”³⁰

²⁵ John Strong, “A Family Quest: The Buddha, Yasodhara, and Rahula in the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya,” in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Juliane Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 114.

²⁶ Jonathan Walters, “Gotami’s Story,” in *Buddhism in Practice: Abridged Version*, ed. David S. Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 107, 111 and Walters, “Wives of the Saints,” 162.

²⁷ Walters, “Gotami’s Story,” 107.

²⁸ Jonathan Walters, trans., “The Legends of the Theris,” in *Legends of the Buddhist Saints: Apadanapali* (Washington: Whitman College, 2017).

²⁹ Bhikkhu Analayo, “Beautiful Eyes Seen with Insight as Bereft of Beauty: Subha Theri and Her Male Counterpart in Ekottarika-agama,” *The Sati Journal* (2014): 39.

³⁰ Analayo, “Beautiful Eyes,” 40.

On the other hand, the *Therigatha* (and the *Theri-Apadana*) contains material that some may find deeply inspirational and in accordance with modern understandings of feminism. Matty Weingast's recent translation of the *Therigatha* takes more creative liberties to lend the nuns' verses further mass appeal. Take, for example, the nun Mettika's verses. Hallisey's more traditional translation reads:

Even though I am suffering, weak, my youth gone,
still I got on, leaning on a stick, climbing the mountain.
I threw off my outer robe and turned my bowl over,
I sit on a rock, my heart is freed.³¹

Weingast's translation, however, invites us to imagine what brings Mettika to the mountain and how her personal history is involved in her experience of Buddhism. He interprets the verses:

I know my older sister passed this way.
At the top of the mountain,
I spread my outer robe
where perhaps
she once spread hers.
I set down my bowl—
and there was her staff.
The twin of my own.
Using both staffs,
I lowered myself down
and leaned back
against a large
gray rock.
I let go of the staffs—
and my hands were empty.
The mountain went on holding me.
Then it let me go.
My staff I also now leave behind.
Just in case you're ever passing this way.³²

In this vivid translation, we can picture Mettika arriving at the top of a mountain with the knowledge that her sister had once been at that very same spot. She sees her sister's staff and uses both to lower herself to the ground. She relates that the mountain held her and then let her go. This may be a metaphor for her death—a meaningful death perhaps in the same location as her sister's. She concludes by telling us that she has left her own staff there, just in case we ever pass the same way.

³¹ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 29-30.

³² Matty Weingast, *The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2020), 29.

A staple of Weingast's interpretive style is the creation of families who ordain together. His other creative translations include the removal of the Buddha from dialectic exchanges such that statements made by the Buddha are presented as a voice—perhaps an inner-voice within the nuns themselves. He creates a network of women who go forth with their sisters and mothers. His work can be more easily received by those with no prior knowledge of Buddhism and he does so by reimagining the nuns. In the introduction to his work, Weingast states: “These women were doing much more than creating beautiful poetry—they were changing the world. Shaving their heads and putting on robes was not simply a sign of spiritual dedication. It was an act of revolution.”³³ Weingast adopts the idea that the women's order was a feminist collective and interprets in ways he finds personally compelling.

For the purposes of this thesis, however, I am not interested in participating in interpretive work that attempts to portray these nuns as feminists. They were not interested in overthrowing the androcentric and patriarchal structure of the *sangha*, nor were they interested in overthrowing householder society gender roles. Instead, these nuns (and those who wrote/compiled their verses) were trying to create a space for women in Buddhist tradition—a space for laywomen to earn merit and a space for those who wanted ordination to have it. As I analyze in my first chapter, many nuns fought for access to ordination—to *join* the monastic order, not to overthrow it. Throughout this thesis, I wish to examine what women's agency may have looked like in the early Buddhist community, but I am not interested in mapping modern senses of women's agency onto those actions. I adhere to both elements Derris highlights as she describes the feminist-ethical hermeneutic: I situate these texts historically and culturally, and I maintain an awareness of the current situation of women in Buddhism and the future implications of my interpretative work.

We should be especially cautious of secular liberal feminist interpretations that propose an exclusive mode of being “feminist,” especially when considering such ancient texts. It is the privileging of a modern mode of feminism that causes the so-called bad nun Thullananda to be so praised by Ohnuma, who calls her a “protofeminist.”³⁴ Thullananda (Skt. Sthulananda) appears in

³³ Weingast, *The First Free Women*, xxii.

³⁴ Karen Lang, “Reimagining Buddhist Women in India,” in *Buddhist Feminisms and Femininities*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 33.

Vinaya, or monastic regulatory, texts as part of a gang of six troublemaking nuns (complementary to a gang of six troublemaking monks). She often adopts a stick-it-to-the-man attitude of resistance and freely does and says what she wishes. These actions often resulted in the Buddha putting forth additional monastic regulations for all nuns. Damchö Diana Finnegan argues that Thullananda's actions reveal a selfishness that affects the women's order as a whole and she is appropriately censured for her behavior. She says of one such censuring that "Mahaprajapati [the leader of the nun's order is] aware of what Sthulananda apparently [does] not see: that her actions as an individual woman seizing opportunities for herself have an impact on what others then expect of monastic women as a group."³⁵ Her actions, while full of resistance, undercut the value of the women's monastic order and ultimately threaten its esteem in the eyes of the householders who sustain the monastic community with alms.

My interpretations do not privilege this singular mode of being feminist or being influential as a woman. Not all feminism must be of the sort that Thullananda evokes and we cannot treat her as a feminist icon while ignoring other women who make remarkable, albeit less shocking, actions. I bring the same awareness Finnegan cautions to my analysis of the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana*. I do not attempt to portray these nuns as feminists, but rather evaluate their stories in culturally significant terms. I argue that there are many powerful stories about influential, inspirational women within these collections and their actions should stand apart from any modern connotations of feminism. Their stories can be evaluated for what they are: examples of women actively trying to create a place for themselves and others in the Buddhist dispensation.

An Aspiration³⁶

Derris concludes: "I want to read not only to describe realities but also to bring about change in ways that promote justice...my hope is that [such interpretations] will contribute to the diminishing of suffering."³⁷ She draws our attention, in part, to the issue of full ordination for Buddhist nuns and the fraught role of motherhood as Ohnuma presents it. The feminist-ethical hermeneutic does not idealize

³⁵ Damchö Diana Finnegan, "For the Sake of Women, Too: Ethics and Gender in the Narratives of the Mulasarvasticada Vinaya" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin at Madison, 2009), 322.

³⁶ Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 79.

³⁷ Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 79.

the Buddhist past or suggest that misogynistic portrayals of women do not exist. Instead, interpretations using the feminist-ethical hermeneutic maintain an awareness of the historio-cultural context in which these texts were produced, while also maintaining an awareness of the consequences scholarship may have on living, dynamic religious tradition. Scholarship which emphasizes only misogynistic portrayals of women, while ignoring positive portrayals, does a disservice to the women still striving for a place in Buddhism.

In this thesis, I attempt to adhere to Derris' aspiration that we read in ways that promote justice. To this end, I first examine various stories about Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's aunt and foster mother and the founder of the first order of Buddhist nuns. I next turn to cases of parallelism between the *Therigatha/Theri-Apadana* and the *Theragatha/Thera-Apadana*, in other words between the lineage of nuns and the lineage of monks. Collett argues that the *Theri-Apadana*, in particular, is written to create a history for the nuns' lineage that parallels that of the monks' lineage. I argue, per Collett, that such parallelisms creatively legitimize the women's monastic order and women's participation in Buddhism more broadly. Finally, I will make a case that there exists a rich and unique women's experience of Buddhism within the stories of the *Therigatha* and the *Theri-Apadana*. It is my hope that through reading with justice in mind, we may as Lang writes "reclaim these long-dead women as part of our own human history" and afford them their rightful place as shapers of early Buddhism.³⁸

³⁸ Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 79 and Lang, "Reimagining Buddhist Women," 59.

Mahapajapati Gotami: The Feminist-Ethical Hermeneutic in Practice

To best illustrate the feminist-ethical hermeneutic in practice, I will turn to the stories of Mahapajapati Gotami. Gotami is a prominent figure in Buddhist tradition both as the Buddha's aunt and foster mother and as the first Buddhist nun. Her story is an important one and has been the subject of many scholarly endeavors. Ohnuma's study of Buddhism and mothers heavily featured stories about Gotami; it was this scholarship that prompted Derris to develop the feminist-ethical hermeneutic. Pascale Engelmajer has offered analysis of how Buddhist soteriology is brought to bear on motherhood.¹ Wendy Garling's recent publication centers on stories of the women in the Buddha's life.² She presents lesser-known versions or "forgotten stories" from Sanskrit and Pali Mainstream³ Buddhist traditions, the contents of which tell a complex and compelling story of women's involvement spanning the Buddha's lifetime. She seeks to highlight the involvement of women and return to traditional accounts the "feminizing detail [that] has been stripped [from it]."⁴ On a different note, Walters ultimately compares Gotami with Gotama Buddha and suggests that Gotami is the buddha for women.⁵

Gotami championed women's involvement at the highest levels of Buddhism, yet in some Buddhist schools she is all but unknown. In Tibetan Buddhism, the stories of Gotami (and the other nuns I will be exploring throughout this thesis) go relatively untranslated and unstudied. As we read the stories of Gotami and other prominent nuns, we should remember that we are not simply reading religious history. We are reading our own modern era. Derris reminds us that the feminist-ethical hermeneutic "needs to account for the complexity of historical contexts but also recognize Buddhist texts as part of living traditions with futures that may be shaped by interpretation."⁶ These stories—and our interpretations of them—have the potential to infuse the lived experiences of Buddhists worldwide. For example, in Tibetan Buddhism, women are not offered full bhikkhuni ordination

¹ Pascale Engelmajer, *Women in Pali Buddhism: Walking the Spiritual Paths in Mutual Dependence* (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2014).

² Wendy Garling, *Stars at Dawn: Forgotten Stories of the Women in Buddha's Life* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2016).

³ Theravada Buddhism is the only remaining Mainstream Buddhist school. Their religious texts were written in the Pali language. They are the only Mainstream Buddhist school to write in Pali; other Mainstream schools wrote in Sanskrit.

⁴ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 18.

⁵ Walters, "Gotami's Story," 111.

⁶ Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 61.

which would see them occupying the same station as male bhikkhus. Ordination statuses are marked by the number of precepts (Pali: *patimokkha*, Skt: *pratimoksa*) a monastic follows.⁷ However, as bhikkhuni status is withheld from women in the Tibetan tradition, a nun who ordained as a novice will remain a novice even after decades of practice. In a modern context such as this, the stories of legendary, fully ordained nuns matter. When we read, we must not only think of the far gone nuns whose stories live within these texts, but the thousands of nuns whose stories have yet to be written or whose stories cannot be written. To this end, I will analyze four key aspects of Mahapajapati Gotami's life: (1) becoming the Buddha's mother, (2) the Great Departure, (3) seeking women's ordination, and (4) *parinibbana* or the great going out.

Who Will Be My Mother⁸: Becoming the Buddha's Mother

Mahapajapati grew up as the eldest of seven sisters, the youngest of which was Maya. Accounts vary on the status of their father—whether he was a king or a wealthy merchant. They similarly vary on their mother's name; some accounts call her Lumbini, perhaps for whom Lumbini Grove—the site of the Buddha's birth—was created and named. When King Suddhodana, likely a relative from another familial branch, arrived to choose a wife, he left with all seven sisters. Garling tells us that he kept Mahapajapati and Maya for himself and gave the middle five sisters to his brothers. She cites a Sinhalese version of this story, which describes Mahapajapati and Maya as “princesses...beautiful as [celestial] queens; no intoxicating liquor ever touched their lips; even in play they never told an untruth; they would not take life, even to destroy insects; and they observed all the precepts.”⁹ It is clear that both sisters are renowned for their beauty, piety, and grace.

Maya became the chief queen and Mahapajapati a junior queen. The *Lalitavistara* tells us that prior to the Buddha's conception, Maya entreats Suddhodana to allow her to become celibate. He agrees and, though she doesn't ask, he too becomes celibate in preparation for the conception and birth. It is worth noting that while the legends are fairly consistent on the idea of an immaculate conception, through which the Buddha entered Maya's side as a pure white elephant,

⁷ Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1996).

⁸ Title borrowed from Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 63.

⁹ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 23.

nowhere in any legend of the Buddha is there a suggestion that Maya was a virgin mother. The notion of virginity as a desirable or enobling attribute in women is virtually nonexistent in Buddhist religious literature. A vow of chastity or celibacy, on the other hand, as taken by nuns and monks (and sometimes lay practitioners) in many Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious traditions, is commonly found as a meaningful aspect of religious life. This is the step Maya takes to prepare for her pregnancy and for which she entreats understanding from her husband.¹⁰

Maya and Siddhodana take on this austerity throughout Maya's pregnancy, perhaps indicating their reverence for the fetal Buddha. Moreover, Maya shuns men and surrounds herself instead with women. We can assume her older sister Mahapajapati is among these women.

When her father learns that Maya is far along in her pregnancy, he asks Siddhodana to allow Maya to return home. Siddhodana agrees and arrangements are made for Maya to return to her parents' home and ultimately give birth in Lumbini's Grove.¹¹ While the traditional, brahmanic legends are adamant that the Buddha's birth in Lumbini's Grove was happenstance and that Maya simply didn't make it home in time, Garling affords the story more intentionality. As she has already established, Lumbini's Grove was perhaps named for Maya's own mother. Garling wonders if this grove may have been the site of Maya and Mahapajapati's own births or "where Maya and her friends played as young girls or where she was later married."¹² This location may have held particular sentimental value to Maya.

Garling also posits its practical, sacred, and ritually powerful value. Lumbini's Grove may have held special significance for women, particularly mothers. Garling suggests Lumbini's Grove was a sacred site of ancient mother goddess worship where a

sacred shrine within the grove would be a specific tree worshipped as the goddess herself, their mutual fertility and vitality symbolically merging as one. This primal mother goddess brooked no consort and could be as fierce and gruesome as she was protective and beneficent.¹³

It was here, in the presence of women—her sister Mahapajapati, the nature goddesses, and her female attendants—that Maya gives birth. With one hand, she grips a branch of the shala tree (the personification of the fertility goddess). The goddess lowers her boughs to support the laboring

¹⁰ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 38.

¹¹ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 49. Garling tells us that this was common in matriarchal traditions in ancient India because women in the family were considered best able to care for the new mother and infant during the birth and post-birth process

¹² Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 46.

¹³ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 50.

Maya. Garling says that this moment is also the first mention we have of Mahapajapati since she is mentioned as a co-wife. Mahapajapati closely attends her sister; early Buddhist art shows Mahapajapati “tenderly supporting her sister on the left side, holding her by the waist.”¹⁴ It is thusly, supported by a feminine nature goddess and her eldest sister, that Maya gives birth to the infant Siddhattha. Suddhodana is quickly summoned to Lumbini’s Grove where he and Maya share a final conversation and arrangements are made for the infant Siddhattha to be returned to their palace in Kapilavastu.

From this point onward, Maya essentially disappears from the narrative tradition. Garling wonders if Suddhodana was summoned to Lumbini’s Grove because Maya was dying. She states:

Maya simply vanishes from the storyline...No lamentations or funeral processions, just deafening silence. It’s not hard to imagine how sad the occasion must have been and how conflicted the Shakyas must have felt—on the one hand, joy at the birth of their beautiful prince and heir to the throne, and on the other, abject grief at the death of their beloved queen...It’s not reported that Maya ever nursed her son, but most sources tell us that she held him.¹⁵

Rationalizations abound concerning Maya’s death—including that her death spared her the pain of Siddhattha’s eventual ordination or that she had to die because one who had carried a buddha could never again engage in sexual pleasures or bear another in her womb. What each of these accounts fail to provide is a natural explanation; they skirt around the issue of Maya’s very human death. What they neglect to say explicitly is that Maya likely died in childbirth or as a result of complications during childbirth. Of all texts that concern Maya’s death, it is only the *Abhinishkramamasutra* which provides a natural explanation. “The Prince Royal now being seven days old, his mother the Queen Maya, being unable to regain her strength or recover the joy she experienced whilst the child dwelt in her womb, gradually succumbed to her weakness and died.”¹⁶

We learn that meanwhile in Kapilavastu, Suddhodana has convened a council to decide who will care for the now-motherless infant Siddhattha. They determine that Mahapajapati is best suited for the role. According to the *Buddhacarita*, she “equaled [Maya] in majesty and did not fall below her in affection and tenderness, [and] brought up the prince, who was like a scion of the gods, as if he

¹⁴ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 53.

¹⁵ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 55.

¹⁶ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 60.

were her own son.”¹⁷ We are even told that Mahapajapati so loved the infant Buddha that she gave her own infant son, only slightly older than the Buddha, to a wet nurse so that she could nurse the infant Buddha herself.¹⁸

Throughout this thesis, I repeatedly highlight the humanity of women in these stories and question how their humanity is brought to bear on these narratives. It is the humanity of the women whose stories feature here that makes them especially compelling heroines of Buddhism. If we examine Mahapajapati as a human character at this point in the narrative, we see a picture of overwhelming and unimaginable grief. Mahapajapati entered the palace with her younger sister at her side; she literally supported Maya when Maya gave birth and was likely with her when she died. Her life is also full of immeasurable joy; she had just given birth to her own son, Nanda. We may imagine that she is also happy to care for her nephew Siddhattha, but this care only came through the traumatic loss of her sister—a loss surely felt throughout the Sakyan kingdom. Yet out of immense love for Maya, Mahapajapati agrees to mother her sister’s son. We see a woman of strength and compassion.

Yet not all interpretations of Mahapajapati are so generous. Ohnuma throws Mahapajapati and her sister Maya into competition. She goes so far as to “describe Mahapajapati as an overarching symbol of *displaced, leftover women*—women who become problematic once their men have departed on spiritual quest, and women who do not conveniently die, as Maya did, but instead continue to serve as living reminders of everything the son still owes to the mother, despite having renounced all familial ties.”¹⁹ Ohnuma sees Mahapajapati as a woman whose needs must be constantly accommodated by her living male kin. She cites a number of instances that showcase Mahapajapati’s status as a “leftover” woman: she is leftover in the sense that she is the “older spinster sister” in Siddhodana and Maya’s marriage and she is leftover in the sense that she did not die before Siddhodana “as a good wife in India always should.”²⁰ Ohnuma further asserts that Mahapajapati routinely complicates and disrupts the lives of her family by mere virtue of her

¹⁷ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 62.

¹⁸ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 62-63.

¹⁹ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 113.

²⁰ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 113.

existence. According to Ohnuma, Mahapajapati's status as the eldest (but unmarried) sister meant that Suddhodana had to marry her if he also wanted to marry Maya.²¹ The legends are not as uniform as Ohnuma presents them; Garling cites a Chinese translation of a Sanskrit text which suggests that Mahapajapati was actually Suddhodana's first choice for a wife.²² Ohnuma continues that Mahapajapati's "very existence complicates the ideal marriage between Suddhodhana and Maya" and that her gross dependency on the men in her life (Suddhodana and later the Buddha himself) "results in other women like her being allowed to invade the Samgha en masse."²³ This is an invasion not only by Mahapajapati, but by all the women in her assembly, whom Ohnuma describes as similarly "leftover" women.²⁴ In other words, a female order—particularly one composed of older mothers—is unwelcome. It is an invasion.

While these characterizations are disturbing, it is Ohnuma's labeling of Maya's death as "convenient" which so troubles Derris, who says:

This is the logical conclusion of what Ohnuma sees in Buddhist literature of the good mother Mahamaya (the Buddha's biological mother), whose death ten days after her birth frees the Buddha from accruing further debt, against the bad mother Mahapajapati whose ongoing life leaves an unwanted "bill for services performed." We are driven to a misogynistic conclusion of harrowing proportions: the best thing a mother can do for her child's spiritual future is die.²⁵

Derris' words hit powerfully at the heart of what is so unpalatable about Ohnuma's conclusions—that a mother ought to die for the sake of her child's spiritual future. Ohnuma's rigid characterization of Maya as the good, short-lived mother and Mahapajapati as the problematic, long-standing mother forces an unnecessary competition between the sisters. However, alternative interpretations do not necessitate the sisters being in conflict. Engelmajer rejects Ohnuma's assertion that Maya and Mahapajapati represent good and bad mothers. Instead, she suggests that the duality of the sisters indicates a concern for the soteriology of women, specifically mothers. She says:

While Ohnuma...argues that [Maya's] death just a few days after the Bodhisatta's birth was a convenient way of wiping out the debt that the Buddha owed his mother, I...suggest that

²¹ Ohnuma mentions Maya and Mahapajapati's other five sisters, whom Suddhodana also married. He gave the middle five sisters to his brothers and kept Maya and Mahapajapati for himself. Ohnuma does not offer an explanation as to why Suddhodana couldn't also give Mahapajapati to one of his brothers. It seems that he *chose* to keep her as one of his wives.

²² Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 23.

²³ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 114.

²⁴ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 114.

²⁵ Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 76.

this death may provide a soteriological model for women who die in childbirth. Maternal mortality has been an inevitable reality for women for all of human history. Today, in India, maternal mortality is still one of the leading causes of death for women of child-bearing age, and it was certainly an even more frequent occurrence in ancient India. The text, with the Buddha's mother's death, is not simply evacuating a socio-cultural issue, but it is addressing an important question: what happens soteriologically to women who die in childbirth?²⁶

If Maya represents a soteriological path for those mothers who die in childbirth, then Mahapajapati represents a soteriological path for mothers who do not die in childbirth. Far from being competing versions of mothers or the diametrically opposed good/bad mother, Maya and Mahapajapati work together to comprehensively provide a soteriological model for all mothers—those who die and those who don't.

The Great Departure

There is rather minimal information about Siddhattha's childhood and adolescence. One story, that of the prophecy regarding Siddhattha's future, is critical to the Buddha biography. Shortly after Siddhattha's birth and Maya's untimely death, Suddhodana receives a prophecy that his son will either be a great king or a great spiritual leader. Suddhodana evidently prefers a royal path for his only legitimate son and successor. In order to ensure that Siddhattha would take his place as king, Suddhodana sees to it that his son grows up without a knowledge of suffering. He will only know a life of pleasure. He is gifted a great harem of the most beautiful and talented women in the kingdom, and Suddhodana effectively orders what Garling calls a "benevolent retain[ment]" within the walls of the palace such that he will not be privy to suffering.²⁷

Nonetheless, Siddhattha's prophesied future takes its course and he begins contemplating philosophical issues. Suddhodana grows frustrated by his son's refusal to indulge in his harem any longer and the two engage in a frank debate over women and the "trappings of worldly existence." Suddhodana evidently leaves the conversation in tears. Garling cites the *Mahavastu*:

Finally abandoning the debate in anguish, the king turns back to the consorts. After all, it is their job to keep the prince happily preoccupied. As professional in the arts of love, their reputations are on the line. Repeatedly the king cajoles them to intensify their seductive

²⁶ Engelmajer, *Women in Pali Buddhism*, 89.

²⁷ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 69.

efforts: ‘Divert, delight and amuse the prince well with dance and song and music so that he may find pleasure at home’.²⁸

Their efforts, while impressive, are still in vain. Suddhodana’s endeavors to keep his son away from suffering fail. While tradition would have us believe that Siddhattha grew up with no knowledge of suffering or death, Garling is apt to point out that “surely Maya’s death at his birth was a truth he lived with his entire life.”²⁹

In his late twenties, Siddhattha decides to leave the palace. Accounts vary, with some involving the intervention of gods to combat Suddhodana’s strong will to keep his son leading a life of pleasure and satisfaction. Siddhattha and his charioteer venture out four times. During the first, second, and third times, Siddhattha sees three of the four signs: old age, sickness, and death. He is evidently so troubled by these sights that he returns to the harem—what Garling refers to as “carnal addictions...as if taking refuge in what is familiar and comforting after a frightening experience.”³⁰ On his final excursion he sees the fourth Sign, an ascetic mendicant. Upon witnessing this sight, he announces his intention to renounce royal life and seek enlightenment. Suddhodana begs his son to stay, to no avail.

It is at this point that Mahapajapati returns to the narratives, as she is largely absent from stories of Siddhattha’s adolescence and early adulthood. She and Suddhodana work in tandem to ensure their son does not leave the palace; while Suddhodana mobilizes his guards to attend more carefully to their prince, it falls to Mahapajapati to “mobilize the consorts, rousing them to new heights of seductive powers.”³¹ Garling suggests that Mahapajapati, as queen, must be keenly aware of the implications for the kingdom—that the Sakyans would lose their prince, their heir, and that the enduring royal lineage would perish. In another story, Mahapajapati experiences a prophetic dream in which she sees Siddhattha as a pure white water buffalo. She recounts: “The bull bellowed so sweetly, and ran out of Kapilavastu, taking the path his heart was bent on.”³² In another variation, she dreams a white water buffalo “in the midst of the city going on in a wistful way bellowing and

²⁸ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 113.

²⁹ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 112.

³⁰ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 118.

³¹ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 119.

³² Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 121.

crying, whilst no one in the place was able to get before it to stop it or hinder it.”³³ Her prophetic dreams prove true when Siddhattha wakes one night and sees his harem women appearing like corpses in a charnel ground. We might imagine that this is the final straw for Siddhattha. He has been troubled by suffering and drawn back in to a life of pleasure so many times, but he can no longer remain in his royal, luxurious life. He escapes Kapilavastu.

In the aftermath, we see a kingdom and a palace in anguish. Siddhattha’s wife, Yasodhara, is angry and distraught. Mahapajapati comforts her and Suddhodana over the loss of their beloved son. Despite the finality of this act, Suddhodana is undeterred. Garling cites several Sanskrit stories which see Suddhodana dispatching “two ministers (or a minister or the head priest) to find Siddhattha in the forest and bring him home. Siddhattha replies to their requests for his return: ‘The sun may fall to the earth, Mount Himavant may lose its firmness, but I will not return to my family as worldly man who has no seen the final truth and whose senses are drawn toward the objects of pleasure. I would enter a blazing fire, but I would not enter my home with my goal unattained.’”³⁴

This story is complex, with many in the royal family and the palace rising to the occasion of keeping Siddhattha happy and in the confinements of the palace. We see all members of Siddhattha’s family participating in his “benevolent retainment” yet Ohnuma looks at this story differently. Of Mahapajapati’s mental state following the departure of the Buddha, Ohnuma writes that Mahapajapati is the epitome of a grieving mother driven mad with grief; she even goes so far as to suggest that “Mahapajapati’s grief over the departure of her son has thus reduced her to the state of a helpless and pitiable animal.”³⁵ She recounts how Mahapajapati, fearful of the Buddha’s imminent departure, instructs the harem and guards to keep him in the palace at all costs. Ohnuma continues: “If *samsara* is indeed a “man trap” and “women are the agents of incarceration,” then the prospect of abandonment by her son has driven Mahapajapati to become the very embodiment of the clutches of *samsara*.”³⁶ Ohnuma names Mahapajapati as the decisive actor in ensuring the Buddha does not leave home. Ohnuma mentions nothing of Suddhodana playing the same role. We cannot condemn

³³ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 122.

³⁴ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 154.

³⁵ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 90.

³⁶ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 90.

one parent for actions both commit, yet Ohnuma's criticism is aimed only at Mahapajapati. Garling suggests that Siddhodana stubbornly struggles against his son's destiny as a future-buddha.³⁷ Indeed, it is Siddhodana who ensures that the Buddha does not witness old age, illness, and death, thus setting up the well-known story of the Buddha defying his father, leaving the palace, and witnessing the four signs. Ohnuma mentions none of this and instead presents Mahapajapati as a crazed woman desperately trying to keep her son within her clutches.

The mother/son relationship is a classic image of attachment that permeates Buddhist literature. The attachment of a mother exemplifies more general attachment within *samsara*. Ohnuma writes that "while mother-love as a symbol is exalted, mother-love as an actual entity is ultimately devalued and undermined."³⁸ These are attitudes I will treat in my final chapter, but they are worth a mention here. The image Ohnuma paints of Mahapajapati exists within a larger frame of attitudes toward mothers. Exemplifying this attitude, Ohnuma decries Mahapajapati for her clinging behavior yet ignores the stories that depict Siddhodana also desperately trying to prevent his son from leaving the palace. Rather than attend to the complex emotions and relationships of the characters involved, Ohnuma prefers to characterize Mahapajapati as a frantic, self-interested mother afraid of being abandoned.

If we return once again to the humanity of these stories, we see a very different picture. Garling casts Mahapajapati as the dutiful representative of the kingdom, who knows the consequences of the heir-apparent abandoning the kingdom and his birthright. She is also his mother, and we can only imagine the emotions Mahapajapati must be feeling during this tumultuous experience. We must remember that the Great Departure was not a single moment; it was the culmination of a long and tense struggle that spanned much of the Buddha's early life in the palace. We might imagine Mahapajapati as a loving, worried mother. Nearly thirty years ago, her sister Maya died and she was entrusted to care for her nephew. She nursed Siddhattha and swore to protect him as her own. The same son she loves and cares for, who had led a life of luxury, expresses a wish to intentionally become homeless and beg for his food. Mahapajapati, who has also led a life of relative

³⁷ Garling, *Stars at Dawn*, 69.

³⁸ Reiko Ohnuma, "Mother-Love and Mother-Grief: South Asian Buddhist Variations on a Theme," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 95.

luxury, must be terrified for her son's future and safety. Finally, in a dream, she realizes that her son will leave and there is very little she can do to prevent it. She adopts an air of acceptance. This acceptance is unique to Mahapajapati; Suddhodana does not display the same acceptance. In fact, we see him continuing to send messengers to Siddhattha to beg him to return. If anyone is unable to let go, it is Suddhodana. Mahapajapati resigns herself to their collective fate and sets to work keeping the palace and her family together. She does not pine after her son as Ohnuma suggests, but instead focuses on caring for Suddhodana and Siddhattha's wife, Yasodhara.

Seeking Ordination

Many years after leaving the palace, Siddhattha attains enlightenment and embarks on his spiritual journey to teach the Dhamma. In the early years following his enlightenment, Mahapajapati—on behalf of herself and five hundred Sakyan women—approaches her son who is in residence near Kapilavastu where he grew up. She bows to him and asks him to establish a female monastic order. She says: “Lord, it were well that women should obtain the going forth from home into homelessness in this dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder.”³⁹ The Buddha, rejecting her request, replies: “Be careful, Gotami, of the going forth of women from home into homelessness in this dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder.”⁴⁰ Undeterred, Gotami asks a second and third time. She is refused twice more. Gotami, “afflicted, grieved, with a tearful face and crying” bows to the Buddha and circumambulates him before returning home.

The Buddha then departs with his male monastics for Vesali, but they do not go alone; Gotami and the Sakyan women shear off their hair, don monastic robes, and follow after the Buddha all the way to Vesali. With “her feet swollen, her limbs covered with dust, with tearful face, and crying, [Gotami] stood outside”⁴¹ of the Buddha's monastery. Concerned, the Buddha's attendant Ananda approaches and Gotami relays to him her request and the Buddha's rejection. Ananda then approaches the Buddha on behalf of Gotami and the Sakyan women and asks for a women's monastic order. Like Gotami, he makes his request three times and is each time refused. Then,

³⁹ I.B. Horner, trans., *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka), Vol 5: Cullavagga* (London: Forgotten Books, 2016, Reprint): 352.

⁴⁰ Horner, *Cullavagga*, 352.

⁴¹ Horner, *Cullavagga*, 352.

Ananda changes tactics and says: “Now, Lord, are women, having gone forth from home into homelessness in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, able to realise the fruit of stream-attainment or the fruit of once-returning or the fruit of non-returning or perfection?” The Buddha replies that women can certainly attain all of the four fruits and the state of perfection.

Ananda continues:

If, Lord, women, having gone forth are able to realise perfection—and, Lord [Gotami] was of great service: she was the Lord’s aunt, foster mother, nurse, giver of milk, for when the Lord’s mother passed away she suckled him—it were well, Lord, that women should obtain the going forth from home into homelessness.⁴²

The Buddha lays out a conditional acceptance: if Gotami accepts the eight heavy rules (*garudhamma*) then he will permit women’s ordination. This set of rules, which the Buddha tells to Ananda alone, effectively subordinate the new nuns’ order to the monks’ order. The *garudhamma* includes rules that nuns may not admonish a monk and that even the most senior of nuns must pay homage even to a monk ordained just that day. Ananda relays these rules to Gotami, who says:

Even, honored Ananda, as a woman or a man when young, of tender years, and fond of ornaments, having washed (himself and his) head, having obtained a garland of some sweet-scented creeper, having taken it with both hands, should place it on top of his head—even so do I, honored Ananda, accept these eight important rules never to be transgressed during my life.⁴³

Comparing the eight heavy rules to a garland of fragrant flowers, Gotami readily accepts them and becomes a nun. Ananda relays this message back to the Buddha, who reveals that the ordination of women would cut the lifespan of his teachings in half. He likens the women’s order to mildew attacking a rice field and then likens the eight heavy rules to a dam that keeps disastrous floods at bay.

This version is one of many that tell the story of the ordination of women. This episode appears more than once in the Pali Canon from the Theravada tradition and a number of times in the texts of other Buddhist schools, both Mainstream and Mahayana. Some accounts are more generous to Gotami and the Sakyan women, while others portray them in a more negative light. In this section, I make a case for thoughtful interpretation in accordance with Derris’ feminist-ethical hermeneutic.

⁴² Horner, *Cullavagga*, 354.

⁴³ Horner, *Cullavagga*, 355.

To this end, I will discuss Ohnuma's analysis of the ordination of women. I argue that Ohnuma installs false analytical frameworks that limit possible interpretation of this material, especially as she discusses the Buddha's response to Ananda's intervention on behalf of Gotami and the Sakyan women. Her interpretation also fails to identify agentive characters. She focuses solely on the Buddha's refusal while giving little to no attention to Gotami's actions, which I suggest are a powerful lens through which to view the ordination episode.

In her reading of this vignette of women's ordination, which includes just one mention of Gotami's mothering, Ohnuma argues that "the sense of an unresolved debt that demands to be repaid...is explicitly linked to the Buddha's establishment of an order of nuns."⁴⁴ She suggests that Ananda makes two arguments in quick succession: first, that women have equal spiritual capability and second, that Gotami was the Buddha's mother. Ohnuma questions which of these arguments ultimately swayed the Buddha; she wonders if the Buddha instituted an order of nuns for the sake of all women or just for the sake of his particular mother.⁴⁵ In setting up her analysis in this way, Ohnuma establishes that a filial debt must be repaid and that the Buddha must have been swayed by one of Ananda's two arguments. Under the analytical framework she presents, certain interpretations are not possible. It is not possible to suggest that a filial debt does not demand repayment or that the Buddha may have been swayed by both or neither of Ananda's arguments.

Furthering this analysis of Ananda's intervention, Ohnuma turns to another section of the Pali Canon in which Ananda is censured by other monks following the Buddha's death. They list his offenses, one of which is aiding in the ordination of women. Ananda replies: "I did work hard so that women could go forth because it was Mahapajapati Gotami who served as the Blessed One's aunt, foster-mother, caregiver, and giver of milk, who breastfed the Blessed One after his mother had died. I do not see this an offense."⁴⁶ Here, Ohnuma draws a false conclusion: "[Ananda] worked hard on behalf of women's ordination *because Mahapajapati mothered the Buddha*, not because women are capable of attaining nirvana."⁴⁷ While Ananda does affirm that he sought a women's order because of

⁴⁴ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 94.

⁴⁵ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 96-97.

⁴⁶ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 97-98.

⁴⁷ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 98. Her italics.

Gotami's mothering, he does not conclusively say that he disregards women's spiritual capabilities. The absence of an affirmation of the second factor is not a negation of its relevance. Ohnuma continues:

we must be led to posit the possibility that the Buddha, as this tradition presents him, did not institute an order of nuns for all women; instead, he did it because his mother Mahaprajapati asked him to, because he owed an enormous debt to Mahaprajapati for everything she had done on his behalf, and because despite his renunciation of the world and all social and familial ties, the tie to the mother—unlike the ties to father, wife, and son—was one that could not be broken.⁴⁸

Ohnuma concludes that the Buddha may have never wanted a women's order and only did so to repay a debt he owed his mother—perhaps one she sought to capitalize upon to create this order. Yet, this framework has far-reaching consequences. If the women's order was built for a particular woman and not for all women, then where does this leave the legitimacy of Buddhist women's orders across the world?

There are, however, more generous interpretations which circumvent Ohnuma's demand for a choice between Ananda's two arguments. While Ohnuma wonders which argument ultimately swayed the Buddha, I wonder why Ohnuma assumes the Buddha must only have been swayed by one of these arguments and not both. Derris offers a compelling answer that situates the women as agents. She lauds Mahaprajapati and the Sakyan women for the fact that before they beseeched the Buddha for ordination a second time, they had started the transformation into nuns. She writes: "Undeterred by the Buddha's first...refusals, with his permission they shaved their heads, donned monastic robes, and on bare feet they followed after the Buddha and his male monks. In spite of their distress, they were determined and resistant."⁴⁹ Like Ohnuma, Derris also questions what makes Ananda's final request to the Buddha so persuasive—yet she does not force a choice between Ananda's two arguments. She suggests that the Buddha "sees these women. He sees both their future possibilities and their lives up until this moment; their mothering is not aside from their spiritual potential, but a foundation for it."⁵⁰ Derris' interpretation bypasses Ohnuma's demand for a choice between the two arguments; both arguments played a role in the establishment of the women's order.

⁴⁸ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 98.

⁴⁹ Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 68.

⁵⁰ Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 68.

In drawing attention to the actions Gotami and the Sakyan women take, Derris reveals their status as agentic characters. She invites us to see what the women did when they were first rejected. Ohnuma's analysis, on the other hand, effaces the agency of Gotami and the Sakyan women. She cites the fragmentary *Bhiksuni Karmavacana* manuscript⁵¹ which sees the Buddha respond to Gotami's request for ordination differently. He says: "Just you alone, Gautami, should practice, for your entire life, the monastic career which is perfectly pure and clean, with your head shaved and wearing the robes of a nun, just as you said."⁵² In this version, the Buddha accepts ordination for Gotami but not the other Sakyan women. It is important to note that Gotami declines his offer—three times. Ohnuma writes:

Mahāprajāpatī is not satisfied by this, however, and continues to put forth the same request a second time and a third time, each time being told by the Buddha that she alone should be permitted to become a nun. It is only when Ānanda intercedes on her behalf that the Buddha finally agrees to allow women in general to go forth into the renunciant's life.⁵³

Ohnuma suggests that because the Buddha is only willing to allow ordination for Gotami, he must be motivated by a debt to her as his mother. He does not offer ordination to the other Sakyan women because he owes no filial debt to them.

I argue that there is an alternative side of this story that Ohnuma has not considered. Instead of questioning why Gotami alone is chosen, I question why Gotami rejects this offer. Ohnuma suggests that Gotami clings to the Buddha as her last remaining male relative. She evidently thinks the same of the five hundred Sakyan women because she claims that Gotami was accompanied by "a large group of Sakyan women, most of whom [had]...been widowed by their husbands' ordination as Buddhist monks."⁵⁴ Nowhere does the text indicate that Gotami is accompanied by a group of widows, yet Ohnuma suggests it broadly when she introduces the *Cullavagga* version of this story—and the genre of women's ordination stories more generally. Yet Gotami's refusal clearly invalidates this claim. If Gotami truly clings to the Buddha in this way, then why does she reject this prime opportunity to live in close proximity to him? The only logical conclusion is that this is not Gotami's

⁵¹ Preserved in Sanskrit and from the Mulasarvastivada school.

⁵² Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 108.

⁵³ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 108.

⁵⁴ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 95.

primary motivation. She wants ordination, not only for herself as she relates in the *Gotami-apadana*, but for all women. The *Bhiksuni Karmavacana* manuscript sees Mahapajapati acting as a champion for women; she will not accept ordination for herself until all women in her retinue, all women in general, are allowed to ordain. This story is a chance to elevate the sheer power behind Mahapajapati's refusal. She would rather remain a lay woman than ordain without the rest of the Sakyan women beside her.

Ohnuma's analysis puts immense focus on what the Buddha does as an agentive force in these stories, but she pays little attention to Gotami's own actions and the ways in which Gotami and the Sakyan women shape the narrative of women's ordination. Returning to Derris' analysis of the Sakyan women's determination, we might say that the women's order would not exist had they accepted the Buddha's first rejection and returned to their homes to live out their lives as laywomen. Where Ohnuma credits the Buddha and Ananda with the founding of the women's order, Derris credits the women themselves. Had they not persisted in their desire for ordination, there would be no women's order.

It is vital to acknowledge the internal diversity of Buddhism. Buddhist tradition is not static or monolithic, but varied and even contradictory. While the stories Ohnuma cites share common content—the ordination of women—they were composed in a variety of languages, times, and cultural contexts. As such, one particularly misogynistic text cannot come to represent the rest, nor can we broadly ascribe the ideas put forth in one as a common characteristic of all. Under the feminist-ethical hermeneutic, scholars may lean into the variance of Buddhist texts. They may study these texts with an awareness of the historical context and cultural conditions that caused them to be composed. At the same time that we recognize the historical context, we can look toward the present and future—in which women's monastic ordination at the highest levels is uncertain. It is up to the scholar, when faced with the sheer variety of texts and translations, to determine which interpretations to privilege in their work. What is the point of continuing to reinscribe and reinforce the idea that the Buddhist order for women was essentially fraudulent and resulted from the Buddha's attempt to repay a debt to a particular woman? The feminist-ethical hermeneutic invites us to read for agency and power, even if that power isn't immediately visible.

Under this framework, Mahapajapati's quest for ordination emerges in a new light. After Suddhodana's death, she occupies a strange, liminal existence. Perhaps free from marital obligations for the first time in many decades, she wishes to ordain in the order her son had founded. After all, her own children, her grandson, and many of her male relatives had followed the Buddha into his ascetic lifestyle. Why not her? Why not the rest of the Sakyan women who share her desire for liberation? When she first asks, she is denied. Perhaps the Buddha truly believed that the existence of women would threaten his teachings or perhaps this is a later addition. Regardless, he says no. Frustrated, but persistent, Gotami and the Sakyan women adopt an ascetic lifestyle anyway. In what was sure to be a dramatic move, they cut off their hair and don monastic robes.

We see a similar instance in the *Therigatha* which speaks volumes to what this act may have meant. Sumedha is a princess, promised in marriage to a nearby king, Anikadatta, who is on his way to her palace. However, Sumedha wishes to live a monastic lifestyle as a Buddhist nun. Her parents discourage her from going forth, just as the Buddha seems to discourage Gotami. She rejects their proposition and her marriage, quite dramatically. "Right at that moment, Sumedha cut her hair, / black, thick, and soft, with a knife, / she went inside the palace and closed herself inside it."⁵⁵ Sumedha on one side of the door and her parents and fiancé on the other, the princess tearfully explains to them Buddhist teachings and reveals an intense and legitimate desire for Buddhism. They are unconvinced.

As Sumedha spoke, she took no delight
in the constructed appearances of the world,
but finally to convince Anikadatta,
she threw the hair she had cut off on the floor.
Anikadatta stood up and joined his hands respectfully,
he asked her father to allow Sumedha to go forth
so she could see nibbana and the four noble truths.⁵⁶

It is the shearing off of Sumedha's hair, a symbol of beauty, that finally convinces her fiancé that she is quite serious in her wish to ordain.

Like Sumedha, Gotami and the Sakyan women cut off their hair. They put on monastic robes and walk barefoot after the Buddha and his monks in an act of determination. After an intervention

⁵⁵ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 482.

⁵⁶ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 517-518.

by Ananda, who reaffirms women's spiritual capability and reminds the Buddha of Mahapajapati's mothering, the Buddha agrees to a women's order and institutes the *garudhamma*. While this story still retains elements secular liberal feminism may not appreciate—the *garudhamma* and the Buddha likening the women's order to a poison that kills crops—we should now throw this story out. We can still appreciate the actions of Gotami and the Sakyan women. We can elevate those actions and their passionate quest for ordination, remaining true to the historical context and attuned to the context of women's ordination in the present moment.

Mahapajapati's *Parinibbana*: The Great Going Out

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Mahapajapati's status within the early Buddhist community comes in the *Gotami-apadana*, recorded in the *Khuddaka-nikaya* of the Theravada Pali Canon. Walters suggests the *Gotami-apadana* may have initially circulated on its own before being incorporated into the *Theri-Apadana*.⁵⁷ The *Gotami-apadana* tells the story of the Gotami's *parinibbana*. *Nibbana* (Skt. *Nirvana*) is liberation from suffering in *samsara*, or cyclic existence. Buddhism holds that there are two stages of *nibbana*: the *nibbana* achieved in life and the *nibbana* achieved in death.⁵⁸ The latter is the “final *nibbana*” wherein an individual dies and will not be reborn again. The Buddha was perhaps intentionally unclear about the nature of *parinibbana*. The *Gotami-apadana* tells us that Gotami is not alone in this final journey; she is accompanied by five hundred Buddhist nuns, an allusion to the five hundred women with whom she sought ordination. While Ohnuma sees this episode as the final, long-overdue death of the clinging mother—the only good thing she has done for her son—Walters sees the rich depiction of Gotami as superhuman and concludes that she is the female buddha. These two very different interpretations indicate how use of the feminist-ethical hermeneutic can bring to light a substantially different interpretation.

The *Gotami-apadana* opens on Gotami, who has wandered off from the other nuns. She considers that she will not be able to see the *parinibbana* of Gotama or the other important monks in his dispensation such as Rahul (her adopted grandson), Ananda, and Nanda (her biological son). Two

⁵⁷ Walters, “Gotami's Story,” 109.

⁵⁸ Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*, 56.

translations here are prevalent, both put forth by Walters. Walters' translation of the *Theri-Apadana* in its entirety was published in 2017, but his prior translation of the *Gotami-apadana* was published in 2007. In his first translation, he translates Gotami's realization as follows: "I cannot bear to look upon / the Buddha's final passing, / nor that of his two chief disciples, / nor Rahula, Ananda, and Nanda."⁵⁹ However, in his 2017 translation, Walters makes an alteration to this translation. The new translation reads: "I will not be able to see / the Buddha's final nirvana, / [that] of his two chief followers, / nor Rahul, Ananda, Nanda."⁶⁰ Walters explains his rationale and what motivated his change in a footnote. He says:

[While the] term (*sakkomi*) carries...connotations of ["cannot bear"] in vernacular usage and this is how I originally understood the text..., I remain more literal and leave it open to varied interpretations: rather than an emotional reason for letting go of life's constituents (or additionally an expression of maternal sentiment) it might be a simple statement of fact, i.e., she realizes it's time...and that means she'll die before the Buddha and great followers.⁶¹

This is an important distinction and Walters ultimately decides it is best to maintain a more literal translation. His prior translation leaves open the possibility that Gotami is still attached and clings to her son and his great followers; however, the *Gotami-apadana* gives us little indication that Gotami is still attached. While she bows at the Buddha's feet and recognizes the finality of her *parinibbana*, she does not show signs of outward grief and even attempts to quell grief in others.

Regardless of her motivation, the conclusion remains: Gotami is steadfast in her wish to attain *parinibbana*. She is not the only one to reach this conclusion; five hundred additional Buddhist nuns, beginning with Khema, adopt the same disposition. Their decision is felt immediately.

At that time there was an earthquake;
the thunder of the gods did roar.
Weighed down by grief, the goddesses
who lived in that refuge [for nuns,]
piteously weeping [at that,]
shed [their] tears there [in the refuge].⁶²

The nuns gather again and decide to attain *parinibbana* together. They walk along the road toward the Buddha's dwelling to seek his blessing. As they pass by, laywomen emerge from their homes and

⁵⁹ Walters, "Gotami's Story," 112.

⁶⁰ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 229.

⁶¹ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," 36 (footnote).

⁶² Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 232.

bow at Gotami's feet. They entreat her to stay, saying: "Nirvana's not proper for you, abandoning us, destitute." Gotami comforts them: "Enough with [your] crying, children, today, which is your time to laugh."⁶³ She states her accomplishments and says that she has achieved her purpose in going forth. Throughout this interaction, Gotami refers to the laywomen as her children; even in her role as a nun, her role as a mother is not absent. It is also noteworthy that Gotami is attended in particular by women; it is the *laywomen* who emerge from their homes wailing and grieving the imminent loss of their leader.

In her request to the Buddha, Gotami rejects the implication of a debt owed to the mother. She says to him: "Great Sage, you owe no debt to me / for protecting and rearing [you]. / To obtain such a son is what / women desiring sons [desire]."⁶⁴ Gotami's words are a direct rejection of Ohnuma's claims that debt closely attends her relationship with her son. The Buddha approves Gotami's request for *parinibbana*. The *Gotami-apadana* tells us that Nanda and Rahula, who have already attained enlightenment, are griefless. But Ananda is "wailing piteously."⁶⁵ Gotami, comforting him, says: "you really should not mourn, when the time for smiling has come! Son, [through] your assistance to me, I have realized nirvana."⁶⁶ Again, Gotami's words challenge Ohnuma's interpretations about the "invasion" of the "leftover, displaced women" into the "healthy" male-only sangha, brought about by Ananda's intervention. Rather than censure Ananda for his role in securing women's ordination and thus their eventual liberation, Gotami suggests it is a reason to smile.

In the subsequent section of the *Gotami-apadana*, the Buddha speaks to Gotami: "There are fools who doubt that women / [too] gain dhamma-penetration. / To dispel that [wrong] view of theirs, / display miracles, Gotami."⁶⁷

Then bowing to the Sambuddha,
[and] rising up into the sky,
with Buddha's assent, Gotami
displayed various miracles.
...

⁶³ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 245-246.

⁶⁴ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 260.

⁶⁵ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 287.

⁶⁶ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 290.

⁶⁷ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 305.

She walked on water as on land,
 leaving its surface unbroken.
 Cross-legged, she flew like a bird,
 across the surface of the sky.
 With her body she took control
 of space right up to Brahma's home.
 Taking Mount Meru as handle,
 she made great earth her umbrella.
 Carrying, twirling root and all,
 she walked back and forth in the sky.
 And like the time when six suns rose,
 she caused the entire world to fume.
 As though it were the end of time,
 she garlanded the earth in flames.
 She took mounts Meru, Mandara,
 Daddara, great Muccalinda—
 all of them, in a single fist,
 like they were [tiny] mustard seeds.⁶⁸

In these verses, Gotami displays superhuman abilities. Here, too, she appears as the female counterpart of the Buddha, who is often depicted as both human and superhuman. Buddhist traditions maintain that only human beings can attain *nibbana*. Both Gotami and Gotama are human beings and both, as a result of their spiritual attainments, gain impressive supernatural powers. Rupert Gethin argues that the Buddha defies the “categories of human and divine.”⁶⁹ Gotama is the Teacher, who discovers the Dhamma and illuminates it for others. Gethin continues: “Thus while on the one hand wishing to stress that the “awakening” of Gautama and his “awakened” disciples is the same, the Buddhist tradition has also been unable to resist the tendency to dwell on the superiority of Gautama’s achievement.”⁷⁰ He is both ordinary and extraordinary, human and superhuman. The *Gotami-apadana* shows Gotami echoing these characteristics. At the same time that she holds the waters of the four oceans in a single hand, she consistently reminds us of her status as a human mother. The *Gotami-apadana* never states that Gotami is a buddha, but in its representation of her impressive supernatural powers, it suggests that she is to some degree the equivalent of the Buddha. Finnegan, in her analysis of the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya, even argues that Gotami’s *parinibbana* is far greater than that of the Buddha himself.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 306-316.

⁶⁹ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 28.

⁷⁰ Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*, 33.

⁷¹ Finnegan, “For the Sake of Women, Too,” 228.

Their miracles concluded, Gotami and her nuns return to their refuge. The Buddha follows them up to the gates of the nuns' refuge. There, Gotami falls before him. She laments that this will be the final time she sees his face and touches his feet. The nuns go into the refuge and assume their meditative postures. Gotami, "having gone along with them / ... / sat in half-lotus position / in her [own] superior seat."⁷² The laywomen approach her, "pounding on [their] chests with [their] fists, / [loudly] howling piteous cries. / Grieving they fell down on the earth / like creepers cut off at the root."⁷³ Their visceral reactions demonstrate their love for, and dependence on, Gotami. Her importance to the early Buddhist community, not just to laywomen and nuns, but to the broader cannot be understated. After comforting them—and offering a lesson on impermanence, Gotami begins her meditation. The *apadana* states that:

Rising up, she reached nirvana
like the flame of a fuel-less lamp.
There was an enormous earthquake;
bolts of lightning fell from the sky.
The thunder was rumbling loudly;
the deities [gathered there] wailed.
A flower-shower from the sky
was raining down upon the earth.
Even regal Mount Meru shook,
just like a dancer on the stage;
the [great] ocean was greatly grieved,
and he was weeping in distress.
...
The [other nuns] surrounding her,
who practiced the Buddha's teachings,
they too attained nirvana.⁷⁴

The Buddha, knowing Gotami's *parinibbana* is attained, turns to Ananda and says "Go [now,] Ananda, tell the monks, / [my] mother has reached nirvana."⁷⁵ In the following verses, Gotami's status as a mother is elevated just as she is elevated as a figure of veneration. Ananda's announcement reaches all Buddhist monks, even those living far away. He says:

This Gotami, who carefully
reared up the body of the Sage,
has gone to peace, [no longer seen,]
just like the stars when the sun rises.

⁷² Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 365.

⁷³ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 367.

⁷⁴ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 374-378.

⁷⁵ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 381.

She's gone home, leaving behind [her]
designation "Buddha's Mother,"
where even [he,] the Five-Eyed One,
the Leader, cannot see one gone.
Each with faith in the Well-Gone-One,
and each of the Sage's pupils,
ought [now] to come, that Buddha's son,
to honor the Buddha's mother.⁷⁶

The description of Gotami's funeral is beautiful. We are told that flowers rose from the earth, that both the sun and moon were visible, that the gods made offerings of garlands that were perfumed with divine fragrances. Gotami was honored with song and dance. Even the nagas, titans, and Brahmas gave offerings "to the laid-out mother who was in nirvana."⁷⁷ Concluding the *apadana* is the Buddha who says: "O! It is a marvelous thing! / My mother who's reached nirvana."⁷⁸

The vivid scene the *Gotami-apadana* paints of Gotami's *parinibbana*—her superhuman status and the ways in which her *parinibbana* is received by her followers—lead Walters to the conclusion that Gotami "is the female counterpart of the Buddha, the founder and leader of the nuns' order who parallels (though does not supersede) Gotama...Gotami is represented as the Buddha for women."⁷⁹ This is a concept I will analyze more fully in the subsequent chapter on parallelism. A far cry from the "leftover" woman, who finally dies after decades of clinging to her male kin, Gotami's importance is patently clear in the *Gotami-apadana*. The response of the laywomen, the monastics, and even the gods are enough to understand how beloved and revered Gotami was by her community.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced Mahapajapati Gotami, the second mother of the Buddha. I analyzed Mahapajapati's life from her youth and marriage, to becoming the Buddha's mother, through the Great Departure, her quest for women's ordination, and finally her *parinibbana*. Work by Ohnuma has endeavored to paint Mahapajapati as the "bad mother": the mother who clings to her son and only does good when she finally dies. Additional works by Ohnuma and Stephen Berkwitz make similar claims about the entire women's community writ large—that they are all bad, clinging

⁷⁶ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 384-386.

⁷⁷ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 396.

⁷⁸ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 407.

⁷⁹ Walters, "Gotami's Story," 111.

mothers. Berkwitz does not analyze Mahapajapati, but his analysis does look rather harshly upon mothers whose children die. He infers from tragic stories of new mothers like Kisagotami and Patacara that madness is gendered female and is a particular facet of the female experience. Shockingly, he suggests that these mothers' madness is not due to their sudden loss of children, but their newfound (and unwanted) freedom from patriarchal figureheads. I will treat this element of women's experience in my final chapter. For all the scholarship that seeks to defame women and their role in the early Buddhist community, we have also seen work by scholars like Garling who reminds us of the important roles women played in early Buddhism, and Derris and Walters who elevate Mahapajapati as an emblem of women's agency and power—the leader of a retinue of impressive women.

At her core, Mahapajapati is a woman who loses her youngest sister in childbirth, then goes on to care for her sister's motherless son. She loves the young prince, and is understandably distraught when he flees the palace to pursue an ascetic lifestyle. Later in life, when she entreats the now awakened Gotama Buddha for ordination, she refuses ordination for herself until all the women in her community are permitted to ordain as well. When the Buddha initially refuses, the Sakyan women led by Gotami shave their heads and don monastic garb—a move that must have lent enormous credence to their desire for ordination and eventual liberation. Finally, the Buddha assents and a women's monastic order is formed. While Ohnuma chooses to see this as a ploy of leftover, displaced mothers, Derris suggests that the Buddha finally assents because he sees the determination of his own mother and the women in her community. No source is more clear about Mahapajapati's renown in the early Buddhist community than the *Gotami-apadana*. Through thorough exposition on the miracles she performs, the way in which the laywomen and deities adore her, and even how the Buddha repeatedly refers to her as “my mother,” the *Gotami-apadana* elevates Mahapajapati to what Walters suggests is the status of a female buddha.

For all that we can draw from this analysis of Mahapajapati, we have only scratched the surface. Ohnuma's interpretation of Mahapajapati as a grief-stricken woman who clings to her son as the only patriarchal authority figure remaining in her kin is a harsh and unjustified interpretation. It seems as though she intentionally seeks out material that vilifies Mahapajapati, while disregarding

material that speaks to her elevated status and brilliance. As Derris asserts, we ought to prioritize texts and interpretations that “affirm women’s place in Buddhist traditions” because so much of Buddhist scholarship has concentrated on texts that “articulate androcentric agendas and misogynistic representations of women.”⁸⁰ Texts that powerfully assert the importance of women as founding members of the early Buddhist community exist, but are often overlooked in favor of androcentric, misogynistic material. Interpretations based only on such material do not do justice to the women whose stories I treat here and they certainly do not do justice to the ways in which Gotami is respected and beloved by her community.

It is the feminist-ethical hermeneutic which takes us from a flat characterization of token women characters, understood solely for the roles they play in the lives of men, to women who are fully human, experiencing love and loss. It is these deeply human elements that we should position at the forefront of our analyses. From interpretations which employ a feminist-ethical hermeneutic approach, we can recover the stories of these fundamentally important women and afford them their rightful places as shapers of the early Buddhist community.

⁸⁰ Derris, “Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering,” 66.

Gendered Parallelism in the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana*

The *Theri-apadanas* or karmic biographies of forty early nuns form the basis of legitimacy for the existence of women in monastic orders. This is a position put forth by Collett, who argues that the *Theri-Apadana* establishes “a narrative recounting that women were motivated and enabled to [practice] in the remote past, and that former buddhas allowed for the ordination of women just as Gotama did.”¹ She makes a case that the *Theri-Apadana* acts as a legitimating history of women’s involvement in Buddhism—that women freely practiced Buddhism and had important roles not just in Gotama Buddha’s dispensation, but in the dispensations of buddhas going as far back as Padumuttara, the tenth buddha. The *Apadana* also creates a female history which boldly asserts that the women who found themselves in Gotama’s community were not there by happenstance. They were destined to be there—by acts they themselves set in motion aeons ago in past lives.

In this chapter, I argue that the stories of the women in the *Theri-Apadana*, and to a lesser extent the *Therigatha*, display a strong gender-based parallelism to the stories of their male counterparts. By parallelism, I am not asserting that women were treated the same as men or did not face misogyny and gender-based obstacles; rather, these women have carved out for themselves a separate, parallel lineage in which they are able to pursue Buddhism’s goal of *nibbana*. In these two collections, women speak to their own spiritual paths and the fruits of their actions. It is in this parallelism that women assert the deservedness of the women’s monastic order and their right to be in that order.

There are many instances of parallelism. For example, the same series of stock verses appears at the end of each of the *Theri-Apadanas* and *Thera-Apadanas*. The verses list the spiritual achievements of the monastic in question.

My defilements are [now] burnt up;
all [new] existence is destroyed.
Like elephants with broken chains,
I am living without constraint.
Being in Best Buddha’s presence
was a very good thing for me.

¹ Alice Collett, “The Female Past in Early Indian Buddhism: The Shared Narrative of the Seven Sisters in the *Theri-Apadana*,” *Religions of South Asia* 5, no. 1 (2011): 210.

The three knowledges are attained;
[I have] done what the Buddha taught!²

These verses, which appear verbatim in both the monks' and nuns' verses describe the experience of enlightenment in identical terms. The newfound freedom-in-enlightenment is natural and powerful, but not gendered.

There are also parallel, yet gendered imageries in the *Therīgatha* and *Theragatha*. Consider the imagery the nun Muttā evokes when discussing her experience of the freedom of enlightenment: “The name I am called by means freed / and I am quite freed, well-free from three crooked things, / mortar, pestle, and husband with his own crooked thing³. / I am freed from birth and death, / what leads to rebirth has been rooted out.”⁴ Lang suggests this phrase is best considered in conjunction with a verse from the *Theragatha* in which the monk Sumangala speaks of the three things from which he is free. He says: I’m free from three crooked things: / Sickles, ploughs, curved spades. / Enough of them!”⁵ These verses, when considered together, paint an image of two parallel spheres of the householder lifestyle from which men and women are freed through their experience of enlightenment.

Parallelism is rife in the *Therīgatha* and *Therī-Apadana*. However, for our purposes, I will focus on (1) the stability of gender across lifetimes, (2) the creation of histories that legitimize the female monastic lineage, and (3) parallel and often familial spiritual journeys. I will also analyze the ways in which women are creatively inserted into existing narrative tradition. Finally, I will return to Mahapajapati with an analysis of how she may be considered the female buddha.

The Stability of Gender Across Lifetimes

In the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, a woman was born in a clan of millionaires. She was “glistening with various gems, / endowed with supreme happiness.”⁶ She encountered the Buddha Padumuttara when he preached and, with her parents' permission, she housed and fed the buddha and

² Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 17-18.

³ Alternatively translated as “my hunchbacked husband”

⁴ Hallisey, *Therīgatha*, v. 11.

⁵ Lang, “Reimagining Buddhist Women,” 38.

⁶ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 417.

his followers for a week. “At the end of [those] seven days, / the Charioteer of Men placed / a great nun in the foremost place / among those who have great wisdom.”⁷ The woman vowed to attain that same status and Padumuttara made the following prediction of her future:

Let your aspiration succeed!
Deeds done for me with Assembly
[will bear] measureless fruit for you.
In one hundred thousand aeons,
arising in Okkaka’s clan,
the one whose name is Gotama
will be the Teacher in the world.
Worthy heir to that one’s Dhamma,
Dhamma’s legitimate offspring,
you’ll be she whose name is Khema
[and will] attain that foremost place.⁸

Khema, the authorial voice of this *apadana*, is one of the most prominent nuns in the Buddha’s dispensation—the chief nun of wisdom as was predicted one hundred thousand aeons prior by the Buddha Padumuttara. Stories like this are replete throughout the *Theri-Apadana*. Take, for example, the nun Sakula. She was the half sister of the Buddha Padumuttara and saw him install a nun in the foremost place of nuns with “divine eye”. She aspired to attain that place and Padumuttara prophesies it. Likewise, the nun Sona in a previous rebirth aspired to attain the status of the nun chief in strong effort. Padumuttara says to her: “Your aspiration will succeed.”⁹

The *Theri-Apadana* not only creates a parallel lineage of nuns going back aeons; it creates lineages of nuns chief in wisdom, chief in divine eye, chief in strong effort and so on. The nuns succeed one another in these categories of recognition. These verses speak back against the popular Buddhist idea that to be reborn as a woman is a lesser form of rebirth. In the rebirth stories of the forty nuns in the *Theri-Apadana*, not a single one is ever reborn as a man. Nor do they aspire to be reborn male.¹⁰ Khema, Gotami, and many of the nuns whose stories feature in the *Theri-Apadana* actively wish to be reborn as women—women who occupied stations of respect in the Buddhist dispensation. On a tangential note, we also observe parallelism between the monk and the nun who

⁷ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 420.

⁸ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 422-424.

⁹ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 861.

¹⁰ Naomi Appleton, “In the Footsteps of the Buddha? Women and the Bodhisatta Path in Theravada Buddhism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 43.

are chief in any category. For example, Sariputta and Khema are both chief in wisdom. These categories supplement one another and strengthen the Buddhist dispensation under Gotama Buddha.

Naomi Appleton, in her study of why women are excluded from the bodhisatta path as presented in the Theravada jataka stories, provides an important framework that can be applied to the study of the *Apadana*. The jataka stories are narratives of the Buddha's past lives as the Bodhisatta, beginning with his rebirth as the ascetic Sumedha. Appleton notes that although some of the conditions for the bodhisatta path are being a human man and a renunciant, the Buddha often is not. In his past lives, the Buddha is "once a lion, a yakkha (sprite or ogre), and a deva (a god), and twice a naga (serpent), and he is rarely a renunciant, yet he still receives his predictions to Buddhahood and resolves to further practice the perfections required to fulfill his aim."¹¹ However, in all of the 574 jataka stories, the Buddha is never reborn as a woman. His gender remains stable across all of his lifetimes leading up to his eventual buddhahood as Siddhattha Gotama. The stability of sex also extends to the rebirth stories of others, in which "character, role, and gender are almost always preserved."¹²

Appleton argues that the reason the bodhisatta is always male in the jataka stories has less to do with the theoretical impossibility of a female bodhisatta than an early Theravada assumption that sex remains stable over lifetimes. It is only when we get to the commentaries on the jatakas, of course written after the jatakas themselves, that Theravada tradition articulates an explicit prohibition on women being bodhisattas. The commentaries transform an implicit assumption about the stability of sex into an explicit mandate that the bodhisatta always be male. Appleton concludes that "the stories influenced the tradition of excluding women, rather than vice versa."¹³ In other words, the requirement that bodhisattas must always be male—which has done irreparable damage of Buddhist women's sense of self—was a trend taken for a rule.¹⁴

The *Theri-Apadana* supports Appleton's conclusion and rejects the notion that women would want to be reborn male for the sake of spiritual progress. The heartfelt desire of past-life women to be

¹¹ Appleton, "In the Footsteps of the Buddha," 37.

¹² Appleton, "In the Footsteps of the Buddha," 44.

¹³ Appleton, "In the Footsteps of the Buddha," 41.

¹⁴ Appleton, "In the Footsteps of the Buddha," 40.

reborn again as women showcases the fallibility of the idea that the human woman is a lesser form of rebirth. If that were the case, we might expect to find evidence of Khema in her past life aspiring to be reborn as the chief monk of wisdom, not the chief nun. Since we do not find evidence of this rebirth wish, it is fair to assume that their womanness was not something these legendary nuns sought to escape—rather, it was something they wished to continue.

While the *Theri-Apadana* adheres to a strong woman-to-woman rebirth lineage, there are cases of male to female rebirth in the *Therigatha*. One particularly relevant example comes from Isidasi. Isidasi, born the only daughter to a wealthy man, is given away in marriage. She says: “My husband only did me wrong, / while I was virtuous, not lazy, and submissive, / he only humiliated me when I waited on him lovingly.” Her husband entreats his parents to get rid of Isidasi. She is returned to her father, who gives her away in marriage a second time. Isidasi says of her second husband, “he treated me more like a slave than a wife.” She was again returned to her father. Even a wandering ascetic did not wish to stay in the same house as Isidasi. Finally, a nun comes to Isidasi’s home. Isidasi recounts that “it was obvious that she was disciplined, learned, and virtuous. / As soon as I saw her, I got up from my seat and gave it to her; / when she had sat, I bowed to her feet and gave her food. / I tried to please her with all sorts of foods and drinks, / I brought in whatever delicacy was available, / and then I said, “Madam, I wish to go forth.”” Isidasi’s father encourages her to stay at home and practice Dhamma, but Isidasi cries and begs him to let her go forth. He relents and allows her to ordain.

Once she attains enlightenment, Isidasi sees her past seven rebirths and what caused her to be so mistreated by her husbands. In her past life—as a man—she had committed adultery with the wife of another. In her subsequent rebirths, she was a castrated monkey, a castrated goat, a castrated cow, then a slave neither male or female. In her penultimate rebirth, Isidasi was born a carter’s daughter “in a family that was miserable and poor, always / under attack from many creditors.” She was kidnapped from her home at sixteen and given as a second wife to the son of her kidnapper. Finally, she was reborn as Isidasi. She says: “So it was all the fruit of my karma, / when they all threw me away and left, / even when I waited on them like a slave, / but now I have put an end to that.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 403-450.

Isidasi's story is significant because it creatively flips the script on rebirth as a woman being a lesser rebirth. Isidasi's rebirth as a woman was the fruit of adulterous karma; however, that karmic seed was planted by a man. Isidasi's conduct as a woman, in the two rebirths she describes, appears rather flawless. It is too often assumed that to be reborn as a woman is a lesser rebirth because a woman herself is lesser; according to Isidasi's verses, what is lesser about her rebirth as a woman is the treatment she receives by others when compared to the treatment she might have received had she been reborn male.

The idea that gender remains stable across lifetimes diminishes the stock we place in the idea that to be reborn as a woman is a lesser rebirth. In fact, we witness women choosing to be reborn as women—aspiring to attain the same station as a famous nun during the time of a past buddha and thus enforcing parallel lineages. In cases where gender does not remain stable through rebirths, the source of karmic sin is not the woman in her present rebirth. As we see in Isidasi's verses, the karmic seed—the fruit of which Isidasi suffered—was planted by the actions of a man. Her story further lends credence to the idea that the female rebirth is only a lesser one because of the treatment of women—not due to any diminished capacity or inherent fault in the women themselves.

Parallelism as Legitimation

The *Theri-Apadana* is rich with meaning and contributes to a conversation about women in Buddhism. Collett suggests that within the verses of the *Theri-Apadana* are “condemnations of women as iniquitous manipulators, delighting in dragging unwilling men away from the path.”¹⁶ Yet far from offering a simple disavowal of these negative interpretations of women, the *Theri-Apadana* firmly establishes the women's right to be part of the Buddha's dispensation. According to Collett, the *Theri-Apadana* accomplishes this feat by creating a history for the nuns' order. She says: “the accounts of the past in the [*Theri-Apadana*] solidify and celebrate an historical narrative of female practice that stretches back in time at least to the era of Buddha Padumuttara, the tenth in the lineage of past buddhas.”¹⁷ She continues:

¹⁶ Collett, “The Female Past in Early Indian Buddhism,” 211.

¹⁷ Collett, “The Female Past in Early Indian Buddhism,” 211.

The [*Theri-Apadana*] consistently and categorically constructs its accounts of the past as pasts containing female practitioners who, reborn in the more recent time of Gotama Buddha, have attained the status of arahants. The text records the recent and remote past lives of Gotama's female disciples, thus establishing historical discourses of the female past.¹⁸

The same general structure repeats in the *Theri-Apadana*. Typically, a woman makes an offering followed by a rebirth wish. Her desire is affirmed by the living buddha and she is often reborn in a heavenly realm. She may go through aeons in *samsara* before being reborn in the time of Gotama Buddha—as was predicted by a past buddha. This structure is even present in the *Gotami-apadana*. Gotami recounts a past life in which she saw the Buddha Padumuttara install his aunt as the foremost among the nuns. She says:

the Leader of Men placed his aunt
in the foremost [place among] nuns.
...
Having fallen down at [his] feet,
I aspired [to attain] that place.
And then the Greatly Mindful One,
the Seventh Sage, said [to the crowd:]
“...
[all of] you listen to my words:
In one hundred thousand aeons,
arising in Okkaka's clan,
the one whose name is Gotama
will be the Teacher in the world.
...
the one whose name is Gotami
will be the Teacher's follower.
She will be his mother's sister,
the Buddha's wet-nurse his [whole] life.
She will attain the foremost place
among the senior Buddhist nuns.”¹⁹

The *Theri-Apadana* weaves a complicated history of women in Buddhism. This history functions to legitimize in two ways: (1) it affirms the right of the lineage to exist, and (2) it affirms the right of the individual woman to be in that lineage. To the first point, the *Theri-Apadana* clearly reaffirms the presence of monastic lineages of women in the orders of past buddhas. Collett reminds us that each of these past buddhas was said to have had foremost nuns and laywomen within their communities.²⁰

¹⁸ Collett, “The Female Past in Early Indian Buddhism,” 213.

¹⁹ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 325-331.

²⁰ Collett, “The Female Past in Early Indian Buddhism,” 212.

In the histories the apadanas paint, for Gotama to *not* have a women's lineage would be unusual. It would constitute a break in tradition going back aeons.

To the second point, the *Theri-Apadana* also affirms the rights of individual women to be a part of women's monastic lineages. The verses see the nuns legitimize themselves and their spiritual achievements—in other words, creating a history of female arhatship.²¹ One way in which this transpires is through a parallelism with the Buddha and his biography. Certain elements of the stories in the *Theri-Apadana* echo the biography of Gotama Buddha. The nun Sankamanatta, for example, explains how in a previous rebirth she saw the buddha Kondañña traveling along the road. She says: “after coming out of [my] house, / with face cast down, I laid down [there]. / The World's Best One, Compassionate, / then took a step [right] on [my] head.”²² We can compare this instance with a similar one in the Buddha's biography in which, as the ascetic Sumedha, the Buddha lays in the muddy road and allows the Buddha Dipankara to step on his body to avoid the mud. This act directly precedes Dipankara's prediction of Sumedha's future buddhahood. Sankamanatta's story echoes that of the Buddha and she invites us to remember Sumedha's spiritual attainments and illustrious future without outright laying claim to them herself.

Likewise, the nuns also use the power of past buddhas' predictions to legitimate their positions in the women's order. These stories do not simply assert that the women are renowned nuns in their current lives, but that they were predicted to be those renowned nuns aeons ago by previous buddhas. The karmic trajectories toward their current lives as nuns were in the making far before they were ever born into their current lives. Naysayers who disavow the worthiness of these women do so against the predictions of past buddhas going back innumerable many aeons. The legitimizing power of past buddha support is most evident in the apadana of the nun Punnikā. She says that she had “gone forth in the dispensation / of the Blessed One, Vipassi, / and of Sikhi and Vessbhu, / the Sage Kakusandha [Buddha], / Konāgamana, Neutral One, / and of the Buddha Kassapa.”²³ Her participation in the dispensations of multiple buddhas supports her right to be in the current dispensation of Gotama Buddha. Her past lives parallel and reinforce her current life. By virtue of

²¹ Collett, “The Female Past in Early Indian Buddhism,” 221.

²² Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 32.

²³ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 1287-1288.

her dedication to Buddhist orders going back aeons, she decidedly deserves to be in Gotama Buddha's dispensation.

The *Theri-Apadana* weaves the nuns' stories into a rich history of women's involvement in Buddhism. Their stories are didactic as they provide soteriological models for laywomen, and they are also affirmative of women's status in monastic orders. Through the creation of histories which parallel those of the male monastic order, the *Theri-Apadana* carves out a space for a women's order and legitimates individual women themselves. It seeks to show that women have always been integral parts of Buddhist orders and should therefore be afforded the same status in the current buddha's dispensation.

Parallel Journeys: A Family Affair

If, as Collett argues, the goal of the *Theri-Apadana* was to create a history for the women's monastic lineage, one possible way to accomplish this is to link prominent monks and nuns in marital or otherwise familial relationships over many lifetimes. Strong argues that spiritual journeys are family affairs rather than individual experiences and challenges the assumption that religious biographies are primarily concerned with telling the stories of individuals as if their journeys are separate and independent from their families.²⁴ Strong discusses the *Sanghabhedavastu* section of the Sanskrit Mulasarvastivada Vinaya and its depiction of the Buddha's spiritual journey from the Great Departure to his enlightenment. Using the language of *karmic companions*, Strong suggests that the Buddha's path to enlightenment was not only his, but that of his wife Yasodhara and his son Rahula too. In this tradition, Rahula is conceived on the night of the Great Departure and Yasodhara carries him for six years—just as the Buddha carries the metaphorically fetal Dharma. Strong notes that Yasodhara, who had been following the information she received about the Buddha and performing the same austerities, stops eating and grows progressively weaker. When Suddhodana prevents information from reaching her, Yasodhara begins eating again. This coincides with the Buddha breaking his fast upon realizing austerities aren't working. As Strong puts it, the “Buddha eats [the] milkrice...and regains [a] wholesome body” and “Yasodhara resumes eating, foetus resumes growth,

²⁴ Strong, “A Family Quest,” 114.

and pregnancy becomes apparent.”²⁵ Yasodhara begins to show her human pregnancy while the Buddha begins to show the Dharma. Similar parallelisms attend the Buddha and Yasodhara’s biography until her ordination as a nun. Strong suggests these connections point to two Buddhist paths which both lead to enlightenment: “a *śramanic* one involving ordination and a stay-at-home one for householders.”²⁶ While Yasodhara and the Buddha experience very different things, they are both “on a path that involves the realization of the truth of suffering and the consequent attainment of nirvana.”²⁷

I argue that we see similar instances of married pairs reincarnating together in the Pali Canon that Strong observes in the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya. Walters argues that while marriage does not seem relevant in the *Thera-Apadana* (past-life stories of monks), it was relevant to the nuns in the *Theri-Apadana*. Walters takes as his case study the apadanas of Maha-Kassapa and his wife Bhadda-Kapilani, who have traversed lifetimes together. Maha-Kassapa’s apadana is characteristically silent on the topic of marriage. He does not reference his wife, but merely states that he erected a stupa for Padumuttara, and subsequently lists his fortuitous rebirths as a result of that root piety. Walters suggests that Bhadda-Kapilani would have been much more involved than Maha-Kassapa presents. She would have prepared the food for the alms-giving and other meritorious acts; without her actions, Maha-Kassapa would not be instantiated with the ability to honor buddhas and reap the fruit of meritorious deeds.

Bhadda-Kapilani’s apadana opens much the same. She also explains her husband’s root piety, though she does so in far greater detail than Maha-Kassapa.²⁸ Walters suggests that Bhadda-Kapilani enriches her husband’s life “paralleling the way in which the wife’s apadana enriches the husband’s by adding numerous bare-bones details and fleshing them out with human texture, struggle, and humor.”²⁹ Walters notes that at “first blush the subject of the wife’s apadana is...actually her husband, but the interest of the text goes beyond mere reportage of biographical details about Maha-Kassapa. Throughout [the] narrative, Bhadda-Kapilani gently but consistently is inserted into the rich

²⁵ Strong, “A Family Quest,” 122.

²⁶ Strong, “A Family Quest,” 123.

²⁷ Strong, “A Family Quest,” 123-124.

²⁸ Walters, “Wives of the Saints,” 177.

²⁹ Walters, “Wives of the Saints,” 181.

kammic biography...of her husband.”³⁰ While Maha-Kassapa’s narrative describes a solitary karmic trajectory, Bhadda-Kapilani indicates a team effort.³¹ Yet even in this linkage, Bhadda-Kapilani is an important actor. Walters analyzes a section of the narrative in which Maha-Kassapa disappears and Bhadda-Kapilani asserts her merit-winning actions as an individual.

In whichever place I’m reborn,
because [I gave] alms, I’m gorgeous;

...

Again when Buddha Kassapa’s
stupa was being completed,
delighted, I [then] gave [for it]
an excellent tile made of gold.

...

Having made seven thousand bowls,
[each adorned] with the seven gems
and filled with clarified butter,
placing [in them] a thousand wicks,
with a mind that was very pleased,
I proceeded to light [them all,]
and laid [them] out in seven rows,
to do puja to the World’s Lord
and at that time especially
I had the share in that merit.³²

Walters says of these verses: “we can understand that even when she was following after her husband it was *she* who gave alms, *she* who approved of the [gifts], *she* who followed after him, *she* who worshipped the [solitary buddhas]...Ultimately, these are all [Bhadda-Kapilani’s] deeds, not [Maha-Kassapa’s].”³³ We may conclude that even as women are linked with their spouses in their spiritual journeys, they ultimately break away from their spouses to pursue enlightenment independently.³⁴ These spiritual journeys are as much independent as they are interconnected.

We observe a similar pattern when we turn to Bhadda-Kapilani’s verses in the *Therigatha*. Bhadda-Kapilani speaks of her former husband Kassapa’s enlightenment. She lists his achievements: knowing his previous lives, seeing heaven and hell, ending rebirth, and perfecting higher knowledge.

³⁰ Walters, “Wives of the Saints,” 178.

³¹ Walters, “Wives of the Saints,” 181.

³² Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 923-928.

³³ Walters, “Wives of the Saints,” 182.

³⁴ Walters, “Wives of the Saints,” 191.

She calls him a “real Brahman / because he knows the three things that most don't know.”³⁵ Then she continues:

In exactly the same way, Bhaddā Kāpilānī
knows the three things that most don't know,
she has left death behind,
she takes care of the body, knowing it's her last,
making sure it doesn't become a vehicle for death after this.³⁶

In her final verse, she speaks to the parallelism that attended her and her husband's relationship. “Once we were husband and wife, / but seeing the danger in the world, we both went forth, / we removed our defiling compulsions, / we became cool, free.”³⁷ Bhadda-Kapilani's verses attest to her own spiritual achievements by likening them to those of her husband. She firmly establishes that they shared an equal role in seeing the true nature of reality and likewise played equal roles in renouncing the world. Their journeys, while not identical, ran along a parallel track which only merged with their identical experiences of enlightenment.

It is easy to suggest that it is only because of her husband's achievements that Bhadda-Kapilani lays claim to her own spiritual achievements. In her song of enlightenment, she still seems to defer to him, even though their marital ties have long been abandoned. However, this interpretation fails to notice that as she sings the praises of Kassapa, it becomes clear that she might as well be singing her own praises. She casts them as equals—both in the decision to go forth and in their ultimate enlightenment. Bhadda-Kapilani's verses also provide an example of creative insertion of women into the tradition and creative telling of their achievements. We notice that Bhadda-Kapilani never asserts that she is a great Brahman; this is a moniker she reserves for Kassapa. However, she subsequently states that she achieved everything he achieved in “exactly the same way.” She has stopped just short of explicitly calling herself a real Brahman, but ultimately does so in a roundabout way.

Many women in the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana* do not mention their husbands and are still able to assert their spiritual achievements. It is likely, then, that Bhadda-Kapilani wanted her

³⁵ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 64.

³⁶ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 65.

³⁷ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 66.

achievements to stand alongside those of her husband or that mention of her husband helped explain her achievements. Walters' analysis of Bhaddā Kāpilānī's *Theri-Apadana* verses and my analysis of her *Therigatha* verses remind us that women are present in the stories we read, even if we do not see their direct involvement. As we will see in a subsequent section, the ways in which women are directly inserted in narrative tradition circumvents potential opposition to women's claims of spiritual significance.

Returning to the *Theri-Apadana*, we see a perfect example of intertwined karmic journeys in the apadana of Yasodhara, the Buddha's wife. While their ties as spouses ended with the Great Departure and Gotama's subsequent enlightenment, the *Yasodhara-apadana* makes clear that they are still connected—as they have been for much of their spiritual journeys across innumerable lifetimes. Yasodhara recounts a previous rebirth in the time of the Buddha Dipankara when she was a woman named Sumitta. This narrative implicitly suggests that it was she who was responsible for Sumedha's aspiration to buddhahood.³⁸ I will address this story in fuller detail in the following section of this thesis.

After recounting this rebirth, Yasodhara lists the impressive series of buddhas for whom she made offerings. She says: "I'm constantly doing service / to Great Sages [whose number was] / eight hundred and fifty trillion, / and seven hundred eighty-five / billion [additional Buddhas]."³⁹ This is but one of many verses in which Yasodhara lists what *she* herself has done for trillions of buddhas. Of particular importance in Yasodhara's apadana is that despite her continuous, often marital connection to the Buddha in his previous lives, she breaks away from him to pursue her own soteriological goal, *nibbana*. Yasodhara, at the end of her life and then living in a convent in Rajagaha, reasons that:

"Nanda, Rahula and Bhadda;
likewise the two chief followers;
Suddhodana Maharaja,
and Gotami Pajapati;
the great theas of great renown;
and the theris with great powers:
they've gone to peaceful [nirvana],

³⁸ Walters, "Wives of the Saints," 188.

³⁹ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 1033-1034.

traceless like the flame of a lamp.
While the World's Lord still is living,
I'll travel that peaceful path too."
And having reasoned [all] that out,
she foresaw the end of her life.⁴⁰

Yasodhara chooses her *parinibbana*, which necessitates her abandonment of the Buddha. While they have traversed lifetimes side-by-side, Yasodhara knows that her journey into *parinibbana* will be hers alone. The two apadanas that directly follow Yasodhara's are those of a group of ten thousand and eighteen thousand Buddhist nuns led by Yasodhara. They say: "We're Yasodharas, Great Hero; / desirable, speaking sweet words. / [And] in the home, O Great Hero, / [we] all [were fixed as] your chief queens."⁴¹ These tens of thousands of nuns all claimed to have been the chief queens of Gotama Buddha at one point or another during his many lifetimes. Using Strong's language, we might also call them his *karmic companions*. Walters suggests that these two apadanas should not be ignored; if we take seriously the numbers presented to us, then "even though there are significantly more male than female apadanas, in fact the female arahants recorded in the *Apadana* as members of the early Buddhist community vastly outnumber their male counterparts."⁴² These impressive statistics yet again affirm women's participation in Buddhism.

Ultimately, men and women tread different, but complementary spiritual paths. These paths merge under a shared desire for liberation. Walters notes that marriage is often discussed in the *Theri-Apadana* and the jataka genre, but is entirely missing in the *Thera-Apadana*; he concludes that the concern with marriage is a gendered concern.⁴³ If we take seriously the *Theri-Apadana*'s role as a legitimating text, then marriage "was part and parcel of the project to establish a place for women in Buddhist history."⁴⁴ In other words, marriage is a gendered concern because marriage was part of the strategy to insert women into established narrative tradition.

⁴⁰ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 954-956.

⁴¹ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 1049.

⁴² Walters, "Wives of the Saints," 190. Five hundred and nine *Thera-Apadana* compared to forty *Theri-Apadana*.

⁴³ Walters, "Wives of the Saints," 164.

⁴⁴ Walters, "Wives of the Saints," 190.

Inserting Women Into Existing Narratives

When we examine the presence of women in Buddhist narratives, we see the clever ways in which Buddhist authors insert women into the existing narrative tradition, and the ways in which those women reaffirm their spiritual achievements. Collett and Walters identify this creative addition in ancient South Asian material like the *Theri-Apadana* and Derris identifies it in medieval Thai Theravada material as well. Taken together, we see a recurring concern among Buddhist writers and compilers, most probably male monastics, to include women in the narrative histories of Buddhist tradition. As members of a dynamic tradition, Buddhist writers in different times and cultures participated in compositional practices that engaged other Buddhist texts in conversation. We see the same concern and actions on the part of ancient Buddhist writers that we witness in some of the medieval Thai material as well. Derris argues that Thai Buddhist compilers placed women into narrative traditions in creative ways that did not disturb the tradition itself.⁴⁵ In this section, I will look first at the medieval Thai material Derris analyzes, then turn to an analysis of the *Theri-Apadana* and *Therigatha* for similar instances of the creative insertion of women into narrative tradition.

Derris draws our attention to the apocryphal Princess Jataka found in the medieval Pali *Sotatthakhimahanidana* (*Sotatthakhi*). It is apocryphal in the sense that it is not included in Theravada canonical tradition. Canonical tradition situates the Sumedha story as the beginning of the bodhisatta path for Gotama Buddha. In this story, the Bodhisatta was an ascetic named Sumedha. As the Buddha Dipankara walks into Sumedha's village, Sumedha lays down in the muddy road and lets the buddha step on his back. When he stands again, Sumedha offers the Buddha Dipankara lotus flowers and makes his rebirth aspiration. Dipankara affirms the aspiration and relays that Sumedha will be Gotama Buddha in a future rebirth. The Princess Jataka, however, takes place in the lifetime prior to the Sumedha story when the Buddha is a princess. We may understand it as a prequel to the Sumedha jataka. In spite of the stability of sex, the Princess Jataka is significant as it showcases a woman, the princess, in the status of bodhisatta—or nearly bodhisatta.

⁴⁵ Karen Derris, "When the Buddha Was a Woman: Reimagining Tradition in the Theravada," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 42.

In the Princess Jataka, Princess Muni's brother is the Buddha Former Dipankara. She witnesses him give a prediction of buddhahood to a monk—who will later become the Buddha Later Dipankara (who we meet in the Sumedha jataka). The princess states her aspiration to also become a buddha, but the Buddha Former Dipankara says he cannot make a prediction for his sister because she is a woman; she lacks the second condition for a bodhisatta, being male.⁴⁶ Instead, the Buddha Former Dipankara gives what Derris calls a prediction of a prediction.⁴⁷ He prophesies that many lifetimes later, when the Buddha Later Dipankara (currently the monk) is the living buddha, the princess will be Sumedha. At that time, the Buddha Later Dipankara will give the prediction of buddhahood.

In another medieval Thai version of this story, however, it is Princess Muni who makes her aspiration for buddhahood first and it is the monk who witnesses her aspiration. It is only through witnessing her aspiration that he decides to make his own aspiration for buddhahood. In this version, Princess Muni sets not only her own karmic path to buddhahood in motion, but that of the Buddha Later Dipankara. We might read between the lines that without her aspiration, we would have neither the Buddha Later Dipankara nor Gotama Buddha.

While Princess Muni's role is significant, there is some scholarly debate over what we might call her. While Derris calls her a bodhisatta, Appleton considers this term misleading. She says:

the story consciously predates the first confirmed aspiration of Buddhahood that marks the beginning of the bodhisatta path as it is traditionally conceived. Although this story may inspire women to become bodhisattas, and open up the possibility of them behaving like—and even looking like—a bodhisatta, it simultaneously reinforces the idea that first a woman must become a man. The narrative therefore upholds the view...that the bodhisatta path is exclusively male, from the first successful aspiration through its completion.⁴⁸

Appleton's criticism actually helps illuminate Derris' point about the creative insertion of women into existing narratives. Appleton suggests that the narrative upholds the idea that women must be first reborn male. While it is true that Princess Muni is not a bodhisatta in a traditional sense, she comes as close as she possibly could. This becomes even more evident when we look to the second version Derris cites, in which Princess Muni is also responsible for the future rebirth of the Buddha

⁴⁶ Toshiichi Endo, *Buddha in Theravada Buddhism: A Study of the Concept of Buddha in Pali Commentaries* (Nediamala, Dehiwela, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1997).

⁴⁷ Derris, "When the Buddha Was a Woman," 36.

⁴⁸ Appleton, "In the Footsteps of the Buddha," 39-40.

Later Dipankara without whom Sumedha would not have received his rebirth prediction. It is the princess whose actions set this karmic path in motion. It's difficult to determine whether or not we can appropriately call her a bodhisatta because she occupies a status in-between. The point Derris makes is that compilers of Buddhist texts found creative ways to insert women into existing narrative tradition without upsetting it. The Princess Jataka does not upset the tradition—that women must be reborn male to be bodhisattas—but it certainly comes awfully close. It bends, but does not break, tradition such that women play pivotal roles.

The presence of women in these critical stories continues when we look to the apadana of the Buddha's wife, Yasodhara. The *Yasodhara-apadana* closely mirrors the *Gotami-apadana*; Yasodhara decides she is ready for *parinibbana* and entreats the Buddha for his permission, which he grants. As he had done with Gotami, he invites her to perform miracles. Then she recounts a previous rebirth in which she is a woman named Sumitta who is born into a brahmin family during the time of the Buddha (Later) Dipankara. She recounts:

At that time there was a brahmin
[known by] the name of Sumedha.
He was making the road ready
for the All-Seer who was coming
...
I went to that gathering.
With eight handfuls of blue lotus
for offering to the Teacher,
in the midst of [all] the people
I saw that fierce [ascetic] sage.
...
Making [my] heart even more pleased,
I said, 'O lofty-minded sage,
seeing no other gift [to give,]
I'm giving flowers to you, sage.
There are five handfuls for you, sage;
the [remaining] three are for me.
Let there be success through this [gift]
for your Awakening, O sage.'⁴⁹

Sumedha offers the flowers Sumitta had given to him to the Buddha Dipankara, who subsequently gives rebirth prophecies to both Sumedha and Sumitta. Sumitta had intended to give her eight handfuls of lotus flowers to the Buddha Dipankara herself, but upon seeing that Sumedha had no gift

⁴⁹ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 1003-1008.

to offer the buddha, Sumitta chose to give five handfuls to Sumedha. She rejoiced in his accumulation of merit and states that she gives him the flowers so that he will succeed in enlightenment. It is through Sumitta's suggestion that Sumedha gives the lotuses to the buddha, thus beginning his journey to becoming Gotama Buddha.

Taken together, we see that Princess Muni's aspiration toward buddhahood resulted in both her rebirth as Sumedha and the monk's rebirth as the Buddha Later Dipankara. Subsequently, Sumitta offers blue lotuses to Sumedha (the princess' rebirth), which Sumedha then offers to the Buddha Later Dipankara (the monk's rebirth). Sumitta's gift sets in motion Sumedha's journey to buddhahood and her own journey as his future wife, Yasodhara. Walters therefore concludes that it is actually Yasodhara who acts as the agentive force behind Sumedha's eventual Buddhahood.⁵⁰

What the authors of these stories so artfully do is insert women into the existing tradition without breaking that tradition.⁵¹ The core story remains intact. Sumedha still offers flowers to the Buddha Dipankara and still receives a prediction of buddhahood. Nothing has been changed and removed from that tradition, but women have been added. Derris attributes this to a clear concern with gender and enlightenment on the part of male, Buddhist monastic writers and compilers.⁵² Lang, citing Buddhist studies scholar Bhikkhuni Dhammadinna, further suggests that those who transmitted these narratives were keenly aware of the reactions of a lay female audience for whom the Princess Jataka might prove especially inspirational in its depiction of a spiritual path to buddhahood that was open to and inclusive of women.⁵³ Princess Muni and Sumitta are significant characters and their presence is an absolute necessity for this foundational jataka story to take place. In keeping with Walters' claim that the *Theri-Apadana* functions as paradigms, I argue that these stories and the women characters in these stories have ramifications for lived experience. They reinforce the idea that women play important roles in Buddhism and further suggest that the equal participation of men and women is required to build Buddhist tradition. Their paths to enlightenment are intertwined, and both men and women are necessary for one another's spiritual success.

⁵⁰ Walters, "Wives of the Saints," 188.

⁵¹ Derris, "When the Buddha Was a Woman," 42.

⁵² Derris, "When the Buddha Was a Woman," 43.

⁵³ Bhikkhuni Dhammadinna, "Predictions of Women to Buddhahood in Middle-Period Literature," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 22 (2015): 489. Lang, "Reimagining Buddhist Women," 48.

Gotami: The Buddha for Women?

Walters, in his analysis of the *Gotami-apadana*, concludes that Gotami is the buddha for women. One question emerges: what is a buddha? As Gethin has articulated, there are three types of enlightened beings in Mainstream Buddhism—of which Theravada is the only surviving example—arhats, solitary buddhas, and buddhas.⁵⁴ Arhats attain enlightenment in their present lives from the teachings of a buddha. Solitary buddhas reach enlightenment in their present lives without the help of a living buddha, but they do not teach. Buddhas, considered the best category, are those who reach enlightenment on their own and stay in *samsara* to teach. If we take these categories at face value, then of course Gotami is not a buddha but an arhat; she did not discover the Dhamma, but learned it through her proximity to a teacher, Gotama.

Understood under new parameters, however, the question of Gotami's buddhahood is not so obvious. Lang reminds us of Gotami's early life within the monastic community when she sought ordination. As we have already examined, the Buddha would only allow ordination if Gotami accepted the eight heavy rules that subjected the women's order to the authority of the men's order. Lang highlights a different aspect: despite these eight rules, women choose to follow Gotami.⁵⁵ Perhaps she inspired in them something akin to what Gotama must have inspired in his earlier followers. Perhaps these women were her chosen family at the palace during her queenly life. We don't know who these five hundred women were to Gotami, but we know that she must have meant something to them if they were willing to lead monastic lives to follow her.

Gotami is more than a leader. She is also a teacher. Gethin articulates that a buddha (*samyak-buddha*) is first and foremost a teacher. It is his through his guidance that men and women cultivate the right attitudes to escape *samsara*. Buddhist texts are replete with didactic discourses in which the Buddha imparts some kind of wisdom to his followers. If we look to the *Therigatha*, we see many instances of his teaching. He convinces Surinanda to abandon her vanity and he teaches Kisagotami about impermanence; yet as Findly has noted, nuns often list female teachers in addition to the

⁵⁴ Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*, 33.

⁵⁵ Lang, "Reimagining Buddhist Women," 31.

Buddha himself among their influences.⁵⁶ The theme of female teachers is one I will explore in greater detail in the final chapter.

If we turn to the *Gotami-apadana*, we see that its titular character is constantly teaching. In her exchanges with the laywomen, Ananda, and the Buddha, Gotami teaches on a number of Buddhist concepts. Walters says:

In addition to nirvana itself, “Gotami’s Story” explains, exemplifies, and mentions numerous other Buddhist themes: the central doctrine of the impermanence and essencelessness of all things (verses 56-57, 59-60, 138, 144, 151, 153, 179- 80), the four noble truths (verse 21), the nature and powers of arhats (verses 76- 78, 124-30, 183-88), the contrast of “form-body” and “dharma-body” (verses 31-33), meditative states of consciousness (verses 145-47), the auspicious marks of a buddha (verses 39, 41, 42, 52) and various cosmological perspectives. This somewhat indirect, but simple, means of teaching abstract concepts serves the obvious intention of the author(s) to encourage listeners to become more Buddhist by following Gotami’s example: to understand what she understood, and to act with her biography as their inspiration (verses 27-29, 188-89).⁵⁷

These teachings are for the laywomen to whom the *Gotami-apadana* is directed. We see Gotami boldly asserting that women can and do attain higher states and liberation. She says: “That state unseen by the ancients, / and likewise by rival teachers, / is known by [Buddhist] young maidens, / when they’re [only] seven years old.”⁵⁸ This is a verse that appears throughout the *Theri-Apadana* and attests to the spiritual capabilities of women and girls. Her words even speak against an earlier assertion by the laywomen, who tell Gotami “nirvana’s not proper for you.”⁵⁹ She affirms that *nibbana* is proper for her and for all women.

Gotami also refers to assumptions about women and their spiritual capabilities. She says to the Buddha: “it is believed / that women make every error. / If there’s any error in me, / forgive it.” The Buddha’s reply is particularly telling of how Gotami is perceived in his community. He says: “What’s not forgiven to forgive / in [one who’s] adorned with virtue?”⁶⁰ The Buddha continues: “There are fools who doubt that women [too] gain dhamma-penetration. / To dispel that [wrong] view of theirs, / display miracles, Gotami.”⁶¹ He invites Gotami to show off her spiritual powers in

⁵⁶ Ellison Banks Findly, “Women and the ‘Arahant’ Issue in Early Pali Literature,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 64.

⁵⁷ Walters, “Gotami’s Story,” 110.

⁵⁸ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 292.

⁵⁹ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 245.

⁶⁰ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 270-273.

⁶¹ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 305.

order to affirm, to *fools*, that women can indeed gain higher states and liberation. She displays miracles that see her taking flight, cloning herself, and growing large enough to hold mountains in her palm as though they are mustard seeds. “With her body she took control / of space right up to Brahma’s home.”⁶²

Even still, Gotami shows reverence for the Buddha. After cloning boundless groups of Buddhist nuns and making them again disappear she looks to the Buddha and says “Your mother’s sister, Great Hero, / is one who’s done what you have taught. / An attainer of [her] own goal, / she worships your feet, Eye-ful one.”⁶³ There is much we can glean from this verse. First, Gotami makes subtle mention of her sister Maya. This isn’t something integral to the narrative flow; she chooses to involve Maya. Even as she displays superhuman qualities, Gotami reminds us of her humanity by reminding us of her human sister. Second, Gotami speaks of *nibbana* as a “wish [she’s had] for very long” and says it is “the reason for which [she] went forth.”⁶⁴ We might recall Ohnuma’s claim that Gotami only wishes to go forth because she desperately clings to her son, the only remnant of her patriarchal ties. Gotami’s own words say otherwise. She went forth out of her own powerful and determined desire for liberation. Finally, Gotami remains respectful and reverential of the Buddha. She is not presuming to have surpassed him in terms of buddhahood. Yet, there is something so powerful about her showing reverence while she still floats in the sky having just displayed miracles. As Derris suggests in her analysis of the Princess Jataka, Buddhist writers creatively inserted women into narrative tradition in ways that did not upset it.⁶⁵ Likewise, Gotami never claims buddhahood. She shows deference for the Buddha, yet her actions reveal her to be something more than an arhat.

We may conclude that while Gotami is not a buddha in the traditional sense or in the sense that Gotama is a buddha, her role in the Sangha is more than that of an ordinary arhat. She is the leader of the women’s order. Walters argues that the available, male-dominant soteriological paradigms were not suitable for half of society. Women were left out of the conversation surrounding *nibbana*.⁶⁶ Walters questions: “But what woman could stand in apposition to the Buddha himself?...

⁶² Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 309.

⁶³ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 317.

⁶⁴ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 254, 249.

⁶⁵ Derris, “When the Buddha Was a Woman,” 29.

⁶⁶ Walters, “Gotami’s Story,” 111.

The Buddha's 'great going out' opened the door to arhatship, guaranteeing the finality of the monks' nirvana. What of the nuns' path? Whose 'great going out' guarantees that the nirvana of nuns, too, is final? The answer of course is Gotami.⁶⁷ Gotami's *parinibbana* guarantees the *parinibbana* of women just as Gotama's *parinibbana* guarantees the *parinibbana* of men. They function in complementary ways that ensure liberation for all in the Buddha's dispensation.

Moreover, Gotami's speeches prior to her *parinibbana* include creative teachings, incredible miracles that refute the belief that women cannot attain higher states of dhamma-penetration, and a bold assertion of her own motives for seeking ordination. Gotami, throughout her *apadana*, challenges dominant narratives. She teaches laywomen that women can attain *parinibbana* and through her miracles, she more than proves that she herself has done so. Gotami went forth, accompanied by five hundred Sakyan women, as a queen with a genuine desire for liberation. She goes into *parinibbana*, accompanied by five hundred of her followers, as a buddha.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced the concept of parallelism. I began by introducing Alice Collett's argument that the *Theri-Apadana* was a legitimizing project that sought to solidify the women's monastic order—and women's participation in Buddhism more generally—by creating a women's history of Buddhism. Both Collett and Walters make the claim that the *Theri-Apadana* was created with women in mind as the stories offer accounts of very realistic, human women encountering experiences unique to women. Following Collett and Walters, I have argued that parallelism attends these Buddhist narratives in ways that legitimate the women's monastic order.

I analyzed three aspects of parallelism. First, the stability of gender across lifetimes indicates that women aspire to maintain their womanhood. They wish to be reborn as women, aspiring to the status of nuns in the dispensations of previous buddhas like Padumuttara. Appleton argues that the stability of sex is a characteristic of jataka or past life stories, but the mandate that the bodhisatta is always male, and therefore cannot be female, came from commentaries of the jatakas—not the jatakas themselves. The *Theri-Apadana* challenges this assumption that maleness is a better identity

⁶⁷ Walters, "Gotami's Story," 111.

to occupy for spiritual journeys by rendering many examples of women who wish to be women. I also considered one case in which a past-life man is reborn as woman, Isidasi. The karmic seed of adultery, the fruit of which Isidasi reaped, was planted by a man. Isidasi's own conduct as a woman in her current life appears flawless. Her verses also challenge the idea that to be reborn as a woman is spiritually inferior, because what is truly lesser about her birth is the way she is treated by others.

Next, I considered parallelism as a form of legitimation of the women's monastic lineage. The *Theri-Apadana* weaves a complicated history of women's participation in Buddhism that affirmed the right of the lineage to exist and affirmed the right of the individual to be in that lineage. I concluded that in the history the apadanas paint, it would have been unusual for Gotama not to have a women's monastic lineage. Moreover, the apadanas legitimate individual nuns by suggesting that past buddhas prophesied that they would attain those stations; the strength of the claims of past buddhas stand up for the nuns and assert that they are living out karmic journeys long in the making. The *Theri-Apadana* also offers potential for laywomen to enter the Buddhist path by supplementing available spiritual paradigms for laywomen to emulate.

Third, I analyzed spiritual journeys as family affairs. Strong noted parallels between the Buddha and Yasodhara in the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya and introduced the term "karmic companions." I argued that we find similar examples in the Pali Canon. Walters notes that concern with marriage is gendered; the *Thera-Apadana* does not mention marriage at all, but the *Theri-Apadana* does. Using the case of Bhadda-Kapilani and her husband Maha-Kassapa, Walters argues that the wife's apadana fleshes out and enriches the husband's. She also creatively inserts herself into his karmic trajectory such that their journey to enlightenment is a team effort, whereas Maha-Kassapa writes of a solitary experience. Walters concludes, however, that although they are linked by marriage, Bhadda-Kapilani does eventually break from her husband to pursue her independent goals of *nibbana*. Looking to her *Therigatha* verses, I argued that while she praises her husband for his spiritual attainments, her language of "in the exact same way" indicates that she is also praising her own spiritual attainments. Likewise, the *Yasodhara-apadana* showed another instance of a woman who has traversed lifetimes by her spouse's side, but ultimately breaks away—in this case, to pursue *parinibbana*.

Additionally, following Derris, I considered how women are creatively inserted into narrative tradition in a way that does not break that tradition. Derris makes the case that the titular character in the apocryphal Princess Jataka comes as close as possible to a female bodhisatta. In one version Derris cites, we see that Princess Muni sets up not only her rebirth as the ascetic Sumedha but the rebirth of a monk as the Buddha Dipankara—without whom Sumedha could not receive his rebirth prophecy. She shows herself to be an integral part of Gotama’s eventual buddhahood. Returning to the *Yasodhara-apadana*, we observe that Yasodhara’s past life was a woman named Sumitta born during the time of the Buddha Dipankara. She intended to offer flowers to the buddha herself, but upon seeing that the ascetic Sumedha had nothing to offer Dipankara, she gave some of her flowers to him. He offers the flowers to Dipankara and receives his rebirth wish. Walters suggests that the *Yasodhara-apadana* indicates that Sumitta’s actions are integral to Sumedha’s aspiration of buddhahood; she is the agent of his enlightenment. Lang and Derris both agree that these narratives display a clear concern with issues of gender and enlightenment—and creating a spiritual path that was inclusive. These two examples, one from ancient South Asia and the other from medieval Thailand, are evidence of a historical concern for the role of women in Buddhism. The concern for female paradigms is not a novel idea and was something Buddhist compilers and writers grappled with at many times in Buddhist history.

Finally, I analyzed how Mahapajapati Gotami may be considered the buddha for women. This compelling claim is put forth by Walters, who argues that the *Gotami-apadana* showcases a buddha attaining *parinibbana*. I noted that Gotami is not a buddha in the traditional sense, but if we consider a buddha to be a leader, a teacher, and a supernatural being, then Gotami certainly qualifies. Lang notes that Gotami’s impressive retinue of women choose to follow her. We may imagine that Gotami inspired in these women something akin to what Gotama inspired in his early followers. Walters makes the case that the *Gotami-apadana* is also rife with Buddhist teachings, most of which are directed at laywomen. Gotami asserts that women can and do reach higher states and ultimate liberation, going so far as to say that liberation is known by seven-year-old Buddhist girls even when it is not known by the ancients.

Walters wonders what woman could possibly stand in for the Buddha—what woman could guarantee *parinibbana* for women just as the Buddha guarantees *parinibbana* for men. The logical answer is Gotami. Gotami and Gotama function complementarily to ensure liberation for the entire Buddhist community. Yet even as Gotami displays miracles before her *parinibbana*, she never claims buddhahood. She even shows reverence for the Buddha and appreciates the value of his teaching. Nonetheless, like the other women whose stories feature here, Gotami ultimately separates to pursue her own spiritual goal—a path she herself set in motion many lifetimes ago.

A Woman's Experience of Buddhism

Many scholars I have treated thus far speak to the highly compelling nature of the women's verses in both the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana*. While Findly identifies the *Theragatha* as "distant, neutral, and devoid of individuality,"¹ she argues that the *Therigatha* verses are "very personal and often filled with autobiographical detail."² They speak from their lived experiences as women and often describe facing challenges unique to women. Chapa recounts a dialogue with her husband in which she begs him not to abandon her and their son to ordain.³ The former courtesan Ambapali's verses metaphorically dissect her aging body.⁴ Isidasi describes repeated abusive or otherwise neglectful marriages.⁵ Sumedha describes her desperation to ordain and her struggle against her parents' wishes for her to marry. In verses ascribed to Kisagotami, a female deity says:

Being a woman is suffering,
that has been shown by the Buddha,
the tamer of those to be tamed.
Sharing a husband with another wife is suffering for some,
while for others, having a baby just once is more than enough suffering.
Some women cut their throats,
others take poison,
some die in pregnancy
and then both mother and child experience miseries.⁶

In speaking personally and giving autobiographical detail, the women present themselves as fully human. One way they do this is by discussing their doubts. They wrestle with their own minds to understand the Dhamma. Some leave the monastic order repeatedly as a result of this mental unrest. We also see women frankly discuss their flaws and mistakes. For example, some nuns recount past lives in which they slandered other nuns.⁷ Collett puts it best:

The accounts do not present perfect or flawless women, but rather women who are all too human; they tell of struggle, and victory over hardship through embracing the teachings of the Buddha. The text suggests that any starting-point for practice is possible, and that

¹ Findly, "Women and the 'Arahant' Issue," 64.

² Findly, "Women and the 'Arahant' Issue," 64.

³ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 292-313.

⁴ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 252-270.

⁵ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 451-525.

⁶ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 216-217.

⁷ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 1273-1274.

whatever situation a woman might find herself in, adversity can be overcome by taking refuge in the truths communicated by Gotama Buddha.⁸

While there are many examples of challenges women faced, for the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on two deeply traumatic experiences often described by Buddhist nuns—the loss of a child and the threat of sexual predation. I argue that these were real concerns for the women whose stories appear in the *Therīgatha* and to a lesser extent the *Therī-Apadana*. For all the difficulties women face, their narratives also speak to the importance of female friendship, female teachers, and a female community. I will discuss this women's community in the final section of this chapter.

Motherhood and Loss of a Child

The tragic loss of a child is a common theme in the verses of famous nuns. The stories of two nuns, Kisagotami and Patacara, are particularly well-known and appear in both the *Therīgatha* and the *Therī-Apadana*. Their stories are haunting and invite immediate empathy from the reader. Kisagotami's apadana opens like many other apadanas: she aspires in a past life to the station of a foremost nun and a former Buddha Padumuttara prophesies that her wish will reach fruition. She is then reborn as a princess—one of the seven sisters—and then into the heavenly realms. However, it is her final rebirth that is so disturbing. Kisagotami relates that she is born poor and unprosperous, but marries into a wealthy clan. Prior to conceiving a child, Kisagotami is widely mocked by her husband's relatives. She says: "Except [my] husband, the others / are pointing at me [saying,] 'Poor!'" / But after I became with child, / then I was loved by all of them."⁹ Her condition within the family is directly linked to her status as a mother and she tells us that she loves her son as she loves her own breath. Kisagotami's newborn son dies young and Kisagotami says of herself: "grief struck, voicing [my] misery, / teary-eyed, [my] mouth crying out, / carrying [that young boy's] dead corpse, / I'm going around lamenting."¹⁰ Kisagotami carries her son's body throughout her village, loudly expressing her anguish over the death of her only child. She encounters the Buddha and begs him to bring her son back to life. The Buddha replies: "bring [me] a white mustard seed, / [collected] in

⁸ Collett, "The Female Past in Early Indian Buddhism," 221.

⁹ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 712.

¹⁰ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 714.

whichever home / where [people] dying is not known.”¹¹ Kisagotami wanders, searching for a home which does not know death. We might imagine that throughout her search, she hears many stories of loss. Finally, she realizes the impossibility of the task the Buddha has given her; she cannot find a mustard seed from a home that has not known death because such a home does not exist. This realization leads Kisagotami back to the Buddha whereupon she joins the women’s monastic order.

Patacara has much the same story. Like Kisagotami, Patacara’s wish to attain the status of a foremost nun is affirmed by Padumuttara. She, too, is reborn as one of the seven sisters. In her final rebirth, she is born into a wealthy family. She falls in love with a lower-class man and runs away with him. She bears a son and is pregnant with another when she decides to visit her parents. Her husband is displeased by this decision, so Patacara takes her son and sneaks out of the house while her husband is away. She says:

At the time for me to give birth,
a massive rain-cloud arose [there],
and then [my] husband having gone
to find grass, was killed by a snake.
Then miserable [and] helpless,
in the throes of painful childbirth,
going toward a relative’s house,
seeing an overflowing stream,
carrying [my] newborn I crossed
to the stream’s other bank, alone.
After nursing [my] newborn son,
to help my other [son] to cross,
I turned; an osprey carried off
my wailing babe. [Then] the current
swept [him] away, [my] other [son].
...I was overcome with grief.¹²

Patacara’s troubles do not end there. Now without her husband or her two sons, she makes the journey to her family’s home only to find them all dead. It is at this pivotally low point in her life that she finds the Buddha. He says to her: “Do not grieve, child; breathe easily. / You should search after your [own] self; / why uselessly torment yourself?”¹³ He goes on to say that there is no shelter in *samsara*, and Patacara then gains enlightenment.

¹¹ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 716.

¹² Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 620-623.

¹³ Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” v. 627.

Patacara and Kisagotami's stories of child-loss are not unique. Many of the nuns whose stories appear in the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana* have lost children. Kisagotami wanders, carrying the body of her son, desperately searching for a cure for death. Patacara loses her entire family in a single day. The nun Vasetthi says:

I was wounded by grief for my son,
mind unhinged, mad,
without clothes, hair unkempt,
I walked from place to place.
Resting on heaps of garbage in the streets,
in cemeteries, on highways
I wandered for three years,
always hungry and thirsty.¹⁴

Their stories speak to a larger theme of child mortality that plagued the lives of women. They encounter the Buddha at what surely is the worst points in their lives and it is through these shocking experiences of loss that they come to realize impermanence and ultimately attain enlightenment. In this section, I analyze critical arguments put forth by Berkwitz and Ohnuma. Both discuss Buddhist motherhood and the loss of children in ways that argue for Buddhism's devaluation of mothers. While such critiques are supported by certain discourses on mothers, I argue that such interpretations are not the only interpretations possible. The feminist-ethical hermeneutic calls for attention to both misogynistic and affirming material with an eye toward the implications of our interpretations. Before delving into the bulk of their arguments, I will start with a note on the words they choose to use.

Berkwitz, in his analysis of madness in Buddhism, argues that madness is gendered female and arises from a strong emotional experience, such as the loss of a child.¹⁵ He says that Kisagotami "eventually realizes that death touches all people and she regains her good sense" and remarks that this story "represents the view that when extreme emotions go unchecked, madness may result."¹⁶ He goes on to discuss Patacara's story. When she goes mad, the Buddha "enters the story and is described as compassionately taking notice of Patacara's sorry plight."¹⁷ The unchecked "extreme

¹⁴ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 133-134.

¹⁵ Stephen C. Berkwitz, "Madness and Gender in Buddhism," in *Images of Madness: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Alessandra M. Pires and Luciana Namorato (Missouri: From the Scholar's Desk, 2010), 37.

¹⁶ Berkwitz, "Madness and Gender in Buddhism," 37-38.

¹⁷ Berkwitz, "Madness and Gender in Buddhism," 40.

emotions” of which Berkwitz speaks result from the traumatic deaths of one’s children—in Patacara’s case, her entire family—yet Berkwitz describes these states as “sorry plights” as though Kisagotami and Patacara have simply lost their level-headedness. Ohnuma, likewise, compares grieving mothers’ spiritual states to those of “lowly creatures such as animals.”¹⁸ This is a comparison she also applies to Mahapajapati during the Great Departure.¹⁹ While Ohnuma admits that the death of a child is “the most potent manifestation of suffering possible,” she suggests that “there is nothing noble or beneficial about such suffering” because it makes spiritual progress impossible.²⁰ Like Berkwitz, Ohnuma argues that the grieving mother (who suffers too much) is mad, and therefore the very opposite of the dispassionate monk, the ideal.²¹

Part of what makes these grieving, animalistic mothers go mad, Berkwitz argues, is that they are bereft of the patriarchal influence they need to survive. In the case of Patacara, Berkwitz argues that the Buddha acts as the missing patriarchy; thus, Patacara’s story “ends with the male Buddha heroically putting an end to a case of female madness and suffering.”²² He suggests that the monks’ order acts as a stand-in for a husband or a father, thus subordinating the women in the nuns’ order to patriarchal control. Ohnuma puts forth a similar claim that the women who follow Gotami into ordination are mothers whose sons have died either physical or social deaths (i.e. become monks under Gotama). These mothers, according to Ohnuma, desperately seek out the remnants of their patriarchal relatives. She argues that Gotami only ordains after the death of her husband, Siddhodana, when she lacked the influence of a patriarchal figurehead; she went to the Buddha in an attempt to recover that patriarchy.

Buddhist narrative tradition includes both negative and positive valuations of mothers—discourses in which mothers are denigrated and discourses in which they are extolled. The feminist-ethical hermeneutic invites us to interpret these stories in deliberate ways that elevate justice. Berkwitz and Ohnuma describe the experience of child-loss in terms of losing one’s good sense or behaving like an animal, but the feminist-ethical hermeneutic offers new insights. These new insights

¹⁸ Ohnuma, “Mother-Love and Mother-Grief,” 102.

¹⁹ Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 127.

²⁰ Ohnuma, “Mother-Love and Mother-Grief,” 102.

²¹ Ohnuma, “Mother-Love and Mother-Grief,” 102.

²² Berkwitz, “Madness and Gender in Buddhism,” 40.

bring complexity to bear on the narratives with an awareness of the trauma of child-loss as well as the potential for healing. There is an ethical question present in scholarly endeavors as we consider the diverse set of narratives which include valuations of mothers and make interpretive choices regarding that material. As Derris suggests, we ought to evaluate the ramifications of our interpretations such that our interpretive work not only does justice to the women in these ancient stories, but also does justice to living women now and in the future.

This is, fundamentally, a matter of grieving mothers. Berkwitz questions why in the narratives women mourn for children and men do not.²³ Ohnuma cites Susan Starr Sered, who suggests that women are more greatly invested in the child-rearing process and are therefore more affected than fathers when a child dies. Ohnuma says: “this leads not only to more profound and prolonged grieving but also to a greater confrontation with compelling, existential questions, which can lead such women to greater religious involvement.”²⁴ Ohnuma notes that mother-love is often metaphorically understood in Buddhism as a height of love, but is ultimately devalued as too attached. She says:

Mother-love is a potent, [recurring] symbol in South Asian Buddhist literature. Buddhist literature often idealizes mother-love as the purest, most compassionate, and most self-sacrificing type of love possible—far more intense, for example, than father-love. Mother-love thus serves, in many contexts, as the most appropriate metaphor for the love and compassion that a Buddha or bodhisattva radiates outward toward all beings; in countless Buddhist texts, we learn that Buddhas and bodhisattvas love all beings “just as a mother loves her only son” ... Despite the positive valuation, however, closer consideration... reveals that mother-love is a two-sided symbol that both succeeds and fails at the same time...while mother-love love is depicted as *particular* to one’s own child alone and not extending to anyone else, the Buddha’s love is *universal* and extends with equal intensity, to all living beings...Mother-love...is condemned in Buddhist texts as...a potent manifestation of desire, attachment, and clinging.²⁵

Ohnuma draws a distinction between particular love and universal love, equating them respectively with realistic mother-love and idealized mother-love (or Buddha-love). Ohnuma sees these categories in opposition with one another. Mother-love is selfish and directed at one individual while Buddha-love is universal; mother-love clings to a delusion of permanency while Buddha-love is aware of

²³ Berkwitz, “Madness and Gender in Buddhism,” 40.

²⁴ Ohnuma, “Mother-Love and Mother-Grief,” 96.

²⁵ Ohnuma, “Mother-Love and Mother-Grief,” 97-98.

impermanence.²⁶ Ohnuma is primarily interested in how mother-love is surmounted. To this end, she analyzes the five *Therigatha* poems which describe the loss of children. She concludes that:

grieving mothers [who] become nuns and then arhats consistently emphasize this movement from the particular to the universal, from the personal emotion of grief to an impersonal and analytical understanding of the *dukkha* (suffering) that characterizes the entire universe. This transformation is made possible, however, only through erasure of the dead child's identity, permanent severance of the mother-child bond, and eradication of a woman's maternal status.²⁷

Two *Therigatha* poems are particularly important here, those of Ubbiri and Patacara. Ohnuma takes both as prime examples of what she calls universalizing the particular.

Ubbiri mourns her daughter, Jiva, in a charnel ground that lies within the forest. She is approached by the Buddha, who says: "Eighty-four thousand daughters, all with that same name, / the ones that said they were "Life," / all have been burnt in this cremation ground, / so which one of them are you grieving for?" Ubbiri then says of the Buddha: "he pulled out the arrow that was hard for me to see."²⁸ Following Ohnuma, a possible interpretation is that the arrow represents the particular child. When the Buddha pulls out that arrow and discards that child's memory, the grieving mother can begin to have compassion for all living beings—not just her own child. However, the Buddha does not ask Ubbiri to have compassion for all living beings; rather, he prompts a realization of all the particular children that Ubbiri has lost by drawing her attention toward *samsara*, the cycle of existence in which she has mourned for innumerable many daughters all with the same name. He directs her toward more of *her own* children, not all children in general, and thus does not reject Jiva. To use Ohnuma's terms, the Buddha expands—but does not universalize—Ubbiri's particularistic grief to encompass all the daughters she has lost in *samsara*. It is not in the rejection of dead children that Ubbiri gains this insight, but in the realization that she has lost so many particular children in *samsara*. It is this realization that leads her to seek an escape from *samsara* and from that cyclic grief.

²⁶ Ohnuma, "Mother-Love and Mother-Grief," 98.

²⁷ Ohnuma, "Mother-Love and Mother-Grief," 104.

²⁸ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 51-52.

Working from a commentary on the *Therīgatha*, Ohnuma notes the Buddha telling Patacara that her tears for her dead children and family are just drops in an ocean of tears. She suggests that water imagery follows Patacara in other extant versions of her story. Ohnuma recounts one case:

Patacara, in the midst of a tremendous rainstorm, believes that the rain is falling on her alone; she says to a man she meets on the road, “I am the only person the rain fell on all night long.” In another version, she asks the man, “Did that rain fall elsewhere too or did it rain just for me?” What Patacara learns, of course, is that the rain of suffering she has experienced falls on all living beings without exception.²⁹

While Ohnuma takes this as evidence of a universalizing of Patacara’s particularistic grief—and therefore a disavowal of the memory of her children—it is better and more simply understood as a realization of the first Noble Truth: the truth of (ubiquitous) suffering.

The verses of Patacara that Ohnuma takes more serious issue with are those in which Patacara addresses grieving mothers on the topic of their deceased children. Like the Buddha for Ubbiri, Patacara is a teacher for grieving women. In one poem, she addresses as many as five hundred Buddhist nuns. She says:

You keep crying out, “My son!”
to that being who was coming or going somewhere else
and who came from somewhere else,
none of which you know.
But you do not really cry for him
over what you do know will face him wherever he is:
that is just human nature.
He came from there uninvited, he went from here without permission,
he came from somewhere or other, he stayed a bit.
From here he went one way, from there he will go another,
a hungry ghost will be reborn as a human.
He went the way he came, what is there to grieve about?³⁰

Ohnuma takes Patacara’s verses as an encouragement for other mothers “to view their dead children with detachment and indifference.”³¹ She continues:

In his commentary, Dhammapala explains the significance of these enigmatic verses. Within the context of the endless cycle of death and rebirth, “mother” and “son” are nothing more than strangers meeting upon a road; therefore, for the mother to grieve for a son as if he had some special relationship to her is nothing more than “complete selfishness”...Only by learning to see their sons in such a detached manner are the five hundred women saved.³²

²⁹ Ohnuma, “Mother-Love and Mother-Grief,” 105-106.

³⁰ Hallisey, *Therīgatha*, v. 127-130.

³¹ Ohnuma, “Mother-Love and Mother-Grief,” 106.

³² Ohnuma, “Mother-Love and Mother-Grief,” 106-107.

While there is nothing particularly inaccurate about this interpretation, a more generous interpretation is possible. Just as Ubbiri realizes that she has mourned countless daughters named Jiva, these grieving mothers realize that they have mourned countless particular children and will continue to do so within the cycle of *samsara*. None of these verses suggest a rejection of dead children or a rejection of motherhood; rather, they indicate a realization of ubiquitous suffering and an acknowledgement that death (in this case, the deaths of particular children) will always be a part of *samsara*.

Ohnuma solidifies her arguments by reliance on commentaries. As Appleton has shown, the commentarial layer of Buddhist texts may add interpretations not present in the narratives themselves. For example, it is the commentator Dhammapala—who writes between the 5th and 7th centuries CE, many hundreds of years after these verses are finally committed to writing around the first century BCE—who brings in the notion of the selfishness of the grieving mother to Patacara’s verses. In the verses themselves, this sentiment does not exist. Ohnuma continues to cite commentaries as she considers the story of Kisagotami. The Pali *Dhammapadatthakatha*, for example, states that upon finding no mustard seed from a house that did not know death, Kisagotami’s heart “which had been soft with love for her son, grew hard” which Ohnuma takes to indicate Kisagotami’s renouncement of her motherhood.³³ In Kisagotami’s verses themselves, however, this language simply does not exist.

Similarly flawed scholarship attends Ohnuma’s interpretation of Patacara’s verses. There are three sets of verses ascribed to Patacara; she does not discuss the tragic loss of her sons and husband in any of them. It is only in Kisagotami’s verses that we see a brief description of Patacara’s story. The latter two sets of verses are Patacara’s teachings. The first set of verses describe Patacara not necessarily mad with grief, but still struggling with Dhamma—a struggle many nuns admit to having. A perhaps older Patacara sits by a stream washing her feet. She tells us that she has still not found freedom, despite being virtuous, calm, and active and doing what the Buddha taught. She says:

While washing my feet I made the water useful in another way,
by concentrating on it move from the higher ground down.

³³ Ohnuma, “Mother-Love and Mother-Grief,” 107.

Then I held back my mind,
as one would do with a thoroughbred horse,
and I took a lamp and went into the hut.
First I looked at the bed, then I sat on the couch,
I used a needle to pull out the lamp's wick.
Just as the lamp went out, my mind was free.³⁴

Dhammapala's commentary suggests that what Patacara notices about the water is the way some droplets trickle down slower or more quickly than others but they all ultimately reach the ground.³⁵ She understands, thus, that human beings may have different lifespans, but are ultimately "subject to the phenomenon of destruction and to the phenomenon of disappearance."³⁶

In her analysis of this story, Ohnuma contrasts the "abstract and disembodied language in this enlightened statement" with the grief Patacara surely suffered earlier in life at the loss of her entire family. Rather than take Patacara's verses at face value, Ohnuma insists that Patacara's language indicates the transformation from particular to universal. She says: "Clearly, the specific identities of her sons, husband, and parents have been replaced by a detached analysis of 'life-forming elements' that come to destruction in youth, middle age, or old age. Her family has become an abstraction, and her own status as a mother disappears."³⁷ Ohnuma forces Patacara's great loss into these verses, where it otherwise does not exist. Nowhere in these verses does Patacara mention, even remotely, the disappearance of her maternal status, nor does she mention her family. She simply sits by the river washing her feet and observes the effects of gravity on water droplets. These verses are better understood as Patacara reflecting on Dhamma, with which she tells us she still struggles.

The point I wish to make here is that not all of Patacara's verses must necessarily be about losing her family. Of course, we cannot underscore how much this loss affects her, but it is absurd to suggest that it continues to monopolize her thoughts even years after the fact. As a multidimensional character, Patacara can have grieved the loss of her family and later reflected on Dhamma without necessarily rejecting her family. While Ohnuma seeks to paint Patacara in one role—the constantly

³⁴ Hallisey, *Therīgāthā*, v. 114-116.

³⁵ Ohnuma, "Mother-Love and Mother-Grief," 106.

³⁶ Ohnuma, "Mother-Love and Mother-Grief," 106.

³⁷ Ohnuma, "Mother-Love and Mother-Grief," 106.

grieving mother—the *Therigatha* shows Patacara to be a fully formed individual. Her verses do not strictly define her as a grieving mother, but as a living being searching for freedom in enlightenment.

While occasionally inaccurate, the claims Berkwitz and Ohnuma put forth are possible interpretations of the texts.³⁸ I argue, however, that they are not interpretations which elevate justice, per the feminist-ethical hermeneutic. These unsympathetic interpretations cast the mother as a pathetic, ever-suffering animal who requires the intervention of a dispassionate patriarchal figure (in this case, the Buddha) to cure their female madness. This interpretation is particularly invalid in light of Patacara teaching to other bereaved mothers. Does Patacara, a once-grieving mother herself, represent a patriarchal intervention as well?

In addition to undercutting the severity and legitimacy of the suffering these mothers experience, Ohnuma narrowly interprets these texts as if the mothers must always be grieving lest they have rejected the memories of their dead children and renounced their motherhood. She does not consider the dulling effect of time on grief, nor does she leave open room for healing after loss. I take primary issue with her claim that women must reject and develop dispassionate attitudes toward their dead children. Ohnuma points toward a universalizing that happens in the minds of each of these women, but she unnecessarily suggest that the universalization includes a rejection of dead children. I argue that what Ohnuma terms universalization is really expansion; the grieving mothers' worldview is expanded beyond (but still inclusive of) their particular dead child to encompass all the children they have lost in *samsara*. In so realizing that they have lost countless particular children in all lifetimes, they realize the truth of constant and pervasive suffering. Kisagotami searches for a mustard seed from a house that has never known death. She cannot find it and therefore comes to realize that everyone experiences death. Patacara thinks that rain (metaphorically understood as death) falls on only her, but later comes to realize it falls on everyone alike. In other versions of her story, she realizes that streams of water all flow downward—all heading toward the same end (death). Ubbiri mourns her daughter Jiva, then realizes with the Buddha's intervention that she has mourned innumerably many particular daughters throughout innumerably many lifetimes.

³⁸ Berkwitz claims women in the *Therigatha* only mourn sons, never daughters. We see this is directly contradicted by Ubbiri mourning her daughter Jiva.

While commentaries such as Dhammapala's may suggest a rejection of the particular child, the *Therigatha* itself does not indicate such a rejection and therefore Ohnuma's statement that the *Therigatha* is unaccommodating to "grief directed toward one's own, particular children" is unwarranted.³⁹ I argue that the *Therigatha* is in actuality very accommodating of particular dead children. According to Derris and Murcott, it is these experiences which form the basis of eventual enlightenment. Derris, reflecting on Kisagotami's story, says:

[Kisagotami] builds upon her mother experiences, reflecting upon her child, her love, his death, her grief, and her hard-won understanding. These mothering experiences are not severed from her life once she becomes a nun; rather, once she has realized the truth of impermanence through reflecting upon her mothering experience, she is awakened to the truth of reality.⁴⁰

Likewise, Murcott makes the case that Kisagotami's story "shows how a woman, overcome by terrible loss, emerges with new spiritual insight."⁴¹ These are spiritual insights gained directly from a close and particular experience of death. Motherhood, and thus the maternal loss of a child, are inextricably part of these nuns' experiences of enlightenment. Indeed, Derris suggests that it is this foundational basis of mothering that leads the Buddha to see that "mother is not aside from their spiritual potential, but a foundation for it."⁴² It is this realization, according to Derris, that prompts the Buddha to create a women's monastic order.

Beyond being a locus of realization of impermanence and suffering, the women's monastic order as it is portrayed in the *Therigatha* is clearly a community of healing. While Ohnuma draws out only four women (Kisagotami, Patacara, Ubbiri, and Vasetthi) who state their experiences of child loss, we cannot forget the unnamed five hundred women to whom Patacara addresses her teaching. Nor can we forget the countless women for whom the *Therigatha* may have been written. If we take the loss of a child seriously, these verses are evidence that real women found solace and healing in Buddhist teachings. The intervention which takes place is not of patriarchy correcting a maddened, stray woman. The intervention is in the misguided, grief-induced belief that one suffers alone. In the *Therigatha*, women suffer together and women heal together.

³⁹ Ohnuma, "Mother-Love and Mother-Grief," 109.

⁴⁰ Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 71.

⁴¹ Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 72.

⁴² Derris, "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering," 68.

Sexual Predation

A common misogynistic view of women is that they are snares of Mara, or Lord Death. Mara is a demonic figure who traps men (often using enticing female forms) in *samsara*, but Mara also tempts women. The nun Upachala had just attained enlightenment when Mara approaches her. He says: “Why not delight in life? / Everyone alive enjoys physical pleasures, / enjoy the pleasures of sex now, / you won’t regret it later.”⁴³ Upachala replies: “What you take as pleasures are not for me, / the mass of mental darkness is split open. / Know this, evil one, you are defeated, you are finished.”⁴⁴ An exchange such as this is common in the *Therīgatha*, with Mara often inviting nuns to enjoy physical pleasures with him; without fail, they all reject his advances.

We can understand Mara as a physical demonic being or as a metaphor for internal temptation, but we can also understand him more insidiously as the threat of sexual violence. Lang argues that sexual violence was a very real threat faced by women, especially nuns. She draws our attention to the Pali *Bhikkhuni-Samyutta*, in which Mara (who looks like Kama, the Indian god of love) approaches ten meditating nuns. “All ten of these enlightened nuns respond with calm detachment to Mara’s sexual aggression.”⁴⁵ As the rejections pile up, Mara grows more hostile. He insults Kisagotami with the suggestion that she only went into the forest with meditation as a guise to meet up with her lover. She replies “sharply that she had dealt already with her son’s death and had no further desire for men (or sex).”⁴⁶ When Mara approaches Uppalavanna, he lauds her beauty and then asks if she fears rape.

The Pali Vinaya suggests that Uppalavanna actually was the victim of rape by a brahmin youth while she was alone in her meditation hut.⁴⁷ The *Karmaśataka* tells the story of Uppalavanna rescuing a fellow nun, Bhadda-Kapilani, who was kidnapped on an alms-round and presented to a king, who subsequently assaulted her. Lang says, “Uppalavanna used her powers to enter the palace undetected, where she taught her skills to Bhadda, who then used them to escape and return to the

⁴³ Hallisey, *Therīgatha*, v. 189-190.

⁴⁴ Hallisey, *Therīgatha*, v. 195.

⁴⁵ Lang, “Reimagining Buddhist Women,” 44.

⁴⁶ Lang, “Reimagining Buddhist Women,” 44.

⁴⁷ Lang, “Reimagining Buddhist Women,” 45.

nuns' community."⁴⁸ Rape and sexual violence were also issues for women in their past lives. Bhadda-Kundalakesa's apadana tells of an encounter with her new husband (a thief) on a mountaintop. He attempts to steal her gold jewelry and rape her. She says: "Quickly indeed, in just a flash, / I came up with a clever trick: / like a deer by a mighty bow, / Sattuka was slaughtered [by] me."⁴⁹ She goes on to explain that she "made him, Sattuka, fall / from a treacherous mountain road."⁵⁰ Moments later, she encounters a group of ascetics and goes forth. If we are to take these stories seriously, then we reach the conclusion that sexual predation and violence is a real part of the lived experiences of nuns. In this section, I will analyze one story in particular, the story of Subha, and offer a re-reading in accordance with the feminist-ethical hermeneutic.

In her study on *asubha-bhavana* (meditation on the foulness of the body) in Indian Buddhist hagiographic literature, Liz Wilson makes the argument that "the objectification of women for the edification of men is truly a pan-Buddhist theme."⁵¹ *Asubha-bhavana* as described by Buddhaghosa is a meditative technique used to reflect on the truly disgusting nature of the body, but he includes a caveat: "monks should avoid using female bodies as objects of meditation, as nuns should avoid using male bodies."⁵² Given the rich amount of literature that offers evidence of men using female bodies as objects of mediation, it seems his warning was ignored. *Asubha-bhavana* ultimately takes on qualities of aversion therapy, such that lustful monks watch the bodies of beautiful women decompose and become otherwise grotesquely disfigured—all as a cure for rampant sexual desire. The Buddha warned that *asubha-bhavana* was not for everyone and it teetered on the edge of arousing necrophilic intentions in some monks. Several monks in the *Theragatha* describe "having succumbed to the necrophilic charms of relatively undecayed female corpses while practicing meditation in the cremation ground."⁵³ Buddhaghosa was rightfully concerned that such monks would be overcome by the sexual desire they sought to overcome through meditation.

⁴⁸ Lang, "Reimagining Buddhist Women," 45.

⁴⁹ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 671.

⁵⁰ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 673.

⁵¹ Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 4.

⁵² Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 16.

⁵³ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 87.

Elsewhere in the Pali Canon are stories of the Buddha teaching *asubha-bhavana* to his monks and then leaving them alone in the cremation ground for two weeks. When he returns, he finds that many of the monks are gone. He learns from Ananda that they have gained the insights they were meant to have gained, but with disastrous consequences. They grew to hate their own bodies and sought an immediate escape in the form of murder. Wilson says: “This story suggests that murder—both invited and uninvited by the victims—resulted from the unsupervised practice of contemplating corpses.”⁵⁴ *Asubha-bhavana* is thus a powerful meditation that causes some monks to lose their minds, killing themselves or others, and causes others to feel sexual desire for decaying female bodies.

Narratives about *asubha-bhavana* recreate the meditative technique, all without ever going to the cremation grounds. In this way, narratives are a solid alternative for a dangerous meditation that leads monks to engage in necrophilia or murder. These written descriptions of the female corpse similarly assault the senses and Wilson notes that “through visceral experience of revulsion, one can achieve an existential awareness of the first Noble Truth of Buddhism: the dis-ease or dissatisfaction that dogs even the most pleasurable sensations.”⁵⁵ Narratives evoke the same disgust, while avoiding most of the danger of *asubha-bhavana*.

While the horrifically disfigured female bodies Wilson describes certainly are found in the literature she studies, she sets up the objectification of women as a theme universally and uniformly found in Buddhism. She says: “it is always the man who sees and the woman who is seen, the man who speaks and the woman who is spoken about.”⁵⁶ She goes on to suggest that South Asian Buddhist women have learned to “identify against themselves in order to see the world from the perspective of their male heroes.” Despite many stories with Buddhist heroines, Wilson argues that these heroines “ultimately reinforce the message of female subservience found in the men’s stories since in them the point of view associated with the male subject is reinforced and shown to be normative for all.”⁵⁷ The only occasion, Wilson states, in which a woman can be a “redemptress”

⁵⁴ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 42.

⁵⁵ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 60.

⁵⁶ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 5.

⁵⁷ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 5.

instead of a temptress is when she loses control of her body; this loss of control comes when the woman is dead or otherwise disfigured. In death, the woman has no capacity to control her own body or the way her body is used. In that capacity, her body liberates men from *samsara* which is gendered feminine—often all without speaking a single word.⁵⁸ Wilson’s interpretation, while bringing light to issues such as sexual assault, reinscribes female victimhood. As I will demonstrate, when women do act, Wilson portrays them as agents of patriarchy whose actions condemn other women to subordinate roles.

One of the stories Wilson uses to prove her point is that of Subha in the *Therigatha*. The nun Subha had just entered the Jivakamba Grove when she is grabbed by a man.⁵⁹ She turns to him and says: “Friend, it is not right for a man / to touch a woman who has gone forth, / why do you keep me from my way?”⁶⁰ Subha goes on to explain to the man that she is enlightened and her mind occupies a pure state. She says: “Your mind is disturbed, mine is not, / you are impure, I am not, / my mind is free wherever I am. / Why do you keep me from my way?”⁶¹ The man goes on to explain, at length, why he has stopped Subha. He says:

You are young and innocent,
how can going forth be right for you?
Come on, get rid of that yellow robe,
let’s enjoy each other in this forest,
its flowers all in bloom.

...
The trees are covered in flowers
like body-hairs standing on end,
they seem to moan in pleasure when the breeze blows,
what delights of love will there be for you
if you go into the forest all by yourself?

...
it is frightening and lonely,
filled with herds of wild beasts,
it echoes with the choruses of female elephants excited by a male.
You will stand out, wandered about in the forest,
like a doll of gleaming gold

...
[H]oly one, would you rather go to old age
with your body untouched,
like a blue lotus that rises from the water

⁵⁸ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 9.

⁵⁹ Hallisey uses the word “rake,” a fashionable or wealthy man of dissolute or promiscuous habits.

⁶⁰ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 370.

⁶¹ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 372,

but is untouched by human hands?⁶²

Subha replies to the man's enticement, "You really are out of your mind. / What is it that you see / when you look at this body, / filled as it is with things that have already died, / destined as it is to fall apart only to fill a cemetery?"⁶³ The man answers that it is Subha's eyes that kindle desire in him and describes his obsession in a number of verses. Subha then offers instruction to the man. She tells him that there is nothing she desires because the Buddha's teachings have destroyed desire down to its roots. She further remarks: "I have seen painted dolls and puppets dancing about, / held up together by sticks and strings. / When the sticks and strings are cut, / let go of, thrown away, scattered, / broken into bits and pieces that can't be seen— / what would you fix your mind on there?"⁶⁴ She explains that the body is like a scattered doll and to lust after it is foolish. She says:

Blind one, you run after things that are not there,
things that are like a magician's illusion
or a tree of gold seen in a dream.
Eyes are just little balls in various shapes.
With its tears, an eye is a bubble of water between the eyelids,
like a little ball of lac in the hollow of a tree,
and milky mucus comes out of it.
*Spoken by those who compiled the Scriptures*⁶⁵
Then the one who was so pleasing to look at,
her mind unattached and with no regard for her eye,
gouged it out and gave it to that man, saying,
"Here, take the eye, it's yours."⁶⁶

We are told that the man's sexual passions ended forever as Subha presented him with her eye. He begs her forgiveness and she is free to return to the nuns' community.

As Wilson understands this story, Subha disfigures herself and uses that disfigured body as a didactic tool to help the rogue man accosting her realize impermanence.⁶⁷ I agree with this interpretation. Wilson goes on to say that Subha "gave that man an education the likes of which only the Buddha can give. She made the abstractions of Dharma come alive for him by bodying forth the words of the Buddhas into her own flesh."⁶⁸ This is an incredibly powerful statement Wilson makes,

⁶² Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 373-382.

⁶³ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 383.

⁶⁴ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 393-394.

⁶⁵ This tag is added by Hallisey to signal that what follows is narration, added by the compilers of the verses.

⁶⁶ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 397-399.

⁶⁷ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 165.

⁶⁸ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 13.

but she ultimately discredits Subha's power as a teacher by casting her as a tool of the male-dominated order. She says "both the self-effacing and the self-defacing nuns thereby repudiate their role as agents of Mara. In so doing, these potential minions of Mara show themselves to be dutiful servants of their male counterparts within the Sangha."⁶⁹ Bhikkhu Analayo is unconvinced of this argument because "Subha is not a minion of Mara in the first place and thus has no need to repudiate such a role."⁷⁰ It is the rogue man who acts with passion; he is more in line with Mara than Subha is. I agree with Analayo's conclusions and also with those of Collett, who claims that Wilson makes a choice in interpreting Subha's position as object instead of subject or agent,⁷¹ especially when the *Therigatha* so clearly paints Subha as a subject—a vocal teacher both defending herself against the threat of sexual violence and teaching her would-be assaulter the true nature of reality. Wilson depicts women as broadly disenfranchised while ignoring evidence to the contrary—even points she herself brings up concerning Subha's Buddha-like teaching style. This is, as Collett sees it, an interpretive choice.

Looking to understand Subha's story in a non-gendered terms, Trainor and Analayo both cite cases in which a man (a king in Trainor's example and a solitary buddha in Analayo's) gouge out their own eyes just as Subha does. In both cases, this act is a celebratory one of merit-making and didactic opportunity. Although Trainor notes the differences in power dynamics between his story and Subha's, he ultimately concludes his analysis by suggesting "the message [in Subha's story] has less to do with misogyny and the rejection of sexuality than with an abiding awareness of physical decay."⁷² Analayo, too, reminds us that Buddhist texts do not "adopt a simplistic logic where one gender is cast unilaterally in the role of being the tempter and the other of being the victim" and states: "I would see the main point of [Subha's] story to be simply about contrasting the attraction of physical beauty with the Buddhist doctrinal view about the true nature of the body."⁷³

⁶⁹ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 179.

⁷⁰ Analayo, "Beautiful Eyes," 43.

⁷¹ Alice Collett, "Historio-Critical Hermeneutics in the Study of Women in Early Indian Buddhism," *Numen* 56, no. 1 (2009): 98.

⁷² Kevin Trainor, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Nonattachment and the Body in Subha's Verse (*Therigatha* 71)" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 71.

⁷³ Analayo, "Beautiful Eyes," 43-50.

I agree with their analyses that this story is about the true nature of the body and its fundamentally impermanent existence, but I don't believe this is the only important facet of this story. We cannot deny that women faced a different reality than men when it came to the issue of sexual violence and we see countless examples in which women encounter (would-be) rapists, kidnappers, and assailants. There are certainly gendered concerns that emerge from these differences. Trainor, citing Lang, suggests that there exists in the *Theragatha* a "fear of both sexuality and death that is expressed through images of women's bodies as objects of impurity."⁷⁴ Yet this same theme does not exist in the *Therigatha*, despite the misogyny Wilson suggests is internalized by women. Rather, Lang detects a "distinctive note of compassionate regard for the folly of men and women alike."⁷⁵ The *Therigatha* verses acknowledge that temptation befalls both men *and* women; they neither cast women as snares of Mara (as Wilson suggests) or as victims (as secular liberal feminists might suggest).

What new elements may emerge if we see Subha's story as part of a larger conversation? What if her verses reply to the misogynistic fear and hatred of women represented in the *Theragatha*? I argue that we can see not only Subha's individual verses as agential, but the *Therigatha* as a whole; as a collection of poetry about (and perhaps written by) women, it strongly rejects common themes of misogyny. In order to reinterpret Subha's story in accordance with the feminist-ethical hermeneutic, we must consider the historical context and implications for the future. Subha's story responds to the *Theragatha*, which sees women's corpses taken as objects of meditation to quell sexual desire and living women depicted as snares that trap men in *samsara*. In Subha's story, it is not the woman who acts as a snare but the man. He grabs Subha as she walks through a grove; the threat is implicit, yet Subha even refers to him as "friend" when she tells him it is not proper to touch a woman who has gone forth. She further denounces his behavior by casting him as disturbed, impure, and trapped, while she is undisturbed, pure, and free. Unrelenting, the rogue man puts forth a series of verses enticing Subha to enjoy physical pleasures with him; sometimes his words appear as an offer and other times as a threat. Trusting in the Buddha's

⁷⁴ Karen Lang, "Lord Death's Snare: Gender-Related Imagery in the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha*," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1986). Trainor, "Eye of the Beholder," 68.

⁷⁵ Trainor, "Eye of the Beholder," 68.

teachings, Subha takes his desire for her eyes and turns it into disgust by gouging out her own eye and offering it to the man who so greatly craved them. She shows both her non-attachment to her body and her didactic prowess which, as Wilson notes, is Buddha-like.⁷⁶

Of course, we cannot forget the gendered dimensions at the core of this story. Subha is in a situation where the threat of sexual violence is apparent. She takes actions to defend herself from the rogue; rather than occupying the status of passive victim, Subha takes an active role in rejecting the rogue's advances and freeing herself from the threat of violence. If sexual violence was as pervasive as these stories lead us to believe, then might Subha's story have been liberating for women in its portrayal of a woman protecting, defending, and ultimately freeing herself?

The *Therigatha* is the locus of a number of reimaginings as women reconfigure Buddhist teachings in ways they find relevant and compelling. Subha's story is no different. In the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana*, women absorb the material written about them and rewrite their own experiences the way they live them. Lang notes that no nuns in the *Therigatha* seek out male corpses—or corpses at all—as objects of meditation. The bodies they meditate upon are their own. Like Ambapali, Vimala, Addhakasi and many others, Subha meditates on somatic ephemerality when she grants her eye to the rogue. She internalizes the teachings she has received—not to denigrate herself or womanhood—but to meditate and teach like a Buddha.

“She Seemed Like Someone I Could Trust”

As I have illustrated thus far, the nuns in the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana* engage with Buddhism through their lived experiences as women. They understand Buddhist concepts through their engagement with loss of physical beauty, abandonment by husbands, death of children, and sexual predation. In this section, I will briefly describe the community the nuns have built through further attention to their verses. The verses of an unknown nun describe a common trope in the *Therigatha*.

This unknown nun says:

It's been twenty-five years since I renounced
but not for a moment, not even a finger's snap,
did I experience stilling of my mind.

⁷⁶ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 13.

With no peace in my heart, dripping with sexual desire,
I entered the monastery, wailing, my arms outstretched.
I approached the nun,
she seemed like someone I could trust.
She taught me the dhamma.⁷⁷

We can read the exasperation in this nun's verses. She has been a nun for twenty-five years, but is still unable to master control over her own mind. She approaches the monastery in desperation and finds what must have been a friendly face in a fellow nun. The language of trust makes clear just how important this relationship is. Under the guidance of this trustworthy nun, our narrator says that "the eye that can see the invisible is clear."⁷⁸ After twenty-five years of what we can only assume was difficult spiritual practice, she is freed.

This phrase appears in another *Therigatha* poem. A nun, Uttama, describes a similarly fraught relationship with Buddhism. She says:

Four times, five times, I went out from the monastery,
heart without peace, heart out of control.
I approached the nun,
she seemed like someone I could trust.
She taught me the dhamma
...
I listened to what she taught,
did exactly as she said,
for seven days I sat in one position, legs crossed,
given over to joy and happiness.
On the eighth day I stretched out my feet,
after splitting open the mass of mental darkness.⁷⁹

Uttama's struggle with Buddhism led her to leave the monastic order multiple times, only to later return and re-ordain. On what reads like a last-ditch attempt, Uttama approaches a trustworthy nun and studies under her for just one week before gaining enlightenment. The teachings of these unnamed teacher-nuns are by no means trivial; they align with Buddhist discourse and bring other nuns toward enlightenment. Like Uttama, the nun Vijaya also left the monastic order repeatedly before finally approaching a nun. She says: "I approached the nun, honored her, questioned her. / She taught me the dhamma about physicality and the senses, / about the four noble truths, / about how we known what we know, / and powers that can be cultivated, / about what brings us to awakening, / the

⁷⁷ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 67-69.

⁷⁸ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 70.

⁷⁹ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 42-44.

eightfold path to the highest goal.”⁸⁰ In Vijaya’s verses, we can imagine a lively conversation that may have ensued as Vijaya questioned her teacher and pressed her for further knowledge.

Throughout the *Therigatha*, many nuns credit one another as teachers—trustworthy, sympathetic teachers. Given the highly emotional reasons women in the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana* seek out Buddhism—particularly the traumatic deaths of young children—it seems only natural that trust would be highly important in the women’s order. The community of healing that comprise Patacara, Kisagotami, and as many as five hundred other nuns necessarily must foster feelings of trust and interdependent reliance. Even women with no children, like the nun Chanda, find community in the women’s order. Chanda “wandered [as a widow] for seven years, tormented by cold and heat” and begging whenever she could until she comes upon Patacara who she says “was sympathetic toward me and...made me go forth, / she gave me advice and pointed me toward the highest goal.”⁸¹ The women’s order as it is represented in the *Therigatha* is highly communal and even loving. This is a uniquely feminine rendering of Buddhism that we do not find in the complementary *Theragatha*.

Of course, we cannot forget the origins of this remarkable women’s order where love is absolutely central. We can, of course, trace its origins to Gotami’s request for ordination, but I think it ought to be traced further to encompass the vast number of women (often unnamed) whose actions contributed to the position of those nuns. Many of the nuns describe their rebirths as queens or goddesses, but the apadanas do not begin there; they begin with a woman giving a set of robes, feeding a solitary buddha, donating her last coin. They are the stories of servants, water-jug girls, and poor women whose generosity to the sangha and past buddhas made it such that they were reborn in positions of privilege, wealth, beauty. The nuns in the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana* stand on the shoulders of those women who came before them—either women they encountered or women they were in past lives. When Gotami beseeches the Buddha for a nuns’ order, she does so not out of self-interest but on behalf of all women—the queens and the water-jug girls. In some variations of the ordination story, the Buddha offers only Gotami monastic ordination. She declines, refusing to be a

⁸⁰ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 170-171.

⁸¹ Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 123-125.

nun herself until all women can become nuns. It takes witnessing the strength and determination of Gotami and the five hundred Sakyan women for the Buddha to establish a women's order.

Within Gotami's monastic order, women who have experienced hardship and suffering find a community. We might recall Kisagotami's verses:

The Sage commended having good friends
for anyone anywhere in the universe.
By keeping company with good friends
even a fool becomes wise.
Keeping company with good people,
wisdom increases for those who do.
By keeping company with good people
one is freed from every suffering.⁸²

If we include the past-life stories of these nuns, their woman-centered community extends even further back and encompasses not only the women they once were, but the foremost nuns whose stations they aspired to fill. Under this paradigm, we can imagine a vast, expansive network of women involved in Buddhism throughout the aeons, leading up to Gotami and her five hundred nuns and even to present-day nuns in various Buddhist schools.

Returning once again to the Gotami-apadana, the significance of the simultaneous *parinibbana* of Gotami and her five hundred nuns cannot be understated. Along with Gotami, five hundred Buddhist nuns independently reach the decision to attain *parinibbana* that day. We are told that the earth quakes and the sky thunders. "Weighed down by grief, the goddesses / who lived in that refuge [for nuns,] / piteously [wept]." ⁸³ The nuns convene and tell Gotami:

we too will all reach nirvana,
with Buddha's consent, Pious One.
Along with [you] we have gone forth
from home and from existence too;
along with [you] indeed we'll go
to nirvana, supreme city.⁸⁴

They make clear that this is a decision long in the making, perhaps since they first sought ordination together when they sheared off their hair and donned monastic garb. Having received the Buddha's permission, the nuns return to their own monastic dwelling. Gotami bows to the Buddha one final

⁸² Hallisey, *Therigatha*, v. 213-214.

⁸³ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 232.

⁸⁴ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 236-237.

time, then leaves him to join her nuns. The family journey as Strong describes it has come to an end and the final stretch of Gotami's spiritual journey belongs to her alone and to each of her nuns individually. But before Gotami can finally leave the world, she offers one final teaching.

At that time the laywomen there,
fond of the Buddha's dispensation,
hearing her proceeding ahead,
those foot-worshippers approached [her,]
pounding on [their] chests with [their] fists,
[loudly] howling piteous cries.
Grieving they fell down on the earth
like creepers cut off at the root.
"Refuge-Bestower, Lord, do not
leave us to go to nirvana.
Bowing down [our] heads, all of us
are begging [you, O Gotami]."
One laywoman, faithful and wise,
was striving the most among them.
While gently stroking that one's head,
[Gotami] spoke these words [to her:]
"Enough with [this] depression, child,
twisted up in the snares of Death;
impermanence is all that is,
ever-shaking, ending in loss."⁸⁵

Her final words complete, Gotami takes her seat in the foremost position among the nuns. Together, they enter the four altered states. The apadana continues:

Rising up, she reached nirvana,
like the flame of a fuel-less lamp.
There was an enormous earthquake;
bolts of lightning fell from the sky.
...
The [other nuns] surrounding her,
who practiced the Buddha's teachings,
they too attained nirvana [then,]
like the flames of lamps without fuel.

The nuns' journeys are complete. They have gone forth together and they go out together. Along the way, they have helped one another heal unspeakable loss, sexual predation, and other types of trauma. They have been teachers, students, and friends to one another, all with Gotami at the helm.

⁸⁵ Walters, "Legends of the Theris," v. 366-370.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with an awareness of the many deeply personal situations in which women experience Buddhism. While there is a great deal of richness to their narratives, I chose to focus on two particularly salient issues: the loss of a child and sexual predation. Child loss is a common story in the *Therigatha*, appearing in the individual *gathas* of four nuns but relevant to over five hundred unnamed nuns. Berkwitz and Ohnuma dismissed the reactions of these women having just lost their young children as feminine madness or lowly, animal grief and Berkwitz even suggests that what causes these women to lose their wits is not the traumatic loss of their children, but the loss of a patriarchal figurehead (Ohnuma makes a similar claim when she asserts that Gotami and the Sakyan women seek ordination to recover patriarchal relationships). I suggest that what is needed is deliberate and sensitive terminology that pays attention to the strong emotional response of child-loss.

Ohnuma goes on to argue that particularistic mother-love is rejected at the same time universal mother-love is elevated as a theoretical foundation of Buddha-love. According to Ohnuma, this universalizing necessitates erasing the identity of the deceased child in order to adopt apathetic grief for all beings alike. I suggested, through interpretation of Ubbiri and Patacara's verses, that what is being universalized is not the mother's attention to all living beings, but the mother's attention to the universality of suffering and death in *samsara*. When the Buddha tells Ubbiri that she has lost countless daughters named Jiva, he does not erase the identity of this particular Jiva but rather places her among all the other losses Ubbiri has suffered in *samsara*. These stories lay bare the first Noble Truth, the truth of (ubiquitous) suffering. While Ohnuma interprets Patacara's didactic verses to five hundred nuns as callous condemnations of their particularistic grief, I see her verses as a teaching on *samsara* and the immeasurable grief it brings. Derris and Murcott argue that the horrific experience these mothers suffer is their foundation for realizing the true nature of reality, and that their mothering is thus the foundation of their eventual enlightenment. We may then consider the women's order to be a site of healing, rather than a site of forgetting.

I turned next to the issue of sexual predation which Lang argues is a prevalent and common experience of women, especially nuns. We see women frequently understood as snares of Mara, or

Lord Death, but we also see Mara tempting women. I suggested there are many ways of seeing Mara—as a demonic being or as a metaphor for internal temptation—but that he may also be a metaphor for the very real threat of sexual violence. While some of his invitations that the nuns enjoy sexual pleasures with him appear as offers, others appear as threats. In the Pali *Bhikkhuni-Samyutta*, Mara grows more and more hostile as each of ten nuns reject him such that by the end of his “invitations,” he is asking nuns if they are afraid of rape. Other stories in the Pali Canon see that women truly are raped or in one case, kidnapped for sexual use by kings. While there are many relevant stories, I focused on interpretations of Subha’s story in the *Therīgatha*.

Wilson understands Subha’s story as part of a larger framework of objectification of women and argues that this is a pan-Buddhist theme. Women are either passive victims or agents working for the patriarchal figureheads (in this case, the male-dominated Sangha). In the latter case, though, women must disfigure themselves in order to be fulfill didactic roles and must always denounce their status as snares of Mara. Analayo disagrees with Wilson’s estimation of Subha as repudiating her role as a snare, because she is not the one who acts out of passion. Collett further suggests that Wilson makes a deliberate choice in interpreting Subha as she does. Wilson, herself, even refers to Subha’s teaching style as Buddha-like and suggests it inspires a shift in the rogue so dramatic that only a Buddha could have brought about. However, Wilson drops this line of inquiry in favor of presenting Subha as a woman whose actions ultimately reinscribe patriarchal ideas.

Trainor and Analayo point to cases in which it is men who gouge out their eyes. They both reach conclusions that Subha’s story, too, is truly about physical decay and impermanence less than sexuality. While I agree with their conclusions, I think it is equally important to acknowledge that women faced a different reality than men as a result of sexual violence. Following these gender-based differences and with an awareness of Lang’s argument that women in the *Therīgatha* do not adopt the same misogyny we see in the *Theragatha*, I suggested we view Subha’s story in conversation with the views of women put forth in the *Theragatha*. This interpretation sees Subha reject both the belief that women are snares of Mara and the belief that women are only passive victims. Subha is neither, but rather inspires immediate realization in the rogue as a result of her

Buddha-like teaching. As a paradigmatic story, Subha stands as a strong example of a woman taking agentive moves to defend and ultimately free herself—all without denigrating womanhood.

Finally, I turned to the theme of community and women-teachers. I discussed the stories of four nuns who each describe lengthy suffering or mental unrest (some within Buddhist communities) until they meet other nuns whom they describe as trustworthy or sympathetic. These teachers instruct the suffering nuns on Buddhist doctrine and all reach enlightenment. I suggested that these stories are just one indication of the highly communal, even loving community of nuns that Gotami created. I turned to the origins of the order, suggesting that it can be traced to the initial women whose small offerings set the stage for future rebirths as queens and goddesses and finally as women who went forth. I stated that the nuns in the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana* stand on the shoulders of their predecessors, both women they encountered and women they once were. They also rely on the women they meet in the monastic order. Kisagotami reminds us of the importance of good friends—that good friends can make even a fool wise and that good friends free one another from suffering. In this network of “good friends,” we can of course include the nuns whose stories appear in the *Therigatha*, but also the past-life women whose stories live in the *Theri-Apadana*, and even the present-day nuns involved in various schools of Buddhism.

Returning to the story of Gotami’s *parinibbana*, the communal nature of her great going out takes on new meaning. Together, these nuns have gone forth. In the women’s order, they have healed traumas such as the loss of a child and sexual predation. They have taught one another and saved one another. In their last act together, they attain *parinibbana*—the culmination of a spiritual journey they themselves set in motion as women aeons ago.

Concluding Remarks

Derris writes that the preoccupation with Buddhist texts that “articulate androcentric agendas and misogynistic representations of women” has trained scholars to expect misogyny when they read and interpret. She argues that, as a result, it is imperative that these assumptions are unlearned so that an “empathetic imagination” can be appropriately developed.¹ In this thesis, I have attempted to adhere to the feminist-ethical hermeneutic by questioning what liberating material my sources have to offer. I read for agency, humanity, and exclamations of enlightenment.

I began with the stories of Mahapajapati Gotami—her origins as a junior queen, her sister Maya’s tragic death, and her assumption of a mothering role for the motherless infant Siddhattha. Gotami’s life, like the lives of so many, was full of both tragedy and joy. She loved the Buddha, but was understandably concerned at his wish to abandon royal life in pursuit of an ascetic lifestyle. She supported Siddhodana, Yasodhara, and her kingdom in Siddhattha’s absence and surely rejoiced in the eventual ordination of her family members. After the death of her husband, she and five hundred unnamed Sakyan women sought monastic ordination. Even though they were initially refused, Gotami and the Sakyan women were determined and proved themselves worthy of a monastic order. Her status as the leader of the women’s monastic order and the reverence shown to her by the laywomen indicate that she was more than just another monastic; perhaps she was the buddha for women—the woman whose *parinibbana* guaranteed the *parinibbana* of all women just as the Buddha guaranteed it for all men.²

I also analyzed instances of parallelism in the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana*. I noted the heartfelt desire of past-life women to be reborn female again—to take the place of nuns chief in various categories. The affirming prophecies they received from past buddhas was just one way in which women’s existence and participation in Buddhism was legitimated in the *Theri-Apadana*. The *Theri-Apadana* created a history of women’s involvement in Buddhism going back many aeons

¹ Derris, “Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering,” 66.

² Walters, “Gotami’s Story.”

ultimately to the time of the Buddha Padumuttara.³ In the *Theri-Apadana*, women connected themselves with their families, past-life women, and other monastics to paint a picture of Buddhism that most certainly included women. I discussed the ways in which Buddhist writers and compilers creatively inserted women into narrative tradition in ways that did not break that tradition. Women reinforce their presence and their achievements at every stage of Buddhism—from the dispensation of Padumuttara to the first canonical Theravada jataka to the *Gotami-apadana* which tells the story of the *parinibbanas* of hundreds of Buddhist nuns.

Finally, I looked at a unique, woman's experience of Buddhism. I focused in particular on the tragic loss of children and the threat of sexual predation—both of which were serious and prevalent issues in the early Buddhist community. I argued that such stories presented women as fully human, experiencing loss but also capable of healing. These stories showcased women's agency and how they flipped the script on narratives about women's bodies. In the community these women create under Gotama Buddha, there is hope, an escape from suffering. I suggested that the *Therigatha* tells us quite a lot about the nun's community: the women who wrestled with Dhamma, the women who taught others and eased their suffering, and the women who found friendship, peace, and healing in the company of other women.

Hundreds and thousands of unnamed women appear in these narratives—in the retinue of women who went forth with Gotami, in the crowds to whom Patacara preached, in the ranks of women who reached *parinibbana* with Gotami and then Yasodhara. As the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana* present the early Buddhist community, women are involved in staggering numbers and at every stage. The feminist-ethical hermeneutic allows us to bring these stories to light and to fully articulate everything these women are. We appreciate Princess Muni's inspirational aspiration to buddhahood and Sumitta's generosity to share her lotus flowers with the empty-handed ascetic Sumedha. We empathize with Isidasi's stories of repeated abusive marriages and are thankful that she finds peace in the women's monastic community. We are in awe of Subha's strong-willed and fervent

³ Collett, "The Female Past in Early Indian Buddhism."

rejection of the rogue man who accosts her in the mango grove. We are moved by Sumedha's impassioned plea for ordination. Our hearts bleed for the tragic loss of children Patacara, Kisagotami, and Ubbiri experience, but we rejoice in the healing they find in the company of one another. We respect Patacara's ability to heal and her kindness in helping other women do the same. We may even smile as Kisagotami lauds the importance of good friends. Finally, we honor Gotami for her perseverance in securing ordination for women and we rejoice with her as she attains *parinibbana* with five hundred nuns at her side.

The women whose stories live in the *Therigatha* and *Theri-Apadana* show us what it means to be determined, vulnerable, and compassionate. In reading their stories, we should not focus on the misogyny aimed at them, but the ways in which they transcend that misogyny to forge a Buddhist community that works for them. The community these ancient nuns created was one of interdependence, empathy, and love and their stories stand as a testament to Buddhism's value for women.

Bibliography

Analayo, Bhikkhu. "Beautiful Eyes Seen with Insight as Bereft of Beauty: Subha Theri and Her Male Counterpart in Ekottarika-agama." *The Sati Journal* (2014): 39-53.

Appleton, Naomi. "In the Footsteps of the Buddha? Women and the Bodhisatta Path in Theravada Buddhism." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 33-51.

Berkwitz, Stephen C. "Madness and Gender in Buddhism." In *Images of Madness: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Alessandra M. Pires and Luciana Namorato, 34-49. Missouri: From the Scholar's Desk, 2010.

Collett, Alice. "Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 55-84.

_____. "Historio-Critical Hermeneutics in the Study of Women in Early Indian Buddhism." *Numen* 56, no. 1 (2009): 91-117.

_____. "The Female Past in Early Indian Buddhism: The Shared Narrative of the Seven Sisters in the *Theri-Apadana*." *Religions of South Asia* 5, no. 1 (2011): 209-226.

Derris, Karen. "When the Buddha Was a Woman: Reimagining Tradition in the Theravada." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 29-44.

_____. "Interpreting Buddhist Representations of Motherhood and Mothering." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 61-79.

Dhammadinna, Bhikkhuni. "Predictions of Women to Buddhahood in Middle-Period Literature." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 22 (2015).

Endo, Toshiichi. *Buddha in Theravada Buddhism: A Study of the Concept of Buddha in Pali Commentaries*. Nediama, Dehiwela, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1997.

Engelmajer, Pascale. *Women in Pali Buddhism: Walking the Spiritual Paths in Mutual Dependence*. Philadelphia: Routledge, 2014.

Findly, Ellison Banks. "Women and the 'Arahant' Issue in Early Pali Literature." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 57-76.

Finnegan, Damchö Diana. "For the Sake of Women, Too: Ethics and Gender in the Narratives of the Mulasarvasticada Vinaya." PhD diss., University of Wisconsin at Madison, 2009.

Garling, Wendy. *Stars at Dawn: Forgotten Stories of the Women in Buddha's Life*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2016.

Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hallisey, Charles, trans. *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Horner, I.B., trans. *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka), Vol 5: Cullavagga*. London: Forgotten Books, 2016. Reprint.

Keown, Damien. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1996.

Lang, Karen. "Lord Death's Snare: Gender-Related Imagery in the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha*." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 63-76.

_____. "Reimagining Buddhist Women in India." In *Buddhist Feminism and Femininities*, edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 27-66. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019.

Ohnuma, Reiko. "Mother-Love and Mother-Grief: South Asian Buddhist Variations on a Theme." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 95-116.

_____. *Ties that Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (March 1988): 3-17.

Strong, John. "A Family Quest: The Buddha, Yasodhara, and Rahula in the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya." In *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Juliane Schober, 111-128. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.

Trainor, Kevin. "In the Eye of the Beholder: Nonattachment and the Body in Subha's Verse (*Therigatha* 71)" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 57-79.

Walters, Jonathan. "Gotami's Story." In *Buddhism in Practice: Abridged Version*, edited by David S. Lopez, 107-132. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

_____. "Wives of the Saints: Marriage and Kamma in the Path to Arahantship." In *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*, edited by Alice Collett, 140-159. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

_____, trans. "The Legends of the Theris." In *Legends of the Buddhist Saints: Apadanapali*. Washington: Whitman College, 2017.

Weingast, Matty. *The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2020.

Wilson, Liz. *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.