Therigatha—Poems by Buddhist Nuns

The following poems are from the Pali Canon; they are supposed to have been composed in the 5th century B.C.E. but they were not written down until the 3rd Century B.C.E. In this collection of 73 poems, Buddhist nuns (or bhikkhnis) share their struggles and accomplishments along the road to arahantship (Enlightenment). Poems and translations taken from this website: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/.

Untitled Poem

So freed! So thoroughly freed am I! —
from three crooked things set free:
    from mortar, pestle,
    & crooked old husband.
Having uprooted the craving
that leads to becoming,
I'm set free from aging & death.

Therigatha, I.11 — Mutta
--Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

“A Mother's Blessing” by Maha Pajapati (Gotami)—Buddha’s Aunt/Foster Mother

Buddha! Hero! Praise be to you!
You foremost among all beings!
You who have released me from pain,
And so many other beings too.

All suffering has been understood.
The source of craving has withered.
Cessation has been touched by me
On the noble eight-fold path.

I've been mother and son before;
And father, brother — grandmother too.
Not understanding what was real,
I flowed-on without finding [peace].

But now I've seen the Blessed One!
This is my last compounded form.
The on-flowing of birth has expired.
There’s no more re-becoming now.

See the gathering of followers:
Putting forth effort, self controlled,
Always with strong resolution
—This is how to honor the Buddhas!

Surely for the good of so many
Did Maya give birth to Gotama,
Who bursts asunder the mass of pain
Of those stricken by sickness and death.

Thig 6.6
--Translated from the Pali by Andrew Olendzki

Introduction to the stories by and commentaries about Kisa Gotami:

There are two commonly-told stories, as well as commentaries, about the famous nun named Kisa Gotami. The Commentary to the poem included here tells that when Gotami’s young child died, she refused to believe it was dead. After asking many people — in vain — for medicine that would revive the child, she was finally directed to the Buddha. When she told him her story, he offered to provide medicine for the child, but said he would need some mustard seed — the cheapest Indian spice — obtained from a family in which no one had ever died. Kisa Gotami went from house to house asking for mustard seed. Nobody refused to give it to her, but when she asked if anyone had died in the family, the universal response was always, "Oh, yes, of course." After a while, the message sunk in: Death is universal. On finally burying her child's body, she returned to the Buddha and asked to be ordained as a nun. Afterwards Kisa Gotami became an arahant.

Kisagotami Theri: The Woman with the Dead Child (excerpt)

The Sage has emphasized and praised
Noble friendship for the world.
If one stays with a Noble Friend,
even a fool will become a wise person.
Stay with them of good heart
for the wisdom of those who stay with them grows.
And while one is staying with them,
from every kind of dukkha* one is freed.
Dukkha one should know well,
and how dukkha arises and ceases,
and the Eightfold Path,
and the Four Noble Truths.

"Woman's state is painful," declares the Trainer of tamable men.
"A wife with others is painful
and once having borne a child,
some even cut their throats;
others of delicate constitution
poison take, then pain again;
and then there’s the baby obstructing the birth,
killing the mother too."

Miserable woman, your kin all dead
and limitless dukkha you’ve known.
So many tears have you shed
in these many thousands of births.

Wholly developed by me is
the Eightfold Noble Path going to Deathlessness,
Nibbana** realized,
I looked into the Mirror of the Dhamma***.
With dart removed am I,
the burden laid down, done what was to be done,
The elder nun Kisagotami,
freed in mind and heart, has chanted this.

*dukkha=suffering
**Nibbana=Nirvana
***Dhamma=dharma (teachings)

Thig 10 PTS: Thig 213-217, 220, 222-223
--Translated from the Pali by Hellmuth Hecker & Sister Khema

Skinny Gotami & the Mustard Seed (Commentary from the Pali Canon)

After flowing-on for a hundred thousand ages,
she evolved in this Buddha-era among gods and men
in a poor family in Savatthi.
Her name was Gotami-tissa,
but because her body was very skinny
she was called 'Skinny Gotami.'
When she went to her husband’s family,
she was scorned [and called] 'daughter of a poor family.'

Then she gave birth to a son,
and with the arrival of the son she was treated with respect.
But that son, running back and forth
and running all around, while playing met his end.
Because of this, sorrow-to-the-point-of-madness arose in her.
She thought: "Before I was one who received only scorn,
but starting from the time of the birth of my son I gained honor."
These [relatives] will now try to take my son,
in order to expose him outside [in the charnel ground]."

Under the influence of her sorrow-to-the-point-of-madness,
she took the dead corpse on her hip and
wandered in the city from the door of one house to another
[pleading]: "Give medicine to me for my son!"
People reviled her, [saying] "What good is medicine?"
She did not grasp what they were saying.

And then a certain wise man, thinking
"This woman has had her mind deranged by sorrow for her son;
the ten-powered [Buddha] will know the medicine for her,"
said: "Mother, having approached the fully awakened one,
ask about medicine for your son."

She went to the vihara
at the time of the teaching of dhamma and said,
"Blessed One, give medicine to me for my son!"
The master, seeing her situation, said,
"Go, having entered the city,
into whatever house has never before experienced any death,
and take from them a mustard seed."

"Very well, Sir." [she replied],
and glad of mind she entered the city and came to the first house:
"The master has called for a mustard seed
in order to make medicine for my son.
If this house has never before experienced any death,
give me a mustard seed."
"Who is able to count how many have died here?"
"Then keep it. What use is that mustard seed to me?"
And going to a second and a third house,
her madness left her and her right mind was established
— thanks to the power of the Buddha.

She thought, "This is the way it will be in the entire city.
By means of the Blessed One’s compassion for my welfare,
this will be what is seen."
And having gained a sense of spiritual urgency from that,
she went out and covered her son in the charnel ground.

She uttered this verse:
It’s not just a truth for one village or town,
Nor is it a truth for a single family.
But for every world settled by gods [and men]
This indeed is what is true — impermanence.

And so saying, she went into the presence of the master.
Then the master said to her,
"Have you obtained, Gotami, the mustard seed?"
"Finished, sir, is the matter of the mustard seed" she said.
"You have indeed restored me."

And the master then uttered this verse:
A person with a mind that clings,
Deranged, to sons or possessions,
Is swept away by death that comes
— Like mighty flood to sleeping town.

At the conclusion of this verse, confirmed in the fruit of stream-entry,
she asked the master [for permission] to go forth [into the homeless life].
The master allowed her to go forth.
She gave homage to the master by bowing three times,
went to join the community of nuns,
and having gone forth, received her ordination.

It was not long before, through the doing of deeds with careful attention,
she caused her insight to grow... and she became an arahant.

ThigA 10.1
--Translation by Andrew Olendzki

Punnika and the Brahman, by Punnika

[Punnika:]
I'm a water-carrier, cold,
always going down to the water
from fear of my mistresses' beatings,
harrassed by their anger & words.
But you, Brahman,
what do you fear
that you're always going down to the water
with shivering limbs, feeling great cold?

[The Brahman:]
Punnika, surely you know.
You're asking one doing skillful kamma
& warding off evil.
 Whoever, young or old, does evil kamma
is, through water ablution,
from evil kamma set free.
[Punnika:]
Who taught you this
— the ignorant to the ignorant —
‘One, through water ablution,
is from evil kamma set free?’
In that case, they’d all go to heaven:
all the frogs, turtles,
serpents, crocodiles,
& anything else that lives in the water.
Sheep-butchers, pork-butchers,
fishermen, trappers,
thieves, executioners,
& any other evil doers,
would, through water ablution,
be from evil kamma set free.

If these rivers could carry off
the evil kamma you’ve done in the past,
they’d carry off your merit as well,
and then you’d be
completely left out.
Whatever it is that you fear,
that you’re always going down to the water,
don’t do it.
Don’t let the cold hurt your skin.”

[The Brahman:]
I’ve been following the miserable path, good lady,
and now you’ve brought me
back to the noble.
I give you this robe for water-ablution.

[Punnika:]
Let the robe be yours. I don’t need it.
If you’re afraid of pain,
if you dislike pain,
than don’t do any evil kamma,
in open, in secret.
But if you do or will do
any evil kamma,
you’ll gain no freedom from pain,
even if you fly up & hurry away.
If you’re afraid of pain,
if you dislike pain,
go to the Awakened One for refuge,
go to the Dhamma & Sangha.
Take on the precepts:
    That will lead to your liberation.

[The Brahman:]
I go to the Awakened One for refuge;
I go to the Dhamma & Sangha.
I take on the precepts:
    That will lead to my liberation.

Before, I was a kinsman to Brahma;
now, truly a brahman.
I'm a three-knowledge man.
consummate in knowledge,
    safe & washed clean.

Thig 12.1 PTS: Thig 236-251
--Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

**Untitled Poem, by Ambapali**

Black was my hair
    — the color of bees —
& curled at the tips;
with age, it looked like coarse hemp.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Fragrant, like a perfumed basket
filled with flowers:
With age it smelled musty,
    like animal fur.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Thick & lush, like a well-tended grove,
made splendid, the tips elaborate
    with comb & pin.
With age, it grew thin
    & bare here & there.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Adorned with gold & delicate pins,
it was splendid, ornamented with braids.
   Now, with age,
   that head has gone bald.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Curved, as if well-drawn by an artist,
   my brows were once splendid.
   With age, they droop down in folds.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Radiant, brilliant like jewels,
   my eyes:
   With age, they’re no longer splendid.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Like a delicate peak, my nose
   was splendid in the prime of my youth.
   With age, it’s like a long pepper.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Like bracelets — well-fashioned, well-finished —
   my ears were once splendid.
   With age, they droop down in folds.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Like plaintain buds in their color,
   my teeth were once splendid.
   With age, they’re broken & yellowed.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Like that of a cuckoo in the dense jungle,
   flitting through deep forest thickets:
   sweet was the tone of my voice.
   With age, it cracks here & there.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Smooth — like a conch shell well-polished —
   my neck was once splendid.
   With age, it’s broken down, bent.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words doesn’t change.

Like rounded door-bars — both of them — my arms were once splendid.
With age, they’re like dried up patali trees.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words doesn’t change.

Adorned with gold & delicate rings, my hands were once splendid.
With age, they’re like onions & tubers.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words doesn’t change.

Swelling, round, firm, & high, both my breasts were once splendid.
In the drought of old age, they dangle like empty old water bags.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words doesn’t change.

Like a sheet of gold, well-burnished, my body was splendid.
Now it’s covered with very fine wrinkles.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words doesn’t change.

Smooth in their lines, like an elephant’s trunk, both my thighs were once splendid.
With age, they’re like knotted bamboo.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words doesn’t change.

Adorned with gold & delicate anklets, my calves were once splendid.
With age, they’re like sesame sticks.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words doesn’t change.

As if they were stuffed with soft cotton, both my feet were once splendid.
With age, they’re shriveled & cracked.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words doesn’t change.
Such was this physical heap, now:
A house with its plaster all fallen off.
The truth of the Truth-speaker’s words
doesn’t change.

Thig 13.1 PTS: Thig 252-270
--Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu