



# The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns

by Matty Weingast

*These poems are selected from Matty Weingast's newest book, The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns, a reimagining of the Therīgāthā. Matty is co-editor of Awake at the Bedside and former editor of the Insight Journal. He completed much of the work on these poems while staying at Aloka Vihara Forest Monastery, a nuns' monastery in northern California.*

For a while, I wasn't sure what had drawn me in so completely. But as my life revolved more and more around the poems of the first Buddhist nuns, I began to see all the ways in which they were changing my practice and my life. Still, I wasn't sure exactly how they were doing all this.

For me, the humanness and universality of the Buddha's path is more alive in the *Therīgāthā*—this collection of 73 poems by the first Buddhist nuns—than anywhere else in the Pāli canon. Here we find teachings from women of all backgrounds—old and young, rich and poor, mothers and daughters and grandmothers, princesses and courtesans and widows and orphans. Each comes from a different place and offers a different teaching in a different way.

Over months and then years, I had to remind myself again and again that these poems were not written, but spoken. Each is a record of one human being speaking to another. If we only see the beauty and the historical importance, we miss their true potential. The value of these poems is not in what they are, Matty Weingast 2020: "The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns", *Insight Journal*, 46: 84–96.

but in what they can do—in how they can affect another person’s life.

Everything changed when I began learning to listen in an entirely different way. This often meant reading a poem hundreds of times and taking long walks with the Pāli rhythms bouncing around inside of me. It often meant long hours of sitting with a poem—without trying to understand or evaluate or contextualize what it was saying. Just listening. Just waiting.

Still, hearing the teaching within a poem could only provide half of the story. The other half required listening for the question or questions behind each particular instruction. Not just *what* a poem is saying, but *why* it is saying it.

This might be the question that led the author away from home. Or it might be the question that carried her along the most difficult sections of the path. Or it might be the question that supported her final steps. It might be the question closest to the heart of whomever the poem was being spoken to. Or it might be some combination or all of these at once.

Of course, these poems rarely answer their questions directly. Instead, each does its best to meet the listener where they are, then guide or nudge them the next few steps along the path. This was also the Buddha’s preferred method of teaching.

In what follows, I offer some of the questions that might have been behind each poem. Hopefully you will hear other questions and other teachings. For me, that is the deepest teaching this collection offers—that there cannot be only one right way to read a poem, live a life, or walk the path to awakening.

Although I worked with the original Pāli texts, these are not literal translations. Some closely resemble the originals. Others are more like variations on a classic tune. For those interested, there are several very good English translations, especially those by Charles Hallisey, Susan Murcott, and Bhante Sujato.

~ ~ ~

***Mitta ~ Friend***

*Full of trust you left home,  
and soon learned to walk the Path—  
making yourself a friend to everyone  
and making everyone a friend.*

*When the whole world is your friend,  
fear will find no place to call home.*

*And when you make the mind your friend,  
you'll know what trust  
really means.*

*Listen.*

*I have followed this Path of friendship to its end.*

*And I can say with absolute certainty—  
it will lead you home.*

~ ~ ~

What is home? Is it a place? A person? A feeling?  
Is our practice a form of leaving home—or returning home?  
Or both?  
Are we actually going somewhere? How do we know if we  
are getting closer?  
Can the path itself be a home—not just something that is  
supposed to take us from Point A to Point B?

~ ~ ~

***Vira ~ Hero***

*Truly strong  
among those*

*who think themselves  
strong.*

*Truly unafraid  
among those  
who hide their  
fear.*

*A hero  
among those  
who talk of heroes.*

*Don't be fooled by outward signs—  
lifting heavy things  
or picking fights with weaker opponents  
and running headfirst into battle.*

*A real hero  
walks the Path  
to its end.*

*Then shows others the way.*

~ ~ ~

What is strength? What is courage?  
What does it mean to be a hero?  
What qualities are most important to us? Who do we want to  
become?  
What do we owe—if anything—to this troubled world and the  
countless troubled beings trying to live on it?

~ ~ ~

***Tissa ~ The Third***

*Why stay here*

*in your little  
dungeon?*

*If you really want  
to be free,  
make  
every  
thought  
a thought of freedom.*

*Break your chains.  
Tear down the walls.*

*Then walk the world a free woman.*

~ ~ ~

Are we free? Are we not free?  
How can we tell?  
What are we asking from this life? What is this life asking  
from us?  
Are there things we want more than freedom? If so, what?  
How honest with ourselves are we really willing to be?

~ ~ ~

***Ubbiri ~ The Earth***

*How many days and nights  
did I wander the woods  
calling your name?*

Jiva, my daughter!  
Jiva, my heart!

*Late one night,  
finally exhausted,*

*I fell to the ground.*

Oh, my heart, *I heard a voice say,*  
84,000 daughters all named Jiva  
have died and been buried  
here in this boundless cemetery  
you call a world.

For which of these Jivas are you mourning?

*Lying there on the ground,*  
*I shared my grief with those 84,000 mothers.*

*And they shared their grief with me.*

*Somehow I found myself healed—*  
*not of grief,*  
*but of the immeasurable loneliness*  
*that attends grief.*

*My sisters.*  
*Those of you who have known the deepest loss.*

*As you cry out in the wilderness,*  
*just make sure*  
*you stop*  
*every so often*  
*to listen for a voice calling back.*

~ ~ ~

What is grief? How are we supposed to grieve?  
What is worth grieving for?  
Can we heal others without healing ourselves?  
Can we heal ourselves without healing others?

Even after countless rebirths, how is it that all of life's  
apparent gains and losses still feel so overwhelmingly crucial  
and immediate?

~ ~ ~

*Vijaya ~ Victor*

*When everyone else was meditating,  
I'd be outside circling the hall.*

*Finally I went to confess.  
I'm hopeless, I said.*

*The elder nun smiled.*

*Just keep going, she said.  
Nothing stays in orbit forever.*

*If this circling is all you have,  
why not make this circling your home?*

*I did as she told me,  
and went on circling the hall.*

*If you find yourself partly in  
and partly out—  
if you find yourself drawn to this Path  
and also drawing away—  
I can assure you,  
you're in good company.*

*Just keep going.*

*Sometimes the most direct path isn't a  
straight line.*

~ ~ ~

What is the shape of the path?  
Does it lead uphill or down? Or does it just depend on where  
we are at any given time?  
How is all of this supposed to look? How long is all of this  
supposed to take?  
How do we know if we're heading in the right direction?  
How do we know that this path will really take us where we  
want to go?

~ ~ ~

***Chapa ~ The Archer***

*Love is like all things.*

*One night it's knocking at your front door.  
The next morning it's waving you goodbye.*

*My sisters.*

*The thing that breaks  
and leaves sharp edges  
that cut you from the inside—  
that's not the heart.*

*That's the house you built  
out of all the pretty things  
other people told you,  
and the strange promise  
that what is felt today  
will still be felt tomorrow.*

*But such houses are built to fall apart.*

*And when they do,*

*the heart must take to the open road  
and leave the past behind.*

*At first I thought I couldn't live without him.*

*Then I realized  
there were certain things  
that for a long time  
I had been unwilling  
to admit—  
even to myself.*

*Look me in the eye, my sister.*

*You are more than your laughter  
and your sighs.*

*You are more than your rage  
and your tears.*

*You are much more than your body*

~ ~ ~

What is love?  
Is love good? Is love bad? Does it just depend? If so, on  
what?  
How do we know when it's time to leave?  
And when we are the one who is left—what are we supposed  
to do with all of that pain?  
Is it all just delusion? Is it all our own fault? Should we ever  
open our heart again?

~ ~ ~

*Kisagotami ~ Skinny Gotami*

*A child dead.  
And a mad search for a magic seed.*

*It's a story as old as dust.*

*Brave up, my sisters.*

*The day will come  
when you run  
from house  
to house.*

*People will meet you at the door,  
look you in the eye,  
and they won't let you in.*

*I'm sorry, they'll say.  
But we can't help you.*

*Listen.*

*When everyone you love is gone,  
when everything you have  
has been taken away,  
you'll find the Path  
waiting  
underneath  
every rock  
on the  
road.*

*These are the words of Kisagotami.*

~ ~ ~

How close are we, really, from the very center of the path?  
Must our lives be torn apart by tragedy and despair before we  
are able to see things as they truly are?  
Or can we somehow access the path right here—somewhere  
in the midst of life's ups and downs?

~ ~ ~

*Mahapajapati ~ Protector of Children*

*I know you all.*

*I have been your mother,  
your son,  
your father,  
your daughter.*

*You see me now in my final role—  
kindly grandmother.*

*It's a fine part to go out on.*

*You might have heard  
how it all began—  
when my sister died  
and I took her newborn son  
to raise as my own.*

*People still ask,  
Did you know then what he would become?*

*What can I say?  
What mother doesn't see a Buddha in her child?*

*He was such a quiet boy.*

*The first time he reached for me.*

*The first time I held him while he slept.  
How could I not know?*

*To care for all children  
without exception  
as though each  
will someday  
be the one  
to show  
us all  
the  
way  
home.  
This is the Path.*

~ ~ ~

What does it mean to care for something that isn't our own?  
What does caring look like? How many different ways are  
there to care?  
What would it be like to relate to other people based on their  
potential—on what they can become—rather than what they  
appear to be at any given moment?

~ ~ ~

***Rohini ~ Wandering Star***

*You don't become the cloth  
just because you put on robes.*

*You don't turn into empty space  
just because you carry a bowl.*

*The sun doesn't bow down.  
Trees don't throw flowers at your feet.  
Birds don't start answering when you call.*

*The Path will hold even the biggest mistakes.  
The Path will make room for even your deepest regrets.*

*But you don't become  
the cloth of the robe  
overnight.*

*It can begin very quietly.  
Something you barely even notice.*

*Like the touch of water on your skin,  
like a knife in a drawer,  
like the next five minutes—  
unless they're your last.*

*The Path isn't a line on a map.  
It's a great shining world.  
Enter wherever you like.*

*You might get thrown back once or twice,  
but if you push through  
the outer layers—  
oh, my sisters,  
then  
you will know  
the true welcome  
that is the very essence  
of the Path.*

~ ~ ~

What does the path mean to you?