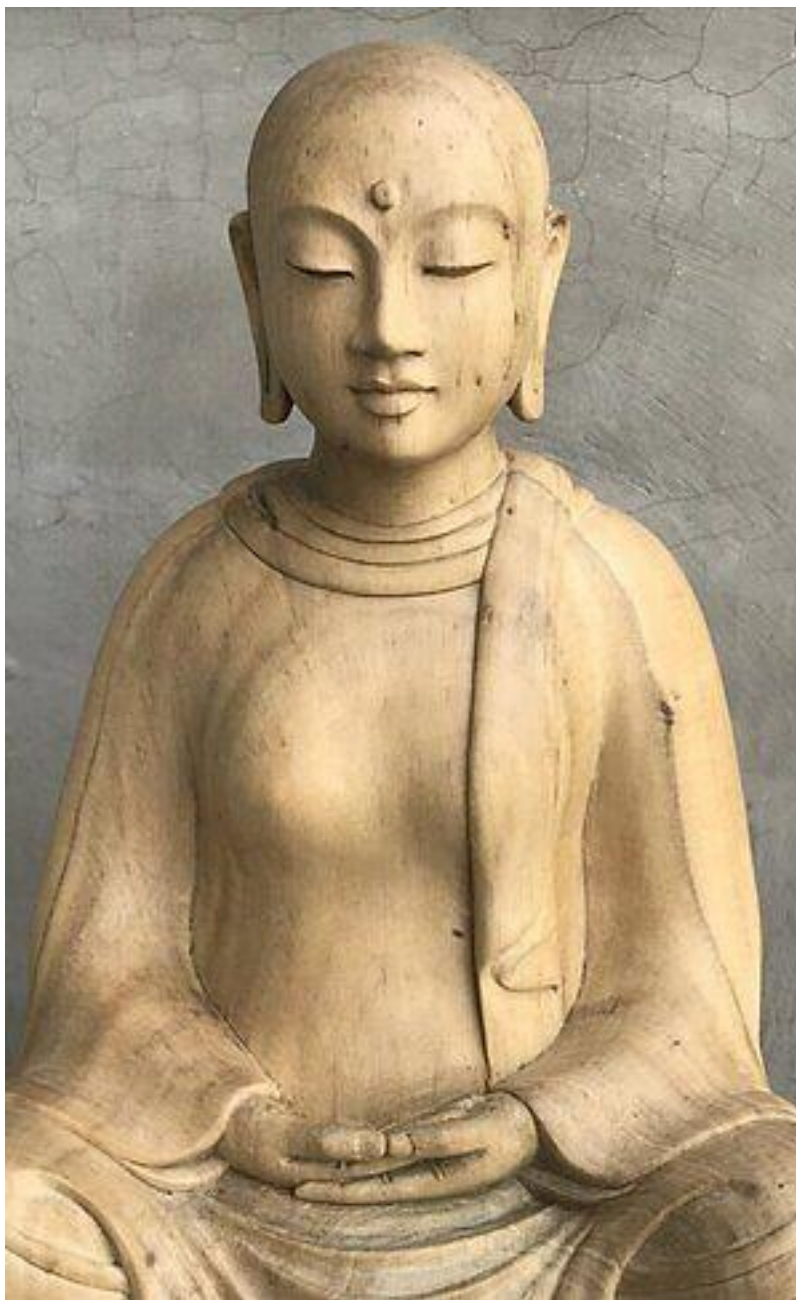


Patachara and her Student Chanda



Venerable Patachara Bhikkhuni - at Anukampa Bhikkhuni Project

Photo from Sutta Central.

Preface

Patachara and Chanda are two of the first female disciples of the Buddha, but they are also teacher and student. Patachara was the leader of a group of ordained bound together by the shared experience of losing children to death. Patachara, who had lost her own children, was able to dispel their grief through her teaching, just as the Buddha had done for her. Chanda's poem about her life before and after she encountered Patachara is an eloquent testament to the significance of women living together in mutual care and intimacy.

Patachara's tragic story is one of the most famous in the Theravada Buddhist world of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Her whole family--two children, husband, and parents—died quickly one after another in a sequence of unconnected disasters. Her grief brought her to madness. A seemingly random encounter with the Buddha punctured that madness of grief and restored Patachara to her senses. One day while washing herself up, she watched the water “run” over the dry sand, some being absorbed quickly while some going quite far. She reflected on how what happened with water was like what happened with the lives of her children, husband, and parents.

Patachara's poem

Furrowing fields with plows, sowing seeds in the ground,
Taking care of wives and children, young men find wealth.

So why have I not experienced freedom,
when I am virtuous and I do what the Teacher taught,
when I am not lazy and I am calm?

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

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.

Chanda's poem

In the past, I was poor, a widow, without children,
Without friends or relatives, I did not get food or clothing.

Taking a bowl and stick, I went begging from family,
I wandered for seven years, tormented by cold and heat.

Then I saw a nun as she was receiving food and drink.
Approaching her, I said, “Make me go forth to homelessness.”

And she was sympathetic to me and Patachara made me go forth,
She gave me advice and pointed me towards the highest goal.

I listened to her words and I put into action her advice.
That excellent woman’s advice was not empty,
I know the three things that most don’t know,
Nothing fouls my heart.

Translated from Pali by Charles Hallisey.

Charles Hallisey, translator, *Therigatha: The Poems of the First Buddhist Women* (Murty Classical Library of India 3). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, pages 67 and 71.