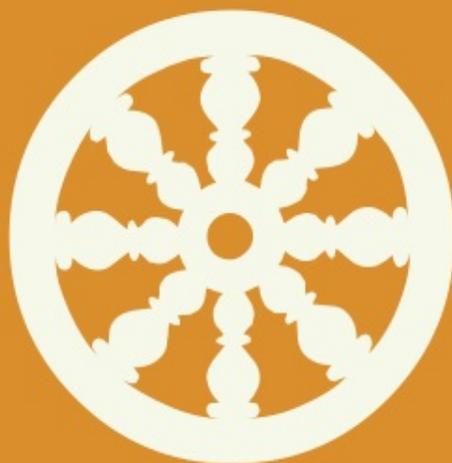


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# The Message of the Saints

*Thera-Therī-Gāthā*

**V. F. Gunaratna**



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## Thera-Therī-Gāthā

by

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# The Message of the Saints



he field of the Tipiṭaka [1] literature is wide and varied. On the one hand, there are the subtle expositions of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and the profound discourses of the Sutta Piṭaka, which call for serious thinking and study, while, on the other hand, there are the simple Jāataka tales so fascinating to the young and old alike. Between these two extremes there is a class of Buddhist literature which is lofty in theme but easy to comprehend, which uplifts the mind but does not tax it. To this category belong the inspired verses of those saints—the Theras and Therīs—who were mostly contemporaries of the Buddha. It is these inspired verses that are collectively known as the “Thera-Therī-Gāthas” and they form part of the Khuddaka Nikāya of the Sutta Piṭaka.

The message of the Saints contained in the Thera-Therī-Gāthas [2] does not appear to have fully reached the Buddhist world of today. These exquisite poems are not sufficiently widely known among the Buddhist public; much less widely have they been read and appreciated. It is a pity that their wonderfully inspiring influence is not much felt today. But the fortunate few who have devoted their time to a regular study of these stanzas have never failed to

be inspired by the uplifting spirit which continually radiates from them.

Nowhere in the whole of the Buddhist Pali literature do we find such a concentration of poetic beauty and loftiness of thought as in these 337 Thera-Therī Gāthas. [3] Really, one must know Pali to enjoy to the full the beauty of these verses. Fortunately, however, for those who cannot enjoy the poems in the original, the Pali Text Society has published translations [4] —thanks to the able translator Mrs. Rhys Davids—which have successfully captured and retained much of the spirit and charm of the original Gāthas. As it is proposed to give the reader an opportunity of enjoying some of these translated verses, I must acknowledge my indebtedness both to the Pali Text Society and to Mrs. Rhys Davids.

## The Background of the Gāthas

These delightfully refreshing verses reflect the religious emotions and inspirations of certain pious men and women of Buddha's time who entered the Order and followed his teachings with genuine devotion. At some time mostly in their youth, the call came to them to forsake the lay life and to take to the life of a homeless monk. This they did in a deeply rooted confidence and persevering diligently they

attained Arahantship, Holiness, the final deliverance from the bondage of passions and the shackles of rebirth. Some of these verses reflect their ardent determination to reach their spiritual goal. Some record the struggle within them between the forces of good and evil and finally recall in triumphant mood the victory of good over evil, and their consequent entry into the glorious state of Sainthood. Often it is some trivial circumstance, some trifling incident in life, that gave the initial impetus to the spiritual activity and upliftment of these monks and nuns. Some would record their passionate yearning for the solitary life and their love of forest life with its solitude and the natural beauties and the opportunity it afforded them for quiet meditation. The charms of solitude and the beauties of forest life they have sung in matchless and mellifluous language. The exquisite calm begotten of the disciplined life, the contempt of the grosser pleasures of life which drag the victim down into a whirlpool of never ending desires have so deeply influenced some of them, that these thoughts have become the themes of some of these fascinating poems. Whatever may be the theme, these Gāthas are said to have been uttered by these saints immediately after their attainment of Arahantship as an open acknowledgement [5] of the cause which led to their final enlightenment. They depict whether subjectively objectively, some aspect or other of the struggle of the human mind in its attempt to escape from the slavery of desire, and the consequent beauty of thought combined with beauty of expression make these extremely delightful

reading. Sometimes a rebuke uttered by the Buddha or by someone else not only helps a Thera to rid himself of the particular fault which provoked the rebuke but it also urges him most powerfully to progress along the spiritual path leading to the state of Arahantship, sometimes after a very short time. These poems do not contain sufficient data about the Monks and Nuns who composed them, nor is even the identity of some of them known. Much light, however, is thrown by an ancient Commentary- entitled Paramattha Dīpanī written by one Bhikkhu Dhammapāla of Kañcipūra (Madras Presidency). This Commentary supplies the background to the incidents mentioned in these Gāthas without which some of them are unintelligible. The Theras in question were laymen who came from various levels of social life to join the Order. There were Brahmins, powerful princes and rich merchants who abandoned the luxurious life of ease and indolence, and donned the saffron-coloured robe for a life of solitude and meditation. There were also cultivators, craftsmen, fishermen, actors, elephant-trainers and labourers. To whatsoever rank or station in life these Theras belonged, there is one common feature which linked one with the other and each with all, namely, their wonderful religious ardour to which they have given expression through these inspired verses.

## The Gāthas as a Source of, Inspiration

These poems are not only inspired they are also inspiring. To those who wish to increase their *saddha* (confidence) one can strongly commend the thoughtful reading of these verses over and over again. To any one, who is struggling to lead the spiritual life and badly needs encouragement, to any one who has fallen from his high ideal and is lacking the necessary strength of mind to-start over again, to any one who is making slow progress on the spiritual path and is in great need of the correct impetus to spur him on to quicker progress, I can think of no other more powerful source of strength than the reading and re-reading of the Thera-Therī Gāthas. They are so consoling, and so uplifting. They are also so human and so true to life. Herein lies the message of these ancient verses to us. The way of spiritual progress lies in the study and practice of the Dhamma and a contemplation of it followed by intense meditation. But, bare study or bare contemplation is sometimes difficult and dry, and is barren of results. Some extra impetus or motivation is necessary, some extra aid is required, to urge the flagging mind. When the spirit droops, when the struggle is weak, or the struggle is abandoned, what better enlivening process is there to flood our hearts with high hopes and aspirations and to galvanize us to activity once again than quietly listening to how similar situations have been successfully dealt with by these Theras and Therīs of old? The stanzas of these earnest devotees show how they have reacted to set-backs and draw-backs in life similar to those with which we are afflicted, how-they too have

suffered within their own minds the same conflicts as we have between the forces of good and evil, and how, despite the powerful urges of evil, they have kept their steadfast gaze on their goal and how their ardent and persistent longing for the goal stood them in good stead, and ultimately helped them to emerge triumphant and obtain the glory and peace of the liberated mind. Situations such as these constitute the inspiring contents of the Thera-Therī Gāthas, and let us now examine some of them.

## Inspiration from a Fall

It was mentioned earlier that some slight incident in life has very often been the starting point of the spiritual activity and uplifting of many of these monks and nuns. Let us now take the case of Bhagu Thera. He was by nature slow and sluggish and was very often found to be in a drowsy condition. One day he left his cell in order to discipline himself and rid himself of this tendency. While he was walking up the flight of steps of a terrace, he fell down. Now, this fall made a deep impression on his mind and set him thinking. We know the story of how when an apple fell Newton began to think, and the discovery of the law of gravitation was the result. This Thera fell. He too began to think, but on far different lines. He began to ponder on the impermanence of all things. Nothing stands for ever. Everything must some day fall. All is *dukkha*, liable to

suffering. Bhagu Thera thus made this fall of himself, the subject of his meditation, and developing insight, very soon attained Arahantship. Soon thereafter the Buddha came to see him and asked him “How now, Bhikkhu, do you continue in earnest?” He answered in the following delightful stanzas:

“Overcome by drowsiness I left my cell for exercise,  
Climbed the terrace-steps and fell thereby, all drowsy,  
To the earth chafing my limbs.  
Once more I stood up. And while I went up and down,  
Within I was all alert, composed, intent.  
There arose in me the deeper thought,  
Attention to the fact and to the cause. [6]  
The misery of it all was manifest.  
Distaste, indifference possessed the mind.  
And so my heart was set at liberty.  
O see, the seemly order of the norm!  
The threefold wisdom have I made my own  
And all the Buddha bids me do is done.”

## Inspiration from Seeing the Fall and Rise of a Bull

There is another instance of a fall which became the start of thoughts leading up immediately to Arahantship. Here it was not merely a fall that constituted the incident. It was

both a fall and a rise. It was the fall and rise of a bull. The Thera concerned was known as Rāmantyavihārin. He was the son of a prominent citizen of Rājagaha. He lived an idle and gay life, but suddenly the call came to him. He heard a sermon of the Buddha, renounced the world and entered the Order. Nevertheless, the comfortable life he had earlier lived, still had its attractions for him, so that, though a Bhikkhu, he had made for himself a well-polished room with ample furniture and saw to it that he was well equipped with food and drink. Hence it was that he was known Rāmantyavihārin which means “dweller in a pleasant lodge.” Despite these comforts he yearned for the greater freedom of the layman’s life and refusing the alms that were offered to him, decided to roam the country. One day as he was seated beneath a tree he saw several carts passing along the road. He noticed one weary bull stumbling at a rough place on the road and falling down. The carter released the bull from the yoke and gave it food and drink. Soon the fatigue was over, the bull arose, it was harnessed again, and again it began to draw the cart. This sight of the bull falling and subsequently rising again made a deep impression in the mind of this pleasure-loving Thera who had fallen off the correct path of a Bhikkhu. Thought he to himself: “Even as this bull having stumbled and fallen, has risen again and is drawing his cart again, so it behoves me who have fallen from the high position of a noble recluse, to rise up again and relive ‘the noble life.’” He began to meditate on this incident and soon attained Arahantship.

This Thera's short but beautiful stanza runs as follows:

“Even though he trip and fall, the mettled brute  
Of noble breed will steadfast stand once more.  
So look on me as one who having learned  
Of Him the All-Enlightened One, have gained  
True insight, am became of noble breed  
And of the very Buddha a disciple true.”

## Inspiration from Elephant-Training

Let us now consider the case of Hatthārohaputta Thera where also a trifling incident led to great results. This Thera belonged to a family of elephant trainers. In his youth he developed a proficiency in training elephants and used to train them very often. One day, as he was training an elephant by the riverside and observing how effectively the savage tendencies of the animal gave way to the influence of his skilful training and also considering what power the presence of the trainer's hook wielded over the animal, he began to think—“Of what avail to me is this elephant-training. Is it not far better for one to train and tame himself?” So thinking he visited the Buddha, heard him preach and entered the Order. He meditated on this incident and ultimately attained Arhantship. His Gatha too is short but beautiful:

“Once roamed this heart afield, a wanderer

Wherever will or whim or pleasure led,  
Today that heart I'll hold in thorough check  
As trainer's hook the savage elephant."

An almost similar incident regarding the taming of an elephant has been the cause of the spiritual upliftment of a nun This will be dealt with later in the section dealing with the verses of the Therīs.

## Inspiration from Ridicule

Let us now consider how a trifling incident of an amusing nature led to great results. This was the experience of Lakuṇṭaka Bhaddiya Thera. He possessed an extremely beautiful voice. He was deemed to have the sweetest voice among the disciples of the Buddha, but his physical form was not at all presentable. He was extremely short and for that reason he was called Lakuṇṭaka which means a dwarf. One day in Sāvattihī a woman was driving a chariot. When she happened to pass this Thera, she laughed exhibiting her teeth. This Thera made that sight of her teeth the object of his meditation and soon arrived at the state of Anāgāmi, the Non-returner. Later he practised mindfulness as regards the body (*kāyānupassanā*) and attained Arahantship. Thereafter he used to repeat these charming verses:

"Beyond the gardens of Ambataka

In woodland wild, craving and craving's root  
Withdrawn, and rapt in deepest reverie  
There happy sits fortunate Bhaddiya.  
And some are charmed by cymbals, lutes and drums  
And I in leafy shadow of my trees  
Do dwell entranced by the Buddha's Rule.  
Let but the Buddha grant one boon to me  
And if that boon were mine; I'd choose for all  
Perpetual study in control of self.  
They who decry me for my shape, and they  
Who listen spell-bound to my voice, such folk  
In toils of lust and impulse know me not.  
The fool hemmed in on every side knows not  
The inner life, nor sees the things without  
And by a voice forsooth is led away.  
And of the inner life he knows not  
Yet can discern the things that are without  
Watching alone the outer fruits that come  
He also by a voice is led away.  
He who both understands the inner life  
And does discern the things that are without  
Clear visioned, by no voice, is led away."

## Inspiration from Bitter Criticism

It is interesting to trace the circumstances which led to the Arahantship of Ānanda Thera, the famous disciple of the

Buddha who for many years attended on him. It is well-known that Ānanda Thera, being preoccupied with his ministrations to the Buddha neglected his own spiritual development so much that when the Buddha passed away all his disciples were Arahants except Ānanda Thera. Shortly after the Buddha's demise, a monk known as Vajjiputta Thera who acquired the six-fold supernormal powers found Ānanda Thera preaching to a large congregation. Vajjiputta Thera, no doubt from the best of motives, criticized Ānanda Thera bitterly pointing out that he had forgotten his main duty and was still preoccupied with other work. This is how Vajjiputta Thera addressed Ānanda Thera:

“Come and plunge in leafy lair of trees, [7]  
Suffer Nibbāna in your heart to sink.  
Study and dally not, Gotamid,  
What does this fingle-fangle mean to you.”

Ānanda Thera was greatly agitated on hearing this bit of sharp criticism. It struck him hard. It also gave birth to a keen resolve to abandon everything else and devote the rest of his time for the one purpose for which he entered the Order, viz. to realize perfect Sainthood. He keenly realized the mistake of not having striven for Arahantship so far. What now behoved him, he felt, was not to be preaching to others but to further his own inner development which he had neglected. Feeling keen remorse he spent that night in intense meditation walking up and down. Then, as he

entered his room, he obtained insight and in the very act of lying down on his couch he attained Arahantship. Ānanda Thera's wonderful devotion and loyalty to his Master is exceptional. There is no greater example in the whole world of a disciple's loyalty to his Master. Even as he lay dying on his death-bed this is what Ānanda Thera uttered:

“The Master has my fealty and love  
And all the Buddha's ordinance is done.  
Low have I laid the heavy load I bore,  
Cause for rebirth is found in me no more.”

## Inspiration from Rebuke

The reaction that rebuke or reproach causes varies with the individual. To those whose minds are not pliable, who are obstinate, headstrong and insolent, rebuke or reproach can have no salutary effect. It will only make them more stubborn. But in the case of those whose general disposition is one of benevolence and kindness, whose general tendencies are towards good and not evil, a little rebuke can sometimes have the effect of arousing in them such a degree of self-examination and repentance that these thoughts may induce a high resolve to shed their faults and weaknesses whatever they are which have thus been brought to light.

Just such was the case of an Elder known as Vaddha Thera. His mother, a pious lady of the city of Bhārukaccha, had

renounced the lay life and had entered the order of Bhikkhunīs or Nuns and subsequently realized Arahantship. Later her son entered the Order and earned a name for himself as an eloquent preacher. One day a desire arose in him to see his mother and he desired to see her alone. He therefore removed his outer robe and went unnoticed to the quarters of the Bhikkhunīs. His mother seeing him come alone and without his outer robe rebuked him severely. This rebuke worked heavily on his mind. He forthwith returned to his monastery, sat himself down in the day-room and meditating, attained Arahantship.

In his stanzas he freely acknowledged his attainment as being solely due to his mother's rebuke. He refers to this rebuke by the Pali word "*patoda*" which means a goad or spur. He starts by calling her "*mat!*", or mother, but as the inspired verses proceed, she is referred to as *bhaginī*, or sister, in the sense that the entire Order of the Bhikkhunīs (of which she was a member) are regarded as sisters from the point of view of the Order of the Bhikkhus (of which he was a member).

As one reads these lines of inspiration one feels how intensely and completely this Bhikkhu must have been influenced by the maternal rebuke. Let us now listen to his Gāthās:

“Oh! Well in sooth my mother used the goad.  
I marked her word, and by my parent taught  
I stirred up effort, put forth all my strength

And won the goal, the Enlightenment Supreme.  
Arahant am I, meet for men's offerings,  
Thrice wise, the ambrosial vision I beheld.  
Conquered is Namuci [8] and all his host  
And now I dwell henceforth sane and immune.  
Yeah, the intoxicants that once were there  
Within, without me are extracted clean.  
Nothing does remain nor may they reappear.  
Lo! Wise and ripe in grace the Sister was  
Who spoke this word of pregnant good to me.  
For you now even as for me  
No jungle of the mind does bar the way,  
A final barrier is made to Ill.  
Last mortal frame is this, to which belongs  
The way world without end of birth and death  
Nor ever comes more rebirth (for you)."

## Inspiration from Being Called a Pig

Let us now consider a case where a very bad rebuke had its most salutary effect—that is, the case of Dasaka Thera. He was the son of a slave, of Anāthapiṇḍika, the great philanthropist. Later he was given the post of Gate-keeper of Jetavanārāma by Anāthapiṇḍika. After some time, on account of his good conduct, he was released from slavery. Though he was freed he preferred to spend the rest of his life as a Bhikkhu and therefore entered the Order. Strangely,

however, from the time he became a Bhikkhu, perhaps due to the sudden cessation of arduous labour, he ceased to be energetic. He became more and more slothful and indolent and began to sleep long after each mid-day meal. When the Buddha was delivering a sermon he would get behind the congregation so that he may remain unnoticed and there he was found snoring away. The Buddha noticing this rebuked him by a verse comparing him to a "*maha varāha*" i.e., a huge pig. This rebuke greatly agitated the Thera's mind and constantly recalling the verse uttered by the Buddha developed insight and realized Arahantship. The verse with which the Buddha rebuked him became his personal verse in the sense that he used to repeat it every now and then pondering on its meaning which urged him on to the spiritual heights which he thereby reached. In his own words this *gāthā* acted as a "*paṭoda*" or goad to him. The *Gāthā* runs as follows:

Who waxes slothful and in diet gross,  
Given to sleep and rolling as he lies,  
Like a great hog with provender replete.  
The dolt comes back again and again to birth.

## Inspiration from Punishment

There is a kind of pride with which some people are afflicted, which is akin to pride of birth. It is the pride of

membership of some institution or body. Are we not reminded of such persons when we find the Thera Channa with egoistic pride speaking of “our Buddha” and “our Doctrine?” [9] This Thera could not rid himself of this weakness. On account of his pride and his obstinacy, a penalty in the nature of a social ostracism (*brahma daṇḍa*) imposed on him by the Buddha was carried out after his demise. In suffering this penalty Channa Thera learned to eliminate his weakness and soon after attained Arahantship which he triumphantly proclaimed in the following Gāthas:

“I heard the Truth which the Great One had taught  
And felt its mighty virtues, known by Him  
Who all things with supernatural insight knew  
The Path for winning things ambrosial I found.  
Past-Master he in sooth to guide into the way of blest  
security.”

## Inspiration from a Curse

An ox belonging to a caravan-leader called Godatta once fell on the road while it was drawing a cart. It was not possible to raise the ox although it was beaten severely by Godatta. Then, it is said, the ox assumed a human voice and uttered a curse on Godatta. This curse had the effect of impressing deeply on Godatta’s mind the real purpose of life. He gave away all his property and, having entered the Order,

attained Arahantship. Among the verses he uttered this is one:”

Even as the mettled brute of noble breed  
Yoked to his load, drawing his load along  
Yough worn by burden past his powers (unfair)  
Breaks not away, revolting from his bonds,  
So they in whom, as water in the sea,  
Wisdom abounds, despise not other men.  
This among creatures is the Ariyan rule.”

## Inspiration from a Dream

There is an interesting case of how great remorse suffered in a dream led to meditation and to the realization of Arahantship. The Thera who so became an Arahant was known as Usabha Thera. He had neglected all his religious duties but was not concerned at all about this neglect. One day he dreamt that he had shaved his head and had donned a crimson-coloured robe and was going on elephant-back to the town for alms. This had attracted the attention of the people who had gathered in large numbers. Seeing the people, he felt ashamed and forthwith dismounted from the animal. He knew his own unworthiness. Usabha Thera then awoke from his dream. He felt great remorse, and, taking earnestly to meditation, attained Arahantship. His dream had acted upon him as his goad. These are the two verses he

uttered:

“A cloak the hue of purple mango-buds  
Draping about my shoulder, I bestrode  
The back of elephant, and so to seek  
Mine alms into the village street I rode.  
Down from his back in very shame I slid  
When lo! I woke and anguish seized me.  
This arrogant self was then made meek and mild,  
Purged were the poisons that my mind defiled.”  
Inspiration from Temptation

There was a Thera known as Sundara Samuddha Thera who was extremely handsome. As a young man the call came to him and he entered the Order. His mother, however, was unhappy in the thought that her son was not married, and when she saw other young men going about with their wives all dressed in the best of clothes and enjoying themselves at festivals, she thought of her lonely son and wept. Noticing this, a young woman of questionable character approached her and offered to entice her son back to the layman's life. The weak-minded mother not only approved the idea but also gave her many gifts. Clad in gay attire she approached the Thera but all her seductive arts failed to win over the Thera. On the contrary, the vile woman's importunities made the Thera all the more determined to pursue his goal and he resolved then and there to exert himself to the utmost in his meditations. Standing where he was he acquired the six-fold

supernormal power (abhinna)-culminating in Arahantship.  
His verses reflect his high resolve:

“Adorned and clad to make a gallant show,  
Crowned with a wreath and decked with many gems,  
Her feet made red with lac, with slippers alight,  
A woman of the town accosted me!  
'So young, so fair and you have left the world!  
Stay here within my rule and ordinance.  
Take your fill of human pleasures.  
See, I will give you all the means thereto.  
It is the truth that I am telling you  
Or if you doubt, I'll bring you fire [10] and swear:  
When you and I are old, both of us  
Will take our staff to lean upon, and so  
We both will leave the world and win both ways.'  
Seeing that public woman making plea  
And professing obeisance gaily decked  
In brave array like snare of Māra laid,  
There arose in me the deeper view:  
Attention to the fact and to the cause.  
The misery of it all was manifest.  
Distaste, indifference the mind possessed  
And so my heart was set at liberty.  
Oh! See the seemly order of the norm.  
The three-fold wisdom [11] have I made my own  
And all the Buddha bids us do is done.”

# Inspiration from Nature

In all ages and climes the desire for the meditative life often goes hand in hand with the desire for the forest life and the desire to be in communion with nature. Therefore it is not surprising to find several Theras in the Buddha's time exhibiting a great fondness for the forest life with its solitude and its natural beauties, affording, as they do, an opportunity for quiet meditation.

## The Inspiration of Usabha Thera

There was once a monk known as Usabha Thera. After he received the higher ordination he resided in the cave of a forest at the foot of a mountain. The rainy season had come. Everywhere the woods were fresh and green. The trees and creepers and bushes were shining with a fresh foliage of healthy green. Now Usabha Thera was thrilled with the charms that nature has thus showered on the forest after the rains. Coming out of his cave one day, and possessing, as he did, the *arañña-saññā* or forest-sense, he appreciated the loveliness and luxuriant growth of the forest. He began to ponder seriously on the fulfilment of growth that had taken

place in all the vegetation of the forest. "These trees and creepers and bushes," he thought, "are unconscious and yet by the season's fulfilment they have won growth, Why should not I, who am conscious and have attained a suitable season, myself win growth by the development of good qualities?" Thinking thus he uttered these delightful stanzas and meditating realized Arahantship:

"The trees on high by towering cloud refreshed  
With the new rain break forth in verdant growth.  
To Usabha who for detachment longs,  
And has the forest-sense of things,  
Does come (from this responsive spring) abundant  
good."

## The Inspiration of Vana Vaccha Thera

Let us now proceed to the case of Vana Vaccha Thera who was also thrilled with the charm of forest life. He was a Brahmin of the Vaccha clan and a native of Kapilavatthu. He was born in the forest and because he was so passionately fond of it he was called Vana Vaccha which means "Forest—Vaccha." Later he entered the Order and went back to the forest and remained there meditating until he realized Arahantship. On being once asked by his fellow monks what comfort he gained from the forest, the verse by which he answered shows his great love of nature:

“Craggs with the hue of heaven’s blue clouds  
Where lies embosomed many a shining tarn  
Of crystal-clear, cool waters, and whose slopes  
The ‘herds of Indra’ cover and bedeck;  
Those are the braes wherein my soul delights.”

## The Inspiration of another Vana Vaccha Thera

There was another Vana Vaccha Thera, son of a wealthy Brahmin of Rājagaha. He too entered the Order and having attained Arahantship decided to remain in the forest in complete detachment. Once, out of compassion for his kinsmen of Rājagaha he emerged from the forest and lived among them for some time preaching the Dhamma to them. When he decided to return to the forest they implored him to live in the Vihara close by, saying that they will wait upon him. He explained to them that he preferred to live in the forest and this he did by uttering a verse which reveals his ardent love of forest-life:

“Craggs where clear waters lie, a rocky world  
Haunted by black-faced apes and timid deer  
Where, beneath bright blossoms, run the silver-streams  
Those are the highlands of my heart’s delight.”

# The Inspiration of Kassapa Mahā Thera

A similar delightful expression of the love of forest life is found in the verses of Kassapa Mahā Thera. This is the Thera who practised the thirteen *dhutaṅgas* or austerities and soon realized Arahantship. When he was asked why at his time of life he preferred to live in the forest rather than in a monastery, this was his beautiful answer:

“Those upland glades delightful to the soul  
Where the Kareri spreads its wildering wreaths.  
Where sound the trumpet-calls of elephants,  
Those are the braes wherein my soul delights.  
Fair uplands rain-refreshed and resonant,  
With crested creatures’ cries antiphonal,  
Lone heights where silent Rishis oft resort,  
Those are the braes wherein my soul delights.  
Here is enough for me who fain would seek  
The highest good, a brother filled with zeal.  
Here is enough for me who fain would seek  
A happy ease, a brother filled with zeal.  
Here is enough for me who give myself  
To studious toil, so am I filled with zeal.”

This same Mahā Kassapa Thera was once asked how he was able at his time of life to climb the hills day after day. To this question he replied in the following forceful stanzas:

“Where some do perish as they climb the rocks,  
Heir of the Buddha, mindful, self-possessed,  
By forces of the spirit fortified,  
Does Kassapa ascend the mountain brow.  
Returning from the daily round for alms,  
Kassapa mounts some craggy coign and sits  
In meditation rapt, nor clutching aught,  
For far from him has he put fear and dread.  
Returning from the daily round for alms  
Kassapa mounts some craggy coign and sits  
In meditation rapt, nor clutching aught,  
For he among those that burn is cool and still.  
Returning from the daily round for alms,  
Kassapa mounts some craggy point and sits  
In meditation rapt, nor clutching aught,  
His task is done; he is sane, immune.”

## The Inspiration of Cittaka Thera

Cittaka Thera was the son of a wealthy Brahmin of Rājagaha. He heard the Buddha preaching at the Bamboo Grove. Filled with faith he renounced the layman's life and entered the Order. Very soon he realized Arahantship whereupon he decided to visit the the Buddha and pay his respects to him. He was then asked by the other brethren whether he was able to meditate strenuously while living in the forest Evidently some of the questioners must have

thought that the quiet of the forest life predisposes one to indolence and sleep. See, however, the answer given by Cittaka Thera in this vigorous and inspiring stanza:

“Peacocks of sapphire neck and comely crest,  
Calling, calling in Karanviya woods  
By cool and humid winds made musical  
They wake the thinker from his noonday sleep.”

## The Inspiration of Vimala Thera

Another Thera of Rājagaha born of a wealthy family was Vimala Thera. Seeing the Buddha one day, he too was filled with faith and betook himself to a mountain cave in Kosala for meditation. One day while he was dwelling in his mountain cave where the heat was oppressive, large rain clouds gathered in the sky and soon there was a severe downpour of rain. Thereafter it was nice and cool. The rains had removed all sense of heat and oppression. The earth was cool and the winds blew. So the Thera was able to persevere in his meditations with eagerness until Arahantship was soon realized. Enraptured and overjoyed he expressed his accomplishment in the following delightful stanza:

“The burdened earth is sprinkled by the rain,  
The winds blow cool, the lightnings roam on high,  
Eased and allayed the obsessions of the mind,

And in my heart, the spirit's mastery."

## The Aspirations of Tālapuṭa Thera

Nowhere do we find the religious aspirations of devotees so well expressed as in the Thera-Therī Gāthas, and foremost among such expressions are those of Tālapuṭa Thera. This Thera in lay life was a well-known actor who had been giving very successful performances in various parts of India. Once, when he was performing at Rājagaha, the thought came to him to visit the Buddha. Having done so he enquired from the Buddha whether it is true that actors on the stage after death are reborn among certain devas. Thrice the question was asked and thrice the Buddha said "Don't ask this question from me." However, on being asked the fourth time, the Buddha replied that those who induce sensual thoughts in others and cause them to lose earnestness are reborn in hell. On receiving this reply the talented actor wept for he had been deceived by older actors, who had told him that an actor is reborn in happy states. He then listened to the Buddha's teaching and, full of faith joined the Order. Having realized Arahantship he uttered several gāthas which bespeak his ardent aspirations to attain Arahantship. Here are some of them:

"When shall I come to dwell in mountain caves  
Now here, now there, unmated (with desire),

And with the vision gained into impermanence  
Of all that into being does become.  
Yea, this for me, even this, when shall it come to be.  
O when shall I, who wear the patchwork cloak,  
Be a true saint of yellow robe,  
Without a thought of what is “mine”  
And from all cravings purified,  
With lust and hate, yea and illusions slain,  
So to the wild woods gone, in bliss abide?  
O when shall I, who see and know that this  
My person, nest of dying and disease,  
Oppressed by age and death,  
Is all impermanent,  
Dwell free from fear, lonely within the woods—  
Yea, when shall these things be?  
O! when shall I abide (unmoved)  
Because of speech abusive, not downcast,  
Nor when again my praise be sung  
Be filled with complacency  
When comes this for me?” [12]

# The Therī Gāthas: Their Nature

The Nuns of the time of the Buddha, like the Monks, were renowned for their devotion and piety. As in the case of some of the Theras a trifling incident in life, a trivial circumstance, often became the starting point of their spiritual effort which culminated in Arahantship, and they too, like the Theras, triumphantly proclaimed their achievement in inspired verses. These verses reflect their religious emotions and aspirations. Most of these nuns too had joined the Order in their youth and sometimes within a short time, realised Arahantship. As in Thera Gāthas there is reflected in these Therī Gāthas the struggle between the forces of good and evil and the indomitable resolve to surmount evil and reach the goal. Hence their appeal to us.

We miss however the poetic excellence that characterizes most of the verses of the Theras. We also miss that impassioned longing for solitude and that ardent love of nature and forest-life so beautifully expressed in the Thera Gāthas. Nor do we find in the Therī Gāthas much of that hortatory element which features largely in some of the Thera Gāthas. In language, in sentiment and in outlook there are differences between the verses of the Theras and those of the Therīs. This may be traced to the circumstance

that in the homes of the early Buddhist era the role of the woman was so different from the role of the man. There is also the added circumstance that Buddhist nuns (*Bhikkhuni*) were not allowed by their Code of Discipline to live alone in secluded places. Intellectually, too they- were not of equal rank. There are however these two very noticeable features common to both types of Gāthas, namely, the reflection of great piety and the manifestation of an unflinching determination to reach the goal.

## Inspiration from a Burnt-up Curry

A daughter of a nobleman of Vesāli was greatly interested in the practice of the Dhamma and became a lay-disciple of the Buddha. Later she desired to renounce the lay life and become a nun, but her husband would not hear of this. So she continued performing her household duties reflecting all the while on the Virtues of the Dhamma. One day in her kitchen a curry of herbs was being cooked when suddenly the flames rose high and burnt up all the herbs with a crackling noise. She was watching this. It made a deep impression in her mind. She made this sight the basis of her meditation on the impermanence of things and reached the state of Anāgāmi (Non-returner). Thereafter she gave up wearing jewels and ornaments. On being asked by her husband the reason for this, she explained that she found it difficult to lead the lay-life. Her husband consenting, she

was ordained by Mahā Pajāpati to whom he took her. Her name as a nun is not known. Shortly thereafter she attained Arahantship. Later when she was brought before the Buddha, the latter with the object of encouraging her referred to the cause which led to her enlightenment in a Gāthā which thereafter she used to repeat in sheer joy :-

“Sleep softly, little sturdy, [13] take your rest  
At ease, wrapt in the robe thyself hast made.  
Stilled are the passions that would rage within,  
Withered as pot herbs in the oven dried.”

## Inspiration from a Fall

A fall while walking led to similar results in the case of Bhagu Thera mentioned earlier. In the present case one Dhammā Therī having gone out for alms one day, was returning to the nunnery when she tripped and fell. She took this as the basis for her meditation and attained Arahantship. Thereupon she repeated this stanza in triumphant mood:

“Far had I wandered for my daily food,  
Weary with shaking limbs I reached my rest.  
Leaning upon my staff when even there  
I fell to earth—lo! all the misery  
Besetting this poor mortal frame lay bare To inward  
vision.

Prone the body lay.  
The heart of me rose up in liberty.”

## Inspiration from an Elephant's Obedience

Similar to the case of Hatthārohaputta which had been dealt with earlier, is the case of Dantikā Therī who was also deeply impressed by the very docile attitude of a well-trained elephant. Returning from a mid-day rest on a hill she saw an elephant meekly raising his foot at the mere bidding of the trainer. She began to ponder deeply. She thought that if training can exert so much influence on a powerful animal, how much more can be achieved if the trainer trains himself. She then began to train her mind in meditation and thereafter attained Arahantship. Then, in a mood of sheer joy, she broke forth in the following inspired verses:

“Coming from noonday rest in Vulture's Peak  
I saw an elephant, his bath performed, forth from the  
river issue.

And a man taking his goad bade the great creature  
stretch his foot.

“Give me your foot”—The elephant Obeyed and to his  
neck the trainer sprang.

I saw the untamed tamed, I saw him bent to Master's

will.

And marking inwardly I passed into the forest depths  
In faith—I trained and ordered all my mind.”

## Inspiration from Watching Water Sinking into the Ground

The Therī Paṭācārā in her lay life suffered many bereavements within a very short space of time. She lost her husband and both her children. She also lost her parents and her brother. Consoled in her great grief by the Buddha’s admonitions she reached the state of a Non-returner (*Anāgāmi*). One day she was washing her feet with a bowl of water. As she poured that water on to her feet, some of the water trickled some distance away from her feet and sank into the ground. She poured more water. This went further away from her feet and similarly disappeared. She then poured water for a third time. This went furthest away from her feet and similarly disappeared. This incident made a deep impression in her mind. She began to ponder “Yes, such also is the disappearance of life. Some live a short while and disappear from earth. Others live longer and disappear in middle age. Yet others live to a ripe old age and then disappear. All must sooner or later disappear from this- world.” She made this incident the basis of her meditation on impermanence. Soon she attained

Arahantship and these are the stanzas she uttered:

“One day bathing my feet, I sit and watch  
The water as it trickles down the slope.  
Thereby I set my heart in steadfastness  
As one doth train a horse of noble breed.  
Then going to my cell, I take my lamp  
And seated on my couch I watch the flame.  
Grasping the pin,  
I pull the wick right down  
Into the oil.  
Lo! The Nibbāna of the little lamp!  
Emancipation dawns.  
My heart is free!”

## Inspiration from Bodily Decay

Ambapālī Therī in her lay life was the notorious young woman who lived a life of voluptuous ease. Possessed of great beauty she was sought after by many young nobles of the country. Despite her life of giddy pleasures, the thought came to her one day to build a monastery for the Buddha and his Order. Later, happening to listen to the preaching of the Dhamma by her own son, the Thera Vimala Kondañña, she turned a new leaf. She was now growing old and observing the devastating changes wrought in her own body by advancing age, began to meditate on

impermanence, uttering several verses of great pathos of which only a few are quoted here:

“Glossy and black as the down of the bee my curls once clustered;

They with the waste of years are like unto hempen or bark cloth.

Such and not otherwise runs the rune—the word of the Truth-speaker.

Dense as a grove well planted, and comely with comb, pin and parting;

All with the waste of the years dishevelled the fair plaits and fallen.

Such and not otherwise runs the rune—the word of the Truth-speaker.

Sweet was my voice as the bell of the cuckoo through woodlands flitting;

Now with the waste of years broken the music and halting.

Such and not otherwise runs the rune—the word of the Truth-speaker.

Such has this body been.

Now age-weary and weak and unsightly, home of manifold ills;

Old house whence the mortar is dropping.

Such and not otherwise runs the rune—the word of the Truth-speaker.”

# Gāthas in Admiration of Recluses

The Therī Rohiṇī from her young days had a great admiration for pious recluses, an admiration which never could be understood or appreciated by her father who regarded them as an idle crowd doing nothing useful. The father would many a time ask this one question—“*Kena te samaṇā piyā?* Why are recluses dear to you?” The delightful stanzas which she uttered by way of reply, she would often recall after attaining Arahantship. Here are some of them:

“For many a day, dear father, have you asked about recluses.

Now will I proclaim their virtues and their wisdom and their work.

Full fain of work are they, no sluggard crew.

The noblest work they do; they drive out lust and hate.

Hence are recluses dear to me.

And when along the village street they go,

At naught they turn to look; incurious they walk.

Hence are recluses dear to me.

They clutch no coin; no gold their hand does take nor silver.

For their needs sufficient yields the day.

Hence are recluses dear to me.”

# Conclusion

Apart from the poetic excellence of these stanzas, apart from the sublime emotions they engender, and the note of triumphant joy that resounds within them, these stanzas, one and all, can never fail to exert a powerful influence for good on those who read them. That the struggle experienced within oneself between the forces of good and evil can ultimately end in a victory for the good and that when the struggle is over and the mind is freed from the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion the resultant position is one of calm, peace and happiness, is the unmistakable message of these inspired Gāthas. Indeed this message must be most inspiring when we find that these stanzas forcibly direct the reader's mind to the great fact that any little event in life, any incident howsoever trifling, if it is made the object of deep contemplation can uplift the mind to the highest levels of realization. There is thus in these Thera-Therī-Gāthas a definite and powerful message of hope to those who feel that evil is insurmountable especially in a highly materialistic age as the present when moral values are discounted and worldly considerations reign supreme.

May the Thera-Therī-Gāthas shed their holy influence on the reader and inspire him to take up the struggle against evil with renewed confidence and redoubled vigour and

may he someday reach the goal.

# Notes

1. Tipiṭaka (lit.: the three Baskets) is the name of the Buddhist canonical scriptures.
2. Thera: Elder Monk of the Buddhist Monastic Order. Theri: Elder Nun. Gatha: stanzas.
3. There are 264 gāthās uttered by the Theras and 73 by the Theris.
4. Published under the titles *Psalms of the Brethren* and *Psalms of the Sisters*. Our thanks are due to the Pali Text Society, London, for kind permission to quote here extensively from these two volumes.
5. This acknowledgement is referred to in the Commentary as *añña*.
6. The original Pali expression represented by this line is “*yoniso manasikāra*”, i.e. the habit of systematized attention which has been highly commended by the Buddha—a way of looking down to the origin and foundation of things as they occur to the mind, as opposed to “*ayoniso manasikāra*” or superficiality in thinking.
7. The original of this line is “*rukhamūla-gahanaṃ pasakkiya.*” This is a bidding to betake to the forest

(literally, to the foot of a tree) away from the maddening crowd.

8. Namuci is another name for Māra.
9. Channa was born in King Suddhodana's palace as the son of a maid-servant. This moat probably accounts for his desire to identify himself with the Sakyas by saying "Our Buddha" and "Our Doctrine."
10. This perhaps refers to the ordeal by fire to test one's truthfulness as mentioned in the Laws of Manu.
11. This refers to the three special types of knowledge, viz. knowledge of past lives, knowledge of death and rebirth of beings, and knowledge of the extinction of the taints (*asavas*).
12. To an actor on the stage it needs much effort to be indifferent to praise and blame.
13. On account of her sturdy build she was called Sturdy by the people of her area

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