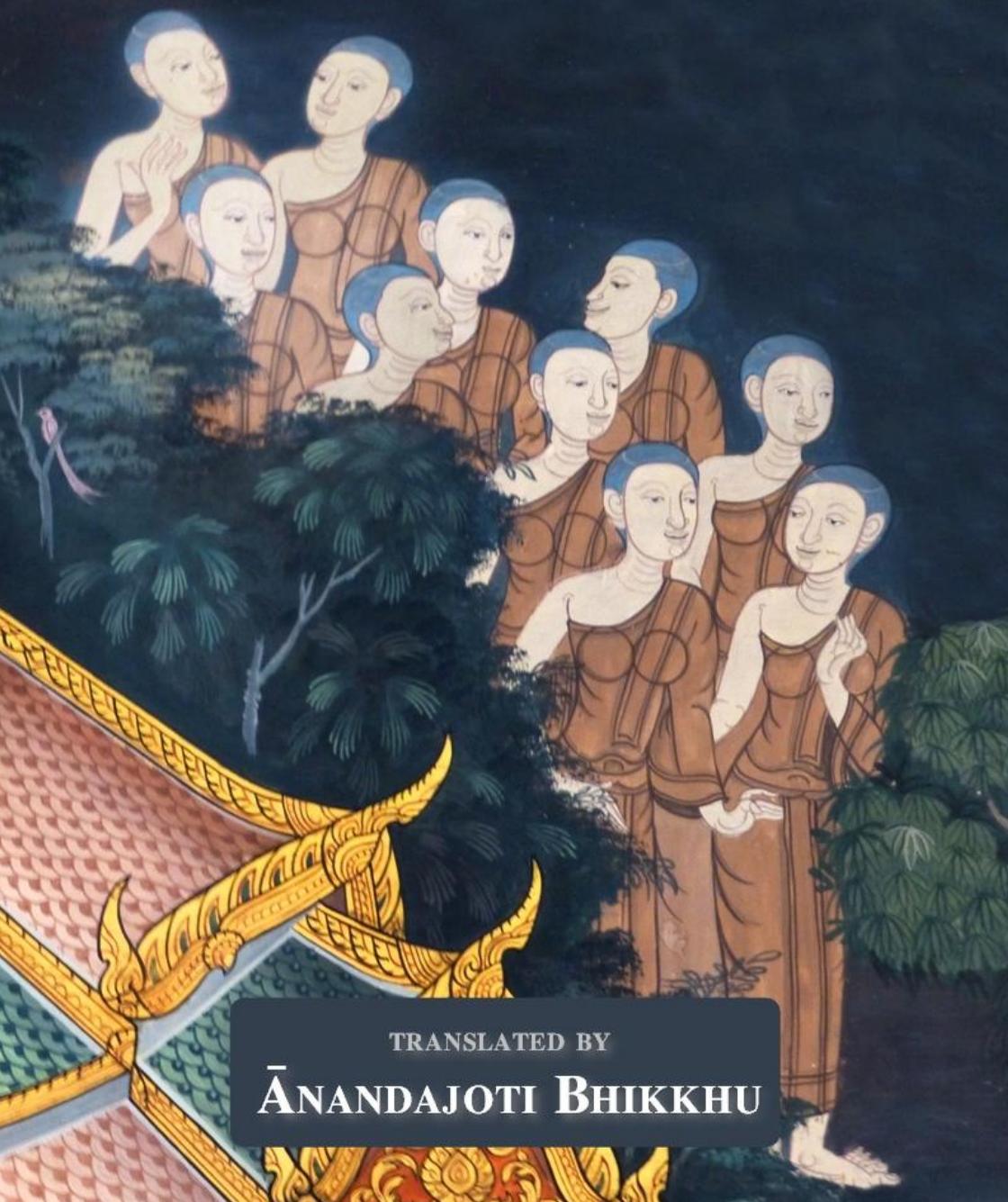


THE STORIES ABOUT
THE FOREMOST ELDER NUNS



TRANSLATED BY

ĀNANDAJOTI BHIKKHU

the stories about
The Foremost Elder Nuns

translated by

Ānandajoti Bhikkhu

(March 2015)

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I am very grateful indeed to Dr. Junko Matsumura, whose superb knowledge of Pāḷi has once again helped prevent me from falling into error, and who made a number of valuable suggestions for improving the text.

I am once again indebted to Ayyā Tathālokā for reading through the text and making many good suggestions for improvement, as well as picking up some corrections along the way.

I am also grateful indeed to Sudhammā Bhikkhunī, whose meticulous reading of the text has helped correct my English and eliminate inconsistencies.

The work would be much poorer without the help of these generous scholars, but if any mistakes now remain then they are my fault alone.

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Introduction

In the Book of the Ones in the Numerical Collection (Aṅguttaranikāya, 1.14) there is a bare list of seventy-four monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen whom the Buddha singled out as excelling in a certain spiritual quality they had developed.¹

No more information is given about them there, or the circumstances that led up to their being given these positions. Although some of them are known from other places in the discourses to have held these positions, like the eldest disciples, others would be unknown today, if they were not named here.

The commentary on the Numerical Discourses, a section of which is translated here, tries to fill in this lacuna by providing detailed histories of the disciples, telling when and where they made an aspiration to hold the position; the good deeds they did, and the story of their last life.

In the case of the nuns this more or less follows this pattern:

- they made their aspiration at the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, normally after seeing him appoint one of his own nuns to that position
- then comes a more or less detailed intermediate section, which records their past lives, and the good deeds they did, normally to Paccekabuddhas or Buddhas

¹ Some, as in the case of Ānanda, were appointed to more than one position, excelling in various qualities.

- their last lives detail where they were born and their circumstances at the time of the Buddha Gotama, and their appointment to the aspired-for position

Some of the life histories given here are long and detailed, while others are brief and hardly accomplish their aim of explaining why they were appointed to their position; a number are justly famous, while a few are short and easily forgotten.

All the stories, however, play a very important role in the teaching, as they show that people with very different backgrounds – both fortunate and unfortunate – were capable of attaining the highest aim in life when given the right teachings at the right time, and they therefore serve as inspirations and role models for us today.

A few of the nuns are named as characters in the previous lives of the Bodhisatta recorded in the Jātaka Birth Stories, where Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Uppalavaṇṇā, Khemā and Bhaddā Kaccānā (Yasodharā) particularly are frequently identified. Bhaddā Kāpilānī and Kisāgotamī are also identified there, but none of the others as far as I could discover.

I have given introductions to each of the stories as they occur, and pointed out some of the key features therein, and also some of the anomalies that are found, and therefore needn't review them again here.

The stories of the nuns as they are recorded here seek only to show why they were placed by the Buddha in such a high and exemplary position, and do not purport to give full biographies of the nuns, and we can often find more information in the Traditions (*Apadāna*)

about them, or in their recorded paeans of joy in the Therīgāthā and its commentary.

Other materials like this are sometimes referred to in the text, and I have included some to fill out parts of the story where appropriate and serve the purpose of helping to explain why they acquired their positions. This is either done in-line, or, sometimes, if they are larger works, they are made available elsewhere on this website and links are provided.

One thing I think worth bringing to notice is that none of the women involved aspire to become men, as it was not seen as necessary – or even useful – to change gender while aspiring to Awakening and positions of great rank. Gender seems never to have been considered an issue in these matters.

I have started with the translations of the nun disciples, not because the others are less important, but because I think it is useful to try and recover these role models for Buddhist women of today who are sometimes struggling to get their voice heard and their role acknowledged in the Sāsana.

In this sense we seem to have gone backward in recent centuries, as the Buddha's generation, and even the commentarial generation, were happy to record the deeds of these great women, and encourage more to aspire for the same ideals, and found no problem acknowledging their contribution to the Sāsana.

I began work on these translations around 2011, but many other works called for my attention in the meantime, and I am happy to see at least this section completed. I hope to return to these texts one day and continue the work by translating first the stories of the lay

disciples, and eventually the male monastic disciples, which is by far the longest section of this part of the commentary.

After I had translated about half of the text I found that a previous translation existed, done as early as 1893 by Mabel Bode, and this helped me correct some passages, and was a help in making the rest of the translation.

I also had the help of the English translation of *The Great Chronicles of Buddhas* (sic), originally written in Burmese, which is a monumental work by Bhaddanta Vicittasārābhivaṃsa (Mingun Sayadaw), who was one of the foremost scholars in Myanmar in the 20th century.

Texts supplementary to the titles and main translations have been marked in *italic*. They are sometimes Canonical, as with quotes from the Apadāna, Dhammapada and Suttanipāta texts; sometimes from other commentaries, as with the Dhammapada commentary; and in the case of one section (in Bhaddā Kāpilānī's story), from an earlier part of the same commentary, to which we are referred. They are identified in the notes as they appear.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN MAHĀPAJĀPATĪ GOTAMĪ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī

The first of the foremost nun disciples is the root and the most important also, as Mahāpajāpatī was the founding member of the nuns' monastic order, and this story tells how she reached such an eminent position. It was a position that is not attained in one life alone, but over a great period of time, just as the Buddha's Awakening was also built on the acts performed during a great succession of lives.

The story of how she came to the title as senior-most of the nuns in many ways sets the pattern for the others that follow: she was born at the time of the previous Buddha Padumuttara,² and saw that Buddha appoint a nun to a foremost position,³ did a great deed, normally consisting of some considerable personal sacrifice, and made an aspiration for the same position herself.

The pattern then records the good deeds that she did in the interim, before meeting the present Buddha Gotama. These take two forms, either good deeds done under former Buddhas, or good deeds done to Independent Buddhas (*Pacceka**buddha*). In this case we see that after being born in the higher worlds only, amongst gods and humans, she was eventually reborn and encountered a group of Independent Buddhas, who were trying to get

² Who was the 13th of the 28 Buddhas that culminated in Gotama Buddha, it seems most of the Foremost Disciples started their career under this Buddha. Gotama began his under Buddha Dīpaṅkara, who was 4th in line, so it appears that Disciples can attain their state with less effort than a Buddha.

³ In this case as foremost in seniority. This is the normal pattern, but Ven. Khemā aspired to her position after meeting Sujāta, the Buddha's Chief Disciple, who was foremost in great wisdom.

The Elder Nun Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī - 11

help from the lay people in preparing for the Rains Retreat, which required building suitable huts.

They were initially turned down by the rich folk in the city. Therefore the earlier incarnation of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī (nameless here, as are nearly all the nuns in their earlier lives), herself a slave, offered to build them and organised a large group of 500 female slaves to give their help by offering to provide food for the Retreat and getting their husbands to donate the manual labour needed to prepare the huts.

This good deed of the 500 slaves binds them together kammically for the rest of their time in saṃsāra (the round of births and deaths), and at the time of Gotama Buddha, they will go forth with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, and attain Liberation.

One thing we should notice about this episode is that it shows that the Independent Buddhas have no problem at all in taking donations from slaves, who were held to be the lowest in society. Indeed, it is this lack of discrimination of the Independent Buddhas that gives the slaves the chance to rise in the scale of existence.

A similar story is recorded next, when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was a weaver's wife near Bārāṇasī. There she organised the feeding of 500 Independent Buddhas, who again had failed to find offerings from the rich folk of the city.

The good deeds that have been recorded are, of course, just some examples from the immense number of lives she lived between the two Buddhas mentioned at the beginning and the end of her career, and we have to understand them as exemplary acts building up her perfections just as the Buddha had accumulated his.

In her last life Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was the younger sister of the Bodhisatta's Mother, Mahā Māyā, both of whom were given in marriage to

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the Sākiyan King Suddhodana. When the elder sister died shortly after giving birth, the younger gave her own recently born son Nanda out to a wet-nurse, and took on the nursing of Siddhattha herself.⁴ She was therefore the foster Mother of the boy who would eventually reach Buddhahood, and would have been engaged in all aspects of his upbringing, including his education and early marriage.⁵

Five years after the Buddha's Awakening, her husband the King attained Liberation, died straight afterwards and left her a widow. At this point she decided to dedicate the remainder of her life to the spiritual path, and requested the Buddha to start a nuns' order, similar to the monks' order, which had been founded at the beginning of the Sāsana.

She was joined in making this request by the 500 women who had been her slave companions in the previous life. They had been reborn in the Sākiyan state, and their husbands had gone forth after the Buddha had resolved a quarrel and taught them Dhamma on the banks of the Rohinī river.

All of them went to Vesālī, where the Buddha was residing, and eventually attained entry into the newly founded order, with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī being the first, and thereby the most senior nun, being the female equivalent of the first monk in the Sāsana, Ven. Aññā Koṇḍañña.

⁴ According to the traditional timings, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was 120 years old when she attained Final Liberation, which was in the last year of the Buddha's life, so that would make her forty at the time of the Buddha's birth. Mahāmāyā was her older sister, but how much older is not clear.

⁵ Something Ven. Ānanda would remind the Buddha of when she requested ordination for women.

1. The Story about the Elder Nun Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī

AN 1.5.1

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanānaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
rattaññūnaṃ, yad-idaṃ Mahāpajāpatigotamī.**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who are senior, that is to say, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī.

AA 1.5.1

The Commentarial Story:

In the first of the texts concerning the Elder Nuns, “That is to say, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī,” it shows how the Elder Nun Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, amongst those who were senior, was said to be the foremost.⁶

This is the exposition concerning the enquiry into her previous deeds.

⁶ *Rattaññū*, means *endowed with (many) nights*; it refers to her seniority as being the first of the nuns who was ordained.

Her Aspiration and Good Deeds

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, it seems, she was conceived in a good family home in Hamsavatī.⁷ Then at another time, while listening to the Teacher teach the Dhamma, she saw the Teacher place a certain nun as being foremost in seniority, did a great deed⁸ and aspired for the same position herself.⁹

She gave donations for the rest of her life and protected her virtue. Having passed away from there she was reborn in the world of the gods and spent one period when there was no Buddha¹⁰ there. She passed away again from the world of the gods, was reborn, and became the chief amongst five hundred female slaves in Bārāṇasī.

Then, as the time for the Rains Retreat was approaching, five Independent Buddhas descended from Mount Nandamūlaka to

⁷ This was Buddha Padumuttara's birthplace. All of the nuns (and a number of the monks) are said to have made their initial aspiration under this Buddha in this place.

⁸ The sort of great deed is characterised in Khemā's story: she sold her hair and gave a donation to Sujāta, one of the Buddha Padumuttara's Chief Disciples. Compare also the sub-commentary on Dhammadinnā's story, which says a similar thing about her resolution.

⁹ It is worthwhile noting here that all the women make an aspiration to become a bhikkhunī who is foremost in one thing or another. Not one of them wishes to change her sex, or seems to think that might give her a better chance in life and in regard to Awakening.

¹⁰ Lit: a Buddha-interval; it means a long period of time when no Buddha awakens on earth. These are said to be much longer than the periods when a Buddha, or his teaching, is available.

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Isipatana.¹¹ They wandered for alms in the city, and after going back to Isipatana, they thought: ‘We will ask for manual labour in order to prepare the huts for spending the Rains.’ After wrapping their robes they entered the city in the evening time and stood at the gate of the treasurer’s house.

The chief female slave took a waterpot and while going to the reservoir saw the Independent Buddhas entering the city. The treasurer, after hearing why they had come, said: “You do not have our permission, please go!”

Then, as they were leaving the city, the chief female slave, took her waterpot and while entering she saw them, put down the waterpot, worshipped, bent down, lifted up her face, and asked: “Noble Ones, having just entered the city, why are you now leaving?”

“We came to ask for manual labour to prepare the huts for spending the Rains.”

“Did you receive it, reverend Sirs?”

“We did not receive it, lay woman.”

“But can these huts only be made by the powerful, or is it possible also for the lowly to build them?”

“It is possible for anyone to build them.”

¹¹ Nandamūlaka was a mountain in the Himālaya, near to Mt. Kelasa (Kailash); Isipatana is outside of Bārāṇasī, and was the site where Gotama Buddha gave his first sermon.

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“Very well, reverend Sirs, we will build them, tomorrow please accept our alms food.” After inviting them she took the waterpot, placed it on the road going to the reservoir, and every time the other female slaves came, she said: “Wait here.” When everyone had assembled, she said: “Ladies, will we always be doing slave-work for another, or do you wish to be free of this slavery?”

“Noble Lady, today itself we wish to be free.”

“If you so wish, as the five Independent Buddhas didn’t receive manual labour they were invited by me for tomorrow. Have your husbands give manual labour for a day.”

They replied: “Very well!” and informed their husbands when they returned from the forest.

They also said: “Very well!” and assembled at the chief male slave’s door.

Then the chief female slave said to them: “Tomorrow, Dears, you must give manual labour to the Independent Buddhas.” She explained the advantages, and even those who did not desire to do it at first, after she had given them strong advice, they all agreed.

On the next day, after giving food to the Independent Buddhas, she gave a sign to all of the slaves. They entered the wilderness straight away and assembled the timber. Having gathered in hundreds and made each of them a hut together with a walking meditation path, they placed suitable beds, chairs and drinks and received a promise

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from the Independent Buddhas to spend the three months¹² right there. Then they prepared alms food for each of them in turn. For those who were not able to take the opportunity to give on their day, the chief female slave took food from her own house and gave it.

After looking after them for three months, the chief female slave had each of the female slaves prepare cloth, and they made five-hundred coarse cloths.

After exchanging them, and having the three robes made, she gave a set to each of the five Independent Buddhas. And even as they watched, the Independent Buddhas went through the air to Mount Gandhamādana.¹³

Another Life: Giving Donations

After doing good deeds for the rest of their lives, they were reborn in the world of the gods. The chief female, having passed away from there, was reborn to the chief weaver in a weaver's village not far from Bārāṇasī.¹⁴

¹² The period of the Rains Retreat.

¹³ The text is indicating that they returned to where they had previously been living.

¹⁴ Being a weaver was considered a very low profession, and therefore the village was kept outside the city.

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Then one day, Padumavatī sons, the five-hundred Independent Buddhas,¹⁵ were invited by the King of Bārāṇasī. After going to the King's Gate, and not seeing anyone there, they turned back and left via the city gate, and went to the weaver's village.

Those women saw the Independent Buddhas, treated them kindly, and after worshipping them all, they gave them alms food. After taking their food, they left for Gandhamādana.

Her Last Life

After doing good deeds for the rest of her life she was reborn amongst gods and humans only.¹⁶ Later she was reborn prior to our Teacher, and was conceived in the house of Mahāsuppabuddha in the city of Devadaha, and was given the name Gotamī, and was Mahāmāyā's younger sister.

The brāhmaṇas learned in the scriptures, examining the characteristics, declared: "The children who dwell in these two wombs will become universal monarchs."¹⁷

¹⁵ See Ven. Uppalavaṇṇā's Story for information on these Independent Buddhas.

¹⁶ This phrase occurs in each of the stories, and it means that she was *only* born amongst gods and humans, in a good destination, from the time of her aspiration.

¹⁷ This is odd, as none of them did. Mahāmāyā gave birth to Siddhattha, who became the Buddha; and Mahāpajāpatī gave birth to Nanda and Nandā, who both ordained and became Liberated Ones.

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The great King Suddhodana, when they had reached maturity, married the two of them and led them to his home. Later, after our Buddha-to-be had passed away from Tusita Heaven, he took conception in the womb of Queen Mahāmāyā.

Mahāmāyā died seven days from the day she delivered him and was reborn in Tusita Heaven.¹⁸

The great King Suddhodana placed the Great Being's Mother's sister, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, in the position of Chief Consort. At that time prince Nanda was born.¹⁹ Mahāpajāpatī gave prince Nanda to a wet-nurse and took care of the Buddha-to-be herself.

On another occasion, the Buddha-to-be left on his Great Renunciation and attained omniscience. While working for the benefit of the world he gradually reached the city of Kapilavatthu and went into the city for alms.

Then his Father, the Great King Suddhodana, hearing a talk about Dhamma on the highway became a Stream-Enterer.²⁰ Then on the second day Nanda went forth,²¹ and Rāhula on the seventh day.²²

¹⁸ As the god Setaketu, who was also called Santusita. Later the Buddha would go and teach the Abhidhamma to her.

¹⁹ Two or three days after Siddhattha.

²⁰ According to the Dhammapada Commentary (DhpA 1.9) Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī also became a Stream-Enterer during the same teaching session.

²¹ Nanda was born to King Suddhodana and Mahāpajāpati and is therefore the Buddha's half-brother; his going forth is told in Ud. 3.2, and also at great length in Ven. Aśvaghōṣa's Saundarananda.

²² The Buddha's son.

The Elder Nun Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī - 20

On another occasion the Teacher was living in the vicinity of Vesālī in the Gabled Hall.²³

At that time the Great King Suddhodana, realised Liberation under the white parasol and was Completely Emancipated.²⁴

²³ In the Mahāvana, or Great Wood.

²⁴ According to the commentary on the Therīgāthā (Verses of the Elder Nuns) he was already a Non-Returner, and when he was dying the Buddha visited him and he became an Arahant. He died the same day and was never ordained.

The Elder Nun Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī - 21

Then the thought of ordination occurred to Mahāpajāpatī.

After leaving the bank of the river Rohiṇī at the conclusion of the Discourse on Quarrels and Disputes,²⁵ all the wives of the five-hundred young men who had gone forth, had but one thought: ‘After going into Mahāpajāpatī’s presence, all of us will go forth in the presence of the Teacher.’

Making Mahāpajāpatī their chief, and going into the presence of the Teacher, they expressed their desire to go forth.

The first time Mahāpajāpatī requested the going forth from the Teacher it was not granted.

Therefore, she summoned the barber, had her hair removed, donned the yellow robes, took all the Sākiyan women and went to Vesālī. There the Elder Ānanda made the request to the One of Ten Powers and she received the going forth and the higher ordination with the eight serious rules.²⁶

All the others also received their higher ordination together.

²⁵ Sn 4.11, The Discourse about Quarrels and Disputes. At the conclusion of the discourse five hundred young men went forth.

²⁶ The giving of the *aṭṭhagarudhamma*, the *eight heavy or serious rules*, constituted her ordination.

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This is told in brief here, but the elaboration comes from the story in the text.²⁷

Then, after her higher ordination, Mahāpajāpatī, after approaching the Teacher and worshipping him, stood on one side, and the Teacher taught the Dhamma to her.

After taking a meditation subject in the presence of the Teacher, she attained Liberation.²⁸

All five hundred nuns at the conclusion of the Discourse on Nandaka's Advice also attained Liberation.²⁹

This is the story of what happened.

Later, when the Teacher was sitting in Jeta's Wood, when placing the nuns in their different positions, he placed Mahāpajāpatī as the foremost amongst those who were senior.

²⁷ From AN 8.51, also part of the Vināyapiṭaka, the Basket of the Discipline, The Chapter on Bhikkhunīs (Cullavagga 10, Bhikkhunikkhandaka).

²⁸ While listening to the Saṃkhittasuttaṃ, AN 8.53.

²⁹ MN 146. See elsewhere on this website for a text and translation. Nandakattheravattu in the Aṅguttara Commentary also says they attained Liberation, but in the discourse itself, and in the Majjhima Commentary, it mentions that the least of the nuns only attained Stream Entry, not full Liberation, so there is a discrepancy between the two sources.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN KHEMĀ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Khemā

Like Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, and indeed all the nuns singled out in these stories, Khemā's story begins at the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, who was the 13th of the 28 most recent Buddhas culminating in our Gotama Buddha.

At that time she saw one of Buddha Padumuttara's Chief Disciples, Sujāta,³⁰ and having sold her hair for cash, made a donation to the Elder on the same day. This is an example of one of the great deeds that all the disciples do before confirming their aspiration. Khemā's aspiration in this case was to be foremost in great wisdom.

One thing to note is that most of the aspirants see a nun being appointed to a position of great eminence, and aspire to the same position, but here Khemā sees the Buddha's Chief male disciple, and aspires to a similar wisdom as he has. In the Traditions (*Apadāna*), however, it says she saw the Buddha appoint a nun to the position of great wisdom, and then made her aspiration.

As with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, she was in that life born as a slave girl and was owned by another.³¹ Again rank had no bearing on what the person could achieve if their aspirations were good and the energy sufficient, and, as in all of these life stories, the energy for doing good deeds over many lives must have been dedicated indeed.

After she had completed a life of good deeds, she was reborn many times over a period of many thousands of aeons, where we must understand that

³⁰ The other was Devala. They were both cousins of Buddha Padumuttara.

³¹ However in the Traditions about her it appears she was the daughter of a wealthy merchant.

The Elder Nun Khemā - 25

she was also engaged in doing good deeds and abstaining from bad ones, which provided the foundation for her later achievements.

She was then reborn at the time of the Buddha Kassapa,³² the Buddha directly before our Gotama Buddha, in the home of Kiki, the King of Kāsi,³³ as one of seven sisters. Five of these seven sisters appear in these stories about the nuns, they are Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Paṭācārā, Dhammadinnā and Nandā.³⁴ The future Rāhula was also their brother in that life, it seems.

In her last life because of her previous good deeds her skin glowed with a golden hue, and she was so beautiful she was married to King Bimbisāra. Her beauty proved to be something of an obstacle, because she believed the Buddha would find fault with her, and didn't wish to meet with him.

The King, however, didn't find this suitable, and first had poets compose songs in praise of the Bamboo Wood where the Buddha was staying, and then, when she agreed to go to see the wood, told his men not to let her return without meeting the Buddha.

When she finally did meet the Buddha he created the appearance of a heavenly angel whom he caused to go quickly through the ages of life, until she fell down dead right in front of Khemā. Thus she gained insight into the transient nature of things, including her own body, and attained Liberation.

³² The Traditions mention other lives at the time of the Buddha Vipassī, under whom she ordained and attained great excellence, and Buddha Koṇāgamana, for whom, as a lay woman, she donated a monastery.

³³ A name for the kingdom that had Bārāṇasī for its capital.

³⁴ The other two were the foremost lay disciples Mahāmāyā and Visākhā.

The Elder Nun Khemā - 26

Khemā's great wisdom was renowned, especially her knowledge and understanding of the Abhidhamma,³⁵ and she was indeed appointed as the Elder Nun foremost in having great wisdom, a position equivalent to that of Ven. Sāriputta for the monk disciples.

I fill out the story in-line with some verses from the Traditions about her, and elsewhere on this website you can read the discourse (Khemāsuttaṃ, SN 44.1) that was held to have earned her this position.

2. The Story about the Elder Nun Khemā

AN 1.5.2

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanam bhikkhuninam
mahāpaññanam, yad-idam Khemā.**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who have great wisdom, that is to say, Khemā.

AA 1.5.2

The Commentarial Story:

In the second story, Khemā is the name of this nun.

³⁵ According to the Traditions even during the time of Buddha Kassapa she had memorised the Mahānidānasuttanta (Great Discourse on Origins, DN 15); and in her final life she was again taught the same discourse, and also the Kathāvatthu.

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From here on, without saying: “This is the exposition concerning the enquiry into her previous deeds,” placing the resolution at the beginning each time, we will say what should be said.

Previous Lives

In the past, at the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, it seems, she was reborn in the city of Hāmsavatī, and was owned by another.³⁶

Then one day, she saw that Fortunate One's chief disciple, the Elder named Sujāta,³⁷ walking for alms and gave him three sweetmeats. She her hair shorn on that very day, gave a donation to the Elder,³⁸ and made this aspiration: 'When a Buddha has arisen in the future may I, like you, have great wisdom.'

She did good deeds for the rest of her life, and being reborn amongst gods and humans only for one hundred thousand aeons, she was conceived in the home of Kiki, the King of Kāsi, in the time of the Buddha Kassapa,³⁹ and was one of seven sisters.⁴⁰

She lived as a celibate in the house for twenty-thousand years and together with her sisters she had a dwelling place made for the One of Ten Powers. She was then reborn amongst gods and humans only during one period when there was no Buddha.

³⁶ I.e. she was a slave-girl.

³⁷ This Buddha had two chief disciples, named Sujāta and Devala; his chief female disciples were called Amitā and Asamā.

³⁸ With the proceeds from selling her hair.

³⁹ In the Therīgāthā Commentary stories about her lives in the times of the Buddhas Vipassī, Kakusandha and Koṇāgamana are also related.

⁴⁰ These sisters are mentioned a number of times below. They eventually became the future disciples, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Paṭācārā, Kuṇḍalakesī, Kisā Gotamī, Dhammadinnā and Visākhā.

When this Gotama Buddha arose she was conceived in a Royal family in the city of Sāgala in the country of Madda, and given the name Khemā.

Her Last Life

The radiance of her body glowed as it were with a golden hue. When she had reached maturity she was taken to King Bimbisāra's house.⁴¹

When the Realised One was living near to Rājagaha in the Bamboo Wood, she, being intoxicated with her own beauty, and thinking: 'The Teacher, it appears, sees fault in beauty,' and: 'He will see fault in my beauty,' through fear, didn't go to see the One of Ten Powers.

The King thought: 'I am the Teacher's foremost attendant,⁴² and for one like me who is known as a Noble Disciple,⁴³ that my Chief Consort does not go to see the One of Ten Powers, is not pleasing to me.'

After having the praises of the Bamboo Grove composed by the poets, he said: "Recite the poems within the hearing of Queen Khemā."

⁴¹ This is an idiom which often occurs, it means she was married to the King.

⁴² Interestingly this position was not given him in the *Etad-agga* chapter, where the position is unassigned. Hatthigāma Uggata was named as the foremost attendant on the Community.

⁴³ He became a Stream-Enterer when the Buddha fulfilled his promise and returned to teach the King shortly after his Awakening.

The Elder Nun Khemā - 30

The Elder Nun Khemā - 31

*“He who has not seen the delightful Bamboo Wood,⁴⁴
the Happy One’s residence,
has also not seen Nandana in Tāvātimsa Heaven,
such was my thinking.*

*He who has seen the Bamboo Wood,
rejoicing in the rejoicer of men,
has also seen Nandana, greatly rejoiced in
by the Lord of the Gods Sakka.*

*The gods, having abandoned Nandana,
and descended to the surface of the Earth,
after seeing the delightful Veḷuvana,
astonished, are not satiated with it.*

*Through the King’s merit it appeared,
it is decorated with the Buddha’s merit,
who could describe
the great quantity of virtues of that Wood?”*

After hearing the praise of the Grove, and gaining a desire to go, she put the question to the King.

The King said: “Go to the Grove, but without having seen the Teacher, you will not receive permission to return.”

Without having given a reply to the King, she took the path to the Grove.

⁴⁴ These are the verses that were recited according to Khemātheriyāpadānaṃ, Therī-Apadānaṃ, 2: 329-332.

The Elder Nun Khemā - 32

The King said to the men who were going with her: “If the Queen, returning from the garden sees the One of Ten Powers, that is good; but if she does not see him, the Royal command is you must point him out.”

Then the Queen, after walking in the Grove in the daytime, and returning without seeing the One of Ten Powers, was ready to go. But the King’s men, against her liking, led the Queen into the presence of the Teacher.

The Teacher saw her coming, and with his spiritual power made an image of a heavenly angel, which took up a palm-fan, and he made it look like she was fanning him.

Having seen her, Queen Khemā thought: “My conceit has perished, such beautiful women, like unto heavenly angels, are standing not far from the One of Ten Powers. I am not fit to be their servant, my wicked mind supported by mad conceit has perished.”

Grasping the image she stood there looking at the woman. Then as she was watching, through the power of the Realised One’s resolve, that angel passed beyond her youth, and from being in middle-age, she passed beyond middle-age, and was like one in old-age having wrinkled skin, grey hair and broken and loose teeth.

Then, as she was watching, the angel stumbled about together with her fan and fell down. Then Khemā, being endowed with the former

The Elder Nun Khemā - 33

conditions,⁴⁵ as that sense-object came within range, reflected thus: ‘Even such a beautiful body comes to misfortune, my body will also come to the very same misfortune.’

At the instant that she had that thought, the Teacher spoke this verse found in the Dhammapada:⁴⁶

“Those impassioned with passion run along with the stream,
just as a spider runs along the web she has made herself,
after cutting that off, the wise journey on
without expectation, having abandoned all suffering.”

At the conclusion of the verse, while standing on that very spot, she attained Liberation together with the analytic knowledges.⁴⁷

For one who attains Liberation while dwelling in the midst of the home life she should either that very day attain Final Nibbāna or go forth.

The Buddha, understanding the lifespan of her existence, said: “I will cause her to receive permission to go forth.”

⁴⁵ This is a phrase that is many times used in these contexts; it means the requisite conditions for attaining Awakening in this life.

⁴⁶ Dhṃ 347.

⁴⁷ In the Traditions it says she heard some more teachings, then she purified the Dhamma-Eye, which normally indicates the attainment of Stream-Entry, requested ordination and went forth and two weeks later attained full Liberation.

The Elder Nun Khemā - 34

After worshipping the Teacher and going to the King's residence, she stood there without having worshipped the King.

Through that sign, the King understood: "She must have attained Nobility," then he said to her: "Queen, have you been to see the Teacher?"

"Great King, only a little insight has been gained by you, but I have gained the One of Ten Power's true insight, you must allow me to go forth!"

The King, answered: "Very well, Queen!" and had her carried in a golden palanquin to the nunnery, and had her go forth.

Then it was said of her: "The Elder Nun called Khemā, while still a householder, attained Liberation," and she became famous for her great wisdom.

(Khemā speaks:)⁴⁸

*Wearied of all processes, skilled in the modes of conditions,
having overcome the four floods, I attained Liberation.*

*I have mastery over spiritual power, the divine ear-element, I
have mastery in knowledge of mind-reading.*

*I know my previous lives, have clarified the divine eye, destroyed
all the pollutants,⁴⁹ there is no continuation of existence.*

⁴⁸ From Khemātheriyāpadānaṃ, Therī-Apadānaṃ, 1.8, near the end.

The Elder Nun Khemā - 35

Right there, in meanings, conditions, language and improvisation⁵⁰ my knowledge was purified, it arose within the Buddha's Teaching.

I was proficient in purification, mature in subjects for discussion, a knower of the Abstract Teaching method, attained to mastery in the Teaching.

Later, on the grounds in Toraṇa, I was questioned by the Lord King of Kosala with deep questions, and I answered just as it is.

Then the King approached the Happy One and questioned him, right there the Awakened One answered, just as I had answered.⁵¹

This is the story here.

Then later, when the Teacher was sitting in Jeta's Wood, in placing the nuns successively in their different positions, he placed the Elder Nun Khemā at the foremost of those having great wisdom.

⁴⁹ This indicates her attainment of the six deep knowledges (*cha abhiññā*).

⁵⁰ These are the four analytic knowledges (*paṭisambhidā*).

⁵¹ These two verses summarise Khemāsuttaṃ, SN 44.1, for a text and translation of which, see elsewhere on this website.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN UPPALAVANNA



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Uppalavaṇṇā

Uppalavaṇṇā Therī's story is not only the longest in this collection, but also the most complicated and fantastical. She made the usual aspiration under the Buddha Padumuttara, and was later reborn in Buddha Kassapa's time, where she was one of the seven sisters who built a residence for the Community.

Later, she was reborn again and became a manual worker. While working in the fields she saw an Independent Buddha and gave a donation of 500 pieces of puffed rice, and a lotus flower, and made an aspiration to have 500 children in the future and for lotus flowers to appear under her feet when she walked about.

Afterwards she was reborn in Heaven, where lotus flowers did indeed spring forth under her feet, and was later reborn inside a lotus flower back on earth.

She was adopted by a hermit, from whose thumb milk miraculously sprang forth, and she was brought up in the seclusion of the forest, and named Padumavatī.⁵²

Her beauty was once again outstanding, surpassing that of normal humans, and when she was seen by a forester he mentioned the matter to the King, who came and claimed her for his Chief Queen.

Her exaltation to such a high position upset the other women in the harem and they plotted against her. She became pregnant, but the King was called

⁵² It means: one who is like a lotus, and is one of only a few names we know from previous lives in this cycle of stories.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 38

away to a border dispute, and she gave birth in the meantime, to one main son Mahāpaduma, and 500 other sons, said to be moisture-born.

The jealous concubines bribed the midwife to replace the child with a blood-stained log and to make out that Padumavatī was not a real human being. The King returned from the battle and heard that she had had an unnatural birth and without enquiring into it banished her from the Palace.

The women wished to hold water sports, and took the 500 children with them in baskets and set them afloat on the river, apparently to dispose of them. However, the baskets were caught in nets and brought to the King, who, through the intervention of Sakka, discovered the women's deceit, and reinstated Padumavatī.

The King made the women Padumavatī's slaves, but she freed them in her magnanimity, and even gave her sons to them to be cared for. The sons, in turn, once grown up, realised the impermanence of life and became Independent Buddhas, at which point Padumavatī, overcome by grief and illness at their departure, died and was reborn in a poor family nearby.

One time she saw eight Independent Buddhas, her former sons, and offered them a meal for the following day. They recognised her as their former Mother, and brought the others along for the meal too, so that she could earn more merit, and both the food she had prepared and the house she gave it in expanded to accommodate the larger number. Satisfied with her gift she aspired to have the colour of a blue lily's heart in a future life.

In her last life this wish was fulfilled, and they named her Uppalavannā because of her skin colour.⁵³ She was so desirable it is said that all the Kings and merchants asked for her in marriage. Her Father, not wishing to anger any of them by choosing one over the others, arranged for her ordination instead.

⁵³ It is the name of the Blue Lily flower.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 39

She went forth and soon attained Liberation, together with the spiritual power of transformation. Before the Buddha performed the double miracle, she offered to perform a miracle of transformation herself, and was later placed foremost of the female disciples who had spiritual power.

Such is a synopsis of the story, and it is a long one, spun out with many details, and we see how her strong aspirations for particular bodily characteristics seem to underpin her eventual ability to attain spiritual power and especially the power of bodily transformation.

Her appointment to this position makes her the counterpart to Ven. Moggallāna, as one of the two Chief disciples on the female side.

The story is long and intricate and one thing it demonstrates is that people who have close family ties, or who are kammically linked in a strong enough fashion, generally get reborn in proximity to their former acquaintances,⁵⁴ just as Padumavatī was reborn close to her children after they became Independent Buddhas.

⁵⁴ These may be connected by love, like Siddhattha and Yasodharā; or by enmity like Siddhattha and Devadatta.

3. The Story about the Elder Nun Uppalavaṇṇā

AN 1.5.3

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanānam bhikkhunīnam
iddhimantīnam,⁵⁵ yad-idam Uppalavaṇṇā.**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who have spiritual powers, that is to say, Uppalavaṇṇā.

AA 1.5.3

The Commentarial Story:

In the third story, about Uppalavaṇṇā, as she was endowed with a colour similar to a blue lily's heart⁵⁶ the Elder Nun received this name.

Her Aspiration

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, it seems, she was conceived in a good family home in Hamsavatī.

Later, after going with the populace into the presence of the Teacher, she listened to the Dhamma and saw the Teacher place a certain nun as being foremost in spiritual powers.

⁵⁵ RTE, PTS: *iddhimantānam*.

⁵⁶ Lit: the calyx, or leaves surrounding the flower.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 41

She then gave a great donation to the Community of monastics with the Buddha at their head for seven days and aspired for that position herself.

Building a Residence for Buddha Kassapa's Monks

She did good deeds for the rest of her life and being reborn amongst gods and humans only, in the city of Bārāṇasī, at the time of the Buddha Kassapa. She was conceived in the home of Kiki, the King of Kāsi, and was one of seven sisters. She lived as a celibate for twenty-thousand years, had a residence made for the Community of monks, and was reborn in the world of the gods.

Feeding a Paccekabuddha with Puffed Rice

Passing away from there,⁵⁷ and coming again to the world of humans, she was reborn in a certain little village, and made a living in that place by doing⁵⁸ manual labour.

One day, while going to the hut in the field, on the highway near a lake in the morning time, she saw a blossoming lotus flower and descended into the lake. She took that flower in a lotus leaf used to wrap puffed rice, cut the tips of rice in the field, and while sitting in the field, she roasted the rice, and counted five-hundred pieces of puffed rice.

⁵⁷ In the Traditions several lives are mentioned at this point, including one under the Buddha Vipassī. None of these are mentioned here. The life which herein follows is disposed of in one verse in the Traditions.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 42

At that time, having arisen from the attainment of cessation on Mount Gandhamādana, a certain Independent Buddha came and stood not far away from her.

Having seen the Independent Buddha, she took a lotus flower together with the puffed rice, descended from her hut, placed the puffed rice in the Independent Buddha's bowl, and covered the bowl over with the lotus flower.

When the Independent Buddha had departed a short way she thought: 'One who has gone forth surely has no use for a flower, I will take the flower and adorn myself.'

She went to the Independent Buddha and took the flower from his hand, but thought again: 'If this Noble One had no use for a flower, he wouldn't have allowed me to place it on the top of the bowl, indeed there will be a use for the Noble One.'

She went again, placed it back on the top of the bowl, and begged the Independent Buddha for forgiveness, saying: "Reverend Sir, may the result of my puffed rice be as many sons as there were pieces of rice, and the result of my giving the lotus flower be that wherever I am reborn lotus flowers arise under my feet."

She made this aspiration.

As she was watching him, that Independent Buddha went through the air to Mount Gandhamādana, and washing his feet near to the

⁵⁸ Here we see the absolute used in its original instrumental sense.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 43

Independent Buddhas' rope ladder, he placed the lotus on Mount Nandamūlaka.

As a result of that deed, she gained conception in the world of the gods, and from the time of her rebirth great lotus flowers appeared under her feet.

Padumavatī's Early Life

She passed away from there and was reborn on a lotus heart in one lotus lake at the foot of a mountain.⁵⁹

A certain ascetic lived near there, and in the morning time, he went to the lake in order to wash his face, saw the flower and thought: 'This flower's head is the largest of all the heads of flowers. Through what reason did the bud come to be here?'

After descending into the water he took the flower. As soon as he had taken it it flowered, and the ascetic saw a young girl lying in the heart of the lotus.

From the time of first seeing her, paternal love⁶⁰ arose, and he carried her with the lotus to his leaf-hut and lay her down on his couch. Through the power of her merit milk sprung from his thumb.

When that flower had faded, he brought a new flower and lay her in that.

⁵⁹ Again in the Traditions, this life, which is so elaborated here, is recounted in just three verses.

⁶⁰ Lit: *daughter love*.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 44

Then from the time she began to play by running around here and there at every step there arose a lotus flower, and the colour of her body was like rays of saffron.

Without having attained the radiance of a god she nevertheless surpassed the radiance of a human.

When her Father had gone to gather various kinds of fruit she remained behind in the leaf-hut.

Then one day, when she had reached maturity her Father went to gather various kinds of fruit and a certain forester saw her and thought: "Amongst mankind there is none as beautiful as this, I will enquire about her," and he sat down looking for the coming of the ascetic.

As her Father was coming, she went out to meet him, took the carrying pole and water pot from his hand, and after he had come, while sitting she showed him the duties she had done.

Then the forester understood she was human, worshipped the ascetic, and sat down.

The ascetic invited the forester with forest roots and various kinds of fruits and water, and asked: "Good sir! Will you stay in this place, or will you go?"

"I will go, reverend Sir, what will I do here?"

“After going from here will you be able to keep quiet⁶¹ about the things you saw?”

“If the Noble One does not wish it, for what reason will I speak?”

And after worshipping the ascetic, so as to recognise the path again when he returned, he went away making marks on the branches and on the trees.

Padumavatī’s Marriage to the King

After going to Bārāṇasī he saw the King, and the King asked: “Why have you come?”

“God-King, your forester has seen a wonderful treasure of a woman at the foot of a mountain and returned,” and he told him all that had happened.

The King heard his report and quickly went to the foot of the mountain and set up camp not far from that place. Then, together with the forester and the other men, after the ascetic had finished his meal duties, at a time when he was sitting, he went and worshipped him there, was received in a friendly manner, and sat down on one side.

The King, after placing the requisite goods for one gone forth at the feet of the ascetic, said: “Reverend Sir, what will we do in this place, shall we go?”

“Please go, Great King.”

⁶¹ Lit: *not speak*.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 46

“Yes, I will go, reverend Sir, but we have heard: ‘The Noble One has the company of the opposite sex nearby’, and this is unsuitable for those gone forth, please let her go with me, reverend Sir.”

“People’s minds are surely hard to please, how will she live in the midst of so many people?”

“Beginning from any time we please, I will place her in a position senior to the rest and look after her, reverend Sir.”

Having heard the King’s speech, because of the name she had taken in her youth, he called his daughter, saying: “Dear Padumavatī.”

She emerged from the leaf hut at that single word, worshipped her Father, and stood there.

Then her Father said: “Dear, you have reached maturity in this place, but from the time you were seen by the King, it has been inappropriate to live here, you should go with the King, Dear.”

She replied to this word of her Father, saying: “Very well, Father,” worshipped him, and stood there crying.

The King, thinking: ‘I will win over her Father’s heart,’ placed a heap of money in that place and anointed her.

Then after taking her, and leading her to the city, from the time they returned, without even looking at the rest of the women, he took delight with her alone.

Padumavatī's Disgrace

Those women, being jealous by nature, and desiring to break her close connection with the King, said this: “This is not one born of humans, Great King! Where in the past did you see amongst humans that lotuses would arise in the place they were walking? Surely this is a demoness, you must drive her away, Great King!”

The King listened to their speech but was silent.

Then at another time there was a border disturbance. Thinking: ‘Padumavatī is advanced in pregnancy,’⁶² he left her in the city and went to the border area.

Then those women, having given a bribe to her nurse, said: “Remove her child as soon as it is born, and having smeared a log of wood with blood, place it near her.”

Not long after, Padumavatī was delivered of her child. The prince Mahāpaduma alone dwelt in her womb. Another four-hundred and ninety-nine sons were reborn from moisture⁶³ after the boy Mahāpaduma exited his Mother’s womb and was laying there.

Then understanding: ‘I must act before she recovers her mindfulness,’ the nurse smeared a log of wood with blood, placed it near her, and signalled to those women. Those five hundred women

⁶² Lit: *heavy in the womb*.

⁶³ This is one of the four ways creatures were thought to be born: *aṇḍaja*, *egg-born*, *jalābuja*, *womb-born*, *saṃsedaja*, *moisture-born*, *opapātika*, *spontaneously born*.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 48

each took a child, employed nearby weavers,⁶⁴ and had them bring baskets. Then each took her child, lay him down there, made a seal on the outside and placed them aside.

When Padumavatī had recovered her senses she asked her nurse: “What have I delivered, Lady?”⁶⁵ Menacing her she said: “Where will your son be found?” Saying: “This is the child that exited from your womb,” she placed the blood-smearred log of wood in front of her.

Seeing that, Padumavatī became depressed and said: “Having chopped it up, quickly remove it, if someone should see it, it would be a cause of shame.”

She listened to her speech as though wishing her well, chopped it up and threw it on the fire-place.

Returning from the border areas, the King waited outside the city for the auspicious time,⁶⁶ made camp and sat down.

Then the five-hundred women went out to meet the King as he was coming and said: “You do not have faith in us, Great King, as though we speak without reason. After calling your Consort’s nurse, ask whether your Queen delivered a log of wood!”

⁶⁴ *Cundakāra* is defined as *turner* in PED, on the basis of one reading. Here the context makes it clear it must mean a weaver of baskets.

⁶⁵ Meaning was it a girl or a boy?

⁶⁶ Lit: waiting for the right constellation.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 49

The King, without properly investigating the reason, thinking: ‘She must be a non-human being,’ drove her from the house.

With her departure from the Palace all the lotus flowers⁶⁷ disappeared, and her skin lost its radiance.

She went by herself along the middle of the street. Then a certain old and aged woman saw her and maternal⁶⁸ love arose, and she said: “Where are you going, Lady?”

⁶⁷ That used to appear under her feet.

⁶⁸ Lit: *daughter love*.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 50

“I am a stranger roaming around looking for somewhere to live.”

She said: “Come here, Lady,” and she gave her a place to live and served her food.

As she was residing like this in that place, those five-hundred women, having one thought, said to the King: “Great King, when you had gone to the camp, we said to the goddess of the Ganges: ‘When our God-King returns victorious from battle, we will make an oblation and hold water sports.’ This was our aspiration, and this matter, God-King, we now make known.”

The King, being satisfied with their statement, went to the Ganges to sport in the water.

All of them took their baskets, covered them over, went to the stream, wrapped up the baskets in order to disguise them, dropped them in the water and sent the baskets off.

All those baskets went off together and got caught in nets that had been fastened under the stream.

Then after playing at water sports, at the time the King was emerging, seeing the baskets suspended in the net, they were brought to the King.

The King, seeing the baskets, said: “What is in the baskets, Dears?”

“We do not know, God-King.”

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 51

The baskets were opened while he was watching, and they first opened the boy Mahāpaduma's basket.

For all of them as they were laying in the baskets during the day, milk had sprung from their thumbs through the power of their merit.

Sakka, the King of the Gods, in order to dispel the King's doubts, had had these words⁶⁹ written inside the baskets: "These boys were reborn in Padumavatī's womb, and are the King of Bārāṇasī's sons. The five-hundred women who are Padumavatī's rivals placed them in baskets and threw them in the water. Let the King understand the reason."

Padumavatī's Redemption

As soon as the baskets were opened the King had the words⁷⁰ read out, and seeing his sons, he raised up the boy Mahāpaduma, and said: "Quickly prepare the chariot, harness the horses, I will enter the city today and endear some of those women."

He ascended the palace, placed a bag with a thousand coins on an elephant's neck, and had the drum beat, announcing: "He who finds Padumavatī, can take these thousand coins."

Hearing that announcement Padumavatī informed her adopted Mother, saying: "Take the thousand coins from the elephant's neck, Lady."

⁶⁹ Lit: *these letters*.

⁷⁰ Lit: *letters*.

“I do not dare to take such a thing.”

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 53

Having said it a second and a third time, she said: “After saying what, Lady, shall I take it?”

“ ‘My daughter has found Queen Padumavatī,’ after saying that, take it.”

She, thinking: ‘What will be, will be,’ went and took the box with a thousand coins.

Then the men questioned her: “Did you find Queen Padumavatī, Lady?”

She said: “I did not find her, but it seems my daughter found her.”
They said: “But where is she, Lady?” and going with her and recognising Padumavatī, they fell at her feet.

At that time understanding: ‘This is Queen Padumavatī!’ she said: “Indeed, a really serious thing was done to the woman, she being a Consort to such a King, and she dwelt in such a place without protection!”

The King’s men set up white curtains around Padumavatī’s residence, placed a guard at the door and went and informed the King.

The King sent a golden palanquin.

She said: “I will not go in this way! From my dwelling place all along the way until the Palace spread noble and beautiful carpets made of cloth, have canopies set up adorned with golden stars above, and when all ornaments are sent for my adornment, I will go by foot. Thus the city-folk will see my good fortune!”

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 54

The King said: “Do it according to Padumavatī’s pleasure.”

Then Padumavatī was adorned with all ornaments, and saying: “I will go to the Palace,” proceeded along the path.

Then at each place she stepped, after breaking through the noble and beautiful carpets made of cloth, lotus flowers arose.

After she had shown off to the populace her good fortune, she ascended the Palace, and by way of giving an allowance to the old lady for her expenses, had all those beautiful carpets given to her.

The King had the five-hundred women summoned, and said: “After making these slaves, I give them to the Queen.”

“Very good, Great King, please make known to the whole city your gift to me of these women.”

The King had the drum beat in the city announcing: “After making these five-hundred treacherous women slaves, I have given them to Padumavatī.”

Understanding: ‘Their slavery has been seen by the whole city,’ she made a request of the King, saying: “I desire to give freedom to my slaves, God-King.”

“As you wish, Queen!”

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 55

This being so, he summoned the drummer, and said: “ ‘After these women were made slaves to Padumavatī, she has given freedom to all five-hundred of them,’ beat the drum and announce this.”

When they were given their freedom, she gave the four-hundred and ninety-nine sons into their hands for bringing up, and took the boy Mahāpaduma herself.

Padumavatī’s Loss

Then later, when those boys had reached playing age, the King had various types of playgrounds made in the garden.

When they were sixteen years of age they all came together, and while playing in the royal bathing pool covered with lotuses in the garden, having seen new lotuses blossoming and old lotuses falling from their stalks, they thought: ‘When even a thing such as this, which is not produced by previous deeds,⁷¹ undergoes decay, how much more then will our bodies be subject to the same destiny!’

Grasping this meditation object they all produced the knowledge characterising the Independent Awakening,⁷² and, after rising from there, sat down cross-legged in the heart of the lotuses.⁷³

⁷¹ It means they are not creatures developed enough to have intentional life.

⁷² I.e. they became Paccekabuddhas.

⁷³ Lit: in the pericarps.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 56

Then the King's men who had come with them, understanding that most of the day had passed, said: "Noble Children, do you know the time?"

They remained silent.

Those men went to the King and informed him: "The princes, God-King, are sitting in the hearts of the lotuses, and when we speak they make no reply."

The King said: "Allow them to sit as they wish."

The whole night a guard was set, and they sat in this way in the hearts of the lotuses until dawn arose.

The men approached on the following day and said: "Princes, do you know the time?"

"We are not Princes, we are now Independent Buddhas."

"Noble Sirs, you are saying something very grave, Independent Buddhas are surely not like you are, they have hair and beard only up to two inches long, and on their bodies are fastened the eight requisites."⁷⁴

They stroked their heads with their right hands, and at that moment the signs of home life vanished, and the eight requisites appeared on their bodies.

⁷⁴ The eight requisites are the three robes, the bowl, a razor, a needle, a belt and a water-strainer.

As the populace was watching they went through the air to Mount Nandamūlaka.

Queen Padumavatī thought: ‘After having so many children, I have become childless!’

Her heart was overcome by grief and she died from this illness, and in a small village near the gate of the city of Rājagaha⁷⁵ she was reborn, and made a living in that place by doing manual labour.

Feeding 500 Paccekabuddhas

Later she went to a good family home,⁷⁶ and while carrying rice-porridge one day to her husband’s field, in the midst of her children, she saw eight Independent Buddhas going through the air at the time they went for alms, and going quickly, she informed her husband, saying: “Look, Noble Sir, let us invite these Independent Buddhas and feed them.”

He said: “These are birds who look like ascetics who are flying somewhere, they are not Independent Buddhas.”

As they were talking they descended to a spot not far away.

⁷⁵ The Traditions specify that it was on the slope of Mt. Isigili, one of the seven mountains surrounding Rājagaha. This life again only requires four verses in the Traditions.

⁷⁶ That is, she got married.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 58

That woman gave her own rice and other solid food to them herself on that day, and said: “Tomorrow, eight people can take my alms food.”

“Well said, lay woman, such is your hospitality, let there be just eight seats then, but seeing a great many Independent Buddhas, your heart would be uplifted.”

On the following day she prepared eight seats, arranged them with great respect for the eight of them, and sat down.

The Independent Buddhas who were invited informed the rest, saying: “Sirs, without going anywhere else today, all of you show your regard for your Mother.”

Hearing their words, they all came through the air together, and appeared at the gate of their Mother’s house.

Having seen a great many more than those whom she had perceived at first and, without wavering, she ushered them all into the house and made them sit down on the seats.

As they were sitting down in order, a further eight seats appeared through supernatural power and the ninth sat himself down on the nearest seat.

As the seats increased, so did the house increase in size.

When they were all thus seated, the woman respectfully offered what was prepared for the eight Independent Buddhas to the five hundred, and bringing eight handfuls of blue lilies in her hand, she placed them at the feet of the Independent Buddhas she had invited

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 59

and said: “Reverend Sirs, in whatever place I am reborn may the colour of my body be like the colour of the inside of this blue lily’s heart.”

She made this aspiration.

The Independent Buddhas rejoiced with their Mother and returned to Gandhamādana.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 60

She did good deeds for the rest of her life, and after passing away from there she was reborn in the world of the gods.

Her Last Life

When this Gotama Buddha arose she was conceived in a merchant's family in Sāvattthī, and as she was the same colour as the heart of a blue lily, she was given the name Uppalavannā.⁷⁷

When she had reached maturity all the Kings in the Rose-Apple Isle⁷⁸ and the merchants also sent a message to the merchant, saying: “Please give us your daughter.”

There were none known to be not sending this message.

Then the merchant thought: ‘I will not be able to satisfy⁷⁹ all of them, I will have to employ some skilful means,’ and after summoning his daughter, he said: “Will you be able to go forth, Daughter?”

Because of being in her last rebirth, that word was like medicated oil sprinkled on her head, therefore she said to her Father: “Father, I will go forth.”

⁷⁷ *Uppala* = blue water-lily; *vanṇa* = colour.

⁷⁸ The normal designation for what we now roughly call India.

⁷⁹ Lit: *grab the mind*.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 61

He paid respects to her, led her to the nunnery, and had her go forth.⁸⁰

Not long after she had gone forth,⁸¹ her turn to work in the observance hall arose.

She lit the lamp, swept the observance hall, and grasping the sign of the crest of the lamp, while looking at it again and again, and producing absorption on the fire meditation subject, and making that a basis, she attained Liberation.

Together with the fruit of Liberation she also mastered the spiritual power of transformation.⁸²

Later, on the day the Teacher performed the double miracle,⁸³ she roared a lion's roar, saying: "I will perform a miracle, reverend Sir."⁸⁴

⁸⁰ In Buddhist countries these days, at the ordination the postulant will pay respects to their parents for the last time, and straight after the ordination, the parents pay respect to the socially elevated child. Here it seems the Father paid respects as soon as she agreed to ordination.

⁸¹ The Traditions state it was less than two weeks.

⁸² This is the power to transform oneself into many beings, and from many to become one again.

⁸³ Performed to confute the heretics, it consisted of emitting fire and water from his body.

⁸⁴ Along with others on that day, Uppalavaṇṇā offered to perform a miracle. However, the Buddha didn't allow her, or anyone else, to perform any miracles at that time. The following few lines are from the Dhammapada Commentary to vs. 181.

The Elder Nun Uppalavannā - 62

Being asked “What miracle will you perform?” she said: “Reverend Sir, after showing myself before an assembly for twelve leagues on all sides, surrounded by an assembly that is thirty-six leagues from front to back and taking the form of a Universal Monarch and approaching, I will worship you.”⁸⁵ The Teacher said: “I know your power.”

For this reason the Teacher, as the occasion had arisen, while sitting in Jeta’s Wood, in placing the nuns successively in their different positions, placed this Elder Nun in the foremost position of those possessing spiritual power.

⁸⁵ The Traditions record a different miracle whereby she fashioned a chariot and four horses.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN

PAṬĀCĀRĀ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Paṭācārā

This nun disciple's story is certainly one of the most memorable in Buddhist literature, and is also one of the most celebrated. Like the others she was born during Buddha Padumuttara's time, and made her aspiration to become a foremost disciple, in this case in bearing the discipline in mind. She was also one of the seven sisters born to Kiki, the King of Kāsi.

The story, however, deals quickly with her past lives and then moves on to her last life, when she was reborn in a good family home in Sāvattihī. Against all family conventions, and outside of marriage she had a liaison with one of the household's workers, fell in love and eloped, rather than marrying the man her family had arranged for her.⁸⁶

When she became pregnant she decided to go back to her family for help with the delivery, but her husband kept putting off the time for departure, and departing late she eventually had the child on the way. She therefore returned home with the child. A second time the same thing happened, and she gave birth on the road.⁸⁷

Just then a great storm blew up and she asked her husband to prepare a shelter, which he did. But as he went to get materials for a roof he was bitten by a cobra and died. When she discovered the body in the morning, she lamented but decided to continue to her parent's home.

On the way, while crossing a ford, one of her children was snatched away by a hawk, and the other one was swept away by the current and drowned. She made it to the city, but only to find that her family home had collapsed

⁸⁶ Cf. the story as retold in the Dhammapada Commentary, which is told in an even more dramatic and convincing form than the one told here.

⁸⁷ Up to this point the story is similar to that of Cūḷa- and Mahāpanthaka, see AA 1.2.1.

The Elder Nun Patācārā - 65

during the storm, and all inside were lost and were awaiting their cremation. This meant that within one day she had lost husband, children, parents and siblings.

At that point she lost her mind completely, threw off her clothes and went around naked and senseless, until one day she met the Buddha who suffused her with loving-kindness and admonished her, whereat she regained her senses, covered herself up and listened to his Dhamma teaching.

The Buddha taught her with a memorable verse and she attained the First Stage of Awakening and ordained. In a story which is not included in this commentary, but is brought in here from another, while contemplating the fading away of water in the ground she gained insight, realised that life was impermanent, and attained Liberation.

Later the Buddha appointed her as the one who was foremost in bearing the discipline in mind. The connection of her story to her position is presumably because of her conversion from being a woman who refused to abide by the rules of society to one who later became the most diligent in Discipline.

She therefore appears as the counterpart of Ven. Upāli, who answered the questions on discipline at the First Recitation.

4. The Story about the Elder Nun Paṭācārā

AN 1.5.4

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanāṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
Vinayadharānaṃ, yad-idaṃ Paṭācārā.**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who bear the Discipline in mind, that is to say, Paṭācārā.

AA 1.5.4

The Commentarial Story:

In the fourth story, “Amongst those who bear the Discipline in mind, that is to say, Paṭācārā,” it shows why the Elder Nun Paṭācārā, amongst those who bore the Discipline in mind, was said to be foremost.

Her Aspiration and Good Deeds

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, it seems, she was conceived in a good family home in Hamsavatī, and later, while listening to the Teacher teach the Dhamma, she saw the Teacher place a certain nun as being foremost amongst those who bore the Discipline in mind, did a great deed and aspired for that position herself.

She did good deeds for the rest of her life and was reborn amongst gods and humans only.

The Elder Nun Patācārā - 67

In the time of the Buddha Kassapa, she was conceived in the home of Kiki, the King of Kāsi, and was one of seven sisters. She lived as a celibate for twenty-thousand years, had a residence made for the Community of monks and was reborn once again in the world of the gods.

She enjoyed good fortune during one period when there was no Buddha.

Her Last Life

When this Gotama Buddha arose, she was conceived in a merchant's home in Sāvattihī.

Later, when she was mature, she became intimate with a certain worker in her own home, and as she was going to someone from a family of her own standing,⁸⁸ she informed the man that she had been intimate with, saying: "From tomorrow even if you beat on the door a hundred times you will not be able to see me. If this is a worthy deed for you, take me right now and let us go."

Saying: "So be it!" he grabbed the most valuable and suitable things, took her from the city, retired for three or four leagues, and set up home in one village.

Then later an embryo was established in her womb.

When her foetus was mature, she said: "Husband, we are without protection in this place, let us go to my family's home."

⁸⁸ I.e. as she was being married off to one of equal rank.

The Elder Nun Patācārā - 68

He said: “Today let us go”, and: “Tomorrow let us go,” and being unable to decide when to go, he let the time pass by.

She understood his reasoning, and thinking: ‘This fool will not take me,’ therefore when he had gone outside, thinking: ‘I will go to my family home by myself,’ she set out on the path.

He returned and not seeing her in the home, he asked the neighbours, and hearing: “She is going to her family home,” he thought: ‘It is because of me that this daughter of a good family is without protection,’ and he followed in her steps and caught up with her.

As she was on the highway she was delivered of her child.

Then, thinking: ‘That thing for which we set out, has happened right here on the highway, having gone there now, what would we do?’ and they turned back.

And again an embryo was established in her womb, and everything happened just as the first time.⁸⁹

But as she was delivering on the highway, at the very moment of birth, a great storm arose in all four quarters.

She said to the gentleman: “Husband, an out of season storm has arisen in all four quarters, please endeavour to make a wooden shelter.”

⁸⁹ Lit: *according to the earlier method*. It means it all happened in the same way as was related for her first pregnancy.

He said: “I will do so!” and he made a little hut with sticks, and said: “I will go and bring grass to thatch it,” and he cut the grass near the foot of a certain great anthill.

Then a black snake⁹⁰ that was lying in the anthill bit him on the foot and through that he fell down dead on the spot.

She, however, spent the whole night thinking: ‘Now he will come, now he will come,’ and said: “Certainly, he is thinking: ‘She is helpless,’ and he will have abandoned me on the road and gone away.”

The light appeared while she was searching for him by following his footsteps and, seeing he had fallen at the foot of an anthill, she lamented: “Because of me this man perished.”

She took her young boy on her side and made the elder one grasp her fingers and while going along the road, she saw a certain shallow river across the highway, and realised: ‘I will not be able to go over in one go with both the boys.’

So she placed the eldest on the near shore, and carried the youngest to the far shore, lay him down on a cloth pillow, crossed back again, and entered the river, thinking: ‘I will go and fetch the other child.’

Then at the time she reached the middle of the river, one hawk, thinking: ‘This is a piece of meat,’ came to peck at the youngest child.

⁹⁰ A cobra, the most deadly of the deadly snakes.

The Elder Nun Patācārā - 70

She waved her hand to drive the hawk off.

Having seen the gesture of her hand, the eldest child, thinking: ‘She is summoning me,’ descended into the river, fell into the stream, and was borne away with the current.

The hawk, before she could reach him, grabbed the youngest child and bore him away.

Overcome with great grief she went along the highway wailing this mournful song:

“Both my sons have died, and my Husband is dead on the path.”

She reached Sāvattthī wailing like this, went to the good families district, and through grief was unable to find her own home, and asked: “In this place there is such and such a family, but where is the house?”

They answered: “Having enquired about that family, what will you do? The home they dwelt in fell down owing to being hit by the wind, and right there and then all of them reached the end of their lives. Now they are all, young and old, burning on a funeral pyre. Look: you can make out the rising smoke.”

When she heard this, she said: “What did you say?”

The Elder Nun Paṭācārā - 71

Being unable to bear being clothed in her robe, just as when she was born,⁹¹ stretching out her arms and crying, she went to her relatives' funeral pyre, and filled out her mournful song, lamenting:

“Both my sons have died, and my Husband is dead on the path;
Mother, Father and Brothers too, burn upon the funeral pyre.”
Though she was given a cloth by other people, each time she tore it off, and threw it away.

Then everywhere she went the populace walked surrounding her, and said: “This cloth-wanderer wanders without a cloth for protection,” and they made the name Paṭācārā.⁹²

Because she became famous for shamelessly wandering around with nothing on, therefore they said: “Her good conduct has fallen away,” and they made the name Paṭācārā.

One day as the Teacher was teaching Dhamma to the populace, she entered the monastery, and stood at the edge of the assembly.

The Teacher, having suffused her with a suffusion of loving-kindness, said: “Regain your mindfulness, Sister, regain your mindfulness, Sister.”

⁹¹ I.e. naked.

⁹² This is an odd explanation, she is called cloth-wanderer because she has no clothes? We might have expected the name to be Apaṭācārā, clothless wanderer. There is a second explanation of the name below, also unconvincing, which suggests that the origin of the name had been forgotten.

The Elder Nun Patācārā - 72

Having heard the Teacher's word she regained a strong sense of modesty and shame, and she sat down on the ground right there.

A gentleman who was standing not far away threw her an upper robe. She dressed herself and listened to the Dhamma.

The Teacher, on account of her, spoke this verse found in the Dhammapada:

The Elder Nun Patācārā - 73

“Not in children is there refuge, not in Father or in kin, for one attacked by the End-Maker⁹³ there is no refuge in relatives.

Having understood the consequence, the wise one who protects his virtue, quickly purifies the Path that leads to Nibbāna.”⁹⁴

At the conclusion of that verse as she stood there she was established in Stream-Entry, and having approached and worshipped the Teacher, she asked for the going forth.

The Teacher said to her: “Go to the nunnery and go forth,” and he allowed her going forth.⁹⁵

One day she took water in her waterpot, and pouring it while washing her feet, it went but a little way and stopped; she poured it a second time and it went a little further; she poured it a third time and it went even further than that.

Having taken that as a meditation object, and defining the three ages of life, she thought: ‘Like the first pouring of the water by me, some of these beings die in the first age of life; those who go further than that, like the second time I poured out the water, die in middle age; those who go further than that, like the third time I poured out the water, surely die in the last age of life.’

⁹³ Another name for Māra, or death.

⁹⁴ Dhṛ. 288-289.

⁹⁵ The following lines are from near the end of the Dhammapada Commentary to verse 113.

The Elder Nun Paṭācārā - 74

The Teacher, sitting radiant in the Perfumed Cottage, appeared as though standing and speaking with her face to face, saying:

“Thus Paṭācārā, better than not seeing the rise and fall of the five constituents (of mind and body) while living for a hundred years, is seeing rise and fall for even a day or for even a moment,” and after making the connection, teaching Dhamma, he spoke this verse:

“He who lives for a hundred years not seeing rise and fall, is surpassed by one living for one day seeing rise and fall.”⁹⁶

At the conclusion of the teaching Paṭācārā attained Liberation together with the analytic knowledges.

Not long after her going forth, and her attainment of Liberation, grasping the Buddha’s words she became one who had mastered the Basket of Discipline.

Later, while sitting in Jeta’s Wood, in placing the nuns successively in their different positions, he placed Paṭācārā in the foremost position of those who bore the Discipline in mind.

⁹⁶ Dhp. 113. It means seeing the rising and falling away of everything in existence, but particularly of one’s own constituent parts.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN DHAMMADINNA



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Dhammadinnā

The story in the commentary about this great nun is somewhat anomalous, as her story is said to have been similar to Ven. Khemā's, even down to doing a deed for the Chief Disciple of the Buddha Padumuttara, the Elder Sujāta, and aspiring for a similar position herself. But the commentary here seems somewhat confused, as in her Traditional verses, it clearly says she did a good deed for the Elder Sujāta, and at a later time heard Buddha Padumuttara place a nun in foremost position of those who talk about Dhamma, and aspired to that position herself, which is indeed the position she fulfilled, being the counterpart of Ven. Mantāṇiputta.

Later she was also one of the seven sisters who built a monastery for the Buddha Kassapa's monks, and was eventually reborn into her last life. Her birthplace is not stated here, but the Tradition states it was in Giribbaja (another name for Rājagaha), and she did indeed marry the merchant Visākha who was living in that city, and who was a close friend of King Bimbisāra.

Her husband Visākha was amongst the crowds of people who went out to greet the Buddha when he returned to Rājagaha around nine months after his Awakening, and there and then he attained the First Path, and later on he progressed through to the Third Path.

At that point he became incapable to living a normal household life, having transcended sensual desire, and he therefore informed his wife and gave her permission to choose her own future. Dhammadinnā, not wishing to take up what he had thrown away, chose to go forth and after ordination went to a hermitage in the countryside, where she quickly attained Liberation.

The Elder Nun Dhammadinnā - 77

Visākha was surprised by her quick return to Rājagaha and didn't know whether it was because she was dissatisfied with the life or not, so he decided to visit her to find out. Rather than asking what could be an embarrassing question though, he skilfully asked her about the teaching, deepening the questions as he received answers.

This showed him beyond doubt, that not only was she satisfied, but that her own personal experience was beyond his own; when he reported his conversation to the Buddha he confirmed Dhammadinnā's greatness and attainment, and made her teaching his own by approving it as being the same as he himself would have taught.

The discourse that was recorded on that occasion, the Small Discourse giving an Elaboration (MN 44), is one of the most outstanding discourses spoken by a disciple in the Tipiṭaka, and is justly famous.⁹⁷ It was owing to this discourse that Ven. Dhammadinnā was appointed to the position of foremost amongst those who talk on Dhamma.

5. The Story about the Elder Nun Dhammadinnā

AN 1.5.5

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanāṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
Dhammakathikānaṃ, yad-idaṃ Dhammadinnā.**

**This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those
who talk about Dhamma, that is to say, Dhammadinnā.**

⁹⁷ I have translated it elsewhere on this website.

AA 1.5.5

The Commentarial Story:

In the fifth story, “Amongst those who talk about Dhamma,” it shows why Dhammadinnā, amongst those who talked about Dhamma, was said to be foremost.

Her Aspiration and Good Deeds

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, it seems, she was reborn in a place belonging to others in Hamsavatī,⁹⁸ and after doing a great deed for the Elder Sujāta,⁹⁹ the Chief Disciple of the Gracious Padumuttara, she aspired for that position herself.

She did good deeds for the rest of her life, and was reborn in Heaven, and everything below should be understood in accordance with the Elder Khemā’s resolution.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ It means she was born to a servant in someone else’s house.

⁹⁹ In the Traditions it says she gave him a cake, led him to her master’s house and fed him again.

¹⁰⁰ It is not easy to see how to apply this instruction as after Khemā’s aspiration the story at the time of Buddha Kassapa is told. But here that comes after the following story during the period of Buddha Phussa.

Various Good Deeds under Different Buddhas

But at the time of the Buddha Phussa, while living with the Teacher's three brothers by different Mothers, she was placed as a servant in the house of the one in charge of almsgiving, and when told: "Give one," gave two.¹⁰¹

Thus she gave all, but without causing decline, and ninety-two aeons having passed by, she was conceived in the home of Kiki, the King of Kāsi, in the time of the Buddha Kassapa, and was one of seven sisters.

She lived as a celibate for twenty-thousand years and had a dwelling place made for the Community of monks.

She was reborn amongst gods and humans only during one period when there was no Buddha.

Her Last Life

When this Gotama Buddha arose she was conceived in a good family home, and later went to the home of the merchant Visākha.¹⁰²

The merchant Visākha, King Bimbisāra's friend, went with the King and for the first time saw the One of Ten Powers, listened to the Dhamma, was established in the Fruit of Stream-Entry, and later realised the Fruit of Non-Returner.

¹⁰¹ This life is unrecorded in her Apadāna.

¹⁰² I.e. she married the merchant of this name.

The Elder Nun Dhammadinnā - 80

That day, after going home, Dhammadinnā was standing at the top of the stairs with outstretched hands, but without taking her hand he ascended the mansion.

Also while eating he did not speak saying: “Give this, bring that.”

Dhammadinnā, having taken a spoon, reflected while serving: “He did not take my hand as I was giving him my hand, and while eating he does not talk, I wonder what is my fault?”

Then, when he had eaten, she asked him: “Noble Sir, I wonder what is my fault?”

“Dhammadinnā, you have no fault, but from today forward intimacy with you, to sit or to stand near, or to chew and eat after you have brought food is no longer possible.

If you wish you can dwell in this home.

But if you do not wish, take however much wealth you need, and go to your family’s house.¹⁰³

Her Renunciation and Attainments

“Noble Sir, that being so, on that which has been spat aside, or vomited up, I could not live with my head held high. Please allow my going forth.”

¹⁰³ This story of Visākha’s and Dhammadinnā’s renunciation is told in much greater detail in the Majjhima Commentary on Cūḷavedallasuttaṃ (MN 44), a translation of which is found elsewhere on this website.

The Elder Nun Dhammadinnā - 81

Visākha said: “Very good, Dhammadinnā!” and after announcing it to the King, he sent Dhammadinnā in a golden palanquin to the nunnery for the going forth.

After the going forth she thought: “This merchant while still in the midst of his house has made an end to suffering,¹⁰⁴ but from the time I received the going forth till now I have yet to make an end to suffering.”

She went to her teacher and preceptor, and said: “Noble Ladies, my mind does not delight in this crowded place, I would go to a village dwelling.”¹⁰⁵

The Elders, because she had renounced a great family through her going forth, felt unable to find fault with her thought, and they took her and went to a village dwelling.

As she had prepared the right conditions in the past not long after she attained Liberation together with the analytic knowledges.

Her Teaching

¹⁰⁴ This usually indicates Liberation, but here we have to understand it as indicating a *relative* end to suffering, as Visākha was a Non-Returner, still at the third stage of the path.

¹⁰⁵ Since the incident when Arahat Uppalavaṇṇā was raped nuns were not allowed to live by themselves in the wilderness (*araññā*), so she asks to go and live somewhere at least not so crowded as a town.

The Elder Nun Dhammadinnā - 82

Then it occurred to her: “I have attained the summit of what was to be done, living here what will I do? I shall go to Rājagaha, and there on account of me a large company of my relatives will make merit,” and with the Elders she returned to the city.

Visākha, hearing that she had come, thought: ‘Quickly she came, is it because she is dissatisfied?’

In the evening time, he went into her presence and worshipped, and sat down at one side, thinking: ‘It is inappropriate to ask about her dissatisfaction,’ and instead he asked a question about the five constituent parts and so forth,¹⁰⁶ and Dhammadinnā, like one who cuts through a lily stalk with a sword, answered each of the questions.

The devotee, understanding how sharp was the Elder Nun Dhammadinnā’s knowledge, after asking questions in order about all the conditions for the three paths of his own attainment, asked about learning the Path to Liberation.

The Elder Nun Dhammadinnā understood that the devotee had only reached the state up to the Fruit of Non-Returner.

Thinking: ‘Now he is going beyond his own state and running on,’ she stopped him and said: “You are not able to grasp, friend Visākha, answers to questions that are beyond your limits, like immersion in Nibbāna, the spiritual life that ends in Nibbāna, that has a conclusion in Nibbāna.

¹⁰⁶ This refers to the Cūḷavedallasuttaṃ (MN 44).

The Elder Nun Dhammadinnā - 83

Desiring this, friend Visākha, approach the Fortunate One and you can ask him about this matter, and just as the Fortunate One explains, so you should bear it in mind.”

Visākha went into the presence of the Teacher and told him the questions and answers that had been given.

The Teacher listened to his words, and saying: “My daughter has no craving for past, future or present constituents,” he then spoke this verse found in the Dhammapada:¹⁰⁷

“The one who has nothing in the past, the future or the present, and is unattached to this nothing, that one I call a spiritual person.”

Then having given approval to Dhammadinnā, he said this to the devotee Visākha: “Wise, Visākha, is the nun Dhammadinnā, having great wisdom, Visākha, is the nun Dhammadinnā, if you were to ask me, Visākha, the same matter, I would answer it in the same way, in the same way as the nun Dhammadinnā has answered, for this is indeed the meaning, and so should you bear it in mind.”

¹⁰⁷ Dhṛp 421.

The Elder Nun Dhammadinnā - 84

Thus did the story unfold.

Later as the Teacher was sitting in Jeta's Wood, as he was assigning the places of the nuns in order, regarding this Small Discourse giving an Elaboration,¹⁰⁸ as the occasion had arisen, he placed this Elder Nun in the foremost position in the Dispensation amongst those who talked about Dhamma.

¹⁰⁸ A text and translation of this discourse can be found elsewhere on this website.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN NANDĀ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Nandā

This is one of the slighter stories regarding the nuns in this section: having made her aspiration during Buddha Padumuttara's time, and being reborn amongst god and men for a hundred thousand aeons, she was reborn through Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī some time before the Bodhisatta, and was the elder sister of Nanda and elder half-sister to the Buddha himself.

In the Aṅguttara commentary translated here, it is clear that she had several names: Nandā, Rūpānandā and Janapadakalyāṇī. In the Suttanipāta commentary (to Sn 1.11), however, Ven. Dhammapāla distinguishes three Elders having these names, and gives different stories for each. It seems that there was quite some confusion about this Elder in the tradition.

She went forth into the homeless life shortly after her Mother, Brother and half-Brother's wife did, but not out of faith, it seems, and she did not like to meet with the Buddha, as she thought he would blame her for her great beauty. She therefore avoided contact even when the time for the fortnightly instruction came round.¹⁰⁹

The Buddha then gave an order saying that everyone must come and see him personally for the instruction, and when she came he created a beautiful woman with his spiritual power who attended on Him, and this caused her regret for her reluctance to come before.

The Buddha then gave her two teachings on the impermanent and unsatisfactory nature of the body, a verse now recorded in the Dhammapada, and a discourse now in the Suttanipāta. Hearing these teachings she soon attained Liberation.

¹⁰⁹ Qualified monks were and are required to give instruction to the nuns on the Full Moon and New Moon dates.

The Elder Nun Nandā - 87

As she had gained deep insight through these teachings and took great delight in meditation thereafter, the Buddha appointed her as the foremost nun amongst those who meditate.

With her story compare Ven. Khemā's above, which it resembles in many respects. Her male counterpart was Kaṅkhā Revata.

6. The Story about the Elder Nun Nandā

AN 1.5.6

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanānaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
jhāyīnaṃ, yad-idaṃ Nandā.**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who meditate, that is to say, Nandā.

AA 1.5.6

The Commentarial Story:

In the sixth story, “Amongst those who meditate, that is to say, Nandā,” it shows why the Elder Nun Nandā, amongst those who delighted in meditation, was said to be foremost.

Her Aspiration and Good Deeds

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, it seems, she was conceived in a good family home in Haṃsavatī. Later, while listening to the Teacher teach the Dhamma, she saw the Teacher place a certain nun

The Elder Nun Nandā - 88

as being foremost amongst those who meditate, did a great deed, and aspired for that position herself.

Her Last Life

She was reborn amongst gods and humans only for one hundred thousand aeons, and was reborn at a time before our Teacher,¹¹⁰ being conceived in the womb of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. She was given the name Nandā, also Beautiful Nandā was said, and later, because of her supreme beauty, the name Janapadakalyāṇī¹¹¹ arose.

After the One of Ten Powers had attained omniscience, and gradually come to Kapilavatthu, given the going forth to Rāhula and Nanda, and was leaving after the time of the Great King Suddhodana's Final Nibbāna, she understood: 'After Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and Rāhula's Mother had renounced, they received the going forth in the presence of the Teacher,' and she thought: 'After their going forth, what work is there for me here?'"¹¹² So she went into the presence of Mahāpajāpatī and also went forth.

From the day of her going forth, thinking: 'The Teacher finds fault with beauty,' she didn't go to attend on the Teacher, and when an occasion for instruction arrived,¹¹³ having sent another, she had her bring the instruction.

¹¹⁰ The Traditions say she was the Buddha's younger sister. Both here and in the Therīgāthā Commentary though, she is said to be the elder.

¹¹¹ Lit: *the Country Beauty*.

¹¹² In the Traditions she is persuaded to go forth by her Mother.

¹¹³ This was given before the fortnightly recitation of the Bhikkhuni Pātimokkha or Rules of Discipline.

The Elder Nun Nandā - 90

The Teacher, understanding that she was intoxicated with her own beauty, said: “Let each one come and receive the instruction herself, she should not send another from amongst the nuns.”

The Elder Nun Nandā - 91

Then Beautiful Nandā, not seeing another way, went unwillingly for her instruction.

The Teacher, because of her conduct, created a beautiful woman with his spiritual power, who held a palmyra fan, and seemed to be fanning him.

Seeing that, Beautiful Nandā thought: ‘Without reason I was heedless and I did not come, yet such beautiful women go about confidently in the presence of the Teacher. My beauty is not worth even a sixteenth part of the beauty of their beauty, not knowing this for such a long time I did not come!’

She stood there gazing at the woman’s form.

The Teacher, knowing she was endowed with all the former conditions, recited the verse found in the Dhammapada:¹¹⁴

*This citadel is made of bones, smeared over with flesh and blood,
where old age and death, conceit and anger are lying hidden.*

and he spoke the Discourse:¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ DhP 150, I have added it in here. In the Traditions the story is quite different: the Buddha makes a beautiful woman appear and Nandā entranced lies in her lap; just then the image is bitten by a poisonous spider and rots away from the inside, giving Nandā insight into the impermanent nature of the body.

¹¹⁵ Sn 1.11 Vijayasuttam, The Discourse on Success.

The Elder Nun Nandā - 92

Whether going or standing, whether sitting or lying, it moves, it stretches, this is the movement of the body.

The Elder Nun Nandā - 93

Bones and sinews conjoined, smeared with skin and flesh, the body is covered with skin, and the reality is not seen.

Full of intestines, full of undigested food, having a lumpy liver, a bladder, heart, lungs, kidney and spleen;¹¹⁶ mucus, spit, sweat and fat, blood, synovial fluid, bile and grease.

Always there are impurities flowing from its nine orifices, eye-defecation from the eyes, ear-defecation from the ears, mucus from the nose.

From the mouth vomit is vomited, also bile and phlegm; perspiration and dirt from the body, and its hollow head is filled with the brain.

A fool, honouring ignorance, thinks of it as beautiful, but when it lies dead, bloated and discoloured, cast aside in the charnel ground, even his relatives have no further expectation of it.

Dogs, hyenas, wolves and worms eat it, crows, vultures also eat it, and whatever other breathing beings there are.

Having heard the Word of the Buddha, the monastic endowed with wisdom here, the one who understands it, sees as it really is.

Thinking: 'As is this, so is that, as is that, so is this,' inside and outside, he should remove delight for the body.

¹¹⁶ These are solid organs, a list of liquids follows. Cf. also the Dvattamsākāra, Khp 3.

The Elder Nun Nandā - 94

Having removed passion and delight, the monastic endowed with wisdom here has passed over to the deathless peace, the immovable state of Nibbāna.

He cares for this stinking, impure two legged body, but it is full of various corpses flowing out from here and there.

He who would think to be proud of such a body, or would despise another because of theirs: what is this except a lack of insight?

With that she was established in knowledge about the dissolution and destruction of beauty and attained Liberation.

In this place the story below is the same as the Elder Nun Khemā's story, and is not elaborated further.¹¹⁷

From thence onwards Beautiful Nandā was chief amongst those delighting in meditation.

Later the Teacher was sitting in Jeta's Wood, and as he was assigning the places of the nuns in order, he placed the Elder Nun Nandā in the foremost position amongst those who meditate.

¹¹⁷ Again it is hard to see how this applies here, in Khemā's case she attained while still in the lay life, and afterwards ordained, and the story is then brought to a conclusion, but here Nandā is already ordained, and there is no more story to be added in.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN

SONĀ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Soṇā

This is one of the most touching stories of the collection. Soṇā, also known as Many-Children Soṇā, after raising ten children, seeing them all married off, and distributing her wealth to them, finds herself despised by her children, and decides to go forth.¹¹⁸

Even when she has gone forth no one respected her, so she took up insight meditation on the nature of the body and worked at it with great zeal. One day while working at her meditation subject, the Buddha projected an image of himself standing in front of her, and gave her encouragement.

She then attained Liberation, but realised she hadn't carried out her assigned duty to warm the water for the nuns' bath when they returned from alms round. Thinking that if someone spoke badly of her they may make demerit, upon their return she warmed the water through miraculous power, and this convinced them of her attainment.

The nuns begged for forgiveness and Ven. Soṇā became at long last a highly respected member of the Community, known as being zealous in making effort, and when the Buddha was placing the nuns in position, she was made foremost amongst those who were energetic.

Her male counterpart also had the same first name, and was known as Ven. Soṇa Koḷivisa.

¹¹⁸ In the Traditions the story is quite different: there her husband and ten sons all decide to go forth, and she, being left alone, also decided to go forth.

7. The Story about the Elder Nun Soṇā

AN 1.5.7

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanāṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
āraddhaviriyaṇaṃ, yad-idaṃ Soṇā.**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who are energetic, that is to say, Soṇā.

AA 1.5.7

The Commentarial Story:

In the seventh story, “Amongst those who are energetic,” it shows why Soṇā, amongst those who have held up and fulfilled energy, was said to be foremost.

Her Aspiration and Good Deeds

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, it seems, she was conceived in a good family home in Hamsavatī. Later, while listening to the Dhamma and seeing the Teacher place a certain nun as being foremost amongst those who were energetic, she did a great deed and aspired for that position herself.

Her Last Life

She was reborn amongst gods and humans only for one hundred thousand aeons.

The Elder Nun Soṇā - 98

When this Gotama Buddha arose she was conceived in a good family home in Sāvattthī.

Later, she was established in the household life and had many sons and daughters,¹¹⁹ and she set them all up individually in the household life.¹²⁰

From thence onwards, thinking: ‘What can she do for us?’ when she came into their presence, they did not even designate her as ‘Mother.’

And Many-Children Soṇā, understanding their lack of respect towards herself, thinking: ‘What will I do dwelling in a house,’ renounced and went forth.

Then the nuns, thinking: ‘She does not know the minor duties, she behaves improperly,’ gave her punishment.

Her sons and daughters saw her being punished, and thinking: ‘Till this very day she does not know the training rules,’ and they ridiculed her on the spot wherever she was seen.

Having heard their words, with spiritual anxiety aroused, thinking: ‘It is fitting to make a course to purification for myself,’ she rehearsed the Thirty-Two Fold Nature in whatever place she was sitting and whatever place she was standing.

¹¹⁹ The commentaries say she had ten children.

¹²⁰ She divided up her property and gave it to them, see the Dhammapada Commentary to vs. 115.

The Elder Nun Sonā - 99

The Elder Nun Soṇā - 100

*There are in this body:*¹²¹

*hairs of the head, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin,
flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys,
heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs,
intestines, mesentery, undigested food, excrement,
bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat,
tears, grease, spit, mucus, synovial fluid, urine.*

And just as formerly she had been known as Many-Children Soṇā, so later she became well known as the Elder Nun Energetic Soṇā.

Then one day as the nuns were going to the monks' monastery, after saying: 'Heat some water for the Community of Nuns, Soṇā,' they departed.

Before the water was heated in the fire house, while reciting the Thirty-Two Fold Nature as she was walking in meditation, she developed insight.

The Teacher, while sitting in the Fragrant Cottage appeared to her and recited this illustrious verse:¹²²

“The one who lives for a hundred years not seeing the Supreme Dhamma, is surpassed by one living for one day only who sees the Supreme Dhamma.”¹²³

¹²¹ This is a separate text at Khp. 3, and is found *passim* throughout the discourses.

¹²² This teaching comes after her attainment of Liberation in the Traditions.

The Elder Nun Sonā - 101

She attained Liberation at the conclusion of the verse, and thought: 'I have attained Liberation, but when they return, without considering, they will speak dispraise of me, and will accumulate much demerit, therefore it is fitting to do something as a sign.'

She placed the water pot over the fire-place, but she didn't make the fire underneath.

After the nuns had returned, seeing the fire-place, but not seeing a fire, they said: "We told this old lady: 'Heat the water for the Community of Nuns,' but today she did not make the fire in the fire-place."

"Noble Ladies, why do you need fire? If you like to bathe with hot water, take water from the pot and bathe."

They, thinking: 'There will be a reason here,' went and put their hand into the water, and understanding it was heated, brought a water pot and took the water, and as they took from it in that place it refilled.

Then they all understood she was established in Liberation, and those who were junior fell at her feet in the five-fold prostration, saying: "Noble Lady, for so long we disregarded you, injured and spoke injuriously, please forgive us," and they asked for forgiveness.

The seniors, having squatted down, said: "Noble Lady, forgive us," and asked for forgiveness.

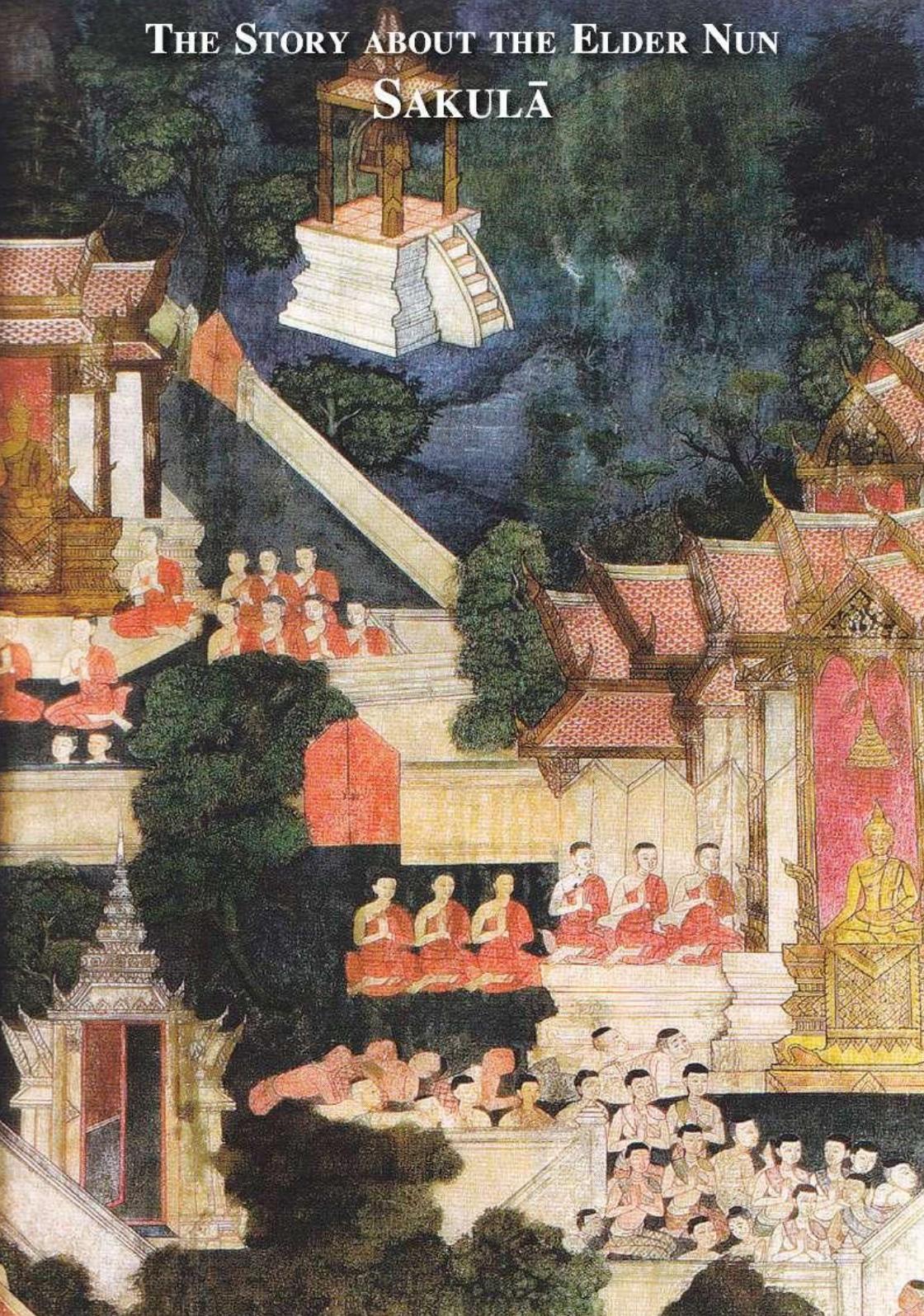
The Elder Nun Sonā - 102

The Elder Nun Sonā - 103

From then on, though she had gone forth in old age, they said: “She has been established in the highest fruit in no long time through being energetic,” and the virtue of the Elder Nun became well-known.

Later, after the Teacher had sat down in Jeta’s Wood, as he was assigning the places of the nuns in order, he placed the Elder Nun Sonā in the foremost position amongst those who were energetic.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN SAKULĀ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Sakulā

This is the shortest of the stories, and the least informative too, which is strange, as a section of her story which is very relevant to her placement here has been omitted, even though it is found in the Traditions (*Apadāna*) about her. As it is crucial for an understanding of the story I have included the relevant section below.

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara¹²⁴ she made her aspiration to gain foremost position amongst those with the divine eye, and during the Buddha Kassapa's time, having received some oil, with a faithful heart, she lighted up the Buddha's shrine with it for the whole night.

Because of that her body also shone forth, and she was famous and had penetrating vision in her next life in the Tāvātimsa Heaven. Later, when she was reborn in Buddha Gotama's time she gained faith, went forth, and finally attained Liberation, and because of her past good deeds became adept in the divine eye, and attained the position as foremost in that skill in accordance with her aspiration.

The male disciple with this same quality was Ven. Anuruddha.

¹²⁴ In the Traditions she is stated to be that Buddha's half-sister.

8. The Story about the Elder Nun Sakulā

AN 1.5.8

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanāṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
dibbacakkhukānaṃ, yad-idaṃ Sakulā.**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who have the divine eye, that is to say, Sakulā.

AA 1.5.8

The Commentarial Story:

In the eighth story, “Amongst those who have the divine eye, that is to say, Sakulā,” it shows why the Elder Nun Sakulā, amongst those who had the divine eye, was said to be foremost.

Her Aspiration and Good Deeds

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, it seems, she was reborn in a good family home in Hamsavatī. Later, when she was mature, while listening to the Teacher talk about Dhamma and seeing the Teacher place a certain nun as being foremost amongst those who have the divine eye, she did a great deed and aspired for that position herself.

(Sakulā speaks:)

The Elder Nun Sakulā - 107

In this auspicious aeon,¹²⁵ a very famous brāhmaṇa arose in the noble and well-known Kassapa clan.¹²⁶

I was a female wanderer at that time, solitary, and after wandering for alms I received a little oil.

Having lighted a lamp with that oil, I attended all night with a confident mind at the Foremost Human's shrine.

Through performing that good deed with excellent intentions, after throwing off the human body I went to the Realm of the Thirty Three.

On account of that deed I shone forth in whatever place I was, like a great light blazing, wherever I went.

Beyond the walls, beyond the rocks, rising above the mountain, whatever I wanted to see I saw, as the result of that gift of light,

I had a purified eye, I shone forth with fame, I was endowed with faith and wisdom, as the result of that gift of light.

Her Last Life

She was reborn amongst gods and humans only for one hundred thousand aeons.

¹²⁵ These verses are from the Traditions about her (Therī-Apadāna, 3.4.17-23).

The Elder Nun Sakulā - 108

When this Gotama Buddha arose she was reborn in a good family home in Sāvattthī, and later, while listening to the Teacher teach the Dhamma, she gained faith and went forth, and in no long time she attained Liberation.

From then on she became well-practiced in the divine eye. Later, while the Teacher was sitting in Jeta's Wood, as he was assigning the places of the nuns in order, he placed this Elder Nun in the foremost position amongst those who had the divine eye.

¹²⁶ I.e. the Buddha Kassapa.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN KUNḌALAKESĀ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Kuṇḍalakesā

Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā's story is one of the longer ones, showing a very capable and confident young woman. She began her career in the normal way under Buddha Padumuttara, and was also one of the seven sisters born to King Kiki.

In her last life she was reborn in a merchant's family on the same day her future husband was born, though the signs accompanying his birth were very inauspicious, and they nearly had him put to death there and then.

The boy however grew up in safety, but from an early age was a kleptomaniac, stealing whatever he could get his hands on, no matter how many times his parents scolded him and tried to guide him rightly, and eventually, as he had no further talent, his Father gave him the means to become a professional thief, and left him to his fate.

The young man eventually broke into nearly every house in the city, and when the King found out, he gave the Mayor only one day to find the person responsible or die himself. The Mayor caught the thief, and when he was brought before the King he was sentenced to death.

For reasons not properly explained in the story here, when Bhaddā saw him on his way to execution, she fell in love, and begged for his release, which her Father organised. He was brought back to the house to be her partner. Even then his passion for theft couldn't be assuaged, and he planned to kill Bhaddā and take her ornaments.

Bhaddā, however, turned out to be quick in wits and disposed of him before he disposed of her. Not able to return home after his death she renounced and became a Jaina nun. We notice here that nuns of other sects had their own hermitages and must have been a common sight in ancient India; these hermitages are mentioned again in the following story.

The Elder Nun Kuṇḍalakesā - 111

She excelled in debate and toured the country challenging others to debate with her, and finally came to Sāvathī. There she met with Ven. Sāriputta who easily defeated her and asked her to meet with the Buddha. She went as asked, and the Buddha taught her in one verse, at the conclusion of which she attained Liberation, and went forth again in the nuns' Community.

It was because of this display of her quick and ready wit that she was placed in foremost position amongst those who were quick in deep knowledge. Her male counterpart was Ven. Bāhiya Dārucīriya.¹²⁷

9. The Story about the Elder Nun Kuṇḍalakesā

AN 1.5.9

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanāṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
khippābhiññānaṃ, yad-idaṃ Kuṇḍalakesā.¹²⁸**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who are quick in deep knowledge, that is to say, Kuṇḍalakesā.

AA 1.5.9

The Commentarial Story:

In the ninth story, “Amongst those who are quick in deep knowledge,” it shows why the Elder Nun Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā,

¹²⁷ The canonical story about him can be found in the influential meditation discourse at Udāna 1.10, which is translated elsewhere on this website.

¹²⁸ RTE, PTS: *Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā*.

The Elder Nun Kundalakesā - 112

amongst those who were quick in deep knowledge, was said to be foremost.

Her Aspiration and Good Deeds

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara she was reborn in a good family home in Haṃsavatī. She listened to the Teacher talk about Dhamma, and saw the Teacher place a certain nun as being foremost amongst those who are quick in deep knowledge, did a great deed and aspired for that position herself.

Various Good Deeds

She was reborn amongst gods and humans only for one hundred thousand aeons.

In the time of the Buddha Kassapa, in the home of Kiki, the King of Kāsi, she was one of seven sisters. She established the ten precepts for twenty-thousand years and lived as a celibate, and made a dwelling place for the Community.

She was then reborn amongst gods and humans only during one period when there was no Buddha.

Her Last Life

When this Gotama Buddha arose she was conceived in a merchant's family in the city of Rājagaha, and they gave her the name Bhaddā, Auspicious.

The Elder Nun Kundalakesā - 113

That very day in the city the King's chaplain's son was born. From the moment of his birth, beginning with King Bimbisāra's residence, and throughout the whole city weapons blazed forth.

In the morning the chaplain went to the King's family and asked if the King had slept comfortably. The King said: "How can I sleep comfortably today, Teacher, when all night we saw the weapons in the King's residence blazing forth and we have become fearful?"

"Great King, do not worry for this reason, not only in your home did weapons blaze forth, it was so throughout the whole city."

"What is the reason, Teacher?"

"In our home was born a child under the thieves' star, he will become an enemy to the whole city, this is the portent concerning him, there is no danger for you, but if you wish, let us bear him off."

"There being no intention to harm us, there is no need to bear him off."

The chaplain, thinking: 'My son has come bearing his own name,' named him Sattuka, Little Enemy.

Bhaddā grew up in the merchant's home, and Sattuka grew up in the chaplain's home.

The Elder Nun Kundalakesā - 114

From the time he was able to play by running around here and there whatever he saw in any place he had wandered to, he took all of it away, and filled up his Mother and Father's home with it.

His Father, although giving him a thousand reasons, was not able to restrain him.

Later, as he reached maturity, understanding it was an impossibility to restrain him in any way, he gave him a pair of blue robes, and put into his hands all the requisites for housebreaking and a grapple, and sent him off, saying: "You can make a living through doing this work."

From that day forward, after throwing his grapple, ascending residences of good families, making a breach, and taking the goods that other families had stored there, as if he had put them there himself, he departed. There was not a home in the whole city that was not plundered by him.

One day as the King was travelling about the city in his chariot, he asked his charioteer: "Why is it that there appears to be a breach in every house in this city?"

"God-King, in this city there is a thief named Sattuka who, having broken through the wall, carries off the property of the good families."

The King summoned the Mayor, and said: "It seems that in this city there is such and such a thief, why have you not grabbed him?"

The Elder Nun Kundalakesā - 115

“We, God-King, are not able to find the thief together with the stolen property.”

“If today you capture the thief you can live; but if you do not capture him, I will issue a Royal command.”¹²⁹

“Yes, God-King,” and the Mayor sent men all over the city, and after Sattuka had broken through a wall, and was making off with others’ goods, they captured him together with the stolen property and brought him to the King.

The King said: “Take this thief out through the south gate and execute him!”

The Mayor gave his assent to the King, and having that thief flogged with a thousand strokes at each of the crossroads, he went out¹³⁰ by the southern gate.¹³¹

Her Marriage

At that time the merchant’s daughter Bhaddā, after opening the window because of the uproar of the populace, while looking around, saw the thief Sattuka being brought out, and holding her two hands over her heart, went and lay down on the couch with her head held low.

¹²⁹ I.e. he will give him capital punishment.

¹³⁰ Present tense used in the sense of the immediate past.

¹³¹ Executions always took place to the south of the city.

The Elder Nun Kundalakesā - 116

She was the family's only daughter and her relatives were not able to endure even a trifling contortion of her face.

Then her Mother, seeing her lying on the couch, asked: “What are you doing, Dear?”

“Do you see this thief they have prepared and brought out to be executed?”

“Yes, Lady, we do see him.”

“If I get him I will live, but if I don’t get him there is surely death for me.”

They, being unable to convince her in any way, considered: “Life is better than death.”

Then her Father went into the Mayor’s presence, and gave him a thousand in a bribe, saying: “My daughter is infatuated with this thief, please free him through some means or other.”

He, saying: “Very well,” assenting to the merchant, grabbed the thief, and delayed at the funeral bier until the sun was setting. Then, as the sun set, he drove a certain man from the prison, and loosening Sattuka’s bonds, he sent Sattuka to the merchant’s home. Having the other man bound with Sattuka’s bonds, he drove him through the southern door and had him executed.

The merchant’s servants grabbed Sattuka and took him to the merchant’s residence.

Seeing him, the merchant, thinking: “I will fulfil my daughter’s desire,” had Sattuka bathed in scented water, adorned with all decorations, and sent him to the mansion.

Bhaddā, thinking: “My desire is fulfilled,” decorated herself with innumerable decorations and amused herself with him.

Sattuka, after a few days had passed, thought: “Her decorative articles will be mine, but by what means is it fitting to grab her ornaments?”

At a time they were sitting comfortably together, he said to Bhaddā: “There is a word of mine I would like to speak.”

The merchant’s daughter, like one who had received a thousand coins, with a satisfied mind, said: “Speak freely, Noble Sir.”

“You thought: ‘His life was saved because of me,’ but when they grabbed me on the mountain from where they throw down thieves I prayed to the god living there, imploring: ‘If I receive my life, I will make an offering to you.’ Because of that my life was saved, quickly get an offering ready.”

Bhaddā, thinking: ‘I will fulfil his desire,’ prepared the offering, decorated herself with all decorations, mounted a vehicle with her husband, and went to the mountain from where they throw down thieves, began to ascend, thinking: ‘I will make an offering to the god of the mountain.’

Sattuka thought: ‘With all of us ascending I will not be able to grab her ornaments,’ so after having her take the offering-vessel, he ascended the mountain.¹³²

¹³² It mean he went with her alone, having dismissed the entourage.

But while speaking with Bhaddā he spoke no endearing words, and from his gestures she understood his intention.

Then he said to her: “Bhaddā, cast off your robe, and make a bundle here of all the ornaments heaped up on you.”

“Husband, what is my fault?”

“Why, fool, do you think I have come to make offerings?” he said, making a sign.

“Having torn the liver out of that god I could give an offering in this place, but I have come desiring your ornaments.”

“Noble Sir, but whose are the ornaments, and whose am I?”

“We do not know of such a thing, as your property is one thing, and my property is another.”

“Very well, Noble Sir, but let me fulfil one wish, let me give you in all your finery a hug from in front and from behind.”

Saying: “Very well,” he accepted.

Understanding his acceptance, she hugged him from the front, made like she was hugging him from behind, and threw him from the mountain from where they throw down thieves.

He fell through the air and was crushed to pieces.

The Elder Nun Kundalakesā - 120

Seeing the wondrous nature of her deed, the goddess who dwelt on the mountain spoke this verse expounding her virtue:

The Elder Nun Kuṇḍalakesā - 121

“Not on every occasion is it a man that is wise,
a women is wise also, she is wise now and then.

Not on every occasion is it a man that is wise,
a women is wise also, if she but think for a moment.”

Her First Ordination and Teaching

Then Bhaddā thought: ‘Because of this I am not able to return again to my home. I will go from here and go forth in some going forth or other,’ and she went to the Nigaṇṭha’s monastery and requested to go forth amongst the Nigaṇṭhas.

Then they said this to her: “What manner of going forth?”

She said: “Please give your supreme going forth.”

Saying, “Very well,” they pulled out her hair with the shell of a palm nut and gave her the going forth.¹³³

But her hair grew back in ringlets and wavy curls, and because of that, the name Kuṇḍalakesā, Curly Hair, arose.

She learned all the skills in the place of her going forth, and knowing: ‘There is no further distinction beyond this,’¹³⁴ wandering

¹³³ In the Traditions the story is very different from here on. There she is said to have lived in a cemetery and seeing a rotting corpse asked the Jainas about it, who couldn’t answer and sent her to the Buddha (!) where she heard the Teaching about impermanence, gained faith, went forth and soon after was Liberated.

The Elder Nun Kuṇḍalakesā - 122

from village to town to capital city, wherever there were learned men, she went there and learned all the arts they knew.

And in many places, because she was so learned no one was able to give a reply to her.

Then not seeing anyone who was able to dispute with her, in whatever village or town she entered, she piled up sand at the gate, and set up a branch of a rose-apple tree right there, saying: “Whoever is able to refute my word, he should trample down this branch,” and she informed the children standing nearby.

No one trampled it down even after seven days.

Then taking it, she departed.

Her Conversion and Attainment

At that time our Fortunate One had been reborn in the world and was living in Jeta’s Wood at Sāvattthī.

Then Kuṇḍalakesā, after gradually reaching Sāvattthī, and entering the city in the same way as before, set her branch in the sand, informed the children and left.

At that time Ven. Sāriputta, the General of the Dhamma, after the Community of monks had already entered the city, saw the Rose-Apple branch in the sand heap while entering the town alone, and asked: “Why is this placed here?”

¹³⁴ I.e. she had learned all they could teach.

The Elder Nun Kundalakesā - 123

The children, without omitting anything, told him the reason.

“That being so, take it and trample on it, children.”

They listened to the Elder’s word but some didn’t dare to trample on it, while some others, after trampling on it in an instant, crushed it to powder.

Kuṇḍalakesā, while leaving after taking her meal, saw the branch trampled down and asked: “Who did this deed?”

Then they told her the General of the Dhamma had caused it to be done.

She thought: ‘He must be knowing his own strength else he wouldn’t dare to have had the branch trampled down, he must surely be a great man! But I am insignificant in comparison, and I will not shine, and yet thinking: ‘After entering the village, it is right to inform the people,’ that is what she did.

It should be understood that all eighty thousand families residing in that city in their various neighbourhoods were informed.

The Elder, after the meal duties, sat down at the root of a certain tree. Then Kuṇḍalakesā, surrounded by the populace, went into the presence of the Elder, exchanged greetings and stood on one side.

She asked: “Reverend Sir, did you have the branch trampled down?”

“Yes, I had it trampled down.”

“That being so, reverend Sir, let there be a discussion on our doctrine, together with yours.”

“Let it be so, Bhaddā.”

“But who should ask, and who should answer?”

“Our questions are ready, you can ask according to your understanding.”

Consent having been given by the Elder she asked everything according to the doctrine she understood, and the Elder answered it all, and having asked everything, she fell silent.

Then the Elder said to her: “You asked many things, but we will ask only one question.”

“Ask away, reverend Sir.”

“What is said to be one?”

Kuṇḍalakesā said: “I don’t know, reverend Sir.”

“If you don’t know even that much, how will you know anything else?”

She fell at the Elder’s feet right there and said: “I go to you for refuge, reverend Sir.”

“There is no coming to me for refuge, the Greatest Person in the world with its gods dwells in a monastery nearby, go to Him for refuge.”

The Elder Nun Kuṇḍalakesā - 126

She said: “I will do so, reverend Sir.”

In the evening time, at the time the Teacher was teaching Dhamma, she went into the presence of the Teacher, worshipped with the fivefold prostration and stood at one side.

The Teacher, by way of subjugating her volitional processes, spoke this verse found in the Dhammapada:

“Even though one possesses a thousand lines from verses which are unbeneficial, they are surpassed by one line of verse, which, having heard, one is calmed.”

At the conclusion of the verse, just as she was standing there, after attaining Liberation together with the analytic knowledges, she asked for the going forth.

The Teacher agreed to her going forth, and she went to the nunnery and went forth.

Later this discussion arose in the midst of the four assemblies:¹³⁵
“Great is this Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā, in that she attained Liberation at the end of just four lines of verse!”

For this reason the Teacher, as the occasion had arisen, placed this Elder Nun in the foremost position amongst those who were quick in deep knowledge.

¹³⁵ That is, the monks, nuns, male and female lay devotees.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN
BHADDĀ KĀPILĀNĪ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī

Bhaddā, after the usual start with Buddha Padumuttara, had a rather uncharacteristic lapse, in that in an intervening life she first gave something to an Independent Buddha, then took it back, and finally gave it again, and made an aspiration to have a beautiful body, which came true in her last life.¹³⁶

The commentary gives an abbreviated version of Bhaddā's final life story, referring the reader to the identical story given for her husband Pippali who would become famous as Mahā Kassapa. To make Bhaddā's story complete I have inserted the relevant section.

It tells a very touching story from the early life of Pippali and Bhaddā. Although betrothed to each other, neither wanted to marry and wrote to the other saying so, and that they intended ordaining instead. The letters were intercepted on the way, however, and they were tricked into marriage. They decided after the ceremony to maintain celibacy, and did not consummate the marriage.

After Pippali's parents died, the young couple were obliged to take on the tasks of householders and look after the considerable fortune that was their family property. One day, on noticing the killing of insects on their estate, they asked who is culpable for the deaths. They learned, to their dismay, that the responsibility belongs to them alone.

As far as I understand the workings of kamma they would bear either none or very little responsibility for the death of the creatures, but in the story

¹³⁶ The same thing happened with Uppalavaṇṇā in her previous life, see above.

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī - 129

here all the blame for the deaths is put on them alone, which puts sufficient fear into their hearts that they abandon their wealth and decide to go forth.

This took place soon after the Buddha had attained Awakening, and they left on their quest before meeting or hearing about the Buddha. After disposing of their wealth and giving freedom to their servants, they wandered off together until they realised that remaining together might attract blame, and decided to split up.

Taking the right hand road, Pippali almost immediately met the Buddha and soon became one of his great disciples. Yet more years would pass before the founding of the Buddha's Community of nuns, hence Bhaddā went forth amongst the Wanderers (*Paribbājika*); this again indicates that communities of female ascetics existed even before the Buddha founded his own Community.

Around five years later Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī went forth as the first of the nuns, and not long after Bhaddā received ordination from her, attained Liberation and was placed at foremost amongst those who could remember their former lives. The male disciple having this same quality was Ven. Sobhita.

The story which leads up to this position really gives no grounds for why she would attain to this particular position, which is odd, as the stories are meant to illustrate this. Another curious thing is that in the next story, about Bhaddā Kaccānā (the Buddha's former wife), she is said to excel all others in her attainment of recalling past lives, so it seems there is another anomaly here. Nevertheless, the story remains of great interest and is memorable in its own right.

The Traditions fail to mention her aspiration under Buddha Padumuttara, and indeed it seems her virtue is simply to support her husband (the future Mahā Kassapa) in his deeds, both here and in other future lives which are mentioned. Neither is it mentioned that she was placed in a foremost

position in the Traditions, so again there is something of an anomaly in the story.

10. The Story about the Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī

AN 1.5.10

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanāmaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
pubbenivāsaṃ anussarantīnaṃ,¹³⁷ yad-idaṃ Bhaddā Kāpilānī.**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who can recollect their former lives, that is to say, Bhaddā Kāpilānī.

AA 1.5.10

The Commentarial Story:

In the tenth story, “Amongst those who have knowledge of their former lives,” it shows why, amongst those who could recollect the succession of the great mass of former lives, the Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī was said to be foremost.

Her Aspiration and Good Deeds

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, it seems, she was reborn in a good family home in Hāmsavatī. Later, while listening to the Teacher teach the Dhamma, seeing the Teacher place a certain nun

¹³⁷ ChS omits: *anussarantīnaṃ*

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī - 131

as being foremost amongst those who recollect their former lives, she did a great deed and aspired for that position herself.

Her Good Deeds

After being reborn amongst gods and humans only for one hundred thousand aeons, when there was no Buddha arisen, she was conceived in a good family home in Sāvattthī.

During a quarrel with her brother's wife, when the sister gave alms food to an Independent Buddha, she thought: "After giving alms food to him, she has him under her control," and she grabbed the bowl from the Independent Buddha's hand, threw away the food, filled it with mud and gave it back.

The people said: "She is a fool," and blamed her, saying: "You had a quarrel with her, but did nothing to her, what offence has the Independent Buddha done to you?"

Feeling shame at these words, she took the bowl again, emptied the mud, washed and scrubbed it with fragrant soap powder, filled it with the four sweet things,¹³⁸ and sprinkling it with ghee shining the colour of a lotus calyx, placed it in the hand of the Independent Buddha, saying: "Just as this alms food shines forth, so may my body shine forth."

She established this aspiration.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Ghee, honey, sugar and sesame oil.

¹³⁹ The text of the relevant sections from Ven. Mahā Kassapa's story have been included here in accordance with the instruction in the text.

Her Last Life

...after our Teacher had arisen in the world, and had Set Rolling the Noble Wheel of the Dhamma, he gradually entered Rājagaha.

While the Teacher was dwelling there, this young brāhmaṇa Pippali,¹⁴⁰ in the Magadha country, in the brāhmaṇa village called Great Ford, had been reborn in the brāhmaṇa Kapila's Queen's womb; and Bhaddā Kāpilānī, in the Madda country, in the Sāgala town, had been reborn in the brāhmaṇa Kosiya's Queen's womb.

Gradually they both grew up, and when the young brāhmaṇa Pippali was twenty years old, and Bhaddā had come to sixteen, his Mother and Father, after examining their son, said: "Dear, you are now mature, you should keep up the family lineage,"¹⁴¹ and they pressed him greatly.

The young brāhmaṇa said: "It is not suitable to talk such talk in my ear, as long as you last I will look after you, but after you have departed, I will go forth."

After a few days had passed they spoke again, and again he refused. Again they spoke, again he refused.

From then on his Mother spoke incessantly about it. The young brāhmaṇa thought: 'I must convince my Mother.' He gave a thousand coins of red gold, and had a woman's form made by the goldsmiths.

¹⁴⁰ The future Ven. Mahā Kassapa.

¹⁴¹ It means he should now get married and have children of his own.

At the end of the work he rubbed and polished it and so on, dressed it in red clothes, had it adorned with various ornaments and colourful flowers, summoned his Mother and said: “Mother, finding someone of such a form I will live in a household, but not finding her I will not live there.”

The wise brāhmaṇī thought: “My meritorious son must have formed a resolution and given gifts. He wasn’t making merit by himself alone, surely there will be a woman whom he made merit with who is like this golden statue.”

She summoned eight brāhmaṇas and satisfied them with all they wished for, and mounted the golden statue on a chariot, saying: “Go, Dears, and wherever there is a family similar to ours in birth, lineage and wealth, look for a girl who is like this golden statue, and after making a present, give it to her,” and she sent them off.

They thought: ‘This is our work,’ and departed.

Thinking: ‘Where will we go?’ and: ‘The Madda country is a mine of women, let us go to the Madda country,’ they went to the Madda country and to the Sāgala town.

They set up the golden statue there at the bathing ghat and sat down on one side.

Then Bhaddā’s nurse washed and decorated Bhaddā and made her sit in the royal bed chamber, and while going to bathe, she saw the statue, and thinking: ‘The Noble Lady has come here,’ she made a threatening gesture, saying: “Why are you so obstinate as to come

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī - 135

here?” and lifting up her hand threateningly, she said: “Go back quickly!” and slapped it on the side.

Her hand trembled like she had struck a rock, and stepping back, she said: “It is so hard!”

Seeing her stiff neck and thinking: ‘My Noble Lady,’ she made a gesture, and said: “This is inappropriate for a Noble Lady who is dressed by me!”

Then those men surrounded her and asked: “Is your Master’s daughter like this?”

“Why this is as lovely as my Noble Lady, who has a hundred, even a thousand, virtues. There is nothing that can hold a candle to her when she is sat in her twelve-cubit chamber, the radiance of her body destroys the darkness!”

“Then come,” and they took the offering, mounted the golden statue on a chariot, and stopped at the gate of the house of the brāhmaṇa of the Kosiya clan and announced their coming.

The brāhmaṇa received them well and asked: “From where did you come?”

“From the house of the brāhmaṇa Kapila in the Great Ford village in the Magadha country.”

“For what reason have you come?”

“For this reason,” (and they explained).

“It is good, Dears, this brāhmaṇa has the same birth, lineage and wealth as us, we will give him the girl,” and he received the bride-gift.

They sent a message to the brāhmaṇa Kapila, saying: “Having found the girl, please do what should be done.”

After hearing the message, they informed the young brāhmaṇa Pippali, saying: “It seems the girl has been found.”

The young brāhmaṇa reflecting: ‘I thought they will not find her and now they say she is found. Misfortune has arisen, I will send her a letter,’ and having gone into seclusion he wrote a letter.

“Bhaddā should gain a household life suitable to her birth, lineage and wealth, but having renounced, I will go forth, do not regret it later.”

Bhaddā also, having heard: “It seems they desire to give me to such and such,” went into seclusion and wrote a letter.

“The Noble Sir should gain a household life suitable to his birth, lineage and wealth, but having renounced, I will go forth, do not regret it later.”

The two letter bearers met on the highway.

“Whose letter is this?”

“The young brāhmaṇa Pippali send it to Bhaddā.”

“This is whose letter?”

“Bhaddā sent it to the young brāhmaṇa Pippali,” and after saying that and reading the letters, they said: “Look at the children’s deeds!”

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī - 138

They tore the letters up and threw them away in the wilderness, wrote similar letters, and sent them from here and there.

Thus neither Pippali nor Bhaddā wished there to be a meeting.

The day they married the young brāhmaṇa took a garland of flowers and set it up.¹⁴²

Bhaddā also set one up in the middle of the bed.

Having enjoyed supper they both thought: ‘We will go up and lie down,’ and having met in the bedroom, the young brāhmaṇa went up and lay down on his right side, and Bhaddā after laying down on her left side, said: “On whichever side the flowers fade we will know that a lustful thought arose to the one on that side, you should not come near this garland of flowers.”

Through fear of their bodies coming into contact with each other they passed the time without falling asleep during the three watches of the night and during the day there was no laughter.

For as long as their Mothers and Fathers continued they were unaffected by material life in this world, and they did not manage the family estates, but with their passing, they had to manage them.

The young brāhmaṇa Pippali was very wealthy, having eight hundred and seventy million.

¹⁴² There seems to be an ellipsis in the story here as they are now married, but it doesn't say how that came about.

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī - 139

The golden powder that was thrown away after bathing his body for one day, was enough for twelve measures by the Magadha measure.

There were at least sixty reservoirs with irrigation machines, his workplace was twelve leagues, there were fourteen Anurādhapura-sized villages,¹⁴³ fourteen elephant armies, fourteen horse armies and fourteen chariot armies.

One day, after mounting a decorated horse and going to work surrounded by the populace, he stood at the top of the ten million fields that were being broken by the plough, and having seen the birds, beginning with the crows, digging up and eating the earth worms, and insects and so on, he asked: “Dear, what are they eating?”

“Earth worms, Noble Sir.”

“Who pays for the wickedness done by these birds?”

“You do, Noble Sir.”

He thought: ‘If mine is the result for the wickedness done by these, what will I do with eight hundred and seventy million, what use is a workplace of twelve leagues, what use sixty reservoirs with irrigation machines, what use fourteen villages? Having given everything over to Bhaddā Kāpilānī I will renounce and go forth.’

¹⁴³ The Great Commentator Buddhaghosa was residing in Anurādhapūra, the ancient Sri Lankan capital, when he compiled the commentaries.

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī - 140

Bhaddā Kāpilānī at that time was sitting surrounded by her helpers. Then three pots of sesame seeds were sown over the inner fields and she saw crows eating the worms that dwelt in the sesame, and asked: “Lady, what are they eating?”

“Worms, Noble Lady.”

“Whose is the unwholesome result?”

“Yours, Noble Lady.”

She thought: ‘Four cubit of clothes and a mere measure of milk-rice is enough for me, but if the unwholesome deeds done by this many people is mine, it is certainly not possible to lift my head from the round of births and deaths through a thousand rebirths. Having given everything over to the Noble Sir as soon as he returns, I will renounce and go forth.’

The young brāhmaṇa returned after bathing, ascended the mansion and sat down on an expensive couch.

They prepared a meal for him suitable for a Universal Monarch.

After they both had eaten, and with the departure of the attendants, they sat down on a comfortable spot in seclusion.

Then the young brāhmaṇa said this to Bhaddā: “Bhaddā, when coming to this house how much wealth did you bring?”

“Fifty-five thousand carts, Noble Sir.”

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī - 141

“There is all this wealth, plus eight hundred and seventy million, and sixty reservoirs with irrigation machines and so on, I give all of this over to you.”

“But where will you go, Noble Sir?”

“I will go forth.”

“Noble Sir, I also have been sitting here waiting for your coming, I also will go forth.”

The three states of continuation¹⁴⁴ appeared to them like three leaf-huts that are burning.

They had their clothes died yellow with astringents and clay bowls brought from the market, shaved off each others' hair, saying: “Our going forth is on account of those who are Liberated in the world,” and depositing their bowls in their bags, and slinging them over the shoulder, they descended from the palace.

No one from the home, whether servants or workers, recognised them.

Then, having departed from the brāhmaṇa village, while going through the entrance to the servants' village, they were recognised by those living in the servants' village by their gait and deportment.

¹⁴⁴ The sense worlds (*kāmaloka*), the form worlds (*rūpaloka*) and the formless worlds (*arūpaloka*).

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī - 142

Throwing themselves at their feet crying, they said: “Noble Ones, why do you leave us helpless?”

After saying: “We, friends, having seen that the three states of continuation are like three leaf-huts that are burning, are going forth. If we were to make you freemen one by one, it would not be possible with one hundred years you are so many. After washing each other’s heads,¹⁴⁵ live as freemen,” and leaving them crying they went away.

The Elder, as he was going along in front, after stopping and looking, thought: ‘This Bhaddā Kāpilānī, who is worth more than all the women in the Rose-Apple Isle, is coming along behind me. But there may be a reason for someone to think thus: ‘Having gone forth they are not able to live apart, but that is unsuitable for them.’ If someone defiled their minds in this way, they might risk filling up the lower worlds, after abandoning her, it is right to go off by myself.’

While going forward he saw a junction in the path and stood at its head. Bhaddā came and worshipped and also stood there. Then he said to her: “Bhaddā, having seen such a woman as you following me, and thinking: ‘Having gone forth they are not able to live apart,’ through us the people may defile their minds, and might fill up the lower worlds, therefore at this junction you take one road, and I will go by another.”

“Yes, Noble Sir, for those gone forth, women are known as a stain, thinking: ‘Having gone forth these are not living apart,’ they will

¹⁴⁵ Apparently a sign that they were given their freedom.

make the fault ours, you take one path, I will take another, and we will live apart.”

After reverentially circumambulating him three times and worshipping with the five-fold prostration on all four sides, she extended a reverential salutation with the ten fingernails joined together, saying: “Our friendship and fellowship that ran over a measure of one hundred thousand aeons is broken today,”¹⁴⁶ and “You are known as one belonging to the right, the right path is suitable for you, I am a woman belonging to the left, the left path is suitable for me,” after worshipping, she entered the left path.

At the time of this juncture the great earth, as though saying: “This universe with its mountains and Mount Sineru I am able to bear, but your virtue I am unable to bear,” quaked with a roar, which spread like thunderstorms in the sky, and the mountain at the centre of the universe resounded.

* * *

But the Elder Mahā Kassapa, after taking the right hand road, went into the One of Ten Power’s presence at the root of the Many Sons’ Banyan Tree shrine, while Bhaddā Kāpilānī, after taking the left hand road, because there wasn’t yet permission for women to go forth, went to the Wandering Nuns’ monastery.

¹⁴⁶ This seems to presage her ability to know past lives, although this was happening before her ordination or attainment.

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī - 144

But when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī received the going forth, then that Elder¹⁴⁷ received the going forth and the higher ordination in the presence of the Elder Nun.

Later, while working at insight meditation, she attained Liberation and became one who had mastered the knowledge of former lives.

¹⁴⁷ It is curious that she should be called an Elder at this point, as she is still unordained in the nuns' Community.

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī - 145

Then, after the Teacher had sat down in Jeta's Wood, as he was assigning the places of the nuns in order, he placed this Elder Nun in the foremost position amongst those who recollect their former lives.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN
BHADDĀ KACCĀNĀ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Bhaddā Kaccānā

This is the story of the nun Bhaddā Kaccānā, also known as Rāhulamātā, Bimbā, Yasodharā, Gopī and other names, who had previously been Siddhattha's wife. The story about her runs somewhat contrary to the preceding story, as she is said to be one of just four disciples who could recollect an uncountable period and one hundred thousand aeons, far exceeding the others in this facility; they are Vens. Sāriputta, Moggallāna, Bakkula, and Bhaddā Kaccānā.

Yet above Bhaddā Kāpilānī has just been placed as foremost amongst those who recollect their former lives. How we resolve this problem is not sure. I tend to think that the position given to Bhaddā Kāpilānī is probably mistaken, as her story gives no indication that would be the position she would hold.¹⁴⁸

However, the story surrounding Bhaddā Kaccānā also gives no real background for her attainment either, simply stating she aspired for it, and that she became famous for having acquired it, and later was appointed to the position.

In the Traditions neither her aspiration, not her appointment to this position, are mentioned, and her main accomplishment seems to have been as being the Bodhisatta's wife in many lives. But then again, given the identification of this nun with Siddhattha's wife, it seems odd that none of the literally dozens of past life stories that were known about her are included here; indeed, apart from her life at the time she made the aspiration no other lives but her last one are mentioned.

¹⁴⁸ Except for the aspiration recorded before Buddha Padumuttara, which would be part of the textual misidentification.

Eventually in the late Medieval period a whole cycle of stories seem to have grown up about her, as can be seen in the Therī-Apadānadīpanī,¹⁴⁹ where her story far exceeds in length that of any other of the Elder Nuns.

One other problem that requires mentioning is that there is no one amongst the male disciples who is mentioned as having this position. Bakkula, who is mentioned in the story as also having this quality of recall, is only placed foremost amongst those with little ill-health in the stories of the male disciples, and this position is not mentioned there.

11. The Story about the Elder Nun Bhaddā Kaccānā

AN 1.5.11

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanānaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
mahābhiññappattānaṃ, yad-idaṃ Bhaddā Kaccānā.¹⁵⁰**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who have attained very deep knowledge, that is to say, Bhaddā Kaccānā.

¹⁴⁹ Effectively the last commentary ever written on one of the Tīpīṭaka books. It was written by Bhaddanta Kumārābhivaṃsa in the 1960s, but first published in 1992 in Burmese script, and then in 2009 in Romanised script. For materials translated from Sinhala based on traditional works, see Ranjini Obeyesekere: *Yasodharā, the Wife of the Bōdhisattva*, SUNY, New York, 2009.

¹⁵⁰ ChS: *Bhaddakaccānā*.

AA 1.5.11

The Commentarial Story:

In the eleventh story, “Amongst those who have attained very deep knowledge,” it shows why the Elder Nun Bhaddā Kaccānā, amongst those who had very deep knowledge, was said to be foremost.

For one Buddha there are four people who have very deep knowledge, and not the rest of the disciples. Other disciples may be able to recall one hundred thousand aeons, but not more than that.¹⁵¹

For those who have attained very deep knowledge they recall at least an uncountable length of time and one hundred thousand aeons.

In our Teacher’s dispensation they were the two Great Disciples,¹⁵² the Elder Bakkula and Bhaddā Kaccānā: these four were able to recall this much.

Therefore this Elder Nun became known as foremost amongst those who had attained very deep knowledge.

¹⁵¹ The six powers (*chaḷabhiññā*) of the later texts are magical power (*iddhividha*), the divine ear (*dibbasota*), knowledge of others’ minds (*cetopariyañāṇa*), recollection of former lives (*pubbenivāsānussati*), the divine eye (*dibbacakkhu*) and the extinction of the pollutants (*āsavakkhaya*). Here the distinguishing feature seems to be her ability to recall more lives than others. But if that was so, why was Bhaddā Kāpilāni named as the disciple who excelled in that ability.

¹⁵² Vens. Sāriputta and Moggallāna.

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kaccānā - 150

Bhaddā Kaccānā is her name.

Her skin-colour was like the finest gold, indeed, like the most auspicious gold, therefore she received the name Bhaddakañcānā, Auspicious Golden One, and later the name Kaccānā came.

She was also designated Rāhulamātā, Rāhula's Mother.

Her Aspiration and Good Deeds

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara she was conceived in a good family home in Hāmsavatī. Later, while listening to the Teacher talk about Dhamma, seeing the Teacher place a certain nun as being foremost amongst those who had attained very deep knowledge, she did a great deed and aspired for that position herself.

Her Last Life

After being reborn amongst gods and humans only for one hundred thousand aeons, when this Gotama Buddha arose, she was conceived in the Sakyan Suppabuddha's home,¹⁵³ and they made the name Bhaddā Kaccānā for her.

When she had reached maturity she went to the Buddha-to-be's home.¹⁵⁴

Later she gave birth to a son, the prince Rāhula.

¹⁵³ Making her a cousin of Siddhattha.

¹⁵⁴ I.e. she married Siddhattha.

The Elder Nun Bhaddā Kaccānā - 151

The Buddha-to-be, after renouncing on the day Rāhula was born, and attaining omniscience within the circle of the Bodhi Tree, while bringing relief to the world, gradually came to Kapilavatthu, and gave assistance to his relatives.

Later, when the Great King Suddhodana attained Nibbāna, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, together with five hundred women, went forth in the presence of the Teacher.

Rāhula's Mother and Janapadakalyāṇī,¹⁵⁵ after going into the presence of the Elder Nun, also went forth.

Beginning from that time she became well-known as the Elder Nun, Bhaddā Kaccānā.

Later, having developed insight and attained Liberation, she mastered the deep knowledges during a single sitting in cross-legged position and with just one advertence.

She recalled at least an uncountable length of time and one hundred thousand aeons, and she became well-known as having this virtue.

As the Teacher was sitting in Jeta's Wood and assigning the places of the nuns in order, he placed this Elder Nun in the foremost position amongst those who had very deep knowledge.

¹⁵⁵ I.e. Nandā.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN KISĀ GOTAMĪ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Kisā Gotamī

Kisā Gotamī's story is another of the really memorable stories in this collection: having made the usual aspiration at the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, no further lives are recorded until she is born in her last life, to a poor family in Sāvattihī.

She gained a good marriage but was despised by the family until such time as she had a son, at which point she was treated with respect. Unfortunately this didn't last, as the young lad died while still a child.

Gotamī, unable to face the fact that her child had died, which, besides the grief involved in losing a child, would also have the unwanted consequence of lowering her status again, wandered around asking for medicine for her dead child, which no one could supply.

One wise man thought to send her to the Buddha, who is a physician who could cure all ills, and she readily went along. The Buddha asked her to bring a mustard seed to him, but there is a catch, it must be from a household that never saw a death in the family.

Full of hope she went into town and started on her quest, but after a few houses she realised every house she went to has seen a death in the family, and that death is not for her son alone, but is a pervasive phenomena in life, and that this is a universal teaching.

She abandoned her child in the charnel ground and returned to the Buddha a wiser person than when she left, and he taught her with a verse, which saw her established in the first stage of Awakening. Later he taught her again, and that time she attained Liberation.

The reason why she attained her foremost position as one who wore rough robes, and it does not seem to be prefigured in the story. It is simply stated

that that was what she was good at, and eventually she was placed foremost for it.

The counterpart to this nun amongst the monks was Mogharājā.¹⁵⁶

12. The Story about the Elder Nun Kisā Gotamī

AN 1.5.12

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikānaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
lūkhacīvaradharānaṃ, yad-idaṃ Kisā Gotamī.**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who wear robes made of rough materials, that is to say, Kisā Gotamī.

AA 1.5.12

The Commentarial Story:

In the twelfth story, “Amongst those who wear robes made of rough materials,” it shows why Kisā Gotamī, amongst those who wore robes brought from the cemetery that are rough in three ways,¹⁵⁷ was said to be foremost.

¹⁵⁶ He was one of Bāvarī’s sixteen students, who made an epic journey across India to meet and ask questions of the Buddha. His answers were enough for most of them to attain Liberation.

¹⁵⁷ The Ṭīkā describes these as being:
vatthalūkhasuttalūkharajanalūkhasañkhāta, reckoned as rough in cloth, rough in thread, and rough in dye.

‘Gotamī’ was her name, but as she was somewhat thin by nature she was called ‘Kisā¹⁵⁸ Gotamī’.

Her Aspiration

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, she was reborn in a good family home in Haṃsavatī. Later, while listening to the Teacher teach the Dhamma, seeing the Teacher place a certain nun as being foremost amongst those who wore robes made of rough materials, she did a great deed and aspired for that position herself.

Her Last Life

After being reborn amongst gods and humans only for one hundred thousand aeons, when this Gotama Buddha arose, she was reborn in a poor family in Sāvattthī, and when she reached maturity she went to a good family.

There they abused her as a daughter of a poor family.

Later, she gave birth to a son, and then she was treated with respect.

But when the boy had reached playing age, running here and running there, he died, and grief arose in her.

She thought: ‘In this home, where gains and respect have been cut off, and since the time of the birth of my son, I have gained respect, they will endeavour to cast away my son.’

¹⁵⁸ It means: thin, skinny.

The Elder Nun Kisā Gotamī - 157

With her son on her hip, saying: “Give medicine for my son,” she wandered successively to the door of various homes, and men, wherever they saw her, saying: “Where did you ever see medicine for one who is dead?” clapped their hands and mocked her.

Although they spoke like this, she wasn’t convinced.

Then, after a certain wise man had seen her, and thought: ‘Her mind has been overthrown by grief for her son, but although no one else will know of a medicine, the One of Ten Powers will know,’ he said: “Lady, there is no one knowing the medicine for your son other than the Greatest Person in the world with its gods, the One of Ten Powers, who dwells in a nearby monastery, go into his presence and ask Him.”

She, thinking: ‘This man speaks the truth,’ carrying her son, stood on the edge of the four assemblies at a time when the Realised One was sitting on his Buddha seat, and said: “Give medicine for my son, Fortunate One.”

The Teacher, seeing she had the supporting conditions, said: “It is fortunate for you, Gotamī, that you came here for medicine. Enter the town and wander through the whole town starting from one end, and at whatever home there has not been a death, from there bring a mustard seed.”

Saying: “Very well, reverend Sir,” she entered into the town with a hopeful mind, and at the first home she said: “The One of Ten Powers has me bring a mustard seed as medicine for my son, please give me a mustard seed.”

The Elder Nun Kisā Gotamī - 158

Saying: “Come, Gotamī,” and stretching forth, they gave it to her. “I am not able to take it, but first must ask: ‘In this home has there not been a death?’ ”

“What did you say, Gotamī, who is able to count those who have died here?”

“Then that is enough, I will not take it, the One of Ten Powers told me I have to take it for him from a home where there has not been a death.”

Having gone to the third house in this way, she realised:

“The whole city will be this way, this must have been foreseen by the Awakened One, who is beneficent and compassionate.”

She became spiritually anxious, departed from there, went to the charnel grounds, and took her son with her hand, and saying: “Son, I thought there was death only for you, but it is not only for you, for the whole population it is the same, this is the Dhamma,” and she abandoned her son in the charnel grounds, and spoke this verse:

“Not a village Teaching, nor a town Teaching, nor is this a Teaching for one family alone,

For the whole of the world with its gods, there is this Teaching of impermanence.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ The verse is quoted from the Traditions about Kisā Gotamī, Therī-Apadāna, 3.2 vs. 27.

Having spoken thus, she went into the presence of the Teacher.

Then the Teacher said to her: “Gotamī, did you get the mustard seed?”

“The business with a mustard seed is finished, reverend Sir, but give me something for support.”

Then the Teacher spoke this verse to her found in the Dhammapada:

“That person whose clinging mind is intoxicated by children and cattle, death will carry away like a sleeping village by a great flood.”¹⁶⁰

At the end of the verse as she stood there she was established in Stream-Entry and requested the going forth, and the Teacher allowed the going forth.

She circumambulated the Teacher three times, worshipped him, went to the nunnery, received the going forth and higher ordination, and in no long time, while wisely reflecting, she developed insight.

Then the Teacher spoke this lustrous verse:

¹⁶⁰ Dhp 287.

The Elder Nun Kisā Gotamī - 160

“The one who lives for a hundred years not seeing the Deathless state, is surpassed by one living for one day seeing the Deathless state.”¹⁶¹

At the end of the verse she attained Liberation, and in the use of the requisites she became pre-eminent, and wandered around after covering herself with a robe that was rough in three ways.

Later as the Teacher was sitting in Jeta’s Wood, as he was assigning the places of the nuns in order, he placed this Elder Nun in the foremost position amongst those who wore robes that are rough in three ways.

¹⁶¹ Dhp 114.

THE STORY ABOUT THE ELDER NUN SIGĀLAMĀTĀ



Introduction to the Story about the Elder Nun Sigālakamātā

The last of these stories concerns Sigālakamātā, who heard the Buddha Padumuttara¹⁶² praise the virtue of having faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, saw him appoint a nun as being foremost in this virtue and aspired for the same position herself.

No other of her lives are recorded here, apart from her last one when she was born to a rich merchant in Rājagaha. She heard the Buddha give a discourse one day and gaining faith she decided to go forth, and had a great attraction to the physical splendour of the Buddha.

Understanding her inclination the Buddha taught her with appropriate teachings that tended to enhance her faith. These are unfortunately not identified in the commentary, but they were sufficient for her to attain Liberation,¹⁶³ and she was later identified by the Buddha as the nun who was foremost amongst those with faith.

Her male counterpart was Ven. Vakkali.

¹⁶² According to the Traditions he was her half-brother.

¹⁶³ She was One who was Liberated through Faith (*Saddhāvimuttī*), which is one of the seven kinds of Noble Disciples (*Ariyapuggala*).

13. The Story about the Elder Nun Sigālakamātā

AN 1.5.13

Text:

**Etad-aggam bhikkhave mama sāvikanānaṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ
saddhādhimuttānaṃ, yad-idaṃ Sigālakamātā.**

This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who are inclined to faith, that is to say, Sigālakamātā.

AA 1.5.13

The Commentarial Story:

In the thirteenth story, “Amongst those who are inclined to faith,” it shows why Sigālakamātā, amongst those who adhered to the characteristic of faith, was said to be foremost.

Her Aspiration

At the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, it seems, she was reborn in a good family home in Haṃsavatī, and listened to the Teacher talk about Dhamma,¹⁶⁴ saying:

Whoever has faith in the Realised One,¹⁶⁵ unshaken and firmly established, whoever is virtuous and good, pleasing to the Noble

¹⁶⁴ It appears from the Apadāna she was a Nun in that Lord Buddha’s Community at the time.

¹⁶⁵ From her Apadāna, verses 7-9.

The Elder Nun Sigālakamātā - 164

Ones and praised, whoever has confidence in the Community, having insight that is upright, they say that one is not poor, his life is not in vain.

Therefore faith, virtue, confidence and insight into Dhamma, should be engaged in by the intelligent, remembering the Buddhas' Dispensation.

Seeing the Teacher place a certain nun as being foremost amongst those who were inclined to faith, she did a great deed and aspired for that position herself.

She was reborn amongst gods and humans only for one hundred thousand aeons.

Her Last Life

When this Gotama Buddha arose, she was reborn in a merchant's family in Rājagaha, and after going to a family of similar birth, she gave birth to one son, and they made the name Sigālaka Kumāra for him.¹⁶⁶

Through that reason the name Sigālakamātā, Sigālaka's Mother, arose. One day, after hearing the Teacher talk about Dhamma,¹⁶⁷ she

¹⁶⁶ It is this Sigālaka Kumāra that the Buddha gives instruction to in Sigālasuttam, DN 31, one of the most popular and influential discourses in the Canon.

¹⁶⁷ This was the famous and influential Discourse to Sigāla, her son, DN 31.

The Elder Nun Sigālakamātā - 165

gained faith,¹⁶⁸ and after going into the presence of the Teacher, went forth.

Since the time of going forth she gained a preponderance of the faculty of faith.

Having gone to the monastery for the purpose of listening to Dhamma, she stood looking at the One of Ten Power's bodily splendour.

The Teacher, knowing that she adhered to the mark of faith, and knowing the suitability, taught confidence-inspiring Dhamma.

So this Elder Nun, bearing the characteristic of faith, attained Liberation.

Later, after the Teacher had sat down in Jeta's Wood, as he was assigning the places of the nuns in order, he placed this Elder Nun in the foremost position amongst those who were inclined to faith.

The Commentary on the Text about the Elder Nuns is Finished

¹⁶⁸ In the Traditions it says she attained Stream-Entry at this point.