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"AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF SELF TRANSFORMATION AS SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THERĪGĀTHĀ "

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ABSTRACT :

To explore how people overcome difficulties by adopting the Buddhist way of living as given in Therīgāthā is important. Also, to analyze case studies about the self-transformation as stated in Therīgāthā. The Khuddakanikāya contains many of such gems- particularly the verses in the form of Therīgāthā. This work deals with the Pāli Therīgāthā, which have high aesthetic value in them. The Therīgāthā is the most important and famous literary work by the nuns going by the name of Nun's songs. These gāthās denote an early stage of lyrical work in Indian literature. Therīgāthā contains 73 poems that are attributed to some specific therīs whose names occur again in these poems. The language of these poems is all through refined, ornate and restrained. Style adopted by the Therīs is simple and what distinguishes these is the clarity of vision.

Keywords: Therīgāthā, Khuddakanikāya, Therīs, Self-transformation, Nuns.

Introduction :

Pāli language possesses a treasure house of literary creations both in prose and poetry, which are, although not uniformly of high literacy value and original beauty. Some of the poetical texts can be considered as gems in Pāli literature. The Khuddakanikāya contains many of such gems- particularly the verses in the form of Therīgāthā. This work deals with the Pāli Therīgāthā, which have high aesthetic value in them.

Buddha defines and details the duties of women in society in many places. Again, Buddha recognizes the fact that these do not constitute the whole of her life. Buddha laid down a code of good living for women, as a complement to the good life already enjoined in his religion to all his followers irrespective of sex. A host of these considerations as they are addressed to women are grouped together in the Samyutta Nikāya. A good lay woman endowed with religious devotion, moral virtue and liberality as well as wisdom and learning, makes a source of her life in this world. It is said that "Saddhāya sīlena ca yīdha vaddhati. Paññāya cāgena sutena cūbhayam, sā tādisī sīlavatī upāsikā, ādiyati sāram idheva attano ti."²

The need to know our passion recognizes our gifts, understand our needs and define our core values. The better we know ourselves, the more aligned are our choices. But when we came across the concept of self-transformation, it's so powerful and empowering. Transforming ourselves takes us beyond self-awareness³

It's like being a potter, holding a ball of clay in your hand. You have shaped it to the best of your ability through your self-awareness; now you must take the additional steps to turn it into a cup or bowl or vase. There are the transforming steps. For instance, pottery requires steps like glazing and firing. You embrace the concept of being willing to transform — to be responsible for your choices, to actively take part in deepening your inner life and broadening your reach. Be present. Be aware.⁴ That's the beginning of self-transformation. The awareness that came in women by following the teachings of Buddha is embedded in Therīgāthā.

The doctrine of Paṭicca-samuppāda, or dependent arising, lies at the heart of all Buddhist thought and practice. The variety of applications of this doctrine can be divided into two major categories with titles drawn from the Theravāda commentarial text Nettipakaraṇa. The first category models beings trapped in cycles of craving and grasping, birth and death, and is called Lokiya, 'worldly'⁵.

¹ Bhattacharya Dr. Bela, *Buddhayāna*, p. 164

² Samyuttanikāya, IV, p.250

³ <https://medium.com/@caralumen/what-is-self-transformation-2b667a84787f>

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-transformation>

⁵ <https://suttacentral.net/define/lokiya>

The most prominent way of representing this form of conditionality is the sequence of twelve nidānas. Second category, called Lokuttara, ‘beyond the world’ the process and dynamics of liberation from those same cycles. Applications of the second category are also referred to as the “Spiral Path” after the coinage of Sangharakshita, the pre-eminent modern exponent of this aspect of Buddhist doctrine.

As regards the religious ideals and the moral teachings that dominate in the poems, Maurice Winternitz says, “All these monks and nuns know nothing higher than that profound peace of the soul for which the gods envy even the holy men and which is attained through the extinction of passion, hatred, delusion and through liberation from all sensual urges and inclinations and which gives foretaste of that supreme bliss, the Nirvāna, the end of all suffering in the consciousness of not-being born again. Blissful is monk who is equally insensitive to joy and sorrow, who feels neither hunger nor cold. Blissful the nun, who can say to herself.” (Therīgāthā 76)

The Pāli text Therīgāthā throws light on the spiritual achievements of women. The text contains five hundred and twenty two stanzas said to have been uttered by several nuns giving expression to their attainment of arhathood, ecstatic feeling and samādhi.⁶

Buddha is likened to the lotus in one verse. Dr. Asha Das says, while discussing Therīgāthā, “In the Therīgāthā we are also introduced at once to something new which no one hinted out before, something incomparably great and enduring for all times. Here the spontaneity of inner inspiration is realized well in the vivid descriptions of stormy cloud and heavy rain.

The scenic beauty of rains accompanied by thunderstorms and lightning has wonderfully been described in several verses, which deserve to be placed at the same level as the best passages delineating the other great literatures in Indian literature. The uniqueness of the gāthās is born out by the fact that while retaining the poetic approach, they represent enough aesthetic sensibility.

The Therīgāthā is the most important and famous literary work by the nuns going by the name of Nun’s songs. These gāthās denote an early stage of lyrical work in Indian literature. Therīgāthā contains 73 poems that are attributed to some specific therīs whose names occur again in these poems. The discovery of these verses by women saints have brought about a radical change in our appraisal of the literary, educative and cultural ability of women in that early period of Indian literary development.

There is no ground to doubt that these poems were composed by women only. The poems reveal, at least to great extent, sympathy for the male members of the community to do. The language in these gāthās is much more naive and emotive than that of its counterpart, the Theragāthā. Here again the poems have their own beauty which we hardly confront in other Pāli texts. A good number of Buddhist women of the period were of high literary caliber, trained in different branches of learning and achieved high status in society. They were poetess of ample talent and as a result, were able to present a kāvya literature in Pāli, which has earned them own ageless appreciations for the contributions. These Buddhist therīs or elderly ladies are represented in the Therīgāthā, a canonical text forms a part of Khuddakanikāya. The verses are attributed to some particular Therīs with their names mentioned. This tradition is borne out by Paramatthadīpani, the commentary on the Therīgāthā by Dhammapala in the fifth century A.D.

The commentary contains also those stories having some sort of biography of these Therīs. Each of these Therīs is supposed to have uttered the gāthā or the gāthās to give vent to her joy on attaining arhathood that is perfect emancipation although in certain cases Buddha himself, it may be assumed, or some of his disciples uttered the verses to ensure that the Therīs lived a virtuous life. As regards the contents of these poems M. Winternitz is of the opinion, “We need only read two collections one after another to believe that in the nuns, songs often even a personal note is struck which is unknown to the monks’ songs, that in the nuns’ songs we hear more often of external experiences, and that in the monks’ songs nature descriptions dominate whereas in the nuns’ songs life-pictures do so.”⁷ The transitoriness of worldly phenomena such as aggregates of existence (Khandā), the sense-bases (āyatana) and elements (dhātu) is expounded in the verses of Vaddhesi, Uttamā and Mittakālī.⁸

The language of these poems is all through refined, ornate and restrained. Style adopted by the Therīs is simple and what distinguishes these is the clarity of vision.

There is a also noteworthy harmony in the selection of words and expression in the gāthās. The adequacy of the language and its wonderful capacity for melody are also utilized by the Therīs in a large number of lyrical Gāthās, which are employed with remarkable skill and sense of rhythm in creating an unparalleled series of musical word-pictures.

Some lines are so striking that they have assumed the character of proverbs and phrases. They are also artistically heaped in the Gāthās.⁹

- Yathā idam tathā etam yathā
- Etam tathā idam (83)

Tr. “As this, so that, as that, so this.”¹⁰

- Sabbo ādipīto loko sabbo loko paridīpito
- Sabbo ādipīto loko sabbo loko paridīpito. (200)

Tr. “The whole world is ablaze, the whole world has flared up, the whole is blazing, the whole world is shaken.” (E.V. 11, p. 22).

⁶ Bhattacharya Dr. Bela, *Buddhayāna*, p. 166

⁷ M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. II, p.100

⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Theragatha-Therigatha>

⁹ Das, Asha., *A Literary Appraisal of Pali Poetical Works*, p.150

¹⁰ Paramatthadīpanī, P.T.S. p. 76

- Dukkho itthibhāvo (216)

Tr. “The state of women has been said to be painful” (E.V. 11, p. 24).

The Buddhist women saints or Therīs led a pious life learnt skillfully the literary art of expression, narrated very efficiently the circumstances that led to their taking shelter and attained lofty religious ideals by observing the moral teachings uttered by Buddha. They revealed their previous domestic lives, the position women held in the society, a profound faith in the doctrine of Buddhism.

Ubberī is mad with bereavement at the loss of her Jīva, goes to the cemetery daily, roams aimlessly, until consoled and enlightened by Buddha. She then finds a place in the order of nuns. The story of Kisā is too well known to be retold. She is at the end convinced that death is inescapable and joins the order. Abhayā, born in a respectable family says,

“Bahūhi dukkhadhammehi,
appamādaratāya me
tanhakkhaya anupatto,
katam Buddhassa sāsanaṃ.”¹¹ VS. 35-36

“Delighting in vigilance because of many painful objects the annihilation of craving has been obtained by me. Buddha’s teaching has been done by me. Guttā (163-68) who is born of a respectable family, Cālā (182-195) and Sisupcālā (195-203) both the sisters of Sāriputta, Vaddhamātā (204-212) who is born in respectable family of Bharukaccha; Uppalavannā (224-235), a beautiful daughter of a merchant of Srāvastī and Cāpā (295-311), daughter of the chief of hunters all disgusted and disinterested in domestic life embrace the mendicant life.¹² In a poem Sonā (102-106) who has distributed all her properties to her sons and daughters-in-law after her husband has left the house but being dishonored and disgusted in household life entered the Order of nuns.”

Therī Sumedhā, the poetess, the composer of the longest poem of the *Therīgāthā* and the daughter of the king of Koñca of Mantāvati and betrothed to Anikaratt, king of Vāranāvati is virtuous (sīlavati), brilliant speaker (cittakathā), having great learning (bahussutā) and trained in Buddha’s teachings (Buddha sāsane vinitā).¹³

Being disgusted in household life, she joins the Order of nuns, attains as usual the arhathood and composes verses to express her views in worldly things and religious outlook: “I delight in quenching, existence non-eternal are empty sensual pleasure, giving little enjoyment, and distress. Sensual pleasures in which fools are bemused, like a snake’s poison consigned to hell for a long time, they are beaten and pained. Why should I cling to this foul body, impure, smelling of urine, a frightful water-bag of corpses, always flowing, full of impure things? Sensual pleasures are like swords and stakes, a disease, a tumor evil destruction, like a pit of coals, the root of evil, fear, and slaughter. Those who are intent upon the teaching of the ten-powered one (Buddhā dasabala) have nirvana; having little greed they strive for the elimination of birth and death.”¹⁴

Conclusion:

Taking all these cases and conditions in consideration it may be worthwhile to conclude the position of women was far more satisfactory in Buddhism. Buddha’s analysis of the cause of suffering and the path shown by him to attend cessation of suffering encouraged women to join the order. The rights of women, which are rather of modern nature, cannot be expected to have existed in the age of Buddha but what may be stressed upon is the fact that Buddhist age saw the rise of equality of both the sexes in a very conspicuous manner. This was rendered possible by the great teaching and message of the Lord.

Credit is due to the Buddhist women for contributing the dramatic literature in Pāli at an early stage of Buddhism. There are twelve dialogue gathas in the *Therīgāthā* and these are the earliest specimens of the kind. These are in fact dramatic poem. The beautiful work composed by the Therīs is subtle in character, aesthetic and illuminating. As far as the question of aestheticism is concerned, the Buddhist women worshippers and the nuns have shown a penchant for things beautiful. The nuns were *ticīvara* of immaculate yellow color. Their disciplined life indicates something greater, something more sublime, something more beautiful. Aestheticism forms an integral part of their lives.

The examples in *Therīgāthā* contain the liberation refrains in terms of Buddhist studies, they are: desire or craving (*rāga, tanhā, nicchāta, anupādāya*) overcome; fetters, bonds or sensual pleasures (*kāma*) destroyed, Nibbāna and triple knowledge obtained, obsession destroyed (*āsavas*), pain gone (*dukkha, soka*), fear overcome (*bherava, bhaya, dara*), peace obtained (*upasanta, santi, anāvila*) and conquest achieved (*jayati, vihanti, nihanti*). Thus, this explains that the Therīs transformed themselves by following the teachings of Buddha.

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