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Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therigatha. By Kathryn R. Blackstone, Curzon Critical Studies in Buddhism, The Curzon Press, 1998, xiii + 185 pages, ISBN: 0-7007-0962-2.

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This book is a revised version of Blackstone's M.A. thesis from McMaster University, 1990. It is a study of the *Therigatha, Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, a collection of verses attributed to women followers of Gotama the Buddha who had renounced worldly life and had become the first generation of female Buddhist monastics, *bhikkhuni*. The author has analyzed the text's 522 verses in comparison with the related collection of 1,279 verses in the *Theragatha, Poems of Early Buddhist Monks*, focusing on the technical vocabulary and the poetic imagery used in both collections, in order to explore the differences in attitudes toward secular social roles and the experience of liberation of the female and male authors of these texts. Blackstone has used K. R. Norman's translations of both texts from Pali, with selections from C. A. F. Rhys Davids' more profuse translations of the nuns' poems as headers for each chapter. She has also occasionally supplemented Norman's translations with her own readings.

Blackstone's opening chapter introduces the reader to the *Therigatha* text and some of the problems related to it, and outlines her theory that both the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha* are "liberation manuals," collections of verses that function as models for those who seek *nibbana*, liberation. The language of the texts communicates the experience of liberation poetically, using imagery of human relationships, the body, and the natural environment, as well as a specific technical vocabulary that elucidates the experience of liberation. The weight given to certain technical terms in the *Therigatha*, and the kinds of imagery chosen to express women's particular experiences, reveal a great deal about the situation of women in early Buddhism, according to Blackstone. She analyzes the differences between the language of the *Therigatha* and the *Theragatha* in Chapters one through four of her book, and summarizes the results of her study in chapter five. Four appendices consist of tables that provide full references to the technical terms, frequency of their appearance, and the manner in which they are used in both texts, and a detailed compilation of each text's use of images drawn from the natural environment. There is a very short glossary of common Pali and Sanskrit technical terms, an index, and a modest but well-chosen bibliography of general and specialized publications that will be especially helpful to those relatively new to the field of Buddhism.

The most telling characteristic of the nuns' poems revealed by Blackstone's analysis is how personalized they are. The poems' authors tell of their own experiences, their own relationships with friends and loved ones, their own conflicts on the path to liberation. In contrast, the monks' poems more often speak of liberation as an abstract ideal that monks can attain. They speak of the Buddha as exemplar, and sometimes recount his

accomplishments, but rarely do they present intimate details of their own lives and struggles. The nuns' inclination to reveal themselves and the monks' preference for impersonal generalizations extends to the way they confront the problem of attachment to the perishable physical body through which we experience the world around us. Attached to these experiences, we cling to the life we have known, and to attain liberation this bond must be broken; the monks as well as the nuns know this. But when contemplating the body, a fundamental Buddhist meditation practice, the monks' poems speak of disgusting corpses seen in a cemetery. The nuns focus on their own bodies that grow old and decay; they face their personal mortality. The monks, on the other hand, not only concentrate on the ugliness of others' bodies, but those bodies are most often specifically identified as female (p. 64).

From her analysis of language and imagery, Blackstone concludes that although both the *Therigatha* and the *Theragatha* are "liberation manuals," they reveal that the path to liberation was experienced differently by the women and men in the poems. The monks sought detachment in the renunciant's solitary life in the forest. Their poems abound in lovely images of the natural environment, where monks lived alone far from the dwellings of ordinary people. The nuns speak instead of the challenges they faced from others even after they had attained liberation, and they also speak gratefully of the women who have guided them on their way. For the nuns, the quest for liberation was a radical disjunction from their former lives, and consequently they describe their experience of liberation as a great conquest. The monks seem to have moved smoothly along the path, and they express their experience of liberation as the attainment of what the Buddha taught, the attainment of rest (pp. 55-58).

Blackstone believes that these women and men also understood the basic Buddhist doctrines differently (pp. 110-111). To attain liberation, a nun or monk must personally realize that all things are impermanent. To reach that point, nuns internalized the struggle and waged the battle within themselves. The monks externalized the struggle. To monks, detachment meant being free of all emotional bondage to others, the end of desire for others' bodies and companionship, "in what amounts to a complete severing of relationships" (p. 109). To nuns, detachment from one's body, one's self, was liberation, and freedom from the false notion of the self would transform the emotional response to others, not destroy all relationships (p. 81).

Blackstone's conclusions are carefully grounded in her scrupulous analysis of technical language and poetic imagery in the two texts, and they are convincing. She has restricted her study to these two works, with lim-

ited reference to other Pali materials belonging to the Theravāda Buddhist school, and none to other Buddhist texts or other documents produced in India. The data she presents can be taken, therefore, as contributing to the growing body of evidence we have for the situation of Buddhist monastics in ancient India, but it cannot be regarded as definitive in itself, nor does Blackstone argue that it should be so regarded. The reader must keep in mind, however, that the scope of this study is limited, and that Blackstone has not extensively consulted other recent scholarship that bears on the early history of Buddhist monasticism. Although Blackstone does take seriously the fact that we cannot be certain of the date, place or authorship of the two texts, and that the probability that the verses were transmitted orally and repeatedly modified over a long period of time before being committed to writing weakens their claim to be historical records of the earliest Buddhist *samgha*, her approach to the texts and their historicity is quite traditional (pp. 2-4).

Blackstone acknowledges that the verses of both the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha* are highly conventionalized, with verses and images being used and reused, and a deliberately limited vocabulary of technical terms employed to characterize the experience of liberation. In her opinion the conventionalization of the poems is evidence that they were meant to serve as a collection of models for the successful quest for liberation. When Blackstone distinguishes between the paths to liberation followed by nuns and monks, she mentions that several of the monks' poems praise the Buddha at length and in detail, while the nuns' poems are far more reticent about the Buddha as a person and a personal teacher (pp. 48-50). It seems to me that this characteristic of the monks' poems is both an important convention, and also a revealing insight into how closely the monks of the poems felt their lives to be reflections of the Buddha's. He was truly their model. This was less true for the nuns. Like the Buddha himself in other scriptures, also, the monks reveal little about their personal life histories. The nuns speak of their circumstances before converting to the Buddhist path, and of their personal conflicts before and after conversion. They also speak of nun teachers who were instrumental in their progress. Blackstone mentions all these things, and she refers to the fact that there was an established tradition in India of male asceticism which gave men's religious vocation credibility and eased their transition from the secular life to the monk's role (p. 118, for example). Women, on the other hand, had to struggle to make the transition, and to make progress on the path. I think this very important distinction should have been examined in greater depth, particularly in light of Blackstone's argument that the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha* are models for the quest for liberation. It could be argued that monks en-

tered the path with a clear model before them, the Buddha, with whom they shared a natural vocation, ascetic practice, because of their gender. Nuns in effect had to create models of the quest for themselves. As Blackstone herself agrees, it is small wonder that the nuns' poems abound in struggle and conflict.

There is no question in Blackstone's mind that the authors of the poems were women. The poems were not the handiwork of a monk redactor, as some scholars have suggested. Her analysis of the language and imagery in the *Therigatha* as compared with that of the *Theragatha* makes a very solid case that nuns did create their own poems. (Blackstone does, of course, state clearly that the ascriptions of poems to particular nuns or monks is only a matter of tradition and is not to be taken as historically accurate.) There are many elements in the nuns' poems that are also found in the monks' poems, and these could as easily have been produced by men. But there are also subtle and distinctive values and viewpoints in the women's poems that are unlikely to have come from a monk redactor. Some of the examples Blackstone cites are the nuns' choice of technical terms for liberation to use to refer to themselves, their portrayal of friendship between nuns, and their dramatic depictions of conflict (p. 114). This assembling of strong evidence that the *Therigatha* is what it says it is, a collection of poems by nuns who have attained liberation, is the most important contribution of this well written, compellingly presented study.

Although Blackstone's book is not a critical philological study of the *Therigatha*, Buddhist scholars should find it of interest because of the fruitfulness of the author's approach to her material. But it is to students that the book will have its greatest appeal, for they will find in it a palpable sense of the lives of the nameless women who contributed to these verses.