THERĪGĀTHĀ : ON FEMINISM, AESTHETICISM AND RELIGIOSITY IN AN EARLY BUDDHIST VERSE ANTHOLOGY (Part I)

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I

The ancient Buddhist verse anthology known as the Therīgāthā (Thig) attracted the attention of some of the earliest Western Pāli scholars[1] and actually became the focus of many admiring comments from a very notable woman among them, Caroline Rhys Davids (who also rendered the anthology into metrical English[2]). Enquirers into the status of women within the Thera-

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1 Therīgāthā, a gathering of 73 versified religious articulations in canonical Pāli, and attributed to women members of the Buddhist Order (therīs or bhikkhuṇīs) are traditionally juxtaposed to a much larger companion collection authored by their male counterparts, the Theragāthā (Thag). These two anthologies (which date back to the earliest period of Buddhist history, though committed to writing perhaps only around 80 BCE), were first printed in the West late in the 19th century in versions edited by R. Pischel and H. Oldenberg respectively. Their conjoint edition revised with appendices by K.R. Norman and L. Alsdorf (*The Thera and Therī Gāthā*, PTS 1966) remains the standard text, and as such will be the source of our references hereafter.

2 Mrs Rhys Davids published her translation of Thig as *Psalms of the Sisters* (1909) and that of Thag as *Psalms of the Brothers* (1913), incorporating into each commentarial elucidations taken from Dhammapāla's Paramattadīpanī. This particular order (which reverses the traditional one) is still retained in the single volume edition of the two translations now available as *Psalms of the Early Buddhists* (PTS 1980). Although English prose versions of the two anthologies have been brought out (cf. K.R. Norman, tr., *Elders' Verses* (PTS 1969–71), this article will use the Rhys Davids translation. In citations hereafter (both in the text and footnotes), *Psalms of the Sisters* is abbreviated to PsS; *Psalms of the Brethren* as PsB. It should be noted that in her Introduction to PsS Mrs Rhys Davids went to some lengths in highlighting the uniqueness and

vāda tradition in particular have time and again drawn this remarkable text[3] into their various disquisitions[4]. Yet its content (which has a complex significance and, especially when viewed from present-day perspectives, encompasses many strands of meaning), does not seem to have been very closely scrutinised so far. Indeed, though Thig can be said to present an unusually

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value of Thig. Not only did she reject the attempts of K.E. Neumann (the German translator of both *gāthā* collections) to cast doubt on the feminine athorship of Thig, but she also sought to stress the fact that the 'rare and remarkable utterances' enshrined in this anthology are indeed 'profoundly and perennially interesting as expressions of the religious mind, universal and unconquerable' (PsS, pp.xix, xxiii).

3 The Thig text deserves recognition as one of the oldest religiously reflective documents whose authority is attributable to a group of women. In commenting on the feminine viewpoints articulated here, Mrs Rhys Davids drew attention to the need to remember that rarely 'since the patriarchal age set in has woman succeeded in so breaking through her barriers as to set on lasting record the expression of herself and of things as they appeared to her' (PsS, p.xxiii).

4 In this connection, the following writings are noteworthy: M.E. Lulius van Goor, *Die Buddhistische Non* (Leiden 1915), I.B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (London 1930, Amsterdam 1975, Delhi 1990), Meena Talim, *Woman in Early Buddhist Literature* (Univ. of Bombay 1972), R. Pitzer–Reyl, *Die Frau im frühen Buddhismus* (Berlin 1984) and Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women* (Berkeley 1991). The general instructiveness of Thag and Thig to the historan of religion has also been underscored in certain accounts of Buddhism, albeit in a fleeting manner. Thus, Ninian Smart (*The Religious Experience of Mankind*, New York 1969, p.98) for instance, refers to the 'tenderness' and 'sense of beauty' in some of the *gāthās*, and points out that the poetry of the early monks and nuns 'help us realize that Buddhism was continuous with, even though transcendent to, the world around it'. There is again some recognition (though inchoate) of the relevance of these *gāthās* to a grasp of esoteric details of Buddhism's psychological bases, cf. Rune E.A. Johansson, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism* (London 1985).

attractive context for multidisciplinary investigation, it is doubtful whether this has been seriously recognised by modern researchers in Buddhist studies. The discussion in this article endeavours to make some amends for this situation by initiating a brief (though nevertheless somewhat broad-based) reflective analysis of the anthology which might serve as a catalyst towards a more thorough-going revaluation of Thig and its Commentary. What follows will first highlight the feminist dimension in a selection of the *gāthās* (whose women authors not unnaturally were often acutely conscious of their femininity, *itthibhāvo*), next draw attention to the character and scope of the philosophic viewpoints and aesthetic and poetic perceptions that are woven into some of them, and finally, dwell on the religiosity that suffuses and indeed gives unity to the anthology, underscoring above all the Buddhist[5] inspiration and roots of this religiosity. The following discussion is mainly sustained by a process of primary reflection on Thig; yet our clarifications will on occasion acquire a comparative character, entailing not only a consideration of the insights developed in other Pāli textual sources, but also those set forth in a fairly wide range of Western philosophical and literary works as well as religious writings[6].

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5 It should be noted that 'Buddhist' and 'Buddhism' as used in this article refer to the standpoints of the Theravāda tradition of early Buddhism.

6 The comparative aspect in our proposed revaluative exercise hereafter, it should be noted, is not idiosyncratic (or for that matter dysfunctional) even when considered from a purely exegetical standpoint. Mrs Rhys Davids, for instance, seems to have been notably persuaded that the thoughts and feelings expressed in the interesting settings of these *gāthās* merit examination from wider perspectives; and closing her Introduction to Thig, she actually drew attention to the new illumination that can result from an application of comparative insights on the ancient Buddhist religious articulations (cf. PsS, pp.li–lii).

II

Conventional approaches allow little room to assume that the articulations of religious and philosophical perspectives are notably affected by gender considerations — that is to say, the biological difference between man and woman, male and female. Yet the distinctive gender character of both thinking and viewing has on occasion been strikingly highlighted in certain philosophical circles[7] and it is, in any event, an important recognition among contemporary feminists. Now when viewed against the background of these circumstances in particular, Thig strikes one as an interestingly instructive text. For what is encountered here is not only an ancient religious verse anthology of women's authorship, but also one which, more significantly, often bears witness in revealing terms to women's distinctive association with and appropriation of the Buddha's soteriological teachings. Feminism as a stance that focuses upon and argues for the rights of women in the social world is of course not seriously underscored or projected in this text (though, as will be shown shortly, it is noteworthy that it does on occasion stress the

7 In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), John Stuart Mill, for example, expressed the view that the 'knowledge men can acquire of women' will indeed be 'wretchedly imperfect and superficial and always bound to remain so until women themselves have told all they have to tell' (*Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* 21, Toronto 1981, p.271). The sociologically minded German philosopher Georg Simmel went much further and characterised civilisation as an essentially masculine one, mirroring in the main the gender distinctive biases and perceptions of just one sex. The ideas in some of Simmel's essays (especially the collection entitled *Philosophische Kultur*) have lately been considered to be seminal in scope, providing 'a new point of view' from which to examine the role of gender in human reflective activities. Cf. Karen Horney, 'The Flight from Womanhood', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 7 (1926).

equality of women and men in the mental sphere in somewhat rhetorical terms). However, feminism in another sense is very much in evidence in the work: indeed, Thig is replete with articulations that record some characteristic viewpoints, experiences, attitudes and thought patterns of women. How exactly does feminism thus understood manifest itself here? As already hinted, notwithstanding the frequent contemporary use of Thig to clarify the backgrounds of the earliest members of the Buddhist Order (and also for the larger purpose of gaining insights into women's association with Buddhism during its early formative stages)[8], the variety of distinctively feminine perspectives that figure in these *gāthās* do not seem to have attracted much specific attention in recent times. Notable cross-culturally conceived feminist critiques of this decade show no awareness of Thig[9], and the characteristic preoccupations with womanhood and the feminine that come to the fore in this setting are also apt to be overlooked in conventional expositions of Buddhist thought (where sensitivity to gender considerations is still non-existent or inchoate)[10]. Yet there is much that is noteworthy in

8 Cf. works cited in n. 4 above and also the following which occasionally use the text to illustrate many secondary details relating to early Buddhism's background: Dev Raj, *L'esclavage dans l'Inde ancienne d'après les textes palis et sanskrits* (Pondichéry 1957), Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimension of Early Buddhism* (Delhi 1987), Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Banaras to Modern Colombo* (London 1988).

9 Cf. Marilyn French, *Beyond Power: Women, Men and Morals* (London and New York 1985).

10 However, that gender impacts on thought, it should be noted, is an important contemporary recognition. The ways in which it has influenced the development of Western philosophical ideas, for instance, has been the subject of several recent studies, cf. G. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (London 1984). See also M. Vetterling-Braggin

the feminine perspectives that find expression in Thig, and an examination of them is perhaps the most appropriate point of departure for our present discussion.

Considered overall, what the verses of Thig record in different ways is just one central thing: the success of committed Buddhist soteriological endeavours. Hence the Buddhist character of this text might impress many as not only paramount, but finally to overshadow the feminine origins of its contents. However, it needs to be reiterated that the fact that the endeavours in question were those of women, though admittedly of mainly secondary importance to a purely religious estimation of the text, is nevertheless of great significance to a gender sensitive enquiry. For many verses of individual therīs (especially when viewed against the background of the relevant commentarial clarification) indeed tend to reveal fascinatingly distinctive feminine perspectives, the likes of which are rarely seen elsewhere in Pāli canonical contexts. That the Buddhist spiritual exertions depicted here are those of women tends, to be sure, to be unmistakably emphasised in the *gāthās*, giving them a feminine stamp which is difficult to ignore. Yet the actual terms in which this is done are by no means uniform. On the contrary, it is possible to say that in Thig, women's distinctive gender consciousness is projected through a complex range of images, perceptions and thoughts. Let me highlight a few charactersitic examples.

The essential femininity of their authors is sometimes prominently and assertively proclaimed within the *gāthās*, a circumstance all the more significant once the strongly pat-

(ed.), *'Femininity', 'Masculinity' and 'Androgyny': A Modern Philosophical Discussion* (Totowa, NJ 1982).

riarchal social milieu in which Buddhism orignated and developed is recalled[11]. The articulations of Subhā, for instance, begin with a poignantly invoked reference to her standing as a female:

> A maiden, I, all clad in white, once heard
> The Norm, and hearkened eager, earnestly,
> So in me rose discernment of the Truths. (PsS, p.142)[12].

To anyone conversant with the negative estimations of women set forth in such writings as the Kunāla Jātaka[13], the sensitive awareness as well as understanding acceptance of the feminine seen in Thig will no doubt strike one as a sharp contrast. Indeed, in this setting where female nature and womanly traits were viewed from within, none of the flaws of character attributed to women by (mostly male) critics were either perceived or acknowledged. 'How should woman's nature hinder us?', asked one religious bent on winning emancipation, and proceeded firmly to rule out doubts raised about female capacities, both intellectual and spiritual[14]. Complementing this attitudinal

11 Cf. V. Dhruvarajan, *Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology* (Granby, Mass. 1989).

12 *Daharāhaṃ suddhavasanā yaṃ pure dhammam asuṇiṃ*
Tassā me appamattāya saccābhisamayo ahu (Thig 338)

13 See text ed. and tr. by W.B. Bollée (PTS 1970).

14 See PsS, p.45. It is interesting to note that the doubts in question are raised by Māra, the mythic–symbolic focus of evil in Buddhism, who thus assumes the role of a 'male chauvinist' in this setting. Māra generally functions in Theravāda sources as an opponent of goodness and spirituality, but the position taken by this figure here can be read as a result of feminine thinking within orthodox frames. Cf. T.O. Ling, *Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil* (London 1962) and M.M.J. Marasinghe, *Gods in Early Buddhism* (Kelaniya 1974, pp.192 ff.).

stance, there is also a striking reliance on what is perhaps best described as feminine models of experience and reflection (backed by images and symbols that can likewise be linked to them). In this connection, the ways in which some common preoccupations of women (both practical and emotional) are brought to bear on the interiorisation of Buddhist doctrinal emphases merit particular notice, for they afford many evidences of this distinctive reliance. It is significant that one therī, it appears, came to recognise the universality of impermanence (*anicca*) as taught in Buddhism — initially amidst domstic chores, actually in the course of what emerges as a cooking mishap[15]. Another, the sister Ambapālī (a courtesan of great beauty in her lay life) arrives at a similar recognition in an even more strikingly feminine fashion: through a contemplative consideration of the faded charms of her formerly much admired body. The sensitively juxtaposed focusings on the graces of the youthful female figure and the unlovely changes wrought upon it through the passage of time evident in her articulations (see PsS, pp.121-6) deserve to be viewed as some of the most arresting examples of Buddhist reflection rooted in feminine self-perceptions. Through a refined use of mainly natural imagery (the aestheticism that comes to the fore here is examined separately below, in Section IV), each detail in the female physique is depicted in Ambapālī's utterances both in its welcome youthful aspect, and again in the conditions of unsightly woe in old age. Of her hair (which it must be noted is a cherished symbol of femininity in traditional South Asian societies, frequently adorned, and always worn long), for instance,

15 See PsS, pp.9–10, which carry the relevant commentarial excerpts that highlight these details.

she thoughtfully reminisced thus:

> Glossy and black as the down of the bee my curls
> once clustered.
> They with the waste of the years are liker to hempen
> or bark cloth . . .
> Fragrant as casket of perfume, as full of sweet blossoms
> the hair of mine.
> All with the waste of the years now rank as the odour
> of the hare's fur . . .
> Dense as a grove well planted, and comely with comb,
> pin and parting . . .
> All with the waste of the years dishevelled the fair
> plaits and fallen . . .
> Glittered the swarthy plaits in head-dresses jewelled
> and golden.
> All with the waste of the years broken, and shorn are
> the tresses . . . (PsS, p.121)[16].

Then again, it is on the basis of a portrayal of a characteristic set of unhappy feminine experiences (no doubt deeply

16 *kālakā bhamaravaṇṇasadisā vellitaggā mama muddhajā ahum*
te jarāya sānavākasadisā . . .
vāsito va surabhikaraṇḍaka pupphapūraṃ mama uttamaṅgabhu
tam jarāya sasalomagadrnhikaṃ . . .
kānam va sahitaṃ suropitaṃ kocchasuvicitaggasobhitaṃ
tam jarāya viraḷam tahiṃ tahiṃ . . .
saṇhagandhakasuvaṇṇamaṇḍitaṃ sobhate su veṇihi alaṅkataṃ
Tam jarāya khalati siraṃ kataṃ . . . (Thig 252–5).

The closing refrain in the English version cited above is 'Such and not otherwise runneth the rune, the word of the Soothsayer'. It translates the original's repeated allusions to the veracity of the Buddha's teachings (*saccavadivacanaṃ*) which stress universal impermanence or the ineluctability of decay.

felt in the contemporary world) that Buddhism's parallel emphasis on the pervasiveness of suffering (*dukkha*) is highlighted in Kisā Gotamī's *gāthās*: sharing home with hostile wives, giving birth in bitter pain, suicide resorted to by some to avoid it, and the sad fate reserved for still others when mother and child 'both alike find death' (PsS, pp.108-9), are identified here as suffering associated with femininity, the woes of womanhood (*dukkho itthibhāvo*)[17]. Significantly, the 'Buddhist feminism' that one can discern in Thig also entailed on occasion an inversion of male paradigms[18]. Perhaps reflecting their largely male authorship, in many Buddhist writings females are cast in roles of seductresses, bent on weaning away men from their spiritual quests[19]. But here, in Thig, there are evidences of a veritable role-reversal: far from fostering passion, in its verses women proclaim piety and dispassion to worldly and passionate *men*. Some sayings of the therīs Subhā and Sumedhā (see PsS, pp.142 ff and 165 ff.) are particularly illustrative of this rather striking circumstance. Accosted by a would-be male seducer in her jungle retreat, Subhā intoned in the following manner:

> Me pure, thou of impure heart; me passionless, thou of vile passions;
> Me who as to the whole of me freed am in spirit

17 *dukkho itthibhāvo akkhāto purisadammasārathinā*
sapattikaṃ pi dukkhaṃ appekaccā sakiṃ vitātāyo
gale apakantanti sukhumāliniyo visāni khādanti
janamārakamajjhagatā ubho pi bysannnāni anubhonti (Thig 216–17).

18 It could be argued that at least the formal features of the perspectives brought to bear in this process admit of some comparisons with the emphases in modern femininist thought, cf. Marilyn French, *Beyond Power*, *op. cit.*, Ch.6.

19 The male articulations in Thag offer striking evidences of this, cf. PsB, p.59; cf. *ibid.*, pp.14, 15, 39, 72–3.

> and blameless.
> Me whence comes it that Thou does hinder . . .
> (PsS, p.150)[20].

Indeed it is women's success in overcoming the temptations of *men*, and their considered attempts to divert women from spiritual endeavours, that the verses of both the above therīs most strikingly record.

Finally, it is necessary to observe that 'liberty', 'liberation' and 'free womanhood' are ideas that are broached in a fair number of Thig contexts[21]. Indeed, that the bonds and burdens imposed on them by culture and social structures on account of their gender are severed and overcome was the ecstatic cry of quite a few of the therīs (and in this connection, the sense of relief expressed by some on their release from domestic servitude and kitchen drudgery is certainly noteworthy)[22]. Yet in the last analysis the liberation celebrated here was most

20 *āvilacitto anāvilaṃ sarajo vitarajaṃ anaṅgaṇaṃ*
sabbattha vimuttamānasaṃ kiṃ maṃ ovariyāna tiṭṭhasi (Thig 369).

The verses of 'Vaddha's Mother' (PsS, pp.103 ff.) when taken with those of her putative son (set forth in Thag, see PsB, pp.194–5) bear witness in an even more direct fashion to an instance of a woman assuming the role of a spiritual mentor and instructing a man.

21 Cf. PsS, pp.100, 15, 21, 25, 146. The characteristic phrases used in the text to convey the above ideas are *muttā* and *muttika*. This, it is well to add, did not escape the notice of Mrs Rhys Davids for, commenting pertinently, she observed: 'It is a suggestive point that the percentage of Sisters' Psalms, in which the goal achieved is envisaged as Emancipation, Liberty won — about 23 per cent — is considerably greater than the corresponding proportion in the Psalms by the Brethren (13 per cent). In most cases the male singer had had the disposal of his life in his own hands to a greater extent than was the case of each woman' (PsS, Introduction, pp.xxiv–xxv).

22 Cf. PsS, pp.15, 25.

importantly a religious one: understood and projected in a typically Buddhist fashion, it entailed freedom from 'rebirth and from death', 'lust and hate'[23] — in short, an attainment of spiritual emancipation through an inner grasp of the system's 'saving truth' (*vimokkhasacca*)[24]. And it is useful to remember that it is again a basic Buddhist emphasis that spurred the women of Thig to think positively about their potentialities and speak openly and without inhibitions in a patriarchal age. For it was the Buddha's position that anyone possessed of the necessary mental and spiritual qualities — 'be it woman, be it man' as a striking canonical statement affirms[25] — can find deliverance in Nibbāna.

III

Any attempt to probe into the philosophical content of Thig must of course take particular account of the work's character and roots. To reiterate a point already made in the phraseology of a recent study[26], what tends to be presented in this anthology in either 'terse, pointed words or in longer details' are the statements of women in the Buddhist fold who had reached the crowning goal of their religious endeavours, the arahant state. On analysis, these statements reveal in various ways the experiences that preceded the attainment of that goal, the learning processes that were brought to bear in winning it, and how those who attained the unique state actually felt. Now evi-

23 *mutta mhi jātimaraṇā* (Thig 11); *rāgañ ca ahaṃ dosañ ca vicchindantī vihārami* (Thig 24). Cf. PsS, pp.15, 25.

24 Thig 515. Our focusings on religiosity in Section V below will deal with this matter in greater detail.

25 S I 32, cf. *Book of Kindred Sayings* I, p.45 (PTS 1979).

26 Cf. Pitzer–Reyl, *Die Frau im frühen Buddhismus*, *op. cit.*, p.57.

dently, this is not a context of self-expression within which elaborate, systematic expositions of Buddhist philosophy can be expected and, to be sure, nothing of the kind in the strict sense is to be found in Thig: even so basic a doctrine as that of the Four Noble Truths (*cattarāri ariya saccāni*), for instance, is not expounded, but rather, tersely mentioned here[27]. Still, there is little room to say that philosophical standpoints are not projected in Thig. On the contrary, all those who read the text carefully will no doubt note that attitudinal stances with philosophical undertones, and thoughts that have discernible philosophical implications, are very much in evidence in many of its verses. Put otherwise, what needs to be recognised in this context is this: it is possible, for one thing, to give philosophical characterisations to many features in the distinctively concrete, subjectively engaged quests for spiritual deliverance which are articulated in this work, and for another, there are several striking focusings on doctrinal emphases here which, though unsystematic, nevertheless offer important insights into the philosophical underpinnings of Buddhism. A few instances of both these manifestations of philosophy broadly conceived such as are encountered in Thig warrant some probing and elucidation.

Those conversant with the thought frames of European existentialism[28] would perhaps recognise that there are good grounds for viewing the strikingly solitary and intensely personal

27 Evidence of this may be found in the verses of Mahā–Pajāpatī and Kisā–Gotamī, cf. PsS, pp.89, 108 ff.

28 For instructive overviews regarding the positions taken in existentialist thinking, see J. Collins, *The Existentialists: A Critical Study* (Chicago 1952) and M. Grene, *Introduction to Existentialism* (Chicago 1959). Cf. H.B. Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers* (London 1951).

soteriological endeavours of the authors of these verses against the background of certain characteristic emphases found in the writings of such philosophers as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Marcel and Sartre. It is significant, for instance, that much like Kierkegaard[29], the therīs as a whole can be said to regard truth as a subjective and inward experiencing best approached through personal engagement rather than discursive thought or ratiocination (and leading to a transformation which is radical)[30]. In this connection the distinctive terms in which some of them recognise and contrast their inner natures in early 'unconverted' and later 'converted' states are especially noteworthy, for they can give philsophical meaning within Kierkegaard's celebrated differentiation between the 'aesthetic' and the 'religious' (or 'ethico-religious') as elucidated in *Either/Or* and elsewhere[31]. Indeed, the Kierkegaardian view that there is a plane of living

29 Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton 1941) and E. Geismar, *Lectures on the Religious Thought of Soren Kierkegaard* (London 1938).

30 As will be shown more amply below (Section V), the inner knowing as admitted in Buddhism was of course attained through spiritual culture understood and interpreted in a distinctive fashion. Further, the knowing in question encompassed an important extra-sensory dimension (which cannot be accommodated within Western existentialism, as witnessed by numerous references to the 'divine or celestial eye' (*dibbacakkhu*) and other allied capacities collectively referred to as *abhiññā*. Cf. PsS, p.51; also pp.74, 92, 95. In all these contexts, significantly, the attainment of liberating knowledge is portrayed as a process which has 'rent aside the gloom of ignorance' — a moment of enlightenment when the darkness that stood in the way of deliverance is pierced or overcome (*tamokkhandaṃ padālayiṃ*, as the text repeatedly puts it, cf. Thig 173, 179).

31 Cf. *Either/Or, A Fragment of Life* (Princeton 1944), *Stages on Life's Way* (Princeton 1940) and A. Shamueli, *Kierkegaard and Consciousness* (London 1971).

which is lacking in purpose, disconnected and without direction or satisfactions, and another which is opposite in character — namely, unified, coherent, focused and satisfying — tends to be clearly anticipated in the following verses of Vimalā:

> How was I once puff'd up, incens'd with the bloom
> of my beauty,
> Vain of my perfect form, my fame and success
> 'midst the people,
> Filled with the pride of my youth, unknowing the
> Truth and unheeding! . . .
> Today with shaven head, wrapt in my robe,
> I go forth on my daily round for food;
> And 'neath the spreading boughs of forest tree
> I sit, and Second-Jhāna's rapture win,
> Where reas'nings cease, and joy and ease remain
> (PsS, pp.52-3)[32].

32 *mattā vaṇṇena rūpena sobhaggena yasena ca*
yobbanena c'upatthaddhā aññā samatimaññi 'haṃ.
sājja piṇḍam caritvāna muṇḍā saṃghāṭipārutā
nisinnā rukkhamūlamhi avitakassa lābhinī (Thig 72, 75).

The verses of Sīhā which follow next serve to project the mental orientation in the first of the two stages referred to above in revealing terms, and merit notice as a further context which bears out the presence of proto-existentialist insights within the Buddhist spirituality articulated in Thig. Indeed, Kierkegaard's analysis of the operation of the consciousness at the 'aesthetic stage' in particular might be instructively recalled in reading Sīhā's account of her former self, distraught, divided and in despair (and hence displaying many symptoms of 'sickness unto death' in Kierkegaard's phrase), and the final dawn of the liberating vision in the couse of an attempted suicide, detailed thus:

> Distracted, harrassed by desires of sense,
> Unmindful of the 'what' and 'why' of things,

The attitudinal patterns that inform many utterances in this ancient anthology can be linked to or viewed within still other existential thought frames. Existentialist categories of freedom, choice, commitment and authentic existence in particular are indeed discernible underpinnings at many levels of the text. It is noteworhty, for instance, that several therīs here embark on their religious careers after making agonising choices by and for themselves, highlighting in the process an acknowledgement of their essential freedom. Striking testimony to this is found in the verses of Sumedhā (PsS, pp.165 ff.): resisting both parental pressure and a king's love, Sumedhā spurned marriage and adopted the religious life of a nun all on her own. Again, each one of the therīs of the anthology displays a singular commitment to spiritual self-culture and the consummation of its admitted goals. Now these goals, as will be evident from our discussion below (Section V), are of course rooted in a soteri-

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Stung and inflated by the memories
Of former days, o'er which I lacked control —
Corrupting canker spreading o'er my heart —
I followed heedless dreams of happiness,
And got no even tenour to my mind,
All given o'er to dalliance with sense (PsS, p.54).
Ayonisomanasikārā kāmarāgena additā
ahosiṃ uddhatā pubbe citte avasavattini
pariyuṭṭhitā kilesehi sukhasaññānuvattini
samam cittassa nālabhiṃ rāgacittasānugā (Thig 77, 78).

It should be noted, however, that viewed within the doctrinal frames of early Buddhism itself, the 'unconverted' mind can be said to reflect the proclivities and the psychological make-up of ordinary persons (*puthujjāna*); and the 'converted', those of the spiritually awakened élites (*ariyā*). Cf. *Compendium of Philosophy* (Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha), tr. Shwe Zan Aung and C.A.F. Rhys Davids (PTS 1979), Introduction, p.49.

ological concern which is characteristic of Buddhist religiosity. Yet a final consequence of their consum- mation seems to be a consciousness of an accession to a truly authentic realm of being highlighted by the 'cool', 'calm' and 'serene' condition of the arahant[33].

The distinctively subjective and practical orientation given to Buddhist teachings in Thig settings is clearly the source of the existentialist dimension that one can recognise there. And this orientation can again be viewed as a necessary key to an understanding of the text's wider philosophical scope. As indicated at the outset of this section, systematic expositions of Buddhist doctrines are not presented in Thig. Yet no-one is likely to fail to notice that the therīs here frequently project some of their basic emphases in philosophical terms[34], and in particular bear witness to an inner cognition of those informing ideas of the system's world-view, namely, impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and insubstantiality (*anattā*). Characteristically, in some contexts one encounters references to a combined grasp of the significance of all 'three signata' (*tila-*

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33 Section V below will also discuss the meanings of these terms and identify Thig contexts in which they occur.

34 Thus, early Buddhism's devaluation of sense-pleasure, for instance, is very much underscored in the verses of Selā:

Like spears and javelins are the joys of sense
That pierce and rend the mortal frames of us.
These that thou callest 'the good things of life' —
Good of that ilk to me is nothing worth (PSS, p.44).
sattisūlūpamā kāmā khandhānaṃ adhikuṭṭanā
yam tvam kāmaratiṃ brūsi arati dāni sā mamaṃ (Thig 58).

Sumedhā expatiates on this theme in three verses (PsS, pp.171–2), expressing similar thoughts.

kkhaṇā)[35]. However, elaborations on these 'signata' in other contexts are sometimes quite revealing, expecially when their manifestation in living experience is dwelt upon or otherwise brought to the fore. In this connection the ways in which some Thig verses highlight *anicca* and *dukkha* as influences felt in life are perhaps particularly worthy of our notice.

Thus, viewed philosophically, in Ambapālī's verses cited above to draw attention to their feminine perspectives, the main doctrinal point emphasised is of course impermanence. But how is it treated and presented? Clearly not as an abstract principle, but rather as one that affects one's being intimately, and as a result amenable to inner apprehension. Indeed, what emerges from the series of poignant contrasts drawn between the body's youthful beauty and its later decline into a pitiful state which is 'weakly and unsightly' and a 'home to manifold ills'[36] is an intimate knowledge of *anicca* which is imbued with transformative, soteriological meaning[37]. There is evidence of other therīs coming to this knowledge as well[38]. But the focusings on *dukkha* carried in Thig are no less striking; besides, as will be indicated below, at certain levels they provide important insights into Buddhism's philosophy of consolation, in other words, per-

35 In this connection, the verses of Abhirūpa-Nandā, Uttamā and Sonā (PsS, pp.23, 37, 63) are noteworthy.

36 PsS, p.125.

37 The Commentary to Thig tends to recognise this especially when it maintains that Ambapālī's intimate grasp of impermanence was complemented by insights into *dukkha* and *anattā* as well (paving the way to an attainment of the arahant state), see *ibid.*

38 Cf. PsS, pp.9–10 already referred to in the preceding section; the verses of Sumedhā are also significant in this connection, for some of them portray this therī 'musing on impermanence, developing the thought' (*ibid.*, p.170).

spectives on the ways in which one could bear with and finally rise above one's particular suffering. Of course, suffering is not altogether unrelated to impermanence in Buddhist thought. Distilling canonical insights, Buddhaghosa in his famous Visuddhimagga represented the transitoriness inherent in life as an aspect of suffering (*viparināma dukkha*)[39]. In any event, that pain and adversity often constitute a veritable backdrop to life is an idea that is stressed in a variety of settings in Thig. In the articulations of Puṇṇā and Isidāsī, for instance, the burdens of domestic labour (with which poor women in particular were commonly charged) are clearly related to the *dukkha* Buddhism held to inform and undergird existence[40]. And, as already indicated in Section II above, Kisā Gotamī, while dwelling on confinement experiences, goes even further through her identification of suffering that touches womankind specifically, *dukkho ittibhāvo*[41].

Since its articulations, as repeatedly noted, are inspired by

39 See Vism, sec. 499. *Dukkha-dukkha, viparināma-dukkha* and *saṅkhāra-dukkha* are identified here as three modalities of suffering, and they encompass respectively the suffering experienced in body and mind, the suffering resulting from impermanence inherent in the nature of things and the suffering associated with our very being as a psycho–physical complex. For some pertinent modern elucidations on this subject, see J.W. Boyd, 'Suffering in Theravāda Buddhism' in *Suffering: Indian Perspectives*, ed. K.N. Tiwari (Delhi 1986).

40 See PsS, pp.117, 158–9. Puṇṇā, formerly a slave in a wealthy house, recounts drawing water from a stream 'in fear of blows' even in the cold season; Isadāsī painfully recalls her endless (and thankless) domestic chores during her lay life. Cf. Dev Raj, *op. cit.*, p.59: 'Probablement le travail le plus dur et le plus malsain auquel on employait les esclaves et les serviteurs des deux sexes était celui de la cuisine'.

41 Cf. n.17 above.

committed Buddhist living, it is, however, also possible to detect in Thig insights and emphases which are more positive in their philosophical implications. For instance, there are clearly in evidence here adumbrations of what might fairly be called a Buddhist philosophy of consolation: in a philosophical appraisal of the text one must not overlook the fact that the particular elaborations of *anicca* and *dukkha* just referred to ultimately have happy outcomes, for the therīs engaged in them finally accept the impermanence and suffering encountered in experience and tend to integrate them into their lives. Finally, it is well to observe that details of this integrative process — which actually led to the acquisition of a definitive 'saving truth' (*vimokkha sacca*) — though mainly religious, are not without philosophical significance. For the truth thus acquired is very much a transcendent vision imbued with ultimate meaning. However, this is a matter that merits discussion in relation to our wider examination of the religiosity projected in Thig. Next I propose to turn to a consideration of some aspects of aestheticism reflected in the text.

(To be concluded)

A COMPOSITE SŪTRA FROM THE EKOTTARĀGAMA*

Étienne Lamotte

translated by Sara Boin-Webb

The Ekottarāgama (abbrev. EĀ), or 'Corpus of Gradual Teachings', is a collection of Buddhist texts, parallel to the Aṅguttara Nikāya of the Pāli Canon. It is only known in its entirety through a single Chinese translation: the *Tsêng-i a-han ching*[1].

The Tocharian monk Dharmanandin, who knew the Madhyama- and Ekottarāgamas by heart, reached Ch'ang-an in 384 CE and, on the invitation of the local magistrate Chao Chêng, undertook to publish these two Indian works in Chinese. The translation of the EĀ began on 7 May 384 and ended in November of the same year, or in the spring of the following year[2]. Dharmanandin 'recited the native text orally', i.e. the Indian original; the Chinese śramaṇas Hui-sung, Chu Fo-nien and others 'received it on their brush'. A preface[3] was added by Tao-an shortly before his death which occurred in 385. Dharma-

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1 See P. Demiéville, 'La Yogācārabhūmi', BEFEO XLIV, 2, 1954, p.374, n.1.

2 On the translation of the EĀ by Dharmanandin, see *Ch'u san tsang chi chi*, T 2145, p.10*b* 21; *Li tai san pai chi*, T 2034, p.75*c* 18; *Ta chou lu*, T 2153, p.422*a* 27–9; *K'ai-yüan lu*, T 2154, p.511*b* 14–15.

3 Preface reproduced in *Ch'u*, T 2145, p.64*b*.

UK BUDDHIST STUDIES ASSOCIATION

We would like to announce the formation of the above association, which aims to act as a focus for Buddhist Studies in the UK. It is open to academics, post-graduates, unaffiliated Buddhist scholars or interested Buddhist practitioners. Currently, the scholarly study of Buddhism in the UK is carried out by lone individuals or very small groups of people in any one location. Moreover, scholars may be located in a range of university Departments: Religious Studies, Theology and Religious Studies, Comparative Religion, Philosophy, Psychology, Anthropology, Asian Studies, Law, etc. The Association will inform people of the ongoing work of others, and any relevant conferences, visiting scholars, seminar series, etc., through a newsletter and/or Internet bulletin board. It seeks to foster: communication between those working in the various fields of Buddhism, historical, contemporary, theoretical and practical aspects, and methodological issues.

The first meeting of the Association will be on Monday, 8 July 1996, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1. At this, there will be papers by Profs R. Gombrich and D. Seyfort Ruegg, as well as a discusssion of the nature of the Association, and planning of further activities. It is also intended to produce a list of scholars and their research interests, along with contact addresses (including E-mail addresses).

If you are interested, please contact Dr Peter Harvey, at School of Social and International Studies, University of Sunderland, Forster Building, Chester Road, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear (E-mail: peter.harvey@sunderland.ac.uk), giving name, postal address and telephone number at your institution (or, if this is not relevant, home) and E-mail number, if you have one (but please indicate if you do NOT want this information to be made public). Please also include brief information on your area of work and research interests.

THERĪGĀTHĀ : ON FEMINISM, AESTHETICISM AND RELIGIOSITY IN AN EARLY BUDDHIST VERSE ANTHOLOGY (Part II)

Vijitha Rajapakse

IV

Aestheticism in its most basic sense entails a sensitivity to and an appreciation of beauty[42]. The degree to which these attitudes manifest themselves in Buddhism is not a matter that seems to have come under much sustained scrutiny[43]. In any event,

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42 Though 'beauty' itself has been given a range of meanings in different aesthetic theories, following classical philosophic insights, it is here taken to stand for symmetry and proportion of form that typically occasion pleasing sentiments in the beholder.

43 It is interesting to note that in commenting on Indian art and aesthetics, A.K. Coomaraswamy (cf. *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. R. Lipsey, Princeton 1977) tends to deliver some strikingly positive judgements on Buddhism's sensitivities to beauty, both natural and artistic. The 'stimulus' to soteriological reflection provided by lovely things, especially in their evanescence, he notes, is very much in evidence in certain Pāli sources (cf. *ibid.*, pp.179 ff. 'Samvega: Aesthetics of Shock'). Unfortunately, this maturity of judgement is not seen in other assessments of Buddhist attitudes to sensuous beauty. G. Van Der Leeuw (*Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Princeton 1986, p.631), for instance, has this to say on the subject: 'In Buddhism the way of the infinite leads to nothingness. For the older Buddhism most faithfully preserved in the "little vehicle" (of salvation), Hinayana, is hostile to all sensuous representation: Buddhist art lived in Mahayana; nor is this to be wondered at, since in the former every presentation of the divine is proscribed: Form disappears, and Will must be annihilated. Buddhism, then, is in the first instance the insight that this vanishing and annihilation are real; it is therefore the religion of the negative'. Even very recent probings in this area reflect scant empathetic knowledge, and finally deliver little that is really instructive, cf. A.J. Martin,

discerning readers, I think, should be able to recognise many evidences of aestheticism in Thig. At what levels in the anthology are these evidences most notably seen? And how exactly should they be examined? While identifying aesthetic objects (aesthetics), aesthetic experiences (aesthesis) and aesthetic making (poesis) as three pivotal conditions that are necessary for 'aesthetics of any sort to be an intelligible enterprise', Brown, in a recent study, has indicated that in 'specifically religious aesthetics' these conditions must be religiously grounded or have religious import[44]. This overview indeed seems to offer a useful intepretative frame for anyone interested in exploring the aesthetic dimensions of Thig. Some especially striking textual evidences of aestheticism manifested here are perhaps best recognised if the 'conditions' referred to by Brown are considered in reverse order. Thus, given its character as a verse anthology, Thig can fairly be taken as an exemplification of 'aesthetic making' associated with Buddhist religiosity: and in viewing things from this angle, the technical merits of the verses of many individual therīs need to be especially borne in mind. Since what is offered here is not a literary study of Thig, it is unnecessary to dwell on this aspect of the matter[45]. But the particular ways in which the anthology tends to encompass

Beauty and Holiness, The Dialogue Between Aesthetics and Religion, Princeton 1990, pp.148 ff., 'Buddhist Tradition'.

44 Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, Princeton 1989, p.6.

45 It is nevertheless well to observe that Western translators of this work have not been unmindful of these merits. Mrs Rhys Davids, for instance, has set down some instructive comments on the metre and rhythm in some of the verses, cf. PsS, pp.xxxix ff. In his more general observations, Winternitz (*op. cit.* II, sec.III) has referred to their 'power and beauty' and has gone so far as to say that the *gāthās* of the therīs and theras can 'stand with dignity' beside the best products of Sanskrit lyric poetry.

'aesthetic objects' and 'aesthetic experience' certainly deserve clarification.

Since they were primarily concerned with and moved by things spiritual, the ascetic authors of Thig cannot of course be credited with inclinations to 'celebrate' beauty for its own sake[46]. Yet the versified compositions in this work do frequently project cultured sensitivities to beauty in both the above senses[47]. And it is not difficult to identify evidences of such sensitivities (within which 'aesthetic objects' as well as 'aesthetic experience' can actually be discerned) in some of the contexts already cited. Thus, in Ambapālī's *gāthās*, the youthful female body is clearly perceived as an object of beauty, albeit transient or non-abiding, and the imagery invoked to highlight that often reflects an unmistakable parallel sensitivity to the beauty manifested in the wider world[48]. Delicate perceptions of beauty, both human and

46 On the contrary, given the prominent articulation of feelings of global distaste towards 'sense desires' on the part of several therīs (cf. n.34 above), it is in fact possible for critics to ask whether their general outlook was conducive to aesthetic perception at all.

47 If one takes a cue from the recent reflections of Serge-Christophe Kolm (*Le bonheur-liberté*. Bouddhisme profond et modernité, Paris 1982, pp.154–5), it is possible to ascribe a deeper aesthetic dimension to the nuns' contemplative living focused on self-perfection. For in noting that beauty has a place in the inner pursuit of the Buddha's Way, Kolm insists: 'Faire de sa vie une œuvre d'art a déjà été le slogan d'esthètes occidentaux. Faire de soi une œuvre d'art est la fin bouddhique. Le *bhikkhou* est un culturiste du for intérieur'. But I do not propose to delve into this aspect of the subject just now, though the insightful point Kolm makes has great relevance here; inner culture is a matter I prefer to treat in relation to religiosity in the next section of this enquiry.

48 The equally evocative imagery through which the hideousness of decay is apt to be driven home in these *gāthās* must not, of course, be overlooked

natural, are woven into Thig in other ways as well. The aestheticism that finds expression in the proto-dialogic setting of Subhā's verses, for instance, is in some respects more striking than that recognisable in Ambapālī's verses. Inded, though she prefers not to be influenced by them, Subhā nevertheless tends to articulate through her would-be male seducer some fine sensitivities to the loveliness of the female form and the attractive charms of nature. In her verses the latter finds her maiden body 'like a gold-wrought statue' (PsS, p.151) and is above all captivated by her eyes:

> Eyes hast thou like the gazelle's, like an elf's in
> the heart of the mountains —
> 'Tis those eyes of thee, sight of which feedeth the
> depth of my passion.
> Shrined in thy dazzling, immaculate face as in
> calyx of lotus,
> 'Tis those eyes of thee, sight of which feedeth the
> strength of my passion.
> Though thou be far from me, how could I ever
> forget thee, O maiden,

either; the use of poetic craftmanship to inculcate Buddhist values indeed becomes specially evident at this level. It would be well to observe that once detached from its Buddhist soteriological moorings, Ambapālī's delicate grasp of the decay to which physical beauty is subject might be interestingly set beside the variously articulated 'ruminations' on 'ruin' found in many of Shakespeare's sonnets. Viewed poetically, Ambapālī's basic recognition in regard to physical beauty, for instance, tends to be strongly echoed in one context here:

> 'Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
> But sad mortality o'ersways their power,
> How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
> Whose action is no stronger than a flower? (*Sonnets*, 65)

> Thee of the long-drawn eyelashes, thee of the eyes
> so miraculous?
> Dearer to me than those orbs is naught, O thou
> witching-eyed fairy! (PsS, p.152)[49]

And the world of nature where Subhā sought seclusion for her spiritual exercises is likewise perceived by her would-be seducer as an arena offering delights of its own, hence his call was:

> Young art thou, maiden, and faultless — what
> seekest *thou* in the holy life?
> Cast off that yellow-hued raiment and come! In
> the blossoming woodland
> Seek we our pleasure. Filled with the incense of
> blossoms the trees waft
> Sweetness. See, the spring's at the prime, the
> season of happiness!
> Come with me then to the flowering woodland, and
> seek we our pleasure.
> Sweet overhead is the sough of the blossoming
> crests of the forest
> Swayed by the Wind-gods. But thou an goest
> alone in the jungle.
> Lost in its depths, how wilt thou find aught to
> delight or content thee? (PsS, p.150)[50]

49 *akkhīni ca tiriyā-r-iva kinnariyā-riva pabbatantare*
tava me nayanāni dakkhiya bhiyyo kāmarati pavaḍḍhati.
uppalasikharopamānite vimale hāṭakasannibhe mukhe
tava me nayanāni dakkhiyabhiyyo kāmaguṇo pavaḍḍhati
api dūrgatā saremhase āyatapamhe visuddhadassane
na hi m'atthi tayā piyatarā nayanā kinnarimandalocane (Thig 381–3)

50 *daharā ca apāpikā c'asi kiṃ te pabbajjā karissati*
nikkhipa kāsāyacīvaraṃ ehi ramāmase pupphite vane.

It must be remarked that beauty observable in nature is not always linked in Thig with sensuality, as is the case in the above verses. On the contrary, the serenely sailing moon in clear skies, for instance, is actually depicted in a few terse *gāthās* as a symbol of emancipation won[51]. On the other hand it is worth noting that this anthology — quite unlike the complementary Thag — does not bear witness to any striking attempt to connect the perceived beauty of the natural world with the vital concerns of spiritual growth and fulfilment[52]. In appreciating beauty, Thig typically tends to project a concomitant awareness of its necessary ephemerality: and if one adopts Coomaraswamy's perspective[53], it is possible to say that what is thus articulated is a veritable defining feature in the way Buddhist religiosity relates to aesthetics and aesthetics. In any event, it would be opportune now to leave these latter themes aside and attempt to take stock of the religiosity manifested in our text.

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madhurañ ca pavanti sabbaso kusumarajena samuddhatā dumā
paṭhamvasanto sukho utu ehi ramāmase pupphite vane.
kusumitasikharā ca pādapā abhigajjanti va māluteritā
kā tuyham rati bhavissati yadi ekā vanam ogāhissasi (Thig 370–2)

The clash and contest between spiritual commitment and worldly urgings that figures prominently in the above setting, it is instructive to remark, is a much worked theme in the tradition of English metaphysical poetry in particular. Projected within Christian theological frames, it is, for example, basic to Andrew Marvell's 'A Dialogue Between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure'; cf. G.M. Hopkins, 'Golden Echo and Leaden Echo'.

51 Cf. PsS, pp.10, 12.

52 For some pertinent Thag affirmations on this score, see PsB, pp. 99–108, 154.

53 Cf. n.43 above.

V

Though it is widely recognised that what lies at the heart of Thig is a distinct religiosity, few matters relating to it seem to have been sorted out or scrutinised so far[54]. Now a comprehensive enquiry into the present subject will no doubt have to raise and answer many questions. However, a grasp of its basic orientation and emphases such as is sought here might be fairly served if attention is narrowed to just a few: What are the dominant traits of the religiosity that finds expression in Thig? How is it typically nurtured, and what are its characteristic results? The sequel, accordingly, proposes to address briefly these particular questions.

An early Buddhist text of the Theravāda tradition, Thig highlights the religiosity inculcated within this tradition in almost paradigmatic terms. Certain modern analysts of religion have turned out harshly negative assessments of Theravāda goals[55], but their actual pursuit as reflected here bears witness to

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54 This religiosity itself is apt to be characterised generally as a quest for an 'insight' which is both 'satisfying' and 'saving', cf. Susan Elbaum Jootla, *Inspiration from Enlightened Nuns*, Kandy 1988. The normal doctrinal teachings that enter into the pursuit of the arahant ideal as pursued by the therīs of our text is of course brilliantly expounded in I.B. Horner, *The Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected*, *op. cit.*, 1936.

55 It should be noted that Van Der Leeuw (*op. cit.*, p.631) actually saw the Theravāda as a 'religion of nothingness'. The conclusions of E.O. James (*Comparative Religion*, London 1961, pp.175–6) in this regard are in the same vein: 'if *nirvāṇa* is not a nullity', he insists, it is nevertheless 'a negative goal, since "becoming cool" virtually ends in "blowing out" . . . The quest for perfection (*arahanship*) inspires ennobling qualities of self-discipline and almost superhuman effort, but . . . the conception of existence involved throughout is as negative and pessimistic as the state when the cessation of desire has been

a spirituality which is vibrant and has echoes in the wider practice of esoteric religion [56]. In any event, the dominant traits of the religiosity that finds expression in Thig can be easily identified. Though its verses frequently invoke the Three Jewels (*tisaraṇa*) as refuges, this religiosity in the final analysis is not grounded on faith in the typical Western sense, but rather is an inwardly propelled striving for personal liberation modelled on Theravāda doctrinal teachings[57]. An invariable starting point of such striving was renunciation — a total severing of mundane ties. The manner in which it was effected is indeed a

achieved'.

56 Following the insights of E. Conze (*Buddhism. Its Essence and Development*, Oxford 1957, p.11), it is possible to link this spirituality with 'the common heritage of wisdom, by which men have succeeded in overcoming this world, and in gaining immortality or a deathless life'. Though one must be wary of global characterisations, Buddhism as practised by the nuns of Thig emerges very much as the 'religion of annulment of suffering' (cf. G. Mensching, *Structures and Patterns of Religion*, Delhi 1976, p.35).

57 The idea of taking refuge in the Three Jewels tends to be incorporated into the verses of Puṇṇā and Rohiṇī, for instance, in identical terms (cf. Thig 249, 289: *upehi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ dhammaṃ saṅghañ ca tādinaṃ. . .*). It is instructive to observe that in its Christian interpretation, faith (*pistis* in Greek, *fides* in Latin) entails a trust in God's redemptive action. Though in a recent publication, P.O. Ingram (*The Modern Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, Lewiston, N.Y. 1988, p.131) considers taking refuge to constitute faith in the Theravāda tradition, their equation can be misleading when applied to actual spiritual practice. For the sentiment of trust that is basic to taking refuge such as is conveyed in the Pāli term *saddhā* is not focused on a hope or belief in external redemptive action. (This point can be more concretely appreciated by perusing a work of Christian esoteric spirituality such as Thomas à Kempis' *Imitatio Christi*: the soteriological vision articulated here has many parallels in Thig, but it is crucially rooted in a trust in external redemptive action such as is not seen in the Therāvada context).

theme upon which several therīs dwell, sometimes in revealing terms. What Subhā records in this regard is striking and serves to bring to the fore an essential implication of renunciation:

> So I forsook my world — my kinsfolk all,
> My slaves, my hirelings, and my villages,
> And the rich fields and meadows spread around,
> Things fair and making for the joy of life —
> All these I left, and sought the Sisterhood,
> Turning my back upon no mean estate (PsS, p.143)[58].

Of course, renunciation in Thig is not an end in itself. Rather, it is projected here as having its final *raison d'être* in the committed pursuit of the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya aṭṭhan-*

58 *hitvān' aham nātigaṇam dāsakammakarāni ca*
gāmakhettāni phītāni ramanīye pamodite
pahāy' ahaṃ pabbajitā sāpateyyam anappakaṃ (Thig 340).

An analogous confession is woven into the verses of Sukulā (PsS, p.61); see also those of Saṅghā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Sundarī and Sumedhā (PsS, pp.21, 113, 139, 167) for still other articulations on renunciation. Typically, the religious renunciants of Thig lead homeless lives in secluded places in ways that conform to the famous injunction set forth in the Mahāvagga (I, 30). Though some (like Mittakālī and Paṭācārā, PsS, pp.59, 73) refer to their particular dwelling places in general terms, quite a few live in the open air, choosing their 'seat and abode' (*senāsana*) in classic fashion under the 'foot of a tree' (*rukkhamūla*), a striking case being Vimalā (PsS, p.53). Cf. Patrick Olivelle, *The Origin and Early Development of Buddhist Monachism*, Colombo 1974, p.13. It is well to add that the nuns of Thig do not merely embrace eremetical asceticism focused on inner culture, but actually come forward on occasion to defend it against the cavils of sceptical critics. The verses of Rohiṇī (PsS, pp. 126 ff.), for instance, exemplify this: she marshals here an array of religiously impressive arguments to establish why 'recluses are dear to me' (*me samanā piyā*). Significantly, some of these arguments are reminiscent of the points made in a notable Dīgha Nikāya context which focuses on the fruits of Buddhist renunciant religiosity, namely, the Sāmaññaphala Sutta.

gika magga), the Buddha's way to peace and liberation from the sufferings of Saṃsāra[59]. Now it would be useful to point out that the factors that constitute the Path[60] are in turn commonly held to 'aim at promoting and perfecting the three essentials of Buddhist training and discipline' (which are identified in a broader classification as ethical training, mental culture and wisdom, *sīla, samādhi, paññā*)[61]. In any event, in reviewing Thig from a religious angle, what stands out most strikingly are attestations of the cultivation of these latter two essentials (*samādhi* and *paññā*), and the actual acquisition of 'saving knowledge' and the consequent attainment of liberation in the arahant state[62]. Accordingly, I propose to confine the remainder of this discussion to an elucidation of some pertinent details on this score. It would be well to emphasise that what are en-

59 This perception is an evident underpinning in, for instance, Cālā's verses (PsS, pp.97–8), cf. v.186: *ariyaṭṭhangikaṃ maggaṃ dukkhūpasamagāminaṃ*. Not surprisingly, references to the Path (denoted in different settings as *magga, ariyamagga, maggaṭṭhangika*) occur very frequently in the text, cf. verses of Sakulā, Puṇṇā, Subhā and Kisā-Gotamī.

60 Eight in number, the factors of the Path are specified as rightness (*sammā*) in respect of view, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration (*diṭṭhi, sankappa, vācā, kammanta, ājīva, vāyāma, sati, samādhi*). These find classic enunciation within elaborations of the Four Noble Truths (*cattari ariyasaccāni*), cf. Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (D II, 312–13).

61 Cf. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Bedford 1959, p.46.

62 If one takes into account the Path of ten factors detailed in certain Nikāya sources (see, for instance, Saṅgīti Sutta, D III, 271) and also recent interpretative reflections on the subject (cf. R. Bucknell, 'The Buddhist path of Liberation: Analysis of the Listing of Stages', *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7, 1984), one may perhaps regard what is referred to here as two further stages (the ninth and tenth) in the Path such as are not distinguished conventionally, namely, right knowledge (*sammā ñāṇa*) and right liberation (*sammā vimutti*).

countered at this level are some of the most notable shared features found in verses of our anthology: the attainment of liberation as an arahant through spiritual self-culture is a feat that every therī celebrates here, sometimes amidst uniquely personal amplifications on the nature or implications of that liberation.

While ethical living is its veritable bedrock, Buddhist spirituality in the Theravāda tradition, especially in its higher reaches, is actualised through specialised forms of meditational practice — most notably *samatha bhāvanā* (which is considered to lead to the development of mental tranquillity), and *vipassanā bhāvanā* (which is held to result in the acquisition of higher religious insight)[63]. In keeping with its position as a Pāli canonical work, the influence or the application of these particular approaches to self-culture is not very much in evidence in Thig. In terse remarks several therīs here draw attention to their firm adherence to the moral norms (*sīla*) as stressed in

63 Much has been written regarding the above two forms of meditation practice which are of course canonically identified, cf. D III, 273; M I, 404. For some pertinent modern elucidations see discussions in P. Vajirañāṇa, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice* (Colombo 1962) and Nyanaponika, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (London 1962). It would be well to observe that though academic enquirers are apt to recognise problems in relating *samatha* and *vipassanā* (cf. P. Griffiths, 'Concentration or Insight: The Problematic of Theravāda Meditational Theory', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 1981), meditators themselves do not appear to encounter them. Jane Hamilton-Merritt (*A Meditator's Diary*, London 1979), for instance, projects concentrative exercises as virtually graduating into those focused on the development of insight. A similar connection, to be sure, is observable in Thig, as will be seen shortly.

Buddhism[64]. Efforts directed towards disciplining their minds and attaining higher insight, however, are focused upon in greater detail as the deepest concerns of their religiosity. Indeed the pursuit of inner mastery and control is the most salient emphasis in some of the initial short articulations carried in the text[65]. But such mastery and control were not easily achieved. As the verses of Samā and Uttamā (PsS, pp.34-5, 36) indicate, many, to acquire the peace of mind (*cetaso santiṃ*) which they sought, had to engage in arduous struggles which, on occasion, were of long duration. Those of Samā and another anonymous therī, it appears, stretched for twenty-five years; the confession the latter makes in this regard is revealingly poignant:

> For five-and-twenty years since I came forth
> Not for one moment could my heart attain
> The blessedness of calm serenity.
> No peace of mind I found. My every thought
> Was soaked in the fell drug of sense-desire.
> With outstretched arms and shedding futile tears
> I gat me, wretched woman, to my cell (PsS, pp.50-1)[66].

64 Thus Sisupacālā (PsS, p.100) identifies herself at the outset as 'a sister in the precepts sure' (*bhikkhuṇī sīlasampaññā*). Puṇṇā (*ibid.*, p.119) refers likewise to her observance of the norms of moral conduct, her resolution to 'keep the precepts' (*samādiyāmi sīlāni*). In an identical utterance Rohiṇī (Thig 289) gives expression to a smiliar commitment.

65 Cf. PsS, pp.12, 13, 14. Tissā's self admonition to 'train in the training' (*sikkhassa sikkhāya*) is particularly noteworthy in this connection. In a no less striking, longer articulation Dantikā (*ibid.*, p.38) is instructed by the sight of a taming of a wild elephant, and turns to train her own mind.

66 *paṇṇavisāti vassāni yato pabbajitā ahaṃ*
accharāsaṃghātamattaṃ pi citass' upasam' ajjhagaṃ.
aladdhā cetaso santiṃ kāmarāgen' avassutā
bāhā paggayha kandantī viharām pāvisiṃ ahaṃ (Thig 67–8).

To be sure, against the uncollected psychological comportment which Buddhism recognised in common situations of mundane living, what it characteristically demanded of the serious religious aspirant was 'systematic attention' (*yoniso manasikārā*)[67]. Accorded definite soteriological implications in Nikāya settings[68], this attentive attitudinal stance is basically meditative in orientation and plays a pivotal informing role in the spirituality articulated in our text at many levels. Though they do not use the phrase, the liberating penetration into the nature of things which Ambapālī as well as others, such as Abhirūpa-Nandā and Sundarī-Nandā[69], finally proclaim indeed appears to be predicated on 'systematic attention'. And insofar as it is shown to have furthered the development of insight in their cases as well as others, there is reason enough to view its basis and function in relation to *vipassanā-bhāvanā*.

In any event, since what the discipline and training adumbrated above aimed at was of course spiritual liberation as an arahant, it would be instructive next to focus on our text's more prominent articulations on this important subject. Much like other Pāli canonical works, Thig, to be sure, allows no room to conclude that Nibbāna attained and experienced as an arahant is

67 The verses of Sīhā (PsS, p.54; Thig 77; cf. n.32 above) cited previously tend to bear this out notably: *ayonisomanasikārā* (In other words, the absence of 'systematic attention') is the phrase used here to describe the state of her psyche prior to her spiritual conversion and illuminative experience as an arahant.

68 Cf. A I, 3. It is worth noting that in an interesting study, Mirko Frýba (*The Art of Happiness*. The Teachings of Buddhist Psychology, Boston 1989, pp.74 ff., 165) interprets *yoniso manasikārā* as 'wise apprehension', and sees it functioning as a means of opening 'awareness of freedom'.

69 Cf. PsS, pp.23, 56.

amenable to definition or description within the frames of ordinary discourse. Still, its verses sometimes encompass noteworthy statements on the implications of the liberation the arahant wins and these, it is possible to say, convey certain instructive clues about the crowning achievement of Buddhist religiosity. Let me elaborate.

Though Buddhism's quintessential religiosity has been identified loosely and uninformatively as 'mystical' in certain modern interpretations[70], a careful reading of Thig indicates that accession to spiritual perfection is depicted in its articulations as entailing an acquisition of 'gnosis' (*aññā*)[71], replete with higher epistomological capacities. Given specific scope, the more striking elements in these capacities are often collectively referred to as the 'triple lore' (*tisso vijja, tevijjā*)[72]. And, as often happens, when a therī proclaims, 'the threefold wisdom have I gotten now'[73], what exactly was meant? Significantly, these higher capacities are traditionally taken to be: i) knowledge of

70 Cf. Conze, *op. cit.*, p.11.

71 A defining attribute necessarily associated with the arahant state, *aññā* can be regarded as the shared essence of the articulations of the different therīs gathered in Thig. Indeed, viewed from the angle of Buddhist religiosity, these articulations, as often indicated in Dhammapāla's Commentary, are but different proclamations of *aññā*.

72 These phrases occur frequently in our text. The verses of Aḍḍhakāsī, Mettikā, Cālā, Uttarā and Puṇṇā offer notable evidences of their use, see Thig 26, 30, 187, 180, 251; cf. PsS, pp.26, 28, 98, 95, 119. Interestingly, *tevijjā* seems to be the product of a 'conceptual revision' instituted by the Buddha, for it is derived from the Sanskrit *trayi vidyā* where the focus was on the three branches of Vedic learning. As indicated below, in its distinctive Buddhist usage, *tevijjā* stands for higher spiritual knowing of three kinds. There are, it must be noted, detailed elaborations on this theme, cf. A I, 163–6.

73 *tisso vijjā anupattā*, Thig 187, 194, 202; cf. PsS, pp.98, 99, 102.

one's previous existence in Saṃsāra (*pubbenivāsā- nussati-ñāṇa*); ii) knowledge of the death and rebirth of beings under the influence of their kamma (*sattānam cutūpapāta-ñāṇa*) and iii) knowledge of the destruction of the cankers of attachment, or 'influxes' (*asavakkhaya-ñāṇa*)[74]. But a particular knowing was not the only consequence of becoming an arahant. Many therīs here seem to refer pointedly to a distinct state of *being* as well. Indeed, when they joyfully proclaim that they are 'free', or that their minds are 'liberated'[75], what is implied, there is reason to

74 'Divine eye' or 'Heavenly Eye' (*dibba-cakkhu*) referred to in many Thig contexts cited immediately above (Thig 179) is usually taken to mean clairvoyant power basic to the second of the 'knowledges' clarified in the preceding. Like classic Nikāya discussions (cf. Samaññaphala Sutta), Thig too considers the higher knowing entailed in 'gnosis' (*aññā*) to encompass in all a total of six supernormal capacities (it is well to remark that *tevijjā* represents three characteristic factors within them). Some of Uppalavaṇṇā's verses (PsS, p.113) tersely highlight this matter:

> How erst I lived I know; the Heavenly Eye,
> Purview celestial, have I clarified;
> Clear too the inward life that others lead;
> Clear too I hear the sounds ineffable;
> Powers supernormal have I made mine own;
> And won immunity from deadly Drugs.
> These, the six higher knowledges are mine.
> Accomplished is the bidding of the Lord.
> — *pubbenivāsaṃ jānāmi dibbacakkhuṃ visodhitaṃ*
> *ceto paricca ñāṇañ ca sotadhātu visodhitā.*
> *iddhi pi me sacchikatā patto me āsavakkhayo*
> *cha me abhiññā sacchikatā kataṃ buddhassa sāsanaṃ* (Thig 227–8).

For useful background information on this issue here treated, see D.J. Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology*, Albany, N.Y. 1967, Ch. 10, 'Analytic Yoga'.

75 Some characteristic contexts in which these ideas are brought to the fore have already been identified in the course of the concluding part of our

infer, is an accession to a realm of being that transcends the one experienced in ordinary life. Escape from the repeated cycle of birth and death (*punabhavo*) was of course one admitted attribute of the 'new being' of the Buddhist saint[76] (who was projected as having rooted out all lust, *sabbo rāgo samūhato*, Thig 34). Recognised as ineffable, its essential transcendence, however, is frequently conveyed by a set of terms which appear in the first analysis to carry a larger content of symbolic rather than referential meaning: thus, Thig again and again depicts the arahant as one who has reached a condition which is 'cool' (*sitabhuta*) or 'calm and serene' (*upasanta*)[77].

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discussions on feminism, Section II above. In this connection Mettikā's and Sīhā's references to *cittam vimucci me* (Thig 30, 81) and Mittakālī's *vimuttacittā uṭṭhāsim* (*ibid.* 96) are especially pertinent.

76 This position is clearly stressed, for instance, in the verses of Jentī and Soṇā (PsS, pp.24, 63); those of the latter also suggest that, unlike the flux of Saṃsāra, the liberated in Nibbāna are stable or 'immovable'.

77 Cf. PsS, pp.19, 20, 21, 23, 30, 61. It is perhaps noteworthy that over-powering inner feelings experienced in solitude tend to be tersely captured in this latter phraseology in other traditions too. For example, in *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (Paris 1973, p.49) Rousseau employs 'le calme ravissant' to describe a particular subjective feeling that affected him greatly. And 'cool' in turn seems to have been put to use to project a philosophically valued attitude of detachment in Hume, cf. *The Natural History of Religion*, London 1956, p.76; Wittgenstein (*Culture and Value*, Oxford 1984, p.2c) identifies a 'certain coolness' as an ideal. In any event, 'cool' is a figure of speech which can be given specific meaning in relation to Buddhism's penchant to regard passion as fire, and Nibbāna as the state where it is finally extinguished. Cf. Lily de Silva, 'Nibbāna as Experience' *Sri Lanka Journal of Buddhist Studies* 1, 1987. Others like 'void' (*suññā*, cf. PsS, pp.37, 153), as Mrs Rhys Davids herself has suggested, are short and neat characterisations of aspects of the Buddhist perceptions of reality. It is well to remark here that recent investigators have drawn attention to the existence of a non-literalist, symbolic 'twilight language'

What has been brought to the fore in the paragraphs immediately preceding strikes me as some of the more outstanding features in the religiosity projected in Thig. Obviously, there are many other things worth noting in this connection. In any event, to conclude the present segment of this enquiry, I would like to draw attention to a few additional considerations which anyone probing the religiosity manifested in this text should take into account.

Clearly, highly motivated individual application is the main driving force behind the religiosity encountered here. Still, it is noteworthy that quite a few therīs acknowledge the assistance of preceptors, sometimes going so far as to ascribe crucial guiding roles to them[78]. Then again, one must not overlook the apparent suddenness with which the liberating insight dawns on many therīs. This, to be sure, comes to the fore rather strikingly in the following verses:

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

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to be conveyed, cf. R. Bucknell and M. Stuart Fox, *The Twilight Language*, Explorations in Buddhist Meditation and Symbolism, London 1986. This is something that might usefully be borne in mind when probing the meaning of the phraseology in which the condition of the arahant is finally projected in our text.

78 Uttamā (PsS, p.36) is a striking case in point. A parallel experience is again recorded in the verses of an anonymous therī, cf. *ibid.*, p.51.

Lo! the Nibbāna of the little lamp!
Emancipation dawns! My heart is free! (PsS, p.73)[79]

Lastly, though I myself do not propose to delve into the matter as it would be necessary to go far afield to do so, it is nevertheless well to point out that the existence of certain discernible variations in the ways different therīs of the anthology reach the final liberating vision poses a challenge of no small significance to all who seek to come to terms with the religiosity of Thig: there is room to ask whether these variations are directly relatable to the famous distinctions early Buddhist literature encompasses as regards modes of attaining liberation. (Nikāya sources, it should be observed, distinguish between *cetovimutti*, *paññāvimutti* and *ubhatovimutti*[80].)

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79 *pāde pakkhālayitvānaudake su karom'ahaṃ*
pādodakañ ca disvāna thalato ninnam āgataṃ
tato cittaṃ samādhemi assaṃ bhadraṃ va jāniyaṃ.
tato dipaṃ gahetvāna vihāraṃ pāvisiṃ ahaṃ
seyyaṃ olokayitvāna mañcakamhi upavisiṃ
tato sūciṃ gahetvāna vaṭṭiṃ okassayām'aham
padipasseva nibbānam vimokkho ahu cetaso (Thig 114–16).

Given the noted role which the idea of 'sudden enlightenment' plays in Mahāyānist traditions (notably Zen, cf. D.T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, New York 1956; see also S. Park, *Buddhist Faith and Sudden Enlightenment*, Albany, N.Y. 1984), the above evidences that point to its anticipation in Thig merit particular notice. Though it has not been viewed from this angle, contemporary esoteric religiosity associated with the Theravāda tradition itself seems to have generated patterns of illuminative understanding which dawns in a sudden fashion, cf. *Buddhism Transformed, Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, Princeton 1988, pp.353 ff., and also the present writer's review of this book in *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 13, 1990, pp.149–50.

80 See A I, 173; M I, 477. Cf. Lily de Silva, *'Cetovimutti, Paññāvimutti, Ubhatovimutti'*, *Pali Buddhist Review* 3, 1978.

VI

To sum up, I think that the brief analytical and evaluative considerations relating to Thig presented in the foregoing discussion establish an important point: this ancient anthology of Pāli verse is a unique Buddhist composition which admits of examination from an interesting variety of angles. The main conclusions of our examination are significant. Authored by individual women members of the Buddhist Order, Thig bears a feminine stamp which comes to the fore impressively at certain levels. But the work also encompasses a notable philosophic dimension. And here, what can be detected are not only the classic emphases of Buddhist thinking, but also a striking delineation of the experienced transitions in the consciousness as it evolves from an ordinary state into a spiritually attuned one, such as is focused on the attainment of its higher potentialities. Moreover, as a versified composition, Thig bears witness to a many-sided aestheticism: there are identifiable sensitivities to beauty (poetic, human and natural) in many of its verses, though considered overall these sensitivities are mediated through an overarching Buddhist perspective which underscores the evanescence of things temporal. There remains, finally, the religiosity. Though treated last, this is clearly the most important and consistently encountered feature in the utterances of varying length and content gathered in Thig. For the women who authored them were without exception committed Buddhist renunciants engaged in a shared soteriological quest. And the goal they aimed at and attained — liberation as an arahant — was again not only the same, but was also depicted in their verses in broadly similar terms.

Though this enquiry has focused on feminism, philosophy, aestheticism and religiosity in Thig, it would be well to mention

that its verses are not without insights on other concerns. For example, the anthology at several levels might be regarded as an important canonical setting which clarifies some crucial, finer points in early Buddhism's approaches to knowledge. Indeed, the uniquely personal terms in which access to supernormal knowledge and the character and scope of this knowledge tend to be detailed here might have few exact parallels elsewhere, save of course in the complmentary Thag. Then again, in one context in particular, this work merits notice from anyone probing early Buddhism's gerontological perspectives. The context in question is Ambapālī's verses where they receive striking articulation, along with what amounts to a veritable semiotic of aging rooted in Buddhist soteriological reflection. Yet the anthology's relevance or value as a textual resource for the study of these subjects seems to have been lost on those who have investigated them recently[81]. Perhaps one general constraint that

81 In this connection I would like to draw attention to K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London 1963, Delhi 1989) and S. Tilak, *Religion and Aging in the Indian Tradition* (Albany, N.Y. 1988). I find the non-use of Thig (and Thag) a definite desideratum in Jayatilleke's discussion of supernormal knowledge as admitted with early Buddhist frames. However, given his apparent lack of interest in probing the practical basis of the quintessential Buddhist claim that meditational self-culture generates supernormal knowledge, the neglect of this text — where such culture plays a major informing role — is of course not surprising. Tilak's disregarding of the latter, while equally striking, is perhaps even more blameworthy. For it is possible to argue that had he paid some attention to the drift of Ambapālī's reflections, it would have been difficult to support his thesis that early Buddhism's attitude to old age is one of fear and that the Buddha's message generally sustains a 'gerentophobia'. A consideration of this same context in Thig also provides grounds for challenging Tilak's tendency to see interest in the 'semiotics of aging' purely within Hindu texts.

has operated against the wider use of Thig in latter-day discussions is its origins and character: what it offers are not discourses or disquisitions on Buddhism, but rather insights into Buddhism as practised through subjective appropriation by the committed religious. For this very reason, Thig, one might say, is a work for whose fuller appreciation an empathetic understanding of Buddhist spirituality in its deepest sense is very much demanded[82]. That Buddhist studies sustained by narrow interests in ideas or linguistic details have often tended to ignore it, therefore, is not altogether surprising. Yet there is good reason to invite serious students of Buddhism to read and revalue the Therīgāthā text. For as our enquiry has sought to adumbrate, this text of short compass traceable to women contains many interesting strands of meaning, all underwritten by a practised religiosity which displays paradigmatic early Buddhist features.

82 In taking account of this feature, which of course relates to its essential religiosity, I am tempted to say that what Wittgenstein held about his famous *Tractatus* is perhaps applicable to Thig as well: his book, Wittgenstein insisted, is one that 'will be understood only by someone who has himself already had thoughts that are expressed in it — or at least similar thoughts' (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London 1961, p.3).

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EĀ is based, while *āda* (also deriving from *dā*)'.

p. 54, l. 3: for 'forebearance' read 'forbearance'.

p. 55, l. 3: for *sthāpana* read *sthāpanā*.

p. 56, l. 8, 19: for 'should also abide' read 'should abide'.

p. 57, l. 4: for *āhrikya* read *āhrīkya*.