

Hagiographic Buddhist Texts on Women

Liz Wilson, Miami University

Themes and Approaches

- Hagiographic literature of the post-Aśokan time period (Kuṣāna-Gupta era)
- Monks achieve insight by viewing female bodies.
- Female bodies instantiate abstractions.
- Observer's body also a site of knowing: *samvega*, aesthetic shock
- Nuns achieve insight by viewing their own bodies.
- Ways of seeing influence subject formation.

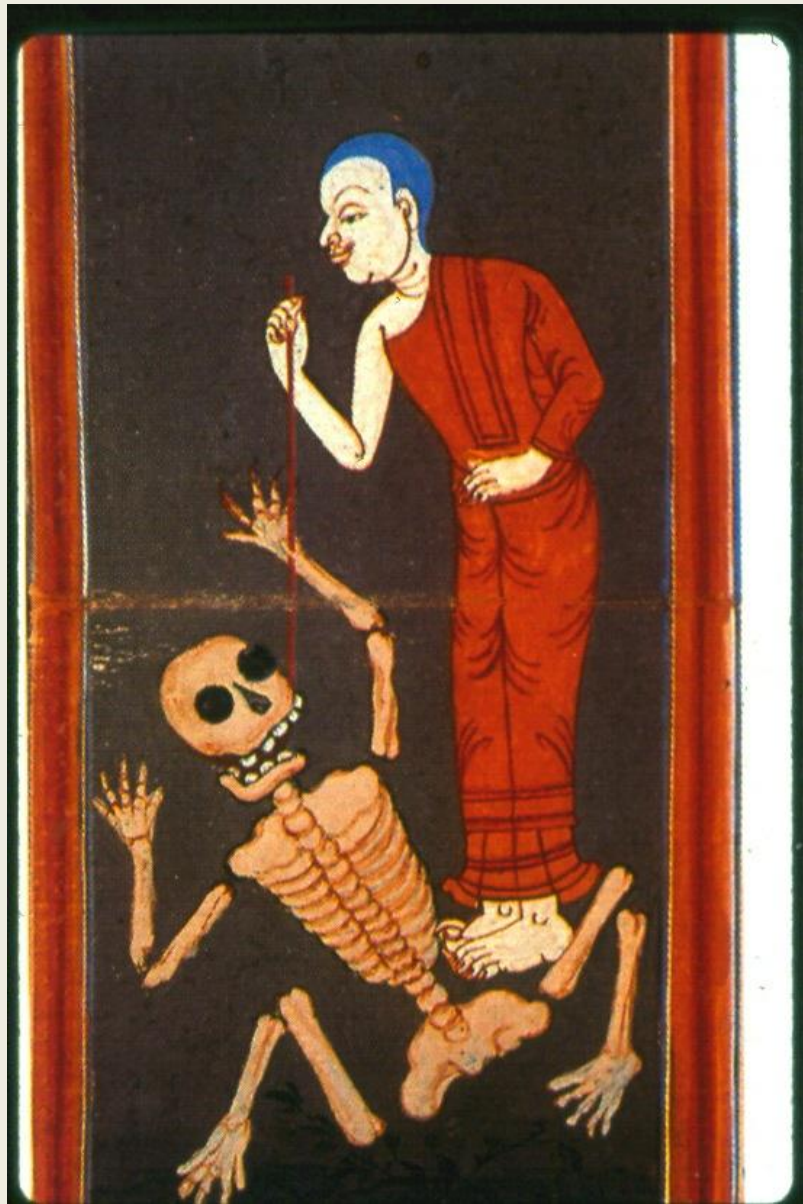
Sources

- Hagiographical commentaries in Pāli:
 - ✧ Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā, commentary on the Pāli *Dhammapada* (attributed to Buddhaghosa)
 - ✧ *Paramatthadīpanī*: Dhammapāla's commentary on the *Theragāthā* (monks' verses)
 - ✧ *Paramatthadīpanī*: Dhammapāla's commentary on the *Therīgāthā* (nuns' verses)
- Sanskrit texts:
 - ✧ *Divyāvadāna*
 - ✧ *Buddhacarita*

Asubha-bhāvanā (contemplation of the foul)

Aṅguttara Nikāya:

"Monks, I know of nothing with the power to prevent sensual desire, if not already arisen, or to cause its eradication, if arisen, as the sign of foulness (*asubha-nimittam*)."



Kulla's verses in *Theragāthā*

393 “I, Kulla, going to a cremation ground, saw a woman cast away, disposed in the cremation ground, being eaten, full of worms.”

394 “See this body, Kulla – miserable, impure, putrid, oozing, dripping, pleasing to fools.”

Sirimā and the unnamed monk (*Dhammapada-atthakathā*)

In this very city men used to pay a thousand coins for the sake of spending one night with this woman. Now there is no one who will take her even for free. Her beauty has perished and decayed.

The male gaze

“The principle protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him.”

-- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), 54.



Split subjectivity of the female gaze



Abhayamātā verses (Charles Hallisey’s translation of the *Therīgāthā*)

Addressing herself, first repeating what was spoken by her son

33 “Whether up from the sole of the foot, Mother,
or down from the top of the head,
reflect on this body as filthy and foul-smelling.”

34 It’s by living that way that all passion for sex is
pulled out

Its burning fever broken; I have become cool, free.

Vimalā's verses (Hallisey's translation of the *Therīgāthā*)

- 72 Intoxicated by my good looks,
by my body, my beauty, my reputation,
haughty because of my youth, I looked down on other
women.
- 73 I decorated this body, decked out it made fools mutter,
a prostitute at the door, like a hunter spreading out
the snare,
- 74 I flashed my ornaments as if I was showing my hidden
parts,
I created illusions for people, all the while sneering at
them,

Vimalā's verses

75 Today I collect alms,
head shaved, covered with the outer robe,
now seated at the foot of the tree,
what I get has nothing to do with schemes.

76 All ties are cut, whether divine or human,
I have thrown away all that fouls the heart,
I have become cool, free.

Rūpa Nanda (*Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*)

Rūpa Nandā, observing this, thought, "This woman has fallen prey to old age, disease, and death right here in front of me; my body will also experience old age, disease, and death." She saw the body from the perspective of impermanence. Because of this seeing from the perspective of impermanence, it was seen also from the perspective of dissatisfaction and essencelessness. Then for her the three states of existence appeared like burning houses, like carrion wrapped around the neck. Her mind flew toward its object of meditation.

Sumedhā, the reluctant bride (Hallisey's translation of the *Therīgāthā*)

473 People cling to this body,
even though it has no essence,
and is only a tangle of bones and sinews,
a foul body filled with spit, tears, feces, and urine.

474 If one's own mother were to open it up
and pull what is inside or it outside,
even she would not be able to stand the stench
and would be disgusted by it.

Subhā (Hallisey's translation of the *Therīgāthā*)

399 Then the one who was so pleasing to look at,
her mind unattached and with no regard for her eye,
gouged it out and gave it to that man, saying,
“Here, take the eye, it's yours.”

400 His sexual passion ended right there forever
and he begged her forgiveness, saying,
“Holy one, be whole again, this won't happen again.”

A male counterpart to Subhā (Anālayo's translation)

The solitary Buddha said: “Wait, wait, dear sister, this is not your fault. It is because of my offences done in the past that I have received this body. On seeing it, people arouse sentiments of sensuality.”

Historical Context

- Success of Buddhism made celibacy more important than ever
- Monastic life became a stepping stone to worldly career
- Celibacy kept monks and nuns socially disengaged
- Rethinking what social disengagement entails in light of Shayne Clarke's work

Thanks for your attention!

- Questions and comments?

Works Cited

- Anālayo, “Beautiful Eyes Seen with Insight as Bereft of Beauty – Subhā Therī and Her Male Counterpart in the Ekottarika-āgama,” *The Journal of the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies* 2 (2014): 39–53.
- J. Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin, 1972.
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