

The Amazing Transformations of Arhant Theri Uppalavanna

Tathālokā Therī



As so many ancient tales, the disciple Uppalavaṇṇā's is one of many twists and turns, spanning vast reaches of time and space, past, present and future – the web of incarnations, human, animal and divine – in connection with the Buddha. It has been a popular tale, told in multiple texts, fascinating generations of story-weavers and listeners for more than twenty-five centuries. For good reason, as it continues to serve as a catalyst for exploration, inspiration and insight.



According to the now-ancient Pāḷi-text commentaries written around the 5th century CEⁱ, the future Uppalavaṇṇā Therī was born into the family of a wealthy merchant of Sāvatti (Skt: Srāvasti)ⁱⁱ. She was extraordinarily beautiful like the dark blue uppala lily after which she was named as a fulfillment of her past life aspirations as well as those of the Buddha to have such a disciple. Her skin was said to be blue or golden like the calyx of the blue lotusⁱⁱⁱ, both colors associated with divine beauty and avatars – the incarnation of a deity in the human realm – in Indian mythology.



Men lost their mindfulness when seeing her due to her extraordinary beauty and presence. When she came of age and began to consider marriage, such a stir began to occur that her father became afraid of civil conflict between powerful and wealthy suitors in competition for the honor of her companionship – kings from all around India sent their proposals – which he could think of no way to solve. The idea came to him of her going forth into monastic life instead, to which she readily and gladly agreed, his idea falling upon her ears as if an anointment with oil a thousand times refined. Already familiar with the Buddha’s teaching, within her heart was exactly such ardent aspiration unfilled from the past, ripening in the present. She achieved awakening within a fortnight of her going forth into monastic life when one evening, while the other bhikkhunīs were out and she remained behind, she lit a lamp to prepare the hall. She sat down, concentrated her mind on the *tejo kasina* of the fire element, and all of her fetters fell away. She realized the path and fruits of the *arahant*, the pinnacle and complete fulfillment of the Buddhist Path.



I have put down the heavy burden; everything that leads to renewed existence has been rooted out.

*The aim for which one goes forth from the home to the homeless state,
that aim has been attained by me – all bonds are destroyed.*

*My defilements are burnt out; all [future] births are completely destroyed.
Having severed my bonds like a she-elephant, I live without taints.*

*Welcome indeed was the presence of the Awakened One to me.
I have attained the three knowledges. I have done the Buddha’s teaching.²*

¹ Tile fresco of the enlightenment of *Phra Mae* (Thai for “Holy Mother”) Uppalavaṇṇā Therī, Noppolbhumisiri-chedi, Doi Inthanon, Thailand

Engraved in Stone

The earliest material records we have of Uppalavaṇṇā (Skt: Utpalavarṇā or Utpala) are archeological – engravings hewn in stone from the third century before the Common Era. By then, she had already captured the imagination of both story tellers and artisans in the image of a simple monastic woman humbly bowing before the Buddha as he descends from a three-tiered staircase, with apparently divine figures on either side of him, and with a great retinue of royal figures before him, one at the forefront holding lotuses and with other magnificent offerings.



Kusana Period image from the Indian Northwest frontier 1st-3rd century CE. The Buddha descends on a triple staircase in three stages together with the Vedic and Hindu gods Brahma and Sakka [Indra] accompanied by heavenly hosts and met by the bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā transformed into a Wheel Turning Monarch with retinue. All the beings in the worlds of heaven, earth and hell were revealed to one another during the time of their descent. The monarch's chariot is on the left, the now headless monarch holding lotuses on the right. Uppalavaṇṇā in her bhikkhunī form bows at the Buddha's feet front and left (image defaced).³

² *Kilesā jhāpitā mayham, bhavā sabbe samūhatā; nāgīva bandhanaṃ chetvā, viharāmi anāsavā. Svāgataṃ vata me āsi, mama buddhassa [buddhaseṭṭhassa (sī. syā. ka.)] santike; tisso vijjā anuppattā, kataṃ buddhassa sāsanaṃ. Paṭisambhidā catasso, vimokkhāpi ca aṭṭhime; chaḷabhiññā sacchikatā, kataṃ buddhassa sāsanaṃ (Kuddhaka Nikāya Therī Apadāna Vv 465-467 (CST-Pāḷi)).* English here adapted from the translation by William Pruitt in the *Commentary on Verses of Therīs*, (Pali Text Society, 2001) of the Uppalavaṇṇā Apadāna vv 56-60 from Ācariyā Dhammapāla's *Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā*. Note: Uppalavaṇṇā's Apadāna verses in the Chaṭṭha Saṅgayana Pāḷi contain verses not present in Ācariyā Dhammapāla's *Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā*.

³ Descent from the Trāyastriṃśā. Courtesy of the [Huntington Archives](#).



In some early images, like this one from Mathura, only the image of the bowing human figure of Uppalavaṇṇā appears together with the triple staircase, itself memorializing the Buddha and the two gods descent, a pattern common to the most ancient Indian Buddhist art. The original staircase, built by the divine architect Vissakamma (Skt: Viśvákarma), was said to have remained visible for at least 200 years after the event, but sank and disappeared to be replaced by staircases of brick. (courtesy see footnote 3)

But who is she in this image?

The scene is set at Saṅkassa, also known as Sāṅkissa (Skt: Sāṅkāśya or Sāṅkiśya), one of the eight early sites of Buddhist pilgrimage⁴. The day is the full moon at the end of the monsoon season in November, and the event is known as *Deva Rohaṇa* or *Devāvatāra* (*Deva Avatāra*) – the blessed Buddha’s return from teaching the Dhamma⁵ to his late mother Mahā Māyā in the Tāvātimsa (Skt: Trāyastriṃśa) Heaven after three to

four months’ disappearance from earthly terrain. According to the images and stories, it was a day of great joy, great religious harmony, great miracles⁶ and transformation, with great insight for all beings into the three worlds, as all were able to see one another, a great light penetrating the veil between them. But again, this is developed by the later story tellers, who had centuries to weave their tales.

Let us look at what has been recorded of them.

⁴ In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha mentions four sites in his life worthy of pilgrimage: his birthplace – Lumbinī, his place of awakening – Bodhgaya, the place of his first teaching – the Deer Park at Isipatana, and the place of his Parinibbāna – Kusinārā (Kushinagar). Four additional sites were later added due to the wonderful and amazing occurrences regarding the Buddha that happened there: Sāvatti (Srāvasti) – the place of the “Twin Miracle”, Rājagaha (Rajgir) – the place of subduing the wild elephant Nālāgiri with loving-kindness, Saṅkassa – the place of the Buddha’s descent from the Tāvātimsa Heaven after teaching there for three months, and Vesālī – where he received honey from a monkey. These comprise the Eight Great Places, the *Aṭṭha Mahāthanāni*.

⁵ Per Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo, the earliest versions of this story do not mention the Abhidhamma, only the Buddha’s heaven visit to his late mother. The Pāli Theravāda textual tradition is unique in including his teaching of the Abhidhamma in this story.

⁶ According to Buddhist teaching, there are three types of miracles that may be realized through higher knowledge (*abhiññā*): the miracle of supernormal powers (*iddhi-pāṭihāriya*), the miracle of telepathy (*ādesanā-pāṭihāriya*), and the miracle of display of instruction [in the Dharma] (*anusāsani-pāṭihāriya*)” It is debated whether it is right to render *pāṭihāriya* (Skt: *prāṭihārya*) as a “miracle” in English or not. See David V. Fiordalis’s PhD dissertation “Miracles and Superhuman Powers in South Asian Buddhist Literature” for a discussion of the subject. Buddhist teachings generally find such actions or events to be wondrous and extra-ordinary, but not at all falling outside of natural law, rather falling within the realm of conditional causality. According to the classical Buddhist teaching, the teaching of the Dhamma is the greatest miracle (see the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*).

Early Texts

In what may be part of the eldest strata of the Pāli-texts⁷ in the *Therīgāthā* and *Bhikkhunī Saṃyutta*, we find Uppalavaṇṇā living as a simple forest-dwelling mendicant almswoman, a Buddhist bhikkhunī, walking for alms, and going to sit in the quiet seclusion of the Dark Wood or *Andhavana* beneath a tree for *diva vihāra* – her day’s abiding. It is here in the *Therīgāthā* that we find her verse of enlightenment. In her own words:

*Now I have directly realized the six higher knowledges;
The divine-eye has been purified
my hearing is pure
and I know the minds of others.
I have great supernormal powers
and have annihilated all the obsessions of the mind.
The Buddha’s teaching has been done.*⁸



She was a fully awakened and completed liberated woman, an arahant.

Her verses in the *Therīgāthā* above mention her development of *iddhi* (Skt: *ṛddhi* or *siddhi*)^{iv}, an attainment which is one of the *abhiññā* (Skt: *abhijñā*) or six special psychic powers. They also mention her victory over Mara (lit. “Death”). Mara, as he seems to have done so often in those days as the personification of evil, challenged her solitary forest dwelling with common gender prejudices, speaking words to her of unawakened women’s weakness and mutability, and of the danger of men’s desire and the rightfulness of women’s fear of them. And she, as an awakened one, as is always true in these exemplary stories of the early bhikkhunī therīs’, shows no fear, and completely sees through Mara’s façade and deceitful ways. Mara, thoroughly defeated, departs to leave her in peace in her sublime tree root dwelling.

⁷ Per Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s lecture on the development of the Pāli Nikāya and Āgama Sūtra traditions and text, Sunnyvale, California, 2009 in which he mentioned his conjecture that the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* and the *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthā* are likely to contain some of the eldest strata of Buddhist text. Scholars such as von Hinüber generally theorize the four Nikāyas, the *Pātimokkha*, *Sutta Nipāta*, *Dhammapada* and perhaps the *Itivuttaka* to be of the eldest strata, and the *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthās* as well as the narrative stories within the Vinaya to be the next eldest. Ven Bhikkhu Bodhi postulated substantial portions of the *Dīgha Nikāya* and *Āṅguttara Nikāya* to be potentially later in composition as compared to much of the *Saṃyutta* and *Majjhima Nikāyas*, with the differing collections developed in response to progressively developing needs and circumstances encountered by the Saṅgha as the Sāsana developed and spread. For a discussion on the dating of the *Therīgāthā* relative to the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* see K.R. Norman’s *Elder’s Verses II* p xxiv.

⁸ Adapted from translation of *Therīgāthā* vv 227-28 by Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women: Poems and Stories of Awakening*, p 70, (Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1996, 2001)

At Sāvatti. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā dressed... [and, taking her bowl and robe, entered Sāvatti for alms. When she had walked for alms in Sāvatti and had returned from her alms round, after her meal, she went into the Blind Man's Grove for the day's abiding. Having plunged into the Blind Man's Grove,] ...she stood at the foot of a sal tree in full flower.

Then Mara the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā, desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her and addressed her in verse:

"Having gone to a sal tree with flowering top,
You stand at its foot all alone, bhikkhunī.
There is none whose beauty rivals yours:
Foolish girl, aren't you afraid of rogues?"

Then it occurred to the bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā: "Now who is this... [that recited the verse – a human being or a nonhuman being?" Then it occurred to her:] ...This is Mara the Evil One [who has recited the verse desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in me.] ...desiring to make me fall away from concentration."

Then the bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā, having understood, "This is Mara the Evil One," replied to him in verses:

*Though a hundred thousand rogues
Just like you might come here,
I stir not a hair, I feel no terror;
Even alone, Mara, I don't fear you.*

*I can make myself disappear
Or I can enter inside your belly.
I can stand between your eyebrows
Yet you won't catch a glimpse of me.*

*I am the master of my own mind,
The bases of power are well developed;
I am freed from all bondage,
Therefore I don't fear you, friend.*



Then Mara the Evil One, realizing, "The bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā knows me," sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.⁹

⁹Uppalavaṇṇā Sutta, Verse 5 of the Bhikkhunī Saṃyutta, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Translation by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi from *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Wisdom Publications, 2000). Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's earlier translation of the Bhikkhunī Saṃyutta can also be found online at: accesstoinight.org.

Although it was not abnormal for arahants to have such powers and all arahants have realized victory over Mara, according to the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, Uppalavaṇṇā’s highly developed abilities in the *iddhi-pāda* or “bases of power” were exceptional and exceeded those of all the other early bhikkhunīs, for which the Buddha especially recognized and commended her. And, as we shall see below, according to the later story tellers, as a former major divinity – and series of divinities – she already had a very long history of psychic powers. Her *Therīgāthā* verses also relay the story that we began to tell above, of her respect for the Buddha and the miracles that she performed in Sānkassa wishing to show the world what is possible for an awakened woman in the Buddha Sāsana, in reverence for the Buddha and in partnership with him, in his display of miracles to transform the stubborn-hearted.

And she roared her lion’s roar¹⁰:

*With chariot and horses four I came,
Created by supernormal power,
And honored his feet,
The glorious Buddha, Lord of the World.¹¹*



As bhikkhunīs kept neither chariots nor horses, and she mentions their being manifest by supernormal power, it is clear that this is not an ordinary scene. And there is a play of words here with *Lokanātha* – “Lord” or “Protector of the World”, as it is Uppalavaṇṇā who has appeared in the form of a “wheel-turning monarch,” a world sovereign or *cakkavatti* (Skt: *cakravartī*). By prostrating herself at the feet of the Buddha, she honors him as her sovereign or Lord of the World, to honor awakening and the teaching of the Dhamma as the greatest miracles of all, in front of and before the most supreme of all other worldly leaders and attainments.

Commentarial stories relay this time to be seven years after the Buddha’s *mahā-bodhi* or great awakening¹², just one or two years after the founding of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, in what the Pāḷi-text commentaries and South and Southeast Asian Theravāda oral traditions relate as the pristine early period¹³ of the Sāsana. It is further recorded that she had thought to perform this miracle together

¹⁰ Per *Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs*, William Pruitt’s translation of Ācariyā Dhammapāla’s *Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā* (p246). For more on the “lion’s roar, see Ven. Anālayo’s “The Lion’s Roar in Early Buddhism —A Study based on the *Ekottarika-āgama* Parallel to the *Cūḷasīhanāda-sutta*” (*Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* (2009, 22:3-24)

¹¹ *Iddhiyā abhinimmitvā, caturassaṃ rathaṃ ahaṃ; buddhassa pāde vanditvā, lokanāthassa tādino* [*sirīmato (syā. ka.)*]. (*Therīgāthā* , 229). Here adapted from the translation of Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Psalms*, I, p. 113. For further on the story of the Descent of Buddha and Uppalavaṇṇā Therī, cf. Rockhill, *Life*, pp. 80-82; Beal, *Si-yu-ki*, I, pp. 202-205; Watters, *On Yuan Chwang*, I, pp. 333--339; *Divyāvadāna*, ed. Cowell and Neil, p. 401; M.E. Lulius van Goor, *Do buddhistische non* [in Dutch]

¹² *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā* i.57

¹³ Referring to the traditional Southern Theravāda Buddhist telling of the first twenty years of the Buddha Sāsana after the Buddha’s awakening and embarking upon teaching as being a period of purity in the monastic Saṅgha,

with the Buddha in his *Yamaka-pāṭihāriya* or the "Twin Miracle" display at Sāvatti before he departed to teach in Tāvattīsa in the season prior, and had volunteered together with other arahant disciples to do so¹⁴, but – at least in some renderings – that she was asked by him then to "wait for the time". This time came with the Buddha's utterly dramatic return from heaven four months later, when the monastic Sangha and ruling leaders, great kings who were his disciples from several countries, gathered with their entourages to meet him and welcome his return.

Foremost Leading Disciple

As relayed in the *Samyutta Nikāya* and *Āṅguttara Nikāya*¹⁵, not only Uppalavaṇṇā Therī's *iddhi*, but also her abilities in leadership and teaching were extraordinary, and she and her contemporary, the arahant bhikkhunī Khemā Therī, were singled out by the Buddha as examples for all her fellow bhikkhunīs to look to and model themselves after on the spiritual path, with the two of them being placed, alongside the noble male arahants Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna, as the foremost female and male leaders – the *exemplars par excellence* – of his monastic Saṅgha¹⁶.

And this is all we find of her – at least in these elder strata of the Pāḷi Buddhist sutta and biographical texts¹⁷.

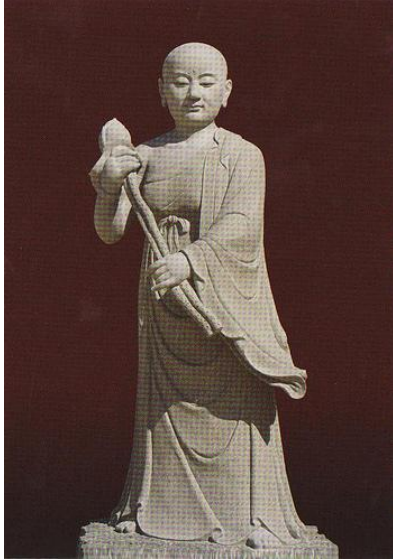
before the conditions became ripe for and amount of degeneration and the discipline of the Vinaya to begin to be established.

¹⁴ *Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā, & Divyāvadāna*. (The Avadāna texts are the Sanskrit as well as Chinese, Tibetan, Khotanese and Gandhari "sacred biography" genre of similar name with some similar and much significantly different content as compared to the Pāḷi Apadāna genre.) From PTS's *Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs* (p246): "Then this therī approached the Teacher when he went to the foot of the mango tree at the gates of the city of Sāvatti to perform the Twin Marvel, and she payed homage to him saying, 'Venerable sir, I will perform a marvel if the Blessed One permits me.' And she roared the lion's roar. The Teacher, when he was seated in the midst of the group of noble ones in the great monastery in the Jeta Grove, taking this matter as the occasion for placing the bhikkhunīs in order, placed this therī in the foremost position of those possessing supernormal powers:" *etad aggaṃ iddhi-matīnaṃ, yad idaṃ uppalavaṇṇā (Āṅguttara Nikāya 1:25). Sā aparabhāge satthu yamakapāṭihāriyakaraṇadvase "ahaṃ, bhante, pāṭihāriyaṃ karissāmi"ti sīhanādaṃ nadi*. And from the *Āṅguttara Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā* (v 237): *Satthā idaṃ kāraṇaṃ aṭṭhuppattim katvā jetavanavihāre nisīno paṭipāṭiyā bhikkhuniyo ṭhānantare ṭhapento imaṃ therim iddhimantīnaṃ aggaṭṭhāne ṭhapesīti*.

¹⁵ *Samyutta Nikāya* 2.17.24 (4), *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 2:176

¹⁶ This is reemphasized at her verses in the *Therī Apadāna* in the *Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā*. As per the venerable Ajahn Jumnieen Seelasettho Chongsakorn (born 1936 CE --), in his recitation of an oral tradition of the Southern Thai Forest tradition, of the bhikkhunīs, she was known as the "Left-hand Disciple of the Buddha," with Khemā Therī being known as his right-hand disciple. These positions are normally said to be held by the bhikkhu disciples Mahāmoggallāna and Sāriputta, but it may be there were both bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs considered such. Biographical information for Ajahn Jumnieen can be found in Jack Kornfield's *Forest Masters* and Kamala Tiyavanich's *Sons of the Buddha*.

¹⁷ We will delve into Vinaya texts later below.



“Utpalavarṇā Bhikṣuṇī” nahan rock carving
Fo Guang Shan Buddha Memorial Center
photo by Coco Rodriguez

Sacred Biography and Birth Stories

With time, her story began to develop – to be fleshed out or filled in – in the texts, and to evolve in a multiplicity of ways. These would most likely have been originally based in part upon older tales based in part upon fact, but as we shall see, clearly developed in the imaginations of both tellers and listeners in significantly different ways over time and space. Ways which have both been impacted by and also had substantial impact upon multiple evolutions of Buddhist doctrine, belief and practice.

There was a point where the earlier *Therīgāthā* transitioned into the *Therī Apadāna* genre, according to internal evidence within the *Therīgāthā* itself, most likely between the Chandragupta to Asokan era or not long thereafter. The *Therīgāthā* was first recorded as text in the first century BCE¹⁸ and the *Therī Apadāna*, a genre of heroes’ or saints’ biography meant for popular theatrical performance, is generally thought to have been recorded between then and the first two centuries of the Common Era. In the *Therī Apadāna*, Uppalavaṇṇā’s past life association and aspiration under previous Buddhas in prior eons and her intertwined destiny with the Seven Sisters – her co-contemporary woman arahants during the Buddha’s lifetime – begins to emerge and be developed. Her *Apadāna*¹⁹ opens by affirming her unexcelled superiority in supernormal powers amongst the

¹⁸ Around 80 BCE according to Caroline Rhys Davids in her *Psalms of the Early Buddhists* (London: Pali Text Society, 1909 & 1980) at 1: xvi. K. R. Norman, in *The Elders’ Verses II: Therīgāthā* (London: Pali Text Society, 1971), xix–lxi estimates that the *Therīgāthā* was composed over a three-hundred-year period between the sixth and third centuries BCE (xxi). He believes the *Therīgāthā* to have been recited at the Third Council. According to the *Dīpavaṃsa*, the fourth recitation and first textual recording of the *Vibhajjavāda* (Theravādan) Tipiṭaka at the Alu Vihāra took place during the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇī (29-17 BCE).

¹⁹ *Khuddakka Nikāya*: Therī Apadāna (2.9), Uppalavaṇṇā Therī Apadāna (vv 384-467)

bhikkhunīs, her enlightenment and her ending the *āsavas* (Skt: *āsravas*: taints, cankers or influxes/outflows), and her long term many life relationship with the Buddha-to-be as well as with his son who she speaks of as her brother, Rahula²⁰.

Her spiritual biography thus begins one hundred thousand eons ago, when she was born as a jewel-adorned naga princess named Vimalā, and she had a chance to meet the very ancient Buddha Padumuttara, who she was utterly impressed by, and gained the opportunity to hear teach. While he was teaching, she especially noticed a bhikkhunī amongst the *sāvaka* (f: *sāvikā*, Skt: *śrāvaka & śrāvikā*) disciples in his assembly who was “modest, unique, skilled in concentration and the absorption states”. Most interesting of all to her, she learned that bhikkhunī was commended by the Buddha for being best amongst those disciples of his possessing supernormal powers. Pleased and exceedingly joyful at heart, she then offered a great seven-day long almsgiving or *dana* to the monastic Saṅgha, and at the end of it, she came before the Buddha himself. She bowed, offered a garland of seven divine smelling lotus flowers at his feet, and asked if she too could attain to such as that bhikkhunī.

“O Hero, I shall be like the one praised by you a week ago, O Sage, if it is suitable, O Leader.”

Then the Teacher replied to her, “Be confident, young woman. In a future lifetime you will fulfill this desire. One hundred thousand eons from now there will be a Teacher in the world named Gotama through his lineage, a descendant of the Okkaka clan. There will be an heir to his Doctrine, a legitimate offspring of his Doctrine named Uppalavaṇṇā, renowned for her beauty. You will be one who attains mastery of direct knowledge, one who does the Teacher’s teaching, a disciple of the Teacher with all your taints exhausted.”²¹

Filled with exquisite joyful appreciation (*pa-muditā*), she then served the Buddha Padumuttara and his Saṅgha with requisites for the rest of her life, her heart full of loving kindness. As a result, she was reborn in the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, and later when she was reborn as a human, she once again gave alms with lotuses to another *Sammā Sambuddha* – this time the Buddha Vipassi – together with his Saṅgha. Again in this Fortunate Eon – the *Bhadda Kappa* (Skt: *Bhadra Kalpa*) – she was reborn near the Buddha Kassapa, the second of the seven daughters of the Varanasi King Kikī. Like flowers strung together in a garland, we find the internally-linked stories of these seven sisters²² – who in their final lives were the great women disciples Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Paṭācārā the Wise, Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā, Kisāgotamī, Dhammadinnā and Visākhā – running through the *Therī Apadāna*. All of them wished to go forth into monastic life in the Dispensation of the Buddha Kassapa, but disallowed by their father, the seven of them together shunned marriage and practiced the Buddha’s teaching at home in the comforts (or confines) of the palace as virgin lay renunciates. None of them realized enlightenment at that time, but were once more reborn in the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, and then again descended as human beings, in various incarnations.

²⁰ See endnote iv for more detail

²¹ *Uppalavaṇṇā Therī Apadāna* vv 8-12 as translated by William Pruitt in *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs (Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā Paramatthadīpanī VI)* by Acariya Dhammapāla. Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1999

²² There has been an association made between these human/divine Seven Sisters and the story of the *Sapta Matrika*, the ancient Vedic Divine Seven Mothers. See the work of Alice Collett in “Heuristics and History in the Shared Narrative of the Seven Sisters in the Therī Apadāna” for more on the Seven Sisters.

Our Uppalavaṇṇā, in one life having become a *gopālā* – a poor and simple peasant girl tending the cows and fields – again offered five hundred grains of puffed rice together with a lotus flower to a *pacceka-buddha*, while making a common aspiration for sons and beauty. In consequence of this, in perhaps her most miraculous incarnation, she was born from the calyx of a great forest lotus (a quasi-divine birth) and adopted by a rishi. Divinely beautiful and named Padumavatī (~“manifestation of the lotus”), she was taken to wife by the king with whom she miraculously gave birth to five hundred sons. All of her children became *pacceka-buddhas*, realizing impermanence upon seeing a barren lotus pod sans petals one day while out sporting in the water. Having thus lost her children, and missing them, milk streamed forth from her breasts on seeing other *pacceka-buddhas* when offering them alms (and more lotuses!), due to the power of her missing her children. Once again reborn in the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, lotuses sprang up beneath her feet wherever she walked, as they are said to do for bodhisattas, before her next to last birth which is told in the *Vessantara Jātaka*, in which she appears as the Bodhisatta’s daughter.

This brings us into the realm of the reemerging pre-Buddhist folk tales brought to new life in Buddhism as the Jātaka tales. These tales may have been told or retold by the Buddha in his lifetime as moral teaching stories to illuminate karmic causation (and were certainly popularized after his Parinibbāna as such). Many of the lives of Uppalavaṇṇā are found here, from the 100,000 eons between receiving her prediction of enlightenment to when she became an arahant. Uppalavaṇṇā figures prominently in the Jātaka genre, appearing in twenty-five or more Birth Stories of the past lives of the *Bodhisatta* (Skt: *Bodhisattva*) – the Buddha-to-be. She appears in various forms, most commonly as a goddess or as sister to the Bodhisatta, but also as his mother, his daughter and as an ascetic. Her most common role in the Jātakas in relationship to the Bodhisatta is that of a highly developed helper and supporter, repeatedly saving his life or saving his virtue. She frequently appears in close association with the god Sakka (Skt: Sakra), the “Lord of the Devas” also called *Sakkadevissara* or *Sakkadevindra* aka “Indra – the Lord of the Devas”.

The Jātaka Tales tell us Uppalavaṇṇā and the Bodhisatta lived the forest life together even in animal births, as in the Kharādiya Jātaka and Tipallatthamiga Jātaka (also called Sikkhākāma Jātaka), where she is the deer sister of the Bodhisatta deer, who brings her son to him for instruction in ways and means to avoid the deer trapper, a later synonym for Mara in the Buddha Gotama’s teaching. In the Mudulakkhana Jātaka, when the Bodhisatta was an ascetic, he fell in love with her and thus temporarily lost his spiritual powers; while she, the wife of another, used skillful means to return him to his senses and to the ascetic life. In the Kurudhamma Jātaka, she was the exemplary courtesan tested in virtue by Sakka who completed the recording of the teaching on the royal virtues, thus bringing much needed rain to the land.

As goddess, she appears as the Goddess of the Sea and savior of the Bodhisatta several times.

Thai mural painting: the Buddha-to-be Prince Mahājanaka is saved from drowning by the Goddess of the Sea Manimekhalā





She also appears as Sakka’s daughter the goddess Sirī (the Vedic goddess Srī or Srī Devi) whose virtue the Bodhisatta honors in the Sirikāḷakaṇṇi Jātaka. Additionally, she appears as an unnamed goddess who instructs the Bodhisatta on virtue when he smells a lotus flower in the Bhisapuppha Jātaka, another unnamed “goddess of the parasol” who advises the Bodhisatta in the all important determination in the famous Temiya Jatika, another unnamed daughter of the gods who intercedes to save his life in the Sāma Jātaka, and again as Sakka’s daughter the goddess Hirī while the Bodhisatta himself was Sakka in the Sudhābhajana Jātaka. Apparently this time as the Bodhisatta’s daughter when he was Sakka stayed strongly in her mind, or perhaps it was her second to last incarnation, for in her Apadāna, in her final birth – fully conscious of all her past lives – she still refers to herself as his daughter, although now his heir in Dhamma²³. Viewing the Jātaka Tales altogether, she appears thoroughly imbued with both virtue and divine power, and replete in her associations with both the supreme deities, her fellow members of the Saṅgha, and the Buddha-to-be. She is a main leading member of the Buddha’s spiritual family.

In Java, Bali, Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand, Uppalavaṇṇā’s past life form as the goddess Sri or Devi Sri (Thai: Mae Posop) still receives both honor and special offerings as the Goddess of the Rice Harvest. She normally stands on a lotus pedestal. Here depicted holding sheaves of grain, she is often depicted pouring out water from her body for fertile crop growth.

In some of these past incarnations, she continues to enjoy popularity, honor and fame to this day. The Goddess of the Sea, Maṇimekhalā, enjoyed such popularity in South Indian Tamil Buddhism, and one of the foremost and only remaining classics of Tamil Buddhism, *Maṇimekhalai*, was named after her in the 2nd century of the Common Era. In the Mahājanaka Jātaka, the Goddess of the Sea Maṇimekhalā still enjoys great acclaim in Sri Lankan Buddhism, as well as in Thai and Cambodian Buddhism in which she still receives regular yearly ritual cultural honor and propitiation as both the Southeast Asian Goddess of Lightning and of the Rains as well as the South Asian Goddess of the Sea for her rescue of the Buddha.

Meanwhile, the great therī’s sacred biography over many lifetimes was fleshed out, closely related to the Buddha in both human and divine forms. The story of the “Eleventh Miracle at Saṅkassa,” as depicted in rock-cut engravings, proliferated throughout India from east to west and north to south, represented in most all of the major sites of pilgrimage and great and long-lasting monastic establishments. In almost all of these images, she appears in both name and form closely connected with the Buddha and the divine beings Sakka and Brahma, both in her form as an ascetic, and her form as a quasi-divine supreme world ruler.

As with the image of the Sānkissa stairway to heaven, she herself is a representative of transcendence, established in and with both genders, the sacred and the secular, the human, the transcendent enlightened, and the divine.

²³ Vv 389-393

New Transformations

We now return to the story of Uppalavaṇṇā the enlightened human person – the arahant – in her last lifetime.

By the fourth century of the Common Era, perhaps near a thousand years after both she and the Buddha's last birth and *Parinibbāna*, an important shift in the telling of her story appears that also occurred in other religious spheres of the time. When the fourth century Buddhist monastic pilgrim Fa Hsien recorded her story as he heard it told in his travel diary, he was unsure whether Uppalavaṇṇā appeared before the Buddha as a cakravartin by *her own* iddhi power or not. Doubt in the ability of a real life human woman to have such power and position had emerged and taken hold, and a split began to occur. Fa Hsien's recording in Chinese as well as other later texts reflect this doubtful ambiguity, with the suggestion being that the power of transformation – specifically gender transformation – that she was said to have employed, could well have not been accomplished by herself as an arahant, but rather might have been accomplished by the Buddha's power instead, as one facet of *his* multi-faceted miracle of that day. This reflects the post-Parinibbāna trend within Indian Buddhism, further developed in the Common Era, towards greater glorification of the Buddha and his power, and a diminution of the role, powers and transcendental enlightenment of the arahant. Also, of the sixteen original arahants that were popularized at that time for their vows to remain in the world, and who continued with a level of cult popularity within Mahāyāna Buddhist culture – to this day widely known in northern and East Asian Buddhism for their miraculous powers – all are male, indicating changes in perception of gendered possibilities in the Indian spiritual sphere and cultural milieu with regards to real living or historical human persons, if not deities.

The theme of gender transformation, especially from female to male²⁴, and gendered discrimination on the spiritual path and with regards to enlightenment, begins to enjoy much attention in the early Mahāyāna texts, which began to appear at around the same time as the early Alu Vihāra Pāli and Gāndhāran Kharoṣṭhī texts were first recorded, following on the popularity and further development of the Apadāna and Jātaka genres. This time was the turning of the millennium, the transition into what we now call the Common Era.

The *Therī Apadāna* appears to record significant reaction or response to this offensive, that is, to a rise in views of human feminine incapability with regards to both spiritual attainment and leadership²⁵. The Buddha is portrayed in the Apadānas as asking three of the foremost leading

²⁴ The verses of Therī Isidāsī in the second to last section of Forty Verses, mention gender transformation from male to female as well as to hermaphrodite and hell being as karmic punishment for sexual misconduct. The Sinhalese Edition shows variation, not mentioning the gender transformation aspect. The last two sections of verses in the *Therīgathā* have content which historically places them during or near the Chandragupta to Asokan eras (320 -232 BCE) and suggest an intrusion of Jain doctrinal content with regards the annihilation of karma via austerities. For a discussion of the date of her verses, see PTS's *Elders Verses II*, p 148 ad vv. 400-47. In Isidāsī's Apadāna verses, this theme is elaborated to include not only hell, but animal rebirth, sickness and castration as well.

²⁵ According to N. Shanta in *The Unknown Pilgrims*, the Digambara Jains declared that a woman cannot be liberated as long as her *atman* resides in the female body (p 62). The Digambara sect became schismatic from the

bhikkhunīs who were his close relations, either before the monastic precepts preventing such acts were established or in special exception to them²⁶, to perform displays of supernatural power – *by their own powers* – to convince those unwitting individuals both within his Sāsana, within the Fourfold Assembly, and within all assemblies involved with Buddhism who were holding doubts and false views regarding women’s spiritual potential and abilities.

“*Thīna dhammābhisamaye, ye bālā vimatiṃ gata; tesam ditṭhippabānattham, iddhiṃ dassehi gotamī*’.

“There are these fools who doubt that women too can grasp the truth; Gotamī, show the spiritual potency of your *iddhi* that they might give up their false views.

- The Buddha to his stepmother Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī Therī, *Gotamī Apadāna*, v 178 .

Iddhiñcāpi nidassehi, mama sāsana-kārike; parisānañca sabbāsam, kañkham chindassu yāvata.

“Demonstrate the spiritual potency of your *iddhi* to those enacting my Sāsana; cut off whatever doubts remain within all the Assemblies.”

- The Buddha to his former wife Yasodharā Therī, *Yasodharā Apadāna*, v 967 .

Iddhiñcāpi nidassehi, mama sāsana-kārike; cattaso parisā aña, kañkham chindāhi yāvata.

“Demonstrate the spiritual potency of your *iddhi* to those enacting my Sāsana; for the Fourfold Assembly now, that remaining doubts be eliminated.”

- The Buddha to his spiritual daughter Uppalavañṇā Therī, *Uppalavañṇā Apadāna*, v 388



Deva Rohaṇa: In this contemporary Thai painting the cakkavatti with retinue are in green colors wearing ancient Indus Valley-like adornments

Svetambaras, in part, over the issue of *strimukti* – the possibility of liberation for women – which was one of the main factors that split the Jaina community between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE (p 140). For the Jainas, this question was based in large part on the perceived impossibility of women practicing the perfect “sky-clad” discipline as well as not equally being able to practice *jhāna* (Skt: *dhyāna*) meditation, both of which were considered essential for liberation by the Digambaras. In *Elder’s Verses II* (p xxxii), K. R. Norman postulates the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE to be the period of the development of the Buddhist Apadāna literature.

²⁶ See PTS’s Vinaya ii.112, iii.91ff and iv.23ff. Also the Vinaya Commentary at vi.1203.

According to Ācariyā Dhammapāla in his *Therīgathā* Commentary, the demonstration was her “lion’s roar,” she then being placed by the Buddha “in the foremost position of those possessing supernormal powers.²⁷”

However, differing Buddhist traditions seem to have gone differing storytelling directions specifically in this regard²⁸, with some approving of Uppalavaṇṇā’s demonstrative acts at Sāṅkassa, others rebuking her for them²⁹, others subverting her, and still others removing her from the scene³⁰ and/or revoking her powers entirely. This was of course not the case with the story of Uppalavaṇṇā and of gender capabilities only. Rather it was part of a much larger movement within Buddhism, with the development of numbers of sectarian schools holding different views on a significant few or wide variety of subjects in Dhamma and Discipline. Questions addressed included whether the monastic discipline is adaptable over time, the nature of the Buddha himself, the nature of the Path and entry into it, and the nature of both phenomenal and ultimate reality.

It is significant to note that in several of the perhaps later Pāli versions of the story of Uppalavaṇṇā’s appearance in Sāṅkassa as we have them recorded today, it is specified that the Buddha has gone to the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven to teach the Abhidhamma (Skt: Abhidharma) to his mother the Lady Mahā Māyā, or in the Pāli-text commentaries of Buddhaghosa, to his father. This may mark these tellings of the story as contemporary or post-contemporary with the development of the Abhidharma and promotional of it. This period of the development of various abhidhamma schools may have been part of the pre-Asokan or post-Asokan development of what has become known as the “Eighteen Schools of Buddhism”. (In the Sarvāstivādan and Mahāvihāravāsin Schools, Sāriputta who becomes the new hero in this scene was the originator of the Abhidhamma.)

It may also be significant that the arahant therī Uppalavaṇṇā has appeared as a *cakkavatti* (Skt: *cakravartī*)³¹ or Wheel Turning Monarch in this story, a mythological form that was revered in her co-contemporary and rival Jaina community which figured prominently in the commentarial stories of the previous miracle at Sāvatti just a few months earlier. The *cakkavatti* is a role that the Pāli-texts and some of the Āgama Sūtras now reserve for men alone, together with buddhahood and the roles of leading heavenly divinities. The appearance of the reservation of this role for men alone in Buddhist suttas has been considered by some scholars to potentially be a later accretion to earlier

²⁷ As translated by William Pruitt in *Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs* (p 246)

²⁸ There is evidence from the 1st millennium CE of certain Buddhist texts containing and seemingly promoting as orthodox misogynist ideas and statements that other Buddhist texts specifically cite and decry as the views and practices of non-Buddhist barbarians. For a discussion of this subject see Jonathan Silk’s *Riven by Lust* (pp 83-85).

²⁹ In the 14th century *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* the Buddha “rebukes her, saying, ‘It is not seeming in a *bhikshuni* to perform magical feats in the presence of the Master.’” (As quoted by Rockhill in his *Life of the Buddha*.)

³⁰ ie *Sarabha Migā Jātaka* in which Sāriputta is the one to greet the Buddha and be glorified

³¹ According to Jan Nattier in her *Once upon a Future Time* (p 13), “the motif of the *cakravartin* is purely non-Ariyan. It is absent from the early Vedic literature, emerges suddenly (without any evidence of evolution in the *Upanisads*, and appears only sporadically in early Buddhist literature. It is central however to Jaina mythology, where the ancient *cakravartins* comprise a series parallel to that of the enlightened sages or *Tirthankaras*.”

strata of the Pāli texts³². Several later Mahāyāna doctrines, although varying in content between teaching traditions, also reserved the attainment of buddhahood, and in several noteworthy texts, even initial entry into and development on the bodhisattva path for male incarnation³³. Thus the transformation from womanhood to manhood, whether in one lifetime, or over many lives, gained a special new and fundamental spiritual importance in several Buddhist traditions that it does not appear to have had in early Buddhist teachings, with the goal no longer the enlightenment of the early Sāvaka Arahant Saṅgha, but entry into a bodhisattva path and buddhahood³⁴ that is ostensibly open to all independent of monastic status – but *in male form only*. And thus theories or doctrines of the mutability or immutability of gender began to appear and be dealt with increasingly within Buddhist culture and teachings in various creative ways. Counter traditions gave rise to the appearance of female buddhas such as Tārā, Vajrayogini, Yeshe Tsogyal, Princess Chökyi Drönme, the one thousand completely enlightened woman disciples of Naropa, and Tantric precepts forbidding the disparagement of womanhood³⁵. In Pāli-text commentarial traditions, both male and female *sāvaka-bodhisattas and -buddhas* also appeared, as another way of expressing the aspiration to and then awakening of the sāvaka arahant³⁶.

³² See “The *Bahudhātuka-sutta* and Its Parallels on Women’s Inabilities” by Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 2009.

³³ According to Asanga’s highly influential *Bodhisattvabhūmi*: “a bodhisattva . . . from the time he has passed beyond the first incalculable age (of his career) has completely abandoned the woman’s estate. . . . Ascending (thereafter) to the most excellent throne of enlightenment, he is never again reborn as a woman. All women are by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence. And not by one who is by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence, is completely perfected Buddhahood attained.”

In a 14th century CE [teaching by Nichiren on the superiority of the Lotus Sūtra for the attainment of Buddhahood](#) he summarizes: “The Kegon [Avatamsaka] Sūtra states: Women are messengers of hell who can destroy the seeds of Buddhahood. They may look like bodhisattvas, but at heart they are like *yaksha* demons.” The *Gonjikinyo* Sūtra [銀色女經] says that even though the eyes of the Buddhas of the three existences should come out and fall to the ground, the women of the world could never attain Buddhahood. Another Sūtra says, “Women are great demon spirits who devour all people.” And bodhisattva Nagarjuna in his *Daichido Ron* [Mahaprajnaparamitapadesa Shastra] says that just looking upon a woman once forms the karma to fall into hell for a long time.”

³⁴ According to the popular Lotus Sūtra Chapter 2: “Again, Shariputra, if there should be monks or nuns who claim that they already have attained the status of arhat, that this is their last incarnation, that they have reached the final nirvana, and that therefore they have no further intention of seeking anuttara-samyaksambodhi, then you should understand that such as these are all persons of overbearing arrogance. Why do I say this? Because if they are monks who have truly attained the status of arhat, then it would be unthinkable that they should fail to believe this Law...”

³⁵ The fourteenth tantric root precept is not to disparage (belittle) women. The tantric precepts are listed in the Six-Session Guru Yoga. In Tsongkhapa’s *Fruit Clusters of Siddhis* translated by Gareth Sparham in *Tantric Ethics* (Boston, Wisdom, 2005) on p 111 Tsongkhapa quotes this as “Fourteenth is despising women, whose essence is wisdom.” He explains, “[women] are the agent that produces the [wisdom of great bliss] in the yogi.”

³⁶ See Ācariyā Dhammapāla’s *Udāna Aṭṭhakathā* (*Udana Commentary*, translated by Peter Masefield, volume I, 1994, Pali Text Society, p 94; Theragāthā Commentary, PTS edition, volume I, p 10, not yet translated, cited by Pruitt in *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, volume XXIX). According to the *Great Chronicle of Buddhas* (II.1-3), a Burmese compilation of the *Buddhavaṃsa* plus its Commentary, by Tipiṭakadhara Dhammabhandagarika U Vicittasarabhivamsa, a *sāvaka-buddha* who has realized *sāvaka-bodhi* and a *pacceka-buddha* who has realized *pacceka-bodhi* are differentiated from a *sammā-sambuddha* who has realized *sammā-sambodhi*. “The Noble Person who has thus attained Enlightenment of a Disciple (*Sāvaka-Bodhiñāṇa*) is called an Enlightened Disciple (*Sāvaka-Buddha*); he may have the status of a Chief Disciple, a Great Disciple or an Ordinary Disciple.” Those who aspire to sāvaka-awakening are termed *sāvaka-bodhisattas*, and so forth for *pacceka-bodhisattas* and *sammā-sambodhisattas*. In Ācariyā Dhammapāla’s *Treatise on the Ten Paramis* (as translated by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi), entry into the [*sammā-sam*]bodhisatta path is reserved for males only.

The depictions of the Buddha Descending from the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven deva scene known in Pāḷi as Deva Rohaṇa continued to develop in popular Buddhist art into the eighth and even through the fourteenth centuries of the Common Era, popular as long as Buddhism lasted in India, as well as in places where Buddhism spread abroad.

In later renditions of the scene, certain important variations appear to the story. Buddha images come to figure prominently in the stories. Sakka changes to his more common later name Indra, and in some places one of the two gods disappears, leaving only One God, whether Sakka/Indra or more commonly Brahma. The Lady Mahā Māyā in the differing renditions of this story also variously becomes Queen of Heaven, or a heavenly consort to Sakka, or changes gender and becomes a ruling male deity Santusita, or a minor male deity, or either remanifests or returns to her primordial forms as the female protective deity Ushnishavijayā, Prajnāparamitā, or Tārā, all known as Mother of All Buddhas³⁷.



8th century Burmese Deva Rohana carving

However, in the telling of Uppalavaṇṇā's component of the story, one common consensus emerges: that either she or the Buddha transformed her into a male cakkavatti as part of the miracle that has occurred, illustrating either the Buddha's or her own power over form and thus the non-essentiality or mutability of gender. And in this scene memorialized in great multiplicity, after her transformation into divine ruling male form, in front of everyone, she transforms back into her feminine form as a bhikkhunī, where she bows down to pay her respects, and before anyone else, welcomes the Buddha back to earth. And this is the unique and crowning aspect of Uppalavaṇṇā's story in this image. For, having been the greatest (perhaps male) worldly ruler, her final and enlightened form is of a female ascetic by choice, illustrating not only a transcendence of the relative and going beyond, but a congruent – and perhaps thus far more radical – manifestation of the mundane and supermundane, the essential and conventional.

³⁷ Another bodhisattva, Candi (or Cundi), from whom the mantra “Om mani padme hum” comes, is associated with Avalokiteśvara and is also known as the Mother of All Buddhas. (She is also known as Devi Sri Sri Candi Mata who is the Hindu feminine trikaya goddess Mahatmaya, now assimilated into the Hindu goddess Durga). According to Red Pine in *Heart Sūtra: The Womb of Buddhas*, in the Mahāyāna Trikaya Doctrine, Prajnaparamitā represents the *Dharmakāya*, Santusita the *Sambhogakāya*, and Avalokiteśvara the *Nirmānakāya* – all three manifestations of the Mother of All Buddhas. Mahamaya appeared first in Buddhism with the early Theravāda, Santusita with the Abhidharma, Prajñāpāramitā and Avalokiteśvara with the Mahāyāna Perfection of Wisdom teachings, and Tārā with the Tantrayāna.

Mahayana Transformation



Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā. Blue-skinned Bhikṣuṇī Utpala bows at the feet of the Buddha with Brahma and Indra on either hand

But then, as the world turns and moves on, and name and fame are fickle companions, Uppalavaṇṇā begins to be moved aside in some traditions which found others the more suitable heroes of their new and changing times for the greatness of the honor.

The first recorded variation comes from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* or “Perfection of Wisdom in Eighty-thousand Lines” Mahāyāna teachings, in which the bhikkhu Subhuti is converted from early sāvaka arahant to great conduit of the Mahāyāna Perfection of Wisdom teachings. In this variation of the story, Subhuti, with the superior eye of his transcendental wisdom, although not physically present on the scene, sees the Buddha in his *Dharmakāya* aspect upon his return, *before* Uppalavaṇṇā with her arahant’s divine eye is able to see and greet him.

In this telling, the Buddha acknowledges that Subhuti has seen him first, and that Uppalavaṇṇā’s intention to be the first to greet him has been superseded. No longer is she commended by the Buddha for her powers and acclaimed as his great disciple; instead she has been one-upped and disgraced³⁸. In some stories, she is even rebuked by the Buddha for her ultimately failed display and specifically denied the position of a foremost leading disciple³⁹. Finally, in the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, Utpalavaṇṇā, in these stories made powerless in the face of such karma, is beaten to death by the man who becomes the Buddha’s arch-rival and enemy, Devadatta⁴⁰.

³⁸ Per 7th century CE Chinese Buddhist pilgrim to India Hsuan Tsang and verses 166-173 of the Khotanese Mahāyāna *Book of Zambasta* (tentatively dated to pre 8th century). In the *Book of Zambasta*, Utpalavaṇṇā and Kātyāyana (Pāli: Kāccāna or Kāccāyana) have a showdown. A combination of the male Elders Kātyāyana and Subhuti deny her or any other woman in the Sāsana such an honor as the role of a “chief disciple”, which is then affirmed by the Buddha in his rebuke affirming the “uncompassionate, ungrateful, deceptive and wretched” nature of all womanhood no matter their state. The *vimoksa* (liberation) of the arahats is denied, and buddhahood promised through the merit of making of Buddha images.

³⁹ See Rockhill’s quotations of the Tibetan *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* in *The Life of the Buddha*, 81. See Chapter 23 of the Khotanese Mahāyāna *Book of Zambasta*.

⁴⁰ Sokha Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism under “Utpalavaṇṇā” per the writings of Nichiren Diashonin (on the Four Debts of Gratitude). According to the venerable Anālayo (personal communication), she is also dealt a death blow by Devadatta in the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Devadatta then falling alive into the Avīci Hell for having committed one of the “sins of immediate retribution”. In the *Ekottara Āgama* it is the exemplary teaching bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā Therī who is murdered by Devadatta rather than Uppalavaṇṇā.

However, these renditions of the story do not seem to have taken over the developing Mahāyāna uniformly, but to have just been one of many currents rising and falling over time within its various schools. For in the popular *Sutra of the Wise and Foolish*⁴¹, Utpala appears as the superior teacher of five hundred enlightened bhikkhunīs by teaching on her past lives and the inevitable loss of all that was beloved and pleasing to her. This story seems to have spread far and wide, appearing in translations and popular masters’ teachings from Mongolia and Tibet to Japan and Korea. As late as the fourteenth century Tibetan thanka paintings depict a bhiksunī Utpalavarṇā not only greeting the Buddha as a cakravartī with full retinue and offerings of the seven treasures, but also depict her – *when she returns to her bhiksunī form* – receiving the Buddha’s prophecy of *anuttara samyak sambodhi*, the unexcelled, perfect and complete enlightenment of buddhahood⁴².



Tibetan thanka painting with Bhikṣuṇī Utpalavarṇā in royal garb as a cakravartin with retinue offering the seven treasures on the left and in ascetic’s robes receiving the Buddha’s prediction to buddhahood on the right.⁴³

⁴¹ *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish (Mdo Bdzans Blun)* or *Ocean of Narratives (Uliger-un Dalai)* 26. See translation from the Mongolian by Stanley Frye (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1981, 2006)

⁴² It may be surprising to Theravadans to find her receiving a further prediction of enlightenment after her awakening as an arahant in which she has already ended coming to any further states of being.

⁴³ See Bhutan Journals [here](#) for a description of this image.

The Pali-text Transformations

She fares differently in more than one way in the Theravāda Pāli Text traditions as well, which begin to show variations in the written commentarial forms of her story by at least the fifth and sixth centuries of the Common Era in Sri Lanka. The Mahāyāna and Theravāda were both strong and in some competition for royal patronage and support on the Jeweled Isle one thousand years after the Parinibbāna. In the first such variance, a male deva Uppalavaṇṇa appears (*deva-avatara*) on the scene in Sri Lanka – first in the *Dīpavaṃsa* and then further in the later *Mahāvamsa* – as a founding protective deity. This deity was recorded as having been sent by the Buddha and Sakka upon the Buddha’s Parinibbāna deathbed to the Isle of Dhamma to meet the exiled Indian Prince Vijaya, the founder of the Sinhalese dynasty. This story is used, amongst others, to give divine support directly from the Buddha for the unique blessings of the Buddha Sāsana to the beautiful island, as Uppalavaṇṇa Devo sprinkles the first Sinhalese inhabitants with holy water therein, and ties *paritta* blessing strings or *pirith* thread upon the limbs of these people, promising their blessings and protection⁴⁴.

Around the same time, strange and interesting things begin to happen with Uppalavaṇṇā the human in both her cakkavattī-emperor and monastic-bhikkhunī forms in the new Pāli-text editions of the ancient commentaries or *aṭṭhakathās* generally attributed to the illustrious and prolific Pāli-text commentator, Ācariyā Buddhaghosa. In the first instance, in Buddhaghosa’s *Commentary to the Dhammapada*, Uppalavaṇṇā disappears from the popular Deva Rohaṇa story entirely. She is replaced by another of the Buddha’s great foremost male disciples, the noble Sāriputta, and the event rendered one for Sāriputta’s glorification, and exclusively that of the other leading bhikkhu males. In the second case, Uppalavaṇṇā is represented as so attractive a young woman before her going forth that she drives men mad, and is sent forth gladly by her father to prevent there being a potential war over her marriage. And in the third case, although her awakening is acknowledged in the *Dhammapada* Commentary, Uppalavaṇṇā’s arahant powers over matter seem to either be lost or to become defunct⁴⁵, as she is helplessly raped by her cousin Nanda, who is driven to madness, crime and death, falling into hell alive due to his desire for her (all dramatizations of the grave dangers of desire and lust). Not only are her individual powers unable to protect her in this final story, but the entire Bhikkhunī Saṅgha is affected, their days of refuge dwelling in the wilds

⁴⁴ See, “[Upulvan or Uppalavaṇṇa – The Guardian Diety of Sri Lanka](#)” by Professor Dhammavihari. Also see, [The Buddhist Visnu: Religious transformation, politics and culture](#) by John Holt.

⁴⁵ It is interesting and perhaps significant that her leading male counterpart, Mahāmoggallāna, one of the Buddha’s foremost two leading bhikkhu disciples and also foremost amongst the bhikkhus in his mastery of supernatural powers, is also recorded in the Pāli-text Commentaries to the *Dhammapada* and *Jātakas* to have been beaten to death (a type of death she shares with him in some stories), as a kind of inevitable kammic retribution. The story goes that this was a result of evil past-life karma, but it could also simply have been that he was taken by surprise. In the Pāli-text suttas the exercise of miraculous powers requires an *iddhi abhisankhāra*, which appears to mean some kind of mental preparation.

recorded as there coming to an end⁴⁶. As rape is often portrayed as a means of feminine subjugation and masculine empowerment, and murder so independent of gender, it is questionable here whether such might have happened at some time posthumously, within a culture in which tales were developed and adapted as suitable according to perceived need.

Those with knowledge of the Pāli Texts have said that “Uppalavaṇṇā’s being accosted is attested to in the Bhikkhu Vibhaṅga of the Vinaya which is an early text”⁴⁷ and many South and Southeast Asian Buddhists believe the entire Pāli Tipiṭaka to be the pristine and original words of the Buddha. And yet scholars of the sutta and vinaya texts have well noted that not only the sutta collections, but also the vinaya collections of the Pāli Texts appears to show stratification, with parts earlier and with parts of the Vinaya Pitaka considered of least antiquity undoubtedly of both earlier and later Sri Lankan origin. There are clear and undisputed marks within the *Parivara* vinaya text of this, and the *Samantapāsādikā* records points of the Mahāvihāra Vinaya Vibhaṅga being open for debate and for what might be considered as significant – even extra-Buddhist – editorial decision-making regarding between the first, second and fifth centuries in Sri Lanka, specifically with regards to issues related to the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and its discipline⁴⁸. Such was recorded as amongst seriously debated topics, with variation between the texts and stances of the Abhayagiri Vihāra, Jetavana

⁴⁶ It is interesting that in this story in the DA (which might be projecting then contemporary practices upon the past), the bhikkhunīs seem to already have a developed lifestyle, as Uppalavaṇṇā becomes an arahant in the *Upasatha* Hall which she is tending for her bhikkhunī community. She is found living in a furnished *kuṭṭi*, a lodging not commonly mentioned for bhikkhunīs in older texts. According to the *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā* at II,49, following the rape of Uppalavaṇṇā, the Buddha requested King Pasenadi of Kosala to offer established lodgings for the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha within the sheltered and protected city walls. The Commentary here contrasts with other parts of the Pāli-text Vinaya. In example, in *Cūlavagga* X, the Vinaya does not record the *vasana* city (*wat*) dwelling mentioned established for bhikkhunīs in such terms, nor any such inner city lodgings for bhikkhunīs. Rather, the first lodging recorded as allowed for bhikkhunīs was not the Rājakārāma or another royally offered *arāma*, but a storehouse (*uddosita*). The commentary to SN records the Rājakārāma as originally built outside the city walls for sectarians and then offered to the Bhikkhu Saṅgha. Inner-city lodgings for bhikkhunīs begin to appear main stream in the later *Apadāna* literary genre closer around the beginnings of the Common Era.

⁴⁷ Clause 7 of the Pāli-text vibhaṅga explication to Bhikkhu Pārājika One relates Uppalavaṇṇā Bhikkhunī’s molestation by a certain young man (no name given), and accounts her blameless. There is no mention of any new discipline established as a result, other than the flushing out of the details of Pārājika One. Interestingly, the clauses which directly follow (8 & 9) deal with *itthi* and *purisa liṅgaṃ pātubhūtaṃ* -- natural gender transformation – for both male and female monastics equally. The text affirms that a bhikkhu or bhikkhunī who trans-genders is still fully ordained, and automatically comes under the appropriate monastic discipline for their new gender. There is no mention of any karmic blame or disciplinary repercussions for such gender transfer.

⁴⁸ See “The case of the nun Mettiya reexamined” by Shayne Clark (pp 120-121, p 124). See also von Hinüber in “Buddhist Law ” (1995) pp 218-219 and “Buddhist Law II: Some Additions and Corrections” (1997) pp 227-230 re *Samantapāsādikā* (iii.582-3). According to the *Samantapāsādikā*, King Bhātika Tissa (perhaps Bhātikābhaya), a devout Buddhist, become involved in a dispute over varying readings and renditions of Vinaya as held by the bhikkhus of the Abhayagiri and Mahāvihāra bhikkhus. He appointed a lay brahmin minister named Dighakārāyāna, skilled in languages and judicial affairs, to hear the case and decide the correct rendering of the Buddha’s past pronouncement with regards to the bhikkhunī Mettiyā and Dabba Mallaputta Thera. His verdict was then, by royal order, held to be correct Vinaya. Contemporary scholarship, as in Clark’s work, would tend to recommend the opposite verdict (see Clark and “Subtle Silks” p 25 for more detail).

Vihāra and Mahāvihāra⁴⁹. The Vinaya tradition of the contemporary Pāli-texts – one of several of the old Theravāda traditions – is that of the Mahā Vihāra or Mahāvihāravāsin.

However, although the Pāli-text Vinaya's Bhikkhu Vibhaṅga mentions an attempted molestation of Uppalavaṇṇā⁵⁰, in the explication of Pārājika One it is, discipline-wise, simply with regards to a question arisen amongst some bhikkhus who were speculating over whether an arahant might still enjoy sensual contact or not, and thinking that s/he naturally could. What emerges is the Buddha's affirmation that arahants are without passion, as he says with regards to the arahant bhikkhunī⁵¹ involved:

*Like water on a lotus leaf,
or mustard seed on needle point,
whoso clings not to sensual things,
that one I call a Brāhmin True.*

Brāhmaṇa Vagga, *Dhammapada* v 401

However, those who attack arahant women, as those who abuse their mothers, whether out of hatred or lust, become subject to very serious karmic consequences. In the *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā*, the earth opens up beneath the feet of Uppalavaṇṇā's rapist as he departs, and he is directly swallowed up by hell⁵². This is much as the punishment inflicted by the commentaries upon the man who became competitor and arch-enemy of the Buddha, Devadatta, who we have already seen in some stories to be credited with Uppalavaṇṇā or Dhammadinnā's death. In the *Dhammapada* itself, not mentioning whether "the fool" is Devadatta, Nanda or mentioned in general, the Buddha in this verse which bears Uppalavaṇṇā's name in warning simply says:

⁴⁹ See "Subtle Silks of Ferrous Firmness: Buddhist Nuns in Early and Medieval Sri Lanka and Their Role in the Propagation of Buddhism" by R. A. L. H. Gunawardana (pp 24-26 and pp 27-32)

⁵⁰ In the Four-fold Vinaya of the Dharmaguptaka (at T.1428, p.974a10-13), Nandā is the name of the *bhikkhunī* who is raped in this story, not the rapist; however, the molestation happens at a place of entertainment, not alone in the woods, with staying in places of entertainment then forbidden by the Buddha. All but one of the stories associated with Uppalavaṇṇā in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya are associated with other figures – both bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs – in the Pāli Texts, and vice-versa. The solitary well-matching story seems to be that of the bhikkhu Udayin's absconding with Uppalavaṇṇā's robe which appears in the Pāli-texts in the Vibhaṅga to Bhikkhu Nissaggiya Paccitiya 5 and in Dharmaguptaka Bhikṣu Nihsargika Paccitika 4.

⁵¹ In the Dharmaguptaka as in footnote 50 above, it is Nandā Bhikkhunī herself who affirms that she was without passion in direct inquiry, rather than the Buddha who makes this affirmation as in the Pāli-texts. In the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, at Parājikā One, it is another of the Buddha's foremost bhikkhunī disciples, Bhadrā Kapilānī (rather than Utpalavaṇṇā) who is raped by King Ajātasātru (who has then recently murdered his father) and then afterwards, upon inquiry, affirms that she is beyond passion. In the Tibetan canonical *Kangyur* texts, it is Utpalavaṇṇā who with her supernatural powers rescues Bhadrā from King Ajātasātru before she can be harmed, causing the king to repent and beg her forgiveness.

⁵² This telling seems to be akin to the developing genre of the primary and supplementary (*ānantaryasabhāga* or *upānantarīya*) "sins of immediate retribution" taken up in the *Abhidharmakosabhāṣya* (IV.106-107ab) and *Mahāvīyutpatti* (2329-2334) which list both the murder of a female arahat and one predicted for buddhahood as such (so Utpalavaṇṇā or Dhammadinnā would qualify in both cases). According to Jonathan Silk in his *Riven by Lust* (p 25-26), also "in the *Yogacarabhūmi* we find the first item of the five sins of the same category as the sins of immediate retribution stated quite clearly to be sexually approaching a female arhat or one's mother... it is the first of the supplementary sins of immediate retribution." In the Pali-text bhikkhu and bhikkhunī ordination *kammavācās*, the *antarāyika-dhammas* are originally the list of health factors and social obligations which may exclude an individual from full ordination.

*As long as the evil deed does not bear fruit,
the fool thinks it is sweet like honey;
but when the evil deed does bear fruit,
the fool suffers for it.*

Uppalavaṇṇā Therī Vatthu, *Dhammapada* v 69

If the *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā*'s commentarial story of Uppalavaṇṇā's rape in relation to the verses above were in fact ancient, and changes were made in the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha's discipline and lifestyle with this occurrence, the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha does not seem to have been aware of it in any of its texts. The story is utterly absent in the Bhikkhunī Paṭimokkha, Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga, Therīgāthā and Therī Apadāna in which Uppalavaṇṇā does appear and in which many sordid tales are told. The main place of such telling with regards to the bhikkhunīs' monastic discipline is the Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga and its third *saṅghādisesa* precept, in addition to numerous *pācittiya* precepts⁵³. The Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga's explication of the third saṅghādisesa precept – the main precept which places restrictions on the bhikkhunīs' individual freedom of movement for safety reasons – would seem the obvious place to find Uppalavaṇṇā's story and that of the restrictions upon the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha that the *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā* claims arose because of her rape. The Vinaya's *Cūlavagga* also, which mentions with uncharacteristic brevity towards the end of its Bhikkhunī chapter that bhikkhunīs were raped and their dwelling in the wilds ended, seems to know nothing of either the cause, the persons involved, or of such a story⁵⁴. Nor does any other part of the Pāli-text Vinaya. Although someone unfamiliar with Vinaya might guess this to be in order to spare the fainthearted the gory details, those knowledgeable of Vinaya will know how this is not the trend of this group of texts, but rather the contrary. Thus it becomes a stark absence, when considering the likely truthfulness of the story. Additionally, all other early stories in the Therīgāthā and Bhikkhunī Saṃyutta, both of hers and of other early bhikkhunīs who were so approached by rogues, illustrate notably different trends⁵⁵.

⁵³ In the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, the occasion warrants the promulgation of a *pācittiya* precept to lock the door of one's monastic lodging before lying down (see below).

⁵⁴ Unlike the Pāli-texts, the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya (T.1428, p.926a5-19) retains four nissayas for bhikkhunīs including the dwelling 'at the root of a tree'. However, in Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, despite numerous potential origin stories, at p.928a15-17, similar to the Pāli-text *Cūlavagga*, it is very briefly and without origin story mentioned that the Buddha forbids bhikkhunīs to live in the wilds (araṇya). The reason given is just that 'some things occurred'. The origin however seems perhaps connected with a story of attempted but *unsuccessful* assault on Uppalavaṇṇā at T.1428, pp.929c29-930a9, which concludes: "bhikkhunīs should not frequent araṇya abodes" - 比丘尼不應至阿蘭若處. In the Pāli-texts the T.1428 story directly aforementioned is not the story of Uppalavaṇṇā but of Subhā Therī, and the story has a very different conclusion as below, but also with no rape resulting. It may be that Subhā Therī's being compared to an uppala lotus twice in her *Therīgāthā* verse 379 accounts for her story being conflated with Uppalavaṇṇā's in the Dharmaguptaka.

⁵⁵ This story does not appear in the Vinaya of the Pāli-texts as related to Uppalavaṇṇā, but rather in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, so it might be a case of either textual borrowing or conflation. In the Pāli-texts, this same and very famous story of "Subhā and the Eyes" appears in [Therīgāthā XIV](#) as the enlightenment verses of Therī Subhā in Jivaka's Mango Grove. However, in the Therīgāthā of the Pāli texts, neither is the bhikkhunīs' forest dwelling revoked at the end of Subhā's story, nor is Subhā raped or beaten by her assailant. Rather it is she herself who removes her eye in demonstration, and she who emerges the victorious heroine, both praised and healed by the Buddha himself.

And although this would seem perhaps her end in one part of the world, with her powers defunct and she both replaced and destroyed, this is not at all the end for Uppalavaṇṇā in the Pāli Texts. The Commentaries to the *Therīgāthā* and *Therī Apadāna* by Ācariyā Dhammapāla, whether contemporary with Ācariyā Buddhaghosa or postdating him by a hundred or more years, seem to be unaware of this story, instead following the lines of the Apadāna and Jātaka genres of sacred biographical story telling. Even other commentaries also purportedly authored by Ācariyā Buddhaghosa, such as those to the *Bhikkhunī Saṃyutta* and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* where she is highlighted, are not so. For there she appears, both as ancient forest dweller, and as one of the two Foremost Leading Bhikkhunī Disciples of the Buddha, following what might be the earlier trend. These commentaries do re-place her, not by exclusion, but rather by repositioning. Her lion’s roar and her working of her great miracle therein simply happens before the monsoons in Sāvatti as a part of the “Twin Miracle” story, before the precepts forbidding such miraculous displays are established, rather than after the monsoons at Samkāssa in the Deva Rohana story, where Sāriputta and the Abhidhamma now figure prominently. Uppalavaṇṇā is also placed as the therī whom the Buddha calls upon to ordain the northwestern queen Anojā and her retinue of a thousand women – all stream-enterers – when King Mahākappina and Queen Anojā leave their homeland one after another to go forth, both gaining faith on hearing of the appearance of a Buddha in the world, gaining realization hearing the Dhamma, and entering into monastic life⁵⁶. All these commentaries remain silent on the subject of Uppalavaṇṇā’s attack and disempowerment, mentioning only her exceptional beauty, her *iddhi*, and her exemplary placement as one of the *etad-aggā sāvakas* – the foremost of the leading disciples of the Buddha, along the lines of the opening pages of our tale.

It might be guessed in her regard that the Pāli-text commentaries, although redacted one thousand years after the Buddha, contain layers of much older story matter. This heart or core may have then successively amalgamated various post-Parinibbāna themes: the practice of pilgrimage as linked to miracles; the wheel-turning monarch; the Abhidhamma schools; reply to the questions about the status of the arahant that figured in early schism; the primary and supplementary sins of immediate retribution; a shift in both the Jain and Buddhist bhikkhunīs’ lifestyle from remote dwellings and independent wandering to a somewhat more settled, protected and communal monastic life; and social acceptability and large-scale support by ruling monarchs instead of a more radical independence. Whether “some things” actually “happened” to ancient Buddhist arahant bhikkhunīs, or non-arahant monastic women, or whether these things arose out of cultural memory shared with the Brahmins and Jains, it seems that at the time of the redaction of the Khandhakas, there was only a vague perception or memory of such, with explanatory stories then attached to various ancient arahants whose names were well known. Perhaps this was used, together with the teaching on the “supplementary sins of immediate retribution,” to give protection – very strongly dissuading the molestation of Buddhist monastic women, whether arahants or those entered upon

⁵⁶ *Aṅguttara Nikāya Commentary – Manorathapurani*, Etad-aggā Vagga, 231. Mahākappina Thera Vatthu: *Satthā tāsamaṃ dhammakathaṃ kathesi. Desanāpariyosāne sabbā sotāpattiphale patitthāya aññamaññaṃ passimsu. Satthā “uppalavaṇṇā āgacchatū”ti cintesi. Therī āgantvā sabbā pabbājetvā ādāya bhikkhuniupassayaṃ gatā, satthā bhikkhusahassaṃ gahetvā ākāseṇa jetavanaṃ agamāsi.*

the arahant path. The fact that Uppalavaṇṇā is named in one Pāli-text commentary and Bhikkhu Vinaya Vibhaṅga, while other famous arahant women such as Dhammadinnā, Bhaddā Kapilānī, Subhā and Nandā Therī were named in the similar places and stories of other old traditions, may simply serve to illustrate the positions of greatness that these bhikkhunī elders held in the memories and stories of the ancient Buddhist monastic community.

Final Forms

As mentioned above, in India and beyond in Mahāyāna texts, Uppalavaṇṇā begins a great *śrāvaka bhiksuni*, but as with other greats of the early tradition, popular Mahāyāna sūtras such as the Lotus Sūtra and Avataṃsaka Sūtra place her amongst the great arhat disciple hearers of the Mahāyāna teachings who were then converted to the Great Vehicle and became bodhisattvas destined for buddhahood. And Uppalavaṇṇā's early miracle, which was in the Tibetan tradition also followed by a prediction of future buddhahood from the Buddha himself, is replaced or complemented by the development of a whole new genre in which she is a forerunner, that of gender transformation.

Stories of miracles of gender transformation similar to hers and Mañimekkalai's occur in the unnamed goddess' transformation in the popular Vimalakīrti Sūtra, in which she transforms from female to male form and back again. Here used so as to prove the superiority of the Mahāyāna bodhisattva path over that of the arahant path at Sāriputta's expense,⁵⁷ this perhaps marks the story as reactionary to certain trends within the Abhidhamma. The popular dragon girl's prediction of buddhahood and gender transformation in the Lotus Sūtra⁵⁸, (in which Sāriputra also appears as fall character), again reminds us of Uppalavaṇṇā's Apadāna. For there too her story began long ago when she was a naga (dragon) princess, and from the ancient Buddha Padumuttara (the Supreme Lotus) received her prediction to bodhi. However, in the Lotus Sūtra, the once female dragon girl hero, having transformed, never returns to female form for her accomplishment of buddhahood. This trend continued within the Pure Land sūtras⁵⁹ and the Kṣitigarbha Sūtra⁶⁰ which both extol means of gaining ultimate change in gender for women in their process of liberation.

⁵⁷ [Vimalakīrti Sūtra Part 7](#): Shariputra: Goddess, what prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?

Goddess: Although I have sought my "female state" for these twelve years, I have not yet found it. Reverend Shariputra, if a magician were to incarnate a woman by magic, would you ask her, "What prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?"

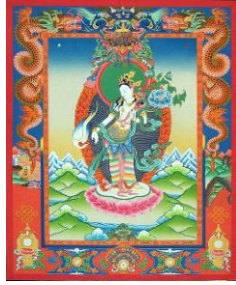
Shariputra: No! Such a woman would not really exist, so what would there be to transform? Goddess: Just so, reverend Shariputra, all things do not really exist. Now, would you think, "What prevents one whose nature is that of a magical incarnation from transforming herself out of her female state?" Thereupon, the goddess employed her magical power to cause the elder Shariputra to appear in her form and to cause herself to appear in his form. Then the goddess, transformed into Shariputra, said to Shariputra, transformed into a goddess, "Reverend Shariputra, what prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?" And Shariputra, transformed into the goddess, replied, "I no longer appear in the form of a male! My body has changed into the body of a woman! I do not know what to transform!" The goddess continued, "If the elder could again change out of the female state, then all women could also change out of their female states. All women appear in the form of women in just the same way as the elder appears in the form of a woman. While they are not women in reality, they appear in the form of women. With this in mind, the Buddha said, 'In all things, there is neither male nor female.'...[continued]"

⁵⁸ [Lotus Sūtra Devadatta Chapter 12](#): "Shariputra spoke to the Dragon Girl, saying, "You claim quick attainment to the Supreme Path. This is difficult to believe. Why? The body of a woman is filthy and not a vessel for the Dharma...What is more, a woman's body has Five Obstacles: one, she cannot become a Brahma heaven king; two, she cannot become Shakra; three, she cannot become a Mara king; four, she cannot become a Wheel Turning Sage king; five, she cannot become a Buddha."

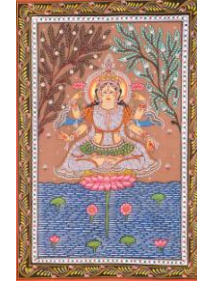
⁵⁹ According to Heng-Ching Shih in "[Women in Zen Buddhism](#)": "The Pure Land scriptures are the most notable in this class. For example, the thirty-fourth vow of the 'Larger Sukhāvativyūha-Sūtra' states, O Bhagavat, if, after I have obtained Bodhi, women in



Lotus –seated Śrī/Uppalavaṇṇā/Lakṣmī
Licchavi coin from Nepal



Padmapani Avalokiteśvara
standing on lotus with utpala lotus in hand



Padminī, Lotus Goddess of the Cosmic Sea
painting from Orissa

And then, there are the related forms in which the feminine remains strong. More than one scholar has commented on the historical possibilities of her quasi-divine and oft-repeated past-life lotus birth story as Padumavatī, mother of five hundred lotus-seated pacceka buddhas, who also showed themselves in both princely and ascetic forms. Her highly developed association with the lotus and its popularization in Buddhism and Indian spirituality and her Jātakas specifically relate her to later forms of Hindu lotus-born or lotus-seated goddesses that she was earlier said to have been incarnate, especially the goddesses Śrī and Lakṣmī. There are others who have similarly connected her with different forms of Mahāyāna bodhisattva and the female Buddha Tārā. Both Padmapani Avalokiteśvara and Green Tārā are especially associated with the utpala lotus.



Syamtārā or Green Tārā holding seated on lotus, holding and with foot touching blue utpala lotuses.
In Tibetan Buddhism, Green Tārā with utpala lotuses is said to be Tārā in her original form.

immeasurable, innumerable, inconceivable, immense Buddha countries on all sides after having heard my name, should allow carelessness to arise, should not turn their thoughts toward Bodhi, should, when they are free from birth, not despise their female nature, and if they being born again, should assume a second female nature, then may I not obtain the highest perfect knowledge." The `Smaller Sukhāvātīvyūha` also explicitly declares that there are no women in the Pure Land. Although the possibility of being born in the Pure Land is not denied to women, the implication here is that a male-nature is necessary for progress on the bodhisattva path in the Pure Land."

⁶⁰ These Sūtras taught women to detest their female bodies and to behave in certain ways in order to be reborn as men in pure lands accessible only in male form or taught those who detested their womanhood how to irreversibly change to male birth by making offerings. I.e., Kṣitigarbha Sūtra Ch 6: "If there are women who detest the body of a woman, and who full-heartedly make offerings to Earth Store Bodhisattva's image, whether the image be a painting or made of earth, stone, lacquerware, brass, iron, or some other material, and if they do so day after day without fail, using flowers, incense, food, drink, clothing, colored silks, banners, money, jewels, and other items as offerings..."

Meanwhile, in divine male form, still closely related in purpose with her past life incarnation as Maṇimekhalā the Goddess of the Sea, Uppalavaṇṇa – known as Upulvan Devo in Sinhalese – lives on to this day as one of the four main guardian protective deities of the island of Sri Lanka, especially favored by political leaders. For hundreds of years mainly associated with protection of seafarers, he is contemporarily associated with the similar forms of Avalokiteśvara of the Sea and an early form of Avalokiteśvara in India and Burma – Lokanātha⁶¹ – known as Nātha in Sri Lanka, as well as Lokanātha’s early association with fellow blue-skinned Vedic and Hindu gods Varuna, Vishnu, Shiva and even Krishna⁶².



Avalokiteśvara of the Sea 海上觀音 walking on, holding and seated in lotuses, as painted by Korean Seon Master Man Bong.

Thus, the association with her male transformation at Saṅkassa as a great political leader blessed foremost by the Buddha in the Deva-avatara scene in the company of the foremost Vedic and Hindu Lords of the Devas, Brahma and Indra [Sakka] continues to this day. Uppalavaṇṇa is now popularly venerated as both Sakka and the Buddha were, as “Lord of Lords” or “Lord of the World”. Much as in the earlier rock-cut Indian images and paintings of Uppalavaṇṇā, as well as the early Potalaka Mountain images of Lokanātha (early Avalokiteśvara/Kwan Yin)⁶³ and the contemporarily popular Hindu god Shiva, Upulvan Devo appears contemporarily in the Dambulla Caves of Sri Lanka portrayed dually both as a blue-skinned ascetic as well as adorned in the regalia of a monarch⁶⁴.

⁶¹ The Sutta Nipāta, Apadānas, Vimāna Vatthu and the Peta Vatthu of the *Khuddhaka Nikāya*, describe the Buddha himself as *Nātha* and *Lokanātha*, variously translated as “Lord, Savior” and “Lord/Savior of the Word”, as does the common Theravāda Buddhist *paritta* (protective blessing) chant the Jayamangala Gatha, the opening line of which addresses the Buddha as *mahā kāruniko nātho* – the “Lord of Great Compassion” or “Savior of Great Mercy”. According to the Pali Texts Society’s *Pali-English Dictionary*, “*nātha*” means a “support, grace, protector” or “refuge” and may be translated as “savior”.

⁶² See [The Buddhist Visnu: Religious transformation, politics and culture](#) by John Holt

⁶³ See “[Origin of the Avalokiteśvara of Potala](#)” by Lokesh Chandra, New Delhi

⁶⁴ See [The Buddhist Visnu: Religious transformation, politics and culture](#) by John Holt

And, due to our love for relics from the past and the interest value we find in them, Uppalavaṇṇā lives on in digital print in her stories from the various Buddhist texts, as well as a contemporary full-length Sri Lankan feature film in her name. Together with digitalized images spanning the world wide web of rock-cuttings, frescoes and paintings of an anonymous monastic and ruler with great entourage bowing before the Buddha, unperceivable in gender or identity, other than through the stories attached. Perhaps this is the heart of the matter – the end of grasping after perceptions of identity. And perhaps, for the reader, dispassion for further becoming may also arise, as for the *buddha sāvikā*, when in her own review of all her own and others manifold past existences gained through the awakening experience, she finds her supreme bliss, peace and happiness, in being complete, her work done, with no more coming to any state of being.

The Victor was pleased with my good qualities and established me in the foremost position;
“She is foremost of those possessing supernormal powers,” the Leader said to the assembly.

Honoring the Teacher, I have fulfilled the Buddha’s Teaching;
I have put down the heavy burden; everything leading to renewed existence has been rooted out.

That purpose for which one goes forth from home to homelessness;
For me that aim has been attained; all my fetters are destroyed.

Monastic robes, almsfood, requisites and lodgings
Were offered quickly by thousands from all around.

My defilements are burnt out; all future births are completely destroyed;
Having burst my bonds asunder like a she-elephant, I live free from the taints.

Welcome indeed was the presence of the Sugata (the Well-come, Well-gone One) to me;
I have attained the three knowledges; I have fulfilled the Buddha’s Teaching.”

Uppalavaṇṇā Therī Apadāna vv 461-467



From forest dwelling bhikkhunī arahant, great teacher and worker of miracles, to traverser of many lives, human and divine, male and female – in our stories, Uppalavaṇṇā of the Color of the Blue Lily has undergone very many transformations. A small wonder, but no matter for a woman who left all of that millennia ago, when she entered into the highest happiness free of all such worldly fluctuations, the peace of Final Nibbāna. Not in another form, but as an *etad-aggā sāvikā* – one of the foremost of the Buddha’s leading women disciples – with hundreds if not thousands of disciples and grand disciples, realizing the freedom of dispassion for themselves, and the utter end of all suffering in her wake. A ripple that still touches and lives in us today – in the flow of that great and timeless stream of the Dhamma – unborn and undying.

Evam



Utpala lotus-adorned ocean Buddha pedestal worshipped by Maṇimekkalai

*Offered for the 2600-year Anniversary of the Buddha's Great Awakening
& September Full Moon 2595th Lunar Anniversary of the Foundation of our Bhikkhunī Sangha*

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Note: Many dates given for early texts are speculative and approximate, and may be the subject of ongoing study. Texts may have been composed near in time to their known extant renditions placements in time or long before (see endnote i, second paragraph).

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Endnotes

ⁱ Although the Pāli-text commentaries attributed to Ācariyā Buddhaghosa are said to have been put into writing in their contemporary renditions in the 5th century CE, 1000 years after the Buddha’s Parinibbāna, they are also said to be new renderings of older Sinhalese commentaries and of ancient commentaries, now lost to us. According to tradition, Ācariyā Buddhaghosa burned the by then archaic Sinhalese-language commentaries after his contemporary perfected Pāli-language renderings were complete. It is unlikely that *all* of the commentarial material attributed to Buddhaghosa was actually composed by him, as there are contradictions between texts. It is most likely that an amount of the Pāli-text commentarial material is indeed ancient passed down through both oral traditions and earlier textual traditions, while an amount of the material was developed with the oral and textual traditions over time up until the time of composition.

This pattern of ancient material content, with development, that is, layers of additional material being amalgamated and incorporated over time, is generally thought by scholars to hold true for both the oral traditions and the textual traditions, for canonical Tipiṭaka and commentarial Aṭṭhakathās, as well as a range of extra-canonical material that belongs to both oral and textual traditions. This process appears to be ancient, to have been ongoing, and to continue to this day.

ⁱⁱ Uppalavaṇṇā Therī’s pre-monastic life story is developed very differently in two non-Pāli textual traditions, that of the Mūlasarvāstivāda and that of the Dharmaguptaka, in which she appears as an accidentally and repeatedly incestuous young woman turned courtesan. There are many further tales told within Tibetan and East Asian Buddhism in her name based upon these stories. As compared to the Pāli Texts, in these texts her biography is exchanged with those of the mother and daughter of Gaṅgātīriya Thera in the *Theragāthā* (vv. 127-8). The Mūlasarvāstivāda text contains additional verses which are in the Pāli-text *Therīgāthā* associated with the former courtesan Vimalā in the *Therīgāthā* (vv. 72-76) and her conversion by the great therā Mahāmoggallāna relayed in the *Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā* (V.2), *Theragāthā* (1150-53) and *Theragāthā Aṭṭhakathā* (III.167-8). As explained twice in Ācariyā Dhammapāla’s key commentarial work the *Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā* (in his commentary to verse 223 and 224), Uppalavaṇṇā Therī repeats the verses of Gaṅgātīriya Thera’s mother and daughter in contemplation of her own dispassion towards sensual pleasures which contributed to her enlightenment. Ācariyā Dhammapāla’s comment may have been his attempt to correct what he felt to be the other traditions’ wrong commentary or at least to clarify a point easy to misunderstand.

*“Ubho mātā ca dhitā ca, mayaṃ āsuṃ [ābhūṃ (sī.)] sapattiyo;
Tassā me abhū saṃvego, abbhuto lomahaṃsano.*

The two of us, mother and daughter, were co-wives.
I experienced a profound stirring, amazing, hair-raising.

*“Dhiratthu kāmā asuci, duggandhā babukaṇṭakā;
Yattha mātā ca dhitā ca, sabbariyā mayaṃ abhuṃ.*

Woe upon sensual pleasures, impure, evil smelling, with many troubles,
Wherein we, mother and daughter, were co-wives.

This pattern of including another’s story verses in teaching occurs often in oral tradition. It also occurs not infrequently with other bhikkhunīs’ verses in the *Therīgāthā* (see p xix-xxi of *Elders Verses II* for a listing of cases), most often when they are either teaching or reciting verses that served as catalysts for awakening, that is, enlightening meditative contemplations, which were taught them by the Buddha or their own bhikkhu or bhikkhunī teachers. As is common with the Mūlasarvāstivādan texts, in the 14th century CE Tibetan *Kangyur* translation/compilation, Uppalavaṇṇā the courtesan (Pāli-text: Gangātīriyā’s mother together with the former courtesan Vimalā)’s story is most extensively developed and further elaborated therein, as compared to all other extant traditions. The inclusion of the courtesan Vimalā’s story in the *Therīgāthā* in the Tibetan text may be due to simple conflation with the fact that both Gangātīriyā’s mother and Vimalā were former courtesans who became bhikkhunīs, or perhaps also due to Vimalā being Uppalavaṇṇā’s first name in her Apadāna at the time of her giving rise to her first aspiration under the ancient Buddha Padumuttara, which finally led to her becoming one of the Buddha Gotama’s foremost disciples in her last life. Or it may be due to the fact that in the Pāli Texts, she was an exemplary courtesan in one of her *past* lives, as relayed in the *Kurudhamma Jātaka* (Jātaka no.276).

The former courtesan Vimalā Therī’s verses that are shared with Uppalavaṇṇā Therī in the 14th century Mūlasarvāstivādan text are vv 72-74 of 72-76 below:

*Mattā vaṇṇena rūpena, sobhaggena yasena ca;
Yobbanena cupattbhaddhā, aññāsamatimaññibhaṃ.*

Intoxicated by my [good] complexion, my figure, my beauty, and fame,
Haughty because of my youth, I despised other women.

*Vibhūsetvā imaṃ kāyaṃ, sucittaṃ bālalāpanaṃ;
Atthāsīm vesidvārambhi, luddo pāsamivoḍḍiya.*

Having decorated this body, very variegated, deceiving fools,
I stood at the brothel door, like a hunter having spread out a snare,

*Pilandhanaṃ vidadāsentī, gūyhaṃ pakāsikāṃ babuṃ;
Akāsīm vividhaṃ māyaṃ, ujjaggbhanti babuṃ janaṃ.*

showing my ornamentation. Many a secret place was revealed.
I did various sorts of conjuring, mocking many people.

*“Sajja piṇḍaṃ caritvāna, muṇḍā saṅghātipārutā;
Nisinnā rukkhamaḷambhi, avitakkassa lābbinī.*

Today I have wandered for alms with shaven head, clad in the outer robe.
Seated at the foot of a tree, I have attained the stage of non-reasoning.

*“Sabbe yogā samucchinnā, ye dibbā ye ca mānusa;
Khepetvā āsave sabbe, sītibhūtāmbi nibbuta”ti.*

I have cut out all ties—those that are divine and those that are human.
I have annihilated all the taints. I have become cool, quenched.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to the Pāḷi -text Commentaries, Uppalavaṇṇā's skin was the color of the *gabha* or "womb" of the lotus, which has been translated as its calyx. The calyx of the uppala lotus is golden. However, there is a well-established tradition of art and storytelling that portrays both she and Mahāmoggalāna Thera as having very dark skin, as part of the fulfillment of the past aspirations of both she and the Buddha himself to have foremost disciples of both lighter and darker skin tones, to inspire and affirm the various *vaṇṇas* (Skt: *varṇas*) or classes and cultures entry into and complete participation in Buddhist monastic life. According to Ranjini Obeysekere in her *Portraits of Buddhist Women: Stories from the Saddharmaratanaḷiyya* (pp 109-110), "since the rank of chief disciple, whether male or female, had to be filled by one of dark complexion, she was born as dark-skinned as a garland of blue lotuses". She notes that of the chief disciples of a Buddha, one is always dark-complexioned, the other light. Thus the Elders Mahāmoggalāna and Uppalavaṇṇā's dark-complexion and Sāriputta and Khemā's light. According to Obeysekere (f 3), this "was to perhaps emphasize the all-embracing inclusiveness of Doctrine, in the context of the various peoples and castes of the [Indian] subcontinent."

^{iv} The word *iddhi* (Skt: *ṛddhi* also rendered *siddhi*) has many meanings in the Pāḷi and Sanskrit languages. Foremost amongst them is the meaning we may be most familiar with, as in the Buddha's given name Siddhattha, "Wish Fulfilled" or "Who Has Achieved Their Aim" or "Who Has Accomplished the Goal". Here, *iddhi*, means "fulfillment, achievement, attainment" or "accomplishment," although it is regularly rendered, according to use, as "power," "psychic power," "supernormal" or "supranormal power," "paranormal ability" and so on. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi mentions preferring the translation "spiritual potency". Although outside of the ordinary and thus considered extraordinary wonders, the *iddhis* are not considered supernatural in Buddhism, but well within the laws of nature. Buddhist monastics, in the monastic discipline of the Vinaya, have strict limits on what types of *iddhi* they may publically display or even speak of themselves or their fellow monastics having attained. There are six types of *iddhi* mentioned in the suttas and ten types mentioned in the *Visuddhimagga*. The sutta list, in brief includes: 1) physical transformation (such as walking on water or through solid objects), 2) "the divine ear" or clairaudience, 3) knowing by encompassing the awareness of other beings, 4) recollection of past lives, 5) "the divine eye" or clairvoyance and 6) the destruction of the *āsavas* (cankers, taints, influxes or defilements). The Buddha recommended that anyone wishing to make an end of suffering develop the *iddhi-pāda*, the "roads to power" or "bases of power". To learn more about the bases of power, see *Samyutta Nikāya* LI. 2 & 26, Thanissaro Bhikkhu's book *Wings to Awakening* Part II.D "The Four Bases of Power", or the venerable Thich Naht Hahn's book *Power*.

Uppalavaṇṇā Therī's full verses on her *iddhi* in the *apadāna* in her name have not yet been published in English and are not included in the *Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā* by Ācariyā Dhammapāla, thus they are also absent from William Pruitt's Pali Text Society translation in *Commentary on the Verses of the Theris*. Twenty-two of these sequential four-line verses, from the beginning of her *apadāna* to the point at which the Commentary picks up, are roughly approximated in prose and verse here below.

[Not long after her awakening, less than a fortnight of her having gone forth into monastic life, (likely between the ages of 12 and 16)], the bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā came before the Buddha and his assembly to announce that all her suffering (*dukkha*) was over, that she had finished with birth in saṃsāra and arrived at "the unshakable".

*“Nūthiṇṇā jātisamsāraṃ [jātisamsāra (pi.)], pattabaṃ acalaṃ paḍaṃ;
Sabbadukkaṃ mayā kkhāṃ, arocemi mabāmuni.*

Finished with saṃsaric birth, I have arrived at the unshakable;
Great Sage, I announce to you, all my suffering is ended.

Face to face with the teacher, she asked forgiveness of all in the assembly for offences committed towards any of them over the course of many lives wandering in *samsāra*, acknowledging them all. She asked the forgiveness of the teacher as well, who responded by asking her to share her experience with the Fourfold Assembly. She then began to speak of herself as the Buddha's daughter, mentioning how immense her difficult kamma has been, which she is now over, as she has surpassed all difficulties. She prostrated at the feet of the Buddha verbally affirming herself as a disciple of his, speaking of him as the Great Hero, the Visionary. She affirmed then that he is witness to the attainment and completion of the path for both herself (his spiritual daughter) and Rahula (his son), who had been like-minded and born near one another for many lives, sharing in aspiration and intention.

She then begins to elaborate further on her experience of the *iddhis* in her awakening, [several of which she has already mentioned]: the ending of the all *āsavas* and her knowledge of her own and others' past lives. She speaks of her experience of the first *iddhi* as being like child's play: flying with her forearms like wings, participating in the circulation of the four great oceans, like a child playing at churning ghee; plunging through the earth and then emerging, and then sweeping across the land with her mind, like a young prince's game of conquest; seeing the spheres of all worlds and forms, with myriad classes of beings and forms of life, whirling around, as if from on top of the highest mountain, with her at the summit. She compares this last experience with seeing the monsoons and each drop of water within them with a child's wonder, playing with the drops. The bodies of water and land of our world are compared to grains in mortars crushed by maidens, with Mt. Sumeru (Everest) as the pestle.

The venerable Uppalavaṇṇā then goes on to mention the higher knowledges and abilities, wonderful and amazing, that she has attained, which have come together with the powers that give beneficial skill for teaching. She lists these – the divine eye (clairvoyance), the divine ear (clairaudience) and the ability to encompass and know the minds of others (mindreading) – as amongst her supernormal powers. She then specifically affirms again that they are so useful with regards to the goal because she has ended all ground for future birth, her divine eye and ear completely purified with the ending of all of the taints; with all defilements that lead to future becoming, completely and irrevocably cut off. Her insight knowledge has thus become pure and expansive, together with all of her mental faculties, giving her direct ability to give full and thorough instruction to others in all the eight branches of the Dhamma in return.

She then recognizes the others present who are foremost amongst the Buddha's disciples for both their complete fulfillment of the path and their communion with one another, a communion that she has now fully entered into. She then offers her own higher abilities and services, dedicating her newly realized skills to sharing the goal of Buddha's teaching with others. She speaks again of this as the fulfillment of her karma, affirming the wholesomeness and virtue of her mind, which is now pure heartwood, essentially pure.

Turning her mind back over time, she says, “from states of blame, I have gone beyond into the supreme blamelessness – in this very life; I am now completely fluent in the goal, the supreme attainment”. Once again, she mentions how very long she has been on the spiritual path, and how many sacrifices there have been, and how much disappointment and dismay she has endured in lives lost; now ended, as the *āsavas* that caused these states of dismay have now been completely crushed, as if between her folded palms held in *añjali*. She once again affirms her coming to the end of the path, her *iddhis* incomparable.

[With her newfound vision still turned to past causes and conditions, she then turns her mind's eye to the arising of her aspiration to awakening, now utterly and completely fulfilled. With this, she begins to relay what she remembers of her past lives from the time of her initial aspiration to *sāvaka bodhi* as the dragon girl Vimalā with the ancient Buddha Padumuttara inspired by his placement of a certain bhikkhunī disciple of his as foremost in *iddhi*, as at page 10 above, and her biography of many lives is unfurled.]

Uppalavaṇṇā Therī Apadāna vv 385-407

^v It has been questioned whether this verse might not be an aberration that has slipped in, as it might seem out of place with the others. Verses sharing the same first two parts of the quatrain, *Cīvaraṃ piṇḍapātañca, paccayaṃ*

sayanāsanam, also occur in similar places in the *Yasodharā Therī Apadāna*, the collective *apadāna* of Yasodharā Therī's 18,000 followers and those of Yasavatī Therī, as well as the collective *apadāna* verses of the 84,000 bhikkhunīs, and the verses of a certain unnamed "uppala lotus offering" bhikkhunī. All of the verses affirm that these bhikkhunī therīs were well supplied with monastic requisites. Yasodharā Therī's *apadāna* employs several verses in this place to emphasize her sense of ease with the renunciation of monastic life, as contrasted with the royal ease and sufferings she had previously experienced: (vv 402-405). This verse within its context follows:

*“Nibbinditvāna saṃsāre, pabbajim anagāriyam;
Sabassaparivārena, pabbajitvā akiñcana.*

Having become dispassionate towards saṃsāra, I went forth into homelessness.
Surrounded by a retinue of thousands, I was untroubled after going forth.

*‘Agāram vijahitvāna, pabbajim anagāriyam;
Aḍḍhamāse asampatte, catusaccamapāpuṇim.*

Abandoning the home, I went forth into homelessness.
Within a fortnight I grasped the Four Noble Truths.

** Cīvaram piṇḍapātañca, paccayam sayanāsanam;
Upanenti bahū janā, sāgareyeva umiyo.*

* Monastic robes and almsfood, solitary lodgings and various requisites:
Many and various were offered, like waves upon the ocean.

Kilesā jhāpitā mayham...pe... vibarāmi anāsava.

Defilements gone...I live free from the taints.

Yasodharā Therī Apadāna vv 403-405

Other bhikkhunīs' similar verses:

*Cīvaram piṇḍapātañca, paccayam sayanāsanam;
Upanenti bahū ambe, sāgareyeva umiyo.*

Monastic robes and almsfood, solitary lodgings and various requisites:
Many and various were those offered to us, like waves upon the ocean.

*Yasodhara's Eighteen Thousand Bhikkhunī Students
Yasodharā-pamukha-aṭṭhārasa-bhikkhunī-sahassā Apadāna v 478*

*Cīvaram piṇḍapātañca, paccayam sayanāsanam;
Upanenti bahū ambe, sada sakkatapūjita.*

Monastic robes and almsfood, solitary lodgings and various requisites:
Many and various were those offered to us, always with honor and reverence.

*Yasavatī's Eighteen Thousand Khattiya Maiden Bhikkhunī Students
Yasavatī-pamukha-aṭṭhārasa-bhikkhunī-sahassā Apadāna v 9*

Cīvaram piṇḍapātañca, paccayam sayanāsanam;

Upanenti sadā ambe, sabassāni tato tato.

Monastic robes and almsfood, solitary lodgings and various requisites
Were always offered us, by thousands [of people] here and there.

*The Eighty-four Thousand Brāhmaṇ Maiden Bhikkhunīs
Caturāsī-bhikkhunī-sahassā Apadāna v 53*

*Civaraṃ piṇḍapātaṅca, paccayaṃ sayanāsanam;
Parimetuṃ na saṅkomi, piṇḍapātassidaṃ phalaṃ.*

Monastic robes and almsfood, solitary lodgings and various requisites:
I cannot measure the fruits (benefits) [to the donors] of that which has been given in alms.

*The Uppala Lotus Offering Therīs
Uppaladāyikātheriyā Apadāna v 70*

A subtle contrast appears here, for in the Vinaya of the Pāli-texts, at Bhikkhu Nissaggiyā Pācittiya 5, Uppalavaṇṇā appears saying with regards to robes, “these things are hard for women to come by,” after her lower robe has been asked of her by a bhikkhu. The bhikkhus then receive a precept of an offence of confession and forfeiture if they receive a robe from a bhikkhunī, unless she is their relative or they give something in exchange for it. In the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, the very first precept in this class is also occasioned by a bhikkhu taking almsfood from Uppalavaṇṇā on successive days, leaving nothing for her. Although in the Pāli-texts this bhikkhunī is left unnamed, again the statement appears: “these things are hard for women to come by.” This time these words are voiced by her lay rescuer, who took in and fed the bhikkhunī after she fell down faint from hunger along the roadside, and who afterwards mentioned the behavior that led to her fainting to the Bhikkhu Sangha. These precepts and others protect the bhikkhunīs from being taken advantage of by the bhikkhus. These statements give the impression that monastic women were – at least in some times and places – not as well supported in the requisites of monastic robes and almsfood as their male monastic brethren. Whether affirming change, a response to the arising of the above statement as a “view,” or simply a different perspective, the *Therī Apadāna* seems to illustrate a large ancient women’s monastic community that was both well affirmed and well supported, to which Uppalavaṇṇā herself here lends her voice.