

Miracle-working Nuns in the *Ekottarika-āgama*

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Abstract

In this article I examine two tales of miracle-working nuns in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, one of which reports how the nun Soṇā defeats the six contemporary non-Buddhist teachers and the other involves Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's spectacular passing away.

Introduction

With the present paper I continue examining outstanding nuns in the *Ekottarika-āgama* collection preserved in Chinese translation. In a previous study I translated and surveyed the listing of outstanding nuns in this collection that parallels a similar but shorter listing in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, and in another study I took up the *Ekottarika-āgama* tales of Bhaddā Kaccānā and Bhaddā Kapilānī from the viewpoint of their contribution to the topic of the karma of being reborn as a woman.¹ In the present paper, I take up another two tales that show two outstanding nuns exhibiting their supernatural abilities, each time presenting a translation of the relevant tale followed by a study.

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¹ Anālayo (2014c) and (2014d).

Translation (1)²

At one time the Blessed One was living by the side of the Monkey Pond.³ The people of the country were supporting him with robes, food, bedding, and medicines in accordance with their means. Each of them brought food for the Buddha and the community of monks, and they took the eight precepts without missing an opportunity to do so.

At that time six teachers had in the course of their wanderings come to stay in the city of Vesālī. The six teachers were: Pūraṇa Kassapa, Ajita [Kesakambalī], [Makkhali] Gosāla, Pakudha Kaccāyana, Sañjaya Belatṭhi[putta], and Nigaṇṭha [Nātaputta]. Then, the six teachers gathered in one place and said [to each other]: “This recluse Gotama is staying in the city of Vesālī and is supported by the people, but we are not being supported by the people. We could approach him and debate with him. Who [among us] would be victorious? Who [among us] would not be up to it?”

Pūraṇa Kassapa said: “Whatever recluses and brahmins there are who do not accept what he proclaims, they have in various ways cross-questioned him, [pointing out] what is contrary to the teaching of recluses and brahmins. Yet this recluse Gotama does not accept what they say and in many ways he cross-questioned them. In what way could we debate with him?”

Ajita [Kesakambalī] said: “[My teaching, which I could debate with him, is that] there is no offering, there is no receiving [of results], there is no giver, there is neither this world nor a future world for living beings, and there is also no fruition of good and evil.”

[Makkhali] Gosāla said: “[My teaching, which I could debate with him, is that if] on the [right] side of the river Ganges someone kills people beyond measure, amassing them into a

² The translated part is taken from EĀ 38.11 at T II 727c5 to 728a29, which is the final part of a longer discourse. Here and below, for ease of comparison I employ Pāli terminology except for anglicized terms like Dharma and Nirvāna.

³ The Monkey Pond occurs regularly in *Āgama* discourses and other texts, but appears to be unknown in the Pāli tradition; cf. also, e.g., Lamotte (1958/1988: 155), Skilling (1997: 295 and 406f), Bingenheimer (2008: 159 note 31), and Anālayo (2011b: 223 note 95).

mountain of flesh, and to the left of the river Ganges someone does meritorious deeds, because of this there is still no fruition of good and evil.”

Pakudha Kaccāyana said: “[My teaching, which I could debate with him, is that if] to the left of the river Ganges someone properly engages in giving gifts and upholding morality, and at the appropriate time makes offerings so that there is no deficiency, there is also no fruition of this.”

Sañjaya Belaṭṭhi[putta] said: “[My teaching is that] I make no statements and I give no replies, I just enjoy keeping silent.”

Nigaṇṭha [Nātaputta] said: “[My teaching is that] I make statements and I also give replies. The recluse Gotama is a man and I am also a man. What Gotama knows, we also know. The recluse Gotama has supernormal powers, I also have supernormal powers. If that recluse manifests one feat of supernormal power, I will manifest two feats of supernormal power.⁴ [If] he manifests two feats of supernormal power, I will manifest four feats of supernormal power. [If] he manifests four, I will manifest eight. [If] he manifests eight, [728a] I will manifest sixteen. [If] he manifests sixteen, I will manifest thirty-two. I will continually increase them until I have overcome him and completely had a trial of powers with him. Suppose he does not accept our teachings, he will be blamed. Having heard this, people will no longer support him and we will get their support.”

At that time the nun [Soṇā] heard this being said: “The six teachers have come together in one place and have given rise to this discussion: ‘We will be fully victorious over the recluse Gotama who does not accept our teachings to the people.’” Then the nun Soṇā flew up into the sky and approached the six teachers,⁵ speaking these verses:

⁴ Adopting a variant without 等.

⁵ My rendering of the nun’s name as Soṇā is based on an emendation. EĀ 38.11 at T II 728a6 actually reads 輸盧 (following a variant without 尼) which I assume to be an error for 輸那. 輸那 occurs in the listing of outstanding nuns in EĀ 5.2 at T II 559a13 as foremost among those who convert outsiders, 降伏外道, and establish them in the right teaching, 立以正教. The present discourse, EĀ 38.11 at T II 728a27, similarly reckons 輸盧 as foremost in the ability to convert outsiders, 能降伏外道. This makes it in my view safe to conclude that the present instance involves the same Soṇā. In

“My teacher has no equal
He is the most venerable one whom none excels,
I am that venerable one’s disciple
Called the nun Soṇā.

“Establish your positions,
Then debate them with me.
I shall reply to all matters,
Like a lion trapping a deer.

“Except for my venerable teacher,
There is currently no Tathāgata.
I am a nun who right now
Can subdue outsiders completely.”

When the nun had said this, the six teachers were not even able to look at her face, let alone debate with her.

Then the inhabitants of the city of Vesālī saw from afar that the nun was up in the air debating with the six teachers, yet the six teachers were unable to reply. Everyone praised and celebrated it, being delighted beyond measure, [saying]: “Today the six teachers have been defeated by her.”

Then the six teachers were very upset. They went out of the city of Vesālī and left; they did not enter the city any more. Then many monks heard that the nun Soṇā had debated with the six teachers and been victorious. Having heard this, they approached the Blessed One, paid respect with their heads at his feet, and fully related this whole event to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said to the monks: “The nun Soṇā has great supernormal power, great might, she is wise and learned. For a long time this thought had arisen in me: ‘There is no one else who is able to debate with the six teachers, only the Tathāgata and this nun.’”

At that time the Blessed One said to the monks: “Have you seen another nun who is able to defeat outsiders like the nun Soṇā?” The monks replied: “No, Blessed One.”

the case of the other tale I take up below from EĀ 52.1, the names of several outstanding nuns are translated differently from the renderings used in EĀ 5, in fact even within the same tale in EĀ 52.1 the renderings vary, showing that the translation of the *Ekottarika-āgama* in the way it has come down to us is not consistent in rendering proper names.

The Blessed One said: “Monks, among my disciples, the foremost nun in the ability to convert outsiders, that is the nun Soṇā.”

At that time the monks, having heard what the Buddha said, were delighted and received it respectfully.

Study (1)

The six teachers and their doctrines, mentioned in the tale above, feature also in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and its parallels.⁶ A closer look at the setting of this discourse can help appreciate the importance given to refuting the doctrines of these six teachers in the discourse translated above.

According to the background narration given in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, King Ajātasattu had asked the Buddha to point out a visible fruit of going forth. This question appears to be less innocuous than it might seem at first sight, in that it could express a critical attitude, even a wish to challenge, the ancient Indian life-style of a recluse that was also lived by the Buddha and his disciples.⁷ This would be in line with a general political change towards a more centralized form of government attempting to assert its control in ancient India.⁸

⁶ The description of the doctrines of the six teachers can be found in DN 2 at DN I 52,21, DĀ 27 at T I 108a27, T 22 at T I 271b25, EĀ 43.7 at T II 763b4, and a discourse quotation in the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Gnoli (1978: 220,22).

⁷ MacQueen (1988: 206) comments that “Ajātaśatru was king and overseer of a region apparently much frequented by śramaṇas, and it may be that he was interested in having the status of this sizeable group of people clarified.” MacQueen (1988: 207) further notes that “criticism of the śramaṇa’s parasitical mode of life is well attested in the literature of this period.” Thus, according to MacQueen (1988: 209), it seems as if “Ajātaśatru puts the śramaṇa on the same level as the ordinary man and asks him to stand up and give account of himself.”

⁸ Warder (1956: 55) notes that the śramaṇa lifestyle was “threatened by political changes in the Ganges region.” Thapar (1976/1978: 86) explains that “the authoritarian trends in the states emerging in the mid-first millennium B.C. were not always sympathetic to wanderers. They were often seen as people escaping social responsibility or socio-political demands. Their survival as free thinkers was dependent on their being able to assert the right to an alternative life.”

In such a setting the Buddha is shown to react wisely by first inquiring from the king if he had already asked this question of others. King Ajātasattu thereupon recounts his visits paid to each of the six well-known contemporary teachers. In reply to his question, each of them simply expounded their respective theory, which of course did not satisfy the king. Having heard this report, the Buddha then dexterously illustrates the visible fruitfulness of going forth with the example of a slave in the royal household. After going forth such a slave would be beyond the king's control and would even merit the king's respect and support. This demonstrates the fruitfulness of going forth with an example taken from the king's personal experience and at the same time gets the king to affirm publicly that he respects and supports those who have gone forth. With the apparent political undercurrent of the question settled in this way, the Buddha then proceeds to give an account of the gradual path in his teaching as a way of demonstrating the spiritual fruitfulness of going forth.⁹

In this way, the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and its parallels showcase the Buddha's superiority over the six contemporary teachers.

The actual teachings given by these six are recorded in the parallel versions with considerable variations.¹⁰ In fact even within the corpus of the Pāli discourses some degree of confusion can be seen regarding the doctrines associated with each of these teachers.¹¹ This gives the impression that what mattered to those responsible for the transmission of the early discourses was the supremacy of the Buddha's teaching over a set of contemporary doctrinal positions, whose relation to a particular teacher would have been seen as being of less relevance. In view of this it is not

⁹ Meisig (1987: 35ff) (cf. also Ramers (1996: 6f)) sees the account of the gradual path as a misfit in the present context; for a critical reply to this suggestion cf. Freiburger (2000: 73f note 165).

¹⁰ These have been studied by Bapat (1948: 109–112), Basham (1951: 21–24), Vogel (1970), Meisig (1987: 124–169), and MacQueen (1988: 148–168).

¹¹ Thus, e.g., SN 22.60 at SN III 69,3 reports Pūraṇa Kassapa holding the view that according to DN 2 at DN I 53,25 was held by Makkhali Gosāla. AN 3.135 at AN I 286,24 seems to confuse Makkhali Gosāla with Ajita Kesakambali. AN 6.57 at AN III 383,17 reports Pūraṇa Kassapa's detailed exposition of a view that according to DN 2 at DN I 54,4 was part of Makkhali Gosāla's position; cf. also the discussion in Basham (1951: 18–20).

surprising that the discourse translated above presents yet another version of relating these doctrines to these six teachers, which even differs from the views associated with them in the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*.¹²

The pervasiveness of the theme of the Buddha's superiority over other teachers can be seen also in the famous tale of the twin miracle (the simultaneous manifestation of water and fire) performed at Sāvathī.¹³ Notably, whereas in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* narration and in the case of the miracle at Sāvathī the Buddha does not personally communicate with his opponents, in the above-translated discourse the nun Soṇā directly confronts the six teachers for debate.¹⁴ Similar to the case of the Buddha's miracle at Sāvathī, Soṇā's victory is based on a display of supernormal powers. In the present case her ability to levitate already suffices to silence the six teachers.

Although the central message of the above discourse is similar to the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* narration and the tale of the Sāvathī miracle, what makes this *Ekottarika-āgama* tale particularly noteworthy is that here a nun takes the role of defeating the six teachers. The significance of this is highlighted in the discourse itself through the Buddha's explicit statement that he does not see anyone else, apart from himself, who could perform this feat, except for this nun. In fact the Pāli discourses and their *Āgama* parallels do not report an instance where a monk defeats all of the six teachers together.¹⁵

In these texts Soṇā is not only outstanding among the nuns, but also outstanding among all disciples, male or female, monastic

¹² EĀ 43.7 at T II 763b4.

¹³ On this miracle cf., e.g., Foucher (1909), Lüders (1941/1966: 62–73), Brown (1984), Verardi (1988: 1540f), Karetzky (1990: 72f), Rhi (1991), Schlingloff (1991), Skilling (1997: 303–315), Zhu (2006: 255f), Anālayo (2009b: 776), and Fiordalis (2010/2011: 401f).

¹⁴ The theme of debate manifests in various ways in the early Buddhist discourses, several cases of which I have studied elsewhere; cf. Anālayo (2009a), (2010), (2011a), (2012b), and (2013a).

¹⁵ An instance found apart from the Pāli discourses and the Chinese *Āgamas* would be T 202 at T IV 420b9, for example, where Sāriputta defeats the six teachers. On the textual history of T 202 cf. Mair (1993/1999). According to the *Divyāvadāna*, Cowell and Neil 1886: 160,13, Mahāmaudgalyāyana would also have been able to defeat the six teachers.

or lay, for having defeated the six teachers. The present tale thereby puts a remarkable spotlight on the agency of women by presenting a nun as the only disciple capable at performing such a feat.

The agency and supernormal abilities of nuns is also prominent in another discourse in the *Ekottarika-āgama* that reports the passing away of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. This tale has parallels in the *Apadāna* and in the *Therīgāthā* commentary, as well as in several texts preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translation.¹⁶

Translation (2)¹⁷

Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying at Vesālī in the communal hall, being in the company of a great group of five hundred monks.

At that time Mahāpajāpatī was dwelling in the Kūṭāgārasālā in Vesālī,¹⁸ being in the company of a great group of five hundred nuns, all of whom were arahants with their influxes eradicated. Then Mahāpajāpatī heard the monks saying: [821c] “The Tathāgata will soon attain complete extinction, within three months, between the twin Sāla trees at Kusinārā.” Then Mahāpajāpatī thought: “I can’t stand seeing the Tathāgata entering complete extinction and I

¹⁶ Ap 17 at Ap 529,22, translated Walters (1995), Thī-a 138,1, translated Pruitt (1998/1999: 185ff), two individual translations, T 144 (佛說大愛道般泥洹經) at T II 867a21 and T 145 (佛母般泥洹經) at T II 869b11, tale 68 in the 大莊嚴論經, T 201 at T IV 333a23, translated Huber (1908: 387ff), and a version in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1451 at T XXIV 248b13 and D 6 *tha* 111a6 or Q 1035 *de* 106b6, translated by Dhammadinnā (2015); for a comparative study based on T 201 cf. Lévi (1908: 160–174); for reservations regarding his conclusions cf. Oldenberg (1912: 207f note 3), Winternitz (1920/1968: 129), and Bechert (1958: 20). I briefly discussed this tale in Ap 17 and its Chinese parallels in Anālayo (2008: 123 and 141 note 86), but was unable to follow this up with a more detailed study until now.

¹⁷ EĀ 52.1 at T II 821b26 to 822b3, which is the first part of a longer discourse. The relevant section has already been translated by Dash (2008: 134–140); cf. also the summaries in Lévi (1908: 164f) and Legittimo (2009: 1202). In what follows I only note selected differences; a comprehensive study and translation of the Chinese parallels is under preparation by Jan Nattier.

¹⁸ On the *kūṭāgāra* cf. Bollée (1986).

also can't stand seeing Ānanda entering complete extinction.¹⁹ It is proper that I should now attain complete extinction first."²⁰

Then Mahāpajāpatī approached the Blessed One, paid respect with her head at his feet, and sat down to one side. Then Mahāpajāpatī said in front of the Buddha: "I heard that the Blessed One will soon attain complete extinction, within three months from now, between the twin Sāla trees at Kusinārā. Now I can't stand seeing the Blessed One and Ānanda attain complete extinction. May the Blessed One permit me to attain complete extinction first."²¹ Then the Blessed One approved by remaining silent.²²

Then Mahāpajāpatī said to the Buddha: "From now on, may the Blessed One grant that the nuns recite the rules [without me]."

The Buddha said: "I now permit that the nuns in turn grant [other] nuns the reciting of the precepts,²³ just as I originally promulgated the precepts, without causing any deviation."

¹⁹ According to Ap 17.3 at Ap 529,28, she also could not stand witnessing the final Nirvāṇa of Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna (referred to as the *sāvakkagayuga*), as well as of Rāhula and Nanda, to which Thī-a 138,18 adds Mahākassapa. In T 144 at T II 867b2 she also mentions Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna, who appear to be implicit in her statement in T 145 at T II 869c12 (their names are given at T II 869b19). The Buddha's eventual passing away comes up again in EĀ 18.8 at T II 592c14, where the Buddha tells Mahāpajāpatī that she should not wish him eternal life (the suggestion by Radich (2011/2012: 247 note 80) that this implies an affirmation of the Buddha's immortality does not seem to me to be correct), an episode that in T 201 at T IV 333a17 and T 1451 at T XXIV 248a29 as well as D 6 *tha* 110b5 or Q 1035 *de* 106a6 precedes the account of Mahāpajāpatī's passing away.

²⁰ Thī-a 138,6 adds that she had realized that her own lifespan was coming to an end and thereupon decided to enter final Nirvāṇa.

²¹ A request to be allowed to enter Nirvāṇa is a standard element in such scenes and similarly relevant for male protagonists. This can be seen, for example, in the story of the monk Dabba in Ud 8.9 at Ud 92,29 which in agreement with its parallels SĀ 1076 at T II 280b27 and SĀ² 15 at T II 378b1 reports that he approached the Buddha indicating his wish to enter Nirvāṇa; for a more detailed study cf. Anālayo (2012a).

²² Ap 17.79 at Ap 535,24 and Thī-a 145,13 report that, after having given her permission to enter final Nirvāṇa, the Buddha explicitly asked her to perform supernormal feats to dispel the doubts of the foolish regarding the ability of women to realize the Dharma.

²³ Adopting an emendation suggested in the CBETA edition of the first of two consecutive instances of 禁 to become 說.

Then Mahāpajāpatī went forward to pay respect at the Buddha’s feet and stood in front of the Buddha. Then Mahāpajāpatī said again to the Buddha: “Now I will no longer see the Tathāgata’s face, and I will also not see future Buddhas. I will not take birth in a womb, but forever abide in the unconditioned. Today I depart and will never again see the noble one’s complexion.”

Then Mahāpajāpatī circumambulated the Buddha seven times and she also circumambulated Ānanda seven times.²⁴ She completed circumambulating the community of monks, withdrew and left. Returning to be among the community of nuns, she said to the nuns: “I now wish to enter the unconditioned element of Nirvāṇa. The reason is that the Tathāgata will soon attain complete extinction. You should each act according to what is suitable at this time.”²⁵

At that time the nun Khemā, the nun Uppalavaṇṇā, the nun Kisā[gotamī], the nun Sakulā, the nun Sāmā, the nun Paṭācārā, the nun *Bhaddacālā, the nun [Bhadda]kaccānā, the nun [Vi]jayā, and five hundred nuns approached the Buddha and stood to one side.²⁶ Then the five hundred nuns, with the nun Khemā at their head, said to the Buddha:

“We all heard that the Tathāgata will soon attain complete extinction. We can’t stand seeing the Blessed One and Ānanda attain complete extinction first.²⁷ May the Blessed One permit us to attain complete extinction first. We would now enter Nirvāṇa, this being proper and suitable.” Then the Blessed One approved by remaining silent. [822a] When the nun Khemā and the five hundred nuns saw that the Blessed One had approved by remaining silent, they came forward to pay respect at the Buddha’s feet, circumambulated him three times, withdrew, and left to return to their former dwellings.

Then Mahāpajāpatī closed the door of the lecture hall, hit the gong, put down her sitting cloth in an open place, and soared up

²⁴ On the symbolic sense of the number seven cf. Anālayo (2011b: 471f note 158); the usual number of circumambulations in the early discourses is three.

²⁵ Adopting a variant that adds 時.

²⁶ My reconstruction of some of the names of the nuns is conjectural.

²⁷ T 144 at T II 867c21 adds that they also did not want to witness the final Nirvāṇa of Śāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna.

into the empty sky. [While] sitting, lying down, standing, and walking in the empty sky, [from her body] burning flames came out; from her lower body smoke came out; from her upper body fire came out; from her lower body water came out; from her upper body smoke came out; her whole body released flames; her whole body released smoke; from the left side of her upper body water came out; from the right side of her upper body fire came out; from the right side of her upper body water came out; from the left side of her upper body fire came out;²⁸ from the front [of her body] fire came out; from the back [of her body] water came out; from the front [of her body] water came out; from the back [of her body] fire came out; from her whole body fire came out; and from her whole body water came out.²⁹

When Mahāpajāpatī had performed many transformations, she returned to her original seat to sit down cross-legged with straight body and straight mind, collecting mindfulness in front. She entered the first absorption. Rising from the first absorption, she entered the second absorption. Rising from the second absorption, she entered the third absorption. Rising from the third absorption, she entered the fourth absorption. Rising from the fourth absorption, she entered the sphere of [infinite] space. Rising from the sphere of [infinite] space, she entered the sphere of [infinite] consciousness. Rising from the sphere of [infinite] consciousness, she entered the sphere of nothingness. Rising from the sphere of nothingness, she entered the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. Rising from the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, she entered the cessation of perception and knowing.³⁰

²⁸ Adopting the variant 火 instead of 烟.

²⁹ Her display of miracles in Ap 17.85+88 at Ap 536,7 and Thī-a 146,3 does include the manifestation of fire and smoke, as well as of raining down water, but these fall short of being a performance of the twin miracle as they do not occur simultaneously. This is in line with a general position taken in the Theravāda tradition which does not envisage a performance of the twin miracle by disciples. Skilling (1997: 315) explains: “the Mūlasarvāstivādins, Sarvāstivādins, Lokottaravādins, Mahīśāsakas, Aśvaghōṣa, and Asaṅga along with the *Ratnaguṇasamcaya*, *Ekottarikāgama*, *P’u yao ching*, and *Book of Zambasta*, agree against the Theravādins that an auditor as well as a Buddha could perform the *yamakaprātihārya*.”

³⁰ Ap 17.146 at Ap 540,10 and Thī-a 151,4 only report her moving up to neither-perception-nor-non-perception and thus do not mention her

Rising from the cessation of perception and knowing, she entered the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. Rising from the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, she entered the sphere of nothingness. Rising from the sphere of nothingness, she entered the sphere of [infinite] consciousness. Rising from the sphere of [infinite] consciousness, she entered the sphere of [infinite] space. Rising from the sphere of [infinite] space, she entered the fourth absorption. Rising from the fourth absorption, she entered the third absorption. Rising from the third absorption, she entered the second absorption. Rising from the second absorption, she entered the first absorption.

Rising from the first absorption, she entered the second absorption. Rising from the second absorption, she entered the third absorption. Rising from the third absorption, she entered the fourth absorption. Having entered the fourth absorption, she attained complete extinction.³¹

At that time there was a great earthquake in the world.³² The east rose up and the west sank down, the west rose up and the east sank down. The four sides rose up and the center sank down, and on

attainment of cessation; the same is the case for T 1451 at T XXIV 248c19 and D 6 *tha* 112b3 or Q 1035 *de* 108a1 (where this description applies to her and the five hundred nuns). Pruitt (1998/1999: 197 note 1) points out that the description in Thī-a marks a difference compared to the otherwise similar description of the Buddha's passing away in DN 16 at DN II 156,14 (for a comparative study of which cf. Anālayo (2014a)). Notably, both Ap and Thī-a explicitly state that her passing away as a whole was more remarkable than that of the Buddha, Ap 17.173 at Ap 542,13: *buddhassa parinibbānaṃ nedisaṃ āsi yādisaṃ, gotamīparinibbānaṃ atīv'* (Thī-a 153,14: *atev'*) *acchariyaṃ ahu*. Shaw (2006/2007: 151) comments that "her achievements exceeded those of Shakyamuni in one area, for the Buddha was not followed into parinirvāṇa by any of his disciples, whereas five hundred of Gotamī's congregation of nuns ... accompanied her on her final journey."

³¹ T 144 at T II 868a10 and 868a17 and T 145 at T II 869c25 do not precede her attainment of final Nirvāṇa or that of the five hundred nuns with a meditative tour through the absorptions and the immaterial spheres. T 201 at T IV 335b25, however, reports such a meditative progression by all the nuns, as is the case for T 1451 at T XXIV 248c20 and D 6 *tha* 112b5 or Q 1035 *de* 108a3.

³² Ap 17.6 at Ap 530,5 and Thī-a 138,26 already report an earthquake when Mahāpajāpatī and the five hundred nuns decide to enter Nirvāṇa before the Buddha passes away.

all four sides a cool breeze arose. [Some] *devas* in the sky danced and made music. [Some] *devas* of the sensual sphere were crying in grief, which was like timely rain that falls from the sky in a month of the spring season. The sublime *devas* scattered various lotus fragrances and various sandalwood powder on her [body].

At that time the nun Khemā, the nun Uppalavaṇṇā, the nun Kisāgotamī, the nun Sakulā, the nun Sāmā, the nun Paṭācārā, the nun [Bhadda]kaccānā, the nun [Vi]jayā, being at the head of five hundred nuns, [822b] each put down their sitting cloths in an open place and soared up into the empty sky. [While] sitting, lying down, standing, and walking in the empty sky, they performed eighteen transformations ... *up to* ... they entered the cessation of perception and knowing ... and each of them attained complete extinction.³³

Study (2)

The tale of Mahāpajāpatī's passing away has already been studied by other scholars, resulting in different interpretations. Walters (1994: 375) holds that “with its portrayal of Gotamī as the female counterpart of [the] Buddha, the *Gotamī-apadāna*” indicates that “Gotamī is the Buddha for women.” Walters (1994: 376 and 378) then even goes so far as to speak of “the Buddhī, Gotamī” and of “Her Buddhahood”.

Although it is certainly true that the narration of Mahāpajāpatī's passing away is remarkable in its vindication of her eminence and importance,³⁴ to my mind it goes too far to assume

³³ As already noted by Skilling 1997: 314, in this way “the *Ekottarāgama* relates that the *yamakaprātihārya* was performed by the five hundred female companions of Mahāprajāpatī”; cf. also Lamotte 1976: 1769 note 4. Xuánzàng (玄奘) refers to the *stūpa* at the site where Mahāpajāpatī and the other nuns were believed to have passed away; cf. T 2087 at T LI 908b28, translated in Beal (1884/2001: 68).

³⁴ Walters (1994: 372) rightly highlights that her miracles, performed “in order to honor a request of the Buddha that she dissuade ‘fools’ who doubt the ability of women to enter the Dharma (verse 79) ... parodies typical misogynist views (verses 43–47).” Murcott (1991: 18) comments that “clearly, the early sangha judged Pajapati to have been a remarkable person,” and Sujato (2011: 303) notes that this tale offers “a welcome positive icon for women’s spirituality”; cf. also Dhirasekara (1967: 157f) and Scott (2010/2011: 496–499).

that this turns her into a female counterpart of the Buddha.³⁵ According to tradition, being a Buddha implies that one has found the path to awakening oneself and then teaches it to others. With all her impressive attainments and abilities, Mahāpajāpatī remains a disciple of the Buddha and thus cannot be a Buddha herself.

Walters bases his assumption on the fact that in the *Apadāna* and the commentary on the *Therīgāthā* her decision to enter final Nirvāṇa is accompanied by an earthquake. Similarly, an earthquake accompanies the Buddha's decision to enter final Nirvāṇa, in line with the dictum that this is one of the occasions for the manifestation of an earthquake.³⁶ Yet, in the *Apadāna* and the commentary on the *Therīgāthā* the earthquake marks the decision of Mahāpajāpatī *and* of the five hundred nuns to enter final Nirvāṇa.³⁷ Clearly this does not imply that they should all be considered Buddhas. In short, in early Buddhist thought one becomes a Buddha by discovering the path to liberation on one's own, not because at the time of one's death there is an earthquake.

A rather different evaluation of the same tale has been proposed by Wilson (2011: 134f), who suggests that “Gotami frets

³⁵ Faure (2003: 183) comments that “Walter’s claim that Gotamī Mahāprajāpatī is a female buddha seems exaggerated.” In my view similarly exaggerated is the suggestion by Walters (2014: 188) that Yasodhara “has enabled the Buddha’s Buddhahood ... we can read Yasodharā’s *apadāna* to mean that she, rather than her husband, was in some ways the actual agent of his Buddhahood.”

³⁶ Walters (1994: 375 note 52) reasons that “the text provides no unambiguous statement of this position, which borders on heresy. But if I am correct in reading *Mahāparinibbānasutta* as the inter-textual basis for our text, then the earthquakes caused by Gotamī define her as a Buddha *de facto*” (the reference is to the listing of eight causes for earthquakes in DN 16, which at DN II 108,28 indicates one such cause is when a *tathāgata* mindfully gives up the life formation). Here I think it needs to be kept in mind that the listing of eight causes for an earthquake, in itself already apparently an expansion from a shorter listing of three such causes (cf. Przyłuski (1918: 424), Waldschmidt (1944: 107), Frauwallner (1956: 158), Bareau (1979: 79), and Anālayo (2013b: 19 note 30)), did not limit the evolution of the earthquake motif in Buddhist literature to these eight occasions only. Instead, earthquakes occur in later texts without such occasions corresponding invariably to one of these eight instances; for a survey of earthquakes in Buddhist literature cf. Ciurtin (2009) and (2012).

³⁷ Ap 17.6 at Ap 530,5 and Thī-a 138,26; the other versions do not relate the decision of either Mahāpajāpatī or the five hundred nuns to an earthquake.

about the death of male kinsmen ... because she may end up as a socially stigmatized woman if she does not relinquish her life before the death of her close kinsmen ... Gotami's decision to pass away before the death of her son and other male relatives" suggests "a form of *sati* in which a woman whose husband is about to die takes her own life in anticipation of her husband's death." In other words, "Gotami wishes to avoid the fate of the surplus woman, the woman without male guardianship."

This seems to me also to be a result of not fully taking into account the five hundred nuns, who are a crucial element of the story.³⁸ These are all similarly motivated to enter final Nirvāṇa because they do not wish to witness the passing away of the Buddha and Ānanda. In the case of the five hundred nuns, it is clear that they are not all relatives of the Buddha or Ānanda, thus they could not be motivated by the wish to avoid being alive when their male relative passes away. In order to do justice to the narration, an explanation of the decision to pass away needs to be developed that fits the case of all five hundred, not only of Mahāpajāpatī alone.

Besides, Mahāpajāpatī and the other nuns had already stepped out of the traditional framework of male guardianship by close family members with their act of going forth. They no longer needed to avoid the role of the surplus woman without male guardianship. In fact in most versions even Mahāpajāpatī herself additionally mentions the passing away of other chief disciples who were not her personal relatives, such as Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna as well as Mahākassapa.³⁹

Thus it is hard to see how this story could be related to the custom of *sati*.⁴⁰ This custom as evidenced in the pre-modern history of India usually forms the reaction of a married woman to the death of her husband and only very rarely her reaction to the

³⁸ Shaw (2006/2007: 149) notes that "the inclusion of a large congregation of female disciples in Gotami's story forecloses on the inference that she is a uniquely accomplished woman and makes it clear that she is not an anomaly, token, or isolated case."

³⁹ Cf. above note 19.

⁴⁰ On this custom cf., e.g., Altekar (1956: 115–142), Nandy (1980), Datta (1988), Sharma et al. (1988/2001), Leslie (1991), Hawley (1994), Courtright (1995), van den Bosch (1995), Weinberger-Thomas (1996), Garzilli (1997), Mani (1998), Adhya (2006), and Brick (2010).

death of other male members of her family.⁴¹ For Mahāpajāpatī to undertake self-cremation in accordance with the standard custom should thus have happened in relation to her husband, who by the time of the present event had passed away long ago and to whom none of the versions of the present tale even so much as alludes.⁴²

Finally, the fire manifestations Mahāpajāpatī performs do not seem to burn her body, as after that she sits down to meditate peacefully. In sum, her wish to pass away before the Buddha in the present story clearly is not related to the custom of *satī*.⁴³ Instead it is simply the application of a trope from the account of the Buddha's passing away, which seems to have provided a model for the present episode. The Sanskrit *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* and several of its Chinese parallels report that the last convert made by the Buddha, Subhadra, also decided to enter final Nirvāṇa before the Buddha's impending decease.⁴⁴

According to another discourse in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, Sāriputta also wanted to pass away, since he could not stand seeing

⁴¹ On exceptions to the rule cf., e.g., Weinberger-Thomas 1996: 130–134.

⁴² The close relationship to the death of the husband in particular, not to the death of other male members of the family, explains itself out of a concern to avoid the fate of being a widow. According to Leslie (1991: 189), “not until the husband's body is consumed in flames and he is thereby deemed to have departed this world alone, without his wife, may she be called a ‘widow’ ... the *satī* is the wife who has in fact chosen not to become a widow.” Similarly Hawley (1994: 13) notes that “sati is a means of avoiding widowhood. Since the husband is not considered really to have died until he is cremated (or, occasionally buried), his wife has the brief time separating his physical death and his ritual one to avoid this undesirable state by joining him on his pyre”; cf. also Hejib and Young (1988/2001: 80), who sum up that “the sati never had the title of a widow”, and Courtright (1995: 189): “the wife does not become a widow until her husband is cremated. By joining him on the pyre she dies together with him ... bypassing the status of widowhood and avoiding the ritual contamination and social marginality it would bring on her and those around her.”

⁴³ Elsewhere the early Buddhist discourses do in fact not show any awareness of this custom and the only instances of self-cremation found in them involve monks; cf. in more detail Anālayo (2012a).

⁴⁴ Cf. Waldschmidt (1951: 382,10 (40.48)), T 5 at T I 172b1, T 6 at T 187c29, and T 7 at T I 204b23, notably in the last case, when Subhadra has expressed that he cannot stand witnessing the Buddha's entering of Nirvāṇa and has received the Buddha's permission to enter Nirvāṇa first, he does so by meditatively attaining the fire element.

the Buddha enter final Nirvāṇa.⁴⁵ Having received the Buddha's permission to do so, he similarly did a meditative tour of the four absorptions, the immaterial attainments, and cessation.⁴⁶ His actual passing away, which here does not take place immediately on completing this meditative tour, then also results in earthquakes.⁴⁷ This confirms that several features of the spectacular passing away of Mahāpajāpatī reported in the *Ekottarika-āgama* are not specific to her role as the Buddha's foster mother.

In sum, as far as I can see the tale translated above neither places Mahāpajāpatī in a position equal to the Buddha, nor does it reflect her womanly dependence on male guardians. I would contend that neither the feminist appropriation nor the feminist critique of Mahāpajāpatī's spectacular passing away, proposed by Walters and Wilson respectively, do full justice to the story.⁴⁸ Instead, it seems to me that the central point is to provide inspiration to other nuns through the depiction of exemplary conduct and feats.

Conclusion

The two tales translated and studied in this paper involve elements that are traditionally viewed as the domain of the Buddha. Soṇā defeats the six teachers with supernormal abilities, just as the Buddha defeated them with his display of the twin miracle. Mahāpajāpatī proceeds through the whole range of meditative abilities on the eve of her passing away, just as the Buddha did on the eve of his Mahāparinirvāṇa.

Nevertheless, the intention of these tales is not to place Soṇā or Mahāpajāpatī at the same level as the Buddha. In the case of Mahāpajāpatī this can be clearly seen in the detailed descriptions of how she worshipped the Buddha and other monks. In this way the spotlight placed on her spiritual power and abilities as a woman

⁴⁵ As Wilson (2011: 142) notes, "Gotami is not alone in responding to the immanent [sic] death of the Buddha by orchestrating her own death. She is only one of many saints who made this choice."

⁴⁶ EĀ 26.9 at T II 640a19.

⁴⁷ EĀ 26.9 at T II 640c14.

⁴⁸ On various approaches taken by scholars in general when studying the role of women in Buddhist texts cf. Collett (2006) and (2009).

comes combined with an acknowledgement of the hierarchically inferior position of women vis-à-vis men that appears to have been so pervasive in the ancient Indian setting.

The driving force behind such descriptions is simply to promote the agency and spiritual capability of women. In promoting the abilities of accomplished female monastics the above tales can serve as a source of inspiration, in line with passages that explicitly aim at providing inspiration for other nuns.⁴⁹ The present tales are among several discourses featuring outstanding nuns in the *Ekottarika-āgama*,⁵⁰ making it probable that a substantial number of nuns would have been among the target audience of the discourses in this collection, sufficiently substantial to be taken into account by the reciters and transmitters of the *Ekottarika-āgama*.⁵¹

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⁴⁹ MN 68 at MN I 466,10 and MĀ 77 at T I 545c29 indicate that the Buddha's declaration that a particular nun had passed away as an arahant might inspire other nuns to dedicate themselves to progress to the same goal.

⁵⁰ Although the present tale does not explicitly introduce Mahāpajāpatī as an outstanding nun, this rank is accorded to her in the listing of eminent nuns in EĀ 5.1 at T II 558c21 as well as once again in EĀ 18.8 at T II 592c26 (on this tale cf. above note 19); both instances highlight her long standing as a nun and her renown. Outstanding nuns are a recurrent feature in the *Ekottarika-āgama* collection, in addition to its listing of outstanding nuns that parallels AN 1.14.5 at AN I 25,17. Besides the above instance of Soṇā, EĀ 38.11 at T II 728a27 (which parallels a reference to her in EĀ 5.2 at T II 559a12), another four such instances are: 1) EĀ 23.1 at T II 611b27 features Bhaddā Kaccānā as outstanding for being liberated by faith (paralleling EĀ 5.1 at T II 559a5). 2) EĀ 34.5 at T II 696b10 shows Sakulā to be outstanding for the divine eye (paralleling a reference to her in EĀ 5.1 at T II 558c25). 3) EĀ 42.3 at T II 750c14 appears to refer to Bhadda Kuṇḍalakesā as outstanding for swift wisdom (in EĀ 5.5 at T II 559c4 she is outstanding for having attained final realization (following T 2040 at T L 12c5), for a study of her tale cf. Todeschini 2013). 4) EĀ 52.2 at T II 825b13 presents Bhaddā Kapilānī as outstanding for recollection of past lives (paralleling EĀ 5.2 at T II 559a10).

⁵¹ On remarkable nuns in the *Samyukta-āgama* that appear even in a better light than monks cf. Anālayo (2014b).

Abbreviations:

Ap	<i>Apadāna</i>
AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Q	Peking edition
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
T	Taishō edition
Thī-a	<i>Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā</i> (1998 ed.)
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>

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