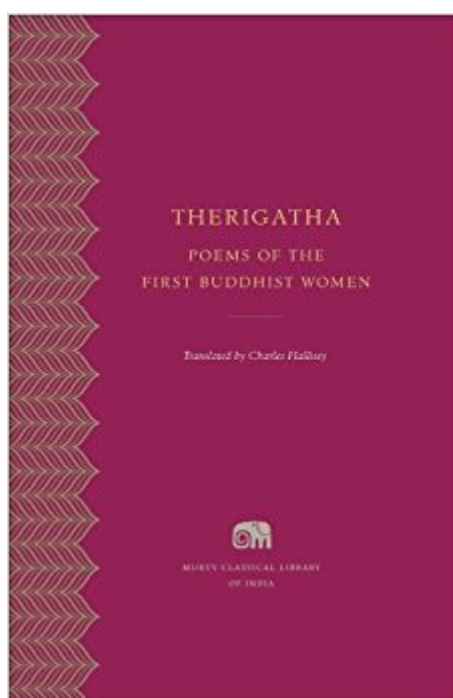


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Therigatha: Poems Of The First Buddhist Women (Murty Classical Library Of India)



Synopsis

The *Therīgāthā*, composed more than two millennia ago, is an anthology of poems in the Pali language by and about the first Buddhist women. These women were the *therīgās*, the senior ones, among ordained Buddhist women, and they bore that epithet because of their religious achievements. The poems they left behind are arguably among the most ancient examples of women's writing in the world and they are unmatched for their quality of personal expression and the extraordinary insight they offer into the lives of women in the ancient Indian past and indeed, into the lives of women as such. This new version of the *Therīgāthā*, based on a careful reassessment of the major editions of the work and printed in the Roman script common for modern editions of Pali texts, offers the most powerful and the most readable translation ever achieved in English. The Murty Classical Library of India makes available original texts and modern English translations of the masterpieces of literature and thought from across the whole spectrum of Indic languages over the past two millennia in the most authoritative and accessible formats on offer anywhere.

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Customer Reviews

The *Therīgāthā* has a lot of claims on our attention. It is among the first poetry of India; among the first poems by women in India; the first collection of women's literature in the world. But these claims should not obscure its status as poetry. While the poems embody the world-view and

morality of early Indian Buddhism, making them invaluable historical documents, they repay the reader's attention generously. (Neel Mukherjee *New Statesman* 2015-03-05) An austere and revelatory compendium of poems composed over two thousand years ago by Buddhist nuns. (Kanish Tharoor *Los Angeles Review of Books* 2015-04-13) *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women* is marvelous not only in that it is an archive of poetry in a language no longer in use but also in that it is the world's first known collection of literary work by women--documenting the aspirations and achievements of women from nearly two thousand years ago. These poems or utterances that introduce their readers to the practice and intricacies of Buddhism also serve as a testament to the multiplicity of faith and cultural experience in the Indian sub-continent. (Pragya Tiwari *India at LSE blog*) *Therigatha* is a collection of Pali poems attributed to the earliest Buddhist nuns. Though it is a part of the major Theravada Buddhist canon and has been well known to scholars for a long time, these beautiful verses haven't reached the general public who might be interested in Buddhism. We see Buddhists meditating on women's bodies as they grow old and lose their beauty, but this time the Buddhists in question are women, and their analysis, though rooted in the same assumptions, is markedly different. The poems of the *Therigatha* are not narratives; rather, they are dialogues, meditations, and songs, and they carry a more intimate tone that is beautifully expressed in Hallisey's fluid translation. These poems present a cacophony of different voices of women struggling to find themselves in Buddhism against the prevailing assumptions of their day. (Eric M. Gurevitch *Public Books*) We can only welcome an undertaking like the Murty Classical Library of India, which intends to inject fresh blood directly into the circulatory system of the English language. Any intelligent reader cannot fail to be favorably impressed in the presence of the variegated offerings of the series' first titles. The Murty Classical Library offers a surprising array of texts that are in any case capable of broadening the all-too-restricted horizons of the average Western reader. (Roberto Calasso *New York Review of Books* 2015-09-24)

Charles Hallisey is Yehan Numata Senior Lecturer on Buddhist Literatures at Harvard University.

Many people have learned a great deal through the Loeb Classical Library of Greek and Roman writing. A new series, modeled on the Loeb Classical Library, has the aim of presenting Indian writing to English readers. The series is called the "Murty Classical Library of India" after Rohan Narayana Murty, a PhD in computer science and intellectual polymath, who generously donated money to fund the project. As stated on its Website, the Murty Classical Library "aims to make

available the great literary works of India from the past two millennia. Many classic Indic texts have never reached a global audience, while others are becoming increasingly inaccessible even to Indian readers. The creation of a classical library of India is intended to reintroduce these works to a new generation of readers". The works will be drawn from several languages, reflecting India's rich heritage including "Bangla, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Pali, Panjabi, Persian, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu". It is a wonderful project; I wish it and Murty the best in the undertaking. Among the first publications of the Library is this new translation of the "Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women." I had read some of the "Therigatha" in a different translation several years ago in a Buddhist Sutta Studies group. I was glad to see this new edition and to learn about the series. The work is beautifully arranged and easy to use. Charles Hallisey, Senior Lecturer on Buddhist Literature at Harvard University, translated the work from the original Pali, wrote an insightful introduction, and prepared useful notes to the poems. The English translations of the individual poems are given on the right-hand side of the page spread while the Pali text, in Roman script, is given on the left-hand side. The translations are clear, simple, and eloquent. The Therigatha is part of a series of Buddhist Scripture known as the Pali Canon. The Therigatha is unusual in that it is in the words of early Buddhist nuns who sought and achieved Enlightenment. The poems are from women in all walks of life in ancient India. The speakers are young and old, rich and poor, single women, wives, and prostitutes. They share in common a desire to follow the Buddha's teaching and to renounce the world of change, flux and the everyday. As one of the speakers, a nun named Rohini, says: "Those who have gone forth are from various families and from various regions and still they are friendly with each other -- that is the reason why ascetics are so dear to me." In their poems, the nuns often give their reasons for abandoning lay life in favor of the Holy Life. Some of these reasons are surprisingly materialistic as one nun remembers her difficulty in getting enough to eat as she walked the streets. Others reflect on their realization of impermanence, on the death of loved ones, and, most often, on the unsatisfactory character of sexuality and of following one's impulses. Whatever the initial impetus, the women whose poems are given in this collection all have achieved Enlightenment, some after many years of effort and some after only days or weeks. The nuns talk about their background and about the joy they have attained in Enlightenment and in self-conquest. Some of the poems are doctrinal but the majority are individual and personal. They offer a sense of immediacy. The poems reject sensuality and the pleasures of the flesh, but in some of the longer works these pleasures receive a full and perhaps frank description. The poems are in a variety of formats. Some are only in the voice of the particular nun. In others the woman speaks in dialogue with the Buddha, with Mara -- the tempter -- or with another person. In other poems, the compilers of

the anthology offer a comment in their own voice. The poems are largely grouped by length. They begin with poems consisting of a single verse and work through to a poem of about forty verses and to a "great chapter" which is even longer. The lengthier poems tend to be more elaborate both in biography and in doctrinal teachings. The notes at the end of the volume offer a summary of the life of each speaker and offer short summaries of doctrinal teachings. As Hallisey says in his introduction, it is valuable to try to approach the "Therigatha" without preconceptions, whether the preconceptions are derived from earlier Buddhist study or from contemporary views of what a Scriptural text based on the voices of women should say. The Buddhist theris -- senior nuns who had achieved Enlightenment -- in this collection differ from what modern readers might want to find in them in their views of sexuality, gender equality, and other matters. An important value of this collection is to understand people and women who are greatly different from oneself and to find what spiritually brings them joy. This is a beautiful collection of poems which will allow the reader to see himself or herself differently than he or she did before. In a short poem of one verse, for example, a nun named Mutta reflects on her name. "The name I am called by means freed and I am quite free, well-free from three crooked things, mortar, pestle, and husband with his own crooked thing. I am freed from birth and death, what leads to rebirth has been rooted out." In another poem, a nun named Soma has a dialogue with the tempter. Mara says: "It is hard to get to the place that sages want to reach, it's not possible for a woman, especially not one with only two fingers' worth of wisdom." Soma replies: "What does being a woman have to do with it? What counts is that the heart is settled and that one sees what really is. What you take as pleasures are not for me, the mass of mental darkness is split open. Know this, evil one, you are defeated, you are finished." I think the best way to study Buddhism remains to read the original texts. This new translation of the "Therigatha" will appeal to those readers with a strong interest in Buddhism. More broadly, the Murty Classical Library will appeal to readers who wish to broaden their spiritual and intellectual horizons by reading works which are too-little known in the West. I look forward to reading further books in this series. Robin Friedman

Love this translation. I found it comparable and in accord with the best translator of Buddhist literature I know, Walpola Rahula. The organization of this book is also awesome.

I feel very privileged to have found this book. Beautiful edition, I am happy to see all of the poems translated in one place.

These books are beautifully made rare translations. I'm happy to have added the first five to my library and hope to continue to add them all as they're released.

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