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SONGS OF THE SONS & DAUGHTERS OF BUDDHA

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SHAMBHALA
Boston & London
1996

Another Mutta

I'm free. Ecstatically free
I'm free from three crooked things:
the mortar
the pestle
and my hunchbacked husband
All that drags me back is cut—cut!

Sumangala's Mother

Sumangala's mother was the wife of a weaver of straw hats.

I'm free
Free from kitchen drudgery
No longer a slave among my dirty cooking pots
(My pot smelled like an old water snake)
And I'm through with my brutal husband
And his tiresome sunshades
I purge lust with a sizzling sound—*pop*
"O happiness," meditate upon
this as happiness

Vimala, the Former Courtesan

Born at Vesali, daughter of a prostitute, Vimala one day spotted Maha-Moggallana going about the town for alms. He was one of the Buddha's most highly realized disciples. She followed, trying to seduce him. Some say she was spurred on by "sectarians." After the elder rebuked her, she felt shame and became a lay believer. She made this confession after joining the order:

> I used to be puffed up
> high on good looks
> intoxicated by a rosy complexion
> voluptuous figure
> I was haughty, vain,
> looked down on other women
> I was young
> All painted up
> I stood at the brothel door
> like a hunter laying snares,
> showing my wares—
> Here are my breasts, a thigh
> *(lifts a skirt)*
> I conjured, mocked, seduced—
> Today I'm bald

> Clad in the outer robe, I go begging
> Sitting at the foot of a tree,
> I no longer discriminate
> All ties have been cut
> I said, cut

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Ambapali Speaks

Ambapali's life was the stuff of legend, and an interesting twist of karma. In a former life she was a *bhikkhuni*, or nun. She had observed another nun spit in front of a shrine and rebuked her, saying, "What prostitute has been spitting in this place?" Ambapali, whose name means "mango protectress" or "mango guardian," came to birth spontaneously at the foot of a mango tree in the city of Vesali. She was extraordinarily beautiful, and princes fought fiercely over her. To end the contention it was soon decided that she be made the chief courtesan of the city. Prosperity graced Vesali, it is said, because of her notoriety. She had a son by King Bimbisara, who later became a Buddhist monk (the elder Vimal-Kondanna). Eventually abandoning fame and wealth to seek the Dharma, according to legend she entertained the Buddha with a retinue of monks, who had been warned by Gautama not to lose their heads over her. Later, out of strong devotion, she built a hermitage, or *vihara*, on her land and gave it to the Buddha. He rested there in his eightieth year, four months before he died.

Once my hair was black like the color of bees
    alive—curly
Now it is dry like bark fibers of hemp

I'm getting old
This is true, I tell you the truth

Covered with flowers, my head was fragrant
    as a perfumed box
Now, because of old age, it smells like dog's fur

Thick like a grove it used to be beautiful—
    ends parted by comb and pin
Now it's thin, I'm telling the truth

This was a head with fine pins once,
    decorated with gold, plaited, so beautiful
Now bald

My eyebrows were like crescents
    exquisitely painted by artists
Now because of old age they droop down with
    wrinkles
Ah, I'm telling the truth

My eyes used to be shiny, brilliant as jewels
Now they don't look so good

My nose was like a delicate peak
Now it's a long pepper
This scarecrow is telling the truth

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My earlobes—can you believe it?
were like well-fashioned bracelets
Now they're heavy with creases

My teeth were pearly white
like the bud of a plantain
Now they're broken and yellow
Indeed, this is the truth

Sweet was my singing like the cuckoo in the grove
Now my voice cracks and falters
Hear it? These words are true

My neck used to be soft like a well-rubbed
conch shell
Now it bends, broken

My arms were round like crossbars
Now they're weak as the *petali* tree

My hands were gorgeous—they used to be,
used to be gorgeous—
Covered with signet rings, decorated with gold
Now they are like onions and radishes
This is true, I tell you

My breasts looked great—
round, swelling, close together, lofty
Now they hang down like waterless water bags

My body used to be shiny as a sheet of gold
Now it is covered with very fine wrinkles

Both thighs—and this was once considered a
compliment—
looked like elephants' trunks—very interesting
I swear I'm telling the truth
Now they're like stalks of bamboo

My calves too, like stalks of sesame

My feet used to be elegant
like shoes of soft cotton wool
Now they are cracked and wrinkled
This hag speaks true

I had the body of a queen
Now it's lowly, decrepit, an old house
Plaster falling off
Sad, but true

Patacara Speaks

Patacara lost a husband to a snakebite, an infant to a hawk, another child to drowning, parents and a brother to calamity.

Young brahmins plough fields,
sow seeds,
nourish their wives and children,
get wealthy
Why can't I find peace?
I'm virtuous
comply with the teacher
not lazy or puffed up

One day washing my feet
I watched the water as it
trickled down the slope
I fixed my mind
the way you'd
train a thoroughbred horse

Later, taking my lamp
I enter my cell
sit on my bed and
watch the flame
I extinguish the wick

with a needle
The release of my mind
is like the quenching of the lamp
O the nirvana of the little lamp!

Ubbiri's Lament

Ubbiri was born in this Buddha-era at Savatthi to the family of an eminent burgess. Extremely beautiful, she was brought to the house of the king of Kosala, Pasenedi himself. A few years later she gave birth to a daughter named Jiva ("alive"), and the king anointed her queen. Soon after, the little girl died and the mother, out of her mind with grief, went daily to the charnel ground. She tried to worship the Buddha but gave up, so obsessed she was by her loss, and went lamenting to the river Achiravati. Buddha revealed himself to her:

Buddha:
O Ubbiri who howls for her dead daughter
"Jiva, Jiva, come back!"
come to your senses
Eighty-four thousand daughters with the name "Jiva"
have been burned in this charnel ground.
Which "Jiva" do you mourn?
Which of the countless "Jivas" do you mourn?

Ubbiri then spoke:
The master plucks the fiery dart
from my heart
It was rooted deep in there,

My loss—O Jiva!—became my obsession
Today I've stopped craving her
I let Jiva go
I take refuge in the Buddha
the Dharma, the Sangha

Kisa-Gotami and the Mustard Seed

Born into a poor family, Kisa-Gotami was named "Lean Gotami" because of the frailness of her body; when she married, they chided her as "nobody's daughter." When she bore a son, they finally paid her respect. But the boy died young—he'd just turned old enough to run and play—and Kisa went insane with grief. A wild thought came to her: *They will try to take my child and expose him.* So she lifted his corpse upon her hip and went from door to door, begging "give me medicine for my child!" "Medicine? (crazy woman) What for?" was the response. She was out of touch. Someone finally took pity and sent her to the Buddha. He glimpsed the promise in her and instructed, "Go, go, enter the town, and collect a little mustard seed from any house where no one has died." She went from house to house, but at each one someone had died. The truth dawned: *This will be the situation in the whole town.* She finally sought a charnel ground to place her dead child in, murmuring:

No village "law,"
    no city law merely
No law for this clan or
    that one alone
For the whole world, for the gods even

All is impermanent
    this is the Truth

"Gotami, did you collect the mustard seed?" the Buddha asked. Gotami answered, "This is the work of the little mustard seed," and requested ordination. She was proclaimed first among wearers of the rough raiment.

Reflecting later, she sang:

Excellent to have wise, noble friends
One should know a few things
It helps your pain
But one should understand how pain arises
    how it ceases
(the Eightfold Path, the Four Noble Truths)
Mark the sorrow, mark how it comes
Being a woman is painful
Miserable sharing a home with hostile wives
Miserable giving birth in bitter pain
Some cut their own throats
More squeamish women take poison
I saw—like others—my husband die
Two sons dead
and mother, father, brother
cremated on the funeral pyre
Miserable, a whole family destroyed!

Tears shed for a thousand lifetimes
Watched my babe's flesh devoured by
dogs, jackals, and tigers
in the charnel ground
But I survived
quenched desire
Saw the teachings as a mirror
held up to show me my crazy mind
Now healed
The poison darts extracted from my heart
All this done and
done by me

The *theri* Kisa-Gotami
saw herself in the mirror
and witnessed these things

Nanduttara

I used to worship
fire, the moon, sun,
all the gods
I used to go down
to the riverbanks
for the bathing rites
I took holy vows
shaved half my head
slept on the ground
wouldn't eat food after sundown
Then I decked myself
out with many ornaments
baths, unguents, massage—
you name it—
Tried everything
to stave off death
I was a slave to my body
Then I really "got" it
saw my body as it really is
went homeless
Lust? Sex?
Forget it
All that binds me head and foot
is loosened

Subha Speaks: Moon as Toy

After heaping up lifetimes of merit under former buddhas, Subha, whose name literally means "bright" or "shining," was born in this Buddha-era in Rajagaha to a prestigious brahmin family. Eschewing marriage, she became a nun under the teacher Prajapati. In keeping with the Buddha's *nissayas,* or guidelines, for monastic living, Subha took to heart the admonition to dwell at the foot of a tree. She loved to wander in the forest. But this was before a nun was raped in the woods and the rules drastically changed. The *Cullavagga* states: "Now at that time, nuns dwelt in the forest and wayward men violated them. They told this to the Buddha. He replied, 'A nun is not to adopt a forest life.'"

A young man tried to seduce the *bhikkhuni* Subha as she was entering Jivaka's tantalizing mango grove:

She:
Why do you stop me—
What have I done to you?
It's not right to proposition a nun.
I've been trained in the precepts, you not.
I'm pure, you're impure.
On top of that you're obnoxious. Out of my way!

He:
But you're young and beautiful. Cast off that silly yellow robe and let's make love in this wood.
Blossoms smell sweet from the tall trees. Spring is a happy season. Let's make love in this flowering wood.
The trees cry out when shaken by wind. It's wonderful and frightening.
What fun can you have alone in the wood?
You could get lost.
The forest is haunted—you want to go it alone?
Haunted by wild beasts—rutting, savage elephants.
You could go about a forest like this like a gold idol.
Just be my little doll. You'd have beautiful clothes.
I'd be your slave. First let's lie in the grove together.
O Kinnari, elf of the forest with languid eyes. Do as I say, please. I'll make you happy. Come live in my house. You'll live in a palace of verandas and terraces with women attending you. You'll wear the finest muslin from Banares, cover yourself with garlands, creams. I'll give you ornaments of precious stones, gold work, pearls, anything you want! Come lie on a bed with a clean cover, spread with a fine woolen blanket—quite new, extremely costly—decorated with sandalwood, having an excellent smell. Come.

(He says almost to himself):

A blue lotus rises up with gorgeous blossoms, preyed on by water sprites. Great! No other man has ever touched her.

She:

What seems to infatuate you so much? Me? In this carrion-filled body of mine? Look again. What makes you speak like this?

He:

It's your eyes like a gazelle, like the elf. Your eyes make me wild. They're like buds of a lotus, spotless as gold. I'm crazy with desire for you! Even if you go away I'll never forget your miracle eyes. And long lashes. Pure gaze. No eyes are dearer to me.

(He lunges for her.) She:

You're crazy! You're on the wrong track. You want the moon as a toy. You want to jump over Mount Meru. You want the impossible. You're trying to seduce a child of the Buddha. I desire no one now. No lust for any man. Desire has been scattered like sparks from burning coal. It's poison, forget it. No lust for any man. Can't see him. I've slain the root and branch of lust through following the Noble Path. Tempt someone else if you can, forget Subha who doesn't see any man. I'm awake in the midst of praise, blame, pain, pleasure. All composite opposites, all conditioned things are disgusting. I tell you, my mind doesn't cling to anything at all. The darts are extracted from my heart, wounds healed, no more intoxicants. I've seen puppets and dolls fastened by strings and sticks, made to dance in crazy ways. Once the strings and sticks are removed, then what? Once they're thrown away, mutilated, scattered, lost, broken to bits, then what?

This little body, this phantom body, does not exist. A puppet can't exist without sticks and strings. If something does not exist without phenomena, on what can you fix your mind? You see a picture on a wall smeared with yellow ointment—is that it? You're confused, you mistake the image for the thing itself. O Blind One! I tell you, you run after an empty thing—a mirage, a golden tree at the end of a dream, a puppet show in the middle of a crowd. Delusion, conjurer's trick! Forget it. An eye is a ball set in a hollow with a bubble in the middle, briny tears, it secretes slime too. Here, look at this!

(The young maiden plucks out her eye to give to her seducer. She is unattached. She has a calm mind.)

He:

Agh!

(He's horrified. His passion dies on the spot. He begs forgiveness.)

Please put it back! Become whole! Forgive me, I won't trouble you again. Please put your sight back. You pierce me, all right. I embraced fire. I seized a poisonous snake. I beg you, please put your eye back!

The nun then visited the excellent Buddha. And on seeing her virtue the Buddha restored her eye.

The Ballad of Isidasi

In the beautiful kingdom of Pataliputta
named for the fragrant trumpet flower
lived two *bhikkhunis,* born of the Shakya clan—
Isidasi and Bodhi—holy beauties
who delighted in their study and practice
They were erudite,
accomplished meditators

Listen how
after having made the round for alms,
eaten, and washed their little begging bowls
they cheerfully sat down
on a secluded bank
by the great river Ganges
and began to speak together
What on earth brought you to renunciation
Isidasi?
You're lovely to look at—
such noble carriage
still young
Were you sick of the domestic life,
Was that it?
Are you really going to stay a nun forever?

And in this quiet spot by the river
Isidasi—now
skilled in the Dharma
now strong in the Dharma,
took up her long strange tale:

Listen, Bodhi, listen to me
I'll tell you how I became a nun

My father was a merchant, a model citizen
of Ujjeni—Avanti's most excellent city
I was his only daughter—his delight—
prized jewel of his eye

One day a high nobleman arrived from Saketa
laden with exotic treasure
sent by a rich merchant
to woo me for his son

My father gave me willingly
No protest. No bargaining

I tell you I waited on my in-laws day and night
bowed and scraped
Paid endless homage,
bowing, obsessively prostrating at their feet
Waited on all my husband's kin
brothers, sisters, his whole retinue in fact
Did everything I was supposed to—everything!

Leapt up,
gave my seat to them zealously
as they'd enter the room
Timid, really overdoing it
Constantly serving drink and food
catering to every need

Bolt up early, Isidasi, wake up
Wash your hands and feet
Now go to him like a good wife
Cup your hands obediently

I'd arrive with soap, combs, ornaments,
dress and groom him as if I were
a slave girl, he the king

I'd boil the rice gruel
wash the pots and pans
Looking after him the way
a mother does her only son

He disliked me from the start
Why? Why?
I who'd shown such slavish devotion
up before dawn, industrious,
humble
I who'd shown real affection
I'd reach for him . . .

One day he said to his parents:
I can't live with Isidasi anymore!
—just like that—
I won't live with her
Give me permission to go

What's wrong with you son?
Isidasi is clever,
a diligent housewife
gets up early, does the chores
How can you say this?
What's happened?
Why doesn't she please you?

She's done no harm
I just can't stand to be around her
She disgusts me
She drives me away

What offense did you commit, Isidasi?
They turned to me . . .

Nothing, I protested—
I've done nothing—
Never said an evil word
Never hurt my husband
What can I do when he loathes me so?

I was devastated
They led me back to my father's home
We've lost a beautiful goddess, they said
to keep our son at home

Then my father gave me to the household
of a second rich man of noble family
for half the bride price
I lived there a month till he too
rejected me
and I'd served him like the other—
like a slave

My father runs out in the street
like a crazy person
and grabs the first mendicant he sees
Come be my son-in-law!
Throw away that ragged robe and begging pot!

But the *sadhu* having lived with me two weeks
demanded
Give me back my cup and robe
I want to go back to the homeless life
beg for scraps out in the street

What hasn't been done for you here
Tell us quickly what we can do for you!
(my father was scared to lose him too)

Even if I were honored like royalty
I tell you I simply couldn't be
under the same roof with Isidasi!

I was alone again
I wanted to die
O please let me die or just
let me go off a wanderer, I pleaded

Then the noble lady Jinadatta
a learned practitioner
—it was most auspicious—
arrived at the house
on her daily round for alms

and as she entered
I offered her my seat
then bent over
paying homage at her feet

I gave her food and drink
And after she was satisfied
I blurted out
O Noble Lady, I wish to go forth
I want to renounce the world
Take me with you

No, no

Stay here,
practice here!—my father broke in
You can take care of the ascetics
and brahmins from here—please stay

But I was wailing now
weeping, begging
praying to him to let me go
I must wear out my evil karma
Let me go

He finally relented with his blessing
Go get enlightened Isidasi
Attain nibbana, little unfortunate one

And I said good-bye to my parents
good-bye to tribal kin
and seven days after my renunciation
I gained the three knowledges

Now I know my last seven births
I understand now, Bodhi
Listen well to my tale

I was a goldsmith in the city of Erakaccha
Wealthy, handsome, lusty
So intoxicated by my own youth and prowess
I slept with other mens' wives

For these indiscretions
I cooked in hell a long time
till I found rebirth in the body of an ape
Only alive seven days
Dog-Ape, the monkeys' chief
castrated me
Castrated me when I was only seven days old
Was this the result of my former lust?

Fallen from there,
having died in the Sindhava Forest
I was born the offspring of
a one-eyed lame she-goat
Again castrated,
carrying children on my back twelve years
I was worm-eaten, tailless, pathetic

Down again
O fallen from there
I was reborn a lac-red bull belonging
to a cattle dealer
castrated another time
pulling a huge plough
blind, no tail, sorry sight
All because I seduced another man's wife?

Next: hermaphrodite
born in the street to a poor household slave

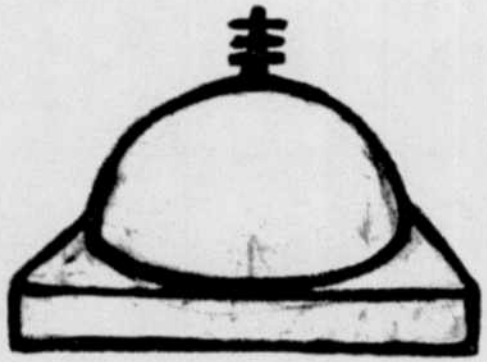
all my miserable life neither man nor woman
and died after thirty years, woe woe

Another time back, daughter now
to a poor carter's family, father oppressed
with debts to usurers
and he used me to pay off the debt
owed to a shrewd caravan merchant
The man dragged me off—
weeping and wailing from my home

When I turned sixteen the merchant's son Giridasa
who loved me, made me his wife
But he had a second wife he loved too and
she was good
And I brought no harmony to that house

See now, Bodhi, how the karma ripened
from this last life and how
it manifested
though I waited on them—all of them
and was their humble slave

Look at my births, observe well, Sister Bodhi:
Sex-craving idiot, helpless monkey babe,
pathetic beasts of burden—goat made ragged by
labor, no eyes in this cow's head—
unspeakable life as hermaphrodite—

was I man or woman?—begging in the streets
then wretched wife, unloved
scorned wife again, again, again—enough!

Well—that's all at an end now
Ah (she lets out a cheerful sigh)
that's all finished now, done
I say *done*