

First Free Women, a bogus translation of Buddhist scripture

Bhante Sujato, 20/1/2021

Imagine if someone were to take a beloved book from the Bible or the Koran, discard 95% of the content, and invent the rest from their imagination. Then it was sold and marketed as sacred scripture, and taught in churches or mosques as if it were ancient wisdom. Well sadly, that's exactly what's happening in Buddhism.

It's hard for me to convey the sense of betrayal and distrust that I feel. I love the Buddha's teachings more than I can say. Maybe they're not for everyone, but for me they are everything: they are illumination and wisdom, they are a pure and unfailing friend. And more than that, they are a direct link to the heart and mind of the Buddha and his immediate disciples. This is all we have; once it is lost, the path slips away.

The Therīgāthā, “Verses of the Senior Nuns”

The Therīgāthā is a collection of verses by Buddhist nuns included in the Pali Tipiṭaka, the oldest scripture of Buddhists. It is a unique testament to the spiritual prowess of ancient Indian women.

Buddhists honor our scripture as one of the Triple Gems. We have passed it down with care and precision for 2,500 years and freely share it with everyone in the world. For myself, and for many Buddhists, it is deeply distressing to see it displaced by the pale fancies of a modern writer.

The Poems of Matty Weingast

In early 2020, a book of original poetry by Matty Weingast was released by Shambhala Publications under the misleading title *The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns*. Despite the title, the author has said it is “not a translation”, while the publisher claims “in general we have not positioned this as a new translation”.

Yet the book has been constantly misrepresented as a translation in Shambhala's marketing, as well as by Weingast himself. It is listed in the Library of Congress as a translation, and endorsed by Buddhist teachers. Reader feedback shows that almost all think it is a translation.

Weingast's poetry is widely found in libraries and universities, and is taught in retreats and Dhamma centers by people who have been misled into thinking that it is the wisdom teachings of ancient Buddhist nuns.

Comparison

Here is a typical example showing how little Weingast's work has in common with the Therīgāthā. This is the verse of Saṅghā Therī from the Therīgāthā (Thig 1.18, translation is my own).

Therīgāthā	Weingast
I gave up my home, my child, my cattle, and all that I love, and went forth. And now that I've given up desire and hate, dispelled ignorance, and plucked out craving root and all, I'm at peace, I'm quenched.	When I left the only home I'd ever known, I thought I'd left everything behind. But I was still carrying all the years of running back and forth and around in circles after this or that. Just sitting still, those circles have broken apart and been carried away by this simple wind blowing in and out. All your old thoughts like snow falling on warm ground. Just sit back and watch.

Let alone a translation, it is not an adaptation, a re-envisioning, or a re-imagining. It's an original poem bearing no more than a superficial resemblance to the Therīgāthā. The clear song of awakening has been replaced by vague and confused meditation metaphors. In my twenty-five years of studying, practicing, teaching, and translating Pali texts, I have never met such a disturbing deception.

Appropriation and entitlement

In an interview with New Book Network Podcast, the author admitted, “I knew that one way or another, if I was going to do this project, I would be one more male co-opting female voices.”

Despite his qualms he continued, apparently in the belief that by somehow channelling or intuiting the voices of women this would qualify as a translation. This fantasy entitles a white American man to steal the voices of brown-skinned Asian women and erase their achievements.

The way forward: withdraw from publication

Weingast's project has been mired in deception and appropriation from the very beginning. It is harmful and dishonors the Buddhist tradition. The publisher should withdraw it from publication immediately.

In addition, the customers deserve their money back, as they have been sold the book under false pretences. A sincere public apology is called for, so that institutions and readers worldwide will know what has transpired.

You can help by emailing the publisher, sharing this information, or leaving a review online. Let the publisher know that while Buddhists are gentle and accepting, we will not tolerate the counterfeiting of our sacred texts.