

THE PAṬĀCĀRĀ STORY AND THE BOOK OF JOB: SUFFERING AND RESILIENT FAITH IN BUDDHIST AND BIBLICAL TRANSFORMATION

G. P. V. SOMARATNA

Abstract: *This article offers a comparative reading of the story of Paṭācārā in Buddhist scripture and the story of Job in the Bible to discover avenues for disciplining individuals who have suffered deep trauma into a new spiritual identity within a Buddhist cultural context. Although both characters endured immense suffering, their stories teach resilience, wisdom, and faith within their respective traditions. Paṭācārā in a karmic Buddhist setting and Job in an Israelite monotheistic setting share several thematic similarities, particularly in their experiences of loss and mental struggle. The key difference is the Paṭācārā story's Buddhist focus on detachment and insight into the universality of suffering (dukkha), and the Job narrative's emphasis on faith in God's justice and ultimate restoration. Both narratives highlight the human experience of suffering and the transformative power of wisdom or faith in overcoming it, even contributing to mental health and personal growth.*

Keywords: *Suffering, faith, resilience, sense of purpose*

1. Introduction

Paṭācārā in Buddhism and Job in the Bible are individuals who experienced traumatic loss and recovery within their respective philosophical or theological worldviews. Both stories are roughly contemporaneous, originating in the 6th century BC during the Judahite exile under the Babylonian Empire and the era of the sixteen North Indian oligarchic republics known as the Mahajanapadas.¹

1. Baveru Jataka (No. 339), E.B. Cowell, *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. Vol 3 (Cambridge: University Press, 1897), 83.

2. The consolations of Paṭācārā and Job

Paṭācārā was a notable female character in the early Pali canon of classical Buddhist literature.² According to the story, she became one of the outstanding female disciples of Gautama Buddha when she became a Bhikkhuni period following her period of grief. Reportedly, she became the foremost exponent of the *Vinaya*, the rules of Buddhist monastic discipline.

Her story is certainly one of the most memorable in Buddhist literature and most referenced in sermons and iconography, particularly in Theravāda Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. She is remembered for her dramatic transformation from deranged grief (when she had thrown off her clothes, roaming naked in the streets) until she met the Buddha and, ultimately, attained enlightened *arahatship*. She is also revered as one of the greatest elder nuns (*thērīs*) of the Buddha with the expert ability to expound the *Vinaya*.³

The Book of Job is one of the most notable pieces of biblical literature in that although it is the story of one man it is mostly a revelatory account of God's sovereignty. It explores some of the most profound existential questions humans ask about life within a theistic framework. While many readers grapple with the cause of Job's afflictions, the narrator reveals that suffering can strike even the righteous. God's purposes involving human tribulations are inscrutable.

Suffering is a significant concept in both Buddhism and Christianity, but each tradition interprets and addresses it differently. The lessons drawn from their stories reflect the distinct spiritual frameworks of Buddhism and Christianity. The stories of Paṭācārā and Job share several

Baveru is identified with Babylon. See, Thomas W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India* (Repr. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), 104. Rabbinic opinion is that Book of Job was composed range from the era of patriarchs to down to the Persian Period. See, Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, The Anchor Bible 15 (3. ed., New York: Doubleday, 1990), xxx.

2. *Angutta Nikaya*, 1.5.4.

3. *The Dhammapada*, vv. 113, 288, 289.

thematic similarities despite originating from different worldview traditions.

The Buddha taught that everything in the world is impermanent (*anicca*), which is why becoming attached to anything, even one's own life, is fundamentally futile. Sorrow is caused by not fully realizing this and feeling that something is wrong when loss occurs even though loss is inevitable in an impermanent world. Buddha refused to admit the existence of a Creator whether in the form of a force or a being. His teaching was based on the impersonal concepts of *samsara* and *karma*.

3. The story of Paṭācārā

The primary source of the Paṭācārā story is found in the *Therīgāthā* (Verses of the Elder Nuns) which celebrates her attainment of insight into suffering and impermanence (112-121).⁴ The *Vinaya Piṭaka* mentions Paṭācārā as an expert in monastic discipline. The *Apadāna* (Legends of Female Disciples) offers additional historical and spiritual details.⁵ The *Dhammapada* Commentary (*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*) provides a detailed background on her tragic life and conversion to Buddhism.

Paṭācārā was born in Sāvathī⁶ to a wealthy merchant family. At puberty her parents confined her within the household to ensure her chastity for marriage to a husband of high-status. However, she fell in love with a servant and decided to elope rather than accept an arranged marriage. She left behind her luxurious life, settled in the village of her husband, and bore her first son. This early episode of her life demonstrates her strong will and independence.

4. Charles Hallisey, ed., *Therīgāthā: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, Murty Classical Library of India 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 66–70

5. Caroline A F Rhys Davids, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*, First Indian edition., MLBD Sacred Books of the Buddhist Series (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2018).

6. Sāvathī was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kosala, near the Rapti river in north-eastern Uttar Pradesh, India. The Buddha lived most of his life there after enlightenment.

While pregnant with their second child, Paṭācārā insisted on returning to her parents in Sāvattihī for better care during childbirth. During their journey, her husband was bitten by a venomous snake and died. Society in 6th cent. India was regulated by the *Dharmashastra*'s social norms and emerging religious practices. The death of a husband had detrimental social, religious, and legal consequences for a widow.⁷

Paṭācārā gave birth to her second son on the journey, but tragedy struck again. A storm broke out, forcing her to cross a river in full flood. She carried her newborn across but while attempting return for her older child, the newborn was swooped away by a bird of prey. Hearing his mother's screams mid-stream, the older son assumed she was calling him and entered the water only to be swept away in the strong current. Sons were considered essential for a family's well-being and spiritual continuity. The *Manusmṛiti* states that a woman is always under the guardianship of a male relative. "In childhood, a female must be subject to her father; in youth, to her husband; and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent" (*Manusmṛiti* 5.148).⁸ Therefore, the death of the male members of her family caused deep personal distress, especially as she blamed herself for their deaths.

Traumatised by the sudden and successive deaths of husband and children, Paṭācārā arrived at her parents' home, only to witness another calamity. The storm had destroyed the house, killing her parents and three brothers. Overwhelmed with grief, she lost all sense of propriety, wandering the streets naked and distraught, lamenting her woes. The duty of support and protection for a widowed daughter fell on the parents according to ancient Hindu norms. But Paṭācārā had lost her entire family and was utterly destitute. She wandered aimlessly until she met the

7. Manmatha Nath Dutt, *The Dharma Sāstra or the Hindu Law Codes*, Vol. 1 (Kessinger Publishing, 2010).

8. G. Bühler, *The Laws of Manu* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964), 195.

Buddha at the Jētavanā monastery in Sāvattihī.⁹

Seeing Paṭācārā's broken state, the Buddha addressed her compassionately and counselled her based on basic Buddhist principles. He taught her the doctrines of impermanence and suffering, helping her realize that grief arises from attachment. She renounced social attachments, joined the monastic order of nuns, and through meditation attained the tranquil mental state of *sōtapatti*. She later became a leading nun (*bhikkhuni*) and was renowned for her teachings on discipline (*vinaya*) and wisdom. According to Buddhist canonical writings, Paṭācārā's journey from immense personal loss to spiritual awakening is regarded as a powerful testament to the transformative power of the Buddha's teachings.

The Buddha never invoked the existence of a creator whether in the form of a force or a being. He interpreted the plight of Paṭācārā purely in karmic terms. According to the *Dhammapada*, Buddha said to her, "Throughout this round of samsāric existences, the amount of tears you have shed on account of the death of your sons, husbands, parents and brothers is voluminous; it is even more than the waters of the four oceans."

4. Modern psychological interpretations

Several modern psychological studies have mined the story of Paṭācārā for therapeutic lessons.¹⁰ It has become a mainstay for trauma counselling within the subfield of Buddhist Psychology. In Sonali Deraniyagala's post-tsunami memoir, the protagonist recovers from severe mental trauma under the guidance of her therapist, a medical

9. Jētavanā was the venue of most of the Buddha's discourses, having resided there for nineteen out of 45 *vassas* (rainy seasons), more than at any other monastery.

10. E.g. P. Srivastava and M. Srivastava, "The Buddhist Perspective of Mental Health: Destigmatization and Relevance in Psychotherapy," *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12, no. 1 (2024): 1,628-1,634; Narotam Singh, D. Patteswari, and Amita Kapoor, "Buddhist Psychology and Mindfulness Interventions for Psychosis," *Bodhi Path* 21, no. 2 (July 31, 2021): 9-14.

doctor with training in Buddhist psychology.¹¹ In a recent paper, Gamini E. A. Fonseka highlights “female resilience in the face of family tragedy” based on the Paṭācārā story. Female Resilience in the face of family tragedy; A comparative study of Sonali Deraniyagala’s wave and the Buddhist tale of Bhikkhuni Paṭācārā.” Considering the similarities and differences between their characters and circumstances, Fonseka makes a literary comparison of the two narratives that have evolved from their biographical details.¹² These accounts operate within the non-theist framework of philosophical Buddhism which does not require faith in a higher power. Human mindfulness, psychological resilience, and ultimate liberation are prescribed within the fundamental tenets of saṃsāric reality in accordance with the laws of unsatisfactoriness, non-being, impermanence, karma, rebirth, and the path of enlightenment.

5. Job’s suffering within the theistic worldview

The biblical story of Job is based on a reality framed within a theistic worldview based on relational moral accountability between the sovereign God and his creatures who live in a world which is orderly yet vulnerable to evil. Belief in personal relationship with God can be deeply therapeutic. It provides comfort, guidance, and a sense of purpose, especially during challenging times. Many people find that faith helps them cope with stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, offering a source of inner peace and emotional resilience.

The story is about a righteous and wealthy man named Job who lives in Uz as the priest and patriarch of his

11. Sonali Deraniyagala, *Wave: Life and Memories after the Tsunami* (Westminster: Knopf Doubleday, 2013).

12. E. A. Gamini Fonseka, “Female Resilience in the Face of Family Tragedy: A Comparative Study of Sonali Deraniyagala’s *Wave* and the Buddhist Tale of Bhikkhuni Patachara,” in *Avenues: Papers on Peace, Reconciliation and Development Challenges, Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences. Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna, 2017*, 142–157.

extended family. God mentions Job to Satan saying, “there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8 NKJV throughout). Despite his righteousness, Job experiences catastrophic losses, including the death of his children, the loss of his wealth, and severe physical afflictions. These trials are permitted by God as a test of Job’s faith, instigated by Satan’s challenge that Job’s piety is solely due to the prosperity and protection with which God has favoured him. The book is part of ancient Israel’s wisdom tradition and provides a profound exploration of God’s interaction with Satan, human suffering, divine sovereignty, faith, and theistic discourse. Job at that time is unaware of the dialogue between God and Satan, and his response of faith is a testament to his faith in God despite his suffering and confusion.

Amidst devastating loss, Job’s initial response is one of deep anguish and pious resignation. “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

Next, Job is visited by friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and later Elihu, who attempt to explain his sufferings through the lens of divine punitive justice. They reason that Job’s afflictions must necessarily be the result of his personal sin. Eliphaz suggests that Job’s suffering is a form of divine discipline (Job 4:7-8). Bildad insists on the righteousness of God and urges Job to repent (Job 8:3-6). and Zophar frankly accuses Job of deserving an even bigger penalty (Job 11:6).

On the other hand, Job maintains his innocence and refuses to accept their simplistic reasoning. Throughout the discussions, Job expresses his agony and bewilderment, but he continually professes his connection with God. Job accuses his companions of being “miserable comforters” (Job 16:2) and challenged their formulaic cause-effect theology.

The story of Job inspires individuals to remain steadfast and find hope even in the most devastating

circumstances. In the face of suffering, we are reminded of our creaturely vulnerability, mortality, and intellectual limitations – hard but undeniable realities of our human existence. This realization can be a humbling experience, leading us to embrace our inherent need for God. When everything is going well, it is easy to forget our reliance on God. One may even be tempted to believe in one's self-sufficiency.

Job's answer to his wife's statement, "Do you still retain your integrity? Curse God and die!" was "You speak as a foolish woman speaks...should we accept from God only good and not adversity?" (Job 2: 9-10). Job shows that faith is not certainty, but an openness to mystery sustained by a trustworthy God. Faith is trust that a greater power is guiding us. It may not erase doubt, but it helps us to live with it.

Eventually, God vindicates Job's innocence and honour, restoring to him double the wealth he had lost, and replenishing his progeny. Job's response of faith is rewarded, not merely with material blessings, but with a deeper understanding of God's character and purposes. His account serves as an enduring example of faith that perseveres through trials, trusting in God's goodness and sovereignty.

6. Faith-like *saddhā* in Paṭācārā's transformation

While Buddhism does not posit a sovereign creator deity, there is a sense of *dhamma* (liberating truth) as a guaranteeing and guiding principle of moral justice and order. The Buddha represents wisdom, but he is not a divine being who intervenes to supernaturally eradicate suffering. Paṭācārā's transformation came from understanding *dhamma*, not divine intervention, but through the compassionate intervention of the Buddha. Buddhism teaches self-mastery for achieving mindfulness and enlightenment. While successive Buddhas provide guidance, the effort and realization must come from human resolution. Paṭācārā's suffering was due to impermanence

and karmic conditions, not divine punishment. Buddha's words initiated her awakening. She was able to see her reality clearly, but she had to walk the path herself. Through meditation she found inner peace. From a Christian perspective, Paṭācārā's transformation is entirely psychological and self-directed. She does receive external intervention from the Buddha, but it is entirely therapeutic, not spiritual in the relational theistic sense.

The closest Buddhist concept to theistic 'faith' in Buddhism is *saddhā* which refers to a serene commitment to the practice of the Buddha's teaching, and to trust in enlightened or highly developed beings, such as Buddhas or bodhisattvas. *Saddhā* may not only be devotion to a person but trust in the efficacy of *dhmma* and the possibility of *nirvāna*.¹³ On the other hand, through faith-based practices like prayer, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, Christians have been able to experience deep healing in all areas of their lives. Although philosophical Theravāda Buddhism does not allow a personal role to the Buddha as the one who reveals truths, aids spiritual progress, or answers prayers after his *parinirvāna* (passing away), there are many instances when such faith was placed in him during his lifetime after attaining Buddhahood. Therefore, even in contemporary Buddhist devotion, the Buddha is prayed to as an ever-present being who attends to the supplications of his adherents. As the astute observer of Sinhala folk Buddhism, Gananath Obeyesekera points out, in Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha is personalized but projected into a past.¹⁴

When Paṭācārā first approached the Buddha in her disturbed state, he assured her with his authority, inviting her to place her faith in him. "Patacara, have no fear; you have now come to one who can protect you and guide you." After Paṭācārā had become a nun, the Buddha appeared

13. *Saddha Sutta*, translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Aguttara Ninkaya 5.38 PTS: A iii 42, 1998.

14. Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 22, no. 2 (February 1963): 143, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2050008>.

to her once again to confirm insights and aid her progress to arahathood. On that occasion, “the Buddha seeing her through supernormal power from the Jetavana monastery sent forth his radiance and appeared to her in person. He then said to her, ‘Patacara, you are now on the right track, and you now have the true perception of the aggregates (khandhas)’.”

7. Conclusion

In Paṭācārā's story, the will to dedicate her life to cultivating spiritual progress as a nun and offer her leadership in the monastic community was inspired by realizing the teachings of the Buddha about impermanence and non-attachment. But it was also accompanied by faith in the compassion and authority of the Buddha as the ultimate teacher of liberative truth. Therefore, a form of faith did play a decisive role in Paṭācārā's transformation.

Human suffering is a curious thing. We can recall our suffering, and, with a certain amount of anxiety, look onward to the future. We write about our sufferings, and those of others, so we participate vicariously in what others have gone through. This could give us pleasure or pain, or even a tantalizing mixture of both. In Christianity, "salvific suffering" refers to the confidence that suffering, when unified with Christ's suffering, can be a means of spiritual growth and even salvation. It is not that suffering is inherently good, but that through faith and by offering one's pain to God, it can lead to a deeper relationship with Him and a deeper understanding of the Christian faith.

Christians have two significant advantages. They have a relationship with a living being whose basic nature is love. They also have faith in this God. Faith is not a philosophy, but an encounter with the Lord. Knowing that we depend fully on the Lord and His grace is basic to faith.

Do those who have faith in God have a stronger sense of purpose to persevere through suffering? Christians would certainly claim it does, often citing Job as the clearest witness to that virtue of faithful resilience in the Bible.