

Theragāthā 168

Martin Straube

Theragāthā 168 runs as follows:

*tvañ ca me maggam akkhāhi añjasam amatogadham;
aham monena monissam Gaṅgāsoto va sāgaran ti.*

And do you show me the straight path which plunges
into the death-free. By sage-hood I shall know it, as the
stream of Ganges will [eventually] know the sea.¹

Th-a II 44.16 glosses the verbal form *monissam* with *jānissam* “I will know”, thereby relating it implicitly to the verb *munāti* “knows, understands”. This derivation of *monissam* from a verbal root *mun* is made clear by Aggavaṃsa in his *Saddanīti* who at the same time addresses the problem of the unusual root vowel *o*.² The verb *munāti*³ is attested once in the Pali canon (Dhp 269) in its present 3rd singular form. In addition, the word *muta* “apprehended, sensed, perceived” has been considered as a past perfect participle of *munāti*,⁴ but is probably to be explained as a phonetic by-form of *mata* (related to *maññati*, Skt. \sqrt{man}),⁵ while some other forms seemingly related to *munāti* are

¹ Norman 2007.

² Sadd 498.6ff., under the sūtra *muna ñāṇe: anāgatavacane ukārassa vuddhi-vasena aham monena monissan ti rūpantarañ ca dissati. tattha monissan ti jānissam*; “due to *vṛddhi* of the vowel *u* in the future tense [the root *muna*] shows a different form, thus: *aham monena monissam*. There, *monissam* means ‘I will know’.”

³ It is probably related to OIA $\sqrt{mnā}$; see Norman 1999, p. 27, n. 6; Oberlies 2019, vol. I, p. 326, n. 4.

⁴ CPD s.v. *a-muta*.

⁵ *Muta* is probably the product of sound change of *a* to *u*, caused by the preceding labial *m*-; cf. Norman 1999, p. 247ff., esp. p. 250.

most likely artificially modelled after *muta*.⁶ Notwithstanding its rare occurrence, *munāti* is used by commentators to explain the words *muni* and *mona*.⁷

Since a future form *monissam* would be the second occurrence of an otherwise rare verb in the Pali canon, it deserves special attention. In addition to the grammatical problem of how to explain the root vowel *o*, the meaning “I will know” appears odd in the given context. In the well-known simile in pāda d we would expect “as the stream of Ganges will reach the sea”, rather than “know”. Moreover, pāda c lacks a subject of comparison to *sāgaram* which therefore has to be supplied from the first half of the stanza. But, to take *maggam* as the subject of comparison only adds another oddity to the simile, since *magga* is the “path” or “means” by which one will reach the goal, not the goal itself, as is the ocean for the river that flows in.

All these problems disappear if we read *monissam* as *mon'issam*, as sandhi form for *monam issam*, with *issam* as future 1st singular of *eti* “goes”.⁸ Then we may translate the second half of the stanza as follows:

By [living] the way of life of a *muni* I will reach the state
of a *muni*, as the stream of the Ganges will reach the sea.

C.A.F. Rhys Davids arrived at a syntactically very similar translation by taking the simile seriously and discarding the commentary’s explanation of *monissam*. However, she did not draw any conclusions with regard to the printed Pali text:⁹

So I in silent study pondering
Shall to the silence of the seers attain,
As glides great Gangā’s river to the main.

⁶ A II 25,16ff.: *mutvā motabbaṃ mutam na maññati, amutaṃ na maññati, motabbaṃ na maññati, motāraṃ na maññati.*

⁷ See, e.g., Spk I 26,28ff.: *monan ti catumaggaññaṃ. taṃ hi munāti ti monaṃ. catusaccadhamme jānāti ti attho*, ad S I 4,19*.

⁸ Similar forms are attested; cf. DoP s.v. *eti*²: *issati, issāmi.*

⁹ Rhys Davids 1913, p. 132 with note 3.

As one can see, other interpretations of the multifaceted term *mona* are possible, including “silence” which in its basic meaning of “not speaking” is undeniably attested at Dhṛp 268,¹⁰ but could also be taken as “quietude, inner peace”. In the given context I am inclined to take *monena* as referring to the way (*magga*) mentioned in the first line, understood in a general sense as the way of life of a *muni*. The expression *mon’ issaṃ* could perhaps be translated more idiomatically as “I will become a muni”, but, it is this peculiar mode of expressing the concept of becoming something by combining an abstract noun with a verb of going to or reaching — “I will reach the state of a *muni*” — that allows for the simile of the river reaching the sea. Similar statements playing with *mona* and *muni* and their different (shades of) meanings are well attested in early Pali stanzas.¹¹ And what is more, the often quoted simile of the river flowing and dissolving in the ocean now appears meaningful in our stanza since being a *muni* may be aptly compared with the ocean. This is in line with a number of passages in old Pali texts where the unmoved, deep and unfathomable ocean is compared to a wise person or a sage.¹²

¹⁰*na monena munī hoti mūlharūpo aviddasu.* The commentaries usually gloss *mona* with *ñāṇa* “knowledge, understanding” which is however hardly the meaning attached to *mona* in the old texts. The evidence of Dhṛp 268 forced the author of the Dhṛp-a to acknowledge the inadequacy of the traditional interpretation: *kāmaṃ hi moneyyapaṭipadāsāṅkhātena maggañāṇamonena muni nāma hoti, idha pana tuṅhībhāvaṃ sandhāya monenā ti vuttaṃ.* (Dhṛp-a III 395,9ff)

¹¹Cf., e.g., Ud 9,7*: *yadā ca attanā vedi muni monena brāhmaṇo*, 43,20*: *munino monapathesu sikkhato*, and especially Sn 723: *yo ca jānaṃ yatatto, jānaṃ na bahu bhāsati / sa munī monam arahati, sa munī monam ajjhagā ti*, where *mona* refers to *moneyya* “the characteristics of a *muni*” (discussed from Sn 700 onwards), but is here obviously used in a word play with the meaning “silence” (cf. Sn 720f.). In addition to the parallels from the Pali canon, the line *maunena vidvān uta yāti maunaṃ* at Mhbh 5: 43, *254: 3 may also be compared, even though *mauna* was surely understood in a different way there.

¹² Cf., e.g., S IV 376,23ff.; Sn 920; Th 372, 660; Mil 21,20.

WORKS CITED

Abbreviations are those of *A Dictionary of Pāli*.

CPD: *A Critical Pāli Dictionary*. Begun by V. Trenckner. Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 1924–2011.

DoP: *A Dictionary of Pāli*, by Margaret Cone. Oxford: PTS, 2001–.

Norman, K.R., 1999. *Collected Papers*. Volume I. Oxford: PTS.

Norman, K.R. 2007. *The Elders' Verses*. I: Theragāthā: Translated with an introduction and notes; 2nd edition. Lancaster: PTS.

Oberlies, T., 2019. *Pāli Grammar: The Language of the Canonical Texts of Theravāda Buddhism*. Bristol: PTS.

Rhys Davids, C.A.F., 1913 *Psalm of the Early Buddhists*, II. *Psalm of the Brethren*. London: Henry Frowde for the PTS.