

About Some of the Women Who Became Followers of the Buddha (I)

Themes: Are there spiritual differences between women and men?

The nature and importance of 'mental control'

This we have been told. In the fifth year after the Buddha attained his Awakening under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha's aunt, his mother's sister, the Great Pajapati Gotami, who had looked after Siddhartha when he was a child, was ordained as a holy follower of the Buddha, perfect in wisdom. From that time onwards Pajapati instructed and inspired many women in practising the great wisdom of the Buddha's teachings. Here are the stories of Soma and Dantika, two of the early women followers of the Buddha.

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Soma

This is what we have been told. On one occasion Soma, a woman of advanced holiness and wisdom, was living at Savatti and went into a grove of trees to rest in the afternoon. Sitting quietly under a tree she was approached by Mara, the spirit of temptation.

'Well now,' said Mara, 'what do you think you are doing, trying to lead a life of wisdom, you a mere woman! Do you really think that you, a woman, can reach the level of wisdom and understanding of the holy men, the followers of the Buddha? You women spend most of your lives, starting from when you are children, worrying about whether the rice is properly boiled, testing the grains between two fingers to see if it is soft. Your two-finger wisdom is about all you can manage. Nothing more.'

Soma thought to herself: 'These are the words of Mara, the spirit of temptation.' And she replied to him, proudly, as follows: 'Why do you think that there is anything in a woman's nature that would prevent us attaining perfect wisdom? What does it matter if you are a woman or a man if your heart is firmly set on practising the Dharma of perfect wisdom? What makes you think you have the right to mock a woman who has fully realized that all earthly pleasures pass away and is engaged in the practice of perfect wisdom? Go away: I'm not afraid of your words.'

And Mara, thought, 'Soma, the holy follower of the Buddha, knows who I am.' Sad and defeated, he vanished.

Questions:

1. Why did Mara think that being a woman would prevent one from becoming a person of great wisdom?
2. What do you think of Soma's reply to Mara?
3. Do you think that when you are seeking the Buddha's Perfect Wisdom it makes a difference whether you are a man or a woman?

Dharma Issue:

- *Is the spiritual path different for men and women?*

Dantika

This is what we have been told. On one occasion when Dantika was living at Rajagaha, she had her midday meal at the top of a nearby hill, called Vulture's Peak. After a rest, on her way down the hill she saw a large elephant plunge into a river and then, having bathed in the water, climb back out again. The elephant's rider, quite a small man, took his stick and said to the elephant, 'Give me your foot'. The elephant obeyed, and instantly the man sprang onto the great elephant's neck and, whipping it with his stick, rode off. Dantika thought, 'Here I have seen how a great force may be tamed and mastered by the human mind. In the same way, surely, my own mind can tame my thoughts and feelings.' And in that moment she understood at last how her mind could indeed control the force of her thoughts and feelings; and she went into the forest, filled her mind with tranquillity, and became an Enlightened being.

Questions:

1. What did Dantika learn from seeing the elephant and his rider?
2. What are the 'great forces' that need to be 'controlled' if you are to find perfect wisdom?
3. Think of times when it is very important for your mind to be 'in control'. Are any of these examples connected with seeking the Buddha's form of wisdom?

Dharma Issue:

- *'The mind in control' as a key aspiration of Enlightenment.*

Based on Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (the Therigatha), translated by C. Rhys Davids and K. Norman, Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1989, pp.35, 155, 29-30, 174.