

## **About Some of the Women Who Became Followers of the Buddha (II)**

*Themes: Spirituality and beauty; spirituality and physical pleasures*

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 Nanda the Beautiful and Vijaya, two of the early women followers of the Buddha.

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### **Nanda the Beautiful**

This is what we have been told. Nanda, daughter of Pajapati and cousin of Siddhartha who became Enlightened as The Buddha, was famous for her beauty. Seeing that so many members of her family (her mother, her brother and her sister) had become followers of the Buddha, she decided that she too would seek the Great Wisdom. However, although she tried hard to follow the path of wisdom she found that she could not stop thinking about how beautiful she was and how everyone must be admiring her beauty. And this of course prevented her from relaxing and focusing her mind. She was too embarrassed to tell the Buddha about her difficulties. But once, when she was with the Buddha, he, understanding her problem, spoke to her as follows.

'Nanda, I see that you are finding it difficult to follow the path of wisdom. You have two problems. The first is that your decision to become a seeker after wisdom was not really based on your own faith in the power of the Great Wisdom teachings, but on your wish simply to follow along the same path as your family. The second is that you cannot stop thinking about your beauty and wanting to be admired. So concentrate on the wisdom teachings about what is real and what is just an illusion: about how your beauty, like everything else in life, will fade and wither, and that your beauty is just an outer covering. Underneath your beauty, your body is made up of things that often look ugly and smell nasty. Think of your body in that way, not as something beautiful for foolish people to admire.'

So Nanda started to think in a different way about her body and to think that she did not really want to be admired for her beauty; because in the end her body and her beauty were not important. Instead, she realised, what was real and important

for her was to gain the peace and tranquillity that come from following the path of wisdom. And from that time on she was able to relax and focus her mind and make progress towards Enlightenment.

#### Questions:

1. What were the two things that were preventing Nanda from following the path of wisdom?
2. Are they common problems? Do they affect men as well as women?
3. What advice would you have given Nanda?
4. Do you agree that only foolish people admire someone because they have a beautiful face and body?
5. What qualities do you think make someone truly admirable?

#### *Dharma Issue:*

- *How should a seeker after wisdom respond to physical beauty?*

### **Vijaya**

This is what we have been told. On one occasion Vijaya, a young woman but advanced in holiness and wisdom, was sitting under a tree to rest in the afternoon. The spirit of Mara approached her, disguised as a handsome young man. 'Hello,' he said, 'You are young and beautiful, and so am I. Look, I know a place where they are playing lovely music: why don't we go there and dance and enjoy ourselves?'

Vijaya thought to herself: 'These are the words of Mara, the spirit of temptation.' And she replied to him, proudly, as follows. 'You go and enjoy being beautiful and eating and drinking and dancing. I have learned the wisdom which teaches that pleasures like that only lead, in the end, to sadness and disappointment. My happiness is based on a stronger reality, free of greediness for pleasure, beyond wanting things that look nice or taste nice or sound nice. My happiness is based on the pure light of peace and tranquillity.'

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

#### Questions

1. Why does Mara the tempter approach Vijaya disguised as a handsome young man?

2. What other disguises might he adopt?
3. Would he have adopted different disguises if Vijaya were a young man?
4. Do you agree with Vijaya that the pleasures of beauty, music, eating and dancing lead in the end to sadness and disappointment?
5. Are there some pleasures that *don't* lead to sadness and disappointment?
6. Is it possible both to seek wisdom and also to enjoy 'pleasures' and beauty?

*Dharma Issue:*

- *Are physical pleasures a distraction from spiritual progress?*

*Based on Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (Therigatha), translated by C. Rhys Davids and K. Norman, Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1989, pp. 44-5, 179-80, 157.*