

IS WOMAN'S WISDOM INFERIOR TO THAT OF MAN'S?

“Nobody is condemned in Buddhism, for greatness is latent even in the seemingly lowliest, just as lotuses spring forth from muddy ponds.”

(Dhammapada)

I know that the lady readers will register a most emphatic “No” to the question which forms the title of the present Article. They will claim that by sheer strength of wisdom women today occupy positions of responsibility in every walk of life, which, a few decades ago, were monopolized by the male of the species. I concede so far as conventional truth (sammuti-vacca) goes which is variable and is subject to change.

I propose to tell them of one of their number who, by determined zeal, persistent endeavour and by systematic development of her mind, gained the Highest Truth (paramattha-sacca), the Highest which is the very opposite of recurrent births and deaths, in other words, the Cessation of Suffering – Nibbana. It is in this context that I raised the question above.

Let me take you to India before Lord Buddha. The Vedas as interpreted by the Brahmins, the priestly class, considered woman very much inferior to men both physically and mentally. A woman was a pawn on the chess-board of domestic life to be pushed hither and thither at the whim of her husband. A woman had not only to perform all the domestic chores, but also she had to bring up a large family. If a married woman had no children, the husband was permitted to bring in a second wife, a third or even more. If a young girl continued single and lived with her parents, she was ridiculed as “one who sits with her father”. A woman had no opportunity to lead a religious life, for she was encumbered with the manifold duties of attending upon her husband. Listen to Mutta after (Theri-Gatha) she entered the Order of Bhikkhuni:-

“O free indeed, O gloriously free

Am I in freedom from three crooked things:

From quern, from mortar and my crooked lord”

And in the fresh bloom of sainthood (arahant), she sang joyously:-

“Free am I from birth and dying

Becoming’s (bhava) cord removed.”

The female mind that had long been held in thralldom by Vedic lore regained its freedom under the benign influence of the Buddha Dhamma, and showed itself in no way inferior to that of the male. In the galaxy of Perfect Ones (arahants) that adorn our sacred books is found (among many others) the names of Bhikkhunis: Maha Pajapati Gotami, Khema, Uppalavanna, Kisa Gotami, Patacara, Dhammadinna, Nanda and Soma.

Some of the sayings of the Bhikkhunis (Buddhist Nuns) which indeed provide the hall-mark of intellectual acumen are recorded in the Bhikkhuni Samyutta of the Samyutta Nikaya. These sayings had received the imprimatur of Lord Buddha (Buddhabhasita), and hence had obtained an honorable niche in the Tipitaka. In like manner, the sayings of His male Disciples are also found in various places in the Sutta Pitaka. The heroic stand taken by Bhikkhuni Soma is found in the Bhikkhuni Samyutta.

Soma was a daughter of the Brahmin chaplain to King Bimbisara. She left home along with several of her friends and joined the Bhikkhuni Order. Theri Soma went through the triple training of Morality (sila), Concentration (samadhi) and Wisdom (panna). Finally having destroyed the Cankers (asavas), she gained Perfect Holiness (arahant).

One day, Theri Soma, after her noonday meal, retired to a woodland not far from Savatthi. She sat beneath the shade of a tree and gradually she gained the Absorptions (Jhanas).

Then Mara, the Evil One, in the guise of a young man, appeared before her intent on disturbing her mental poise. He was not aware that Theri Soma had gone beyond both good and evil. Mara addressed her in this insolent manner:-

“Arahathood can only be attained by the wise, and that too with much difficulty; it is, indeed, beyond the reach of a woman possessed of two-finger-width wisdom.”

Now, what did Mara mean by “two-finger-width wisdom”? It was a common belief at that time that a woman’s wisdom was limited to the width of the index finger and the middle finger which were used by women in spinning cotton. Weaving and spinning was a house to house occupational activity in those good olden days. It was thought that a woman’s wisdom could go only so far – nothing more nothing less.

Theri Soma had no difficulty in recognizing the young man as Mara, who was blissfully ignorant of the fact that she was a Perfect One. To the self-conceited Mara, she thus made answer:-

“What should the woman-state count for me, in her who with mind tranquilized sees with penetrative wisdom the true nature of all phenomena? To one for whom the thought arises: “I am a woman”, or “I am a man.” Or “I am anything else,” – Mara, go find him, mark him well, and make the statement you made to me.”

The answer is both bold and to the point. Its terse simplicity is evidence of a deep understanding and realization of the three fundamental characteristics of phenomenal existence namely: (1) impermanence, (2) imperfectness and (3) impersonality or no Self or no Soul. The psycho-physical (nama-rupa) combination called a body exists, but there is no being, no person, no man, no woman, no soul and nothing belonging to anyone, except a concentration of forces and qualities, ever arising and disappearing from moment to moment – a dynamic process of being born ageing and dying. This is briefly what she meant in her answer.

And the Wisdom to see things as they truly and really are (yatha bhuta nana) is gained by a systematic development or one’s consciousness (bhavana) established on moral habits. This is the Noble Eightfold Path in its triple division of Morality (sila), Concentration (samadhi) and Wisdom (panna). This Wisdom could be gained both by man and woman. I have in this Article endeavoured to explode the myth of the two-finger-width wisdom which was the current belief in respect of the much-maligned woman.

It is to the eternal credit of the Buddha-Dhamma that women were not despised and looked down on, but they were given equal status with men in their spiritual endeavour on the Way to gain Wisdom and Nibbana. The Theri Gatha, the Apadana and the Bhikkhuni Samyutta record their achievements which have, in no small measure, contributed to the strength, vitality and longevity of the Buddha-Sasana.

