

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Spring 2010

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Soma (Bhikkhuni-Samyutta: Discourses of the Ancient Nuns)

Setting at Savatthi. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhuni Soma dressed and, taking bowl and robe, entered Savatthi for alms.¹ When she had walked for alms in Savatthi and had returned from her alms round, after her meal she went to the Blind Men's Grove for the day's abiding. Having plunged into the Blind Men's Grove, she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day's abiding.

Then Māra the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhuni Soma, desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her and addressed her in verse:

4. "That state so hard to achieve
Which is to be attained by the seers,
Can't be attained by a woman
With her two-fingered wisdom."²

Then it occurred to the bhikkhuni Soma: "Now who is this that recited the verse — a human being or a non-human being?" Then it occurred to her: "This is Māra the Evil One, who has recited the verse desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in me, desiring to make me fall away from concentration."

Then the bhikkhuni Soma, having understood, "This is Māra the Evil One," replied to him in verses:

5. "What does womanhood matter at all
When the mind is concentrated well,
When knowledge flows on steadily
As one sees correctly into Dhamma."³

6. One to whom it might occur,
'I'm a woman' or 'I'm a man'
Or 'I'm anything at all' —
Is fit for Māra to address."⁴

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, "The bhikkhuni Soma knows me," sad and disappointed, disappeared right there. ❖

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1. Therīgāthā Atthakatha 66 identifies her as the daughter of King Bimbisara's chaplain. The three verses here are also at Therīgāthā 60-62, also ascribed to Soma.
2. Samyutta Nikaya Atthakatha *That state (thana): arahantship. With her two-fingered wisdom (dvangulapaññaya): with limited wisdom (parittapaññaya); or else this is said of women because they cut the thread while holding the cotton ball between two fingers. Samyutta Nikaya Tika and Therīgāthā Atthakatha 67 offer a different explanation: "From childhood on they are always determining whether the rice is cooked by pressing the grains in the pot between two fingers. Therefore, because of the feebleness of their wisdom (acquired with two fingers), they are said to have 'two-fingered wisdom.'" It should be noted that it is Mara the Evil One who voices this ancient bias.*
3. Samyutta Nikaya Atthakatha: *When knowledge flows on steadily (ānāmihi vattamanāmi): while the knowledge of the attainment of fruition is occurring (phalasaṃpattirāne pavattamāne). As one sees correctly into Dhamma (samma dhammam vipassato): seeing into the Dhamma of the four truths, or into the five aggregates which form the object of insight in the preliminary phase of practice. Samyutta Nikaya Atthakatha explains in terms of the knowledge of fruition attainment because Soma, being already an arahant, would have been dwelling in the concentration of fruition.*
4. One entertains such thoughts on account of craving, conceit, and views.

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Once, while Mahánāga was begging alms at Nakulanagara, he saw a nun and offered her a meal. As she had no bowl, he gave her his, with the food ready in it. After she had eaten and washed the bowl, she gave it back to him saying, “Henceforth there will be no fatigue for you when begging for alms.” Thereafter the Elder was never given alms worth less than a kahāpana. The nun was an arahant.

DhSA.399