

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Spring 2010

Buddhist Discrimination Against Women in Modern Burma • Venerable Anālayo • Take It or Leave It and the Ground Between • Saccavadi Bricker • Welcome Good Branch, You are Not Unwelcome • Thea Mohr • Dignity and Discipline • Thanissara Mary Weinberg • Archetyping and the Language of Personhood in the Mātugāmasamyutta • Jampa Tseodren • The Bahudhātuka-sutta and its Parallels On Women's Inabilities • Marica Pimentel • The Four Assemblies and the Foundation of the Order of Nuns •



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

Setting at Savatthi. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhuni Uppalavanna dressed... she stood at the foot of a sala tree in full flower.¹

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

14. “Having gone to a sala tree with flowering top,
You stand at its foot all alone, bhikkhuni.
There is none whose beauty can rival your own:
Foolish girl, have you no fear of rogues?”²

Then it occurred to the bhikkhuni Uppalavanna: “Now who is this...? This is Māra the Evil One... desiring to make me fall away from concentration.”

Then the bhikkhuni Uppalavanna, having understood, “This is Māra the Evil One,” replied to him in verses:

15. “Though a hundred thousand rogues
Just like you might come here,
I stir not a hair, I feel no terror;
Even alone, Māra, I don’t fear you.”³

16. I can make myself disappear
Or I can enter inside your belly.
I can stand between your eyebrows
Yet you won’t catch a glimpse of me.

17. I am the master of my own mind,
The bases of power are well developed;
I am freed from every kind of bondage,
Therefore I don’t fear you, friend.”⁴

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhuni Uppalavanna knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there. ❖

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1. She was the foremost among the bhikkhunis in the exercise of supernormal powers (*iddhi*), to which she testifies in her verses below. Vv.14-17 correspond to Thi 230-33, but with significant differences. Thi 234 is identical with v.3, here ascribed to Alavika.

2. Pada c: *Na c’atthi te dutiya vannadhātu*. I translate freely in accordance with the gloss of Samyutta Nikaya Atthakatha: “There is no second beauty element like your beauty element; there is no other bhikkhuni similar to you.” A pun on the bhikkhuni’s name is probably intended. Therīgāthā Atthakatha includes an additional pada between padas c and d of the other eds., which seems a scribal error, as it is identical with pada b of the next verse, where it belongs.

3. Samyutta Nikaya Atthakatha explains padas ab as if they meant: “Though a hundred thousand rogues might come here, they would be treated just like you in that they would get no intimacy or affection.” I translate, however, in accordance with the apparent sense, which also can claim support from Therīgāthā Atthakatha’s gloss on Therīgāthā 231.

4. The *iddhipada*, “bases of power,” are the supporting conditions for the exercise of the *iddhi* or supernormal powers described in the previous verse.

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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