AN 8.51 — AN 8:51 To Gotamī | Gotamī Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

To Gotamī

Gotamī Sutta (AN 8:51)

On one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Kapilavatthu in the Banyan Park. Then Mahāpajāpati Gotamī went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed to him, stood to one side. As she was standing there she said to him: “It would be good, lord, if women might obtain the Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”

“Enough, Gotamī. Don’t advocate women’s Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”

A second time.... A third time she said to him: “It would be good, lord, if women might obtain the Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”

“Enough, Gotamī. Don’t advocate women’s Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”1

So Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, (thinking,) “The Blessed One does not allow women’s Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata”—sad & unhappy, crying, her face in tears—bowed to the Blessed One and left, keeping him to her right.

The Blessed One, having stayed as long as he liked in Kapilavatthu, set out for Vesālī. After wandering in stages, he arrived at Vesālī. There he stayed near Vesālī at the Gabled Hall in the Great Forest.

Then Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, having had her hair cut off, having donned ochre robes, set out for Vesālī together with a large number of Sakyan women. After wandering in stages, she arrived at Vesālī and went to the Gabled Hall in the Great Forest. Then she stood there outside the porch, her feet swollen, her limbs covered with dust, sad & unhappy, crying, her face in tears. Ven. Ānanda2 saw her standing there outside the porch, her feet swollen, her limbs covered with dust, sad & unhappy, crying, her face in tears, and so asked her, “Why, Gotamī, why are you standing here outside the porch, your feet swollen, your limbs covered with dust, sad & unhappy, crying, your face in tears?”

“Because, venerable sir, the Blessed One does not allow women’s Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”

“In that case, Gotamī, stay right here3 while I ask the Blessed One to allow women’s Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”

Then Ven. Ānanda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One: “Lord, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī is standing outside the porch—her feet swollen, her limbs covered with dust, sad and unhappy, crying, her face in tears, because the Blessed One does not allow women’s Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata. It would be good if women might obtain the Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”

“Enough, Ānanda. Don’t advocate women’s Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”

A second time.... A third time, Ven. Ānanda said, “... It would be good, lord, if women might obtain the Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”

“Enough, Ānanda. Don’t advocate women’s Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”

Then the thought occurred to Ven. Ānanda, “The Blessed One does not allow women’s Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata. What if I were to find some other way to ask the Blessed One to allow women’s Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.” So he said to the Blessed One, “Lord, if a woman were to go forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata, would she be able to realize the fruit of stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning, or arahantship?”

“Yes, Ānanda, she would....”

“In that case, lord, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī has been of great service to the Blessed One. She was the Blessed One’s aunt, foster mother, nurse, giver of milk. When the Blessed One’s mother passed away, she gave him milk. It would be good if women might obtain the Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata.”

“Ānanda, if Mahāpajāpati Gotamī accepts eight rules of respect [garu-dhamma], that will be her Acceptance [as a nun].

[1] “A nun who has been fully accepted even for a century must bow down, rise up from her seat, salute with hands palm-to-palm over her heart, and perform forms of respect due to superiors to a monk even if he has been fully accepted on that very day. This rule is to be honored, respected, revered, venerated, never to be transgressed as long as she lives.

[2] “A nun must not spend the Rains in a residence where there is no monk (nearby)....

[3] “Every half-month a nun should expect two things from the Saṅgha of monks: (permission to) ask for the date of the uposatha and (permission to) approach for an exhortation....

[4] “At the end of the Rains-residence, a nun should invite (accusations from) both Saṅghas [the Saṅgha of monks and the Saṅgha of nuns] on any of three grounds: what they have seen, what they have heard, what they have suspected....

[5] “A nun who has broken any of the rules of respect must undergo penance for half a month under both Saṅghas....

[6] “Only after a female trainee has trained in the six precepts for two years can she request Acceptance from both Saṅghas....

[7] “A monk must not in any way be insulted or reviled by a nun....

[8] “From this day forward, the admonition of a monk by a nun is forbidden, but the admonition of a nun by a monk is not forbidden. This rule, too, is to be honored, respected, revered, venerated, never to be transgressed as long as she lives.

“If Mahāpajāpati Gotamī accepts these eight rules of respect, that will be her Acceptance.”

Then Ven. Ānanda, having learned the eight rules of respect in the Blessed One’s presence, went to Mahāpajāpati Gotamī and, on arrival, said to her, “Gotamī, if you accept these eight rules of respect, that will be your Acceptance. [And he repeated the eight rules.]”

“Ven. Ānanda, just as if a young woman—or man—fond of ornamentation, with bathed head, having been given a garland of lotuses or jasmine or scented creepers, having accepted it in both hands, were to place it on her head, in the same way I accept the eight rules of respect, never to transgress them as long as I live.”

Then Ven. Ānanda returned to the Blessed One and, having bowed down, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said, “Venerable sir, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī has accepted the eight rules of respect, never to transgress them as long as she lives.”4

“But, Ānanda, if women had not obtained the Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata, the holy life would have lasted long, the true Dhamma would have lasted 1,000 years. But now that they have obtained the Going-forth from the home life into homelessness in the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata, the holy life will not last long, the true Dhamma will last only 500 years.5

“Just as a clan in which there are many women and few men is easily plundered by robbers and thieves, in the same way, in whatever Dhamma & Vinaya women obtain the Going-forth from home life into homelessness, the holy life does not last long.

“Just as, when the white blight falls on a field of ripening wheat, that field of wheat does not last long, in the same way, in whatever Dhamma & Vinaya women obtain the Going-forth from home life into homelessness, the holy life does not last long.

“Just as, when the rust disease falls on a field of sugar cane, that field of sugar cane does not last long, in the same way, in whatever Dhamma & Vinaya women obtain the Going-forth from home life into homelessness, the holy life does not last long.

“Just as a man might make an embankment in advance around a great reservoir to keep the waters from overflowing, in the same way I have set forth in advance the eight rules of respect for nuns that they are not to transgress as long as they live.”6

Notes

1. DN 16 reports a conversation between the Buddha and Māra shortly after the Buddha’s awakening in which the former declines to totally unbind until he has established both a

Saṅgha of monks and a Saṅgha of nuns on a firm foundation. Thus there is the question: Why did the Buddha refuse Mahāpajāpati's first request to allow a Saṅgha of nuns? The apparent answer is that he had already thought through the conditions on which he would establish that Saṅgha, and suspected that Mahāpajāpati would reject them unless she was fully sincere in her request. Only when she later showed her sincerity, and Ven. Ānanda brought up a telling reason for allowing her ordination—that women would be able to attain the noble attainments if they were allowed to ordain—did the Buddha set forth his conditions.

Although the most common pattern in the Vinaya is for the Buddha to wait for complaints about a monk's or nun's behavior before establishing rules, many rules were established in a way that does not follow this pattern. In some cases, monks bring the Buddha questions about how to behave, and he establishes rules in response to their request. In other cases, such as the rules for the kaṭhina (Mv VII), the Buddha simply sets out conditions even without being asked. Thus there is nothing out-of-character in his setting out conditions prior to the establishing of the Saṅgha of nuns.

2. According to the Commentary, the events in this sutta took place soon after the Buddha's first return to Kapilavatthu shortly after his awakening. The Commentary elsewhere states that Ven. Ānanda did not become the Buddha's permanent attendant until twenty years after the Buddha's awakening. The Canon is silent on both of these points, but if the Commentary's claims are true, then these events would have occurred when Ānanda was serving as a temporary attendant, or simply happened to be near the Buddha, prior to his later permanent appointment to the post. However, given the Buddha's references to Rains-residence, uposatha, and Invitation in this account, it's more likely that these events took place later in his career, after a fair number of rules and procedures for the bhikkhus had already been established.

3. The Thai edition of Cv X, which also contains this account, adds here "for a moment."

4. In Cv X, Ven. Ānanda's statement is: "Venerable sir, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī has accepted the eight rules of respect. The Blessed One's foster mother is fully accepted."

5. As SN 16:13 explains, the "survival of the true Dhamma" means not simply the brute survival of the teachings but the survival of the teachings unadulterated with "synthetic Dhamma" (saddhamma-paṭirūpa), later "improvements" that would call the authenticity of the true Dhamma into question. One possible example of this sort of adulteration—the early Prajñā-paramitā literature, with its teachings on the non-arising of dhammas—actually did begin to appear approximately 500 years after the Buddha's lifetime.

The hypothesis suggested in note 1—that the Buddha did want to establish a Saṅgha of nuns, but wanted Mahāpajāpati to be in a position where she would accept his conditions—is supported by the fact that the Buddha did not bring up the question of the survival of the True Dhamma until after she had accepted them. Had he not wanted to establish a Saṅgha of nuns, he would have mentioned this point to Ven. Ānanda

immediately when the issue was broached, and Ānanda would have probably abandoned his efforts to argue Mahāpajāpati' case.

6. The early nuns did not accept these eight rules docilely. Soon after vowing to adhere to them for the rest of her life, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī requested that the nuns be relieved of the most onerous one—the first (Cv.X.3). The fact that she was asking to renege on her word to the Buddha doomed the request to failure. According to the Vibhaṅga to the Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha, individual nuns at later dates disobeyed the second, third, fourth, sixth, and seventh rules of respect, leading the Buddha to add pācittiya rules forbidding these transgressions to their Pāṭimokkha (respectively, Bhikkhunī Pc 56, 59, 57, 63 (66), & 52). Cv.X.20 reports that nuns tried to initiate accusations against monks in violation of the eighth rule of respect, leading the Buddha to declare such attempts invalid and to impose a dukkaṭa on them. The existence of these rules meant that any nun who broke them would have to confess her transgression to her fellow nuns. Because disciplinary transactions can be imposed only on those who confess their actions, the act of confessing these transgressions would thus open the way for both Saṅghas to impose penance on the offender in line with the fifth rule of respect.

Interestingly, the first rule of respect was enforced by a rule for the monks. Cv.X.3 imposes a dukkaṭa on a monk who bows down to a woman, rises up from his seat for her, salutes her with hands palm-to-palm over his heart, or performs forms of respect due to a superior to her. Thus if a monk broke this rule, he would have to confess the fact; the nun in question would be confronted with his confession, thus setting in line proceedings that could lead to her observing penance.