SN 5.2 — Soma Sutta: Mara Meets His Match

English translation by Andrew Olendzki.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: UNKNOWN. Entire protected source unit, including notes and verses, preserved; canonical completeness has not been independently established.

Text

The nun Soma has entered Andhavana (Blind Man's Grove) near Savatthi to practice meditation. Mara, the embodiment of delusion, sees her there and desires to make her waver and abandon her concentration. He addresses her with a verse:

That which can be attained by seers — The place so hard to arrive at — Women are not able to reach, Since they lack sufficient wisdom.

[Soma replies:]

What difference does being a woman make When the mind is well-composed, When knowledge is proceeding on, When one rightly sees into Dhamma? Indeed for whom the question arises: "Am I a man or a woman?" Or, "Am I even something at all?" To them alone is Mara fit to talk!

Translator's note

This, in my view, is the definitive statement in the Buddhist tradition regarding the equality of the sexes. Whatever other words have crept into the literature — from ancient times to the present — whatever attitudes may have been expressed by Theras, Lamas, Roshis or Teachers over the ages, this position of thoroughgoing equality in light of the Dhamma is plainly stated by Soma, one of the Buddha's contemporary nuns.

Soma was the daughter of the chief priest of King Bimbisara of Magadha, and was an early convert to the Buddha's teaching. She spent many years as a lay supporter before eventually becoming a nun, and achieved awakening — like so many of her sisters — not long after joining the order.

In this exchange Mara is clearly trying to provoke and discourage Soma, but only reveals his delusion. The expression he uses literally means "two fingers' [worth]" of wisdom. It may originally have been a reference to the domestic task of checking if rice is cooked by examining it between the fingers, but here it is obviously used pejoratively to impugn that women are less capable of liberation. Soma not only refrains from getting offended (perhaps remembering Buddha's teaching to always "forebear the fool"), but calmly points out how ludicrous the statement is when viewed in light of the Buddha's higher teaching about the nature of personhood.