

## MĀRA MEETS HIS MATCH

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 1.5.2)

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

*yan - tam isihi pattabbam  
thānam durabhisambhavam  
na tam dvangulapaññāya  
sakkā pappotum itthiyā ti*

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.

Somā replies:

*itthibhāvo kim kayirā  
cittamhi susamāhite  
ñānamhi vattamānamhi  
sammādhammam vipassato*

What difference does being a woman make  
When the mind is well-composed,  
When knowledge is proceeding on,  
When one rightly sees into Dhamma?

*yassa nuna siyā evam  
itthāham puriso ti vā  
kiñci vā pana asmīti  
tam Māro vattum arahaṇi ti*

Indeed for whom the question arises:  
“Am I a man or a woman?”  
Or, “Am I even something at all?”  
To them alone is Māra fit to talk!

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 Somā, one of the Buddha's contemporary nuns.

Somā was the daughter of the chief priest of King Bimbisāra 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 Māra is clearly trying to provoke and discourage Somā, 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. Somā 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.