

Women in Indian Buddhism, Lecture 1:

Women in Early Buddhist Discourse

by Bhikkhu Anālayo

MN 146 – *Nandakovāda-sutta* - the introductory narration -

Then Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī together with five-hundred *bhikkhunīs* approached the Blessed One. Having approached and paid homage to the Blessed One, she stood to one side. Standing to one side, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī said this to the Blessed One:

“Venerable sir, may the Blessed One instruct the *bhikkhunīs*, venerable sir, may the Blessed One teach the *bhikkhunīs*, venerable sir, may the Blessed One give the *bhikkhunīs* a talk on the Dharma.”

At that time the senior monks were taking turns at instructing the *bhikkhunīs*. The venerable Nandaka did not wish to take his turn at instructing the *bhikkhunīs*.

Then the Blessed One addressed Ānanda: “Ānanda, whose turn is it now to instruct the *bhikkhunīs*?”

[Ānanda said]: “Venerable sir, in taking turns to teach the *bhikkhunīs* it is Nandaka’s turn. Venerable sir, the venerable Nandaka does not wish to take his turn at teaching the *bhikkhunīs*.”

Then the Blessed One addressed the venerable Nandaka: “Nandaka, instruct the *bhikkhunīs*, Nandaka, teach the *bhikkhunīs*, brahmin, give the *bhikkhunīs* a talk on the Dharma.”

The venerable Nandaka assented: “It is well, venerable sir.”

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Picture of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and a group of *bhikkhunīs*

Wat Thepthidaram, Bangkok



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**SĀ 276 – [Nandaka Teaches the Dharma]
- the introductory narration -**

At that time, in the Rājakārāma at Sāvattthī there were various great disciples from the community of *bhikkhunīs*, with *bhikkhunīs* from the community of *bhikkhunīs* by the name of the *bhikkhunī* Chandā, the *bhikkhunī* Míntuó, the *bhikkhunī* Móluópó, the *bhikkhunī* Paṭācārā, the *bhikkhunī* Ālavikā, the *bhikkhunī* Khemā, the *bhikkhunī* Nánmó, the *bhikkhunī* called Kisāgotamī, the *bhikkhunī* Uppalavaṇṇā, and the *bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī.

At that time the *bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, surrounded by five-hundred *bhikkhunīs*, approached the Buddha, paid respect with

her head at his feet and withdrew to sit to one side.

Then the Blessed One taught the Dharma to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī [and the other *bhikkhunīs*], instructing, teaching, illuminating, and delighting them. Having in various ways taught them the Dharma, instructed, taught, illuminated, and delighted them, he gave them leave to return by saying: “*Bhikkhunīs*, it is the proper time for you to leave.”

Hearing what the Buddha had said, the *bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī [and the other *bhikkhunīs*] were delighted and rejoiced in it, paid respect, and left.

When the Blessed One knew that the *bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī [and the other *bhikkhunīs*] had left, he addressed the monks: “I have become old, I am no longer able to teach the Dharma to the *bhikkhunīs*. From now on those of you in the community of monks who are senior virtuous elders should give instructions to the *bhikkhunīs*.”

Then the monks, on receiving the Blessed One’s instruction, took turns in giving instructions to the *bhikkhunīs* until it was Nandaka’s turn. Then Nandaka did not want to give them instructions, [even though] it was his proper turn.

Then the *bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, surrounded by five-hundred *bhikkhunīs*, approached the Buddha, paid respect with her head at his feet ... *up to* ... they were delighted and rejoiced in hearing the Dharma, paid respect, and left.

When the Blessed One knew that the *bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī had left, he asked the venerable Ānanda: “Whose turn is it to give instructions to the *bhikkhunīs*?”

The venerable Ānanda said to the Buddha: “Blessed One, the elders have been taking turns in giving instructions to the *bhikkhunīs* until Nandaka’s turn has come, yet Nandaka does not want to give them instructions.”

Then the Blessed One said to Nandaka: “You should give instructions to the *bhikkhunīs*, you should teach the Dharma to the *bhikkhunīs*. Why is that? I myself give instructions to the *bhikkhunīs*, so you should also do it. I teach the Dharma to the *bhikkhunīs*, so you

should also do it.”

At that time, Nandaka silently accepted the instruction.

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Introductory narration in MN 146

- 1) the *bhikkhunīs* are not introduced by name nor qualified as great disciples
- 2) Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī remains standing,
- 3) the Buddha does not teach the *bhikkhunīs*, in spite of their request
- 4) the discourse does not explain why the monks should teach the *bhikkhunīs*
- 5) the Buddha ignores the presence of the *bhikkhunīs*
- 6) the Buddha just passes on Gotamī’s request to Nandaka
- 7) Nandaka, lauded as a Brahmin, replies as if nothing had happened
- 8) when he arrives, the *bhikkhunīs* act as respectful as if he were the Buddha

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Introductory narration in SĀ 276

- 1) the *bhikkhunīs* are introduced by name and as great disciples
- 2) Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī sits down
- 3) without being asked to do so, the Buddha twice gives them a teaching
- 4) because of his old age, the Buddha asks the monks to teach the *bhikkhunīs*
- 5) he waits until they have left to inquire who has not taken his turn
- 6) by teaching the *bhikkhunīs* Nandaka would follow the Buddha’s example

7) Nandaka remains silent, in line with his having failed to do his duty

8) when Nandaka arrives, the *bhikkhunīs* politely welcome him

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**MN 146 – *Nandakovāda-sutta*
- the attainments of the *bhikkhunīs* -**

Then the venerable Nandaka, having instructed the *bhikkhunīs* with this instruction, dismissed them saying: “Go, sisters, it is time.”

Then the *bhikkhunīs*, having delighted and rejoiced in what the venerable Nandaka had said, rose from their seats and paid homage, keeping him to their right, and approached the Blessed One. Having approached the Blessed One and paid their homage to him, they stood to one side. The Blessed One said to the *bhikkhunīs* who were standing to one side: “Go, sisters, it is time.” Then the *bhikkhunīs* paid homage to the Blessed One and, keeping him to their right, left.

Soon after the *bhikkhunīs* had left, the Blessed One addressed the monks: “Monks, it is just as if on the observance day, the fourteenth, people have no doubt or uncertainty: ‘Is the moon not yet full or is the moon full?’, since the moon is not yet full. In the same way, monks, the *bhikkhunīs* are delighted with the Dharma teaching of Nandaka, but their aspirations have not been fulfilled.”

Then the Blessed One addressed Nandaka: “Well then, Nandaka, tomorrow you should instruct the *bhikkhunīs* with the same instruction. The venerable Nandaka assented: “It is well, venerable sir.”

(As on the previous occasion, Nandaka goes begging in the morning and then approaches the nunnery to deliver the same talk to the bhikkhunīs).

Then the venerable Nandaka, having instructed the *bhikkhunīs* with this instruction, dismissed them saying: “Go, sisters, it is time.”

Then the *bhikkhunīs*, having delighted and rejoiced in what the venerable Nandaka had said, rose from their seats and paid homage, keeping him to their right, and approached the Blessed One. Having

approached the Blessed One and paid their homage to him, they stood to one side. The Blessed One said to the *bhikkhunīs* who were standing to one side: “Go, sisters, it is time.” Then the *bhikkhunīs* paid homage to the Blessed One and, keeping him to their right, left.

Soon after the *bhikkhunīs* had left, the Blessed One addressed the monks: “Monks, it is just as if on the observance day, the fifteenth, people have no doubt or uncertainty: ‘Is the moon not yet full or is the moon full?’, since the moon is full. In the same way, monks, the *bhikkhunīs* are delighted with the Dharma teaching of Nandaka and their aspirations have been fulfilled. Monks, even the most backward of the five-hundred *bhikkhunīs* is a stream-enterer, no longer subject to downfall, certain to proceed to full awakening.”

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**SĀ 276 – [Nandaka Teaches the Dharma]
- the attainments of the *bhikkhunīs* -**

At that time the venerable Nandaka taught the Dharma to the *bhikkhunīs*, instructing, teaching, illuminating, and delighting them. Having instructed, taught, illuminated, and delighted them, he rose from his seat and left.

Then, the *bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, surrounded by five-hundred *bhikkhunīs*, approached the Buddha, paid respect with her head at his feet and sat back to one side ... *up to* ... she paid respect to the Buddha and left.

When the Blessed One knew that the *bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī [and the other *bhikkhunīs*] had left, he said to the monks: “It is just as when various people look at the bright moon on the night of the fourteenth day, [thinking]: ‘Is it full or is it not yet full?’ One should know that the moon is not really full.

“In the same way, the clansman Nandaka has given proper instructions to the five-hundred *bhikkhunīs*, properly taught them the Dharma, [yet] their liberation is not really full. [However, if] it were the time for passing away for those *bhikkhunīs*, I do not see a single fetter that they have not eliminated due to which they would be reborn in this

world.”

Then the Blessed One said to Nandaka: “You should teach the Dharma to the *bhikkhunīs* again.”

Then the venerable Nandaka silently accepted the injunction.

(The discourse continues with the same description as earlier, given in partially abbreviated manner, of Nandaka’s going begging in the morning and then approaching he nunnery to deliver a talk to the bhikkhunīs).

[Nandaka] taught the Dharma to the *bhikkhunīs*, instructing, teaching, illuminating, and delighting them. Having instructed, taught, illuminated, and delighted them, he rose from his seat and left.

At a subsequent time, the *bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, surrounded by five-hundred *bhikkhunīs*, approached the Buddha, paid respect with her head at his feet, and sat back to one side ... *up to ...* she paid respect to the Buddha and left.

When the Blessed One knew that the *bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī [and the other *bhikkhunīs*] had left, he said to the monks: “It is just as when people look at the bright moon on the night of the fifteenth day and have no doubt whether it is full or not full, since the moon is completely full.

“In the same way, the clansman Nandaka has given proper instructions to the five-hundred *bhikkhunīs*, their liberation is complete. If it were the time for passing away for them, nobody could proclaim the course of their destination. It should be known that [they reached] the end of *dukkha*.”

In this way the Blessed One conferred on the five-hundred *bhikkhunīs* a declaration of the supreme fruit.

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Attainments of the *bhikkhunīs* in MN 146

- 1) no attainment of the *bhikkhunīs* reported after the first teaching
- 2) the second teaching is same as the first

3) with the second teaching some *bhikkhunīs* only reach stream-entry

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Attainments of the *bhikkhunīs* in SĀ 276

- 1) with the first teaching the *bhikkhunīs* all reach non-return
- 2) the second teaching is a talk on the Dharma
- 3) with the second teaching the *bhikkhunīs* all reach full awakening

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Māra and *bhikkhunīs*

According to Batchelor 2004: 20f Māra is “a metaphoric way of describing Buddha's own inner life ... Mara’s tireless efforts to undermine Buddha by accusing him of insincerity, self-deception ... are ways of describing the doubts within Buddha's own mind.”

Batchelor, Stephen 2004: *Living with the Devil, A Meditation on Good and Evil*, New York: Riverhead Books.

SN 4.16 and SĀ 1102: Māra changes himself into an ox and comes close to the begging bowls of the monks

MN 50 and MĀ 131, T 66, and T 67: Māra causes an arahant monk to be hit on the head so that it starts bleeding (either doing it himself or possessing someone who then does it)

conclusion: Māra is not just a personification of one’s own defilements, but in the early discourses can also just function as a personification of challenges by outsiders or difficult circumstances

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SĀ 1199 [Discourse on Somā]

(Parallel to SN 5.2 / SN I 129 and SĀ² 215 / T II 453c)

Māra ... transformed himself into a youth of handsome appearance and went to the *bhikkhunī* Somā. He said to the *bhikkhunī*:

“Lady, where do you want to go?”

The *bhikkhunī* replied: “Friend, I am going to a secluded place.”

Then Māra, the Evil One, spoke in verse:

“The state wherein seers dwell,
This state is very difficult to attain.
One with [just] a two-fingers’ wisdom
Is unable to attain that state.”

Then the *bhikkhunī* Somā thought: “Who is this, wanting to frighten me? Is he a human or is he a non-human? Is this person scheming to seduce me?”

Having considered it, certainty of knowledge arose in her and she knew: “This is the evil Māra who has come wanting to confound me.” She spoke in verse:

“[Once] the mind has entered a [meditative] attainment,
What has a female appearance to do with that?
If knowledge has arisen,
The unsurpassable state will be reached.

[But] if the mind has not reached complete separation
from the perception of being a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’,
Then such a one will speak like you, Māra,
You should go and speak to such a one.

Separated from all *dukkha*,
Having entirely relinquished the darkness [of ignorance],
Having attained and realized cessation,
I dwell in peace, established in the eradication of the influxes.

I recognize you, evil Māra, make yourself disappear and go!”

Then Māra, the Evil One, thought: “The *bhikkhunī* Somā has understood my intentions.” Harboring sadness and regret within, he

vanished and was seen no more.

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AN 1.14.5 / AN I 25 and EĀ 5.1-5 / T II 558c

***bhikkhunīs* outstanding in relation to morality:**

upholding the disciplinary rules without infraction (8),
 keeping to three robes (26),
 wearing the robes in an orderly manner (17),
 not being ashamed of wearing rough robes (15),
 begging in order (31),
 begging among a range of people (24),
 begging alms without choosing between rich and poor (22),
 continually sitting on a grass mat (30),
 always being in secluded quiet places (21),
 delighting in empty and secluded places (29),
 always living out in the open (28),
 undertaking ascetic practices (4),
 delighting in being in abandoned cemeteries (32).

***bhikkhunīs* outstanding in relation to concentration:**

having a mind that is not scattered (6),
 being during all activities with a mind that does not stray (36),
 always being with unification of the mind (16),
 sitting alone without moving at all (23),
 sitting at the root of a tree with an unmoving mind (27),
 having a mind that is calm, without agitated perceptions (44),

dwelling much in benevolence and empathy (33),
 having compassion for living beings (34),
 cherishing patience (42),
 entering concentration on water (47),
 entering concentration on fire (48),
 having supernatural powers (3),
 recollecting past lives (11),
 possessing the divine eye (5).

***bhikkhunīs* outstanding in relation to wisdom**

learned and kind (20),
 wise and intelligent (2),
 widely discoursing on the teaching (14),
 contemplating the teachings with understanding (45),
 being liberated by faith (9),
 being not polluted by attachment (46),
 having acquired the four analytical knowledges (10),
 joyfully attaining the path (35),
 quickly accomplishing the fruits of the path (25),
 contemplating impurity and analysing dependent arising (49),
 cultivating wishlessness (39),
 delighting in signlessness and in eradicating all attachments (38),
 keeping to emptiness (37),
 attaining final realization (51).

***bhikkhunīs* outstanding in relation to benefitting others**

supporting people, giving them what is lacking (50),
 composing stanzas in praise of the virtues of the Tathāgata (19),

discussing in various ways without hesitation (18),
 converting outsiders, establishing them in the right teaching (13),
 being respected and liked by the people (12),
 teaching and transforming people (43),
 delivering people without limits (40),
 widely teaching the development of the path (7),
 widely explaining and analysing profound teachings (41).

Depiction of outstanding *bhikkhunīs* mentioned in the *Etadagga-vagga* of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. The *bhikkhunīs* visible in the present section are:

Uppalavaṇṇā, foremost for supernormal powers,
 Paṭācārā, foremost for upholding *Vinaya*,
 Dhammadinnā, foremost in teaching the Dharma, and
 Nandā, foremost in meditation.

Sulamani gu hpaya, Myanmar.



