

Lesson 19 – VANITY – The First Buddhist Nuns

The Buddha's father, King Suddhōdana, became very ill and soon thereafter, he died. However, he had become an arahant, so he passed into nirvana, ultimate bliss and peace, free from the cycle of birth and death. When the Buddha heard the news of his father's death, he returned to his home town of Kapilavatthu,

The queen, Mahapajāpati Gotami—the Buddha's aunt who took care of him like a mother since he was an infant—was now alone without her husband, the king. When she heard the Buddha was in town, she went to visit and said to him,

“Lord, it would be good if women could become ordained to go from the house life into homelessness in the Dharma and Discipline taught by you.”

The Buddha said, “Gotami, do not ask for ordination to go from the house life into homelessness for women in the Dharma and Discipline.”

She asked three times, but he would not agree. Sad and unhappy, she understood, “The lord does not allow it.” She bowed to him and left.

After the Buddha's visit in Kapilavatthu, he traveled for many days, stopping here and there along the way, until he reached a town called Vesali.

Meanwhile, Gotami was not giving up on her hope to be ordained and live like the monks. She had her hair cut very short and began wearing a robe like a monk's robe. She started walking on the long journey to Vesali along with several women from the Sakya clan, including Yashōdhara, who was the wife of Prince Siddhartha who later became the Buddha.

When they finally arrived in Vesali at the meditation hall where the Buddha was, Gotami stood outside on the porch. Her feet, not used to walking long distances, were swollen from walking barefoot on such a long journey. Her arms and legs were covered with dust from the wind blowing dust from the road. She was feeling very sad, and tears rolled down her cheeks as she sobbed, remembering the Buddha's rejection of her request to be ordained.

Venerable Ananda saw her, and feeling great compassion for her, gently asked, “Gotami, why are you standing outside on the porch like this?”

She replied, “Lord Ananda, it is because the Buddha does not allow the ordination for women in the Dharma and Discipline.”

Venerable Ananda said, “Then, Gotami, wait here until I ask the Buddha about this.”

He went inside and said to the Buddha, “Lord, it would be good if women could go from the house life into homelessness in the Dharma and Discipline taught by you.”

The Buddha responded, “Ananda, don’t ask for the ordination from house life to homelessness for women in the Dharma and Discipline.”

Venerable Ananda asked a second and third time, and the Buddha refused to consider it. Venerable Ananda thought, “The Buddha does not allow it. But suppose I asked him in another way?”

He said, “Lord, are women, after being ordained from house life into homelessness in the Dharma and Discipline, able to reach the first, second, or third stage of enlightenment, or the fourth stage, becoming an arahant?”

The Buddha answered, “They are, Ananda.”

Venerable Ananda said, “If that is so, Lord, then since Gotami has been extremely helpful to you when, as your mother’s sister, she was your foster mother and gave you milk when your own mother died—since that is so, Lord, it would be good if women could be ordained.”

The Buddha responded, “Ananda, if Gotami accepts eight major rules, that will count as her full ordination.” Then he announced eight rules for women to be ordained as nuns. The rules ensured that the nuns would fully respect the monks. In addition, they had to follow the same rules as the monks did.

Venerable Ananda then returned to Gotami and told her what the Buddha had said. She responded very happily, saying that she accepts the eight rules to be obeyed for the rest of her life like a person would accept a garland of flowers on her head.

Venerable Ananda told the Buddha that Gotami had accepted the rules. What about the other women who traveled with Gotami? The Buddha directed the monks to ordain them as nuns. This is how the community of nuns began.

Gotami had a daughter named Beautiful Nandā, who was the half-sister of the Buddha and who was extremely beautiful. Now that her father King Suddhōdana had died, her brother Nanda and her little nephew Rahula had become monks, and Gotami and Yashōdhara had become nuns, she felt that there was nothing much to do at the palace. So she went to her mother, Venerable Gotami, and requested to be ordained as a nun also.

However, she thought the Buddha would probably criticize beauty, and she didn’t want to be criticized. So, she never went to the Buddha to hear him teach, and instead had another nun listen to the Buddha and tell her what he had taught.

The Buddha, knowing that she avoided him because she enjoyed being beautiful and was attached to her beauty, wanted to help her. So, he made a rule that each nun should listen in person to his teachings and not send another nun to listen for her.

So, Beautiful Nandā had no other option but to go and to hear him teach. The Buddha, by his spiritual power, made an image appear only to Beautiful Nandā of an extremely beautiful woman holding a palm fan and waving it back and forth to fan the Buddha.

Shocked by this image, Beautiful Nandā, thought, “Without good reason and being careless, I didn’t go to him, yet such beautiful women go confidently around the Buddha. My beauty isn’t even one sixteenth part of her beauty, and not knowing this for such a long time I didn’t come to the Buddha!”

She stood there, gazing at the beautiful woman. The Buddha gave a Dharma teaching about the body being made of bones smeared with flesh and blood, with old age and death, arrogance and anger hidden inside it. He talked about what the body is made of inside, including fat, mucus, vomit and sweat, and said that a fool thinks of it as beautiful, but not beautiful when the body is dead.

Beautiful Nandā deeply understood his teaching, and attained the first level of enlightenment. She later became famous as the Buddhist nun with greatest skill in meditation.

A similar event was experienced by Queen Khema, the chief queen of King Bimbisara. She had golden skin, and a perfect face and body. She was very proud of her beauty, and like Nanda, she didn’t want to visit the Buddha because she suspected that he would criticize her for enjoying her beauty, and she didn’t want to be criticized.

The king, being a well-known follower of the Buddha, was not pleased that his chief queen was not also a follower of the Buddha. He wanted her to go and see the Buddha, but she wouldn’t agree to go. So, he made a plan. He requested his poets to write beautiful poems about the Bamboo Grove where the Buddha was staying, and recite them where she could hear them.

When she heard from the poets all about the wonders of the woods, flowers, butterflies and birds at Bamboo Grove, she finally said to the king that she wanted to go and see it. The king warned her,

“Go to the grove, but without having seen the Great Teacher, you will not have permission to return here.”

The king then told guards to go with her and if she returns having seen the Buddha that is good, but if she hasn’t, they must point him out to her.

The queen then went to the Bamboo Grove with the guards, and started to walk back home to the palace. The guards, as ordered by the king, led her toward the Buddha, even though she didn't want to go.

The Buddha saw her coming, and with his spiritual power made an image of a heavenly goddess holding a palm fan, waving it around to fan him.

Queen Khema thought, "I don't feel beautiful anymore. Such a beautiful woman, like a goddess, is so close to the Buddha. I am not good enough to be her servant. My terrible mind polluted by my crazy arrogance now has been destroyed."



She sat there looking at the image of the beautiful goddess. As the queen was watching, by the Buddha's spiritual power the goddess image aged from a young woman to a middle-aged woman, then beyond middle age, and then to old age with wrinkled skin, grey hair, and broken and loose teeth. Then the very old, thin and feeble goddess stumbled around with her fan, fell down, and appeared to die. Then only the bones could be seen, which then turned into dust.

Queen Khema, shocked by the image, reflected deeply, "Even such a beautiful body comes to misfortune; my body will also come to the very same misfortune." Realizing that she would surely lose her beauty and that the body is always getting older and one day will die, she wondered, why be so attached to it?

From that experience she gained a deep understanding of the impermanence of all things, the suffering of all beings, and that the body is not who we are. The Buddha at that moment gave a Dharma teaching, and she had such a great understanding of it that she attained the first level of enlightenment.

The Buddha then by his spiritual power made it possible for her to receive permission to be ordained as a nun. She bowed to the Buddha and returned to the palace. But, when she arrived, she didn't bow to the king as she usually did. He understood why she didn't, and asked,

“Queen, have you been to see the Great Teacher?”

“Great king, only a little spiritual wisdom has been gained by you, but I have gained the Buddha's true wisdom; you must allow me to become a nun!”

The king happily agreed, and had her carried on a golden palanquin—a seat fastened to poles held by four men—to the nuns' residence, to be ordained as a nun.

Later, she became very famous as the Buddhist nun with the greatest wisdom.

Questions:

1. What did Queen Gotami do after the Buddha would not agree to ordain her as a nun? (She cut her hair short, wore robes, and walked all the way to where the Buddha was staying, hoping to be ordained as a nun)
2. When Venerable Ananda asked the Buddha whether women ordained as nuns are able to become arahants, did he agree that they could? (yes)
3. Why did Beautiful Nandā and Queen Khema not want to see the Buddha at first? (they thought he would criticize them for enjoying their beauty)
4. Did he criticize them? (no)
5. What image did the Buddha show to Beautiful Nandā? (a woman even more beautiful than Beautiful Nandā)
6. What image did the Buddha show to Queen Khema? (a beautiful goddess who became older and then very old and then died and became dust)

What the Buddha said:

“Passa cittakataṃ bimbaṃ, arukāyaṃ samussitaṃ, āturaṃ bahusankappaṃ, yassa natthi dhavaṃ ṭṭiṭi.”

“See this dressed up beautiful body, but it is a mass of sores, held up by bones, it gets illnesses, and it is not permanent.”

Dharma Discussion - Vanity:

Beautiful Nandā and Queen Khema enjoyed their beauty. In other words, they were vain; they had too much vanity; they were very proud of the way they looked; they were too attached to their beauty. Wherever they went, people would look at them, admiring their beauty, giving them special attention, making them feel important and popular.

Since ancient times, people like to look attractive, have beautiful things, and have clothes and hairstyles to make themselves look attractive. This is natural. Even some birds admire the colorful feathers or beautiful song of another bird when choosing a mate.

But in our society, everyone seems to judge others based only on their looks, their appearance, their beauty. With this pressure, what happens to us? For many people—males and females—their appearance is an obsession; they become addicted to the attention they get from the way they look. They might look in the mirror very often, take many selfies and post them on social media, buy a lot of clothes or get more tattoos, always expect others to admire them, and focus on how to improve the way they look. Their vanity—their attachment to their looks—becomes a big distraction, taking up a lot of time and money.

Even people who are always being admired are never really satisfied. They get so used to others' admiration, reassuring them that they're special, that they expect it all the time; they want to be admired wherever they go. And what happens as they get older? They become very upset and anxious when they see signs of aging, like wrinkles.

For many others, the way they look distresses them even when they're young. They're dissatisfied when they look in the mirror, they feel hurt when others criticize the way they look, they compare themselves with the way others look, and they feel jealous of others whom they think look more attractive. They often feel unattractive and unworthy, unimportant, rejected, or unloved.

All that craving, addiction to attention, worry, dissatisfaction and stress comes from attachment to looking attractive, which comes from society's pressure.

The Buddha taught Beautiful Nandā and Queen Khema that this way of thinking—this vanity, this craving to feel attractive—is ignorance. There always will be someone who people think looks more beautiful than us. We only judge the outside of the body, but what about the inside? We ignore how disgusting we would find the inside of our bodies to be. We ignore the fact that our bodies are constantly changing, including changes from illness, injury and aging, and that one day the body definitely will die. Nandā and Khema realized how ignorant, careless and arrogant they had been. They felt much greater joy from wisdom than they ever felt from being admired.

Once they became nuns, what did they do about their hair and clothes?

They shaved their heads and wore robes.

They didn't have to think about how their hair and clothes look, and they no longer craved attention to satisfy a need for reassurance.

They realized that their value no longer depended on what others see on the outside of their body, their outer beauty.

They knew their value was inside—good qualities in their hearts, inner beauty.

What are some examples of good qualities? Loving-kindness, compassion, patience, tolerance, honesty, self-discipline, generosity, gratitude, peacefulness.

We are not monks or nuns, so how can we reduce our stress from the pressure of society, with others always judging us by the way we look?

Here are some helpful thoughts and reminders:

Remember that too much focus on our looks is an addiction that is stressful, wastes a lot of time and energy and doesn't lead to lasting happiness.

When we notice we are comparing our looks with others, think "let them enjoy their beauty, it doesn't last long; but good inner qualities grow and last forever."

Remember that our inner qualities are far more important and valuable and give us more peace of mind than outer beauty.

People who have inner beauty have an attractive, peaceful expression on their face that makes others around them feel relaxed. They have a smile that makes others happy and smile back, and their eyes sparkle with friendliness.

People who have outer beauty but who have a lot of anger, hatred, jealousy, selfishness or other bad qualities often have an arrogant, tense, aggressive, or artificial expression on their face.

Remember that we are not the body. The body is our vehicle, like our car, that we drive around all through our life until our body dies. Then we get a new one.

Activity - Word Search:

Find 12 words from the lesson:

K E N N A B Q G E
H I M A G E S F I
E N U N Y A V A N
M O L D C U A N N
A O P A D T I M E
V A N I T Y N I R
P O P U L A R N O

Word Box:

KHEMA	NUN	BEAUTY	VANITY	TIME	FAN
VAIN	POPULAR	NANDA	IMAGE	INNER	OLD