

Woman - Entirely A Snare of Māra

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Abstract

This article looks back at the controversial statement “Women – entirely a snare of Māra” in the Pāli Canon and how it has been interpreted over time. In the context of ancient India, Brahmanical thought regarded women as inferior and subordinate, and even some Buddhist texts appear to view women as sources of temptation and danger. However, looking closely at the suttas and context, the Buddha’s intention was not to degrade women, but to use powerful imagery and possibly the most easily fallen traps for humans to warn bhikkhus about lust and attachment in general. Research shows that the Buddha acknowledged the physiological and social difficulties that women face, affirmed their capacity for enlightenment as equal to men, and even established the bhikkhunī Sangha as a parallel organization to the Bhikkhu Sangha. By returning the statement to its original pedagogical intent, it can be seen that Buddhism is not inherently sexist; it is misinterpretations over time that have obscured its message of equality, compassion, and liberation for all, regardless of gender.

Keywords: Buddhism, women, Māra, bhikkhunī, Pāli sutta.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many social institutions and religious structures of all times have recognized that women are the weaker sex, born to endure and obey men. They are also seen as representing negative traits, such as deceit, cunning, and seduction, which men must be wary of and avoid if they do not want to be tainted on the path of spiritual practice. Buddhism also says that women are the trap of Māra. Not stopping there, the Pāli literature records many comments by the Buddha on female traits such as impurity, greed, hatred, jealousy, etc. These lead to the conclusion that Buddhism dislikes, or more precisely discriminates against, women due to the influence of male-dominated ideology in contemporary society.

Buddhism is a religion that promotes wisdom, compassion, and equality. In his sermons, the Buddha consistently spoke the truth about social injustices and false prejudices, enabling people to perceive and transform themselves. Therefore, the above statement may not align with the spirit of Buddhist teachings. As a woman and a Buddhist nun, the author seeks to revisit the original scriptures to discover the Tathāgata’s original teachings, thereby gaining an objective perspective on the topic “Women - Entirely a snare of Māra” and restoring the pure meaning of this statement.

2. Social background and traditional views of women

Brahmanical philosophy, built on the foundation of the four Vedas, views women as the source of all troubles for their own parents, as the bearers of children for their parents-in-law, and as the property of men, born to depend on and obey men without any respect or honour. An ideal woman is a loyal slave, obedient and submissive to her husband's every wish, even deprived of the right to live when the husband dies.⁴ The Law of Manu stipulates that women must depend on their fathers in childhood, on their husbands in adulthood, and on their sons when their husbands die. They are never allowed to live independently or try to separate themselves from their fathers, husbands and sons because such an action would bring contempt upon themselves and their husbands’ families.⁵ These strict rules pushed women to the lowest bottom of society, viewing them as slaves and servants and confining their lives to men.

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⁴ I. B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1930), 1.

⁵ F. Max Müller, ed., *The Sacred Books of the East: The Laws of Manu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), 195.

3. Teachings of the Buddha on women, suffering, and the body

The Buddha mentioned in *Aṅguttara Nikāya*: “There are these five dangers in women. What five? They are wrathful, hostile, of virulent venom, double-tongued, and they betray friends. Bhikkhus, this is how women are of virulent venom: for the most part they have strong lust. This is how women are double-tongued: for the most part they utter divisive speech. This is how women betray friends: for the most part they are adulterous. These are the five dangers in women.”⁶

The Buddha mentioned the five dangers of black snakes and related them to the characteristics of women. Women are impure and foul-smelling. Did he agree with society's belief that women's menstrual cycle is impure and that after giving birth, they are so dirty that they have to use cow urine to purify the entire house? When it is said that the human body is impure and is an aggregate made up of five aggregates, the Buddha wanted to teach the bhikkhus to use that as a subject of contemplation, to practice and overcome their attachment to the body. He himself declared that his own body is impure and foul-smelling when he taught the Venerable Vakkali. This person loved the Buddha's physical appearance so much that he could not get enough of looking at it. When he was seriously ill and about to die, he still felt regretful that he could not meet the Buddha, so the Buddha taught him: “Enough, Vakkali! Why do you want to see this foul body? One who sees the Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees the Dhamma. For in seeing the Dhamma.”⁷ Furthermore, women were always proud of their beautiful appearance, such as Queen Videhi of King Bimbisāra, Princess Sundarī Nandā, courtesan Uppalavannā... For these people, understanding that the body is impermanent, illusory, and impure was the most suitable method to help them attain enlightenment, so the Buddha taught them accordingly.

Saṃyutta Nikāya mentions five distinct sufferings of women: having to go to her husband's house when young, having to menstruate, having to get pregnant, giving birth and serving men.⁸ This is the Buddha's objective assessment, stating the truth about women. Women have to endure monthly menstruation, have to get pregnant and give birth, which is their own physiological characteristic different from men. In addition, going to her husband's house and serving men are social conventions that women must follow if they get married. However, conventions set by humans can also be abolished by humans themselves. The Buddha's views were clearly expressed through the establishment of the bhikkhunī Sangha, which practiced celibacy and did not marry.

4. The allure of women and the metaphor of ‘the Māra's trap’

Speaking of the allure of women, the Buddha taught:

“Bhikkhus, I do not see even one other form that is as tantalizing, sensuous, intoxicating, captivating, infatuating, and as much of an obstacle to achieving the unsurpassed security from bondage as the form of a woman. Beings who are lustful for the form of a woman—ravenous, tied to it, infatuated, and blindly absorbed in it – sorrow for a long time under the control of a woman's form.”⁹

The Buddha continued to emphasize the allure of women:

“One might talk with a murderous foe,
One might talk with an evil spirit,
One might even approach a viper
whose bite means certain death;
but with a woman, one-to-one,
One should never talk.

They bind one whose mind is muddled
with a glance and a smile,
with their dress in disarray,
and with gentle speech.
It is not safe to approach such a person

⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), AN 5.230; 830.

⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), SN 22.87; 938.

⁸ Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, SN 37.3; 1287.

⁹ Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, AN 5.55; 683.

Though she is swollen and dead.

These five objects of sensual pleasure
are seen in a woman's body:
forms, sounds, tastes, and odors,
and also delightful touches.”¹⁰

All the pleasures of the five senses – form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental objects – that fascinate and seduce men are concentrated and crystallized in the form of a woman. The glances, the charming smiles, the loving gestures, the care and grooming, and the sweet words are irresistible honey. Just a little bit of forgetfulness, of not being able to guard one's mind, and a man will easily be attracted. From attraction, he becomes infatuated, from infatuation, he becomes attached like a person who is unconscious, and dies. This danger is more dangerous than the venom of a snake. Because a snake bites to death in one lifetime, but being attached to the five desires will lead to endless birth and death. The cause of samsara is love: “It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there.”¹¹ If one lets lust entice one, one will become bound, enslaved by lust and imprisoned in a trap of ignorance with no way out. “Beings who are lustful for the touch of a woman – ravenous, tied to it, infatuated, and blindly absorbed in it – sorrow for a long time under the control of a woman's touch.”¹²

From this meaning, the Buddha used a metaphor in a subtle and precise way: “If, bhikkhus, one could rightly say of anything: ‘Entirely a snare of Māra,’ it is precisely of women that one could say this.”¹³ By saying this, the Buddha did not mean to belittle, despise or lower the value of women, but only wanted to remind the monks to understand that women are like traps. Still, if their minds are skilful in practising, mindful and alert, not craving for that bait, they will not fall into the trap. If someone is greedy, meaning they have not protected their body and mind, have not established mindfulness, such a person is reprimanded by Him as foolish, a loser on the battlefield.

“Here, some bhikkhu dwells in dependence upon a certain village or town. In the morning, he dresses, takes his robe and bowl, and enters that village or town for alms, with body, speech, and mind unguarded, without having established mindfulness, his sense faculties unrestrained. There he sees women with their dress in disarray and loosely attired. When he sees them, lust invades his mind. With his mind invaded by lust, he has sexual intercourse without having disclosed his weakness and given up the training. This person, I say, is just like the warrior who takes up a sword and shield, arms himself with a bow and quiver, and enters the fray of battle, and whose foes slay him and finish him off while he is striving and exerting himself in battle. There is, bhikkhus, such a person here. This is the first kind of person similar to a warrior found among the bhikkhus.”¹⁴

The Buddha repeatedly advised the bhikkhus that not only female desires but also all sensual pleasures, “little gratification, much suffering and despair, and that the danger in them is still more,”¹⁵ so they must practice the practice of renunciation, but not all monks can easily give them up. When he was still a Bodhisattva, not yet having attained the Fully Enlightened One, he praised the practice of renunciation, but that renunciation did not inspire his mind; he had no pure faith, no stability, no liberation, even though he knew that “This is peace”. The reason for this is stated: “I have not seen the danger in sensual pleasures and have not cultivated that [insight]; I have not achieved the benefit in renunciation and have not pursued it. Therefore my mind does not launch out upon renunciation and become placid, settled, and liberated in it, though I see it as peaceful.”¹⁶

As long as they realise the danger of desires and see the confusion of family life, the bhikkhus will never indulge in those desires. Like the Arahants who have completely cut off the defilements, even though

¹⁰ Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, AN 5.55; 683-684.

¹¹ Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, SN 22.103; 963.

¹² Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, AN 5.55; 683-684.

¹³ Ibid., AN 5.55; 683.

¹⁴ Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, AN 5.76; 705.

¹⁵ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., and Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society; Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), MN 22; 225.

¹⁶ Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, AN 9.4; 1310.

women, harmed by Māra, seduce them, they are not the least bit shaken but always mindful, guarding their body and mind, and restraining their six senses in tranquility.¹⁷

Aṅguttara Nikāya mentions eight dharmas that bind women and men to each other, which are: beauty, laughter, speech, song, tears, clothing, gifts, and touch.¹⁸ Sentient beings are skillfully bound by these forms, just as a trap binds them. That is, women are the bait of men, and men are also the bait of women; they themselves bind themselves to each other. The Buddha never emphasized which side is greedier or accused women of seducing men. Pāli literature also records that there is no sutta in which the Buddha said that women have heavier karma than men. All living beings are equal in receiving karmic retribution, regardless of class, status, lineage, or gender.¹⁹

5. The practice and the role of women in Buddhism

In the world, nothing can hinder the progress of a hero like a beautiful woman's hair. History has recorded many kings who lost their kingdoms because they were infatuated with a beautiful figure. Even Prince Shiddhattha hesitated three times before setting out on his journey to find the path of enlightenment in front of Yasodharā's room. The nature of women enticed and seduced him, or it was his love, affection, and responsibility for his wife and children that made the prince hesitate on his path to seek the truth. Difficulties and challenges can be overcome with strong will and strength, but wealth, glory, high position, royal habits, and female beauty are sweet and soft things, yet have a strong binding power that not everyone can resist.

The last night the prince fought with Māra was described as a fierce battle under a stormy sky, full of ghosts and chaos.²⁰ This was a real battle with bows and arrows, spears or symbolic images of his own inner struggle. Born as a human being, full of worldly emotions, the prince certainly missed his wife, children, and old life of luxury during his practice. This was the last moment he had to overcome to become a great hero or fall back into secular life. The three daughters of Māra – Thirst, Unhappiness, and Desire – may have represented greed, anger, and delusion, the remaining habits that manifested in his mind, the fundamental afflictions binding him and all sentient beings to the cycle of saṃsāra. Prince Shiddhattha defeated Māra, which meant he defeated himself, bravely overcoming the temptations of demons both outside and inside, mastering both his body and mind. Such a person deserves to be praised as the "Supreme Conqueror," regardless of their class, race, or gender.

Reaffirming this, the Buddha declared that after leaving home, living without a family in the Dhamma and Vinaya taught by the Tathāgata, women can attain Stream-entry, Once-returning, Non-returning and arahantship²¹, paving the way for the establishment of the first bhikkhunī Sangha in the history of contemporary religions.

In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, there is a passage that raises many doubts. Venerable Ānanda asked the Buddha before he entered nibbāna:

"Lord, how should we act towards women? 'Do not see them, Ananda.'"But if we see them, how should we behave, Lord? 'Do not speak to them, Ananda.' 'But if they speak to us, Lord, how should we behave? 'Practise mindfulness, Ananda.'"²²

This is not the way of handling and resolving things of the Enlightened One. He never avoids or denies reality, but always teaches to recognize the right cause and find a way to deal with it from the root. Moreover, when the Buddha asked bhikkhus if anyone had any doubts or uncertainties about the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, path or method, to ask clearly before the Tathāgata entered nibbāna, all of them remained silent. The Buddha confirmed that in this assembly of five hundred bhikkhus, the lowest one had attained the Stream-enterer fruition, and no one had any questions about the basic teachings. In such an atmosphere, the question of Venerable Ānanda, the foremost learned disciple who served the Buddha for twenty-five years, seemed out of place and unreasonable.

When he had just attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha affirmed to Māra that he would only enter nibbāna when all four groups of people had become true disciples, wise, well-read, living

¹⁷ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *Middle Length Discourses*, MN 82; 677–691.

¹⁸ Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, AN 8.17; 1141.

¹⁹ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *Middle Length Discourses*, MN 93; 763–770.

²⁰ Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, SN 4.3; 196.

²¹ Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses*, AN 8.51; 1189.

²² Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), DN 16; 264.

according to the Dhamma, after studying the teachings, could declare, explain clearly, and skillfully subdue heretics.²³ If he had accepted women, allowed them to become monks in the Sangha and affirmed their attainment of enlightenment, there was no reason why he would teach Venerable Ānanda to stay away from women.

One of the ten titles of the Buddha is Tathāgata, meaning “one who does what he says and says what he does”. His words and actions are always consistent, earning him the respect of people. The scriptures have never recorded the Buddha’s attitude of staying away from women, but always depending on the circumstances, converting and teaching, regardless of family, class, or gender. When Aṅgulimāla met a woman in labor on the road, the Buddha did not advise him to stay away to avoid being defiled, but taught him to bless the woman so that she could have a safe delivery.²⁴

So how should a bhikkhu behave towards women? “Practise mindfulness.”²⁵ More specifically: “Bhikkhus, towards women old enough to be your mother set up the idea that they are your mother; towards those of an age to be your sisters set up the idea that they are your sisters; towards those young enough to be your daughters set up the idea that they are your daughters.”²⁶ This is the cause that makes a young bhikkhu no longer be attached to lust, practice pure celibacy until the end of his life and live a full-time life in complete fulfillment.

In history, the Buddha was the first person to respect and bring women to an equal position with men in a society full of injustice and discrimination. He established two parallel systems of Sangha to coexist. If the Bhikkhu Sangha had leaders like Sāriputta and Moggallāna, the Bhikkhunī Sangha also had bhikkhunī Khemā and Uppalavannā with supreme wisdom and supernatural powers. These people are all equal in terms of their attainment, with no differences.

The body is divided into male and female, but Buddhahood is not divided into male and female. The false beliefs about the inferiority of women compared to men created by social conventions were refuted by bhikkhunī Somā:

What does womanhood matter at all
When the mind is concentrated well,
When knowledge flows on steadily
As one sees correctly into Dhamma.²⁷

Enlightenment and liberation are expressed at the level of attainment of consciousness. To distinguish between male and female is to be unenlightened, to have not yet transcended worldly conventions. Not discriminating and not being attached are the virtues of a Buddha. When one is still attached to anything, whether it is a method of practice or a fruit, one cannot attain enlightenment. The Buddha’s teachings are like a raft to cross the river, but when one reaches the other shore, one should abandon it: “Bhikkhus, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even good states, how much more so bad states.”²⁸ This is the spirit of enlightenment that the Buddha wanted to convey.

6. CONCLUSION

Women, no matter how resilient they are, are easily bullied by the inhumanity of their abusers when they are single. Their intelligence is not inferior to that of men, but due to the characteristics of their biological cycle, their psychology changes erratically, and they are easily seduced into committing crimes. Few women have the same love for life, but if they are not guided by wisdom, they are easily mistaken and go astray. Realizing the nature of women, the Buddha never criticized or discriminated against them, but gave them appropriate instructions to help them practice. The heroic nuns of that time understood the Buddha’s intention, did not feel inferior, and did not surrender to fate. They affirmed that the path to truth has no place for weak souls who confine themselves to the euphemism of ‘the weaker sex’, living a life of dependence, dependence, being a shadow or an ornament of others. Overcoming the prejudices and injustices of society, they became enlightened and liberated beings, and the Theravāda verses are their triumphant songs.

²³ Ibid., DN 16; 250-251.

²⁴ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, *Middle Length Discourses*, MN 86; 710-717.

²⁵ Walshe, *Long Discourses*, DN 16; 264.

²⁶ Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, SN 35.127; 1197.

²⁷ Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, SN 5.2; 222.

²⁸ Bodhi, *Middle Length Discourses*, MN 22; 229.

The Buddha's main concern was to restore the moral and ethical spirit to all people, regardless of whether they were rich or poor, noble or humble, male or female, and to free them from the endless bonds of reincarnation. Therefore, he did not participate in worldly issues such as social reform, equality or political advice, but left them to those in authority.

During his teachings, the Buddha mentioned that women, or more generally, the five desires, are the traps of Māra, always ready to detain anyone who is still heedless and greedy. Those who listen to the teachings of the master diligently and energetically, and make efforts, will forever escape the control of the Māra. He did not intend to despise or discriminate; rather, he sought to restore women to their rightful position, stating the truth without exonerating or defending, so that people could see for themselves and change their perspective. However, later Buddhists did not carefully consider the historical context, did not grasp the Buddha's educational purpose, so sometimes they misunderstood, imposed their personal views as the Tathāgata's intention, deviating from the original pure meaning, of which the saying: "Women - Entirely a snare of Māra" is a typical example.

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