

# Sona Theri

**Introduction:** Back some 2540 years ago, in the life time of Buddha, women had been given equal opportunity by Buddha to attain Arahantship, just like man. However, we have yet to see, to this date, in the Theravada Sect, woman of their own choice, be fully ordained as **Bhikkhuni** instead of laid on the side line as Silashin. Historical facts from Pali Canon shows there were pre-eminent women disciples of the Buddha such as:

- ? **The founder** of the order of nuns - Sister **Pajapati Gotami**
- ? **Great Wisdom** - Sister **Khema**
- ? **Supernormal powers** - Sister **Uppalavanna**
- ? **Proficiency in the Rules** - Sister **Patacara**
- ? **Dhamma teaching** - Sister **Dhammadinna**
- ? **Meditative powers** - Sister **Nanda**
- ? **Energy** - Sister **Sona**
- ? **Fastest in realisation** - Sister **Bhaddz Chaconne**

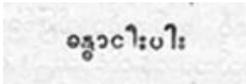
**Sona Theri** entered the Bhikkhuni Sangha order at her mid-age; with strong desire to liberate herself from the Samsara she strove hard to attain the Arahantship. She was declared as the foremost in working hard among the Buddha's disciples of Bhikkhunis. Since she was late in entering the Sangha order in her mid-age, she had to work harder than the younger Nuns. Her strong effort resulted in attaining the divine eye and wisdom. The moral lesson is never too late to strive for the goal of Nibbana – keep on working hard, like Sona Theri.

Her story of raising ten children and later entered the sangha order is very typical of most Asian family. The parents will raise many children raised them, feed them and give them the inheritance; but her ten children could not support their own mother – one and only mother between the ten children.

My earlier article explains the Five Aggregates –Khan Dha Ngar Par and Sona Theri she first learns to understand the Five Aggregates and later attained the Arahantship.

*She gave me a discourse on the Teaching,*

*On the aggregates, sense bases, elements.*



This is a great inspiration for all of us as a reminder, that we have our obligation to care for our parents when they are old and frail Buddha said - that even if we carried our parents on our shoulders for our entire lifetime (**shoulder the responsibility of their care and comfort**) we would not be able to settle the obligation we owe them for what they have done.

Seeing, Sona with many children, could attain Arahantship, we should all be so inspired by her performance that we too could reach for that fruit of the holiness Arahantship, one day.

**Webu Sayadaw uses Sona Theri to inspire his devotees – Yogis. Thus –**

**Webu Sayadaw said –**

I shall tell you a story you probably already know. At the time of the Buddha, there was a rich lady who owned a big estate. When she became old, she distributed the inheritance among her children. But the children, after receiving the money, didn't care for their mother any more. She was not treated well in the houses of her sons and daughters and she was in distress.

**When she was about eighty or ninety years old**, the neighbors had her ordained as a nun (bhikkhuni) as they couldn't bear to see her poverty and suffering. When the nuns of her nunnery were invited for alms food to a house one day, they all went. Only Sona Theri our old woman, had to stay back because she was too old to go along.

Before they left the nunnery they said to Sona Theri, "You are very old, you can't come with us. But fill the water pots for drinking water, and those for washing hands and feet, so that everything is ready when we return, and also prepare some hot water.

But this nun was very old. To carry the water she had to use a small pot, and as she was working away, she got very tired. But she didn't rest. She forced herself to do what she had been ordered to do. Because she overworked herself, she fell down between the water pots, and couldn't lift herself up any more. She wasn't pretending; she was exhausted from carrying water.

She had been given the Teachings of the Buddha. So she thought, "Well... I can't fill the pots any more. There is more water to be carried and I haven't prepared any hot water yet either. But I can't even get up. I will take up an object of meditation given by the Buddha." And she started meditating as we did. She fixed her attention firmly on the spot. She focused her attention so that it stayed there, whatever happened. That's all! And as she was meditating with strong effort, she did what had to be done and made an end to suffering.

Of course she was full of the bliss of emancipation. When the others came back, they couldn't find her. "Where could this old nun have gone?" they said and looked all over the nunnery. Eventually they found her lying between the water pots, and they all gathered around her and abused her. "Now what about our orders? You didn't fill the pots, and there is no hot water either. You are so lazy that you just lie down and sleep."

But the old nun was absorbed in bliss. The other nuns were worldlings, of course, and they stood there blaming her. "Look how lazy she is. No water pot is full, no hot water. Just lying around!"

You too can talk like that, can't you? Not pleasant talk. But this nun was an Arahant. She had attained Arahantship along with the super-normal powers. She said: "All you desire will be done. There will be water in the pots and there will be hot water too." And after saying this, she made a strong determination and the water pots were filled to the brim and the hot water was boiling over.

This nun was very old, and in exhaustion she fell down and could not get up again. She practiced as you are doing now. Do you hear this? How long will it take you to reach the goal, you who are healthy and strong?

**Disciples** - : We shall work hard.

**Sayadaw** - : Will you still say, "Oh, we are old; we can't practice any more"? Sona Theri was eighty or ninety years old and she still carried the water as she had been told to do. When she fell down in exhaustion she just meditated. The disciples of Buddha attained the goal because their power of effort was great.

You have the Teachings, the technique. All you need now is effort. And why do you need effort? **Because during meditation the enemies will come to disturb you.** Keep your attention on this small spot. If your limbs ache, work so that you reach the state where there is no aching. When you are drowsy, work so that you reach the state where there is no drowsiness. Good, good ... establish effort and meditate, work to make an end to all suffering.

## Sona – Woman with many children.

At the time of the Buddha there lived in **Savatthi** a woman named **Sona** who had ten children. She had spent her entire life occupied with the welfare of her children. She had enjoyed nursing them, feeding them, educating them and when they were older, finding suitable partners for them. Her whole life centered on her children and soon she was known as '**Sona with many children**'.

**Sona's husband was a lay devotee of the Buddha. As his children were all married and his responsibilities reduced, he spent more and more time studying and practicing the Dhamma. Before long he was totally inspired by the Teachings. He decided to join the Holy Order. It was not easy for Sona to accept this decision, but instead of holding him back**

she decided that she too would lead a more religious life. With this in mind she divided up her wealth among her children and asked them to support her by providing her with the bare necessities of life. She then spent her time in religious activities as a lay devotee of the Buddha.

For some time all went well. Then, one by one, her children and their spouses began to feel that she was a burden to them. They had never really accepted their father's decision to join the Noble Order and they resented supporting their mother who was now spending most of her time in religious devotion. Forgetting how much she had done for them, they started quarrelling amongst themselves on an equitable division of her support and care. They all felt that it had been an unfair arrangement in which each of them had to bear an unfair proportion of her support. To them the mother who had sacrificed so much became a nuisance and a burden.

This ungrateful treatment caused great suffering to Sona, who had sacrificed her entire life for her children. She became bitter and angry. She had expected her children to support her in her old age as was the custom in India. Having distributed her wealth among them she had no means to support herself. Disillusioned, she decided to seek solace from the Buddha.

After listening to one of the Buddha's nuns, Sona began to analyze her feelings and disappointment in her children. Had she sacrificed her life for them and nurtured them selflessly or had she done it with expectation of return? Had she given unconditional love to her children? How did her feelings compare with the compassion and loving-kindness the Buddha advocated?

Sona decided to join the Buddha's order of nuns to practice and develop selfless love and virtues. Following her husband's path, she became a nun. Before long, however, Sona realized that she had taken her old habits with her into the order. She was an old woman who was set in her ways. Joining the order had not changed her as a person. Often she was a target for criticism by younger nuns as she had difficulties in changing her ways. **Sona realized that attaining spiritual purity was no easy task.**

Sona began to practice mindfulness and self-observation in earnest. She had to be aware of her emotions and weaknesses and discipline her

mind. Because she had entered the order in her latter years Sona knew that she had to work with effort. **She practiced meditation with urgency, often passing the entire night in sitting and walking meditation.** So as not to disturb others, she started to meditate in the lower hall in the dark by guiding herself with the pillars. **Before long her determination and effort resulted in Sona attaining Arahantship.** She describes her attainment in her own words:

*"Then the other Bhikkhunis  
Left me alone in the convent.  
They had given me instructions  
To boil a cauldron of water.  
Having fetched the water  
I poured it into the cauldron.  
I put the cauldron on the stove and sat,  
Then my mind became composed.  
I saw the aggregates as impermanent,  
I saw them as suffering and not self.  
Having expelled all cankers from my heart,  
Right there I attained Arahantship."  
-- ( Apadana 234-236)*

When the other nuns returned they asked Sona for the hot water and she realized that she had not as yet boiled it. Using the supernormal powers that she now possessed and the fire element Sona heated the water and offered it to the nuns, who reported her extraordinary feat to the Buddha. **The Buddha declared Sona as foremost among the nuns who put forth great effort and praised her effort and attainment by saying:**

*"Though one should live a hundred years  
As a lazy, sluggish person,  
Better it is to live a single day  
Firmly arousing one's energy."  
-- (Dhammapada 112)*

Sona describes her life in the Therigatha as follows:

*"I bore ten children in this body,  
In this physical frame of mine.  
Then when I was old and frail,*

*I went up to a Bhikkhuni.  
She gave me a discourse on the Teaching,  
On the aggregates, sense bases, elements.  
Having heard the Dhamma discourses from her,  
I shaved my hair and then went forth.  
Whilst still a probationer,  
I purified the divine eye.  
Now I know my past abodes,  
Where it is that I lived before.  
With one-pointed mind well composed,  
I developed the sinless state.  
Immediately I was released,  
Quenched with the end of clinging.  
The five aggregates are well understood,  
They stand cut off at the root.  
Fie on you, O wretched aging,  
Now there is no more re-becoming."  
-- (Therigatha 102-106)*

Sona's story is one from which we can all learn. Children who read this should reflect on their responsibilities to their parents. Our parents took care of us when we were too young to take care of ourselves, taught us right from wrong and showed us the Dhamma. The Buddha said that even if we carried our parents on our shoulders for our entire lifetime (shoulder the responsibility of their care and comfort) we would not be able to settle the obligation we owe them for what they have done. The effects of what one does to one's parent have forceful results. Both the wholesome and unwholesome deeds we perform towards our parents have serious consequences.

For parents there is much to learn from Sona. We do not own our children. How can we, when we do not even own ourselves? Children should fulfill their obligations to their parents. We should show them by example. But bringing up children in Western society is even more difficult than bringing them up in the East. If our children don't fulfill their duties we must remember that the Buddha said that we are our own saviors. Nothing is gained by reflecting on their omissions and getting bitter and angry. But much can be gained by disciplining ourselves and purifying our own minds. The cause of suffering – craving lies within us. All we can do is to ensure that we have done our best for

our children. We cannot save them just as they cannot save us. In the end each of us is our own savior.

## **Another rendition of Sona Theri.**

**Soná. A Therí. She was declared foremost among nuns for capacity of effort (áraddhaviriyánam). She belonged to the family of a clansman of Sávatthi, and because, after marriage, she had ten sons and daughters, she came to be called Bahuputtiká. When her husband renounced the world, she distributed her wealth among her children, keeping nothing for herself.**

**Her children soon ceased to show her any respect, and she entered the Order in her old age. She waited on the nuns and studied most of the night. Soon her strenuous energy became known to the Buddha, and he, sending forth a ray of glory, spoke to her. Then she attained arahantship. Her resolve to win eminence was made in the time of Padumuttara Buddha, (App. A) when she was the daughter of a rich setthi. (A.i.25; Thig.vss.102-6; ThigA.96f.; Ap.ii.576; cf. the story of Bahuputtiká at DhA.ii.276f).**

**The Anguttara Commentary says (AA.i.199) that after she became an arahant she wished her colleagues to know this because they had been in the habit of constantly finding fault with her for various things, and she did not wish them to continue doing so and thereby commit a sin. She therefore filled a vessel with water, which she heated by her iddhi-power, using no fire. When the nuns came to look for water she told them that if they wanted warm water they could have it from the vessel. They found the water hot, and understood. Then they begged her forgiveness.**

**Another rendition of Sona Theri**

## **Sona With Many Children**

**There was a housewife in Savatthi who had ten children. She was always occupied with giving birth, nursing, upbringing, educating and arranging marriages for her children. Her children were her whole life. She was therefore known as "Sona with many children."**

She was rather like Migara's mother of the same city, though the latter had twenty children. We may find such an abundance of offspring in one family somewhat strange today. However, this was not uncommon in Asia and even in some parts of the West.

Sona's husband was a lay follower of the Buddha. After having practiced moral conduct according to the precepts for several years while living the household life, he decided that the time had come to enter into the holy life, and so he became a monk. It was not easy for Sona to accept this decision, yet she did not waste her time with regrets and sorrow, but decided to live a more religiously dedicated life. She called her ten children and their husbands and wives together, turned her considerable wealth over to them, and asked them only for support for her necessities. For a while all went well. She had sufficient support and could spend her time in religious activities.

But soon it happened that the old woman became a burden to her children and children-in-law. They had not been in agreement with their father's decision, and even less did they agree with their mother's devout attitude and religious speech. Indeed, they thought of their parents as foolish because they would not indulge in the pleasures their wealth could purchase. They considered their parents mentally unstable, religious fanatics; this attitude made them despise their mother.

They quickly forgot that they owed all their riches to their mother that she had lavished many years of care and attention on them. Looking only at the present moment, they considered the old woman a nuisance. The words of the Buddha, that a grateful person is as rare in the world as one who becomes a Noble One, proved true again in this case. (A III, 122; V, 143; V, 195).

The increasing disdain by her children was an even greater pain for Sona than the separation from her husband. She became aware that waves of bitterness arose in her, that reproaches and accusations intermingled. She realized that what she had taken to be selfless love, pure mother's love, was in reality self love, coupled with expectations. She had been relying on her children completely and had been convinced that she would be supported by them in her old age as a tribute to her long years of solicitude for them, that gratitude, appreciation and participation in their affairs would be her reward.

**Had she not looked at her children as an investment then, as an insurance against the fear and loneliness of old age? In this manner, she investigated her motives and found the truth of the Enlightened One's words in herself. Namely, that it was a woman's way not to rely on possessions, power and abilities, but solely on her children, while it was the way of the ascetic to rely on virtue alone. (A VI, 53).**

**Her reflections brought her to the decision to enter the Order of Nuns so that she could develop the qualities of selfless love and virtue. Why should she remain in her home where she was only reluctantly accepted? She looked upon the household life as a gray existence and pictured that of a nun as brilliant, and so was ready to follow her husband's path. She became a nun, a Bhikkhuni in the order of the Buddha's followers.**

**But after a while she realized that she had taken her self-love along. The other nuns criticized her behavior in many small matters. She had entered the Sangha as an old woman and had dozens of habits and peculiarities which were obstacles in this new environment. She was used to doing things in a certain way, and the other nuns did them differently.**

**Sona soon realized that it was not easy to reach noble attainments, and that the Order of Nuns was not the paradise she had envisioned -- just as she had not found security with her children. She also understood that she was still held fast by her womanly limitations. It was not enough that her weaknesses were abhorrent to her, and that she was longing for more masculine traits. She also had to know what to do to effect the change. She accepted the fact that she had to make tremendous efforts, not only because she was already advanced in years, but also because until now she had only cultivated female virtues. The masculine characteristics which she was lacking were energy and circumspection. Sona did not become discouraged, nor thought of the Path as too difficult. She had the same sincerity and steadfastness as her sister-nun-Soma, who said:**

**What's it to do with a woman's state  
When the mind, well-composed  
with knowledge after knowledge born,  
sees into Perfect Dhamma clear?  
For who, indeed, conceives it thus:**

**A woman am I, a man am I,  
or what, then indeed, am I?  
Such a one can Mara still address.  
(S 5,2)**

**It became clear to Sona that she had to develop courage and strength to win victory over her willfulness and her credulity. She realized that it was necessary to practice mindfulness and self-observation, and to implant into her memory those teachings which could be at her disposal when needed to counteract her emotions.**

**What use would be all knowledge and vows if she were carried away by her emotions, and her memory fail her when it was most needed? These were the reasons which strengthened Sona's determination and will-power to learn the Buddha's discourses. Through many a night thereby she attained the ability to memorize them. Furthermore, she took pains to serve her sister-nuns in a loving way and to apply the teachings constantly. After having practiced in this way for some time, she attained not only the assurance of Non-returner, but became an Arahant, fully-enlightened, a state she had hardly dared to hope for in this lifetime.**

**It happened without any special circumstances to herald it. After she had made a whole-hearted commitment to perfect those abilities which she lacked, no matter what the cost, she drew nearer to her goal day by day. One day she was liberated from the very last fetter. The Buddha said about her that she was foremost of the nuns who had energetic courage. (A I, 24)**

**In the "Verses of the Elder Nuns" she describes her life in five verses:**

**Ten children having borne  
from this bodily congeries,  
so I, now weak and old,  
approached a Bhikkhuni.**

**The Dhamma she taught me --  
groups, sense-spheres and elements, [\*]  
I heard the Dhamma,  
and having shaved my hair, went forth.**

While still a probationer  
I purified the eye divine;  
Former lives I knew,  
and where I lived before.

One-pointed, well-composed,  
the Signless [\*\*] I developed,  
immediately released,  
unclinging now and quenched!  
**Knowing the five groups well,**  
they still exist; but with their roots removed.  
Unmovable am I,  
on a stable basis sure,  
now rebirth is no more.

(Thig 102-106)

\* [The five groups (or aggregates), the twelve sense spheres and the eighteen elements -- see Buddhist Dictionary, B.P.S. Kandy, for definition.]

\*\* [One of the three gates to freedom the other two being the Desireless and Emptiness.]

Sona's sister-nuns, who had formerly been her severe critics, and who had thought that because of her age she would not be able to change, now apologized to her sincerely and endeavored to follow her good example.

Sources: A I, 24; Thig 102-106; AP. 11, No.26

## Appendix – A

### Padumuttara

**The tenth of the twenty four Buddhas.** He was born in Hamsavatí, of the khattiya Ananda and his wife Sujátá. At the moments of his birth and his Enlightenment, a shower of lotuses fell in the ten thousand worlds, hence his name. He lived as a householder for ten thousand years in three palaces: Naraváhana, Yassa (or Yasavatí) and Vasavatti. His wife was **Vasudattá**, by whom he had a son, **Uttara** (according to SNA.i.341, his son was Uparevata). He left home and his palace (Vasavatti), and **practised austerities only for seven days.** A maiden of Ujjeni, called

**Rucinandá**, gave him milk rice, and the **Ájívaka Sumitta** gave him grass for his seat. His bodhi tree was a salala, under which he spent a week, and when he touched the ground with his foot, huge lotus flowers sprang out of the earth, covering his body completely with their pollen. (The Samyuttabhánakas give this as the reason for his name.) His first sermon was preached to his cousins **Devala** and **Sujáta**, who later became his chief **disciples**. The spot where the sermon was preached was Mithiluyyána. Sumana was Padumuttara's personal attendant, Amitá and Asamá his chief women **disciples**, Vitinna and Tissa his chief patrons among men, and Hatthá and Vicittá among women. His body was fifty eight cubits high, and his aura spread for twelve yojanas. He died in Nandáráma at the **age of one hundred thousand**, and a stúpa twelve leagues in height was erected over his relics. In his time, the Bodhisatta was governor of a province (ratthika) called Jatika (Jatila). Bu.xi.1ff.; BuA.157ff.; J.i.37, 44; DhA.i.99, 417; iii.146, etc.; also Ap.i.57, 63, 101, 107; Mtu.ii.58.

It is said (E.g., MT.59) that in the time of Padumuttara there did not exist a single heretic.

Many of the eminent **disciples** of Gotama **Buddha** are said to have first conceived their desire for their respective positions in the time of Padumuttara **Buddha**, after seeing similar rank conferred on Padumuttara's various **disciples** in acknowledgment of their special attainments - e.g.,

- ? Aññákondañña,
- ? Mahá Kassapa,
- ? Anuruddha, Bhaddiya,
- ? Pindola Bháradvája,
- ? Punna Mantáníputta,
- ? Mahá Kaccána,
- ? Culla Panthaka,
- ? Subhúti,
- ? Khadiravaniya Revata,
- ? Kankhá Revata,
- ? **Sona**-Kolivisa,
- ? **Sona** Kutikanna,
- ? Sívalí,
- ? Vakkalí,
- ? Ráhula,
- ? Ratthapála,
- ? Kundadhána,
- ? Vangísa,
- ? Upasena,
- ? Vangantaputta,
- ? Dabba Mallaputta,
- ? Pilinda Vaccha,
- ? Báhiya Dárucíriya,

- ? Kumára Kassapa,
- ? Mahá Kotthita,
- ? Ánanda,
- ? Uruvela-Kassapa,
- ? Káludáyí,
- ? Sobhita,
- ? Upáli,
- ? Nanda,
- ? Mahá Kappina,
- ? Ságata,
- ? Rádha,
- ? Mogharájá,
- ? Vappa,
- ? Upavána,
- ? Mahápajápatí,
- ? Gotamí,
- ? Khemá,
- ? Uppalavanná,
- ? Patácára,
- ? Dhammadinná,
- ? Sundari Nandá,
- ? **Soná,**
- ? Sakulá,
- ? Bhaddá Kundalakesá,
- ? Bhaddá Kapilání,
- ? Bhaddá Kaccána,
- ? Kiságotamí and
- ? Sigálakamátá.

## Appendix – B

### Verse 112

#### The Story of Thera Sappadasa

While residing at the Jetavana monastery, the Buddha uttered Verse (112) of this book, with reference to Thera Sappadasa.

Once a bhikkhu was not feeling happy with the life of a bhikkhu; at the same time he felt that it would be improper and humiliating for him to return to the life of a householder. So he thought it would be better to die. So thinking, on one occasion, he put his hand into a pot where there was a snake but the snake did not bite him. This was because in a past existence the snake was a slave and the bhikkhu was his master. Because of this incident the bhikkhu was known as **Thera Sappadasa**. On

another occasion, Thera Sappadasa took a razor to cut his throat; but as he placed the razor on his throat he reflected on the purity of his morality practice throughout his life as a bhikkhu and his whole body was suffused with delightful satisfaction (*piti*) and bliss (*sukha*). Then detaching himself from piti, he directed his mind to the development of Insight Knowledge and soon attained arahatship, and he returned to the monastery.

On arrival at the monastery, other bhikkhus asked him where he had been and why he took the knife along with him. When he told them about his intention to take his life, they asked him why he did not do so. He answered, "I originally intended to cut my throat with this knife, but I have now cut off all moral defilements with the knife of Insight Knowledge." The bhikkhus did not believe him; so they went to the Buddha and asked. "Venerable Sir, this bhikkhu claims, that he has attained arahatship as he was rutting the knife to his throat to kill himself. Is it possible to attain Arahatta Magga within such a short time?" To them the Buddha said, "Bhikkhus! Yes, it is possible; for one who is zealous and strenuous in the practice of Tranquility and Insight Development, arahatship can be gained in an instant. As the bhikkhu walks in meditation, he can attain arahatship even before his raised foot touches the ground."

Then the Buddha spoke in verse as follows:

**Verse 112.** Better than a hundred years in the life of a person who is idle and inactive, is a day in the life of one who makes a zealous and strenuous effort (in Tranquility and Insight Development Practice).

Reference –

1. Relatives and Disciples of the Buddha by Radhika Abeysekera
2. Dhammapada by Daw Mya Tin Tipitala Association of Myanmar.