

Dharma Reflection: The Woman at the Well

On one occasion the Elder Ananda was traveling through the countryside. It was a hot day and he had been walking for a long time. As he reached the edge of the village he walked up to a young woman pulling water out of a well. Seeing the clean and fresh water, he asked her, "Sister, if it is not too much to ask, I would like a cup of the water you have drawn."

"Surely, Sir you have come to the wrong place," she stammered, "for this is the well used by those of us from the untouchable class. Even though you are a monk, you have the bearing of someone from the brahmin or warrior castes. Their well is on the other side of the village. Any water you took from my hands would surely be a defilement for you and bring bad karma to me as well"

"It is not so, Sister. Just as water does not discriminate by whom it is drunk or used, so too should the heart not discriminate between people of different backgrounds, races, customs, or social stations - these are mere conventions of our own human creation, they are not the Dharma. Please, let me have some water."

As he said this he held out a small coconut-shell cup and, with trembling hands, the girl filled it with sparkling water. Ananda then sat and slowly drank the cup dry; the girl looked on joyfully, wide-eyed and with a racing heart, as if she were witnessing a miracle - for in a way she was. Never in her life before, when around any people other than her family, had she ever been able to feel that she was just another person; the presence of "untouchable" hung in the air and cast a veil between her and the whole world. Now here was a holy man who, in these few moments, had brushed that veil so easily aside - she saw that he was right and her heart was free from fear of any wrong doing. This day her life had changed forever.

The Elder then thanked her for the drink and continued on his way. It was not surprising that the young woman found herself in love with this mysterious stranger. Her heart became infatuated with the memory of him, the only one who had changed her world so much, so it was not long before she made her way to the Jetavana Monastery, in the hope of finding him and declaring her love. When she arrived at the monastery she chanced to meet the Buddha. He asked her why she looked so radiant and happy - she explained that she had met this wonderful man, dressed just like him, and that she was going to give herself to him and they were going to be married. The Buddha gently drew the story of the encounter at the well out of her. He then asked what it was she loved so much about Ananda and she replied it was his peaceful radiance, his purity, and his impartiality that had really won her heart.

Within a few words the Buddha was able to help her realize that it was not so much Ananda as a person that she was attracted to, it was more the qualities of Dharma that he embodied: purity, radiance, and peacefulness. And, whereas the lives of people were fickle and fleeting, certain to be separated by distance or death at some point, taking Dharma as a Refuge was infinitely more rewarding

and secure. Her eyes were opened, yet again and she there and then asked for the going forth as a nun. It was not long after that that she realized arahantship.

Adapted from the Divyavadana