

Mahapajapati Opens the Door

Mahapajapati was the aunt and foster mother of the Buddha and a queen of the Shakyas. Many women turned to her for counsel when their husbands and sons left home to join the Buddha's order. She was the first to ask the Buddha if women could also ordain.

The Buddha replied, "Don't set your heart on this."

She asked two more times and received the same answer. She departed in tears.

Later Mahapajapati and five hundred other women cut off their hair, put on saffron-colored robes, and walked barefoot for hundreds of miles to where the Buddha was teaching. Weeping, they stood outside the gates.

Ananda saw them there and asked Mahapajapati, "Why are you crying?"

"Because the Buddha does not permit women to ordain."

Ananda went to the Buddha and said, "Your aunt is standing outside with swollen feet, covered with dust, crying because you do not permit women to ordain. It would be good, Lord, if women had permission to ordain."

The Buddha replied, "Enough, Ananda. Don't set your heart on this."

Ananda asked two more times to no avail. Then he asked, "Are women able, Lord, to realize the full fruits of the way, even *arahantship*?"

"Yes, Ananda, they are."

"Since women are able to realize perfection, and since Mahapajapati was so kind to you—caring for you and suckling you at her own breast—surely it would be good if women were allowed to ordain."

The Buddha relented, and the sangha of women was born.