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Buddhism & Women

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As Buddhism becomes an increasingly relevant globalised force, with the scriptures of all schools being freely available to so many, and as both lay and monastic women take on key roles, this will be the case because both groups of women are taking on key roles.

Though, numerous studies have revealed that Buddhism and feminism are becoming increasingly intertwined, as evidenced by recent research. In addition, Sakyadhita Worldwide Association of Buddhist Women has conducted a series of international conferences since 1987 in Bodhgaya, India, to address the myriad obstacles that Buddhist women face.

Five years after he attained enlightenment, Gautama Buddha first ordained women to become nuns. This occurred simultaneously with the first ordainment of men into the sangha. His aunt and foster mother, Mahapajapati Gotami, became the first Buddhist nun after he passed away. Bhikkhunis are required to adhere to a set of eight oaths that are together referred to as The Eight Garudhammas.

According to Peter Harvey "The Buddha's apparent hesitation on this matter is reminiscent of his hesitation on whether to teach at all," something he only does after persuasion from various devas. The ordination of women in Buddhism is and has always been practiced in some Buddhist regions, such as East Asia, is being revived in some countries such as Sri Lanka, and is newly beginning in some Western countries to which Buddhism has recently spread, such as the United States. As Buddhism spreads, its

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prevalence in Mahayana countries grows in popularity as well despite the decrease in Theravada Buddhist nuns.

The Buddha places a strong emphasis on the positive role that a woman may play and should play in a successful family life by serving as a good mother and a loving wife. It is expected that husbands and wives will share equally in the responsibilities of the household and will carry out their obligations with the same level of commitment. The husband is advised to think of his wife as a friend, a companion, and a collaborator in the relationship. In matters pertaining to the family, it was customary for the wife to take the place of the husband in situations where the latter was incapacitated. In point of fact, it was required of a wife to familiarise herself with the trade, business, or industries in which her husband was engaged so that she would be able to take care of her husband's responsibilities in the event that he was absent. This demonstrates that wives in Buddhist societies held positions of equality with their husbands in the social hierarchy.

Buddhism does not restrict either the educational opportunities of women or their religious freedom. The Buddha unhesitatingly accepted that women are capable of realising the Truth, just as men are. This is why he permitted the admission of women into the Order, though he was not in favour of it at the beginning because he thought their admission would create problems in the Sasana (a term frequently used by Buddhists and Shaivites to refer to their religion or non-religion. It has a range of possible translations, including teaching, practice, doctrine, and Buddha Sasana, which means “the teaching of the Buddha”). Once women proved their capability of managing their affairs in the Order, the Buddha recognised their abilities and talents, and gave them responsible positions in the Bhikkhuni Sangha. The Buddhist texts record of eminent saintly Bhikkhunis, who were very learned and who were experts in preaching the Dhamma. Dhammadinna was one such Bhikkhuni, Khema and Uppalavanna are two others.

Buddhism's greatest contribution to the social and political landscape of ancient India is the radical assumption that all men and women, regardless of their caste, origins, or status, have equal spiritual worth. This is especially pertinent concerning the status of women, who were traditionally prevented by the brahmanas from performing religious rites and studying the sacred texts of the Vedas. Halkias (2013, p. 494)

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Two important features of early Buddhism were the assertion that the highest goal—nibbana—was possible for women, and the creation of a bhikkhum sangha. On the other hand, Buddhist texts reflect stereotyped ideals of the submissive and obedient women, whose life was supposed to revolve around her husband and sons, They also contain many negative images of women as temptresses and creatures of passion. Comparisons with poisonous black snakes and fire (the message is: stay away from them) are not surprising in a tradition that set such store on celibacy and which therefore perceived women as a threat. Just as monks were warned against women, nuns were warned against men.

Buddhist tradition suggests that the Buddha was not mutually keen to establish a bhikkhuni sangha but ultimately gave in to the persistent pressure of his disciple Ananda and his aunt and foster mother Mahapajapati Gotami. The Vinaya Pitaka describes him as making the gloomy prediction that the doctrine would decline in 500 instead of 1,000 years because women had been admitted into the sangha.

The sangha was not open to pregnant women, mothers of unweaned children, rebellious women who associated with young men, and those who did not have their parents' or husbands' permission to join, The rules for nuns were basically the same as those for monks, but there were more rules, The Buddha is also described as having laid down eight special rules subordinating the order of nuns to that of monks. However, it has been suggested that this was a later interpolation. While women could attain salvation, their capability for attaining Buddhahood directly (without first being born as a man) was not accepted.⁸

Buddhist texts contain several references to learned nuns. The Samyutta Nikaya refers to Khema, whose discourse to king Pasenadi so impressed him that he stood up and bowed before her when she had finished. The Anguttara Nikaya tells us that when the Buddha heard the answers Dhammadinna Theri had given to questions posed by the laywoman Visakha, he said, 'Visakha, the nun Dhammadinna is truly wise, she is very learned; if you had put these questions to me, I would have given you the same answers.'

The Therigatha (Verses of Elder Nuns) is a collection of 73 poems consisting of 522 verses, supposed to have been composed by 72 nuns who had reached a high level of spiritual attainment. Many of these nuns are described as possessing tevijja (the three kinds of knowledge), an attribute of arhats. Some of the

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poems express the nuns' experience of nibbana. They also tell of the experiences which preceded their joining the sangha. These range from unhappy marriages to tragedies such as the death of a child. One of the stories is that of Chanda, a young girl from a Brahmana family, who found herself destitute when her parents died in an epidemic. A nun named Patachara gave her some food to eat, taught her the doctrine, and initiated her into the order.

Monks and nuns were bound to have had some amount of interaction. In fact, nuns were not supposed to live too far away from monks during regular times as well as during the monsoon retreat. They had to consult the latter for the date of the uposatha ceremony. If a nun broke certain rules, she had to answer to a mixed gathering of monks and nuns. However, contact and interaction were carefully regulated and restricted. For instance, a monk was not supposed to be alone with a nun in a closed room, and was not allowed to preach to a woman in private without the presence of a third person who could understand what was being said. However, a monk could accompany a nun on a road that was considered dangerous.

A tradition's progressiveness has to be judged by the standards of its own time. By the standards of the 6th or 5th century BC, the Buddha opened up a significant space for women's spiritual aspirations. Similarly, compared to texts of other religious traditions, women are strikingly visible in Buddhist texts. In subsequent centuries, women—both bhikkhunis and upasikas—were very visible as donors at Buddhist stupa-monastery sites, Nevertheless, after its inception, the bhikkhuni sangha seems to be a shadowy entity in the available sources.

The Buddhist concept of the equality of men and women serves as the philosophical foundation for the work done by this group. Sakyadhita's mission is to realise genuine equality within Buddhism and to ensure that all people, regardless of gender, have equal opportunity to pursue Buddhist education. This organization's mission is to provide assistance to all Buddhist women, irrespective of their level of spiritual devotion or social standing.⁴⁰ In addition to these objectives, the organisation seeks to better the position of women all over the world, to maintain dialogue and harmony between Buddhist and representatives of other religious traditions, to encourage research on the position of Buddhist women, and to preserve peace through the dissemination of The Buddha's humanistic ideas (Tsomo, 2006).

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In the meantime, it was discovered that the position of women saw a slight improvement during the Buddhist period, despite the fact that there was no significant shift overall. The caste system is responsible for the imposition of numerous rigidities and prohibitions, some of which have been reduced. Buddha was an advocate for gender equality, and he worked to advance women's cultural, educational, and religious standings during his lifetime. During the enlightened reign of well-known Buddhist rulers. By the time of Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Sri Harsha, and others, women had regained some of the independence and dignity they had lost as a direct result of the comparatively open-minded ideology of Buddhism.

Women were not just restricted to working in the home; if they so wished, they may also pursue a career in education. This was not the case in the past. Within the realm of religion, women eventually attained a position that was unique from that of men. Women were allowed to join the order of the "Sanyasis." There were many women who held prominent positions in Buddhist monastic life. Women had their own sangha, which was known as the Bhikshuni Sangha. They were subject to the same rules and regulations as the monks. They were given access to the sangha, which allowed them to participate in cultural activities, engage in social work, and take advantage of numerous possibilities to participate in public life. However, their political and economic status did not change at all during this time.

Buddhist Education came out from the religious arena and went out for the benefit of the mankind.

The eight conditions imposed on nuns

According to the Vinaya Pitaka, nuns who entered the Buddhist order were supposed to observe 'eight important conditions' for their entire life:

- 1. A nun, even if ordained for a hundred years, must greet a monk with deference, even if he has been ordained that very day. She must rise up from her seat, salute him with joined hands, and show him respect.*
- 2. A nun must not spend the monsoon retreat in a district where there is no monk.*
- 3. Every fortnight, a nun is to ask the monks two things—the date of the uposatha ceremony and to preach the doctrine.*

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4. *At the end of the monsoon retreat, a nun must address the 'triple invitation' to both the order of monks and the order of nuns. She must ask whether anyone has seen, heard, or suspected anything against her.*
5. *A nun who has committed a serious offence must undergo the manatta discipline (a sort of temporary probation) before both orders.*
6. *It is only after a postulant has followed the six precepts (the five lay vows plus the additional vow of not eating after noon) for two years that she could seek ordination from both orders. (Monks could be ordained at any time they were ready, provided they were at least 20 years old.)*
7. *A nun is under no circumstances to revile or abuse a monk.*
8. *Monks can give admonition and advice to nuns, but nuns cannot give either of these to monks.*

- Source: Wijayaratne, 1990: 135-36, 159-60

Notably, with all his limitations and personal ambivalences about women, Buddha can be credited with five significant achievements:

The fact that i) he recognised the political right of women to join the sangha was one of the first steps ii) he took in forcing the sangha to acknowledge women's leadership roles. Other steps included: iii) challenging the dominant Hindu view that a woman cannot develop her own personality and individuality without male support; iv) he broke the myth of family and the importance of producing male children to attain salvation. v) he was the first person to recognise the need for women's education and political initiative.

To join the Sangha, a woman should have reached 20 years of age, be free from debts, not be in the king's service; should obtain the permission of her parents if living, be duly provided with robes and alms bowl and recommended by an ordained bhikkhuni. Several women contemporaries of Buddha seem to have treated the establishment of the sangha as a new opportunity. Both within the family and outside, women were granted no personality and individuality of their own; with the establishment of the sangha and the admission of women into them, there was now an opportunity for women to improve their status.

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Though relatively speaking the number of women who joined these sanghas was small, the fact that the writings of 73 women were included in the Gatha records, shows that the bhikkhunis inspired vast sections of women.

After joining Sangha, women found dignity and respect like Sumangala, Mathika, Vasanti, Sumedha, Utpalavarna. Several sex workers who were looked down upon by society joined the sangha and acquired a respectable place. Arthakasi of Kasi, Padmavati of Ujjain and Ambapali (Amrapali) of Vesali were noted women who came from this background and enjoyed a high reputation.

Buddha declared that women could attain nirvana. While the Hindu thinkers denied the right to education to women of all castes and classes, the Buddhist sangha gave them the freedom to read and write. Thus, the first generation of women intellectuals in India emerged from the Buddha sangha. For example, Ambapali, Sumangala, Mathika, Ishidasi, Subha and many other women not only acquired the skills of composing songs but assumed enormous importance in sangha life. The bhikkhuni sangha encountered enormous problems because of the unequal treatment meted out to women.

The sangha system itself was operating under the enormous influence of gender distinctions. For example, while the bhikkhunis when compared with Hindu women were far closer to being free citizens and were liberated souls, within the sangha the bhikkhus had superior status. This only indicates that achieving women's equality requires the bitterest battle, a far more protracted one than that required to establish the equality of castes and classes. This is because any classes of men treat women of their own class as subordinates and as objects of oppression and so do men of all castes. Buddha's sangha also operated within that patriarchal paradigm.

Archaryas, or learned women, were the ones who taught other novices, but even male novices were reluctant to learn from women teachers. It was quite obvious that Sangha structures matched the lay patriarchal norms. According to the hypothesis of one academic, the fall of Buddhist nuns' orders in India was caused by the subjection of women. In spite of deeply ingrained patriarchy, early Buddhists and Hindus did not cast doubt on the ability of women to attain salvation. When it comes to attaining moksha, the Hindu belief in virtue and Dharma, as well as powerful goddesses and a genderless Brahman,

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demonstrates that gender is an irrelevant distinction. Nirvana, the ultimate spiritual destination, is said to be accessible to all good people, according to Buddhist doctrine, regardless of their socioeconomic standing.

Buddhism, and in particular the Mahayana school of Buddhism, is well-known for fostering attitudes that are considerate and reverent toward female followers, particularly elderly ladies. The earliest instances of women being recognised as equal members of society can be traced back to the establishment of the first communities dedicated only to the monastic life of women. The propagation of Mahayana Buddhism from India to other countries in Asia was a crucial influence in both the rise of women's social status in Eastern societies and the following advancement of civilization in those societies. Mahayana Buddhism originated in India. In nations where Theravada Buddhism is practised, some scholars believe that the Buddhist ethos has been distorted and misunderstood in order to conform to the socio-cultural attitudes and prejudices of such countries (Dewaraja 1994, paragraph 19):

Conflicting with the Buddhist ethos and negating its effects in varying degrees is the universal ideology of masculine superiority. So that in all three societies—Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma—there is an ambivalence in the attitudes towards women...

The account of the Buddha's initial refusal to grant the request of his aunt and foster mother Prajapati Gautami and her women to become monastics three times forms the primary basis for the view that early Buddhism displays a strong patriarchal and even misogynistic attitude towards women. This view is based primarily on the recount of the Buddha's initial refusal to grant the request.

According to the Pali Canon, the Venerable Ananda was the one who finally succeeded in persuading the Buddha by making a rational argument on behalf of the women. The Buddha himself eventually conceded that women were fully capable of achieving the highest goals along the Path to Enlightenment after hearing the arguments made by the Venerable Ananda. It is also said that the Buddha predicted that his original prediction of the teachings lasting for one thousand years would be cut in half if women were allowed to ordain. This statement is attributed to the Buddha.

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Buddhism, and particularly the Mahayana school of Buddhism, is known for cultivating attitudes that are respectful and compassionate toward women. The first examples of women being seen as equal members of society are seen in the form of the first female monastic communities. The spread of Mahayana Buddhism from India to other countries in Asia was a significant factor in both the elevated social standing of women in the East and the subsequent progressive development of civilization.

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