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## THE ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

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### ABSTRACTS

*Position of women in Buddhism has been debated for a long time. In my article, I will try to figure out the real situation of women in Buddhism. I will discuss something about sexism in Buddhist religion. There seem to be many difficulties that women following Buddhism are facing. I will highlight some of them in my article. I will also discuss the inferiority issues and how women are perceived as an inferior being in Buddhism. I will focus on the birth issues in Buddhist culture and religion in my article. I will be talking about how the birth of a woman is considered in Buddhism. I will also talk about the difficulties women are facing following Buddhism. In*



*this way, I will try to explore the room for women in Buddhism in my article. We are now in the twenty first century. In today's world, women have been competing with men in all the fields and have been excelling in all the fields. Today, we can find that women have reached to positions such as head of the state. We can take examples of Germany, Nepal and many other countries in this regard. Today, CEOs of big organizations are women. There has been a sense of equality in both men and women. This is in fact very good news. This shows us how things have been changing in the modern days. This will give equal opportunities to both men and women. The country can also develop very fast if everyone gets good opportunities. Men and women are considered the two wheels.*

**KEY WORDS :** *real situation , sense of equality, equal opportunities.*

### INTRODUCTION

Our received image of Buddhism is a way of life infused with compassion and loving-kindness for all beings, whom we, especially in the West, consider of equal merit. According to stories of the Buddha, his establishment of a female mendicant order supports this image of Buddhism, for women were said to have equal enlightenment potential as males. However, a broad overview of the role of women in Buddhism shows an often-marked disjuncture between that received image and reality in heavily patriarchal Asian societies. In most parts of the world, but especially in Asia, most Buddhist teachers are male, as are the leaders of most Buddhist institutions, all of which is often accompanied by the assumption of the spiritual inferiority of Buddhist women, all estimated 300 million of them.<sup>1</sup> However, as Buddhism spread to the West in the middle of the twentieth century, these patriarchal attitudes encountered the critical and unapologetic scrutiny of the feminist movement.<sup>2</sup> The result has been a rethinking of the status of women in Buddhism in many places around the world. Although the

full equality of women and men throughout Buddhism has not yet been achieved, inequity between the sexes has become a major focus of concern and debate.

### OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- ❖ The objective of Buddhism is to become illuminated and arrive at nirvana. Nirvana is accepted to be feasible just with the disposal of all voracity, contempt, and obliviousness inside an individual. Nirvana implies the finish of the pattern of death and resurrection.
- ❖ Ladies have similar potential as men to acquire the insight, understanding and sympathy fundamental for edification. Both the Mahayana and the Theravada customs notice ladies who have accomplished illumination.
- ❖ Dukkha Life is agonizing and causes languishing. Many individuals could say that Buddhism is skeptical or negative. ...
- ❖ Anitya Life is in steady motion. Anitya or "temporariness" implies that life as far as we might be concerned is in consistent motion.
- ❖ Buddhism is one of the world's biggest religions and began a long time back in India. Buddhists accept that the human existence is one of anguish, and that reflection, otherworldly and actual work, and appropriate conduct are the ways of accomplishing edification, or nirvana.
- ❖ The really Buddhist qualities are love, insight, goodness, tranquility and poise. Buddhists accept that individuals ought to attempt to end enduring; all things ought to be viewed as having no self or fundamental nature.

### SOCIAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN AT THE TIME OF THE BUDDHA

The social attitude towards women in pre-Buddhist days can be traced from the early Vedic literature, such as the Rigveda. There is evidence indicating the honour and respect which women received in their homes. In the realm of religion too, they had access to the highest knowledge of the Absolute or Brahma. However, such a liberal attitude towards women changed with the course of time, under the influence and dominance of the priestly caste along with their priestcrafts, animal sacrifices, and other ritualistic practices. New interpretations were given to the scriptures. Women came to be considered as greatly inferior to men - both physically and mentally. Women were looked down upon as a mere possession or a thing. Her place was the home, under the complete whims and fancies of her husband. She not only had to perform all the domestic chores, but also had to bring up a large family. Some of the priestly caste Brahmins married and lived with their wives, yet regarded food -cooked by women impure and unfit to eat. A myth was built up - that all women were regarded as sinful and the only way to keep them out of mischief was to keep them occupied endlessly with the task of motherhood and domestic duties.

If a married woman had no children or failed to produce any male offspring, she might be superseded by a second or third wife or even turned out of the house; for there was the strong belief that there must be a male child for the continuance of family line and the performance of the 'rites of the ancestors'. The traditional belief was that only a son could carry out such rituals which were thought to be very necessary for bringing peace and security to the father and grandfather after their death, otherwise they might return as ghosts to harry the family. Uncertain were the lives of married women. No less uncertainty await the unmarried ones. As marriage was considered a holy sacrament, a young girl who did not marry was badly criticised and despised by society. In the field of religious practices, the position which they once enjoyed, was denied to them. A woman was believed to be unable to go to heaven through her own merits. She could not worship by herself, and it was believed that she could only reach heaven through unquestioning obedience to her husband, even if he happened to be a wicked person. The food left over by her husband was often the food for the woman..

### WOMEN IN BUDDHISM, PAST AND PRESENT:

Topics for Reflection The issue of women in Buddhism is a topic that has been approached from a variety of perspectives, including history, anthropology, feminism, and theology. Accordingly, the

questions that can be asked about women in Buddhism are extensive. Among the most commonly cited concerns are: how Buddhist societies have traditionally viewed women and how Buddhist women have viewed themselves; what role women have traditionally played in the secular and religious life of Buddhist societies, and how that role might be expanded or changed; Buddhist women in the West; women and celibacy; inaccuracies in the history of Buddhist women; Buddhist women and the media; education for Buddhist women; the role of Buddhist women in social welfare; living by the vinaya (monastic codes) in the present day; the creation of opportunities for full ordination for Buddhist women; living as a nun in the West; growing up as a Buddhist woman; 1 and sexual conduct and misconduct. Questions like these address, of course, the issue of gender in religion more broadly than just in Buddhism. This section reflects on six topics that follow from questions like these: the place of women in classical Buddhism; Buddhist women across cultures; the problem of full ordination for Buddhist women; foraging new paths of life for Buddhist women; feminist deconstruction of Buddhist life; and what it means (or takes) to be a remarkable woman within Buddhism.

### **WOMAN'S NATURE**

Despite the fact that the Buddha had elevated the status of women, He was practical in his observations and advice given from time to time in that He realized the social and physiological differences that existed between men and women. These were depicted in the Anguttara Nikaya and Samyutta Nikaya. It was clearly mentioned that a man's duty is his unending quest for knowledge, the improvement and stabilisation of his skills and craftsmanship and dedication to his work and ability to find the wherewithal for the maintenance and sustenance of his family. On the other hand it was stated, as a matter of fact, that it was the woman's duty to look after the home, and to look after her husband. The Anguttara Nikaya contained some valuable advice which the Buddha had given to young girls prior to their marriage. Realising that there was bound to be difficulties with the new in-laws, the girls were enjoined to give every respect to their mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law, serving them lovingly as they would their own parents. They were requested to honour and respect their husband's relatives and friends, thus creating a congenial and happy atmosphere in their new homes. They were also advised to study and understand their husband's nature, ascertain their activities, character and temperament, and to be useful and co-operative at all times in their new home. They should be polite, kind and watchful in their relationship with the servants and should safe-guard their husband's earnings and see to it that all household expenditures are properly regularised. Such advice given by the Buddha more than twenty five centuries ago stand good even today.

The handicaps and drawbacks under which a woman had to undergo in life were also clearly indicated. The suffering and agony to be borne by a woman in leaving her family after her marriage, and the difficulties and problems she had to encounter in trying to accommodate herself in a new environment, were the trials and tribulations she had to bear. In addition to these problems, a woman is also subjected to physiological pains and sufferings during her menstrual periods, pregnancy and child-birth. These are natural phenomena depicting the differential handicaps and circumstances prevailing between a man and a woman. Although in certain sections of the Tripitaka, some caustic comments were made on the wiles and behavior of a woman, the Buddha in the Samyutta Nikaya, did bring forth many redeeming features in that, under certain circumstances, women are considered more discerning and wise than men and that women are also capable of attaining perfection or sainthood after treading the Noble Eightfold Path.

### **The Place of Women in Classical Buddhism**

According to classical Buddhist texts, Mahaprajapati, the Buddha's step-mother and aunt, asked the Buddha to affirm the equal potential of women to achieve spiritual enlightenment and to recognize the right of women to wear the robe of a Buddhist mendicant – which he did after some hesitation, for his cultural context was patriarchal Indian society.<sup>3</sup> After the Buddha's death, however, earlier modes of gender relations began to reassert themselves around the time written Buddhist literature began to appear. Nonetheless, the order of women renunciates, the Bhiksuni Sangha, has continued to exist in

some areas of Asia up to the present day. The classic model of Buddhism that emerged is referred to as the “two accumulations” or the symbiotic model. In this system male monastic elites engaged full-time in the accumulation of wisdom through study and meditation in a monastic setting, while laywomen earned merit by supporting these elite males. This division of labor was consistent with the view in the India cultural context that the ideal role for women was in the family. Limited by the socially approved roles for women, laywomen were to accumulate merit by tending to the family shrine, keeping the precepts, giving charity to the needy, chanting the sutras, transmitting the Buddha’s teachings to children, and making offerings to the male Sangha, among similar efforts. This inferior status for women was occasionally accompanied by negative stereotypes of women in both Theravada and Mahayana texts – and of course to challenge the texts was to call into question their very validity.<sup>4</sup> But whether those statements are true reflections of the role women played in early Buddhism has been called into question, for there is a conspicuous lack of information on women in Buddhist literature over the last 2100 years. The situation is complicated as well by the widely varying view of women in early Mahayana sutras. In some, a woman transforms herself into a male body upon enlightenment, while in others she achieves enlightenment in a female body. Did males intentionally rewrite the history of Buddhism or were they only focused on writing about the male elite? The answer is not clear. Nonetheless, these conflicting images of women in Buddhism have made the study of women in Buddhism complex and difficult

### BUDDHA'S ADVICE TO MARRIED WOMEN

In advising women about their roles in married life, the Buddha appreciated that the peace and harmony of a home rested largely on a woman’s shoulder. His advice was realistic and practical when he quoted a good number of day-to-day characteristics which a woman should and should not emulate. On diverse occasions, the Buddha counselled that a wife:- 4

- a) should not harbour evil thoughts against her husband;
- b) should not be cruel, harsh or domineering;
- c) should not be a spendthrift but should be economical and live within her means;
- d) should zealously guard and save her husband's property and hard-earned earnings;
- e) should always be virtuous and chaste in mind and action;
- f) should be faithful and harbour no thought of any adulterous acts;
- g) should be refined in speech and polite in action;
- h) should be kind, industrious and hard-working;
- i) should be thoughtful and compassionate towards her husband and her attitude should equate a mother loving and protecting her only son;
- j) should be modest and respectful;
- k) should be cool, calm and understanding - serving not only as a wife but also a friend and adviser to her husband when need arises.

In the days of the Buddha, other religious teachers had also spoken on the duties and obligations of a wife towards her husband - stressing particularly on the duty of a wife bearing an offspring for her husband, rendering faithful service and providing conjugal happiness and heavenly bliss. Confucianism also shares this view. However, although the duties of a wife towards the husband were laid down in the Confucian code of discipline, it did not stress the duties and obligations of the husband towards the wife. The teachings of the Buddha did not have such bias towards the husbands. In the Sigalovada Sutta, the Buddha clearly mentioned the duties of a husband towards the wife and vice versa. A husband should be faithful, courteous and not despising. It is the husband's duty to hand over authority to his wife and from time to time, provide her with adornments. Other useful advice was given to women on different occasions and under different circumstances.

### ADVICE TO BEAUTY CONSCIOUS WOMEN

For the vain and beauty conscious, the Buddha had taught the lesson of impermanence. Khema, the beautiful consort of King Bimbisara, was at first reluctant to see the Buddha as she heard that the

Buddha used to refer to external beauty in rather disparaging terms. One day she paid a casual visit to the monastery merely to enjoy the scenery of the place. Gradually she was attracted to the hall where the Buddha was preaching. The Buddha, through his psychic powers, read her thoughts, and created a vision of a young lady, standing in front of her. Khema was admiring her beauty when the Buddha transformed the created image from youth to middle age and subsequently to old age, till it finally fell on the ground with broken teeth, gray hair and wrinkled skin. This transformation caused Khema to realize the vanity of external beauty and to appreciate the fleeting nature of life. She pondered: 'Has such a body come to be wrecked like that? Then so will my body.' With this, realisation dawned upon her. She subsequently attained Arahatsip, and with the King's consent, she entered the Order of Bhikkuni.

### **BUDDHIST WOMEN ACROSS CULTURES**

Surveys of Buddhist women across cultures have shown that women are most likely to be denied admission to the Sangha Buddhism's most fundamental institution, and are most likely to be discriminated against in Theravada countries like Burma and Thailand<sup>8</sup> in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup> Issues include menstrual taboos in some countries that prevent women from entering many Buddhist shrines, the pervasive desire among women to be reborn a man, difficulties in living a celibate religious life, and the fact that many nuns are poor, untrained, uneducated, and neglected. In Southeast Asia, Buddhism in general has been nearly obliterated by war in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, while the life of nuns in Cambodia and Laos are similar to those discussed above; by contrast, Buddhism in Vietnam has endured and is experiencing an energetic revival.

It was in the midst of such extreme social discrimination and degrading attitudes towards women that the Buddha made his appearance in India. His teachings on the real nature of life and death -about karma and samsaric wanderings, gave rise to considerable changes in the social attitudes towards women in his days. <sup>2</sup> According to what the Buddha taught about the Law of Karma, one is responsible for one's own action and its consequence. The well-being of a father or grandfather does not depend upon the action of the son or grandson. They were responsible for their own actions. Such enlightened teachings helped to correct the views of many people and naturally reduced the anxiety of women who were unable to produce sons to perform the 'rites of the ancestors' In early Buddhist period, an unmarried girl could go along, unabused, contented and adequately occupied in caring for parent and younger brothers and sisters. She might even become the owner of great possessions, of slaves, and rich fields; as did Subha, the daughter of a goldsmith, during the time of the Buddha. But when the Dhamma was taught to her by Mahapajapati, Subha realized the nature of all fleeting pleasures and that 'silver and gold lead neither to peace nor to enlightenment', with the result that she entered the Order of Buddhist Nuns. This act was a great boon to the unmarried women.. The teachings of the Buddha had done a great deal to wipe off many superstitious beliefs and meaningless rites and rituals including animal sacrifices, from the minds of many people. When the true nature of life and death and the natural phenomena governing the universe were revealed to them, wisdom and understanding arose. This in turn helped to arrest and correct the prevailing social injustices and prejudices that were rampant against women in the days of the Buddha thus enabling women to lead their own way of life

### **FORGING NEW PATHS OF BUDDHIST**

Life for Women Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, a very different model of non-monastic lay Buddhism has been in the process of creation among Western Buddhists. In this model, the heart of their involvement in Buddhism is a commitment to the practice of meditation and the study of Buddhist teachings. As a result, many Western Buddhist laywomen in using this model of combining worldly life with serious Buddhist practice, have actually been able to pursue more advanced meditation practices and philosophical studies than do Buddhist nuns in many Asian countries.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, these developments must be forged in the West and in the modern world, for Buddhism lacks robust models for meaningful lay Buddhist life. Regardless, when lay meditators are at the heart of the Buddhist

community, a much more complete version of Buddhism is followed by the average Buddhist, for while generosity is central to Buddhist values, no one would claim that it is sufficient for the full practice of Buddhism. For that, study and practice are also required in most versions of Buddhism. A modern goal of the women's movement in Buddhism, then, is to recover Buddha's original egalitarian approach to enlightenmen.

Lay meditation has also become quite important in Buddhist revivals in several Asian countries. However, the issues involved for Buddhist women in Asia are quite different from those in North America. In North America, the prominent issues seem to be environmental, race, sexual exploitation, and social engagement, whether through the performing arts, writing, or direct action.<sup>21</sup> In Asia, by contrast, the major issues are survival, education, training, and ordination. As a consequence, the task of forging relationships among women who have otherwise had little contact with contemporary women's movements has become a pivotal concern.

In the modern world, especially in Western countries, the Buddhist tradition has come under scrutiny in the light of various feminist ideas. Four major issues are: the inferior status of women in Buddhist societies; sexual interpretations of Buddhist texts and tenets; male domination of Buddhist institutions; and the authoritarian role of religious teachers. Besides these issues, the non-monastic model of lay Buddhist life also brings up certain issues that intersect with central feminist concerns. When Western women insist on practicing Buddhism as fully as do men, and when lay Buddhists with families and careers insist that the heart of their involvement in Buddhism is meditation and study, not just donating to others who meditate and study, vast changes are required. Fortunately, feminine thought had already considered related problems in great detail.

In brief summary, if Buddhism is to have global relevance, it must begin to address some pointed questions about gender issues, not only for Western women but for Asian women as well. Buddhism must speak about liberation as not just a distant goal, but as an immanent, accessible social and intellectual freedom. The argument is that feminist perspectives can contribute to these goals. The result of these arguments is a heightened awareness of women's issues around the world, for women have become catalysts for change in all Buddhist traditions. They are forcing teachers and practitioners everywhere to take a new look at old attitudes over women's roles in Buddhism.

### Woman in Buddhism

This issue is an extremely intriguing issue to the extent that Buddhism is thought of. Birth of women has not been viewed as a decent sign as I would see it. Women birth has forever been taken adversely as I would see it. Give us consider Thai Buddhism access this respect. It is viewed as in Thai Buddhism that women are brought into the world from their awful karma. How could karma choose the sex of a hatchling? This is an extremely unusual assessment in my view. Women are made to accept that their body is the consequence of terrible karma they had done previously. One of the specialists has done a great deal of examination in such manner. He composes that numerous women are persuaded that they convey a weighty heap of negative karma because of the basic truth of their orientation. Thai women appear to acknowledge their concealment without grumbling [8]. This shows that assuming you demand something persistently for an extensive stretch of time, the other individual might begin to accept what is going on is equivalent to demanded. An illustration of this can be that assuming somebody is over and over blamed for being out of psyche, he will one day begin to think in such manner and in the event that many individuals say as much, he will gradually acknowledge this. The women structure is never viewed as a total one until and except if she accepts resurrection as a man. Declaration to this thought can be tracked down in a 14thcentury engraving from Sukhotai, where the sovereign mother figures out a yearning that the value of her establishing a cloister might conduce to her resurrection.

### CONCLISION

In many regions of the planet, yet particularly in Asia, most Buddhist educators are male, similar to the heads of most Buddhist foundations, which is all frequently joined by the presumption of the

otherworldly mediocrity of Buddhist women , all assessed 300 million of them.<sup>1</sup> In any case, as Buddhism spread toward the West in the center of the 20th 100 years, these man centric mentalities experienced the basic and unashamed examination of the women's activist movement.<sup>2</sup> The outcome has been a reevaluating of the situation with women in Buddhism in many spots all over the planet. Albeit the full correspondence of women and men all through Buddhism has not yet been accomplished, imbalance between the genders has turned into a significant focal point of concern and discussion. Among the most normally referred to worries are: the manner by which Buddhist social orders have generally seen women and how Buddhist women have seen themselves; which job women have customarily played in the mainstream and strict existence of Buddhist social orders, and how that job may be extended or changed; Buddhist women in the West; women and chastity; mistakes throughout the entire existence of Buddhist women ; Buddhist women and the media; schooling for Buddhist women ; the job of Buddhist women in friendly government assistance; living by the vinaya in the current day; the making of chances for full appointment for Buddhist women ; living as a sister in the West; growing up as a Buddhist lady; 1 and sexual direct and wrongdoing. Questions like these location, obviously, the issue of orientation in religion more comprehensively than simply in Buddhism.

This part ponders six points that follow from questions like these: the spot of women in old style Buddhism; Buddhist women across societies; the issue of full appointment for Buddhist women ; scavenging new ways of life for Buddhist women ; women's activist deconstruction of Buddhist life; and what it means to be a striking lady inside Buddhism. This sub-par status for women was sporadically joined by regrettable generalizations of women in both Theravada and Mahayana texts - and obviously to challenge the texts was to raise doubt about their very validity.<sup>4</sup> Yet whether those assertions are valid impressions of the job women played in early Buddhism has been raised doubt about, for there is a prominent absence of data on women in Buddhist writing throughout the course of recent years. Reviews of Buddhist women across societies have shown that women are probably going to be denied admission to the Sangha Buddhism's most central foundation, and are probably going to be victimized in Theravada nations like Burma and Thailand<sup>8</sup> in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup> Issues remember feminine restrictions for certain nations that keep women from entering numerous Buddhist holy places, the unavoidable longing among women to be renewed a man, hardships in carrying on with a chaste strict life, and the way that numerous nuns are poor, undeveloped, uninformed, and dismissed.

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