

WOMEN LIBERATION IN BUDDHISM

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“Wisdom Knows No gender”

In every circumstance, a man does not act wisely.

A woman does act wisely, wherever she is attentive.

–*Kundalakesi Vatthu, DhA.II, 217ff.*

Woman’s liberation and her social role are questions often discussed today. Therefore it is not impertinent to see how early Buddhism looked at woman and her liberation in general and how it defined her social role in particular, against the contemporary social milieu in North India. Every culture in the world expects men and women of that culture to play their respective gender roles assigned to them by that culture. In any society where the male plays the dominant role, the female is given a subordinate position. Victory in battle and heroic sons to fight enemies, were two of the aspirations of the Ancient Indo-Aryans. The ideology of Sexism verses Changing Social Roles What we see today is something different from what had been attributed to each sex from the time of recorded history. The traditional status assigned to the sexes has been violated to a greater extent; specially the traditional gender role of females has been challenged and changed today, due to the participation of many women in economic activity. Women’s Social Role in Buddhism within the social role of woman envisaged in Buddhism can study by two different methods. Firstly, by studying the numerous references on women scattered over the Pali canonical literature and analysing them to find out the underlying principles of these issues Buddhist teaching. Secondly, by examining the role of woman in the countries where Buddhism became the dominant religion of the people in different stages of the history of those countries.

Key words: Women Buddhism, Pali education, traditional status, envisaged, methods of literature.

Woman’s liberation and her social role are questions often discussed today. Therefore it is not impertinent to see how early Buddhism looked at woman and her liberation in general and how it defined her social role in particular, against the contemporary social milieu in North India. Every culture in the world expects men and women of that culture to play their respective

gender roles assigned to them by that culture. Because the human species also, just as other species, is divided into two fundamental divisions: 'male and female or 'man' and 'woman', on biological grounds based on sex distinction. But as we know, 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are secondary non-biological classifications, resulting in individual effect of what one has become due to the socialization process.

As accepted in every culture, social roles of males and females are gender roles defined in relation to their behavior, dressing, hairstyle, occupation, deportment, duties and obligations. Gender roles may differ from culture to culture. Sociologically, the social status of males and females are unequal and based on the social norms of that particular culture. Because of this fact, today, women's movements throughout the world, basing their arguments on scientific findings, challenge the feasibility of roles assigned to them traditionally and assert that supposed differences are not biological but cultural. In any society where the male plays the dominant role, the female is given a subordinate position. Victory in battle and heroic sons to fight enemies, were two of the aspirations of the Ancient Indo-Aryans.

It is stated there that when a girl was delivered, the midwife kept her a side silently, but if the woman had given birth to a boy she lifted it up and showed it to the people. Besides, Atharvaveda prescribe special mantras to be chanted to get her with rites to be performed for the purpose of obtaining a male child.

The ideology of Sexism verses Changing Social Roles What we see today is something different from what had been attributed to each sex from the time of recorded history. The traditional status assigned to the sexes has been violated to a greater extent; specially the traditional gender role of females has been challenged and changed today, due to the participation of many women in economic activity. The opening up of new avenues to acquire skills other than domestic skills enabled them to change their lifestyle with a good income and hence to win independence from the other sex. They are very competitive in the job market and have won the right to enter many professions which had been confined only to males previously. Sexism or prejudice and discrimination is being challenged by movements organized to fight the inequality of status and to safeguard women's rights.

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history of those countries. It is noticeable that in the countries where Buddhism spread, woman enjoyed and presently enjoys greater freedom and liberality in society than the countries where the ideology of sexism prevails.

Women education during the Buddhist period was at its lowest ebb, as the women folk were despised in the sense that Lord Buddha had regarded them as the source of all evils. So he had advised during his regarded them as the source of all evils. So he had advised during his life time not to admit women in monasteries. But after some time due to the insistence of his dear pupil Ananda, Buddha had permitted about 500 women along with his stepmother for admission in viharas with many restriction and reservation. The Vedas give a very honorable & respectable status to women. They were eligible for higher education for the study of the Vedas and the performance of administrative and other important jobs mostly performed by men even today. Boys should go to the schools meant for boys and girls should go to the schools where there are women teachers. The women should have opportunity to attain knowledge of the Vedas from all the four concerns. Role of Mother in Education in Buddhism a mother should impart education to her children so as to broaden their horizon. At this stage good manners are to be taught so that the children behave properly with the elders and in assemblies.

Position of Women at the Time of the Buddha is on ancient India the position of women does not appear to have been a very happy one. Generally women seem to have been looked upon as being inferior to men. And, at times they were considered as being on the same level as the Sudras, the lowest of the four castes. Their freedom was extremely limited. The general view appears to be that they had to be under the care of parents in their childhood, under the protection of husbands in their youth; and in their old age they had to be under the control of their sons. Therefore, it was thought that they do not deserve any freedom. Their main role was considered to be that of housewives, managing the affairs in the house according to the wishes of their husbands.

Even as a wife the life of a woman was often miserable. This was specially so when she had the misfortune of being a co-wife. Jealousies and conflicts between co-wives were a common feature in ancient Indian society. The widow's plight was still worse. Normally, a widow not allowed to remarry. It said that a widow had to kill herself by jumping into the funeral pyre of her husband. Women did not have educational freedom. Education not considered as being of any importance to women. Their religious freedom, too, was restricted. As they had only little freedom, their chances of performing meritorious religious rites, too, were very limited. The Lotus Sutra teaches that all living beings possess the world of Buddha hood. There is not even a hint of discrimination toward women. If there are men who deny the enlightenment of women, they are denying the possibility of their own attainment of Buddha hood.

To discriminate against others in any way is to discriminate against your own life. In a fiercely discriminatory society, Shakyamuni staunchly refused to allow his actions to be colored by distinctions of class,

gender and birth, or of lay practitioner and monk or nun. As a result, he was seen as a dangerous person by conservative elements of society who stood by the status quo. Whether male or female, being noble or base depends entirely on what a person has done. It is one's actions and sincerity that count. That is Shakyamuni's spirit. The Lotus Sutra teaches that men and women are equal both in enlightenment and in practice. This amounts to a declaration that men and women are equally qualified to expound the Law in the Buddha's stead.

In the thirteenth chapter, entitled "Encouraging Devotion," Shakyamuni bestows prophecies of future enlightenment upon a multitude of women. And the people to whom Bodhisattva Never Disparaging bows in reverence (acknowledging their inherent Buddha nature), saying, "I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance," include laymen and laywomen, priests and nuns. The premise, here, naturally are those women equally can attain Buddhahood. In the future, rather than a situation where either one sex or the other dominates society, it will be necessary to develop a completely new civilization in which there is balance and harmony between the sexes. The fundamental point of the "declaration of women's rights" arising from the Lotus Sutra is that each person has the innate potential and the right to realize a state of life of the greatest happiness. Our realizing such happiness will ensure that this noble history of sacrifice and struggle has not been in vain. The goal is for each person, like the dragon girl, to set out on a voyage to attain absolute happiness, while helping those adrift on the sea of suffering do the same—without anyone being victimized.

"All women have the right to become happy. They have to become happy without fail."

That is the spirit of the Lotus Sutra.

The land where the dragon girl attains Buddhahood and leads others to happiness is called the "Spotless World." This suggests that when one woman attains enlightenment, it causes her surroundings to turn into a world of purity and beauty. Solidarity of women who are awakened to the nobility of their own lives will doubtless change the tenor of the age and the very character of civilization. The women and young women members are the pioneers and nucleus for the development of such solidarity. They are infinitely respected worthy. They are truly irreplaceable individuals who can answer the expectations of people around the world. The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore characterized modern civilization as a "civilization of power" dominated by men, and yearned for the development, through the efforts of women, of a "civilization of the spirit" based on compassion. In that sense, this chapter of the sutra contains important suggestions for transforming the very makeup of modern civilization. It aims a shift from a material civilization to a civilization of life and from a society of control to a society of cooperation and compassion goal of Buddhism. To the compassionately embrace all living beings as one's own children, this is a state of life that all people, women and men alike, should strive to attain. Herein lies the true significance, for civilization and for the age, of the dragon girl's enlightenment.

Place of Women in Buddhism and role of women in Buddhism may consider in several ways.

1. The doctrinal statements relating to gender in the Buddhist teaching (which Buddhists call Dhamma/Dharma)
2. The position of women in the religious and the secular life in India before the Buddha's time with that after;
3. Whether the Buddha's teaching accords to women a position different to that accorded to men, as is the case in some other religions;
4. Whether the accident of the sex of one's birth helps or retards progress on the Buddha's path, and indeed whether gender is itself a chance event or caused by pre-existing factors;
5. The part played by women in the early history of Buddhism, notably during the Buddha's own time;
6. The circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Order of Nuns (*Bhikkhunis*); and
7. The influence of Buddhism on the position of women in the countries where Buddhism became a living presence. It is not possible to consider all these questions in an article, of this length, so the treatment of the subject has to be selective.

While the attitude of the Buddha to the role of women was an enlightened one, even when judged by the standards of the modern age, it must not be thought that everything that is said on this subject in Buddhist writing, is complementary to women. There are many explanations for this, not least of which is the fact that most of the Buddha's discourses were written down several centuries after the his death. During this time the teachings were sustained in an oral tradition by monks, some of whom were not entirely free from the prejudices of the age. It is interesting to note that such "backsliding" occurs most commonly in the later works, e.g. in the prose sections of the *Jātakas*. And popular Buddhism took liberties of its own with this aspect of Buddhist teaching as it did with several others. The stories, sayings and deeds of these distinguished *Bhikkhunis* are recorded in many places in the Pali Canon, most notably in the *Therīgāthā*, a compilation of verses uttered by these Theris when they saw the clear light of the Dhamma, and which constitutes a part of the *Khuḍḍaka Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

Amongst those whose verses are recorded in the *Therīgāthā* are some of the best known names in early Buddhism. They include *Prajāpati Gotami*, who was the first *Bhikkhuni*, *Uppalavannā* and *Khema*, who are traditionally regarded as "foremost of the *Bhikkhunis*", *Kisāgotamī* and *Paṭācāra*, who figure in the best known stories in early Buddhism. The members of the order belonged to all walks of life. Some were former courtesans like *Ambapālī* and *Vimalā*, others were of royal lineage like *Sumeda* and *Sela*. There were distinguished exponents of the Dhamma like *Dhammadinnā*, scions of noble or merchant families like *Bhadda Kuṇḍalkesa*, *Sujāta*, and *Anopama*, not to mention those of humbler origins like *Punnika* the slave girl, or

Chanda the daughter of a poor Brahmin. The actual numbers of Thesis involved is not known. Paṭācāra is credited with having 500 personal followers, and there are several unnamed Thesis to whom sayings are attributed.

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