



# Establishment Of Bhikkuni Sangha In Ancient India

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Abstract: Asceticism is as old as the religious history of man and efforts for spiritual attainment have taken innumerable forms. The Buddhist Sangha is a religious society in that members adhered to the path provided by the teacher so as to be freed from the bonds of existence and achieve redemption. The Sangha was just a group or fraternity of Buddha's most devoted disciples. Women battled greatly during Buddha's time to forsake the world and be without worldly bonds. It marked a historic moment in Indian women's history. There were no women in the Sangha at the early stage, it consisted of Buddha's male disciples only. It was actually a few women who undertook the initiative to enroll femininity into the Sangha. Women during Buddha's day may have viewed the life at Sangha as a new start. Women were not allowed to have their own identity, both within and outside of their familial community due to rigid Brahmanical norms. They saw the establishment of Sanghas for women as an opportunity to advance their position in society and personally. The aim of the paper is to revisit the theories regarding the establishment of the Bhikkuni Sangha in early Buddhist time, Buddha's thought about women and the bhikkhuni sangha, the relationship between both genders under the Sangha and conclude the remark on the spiritual journey of the bhikkunis and how it impacted as one of the earliest movement led by women.

Keywords: Buddhism, Women, Sangha, Gender Relations.

## Introduction:

Asceticism is as old as the religious history of man and efforts for spiritual attainment have taken innumerable forms. "Spiritual life" is India's fundamental expertise. The holy sages, the rsis who exemplify devotion at its highest and purest, make an immense appeal to the Indian mind. Ambition and authority, fortune and fame are little in contrast to the force of the spirit'. According to Sukumar Dutta in his book 'Early Buddhist Monachism', "Brahmanical Sannyasis, Buddhist Bhikkhus, and Jama Sravakas all fell to a similar time period of stumbling religious mendicants, and it is indisputable that among all the communities there should existed an identifiable group of thoughts and practises. The origins of the tradition of traveling religious mendicancy remain unknown. The establishment of Buddhism occurred during a period when "certain ills in conventional faith had developed and proven intolerable, challenging "old ideas of social function and the supremacy of the brahmanas. The Buddhist Sangha is a religious society in that members adhered to the path provided by the teacher so as to be freed from the bonds of existence and achieve redemption. Buddhist Sangha was founded not just for the enlightenment of bhikkhus, but also for betterment and well-being of others. Though Buddhism is essentially a scholastic faith, common people have a position in it due to the minimum wants of bhikkus and bhikkunis to ensure their mortal survival. They have consistently given meals and also bore the cost of any additional material needs. And the Sangha members, in turn, offer the laities with all practical instruction, assist them in acquiring merit through spiritual advancement, and encourage them to achieve spiritual perfection. The Vinaya Pitaka describes the way the initial sangha imagined the Buddha's first public shape, convincing the first followers and defeating the first adversaries. After attaining awakening, the Lord spent forty-nine days in perfect contentment and serenity of mind near the holy Bodhi tree. According to the Mahavagga and Samuyutta Nikaya, after attaining enlightenment, the Buddha refrained to proclaim his teachings since he felt unsure if anybody could comprehend his noble message. However, thanks to the involvement of Mahabrahma Sahampati, he accepted to preach his idea for the benefit of humanity.

## Foundation of Bhikkuni Sangha:

Gotama Buddha obtained nirvana in his 35th year. There are a few examples of preachers of a new faith that took such a long period of time to establish and elaborate their doctrine. The Buddha was a Dhamma preacher who demonstrated the way to the abolition of suffering. But his Dhamma was distinct from that of other religious instructors, and it required a Sahgha to spread and succeed. From the outset, the Buddha's disciples

were divided into two groups: Bhikkhus or mendicants and Gahapatis or Householders - also known as Upasakas or Adherents. The Sahgha was just a group or fraternity of Buddha's most devoted disciples. They have moral conduct and wisdom in order to achieve Nibbana, the elimination of Desire. Initially, the Sahgha was made entirely of men. Buddha was extremely hesitant to grant 'Pabbajja' to women. The formation of the order of bhikkunis was not as spontaneous as that of the Bhikkhu-Sangha. He was opposed to permitting women to live on the streets. However, the Buddha recognised the natural magnificence and ability of women to reach the highest objective. He confirmed that the route to emancipation and accomplishment of Arhatship wasn't solely a human right. However, the Buddha recognised the natural magnificence and ability of women to reach the highest objective. He confirmed that the route to emancipation and accomplishment of Arhatship wasn't solely an individual's right. I.B. Horner rightly puts it "Under Buddhism a woman no longer felt bound to marry to save her self-respect and that of her family. She could honourably remain unmarried without running the gauntlet of public scorn". Women ascetics were also mentioned in Jain works. Mahavira did not regard hermit life as a male-only privilege, and he also allowed women to embrace the renounced life. Thirty-six thousand women and fourteen thousand men left their homelands to become mendicants in the Jain Order's Svetambara sect. This demonstrates that the custom of women mendicancy persisted from the beginning of time until the Buddhist era. The Buddhist community of Women incorporated the concept of an ordered society of bhikkunis into the Buddhist order of Women. "It wasn't an innovative idea, but more women than previously were willing to give up worldly ties." Women battled greatly during the Buddha's time to forsake the world and be without worldly bonds. It marked a historic moment in Indian women's history. Her previous ideals, dreams, and way of life had all altered. She did not pause for a second to consider her options before accepting her homeless status. Women were divided into two categories in Buddhism. Ordinary-women or Upasikas are women who stayed in the world as lay votaries of the faith. Others left their home to live on their own as bhikkunis, nuns, sisters, or almswomen.

The true formation of the Buddhist Community of Bhikkunis is disputed, and its origins are debatable. As stated by Apadana, Yasodhara, Gotama's former wife, managed to make available the order to women and was the leader of eighteen thousand women individuals to Gotama. However, in the Vinaya Pitaka Mahapajapati Gotami, Gotama's aunt and foster mother, is depicted as the first female of the Buddhist order of Bhikkunis. I.B. Horner agreed that Yasodhara was the leader of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, saying, "It could be true that Mahapajapati arrived later into the Order following her husband passed away, and that the first

woman truly to make the organisation accessible for women was Yasodhara, perhaps a former spouse of Gotama, who is believed to represent many women and herself in her text in the Apadana." On the other hand, the Vinaya Pitaka is the most ancient history of Buddhist solitary confinement, mentioned, Mahapagapati Gotami and five hundred Sakya ladies were the first to break free from worldly bonds and found the Order of bhikkunis. Despite coming from an aristocratic lineage, Mahapagapati was the initial lady to give up all worldly and embrace the homeless life. She had to confront the reality of life and battle to put down the barriers. Before the order was established, she had to overcome several difficulties, which she eventually did. According to the Vinaya Pitaka, they were extremely exhausted when they arrived at their goal. Their expressions were sorrowful and dismal, and emotions welled up in their eyes, as though they'd been unsure if the Lord Buddha would allow them or not. They were standing outside, beneath the front porch. Then Ananda, another of the Buddha's major followers, was astounded by witnessing women in such distress. He brimmed with sympathy when he saw the ladies' sad state, and he was immensely inspired through their fervour and tenacity. He approached Lord Buddha and begged him to help the ladies. "It would be well, Lord, if women were able to get the ability to venture forth from household into exile in this the path and discipline announced by the Truth-finder," he asked Gotama multiple times.

Buddha tells Ananda that the explanation for why he refused women entry to the Sangha wasn't since he thought that only women were able to lead a life of spirituality, but for pragmatic reasons. "Sangha's life is going to last 500 years if women gain entry; otherwise, it will continue to exist for 1000 years," Buddha reportedly told Ananda. Neither Buddha nor his followers Ananda imply in their interaction that women are lower regardless of the spiritual or logical realms. The expression 'practical issues' refers to the development of Sangha for bhikkunis and the consequences it will have on social circumstances inside the Buddhist Sangha. In practise, there was a clash in the bhikkus' practical system because bhikkus were supposed to avoid involvement with women but needed to handle the women who entered the Sangha. Buddha may have been concerned that this might jeopardise the Sangha's practise of celibacy. In the Cullavagga, Buddha may be found dealing with such issues when referring to the ceremonies to be performed by Bhikkunis and Bhikkus. In the process of attempting to regulate the Bhikkus through regulations and ceremonies, it is clear that Buddha was unable to totally remove his perception from the broader public consciousness of the time. However, current research on the subject refutes this notion. The majority of them imply that such anti-women passages were later inserted into the manuscript. These research efforts make this assertion by

studying such occasions in the text using language theories and determining the temporal stream of these texts. According to their observations, Buddha believed that women, too, could live a spiritual existence. This disclaimer is unnecessary. This contradicts the concepts of equality outlined in Vinaya scriptures.

### **Eight chief rules:**

There appeared to be no actual question in his thoughts about the equal status of men and women's abilities. He consequently acceded to Ananda's suggestion and extended the Order to women, on the condition that Mahapagapati must embrace the Eight Chief Rules or 'Atthagarudhamma'. Gotami acknowledged all the conditions put out by the Buddha as a wreath of Jasmine flowers with tremendous zeal to become a bhikkuni.

These eight guidelines were:

- i. A Bhikkuni should always bow to a Bhikku, despite her age and experience.
- ii. A Bhikkuni should avoid spending the monsoon in a district without any Bhikkus.
- iii. A Bhikku should teach a Bhikkuni a lesson once every two weeks.
- iv. Each Bhikkuni is required to reveal what they have observed, heard, and sensed at a joint assembly of Bhikkus and Bhikkunis after the rainy season.
- v. A Bhikkuni who commits a significant offence will be punished in a joint assembly.
- vi. A Bhikkuni is required to serve a two-year probationary period before being granted full membership.
- vii. A Bhikkuni must never disparage or mistreat a Bhikku.
- viii. Officially, no Bhikkuni shall be permitted to reprimand a Bhikku, but a Bhikku may reprimand a Bhikkuni.

These Eight Chief Rules were enforced on women before they were admitted to the Order. All of these were mandatory and could not be broken. These regulations placed women in a submissive position and assumed that bhikkus were superior to bhikkunis. She possessed no authority to rule or chastise any bhikku. Despite being in a subservient status, women embraced all of these restrictions since they had a strong desire for education and independence. They were determined to pave the path for independence in any manner possible. Their longing for an alternative existence was so strong and sincere that they were unable to go back

to worldly life. Then their concentration was on accomplishing their commitment, and when their need was met by adopting these circumstances, they weren't hesitant for another moment to acknowledge it.

### **Relationship between Bhikkus and Bhikkunis in early Buddhist Sangha:**

We can see that Buddha intended Bikkhuni Sangha to be autonomous and not rely on Bhikkhus progressively. He let bhikkunis to recite Patimokkha regulations during congregation. He also permitted bhikkunis to highlight their own guilt during the Patimokkha recital. Bhikkus were encouraged to assist and correct bhikkunis. Nonetheless, bhikkus were warned to be cautious when visiting nuns and not rely on bhikkunis. The nature of women, according to the commentator, tends to shatter Sila (virtue). In a comparable manner, if a bhikkuni goes for warning an unwell bhikkunis, he should go together with other bhikkus. The connection between the orders of Bhikkus and Bhikkunis appeared to be quite cooperative, as the two groups assisted one other. Technically, the bhikkunis were regarded juniors and inferior to the bhikkus in several ways, for it is apparent that they did not need the support and the importance of the latter in many ways. "Otherwise, they were parallel and autonomous organisations." In terms of spiritual exercises, the nun had the same rights as the monk. She may strive for self-emancipation, enjoy the rapture of meditation, delve into knotty metaphysical questions, endeavour to discover supernormal authority, experience the joy of vision, and be well-versed in discipline norms. Bhikkus assisted bhikkunis in a variety of ways. Anguttara Nikaya" tells the account of a bhikkuni who, despondent and discouraged, sought the assistance of Ananda and revealed all her problems. He assisted her and directed her in the proper direction. Ananda frequently supported bhikkunis in many ways, as well as in overcoming hurdles. There were numerous bhikkus that assisted the bhikkunis besides him. The bhikkunis were well-protected by Buddha. A bhikkuni was advised to travel to a village to beg donations from a Bhikkhuni-Vihara, and then come to the vihara with offerings. This means that, unlike bhikkus, she cannot take food while resting beneath a tree's root or in a forest. If a vihara is located on a road leading to a city gate, she shouldn't go the exact same way. The explanation given is to protect the bhikkunis. While returning to Vihara, a herd of elephants may roam freely on the route (towards the city gate) or a procession of kings may march down the same path to the city gate. At one point, Buddha told bhikkus that if a bhikku meets with and behaves impulsively or speaks with arrogance, he won't be well regarded by bhikkunis. All of these examples show that Buddha intended bhikkus to honour bhikkunis and treat women kindly.

**Conclusion:**

Despite limitations and personal reservations, we are able to observe that Buddha contributed significant efforts to improve the condition of women. In comparison to Hindu ceremonies, Buddha's actions on admitting women to the sangha and destroyed the legends about family and marriage demonstrate revolutionary distinctiveness. Buddha was the initial human to recognise the need of education and political roles for women. Buddha also gave them the authority to lead the Sangha. Contrary to popular belief, Buddha stated that a woman may create a distinct personality without the assistance of a male. Bihkkunis had equal privileges and opportunities throughout Buddha's time. In one instance, eight garments were provided to both Samghas at a location where there had been only one bhikkuni and four bhikkus. Because the garments remained for the two Samghas and needed to be distributed equitably no matter what number there were in each group, the Buddha divided them in half, delivering four to the bhikkunis and four to the bhikkus. Because nuns were less likely to be invited to lay at the homes of others, the Buddha ordered all offerings carried to the sangha and split equitably between both Sanghas. He stood up for the bhikkunis and was impartial to both sides. The constraints of Buddhist concepts ought to be examined against the backdrop of that specific era. Despite the fact that India has some of the world's most protective laws for women, the current condition of affairs reveals that prejudice persists in various forms in India. As a result, if one looks at Buddha, the inconsistencies people can see reflections of the paradoxes that occurred in the world during Buddha's time. Because of this, it can be concluded that Buddha took a revolutionary stride forward by admitting women to the Sangha, although with significant constraints and conflicts and this journey of those women can be certainly marked as a revolutionary one as well.

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