

THE BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN.

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Abstract

Women have faced discrimination in various communities throughout history. It should come as no surprise that prejudice against women is a phenomenon that is present in all communities. The vast majority of women have traditionally taken a back seat. If one were to travel back in time to ancient Rome, one would find that the husbands held complete control over their wives lives. Simply put, they were indentured servants. It is based on a unique impairment that women endure as well as religious intolerance. Some forms of social bias are grounded in widely held ideas.

INTRODUCTION

Some religious myths have it that God created man in his image and then brought him into the world as his son. On the other hand, females have never been accorded the same status as the daughter of god. There are others who feel that a soul can only be found in a man and not a woman. The types of prejudice against women that have been mentioned above are examples.

In some religious sects and sectarian groups, women are not allowed to participate in specific religious rites and ceremonies. They were not allowed to read from the scriptures at any time. In addition to that, they were discouraged from entering places of worship where others were worshipping. They were only allowed to engage in such religious activities within the confines of their own homes. Even though many obstacles have been removed, at least partially, to a certain level, there are still some obstacles in the way of the spiritual upliftment of women. These blockages exist to varying degrees.

It is possible to trace the social attitude toward women all the way back to pre-Buddhist times. The legacy of the Dravidian people, who lived from around 3000 BC to 2000 BC, had some influence on the culture and religion of India. The excavation of Mohenjo-Daro yielded a few seals, figurines, and images carved into stone. During the civilization that flourished in the Indus valley, women were held in higher regard. During that time period, the religion of the divine mother was extremely widespread. People had a strong belief that female energy was the driving force behind all creative endeavors. Even after the invention of the Aryans, women continued to hold greater positions. Women have written many of the world's greatest poems. Vishvasara, Gargi, Ghosha, Apala, and Lopa are all examples of poems that were written by women. Rishika and Brahmavadini were their popular names in common parlance.

Content

During the time of the Brahmans, this liberal mindset underwent a shift. Women's roles were diminished, and they were given less priority overall. It eventually became common practice to view women as mentally and physically less capable than males. They were regarded as Shudra, which means they were an object of impurity. There were certain religious activities in which women were not permitted to participate. It is expected of women to show obedience to their husbands or male partners.

Their care and protection fall on their father when they are young. The wife is safeguarded by the husband. After their father passed away, the oldest son became responsible for the care of their mother.

One could argue that Buddhism is the religion with the least amount of sexism towards women. If we go back to the early days of Buddhism, we will find that women were not permitted to join the Bhikkhu order. The Buddha had an understanding of societal context. The teachings of Buddha ought to be consistent with the norms and standards of society. Because of his omniscience, the Buddha was aware that the presence of women in the monk (*Bhikkhu*) order would result in both positive and negative consequences.

Once, Ven. Ananda questioned whether or not it was possible for women to achieve the levels of *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmi*, *Anāgāmi*, and *Arahanthood*. The Buddha taught that women can reach the same levels of enlightenment as males, including *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmi*, *Anāgāmi*, and *Arahanthood*¹. This suggested that women were just as capable as males of cultivating and purifying their minds and experiencing the happiness of *Nibbāna* in their lives. Both the *Anguttara-Nikāya* and the *Saṃyutta-Nikāya* contain the Buddha's various words of wisdom directed at women that were spoken at various times. Buddha gave his female disciples the advice to show proper deference to their husbands' acquaintances, family, and parents-in-law.

At the time of the Buddha, there were a number of other religious teachers who had spoken on the subject of the obligations that a wife owed to her husband. However, the Buddha emphasized the need for mutual and reciprocal responsibilities between a husband and wife. The Buddha had stated, in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, both the responsibilities that a wife has toward her husband in addition to the duties he must fulfill for his wife. The Buddha established the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in the fifth year of his ministry, which paved the way for women to take part in the practice of religion and offered doors for them to do so. The founding of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* was a significant step toward achieving gender equality in terms of religious freedom. Because of this, we are able to say that Buddha was the very first religious leader to provide women with equal possibilities in terms of their spiritual growth.

The Buddha is quoted as saying in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* that there are specific situations in which women are thought to be wiser and more discerning than men and that they are capable of obtaining perfection after traveling the Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya aṭṭhaṅgika Magga*)². In conclusion, it is possible for there to be some discrimination in Buddhist culture with regard to religious activities at particular points in time. However, Buddhism has been said to have the least sexist attitudes toward women of any major world religion.

¹ Dhammaddharo, Phra Ajaan Lee; "What is the Triple Gem?"; and Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation; 2005.

² MN. 117 or Maha-Cattarisaka Sutta

1. The Buddhist perspective on women

Brahmanism, in which a woman's place in society is considered to be among the lowest and most degrading, was the foundation upon which Buddhism was built. To begin, we need to investigate the many Buddhist texts in order to learn what the Buddha had to say about women and how the Buddha envisioned women's role in Buddhism.

It is possible to assert that the Buddha was one of the individuals who were instrumental in bringing about a significant shift in ancient Indian culture and who were instrumental in leading a democratic government in which men and women were both given equal rights. Women now had a higher status in society as a result of the Buddha's teachings, and they understood the contribution they made to society.³

According to the teachings of the Buddha, every single woman has the same potential to engage in spiritual practice and to achieve any of the noble fruits of sainthood. The Buddha is quoted as saying in the *Samyutta Nikāya* that

“whoever has such a vehicle, whether a man or woman shall indeed by means of that vehicle, attain to Nibbāna.”⁴

This is true whether the person is male or female. It indicates that his instruction was made available to all human beings so that they may achieve *Nibbāna*.⁵

But there have been moments when the Buddha has laid the responsibility for a woman's typical resoluteness on the woman. According to the *Anguttara Nikāya*⁶, womenfolk are unrestrained, jealous, selfish, and deficient in wisdom. In a few of the suttas, the Buddha is quoted as praising the qualities of women that have been discovered to be soothing. Because he wanted to demonstrate that love and sexual relations are incompatible with the practice of meditation, he did this.⁷

According to the writings in *Pāli*, the most important lesson that the Buddha taught to women was an approach to education. It is common knowledge that the Buddha gave the king of *Pasenadi*, who came to him in devastation because his queen, *Mallika*, had given birth to a daughter, the advice that a female offspring may prove to be even nobler than a male. The Buddha also shared his knowledge of the seven different types of women with *Anathapindika's* daughter-in-law.⁸

The *Sigālovāda sutta* is where the Buddha lays forth the five responsibilities that a wife has toward her husband. There is a record of *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī* in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. She had a tremendous desire to become a member of the *Saṅgha*, but the Buddha did not allow her to do so. At long last, following the third request and thanks to Ven. Ananda's assistance, one is allowed to enter the *Saṅgha*.⁹

Many *Bhikkhunīs* had reached the status of sainthood with the assistance of the Buddha and various other revered *Bikkhus*. The role of a *Bhikkhunī* who is engaged in the practice of Dhamma can be found in *Theravāda* texts. The Buddha held a great deal of respect for the many *Bhikkhunī* who served as Chief Disciples (*Etadagga*¹⁰) like *Bhikkhu*. There is evidence that early Buddhist practices included the participation of lay women, known as *Upāsika*. For example, *Visākhā*¹¹ and *Āmbapālī*¹² have the ability to make influential requests to the *Saṅgha*.

According to the writings of the *Mahāyāna* school of Buddhism, the path of the *Bodhisattva* is open to anybody who wants to devote their life to working toward the liberation of all living beings. There are many *Bodhisattvas* who take the form of women, and their efforts are much appreciated. The *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* or Lotus Sutra records a well-known story about a little girl who, at the age of eight, possesses profound doctrine, practices the *Bodhisattva* precepts, and eventually becomes the Buddha.¹³

Because the Buddha criticized women's qualities, some scholars have pointed the finger of blame at the Buddha, claiming that he is the tyrant who wants only the monk to govern *Saṅgha*. However, we are able to establish that during

³ Paul, Diana Y.; and Frances Wilson; “Women in Buddhism: Images of the feminine in the Mahayana tradition”; University of California Press; 1985.

⁴ SN 35.147

⁵ Willis, Janice D.; “Nuns and benefactresses: The role of women in the development of Buddhism”; Women, religion, and social change “; in 1985; 59-85.

⁶ AN. 3.55

⁷ De Silva, Swarna; “The place of women in Buddhism”; in 1988, A Talk given to the Midlands Buddhist Society (UK); in 2011.

⁸ SN. 3.8

⁹ AN. 8.53

¹⁰ AN. 2.151-162

¹¹ SN. 21.7

¹² SN. 47.1

¹³ Donald S. Lope, and Buswell, Robert E.; “The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism”; In The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism; at Princeton University Press; 2013.

that time period, women were never permitted to hold the position of chief, and no other religion permitted any women to hold the role of priest. Since his approval is preliminary, he needs to be mindful of the standing that his religious community holds in the larger society. And to put that another way, the Saṅgha is analogous to the troop; if the troop is filled with women, then it is certain that the troop is filled with weakness.

2. Ahimsā, Women, and Caste in Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion that emphasizes compassion, equality, and humanity. The Buddha was a social reformer who advocated for nonviolence and the equality of all human beings. This is something that is generally agreed upon. Whatever it was that he taught about nonviolence and the emancipation of women and those born into lower castes, it resulted in some kind of societal revolution.¹⁴

To begin, Buddhism is known as the religion of compassion because it was founded by the Buddha on the ideal of *ahimsā*, or nonviolence toward all living beings. He issued a command that his disciples must refrain from killing both people and animals. If Buddha and the other members of the Saṅgha ate meat, there was a very straightforward explanation for why they did so. Because they lived in a society where meat was a typical component of the diet, both he and his students were forced to rely on the charity food that was provided by local residents; neither of them ever prepared meals for themselves. They almost certainly would have perished from starvation if they had maintained their vegetarian diet. In addition, the Buddha was a very practical man, therefore he had to steer clear of extremes and stick to the Middle Path. He only stipulated that a monk should refuse to consume the flesh if he had any reason to suspect that an animal had been slaughtered specifically for him, including if he saw or heard that the animal had been put down.¹⁵

The Buddha encourages his followers to constantly live their lives in peace and harmony and to refrain from taking any actions that could potentially lead to disagreement, conflict, violence, or war.¹⁶ He stated that victory breeds hatred while defeating ushers in an era of suffering. And hatred is never eliminated by hatred; rather, it is vanquished by love.¹⁷ Asoka, the Great Emperor of India in the third century B.C., implemented a humanist program that he called Moral Conquest. This policy was inspired by the teachings of the Buddha on *ahimsā* (*Dharma Vijaya*). According to what he says, "All men are like my children"¹⁸, and he says this in the place of his own children. It is my sincere hope that they will, in this life as well as the next, find everything they need to lead a life filled with joy and contentment. The same is something I wish for each and every man.

Secondly, another aspect of Buddhism that is of considerable sociological relevance is the fact that the Buddha allowed women to participate in religious life. This was an important step in the development of Buddhism. According to him, it is still possible for women to achieve sainthood in the same way that it is possible for males. As a result of this line of thinking, Buddha welcomed women into the Saṅgha and gave permission for them to create the Bhikkhuni Saṅgha. As a result, he not only removed them from the constraints of worldly life and the thoughtlessness of society, but he also educated them in a manner that was consistent with their skills and principles. And not only did he obtain ladies from royal families like *Mahāpajāpati Gotamī* and Yasodhana, but he also received women from slave households like Khujjuttara¹⁹... In addition to that, he entertained courtesans such as Padumvati and Ambapālī... After becoming *Bhikkhunīs*, many women went on to pursue the Dharma rigorously and eventually attained the status of *arahants*.

However, in the beginning, the Buddha did not allow women to become members of the Saṅgha. This was due to the fact that he was aware that the psychology of women is typically proud. As a result, he devised a plan to force women to accept the practice of the Eight Special Rules²⁰. This plan was not intended to put undue pressure on women; rather, it was designed to cause them to solemnize themselves while also maintaining order within the Saṅgha.

Thirdly, with regard to the caste system, the Buddha criticized and demonstrated the emptiness of all pronouncements about power based on birth, which the *Brahmins* asserted was their source of authority. He refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of an unfair society based on the hierarchical caste system that existed in ancient India. He asserted that the actions of a person are the best way to judge if a person is noble or poor in merit. In this regard, the Buddhist view is one of unwavering steadfastness on the equality of social standing based on one's activities rather than on one's birth. There was no discrimination made by the Buddha toward the castes of the individuals who became his disciples; he welcomed all of them into the Saṅgha.

¹⁴ AN. 8.1

¹⁵ Hall, C. Michael. "Buddhism, tourism and the middle way"; and "In *Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys*"; p.p. 172-185, at Routledge; in 2006.

¹⁶ Theresa Der-lan Yeh; "The way to peace: A Buddhist perspective"; *International Journal of Peace Studies*; in 2006; 91-112.

¹⁷ Ibid, 91:112

¹⁸ Thākkura, Bhaktibinoda. *Jaiva-dharma: The Essential Function of the Soul*. Krishnadl-Downloads, 2001.

¹⁹ AN. 2.127

²⁰ Tsedroen, Bhikṣuṇī Jampa, and Bhikkhu Anālayo. "The gurudharma on bhikṣuṇī ordination in the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 20 (2013): 743-774.

The Buddha declared, based on this idea, that “there is no difference in the red blood of ours”²¹. He held the belief that anyone may become a Buddha so long as they put in the effort to learn the correct teachings. In the presence of the truth, there is no hierarchy. The truth does not come from a single source or from a select few guys. Therefore, his advice is applicable to everyone. Additionally, he stated, ‘It’s not that people are inherently good or bad, but rather that actions are either good or harmful’²². It was because of this that many referred to him as the greatest social reformer. When he emphasizes the role of the individual as the focus of social reform, his position on how social reform should occur is made very obvious. As a result of the fact that individuals makeup society, reforming individuals necessarily results in reforming society.

To summarize, one cannot deny the contribution of Buddhism in society to the equality and happiness of mankind from the past to the present and in the future of Buddhism in society, despite the fact that there have been many various viewpoints regarding the three topics that have been discussed above.

We may say that the Buddha had an attitude toward women that was quite progressive and innovative for his day. He opened the doors to the possibility of deathlessness for the benefit of both men and women equally. The spiritual accomplishments of a great number of female Arhants have provided proof that the Buddha's holy remark to the effect that the value of a person does not depend on their gender or their familial background but rather on their wisdom and virtue has been validated.

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²¹ Peter Harvey; “*An introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices*”; at Cambridge University Press, in 2012.

²² Oscar Wilde; “*The picture of dorian gray*”; OUP Oxford, in 2006.