



POSITION OF WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

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Abstract

Today, when the role of Women in Society is an issue of worldwide interest it is opportune that we should pause to look at it from a Buddhist perspective. In the recent past, a number of books have been written on the changing status of women in Hindu and Islamic societies, but with regard to women in Buddhism, ever since the distinguished Pali scholar, Miss I.B. Horner, wrote her book on Women under Primitive Buddhism, as far back as 1930, very little interest has been taken in the subject.



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Introduction

The role of women in Buddhism could be considered in several ways. We can, for instance, compare the position accorded to women in both the religious and the secular life in India before the Buddha's time with that after the establishment of Buddhism, and consider whether the Buddha's teaching resulted in a change radical or otherwise. We can see whether the Buddha's teaching accords to women a position different to that accorded to men, as is the case in many other religions. We may consider 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. The part played by women in the early history of Buddhism, notably during the Buddha's own time, could be considered as providing a clue to the place accorded to women in Buddhism. In this connection the events surrounding the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order need to be re-examined, as there is a measure of misunderstanding on this question. The influence of Buddhism on the position of women in the countries where Buddhism became a living presence could be highlighted.

Buddhist ideology for women

Buddhist attitude is different towards women from that of other religions. Examining the position in ancient India it is clear from the evidence in the Rigveda, the earliest literature of the Indo-Aryans, that women held an honorable place in early Indian society. There were a

few Rigvedic hymns composed by women. Women had access to the highest knowledge and could participate in all religious ceremonies. In domestic life too she was respected and there is no suggestion of seclusion of women and child marriage. Later when the priestly Brahmins dominated society and religion lost its spontaneity and became a mass of ritual, we see a downward trend in the position accorded to women. The most relentless of the Brahman law givers was Manu whose Code of Laws is the most anti-feminist literature one could find. At the outset Manu deprived woman of her religious rights and spiritual life. "Sudras, slaves and women" were prohibited from reading the Vedas. A woman could not attain heaven through any merit of her own. She could not worship or perform a sacrifice by herself. She could reach heaven only through implicit obedience to her husband, be he debauched or devoid of all virtues. Having thus denied her any kind of spiritual and intellectual nourishment, Manu elaborated the myth that all women were sinful and prone to evil. "Neither shame nor decorum, nor honesty, nor timidity", says Manu, "is the cause of a woman's chastity, but the want of a suitor alone". She should therefore be kept under constant vigilance: and the best way to do it was to keep her occupied in the tasks of motherhood and domestic duties so that she has no time for mischief. Despite this denigration there was always in Indian thought an idealization of motherhood and a glorification of the feminine concept. But in actual practice, it could be said by and large, Manu's reputed Code of Laws did influence social attitudes towards women, at least in the higher rungs of society.

Status of men and women in Buddhism

It is against this background that one has to view the impact of Buddhism in the 5th century B.C. It is not suggested that the Buddha inaugurated a campaign for the liberation of Indian womanhood. But he did succeed in creating a minor stir against Brahman dogma and superstition. He condemned the caste structure dominated by the Brahman, excessive ritualism and sacrifice. He denied the existence of a Godhead and emphasized emancipation by individual effort. The basic doctrine of Buddhism, salvation by one's own effort, presupposes the spiritual equality of all beings, male and female. This should mitigate against the exclusive supremacy of the male. It needed a man of considerable courage and a rebellious spirit to pronounce a way of life that placed woman on a level of near equality to man. The Buddha saw the spiritual potential of both men and women and founded after considerable hesitation the Order of Bhikkhunis or Nuns, one of the earliest organizations for women. The Sasana or Church consisted of the Bhikkhus (Monks), Bhikkhunis (Nuns), laymen and laywomen so that the women were not left out of any sphere of religious activity. The highest spiritual states were within the reach of both men and women and the latter

needed no masculine assistance or priestly intermediary to achieve them. We could therefore agree with I.B. Horner when she says Buddhism accorded to women a position approximating to equality.

Funeral rites of women in buddhism

Moving from the sphere of philosophy to domestic life one notices a change of attitude when we come to Buddhist times. In all patriarchal societies the desire for male offspring is very strong for the continuance of the patrilineage and, in the case of Hindus, for the due performance of funeral rites. For only a son could carry out the funeral rites of his father and thus ensure future happiness of the deceased. This was so crucial to the Hindu that the law allowed a sonless wife to be superseded by a second or a third one or even turned out of the house. It is said "through a son he conquers the world and through a son's son he attains immortality." As a result of this belief the birth of a daughter was the cause for lamentation. In Buddhism future happiness does not depend on funeral rites but on the actions of the deceased. The Buddhist funeral ceremony is a very simple one which could be performed by the widow, daughter or any one on the spot and the presence of a son is not compulsory. There is no ritual or ceremonial need for a son and the birth of a daughter need not be a cause for grief. It is well known that the Buddha consoled king Pasenadi who came to him grieving that his queen, Mallika, had given birth to a daughter. "A female offspring, O king, may prove even nobler than a male..." a revolutionary statement for his time. Despite the spiritual equality of the sexes and the fact that a son is not an absolute necessity in securing happiness in the after life, yet even in Buddhist societies there is a preference for male offspring even today, so potent is the ideology of male superiority.

Reciprocal relationship of husband and wife

Marriage and family are basic institutions in all societies whether primitive or modern and the position of woman in a particular society is influenced by and expressed in the status she holds within these institutions. Has she got the same rights as her husband to dissolve the marriage bond? Has she the right to remarry or is this a man's privilege? The answers to these questions will undoubtedly determine the position accorded to women in any society. Let us examine the Buddhist attitude to the question. In Buddhism, unlike Christianity and Hinduism, marriage is not a sacrament. It is purely a secular affair and the monks do not participate in it. Sometimes monks are invited to partake of alms and they in turn bless the couple. Although there are no vows or rituals involved in the event of a marriage, the Buddha has laid down in the SigalovadaSutta the duties of a husband and wife:

"In five ways should a wife as Western quarter, be ministered to by her husband: by respect, by courtesy, by faithfulness, by handing over authority to her, by providing her with ornaments. In these five ways does the wife minister to by her husband as the Western quarter, love him: her duties are well-performed by hospitality to kin of both, by faithfulness, by watching over the goods he brings and by skill and industry in discharging all business."

The significant point here is that the Buddha's injunctions are bilateral; the marital relationship is a reciprocal one with mutual rights and obligations. This was a momentous departure from ideas prevailing at the time. Buddha spoke "in this way when the deferential obedience of the wife was complete, the internal harmony was secured, and a long continuance of the family could be reckoned with." Confucius gives in detail the duties of the son to the father, the wife to the husband and the daughter-in-law to the mother-in-law but never vice-versa; so that the wife had only duties and obligations and the husband only rights and privileges. According to the injunctions of the Buddha given in the SigalovadaSutta, which deals with domestic duties, every relationship was a reciprocal one whether it be between husband and wife, parent and child, or master and servant. Ideally, therefore, among Buddhists, marriage is a contract between equals.

Social freedom of women in Buddhism

The social freedom that women enjoyed in Buddhist societies. It is not so much the equality of status but the complete desegregation of the sexes, that has distinguished the women in Buddhist societies from those of the Middle East, the Far East and the Indian subcontinent. Segregation of the sexes only leads to the seclusion and confinement of women behind veils and walls. The Confucian code lays down detailed rules on how men and women should behave in each other's presence. Manu went to the furthest extreme of segregation by warning that one should not remain in a lonely palace even with one's own mother and sister.

In early Buddhist literature one sees a free intermingling of the sexes. The celibate monks and nuns had separate quarters, yet the cloister was not cut off from the rest of the world. It is recorded that the Buddha had long conversations with his female disciples. The devout benefactress Visakha frequented the monastery decked in all her finery, and accompanied by a maid servant she attended to the needs of the monks. Her clothes and ornaments were the talk of the town, yet neither the Buddha nor the monks dissuaded her from wearing them. It was after she developed in insight and asceticism that she voluntarily relinquished her ornaments.

Religious freedom of women in Buddhism

Women's position in Buddhism is unique. The Buddha gave women full freedom to participate in a religious life. The Buddha was the first religious Teacher who gave this religious freedom to women. Before the Buddha, women's duties had been restricted to the kitchen; women were not even allowed to enter any temple or to recite any religious scripture. During the Buddha's time, women's position in society was very low. The Buddha was criticized by the prevailing establishment when He gave this freedom to women. His move to allow women to enter the Holy Order was extremely radical for the times. Yet the Buddha allowed women to prove themselves and to show that they too had the capacity like men to attain the highest position in the religious way of life by attaining Arahantahood. Every woman in the world must be grateful to the Buddha for showing them the real religious way of living and for giving such freedom to them for the first time in world history.

A good illustration of the prevailing attitude towards women during the Buddha's time is found in these words of Mara:

'No woman, with the two-finger wisdom (*narrow*) which is hers, could ever hope to reach those heights which are attained only by the sages.'

Undoubtedly, the Buddha was vehement in contradicting such attitude. The nun (bhikkhuni) to whom Mara addressed these words, gave the following reply:

'When one's mind is well concentrated and wisdom never fails, does the fact of being a woman make any difference?'

The Secular Position of Women in Buddhism

When we consider the position accorded to women in ordinary life we have to note that the Buddha's teaching was primarily concerned with individual spiritual emancipation. This emancipation would be manifested in the worldly conduct of individuals, but the Buddha was not interested in establishing and perpetuating a particular worldly order, for whatever actual regime that would be put in place would in a Buddhist sense be unsatisfactory. In this respect Buddhism differs from other religions where private and public affairs were brought within the gambit of religious regulation.

A few discourses given to householders emphasize the more worldly aspects of living, and of these the SigalovadaSutta is the best known. This Sutta has been dissected to get actual rules of conduct on a wide variety of secular matters. This is a wrong way to approach the question. In this Sutta the Buddha was not laying down a code of domestic jurisprudence but instructing the Brahmin Sigala on certain basic principles. Of these the ones that are relevant here are the duties of wife to husband and vice versa. The Buddha lays down rules in this

regard that could be considered common sense and eminently sensible. They conform to the mores of the time. The actual details are not important, but what is important is that the Buddha emphasizes the principle of reciprocity. Thus just as the wife has duties prescribed vis-a-vis the husband, so has the husband towards the wife. The equal burden of responsibility and duty laid on both husband and wife is the hall-mark of the Buddha's attitude to the role of women in the family life. In this Sutta the Buddha identifies qualities in women (beauty, wealth, kin, sons, virtue) which would make them the superior partner in a marriage, but these qualities are those generally accepted in society in the Buddha's time. The SigalovadaSutta presupposes a monogamous system, but some of the royal patrons of the Buddha practiced polygamy having large harems, but they were not admonished for this by the Buddha. This was a matter belonging to social convention, and the Buddha preferred not to pontificate on it.

Bhikkhunisvinaya

The Buddha's decision to sanction the establishment of an Order for women in the fifth year after his enlightenment was a landmark in Buddhist and Indian history. But by the standards of the modern age it was marred by the special rules which the Buddha imposed on the Bhikkhunis. Thus PrajâpatiGotami had to agree to 8 special rules (garudhammâ) before she was ordained, and these rules were later incorporated in the BhikkhuniVinaya. These rules could be summarized as follows:

- Bhikkhus were always to have precedence over Bhikkhunis in matters of salutation, etc. irrespective of any other consideration.
- Bhikkhunis could not observe the annual retreat (vassa) in a district where there were no Bhikkhus.
- Bhikkhus had to set the dates for BhikkhuniUposatha ceremonies. Confessing transgressions by Bhikkhunis had to be done before the assembly of both Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis.
- Certain judicial processes in case of Bhikkhunis had to be undertaken by both the Sanghas.
Upasampadâ initiation of Bhikkhunis should be given by the Bhikkhu sangha as well.
- A Bhikkhuni should never abuse a Bhikkhu.
- Bhikkhus can officially admonish Bhikkhunis, but not vice versa
- That these rules involve a subordination of Bhikkhunis to Bhikkhus cannot be denied.

Some of the rules may be explained in terms of practical necessity. Thus Rule 2 recognized the dangers to which Bhikkhunis would be exposed to if they spent the long period of retreat in isolated areas. Rules 3 and 6 might have been set up to see that the procedures in the newly established Bhikkhuni Order would correspond to and benefit from similar procedures in the already established Bhikkhu Sangha. Rule 7 seems to be a restatement of the precept regarding “wrong speech”. But Rules 1 and 8 cannot be seen in any other light than a concession to male superiority. In practical terms Rule 1 must have been the most irksome, and even humiliating in a society where the protocol attaching to salutation was very strict. The usual Buddhist rule which guided seniority was the number of years a person had spent in the Order, and while this continued to apply to Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis considered separately, any individual Bhikkhuni had always to pay respect to any Bhikkhu however junior the latter may have been. It is not surprising that it was from this rule that PrajâpatiGotami sought exemption (unsuccessfully despite the support of Ananda). Yet whatever be the explanation the rules lack reciprocity between males and females, and would not suit the present age. Unfortunately the extinction of the Order of Bhikkhunis must mean that this question has to remain an academic one. On his deathbed the Buddha gave permission to revise the less important rules of the Vinaya, but the offer was never taken. Whether this contributed to the extinction of the Bhikkhuni Order we shall never know.

Conclusion

Nowadays many religionists like to claim that their religions give women equal rights. We only have to look at the world around us today to see the position of women in many societies. It seems that they have no property rights, are discriminated in various fields and generally suffer abuse in many subtle forms. Even in western countries, women like the Suffragettes had to fight very hard for their rights. According to Buddhism, it is not justifiable to regard women as inferior. The Buddha Himself was born as a woman on several occasions during His previous births in Samsara and even as a woman He developed the noble qualities and wisdom until He gained Enlightenment or Buddhahood.

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