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## Status of Women in Buddhism: Spiritual and Social energetic movement

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### Abstract

*The Buddha is a great benefactor of humanity. After the attainment of the Enlightenment in Bodhgaya and preaching First Sermon in Sarnath, the Buddha founded the order of Monks (Bhikkhusangha). This order of Monks increased and within forty five years of Buddha's ministry it had spread throughout ancient India. But groundless belief of Brahmins is that woman is inferior to man. The position which the woman lost under the dominance of the Brahmins of the day evidently showed little sympathy for her. In this article I will explore the status of women considering their spiritual and social energetic movement.*

**Keywords:** *Buddhist Women; Therigatha; Bhikkhunisangha; Status of women*

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### Introduction

Women are often the main upholders and supporters of a religion or faith or movement. This was certainly so with Buddhism when it was at its beginnings, and hence we are able to find a good deal about them in those portions of the Pali canon known as the Vinaya-pitaka and the Sutta-pitaka. The Vinaya, which comprises the rules and regulations for monastic discipline, contains two sections: the Bhikkhunivibhanga and the Bhikkhunikhandhaka, both of which deal with the conduct nuns, or bhikkhunis, and female probationers should observe, and with the legislation that was laid down for the proper management of their Order — now unfortunately extinct. In the Buddha's times, however, it seems that quantities of women became nuns, so as to seek for peace, inner and outer, self-mastery, the light of knowledge, and so on, and perhaps especially for various forms of that freedom

which lies at the very heart and center of the Buddha's Teaching: "As this great ocean has but one taste, that of salt, so has this Dhamma but one taste, that of freedom." The ardor and the energy of these early nuns, whether they were active in preaching the Word of the Buddha or were absorbed in contemplation and meditation, come through to us in three portions of the Suttapitaka that are specially devoted to the verses such nuns are held to have uttered, mostly at the time they attained arahantship or won a vision of nibbana. In the Manu Smriti we witness the cruel infliction of domestic subservience on woman. The road to heaven is barred to her and there is hard bargaining with her for the offer of an alternative route. Matrimony and obedience to the husband are the only means whereby a woman can hope to reach heaven. Nasti strinam prithag yajno na vratay napyuposatham, Patim susrusate yena tena svarga mahiyate. (Jha 123) "Women do not need to perform any sacrifice or follow



religious rites or observances on their own. Obedience to the husband alone would exalt the woman in heaven.” (Translation) This hostile attitude to women both in religion and in society was repeatedly criticized and challenged by the Buddha on numerous occasions. In the Kosala Samyutta sutta the Buddha contradicts the belief that the birth of a daughter was not as much a cause of joy as that of a son, a belief which the ritualism of the Brahmins had contributed to strengthen.

The Buddha pointed out clearly that a woman had a dignified and an important part to play. In spite of this fact, the Buddha was at first unwilling to admit women into the Sangha (Hastings 799). Why was the Buddha inclined to admit women into the religious order? Because, three things require secrecy, namely- 1. Woman, 2. Priestly Knowledge and 3. Fake Doctrine. Through his intuitive knowledge He knew men's nature. On the other hand, the Buddha was thinking for the benefit of women. Buddha's love and sympathy for women knew no bounds. History shows him to have been the greatest benefactor of women, even born to India” (Journal) Venerable Ananda Thera, a great disciple of him, also had placed the same view to the Buddha and requested him to make the religious order open for women. At that time, Mahapajapati Gotami, the aunt and foster mother of Gautama had sacrificed everything terrestrial to embrace the homeless life. The Buddha therefore acceded to Ananda's proposal and opened the religious order of women (Bhikkhuni sangha) on the condition of following the Eight Chief Rules (Atthagarudhamma) (Oldenberg 313) for maintaining the dignity and purity of both the monks and nuns. With the great intensity to become a nun Gotami accepted all these conditions laid down by the Buddha and thus she received Upasampada Ordination (Vinaya Pitaka 255) along with her hundred companions. She

was the first lady to receive the ordination in the Buddhist order of nuns.

Thus, admission to the Sangha was open to all women irrespective of caste or social position. Even a courtesan or a woman who lived a low life was admitted to the order and treated in the same way as the other women without any disrespect. As a result, from the Sixth century B. C. the Buddhist order of Nuns also constituted a strong and vitalizing force in religious and cultural history of India. The power of man if rightly used can give strength, freedom, better life and in this matter there is no discrimination between male and female. After the admission of women into the Buddhist Sangha and their achievement in the field of spiritual and cultural progress bear sufficient proof of that statement. Though the nuns were always considered inferior to the monks, yet their spiritual achievement had recognition. The cultural achievement of the nuns can be highly understood if we study the Psalms of the Sisters (Therigatha). Mrs. Rhys Davids utters, “In spite of their various defects, their contents are substantially interesting as the expressions of the religious mind- the mind expressed in it was intensely alive because it knew what it was and prepared itself instead of depending upon others merely saying “A man”. (Davids xxiii) It tried to realize what should be known. There are many stanzas in the Psalms of the Sisters which describe the mental commotion (Samvega), produced not so much by a sense of guilt as that of insight into real nature of the Universe. Considering the deliverance from the suffering of mental, moral, domestic and social life, Mrs. Rhys Davids remarks: The bereaved mother, the childless widow are emancipated from grief and insolence; the Magdalen from the remorse, the wife of a king or rich man from the satiety and emptiness of an idle life of luxury, the poor man's wife from care and drudgery, the girl from the humiliation of being handed over to the suite who bids the



highest, the thoughtful woman from the ban imposed upon her intellectual development by convention and tradition. (Davids xxiv)

Although the Psalms of the Sister are poorer with the descriptions of the worldly experience than those of the brethren, yet emancipation won by them was greater than that of the opposite sex. Most of the women became nuns out of worldly troubles. They wanted peace and intellectual development by getting away from the Shackles of social tradition and time- old conventions. Many of them achieved success. Such women were Patacara, Kisagotami, Ambapali, Kundalakesi, Isidasi, Addakasi, (Davids xxiv) Bimala (Davids 172) and Abhaya's mother. Some of the ladies mentioned above joined the monastic order out of disgust for their lives, filled as they were with bitterness and remorse. They were converted to Buddhism which regenerated in them a new faith that led to an adjuration of their degraded life. The sermons of the Buddha were the most instructive to them. They aimed at elevating the humble and evangelical touch to the tender chords of the proletariat heart. The life stories of the courtesans prove that they were most successful in their pursuits and became prominent through their spiritual attainments. The Theri- Apadana (Lilley 339-615) give the wonderful episodes of the minds of distinguished Theris who attained bliss through their exertions. They seemed to be glad to have escaped the tremendous hardships and drudgery of family life (gharavasa). They were free from household barriers and enjoyed complete freedom of movement. One of the Bhikkhunis expressed her in the following words. "O woman, well set free, how free am I". (Psalms 25) Another woman who bid down all social positions and domestic success, said: With shaven head, wrapped in their robes- a dress distinguishable, it would seem from the swathing toga and swathed under garments of the male religious- sister was free to come and go. Wood or climb

aloft. (Psalms of the Sisters, xxvi) Another woman expressed how she was victorious over pain and sorrow: In that I now can grasp and understand, the base on which my miseries were built. (Davids T.W. 38) Here we find that they never tried to explain their emancipation in terms of positive or negative conceptions. Their expressions implied that with the attainment of Nibbana (Enlightenment), repeated births and deaths ceased.

The Nibbana is inexpressible in words. It is something like the safest place of residence which is found after a long journey through the perilous road. There are so many instances where broken-hearted Ladies expressed how they got consolation after renouncing the family life. One Bhikkhuni said: O free indeed, a gloriously free, Am I in freedom from the crooked thing, From quern, mortar, from my crooked lord, Ay, but I'm free from rebirth and from death, And all that dragged me back is hurled away. (Psalms of the Sisters, 40)

The most interesting story is that Ambapali was a celebrated prostitute of Vesali. She was very charming and beautiful. The kings, nobles and rich men would come to visit her. So after that she had to refuse some of them. Once while walking, the Buddha come to Vesali. Ambapali met him and offered all her resources including her mango garden for the use of the Buddha and his disciples. She gave up her profession and embraced the life of Bhikkhuni. Ultimately she became an Arhant when she had heard the sermon preached by her son Thera Bimala Kondanna. (Davids T. W. 30-33) In her old age she wrote about her religious experience in beautiful verses which are known as the Gathas of Ambapali in Pali literature. The poem shows Ambapali at her best making us feel and understand her joy in the pursuit of spiritual attainment. In several places Ambapali states that the Buddha was the source of inspiration to her.



She achieved spiritual attainment due to the noble admonition of the all-enlightened Buddha. Her mind is peaceful and happy. Through many hardships all her hopes and aspirations are fulfilled- What Ambapali discovered from her vast experiences is that everything is transitory – this life, youth etc are decaying and unsubstantial. The story of Bhikkhuni Subha is also very interesting. She tears out her eyes and gives these to him who is in love with her. For she is fascinating to him due to her beautiful eyes. She rejects the man with these words: Lo, thou art wanting to walk where no path is; thou sickest to capture moon from the skies for they play. Thou would jump over the ridges of Meru, Thou who presumes to lie in wait for A child of the Buddha. (Psalms of the Sisters, 152)

The frail of Kisagotami who roamed with her dead child and found consolation by becoming a nun was released from sorrow, grief and lamentation by experiencing Enlightenment. The Samyutta Nikaya gives a vivid account of Kisagotami, Soma, Vijaya, Upphalavanna, Cala, Upacala, Sisupacala, Sela, Vajira and tells how they were tempted by Mara,<sup>1</sup> the evil one and they at last subdued him. The greater portion of Therigatha deals with meditation. Nearly all the Bhikkhunis vanquished Mara and realized the truth through strenuous exertions. The description of the Therigatha may be mingled with extreme religious fervor and poetic imagination, but the historical aspects of the stories are more realistic and precise than those of the Nikayas. A comparative study of both the sources may help us to find out the true picture of the cultural progress of the nuns. If we leave aside the question of some of physical disabilities from they suffered, the nuns were not in any way inferior to the monks. They spent the greater part of their times in meditation, training novices and study of Patimokkha. Teaching of the Vinay and Dhamma to the novice was one of the

foremost duties of the Bhikkhunis. To take care of education for spiritual progress of the nuns was not a Very easy job. So distinguished Theras and Theris were selected to take up that job. In determining the competence of a teacher the spiritual advancement of an ideal Bhikkhuni was also considered.

According to Mrs. Rhys Davids, Bhaddhamata was one of the foremost motherly nuns.<sup>2</sup> In addition to their spiritual attainments, the Theris contributed greatly to the development of art and literature. A study of the Therigatha reveals that this Indo-Bangladesh-Pakistan subcontinent in those days had not only produced courtesans but also woman poets, philosophers, commentators and wits. (Davids 147) The gathas of Ambapali exhibit wonderful poetic excellence. The gathas of Sumedha and Isidasi are not less interesting. Both of them describe the Philosophy of life in which a splendid manner is that their sermons may be treated like romantic poems. The Samyutta Nikaya (Samyutta Nikaya 212-213) mentions that Theri Subha was a celebrated orator. She delivered a sermon in a big gathering at Rajagaha. Baddha Kundalakesa was an eloquent debater. There was none equal to her except the great disciples – Sariputta and Moggallana Thera. The Dipavamsa refers to Khema, the former queen of Bimbisara of Magdha as the Master of Vinaya discipline. She was intelligent, ready witted and eloquent debater. The Theri Dhammadinna was the great master of Buddhist philosophy. Most of the Theris wandered from place to place for propagating Buddha's teaching. Theri Bhadda Kundalakesa says, "I traveled through Anga, Magadha, Vajji, Kasi and Kosala preaching the Dhamma to the people for nearly 50 years" (Bhagawat 12). Nuns showed that women could attain dignified position like monks and they were quite eligible for spiritual emancipation and



cultural development if they made effort as males (Barua Subra 74). The formation of the order of Nuns in Srilanka and the part played by Sanghamitta, the daughter of emperor Asoka is highly appreciated. Dipavamsa (Oldenberg 97) mentions that the Theris, headed by Sanghamitta, went to the Island of Ceylon during the reign of king Devanampiyatissa and recited the five Vinaya Books and the Seven Abhidhamma Treatises at Anuradhapura. The Bhikkhuni Dhammapala was the preceptor of Sanghamitta and Bhikkhuni Ayupala was her teacher. In due course she gained full ordination and attained Arhatship. Theri Sanghamitta on her arrival to Srilanka initiated Anula and five hundred other women into the order. With the ordination of Anula and her followers, the order of female disciples was founded in Srilanka. King Devanampiyatissa erected a nunnery for Sanghamitta. There she remained till death "working for the progress of the doctrine and mindful of the good of the nuns" (Geiger 78). Visakha was the chief among the female lay followers of the Buddha. She was a daughter of Dhananjaya, son of Mendaka, a renowned Banker in the city of Bhaddiya of Anga.

Visakha was married to Punnavaddhana, son of Migara, a Banker of Savatthi. At the time of marriage Dhananjaya the father of Visakha gave her ten admonitions<sup>3</sup> which are highly interesting and instructive for the women irrespective of caste and creed. All the family-members of Visakha would bow to the Buddha and His disciples and pay respect to them. Visakha would go to the Monastery of Jetavana at Savatthi three times in a day to see the Buddha. She donated them eight kinds of donations with water, rice-gruel and food and served them with her hands, a most excellent meal. She would always hear the admonitions of the Buddha. The other female followers were Sumanadevi, the daughter of Anathapindaka; queen Mallika, the chief wife

of king Pasendi; Samavati, the queen of Udayana of Kosambi; Uttara, the daughter of Punnasinha; Suppiya of Varanasi and others also. All of them possessed high knowledge in the doctrine and observe the Upasatha Sila. It is evident from the above discussion that the nuns not only attained spiritual progress but also made their mark in scholarship and disputation. The psychological analysis given by Khema, Uppalavanna, Dhammadinna are excellent examples of female erudition. Buddhism has introduced radical changes in the doctrinal as well as in the practical side of the religious life. Buddha's teachings are mainly meant for the Monks and Nuns. They are expected to work diligently and they were guided by a cannon ideal of virtuous life based on clear Knowledge. As soon as the women received permission from the Buddha to enter into the order a new and experimental world and a novel life-style opened before them.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope to have presented with some examples for thinking that in the Buddha's time women were not despised and looked down on but, on the contrary, were respected and had a place of honor in the home. The difficulties they had to face and overcome were no more than normal for women in any time or country, even if their life was, at the worldly level, more restricted than it has come to be in the last decades as women go in more and more for public work and hold professional posts. At the higher, more spiritual level however, they had the great advantage and great joy of entering the Order of Nuns either because they wanted to get free of worldly sufferings or, more positively, and above everything else, because they wanted to find the way to the peace and bliss of Nibbana, all their former craving for sense-pleasures rooted out, tranquil and cool. Many of the women I have mentioned here, whether they have been



nuns or lay-devotees, by their response to the majesty of the Buddha's Teaching, have made an imponderable contribution to its strength, vitality, expansion, and longevity. It is as well to survey again from time to time the lives of these ardent contemporaries of the Buddha. Indeed the Buddhist world owes them a large debt of gratitude. We of today, in view of this wonderful gift of the Dhamma that has been vouchsafed to us, cannot be merely recipients. We must be givers too. We have had the lofty privilege of coming to know something of the Teachings of the Buddha. We live in a Buddha-era, that is at a time when the Teachings of the Buddha are still remembered and are of significance. This alone would make it incumbent on us to spread this Teaching of Peace, inner and outer, as far and wide and as faithfully as we can.

**Notes:** 1. The word 'Mara' is derived from the root 'mr' which means to kill, to destroy or to 'bring death'. The Mara is usually personified as the god of death, 'the evil one, the tempter, 'the Devil' or 'the principle of destruction.' Sometimes the word is used to imply the whole of the worldly existence or the realm of rebirth, as opposed to Nibbana. The other epithets of Mara are Kanha, Antaka, Papima, namuci and Pamattabandhu. Mara is personified as lust or craving, sloth and indolence, cowardice, doubt, hypocrisy and stupidity as mentioned in the Buddhist Literature. (Samyutta Nikaya, vol. 1, op. cit; pp. 128-133) 2. Baddhamata was the maid servant of queen Khema. She renounced the world when she heard that her mistress, the queen of Bimbisara had become a nun. She said, 'if she as a queen, can renounce then surely I can.' Not long after that she attained arhatship. 3. The ten admonitions given to Visakha by her father are as follows: (i) Not to give away fire from within the house; (2) Not to take into the house fire from outside; (3) To give only to those who give in return, (4) Not to give to those who do not give in return; (5) To give

to him that gives and not to him who gives not; (6) To sit at ease; (7) To eat at ease; (8) To sleep at ease; (9) To tend the fire and (10) To honor the household deities. 'Fire' here is meant troubles and tribulation.

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19 Psalms of the Sisters, op. cit; p. 152

20 Samyutta Nikaya, vol. 1, op. cit; pp. 212-213

21 Vinaya Pitaka, vol. 11, op. cit; p. 255

22 See the Commentary to psalm XLVI (Thig 5.9) in Psalms of the Sisters, translated by Mrs. C.A.F. Rhys Davids (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1909, 1989).