

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: THE BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Buddha, being a great thinker and a social reformer, instituted an ethical faith to free human minds from the age old orthodoxies and opened a new vista of religious experience called Buddhism. His towering personality, simplicity and loving kindness for the impoverished and the sick, his denial of caste consideration for the attainment of salvation, his emphasis on conduct over birth and his admission of women into the *Sangha*, were the principles of a very high order incomprehensible in his era and they are quite applicable even today. This paper shows the position of women and the feministic philosophical view in Buddhism. By following the way of Buddha's teaching, many women in his time achieved highest goal, the state of ever happiness. Buddhism does not consider women as being inferior to men. For imposing the eight *Garudhammas*, many critics misjudged Buddha and consider that Buddha hesitated to give recognition to the right of women for two times. But, it was because of that, *Bhikkhuni Sangha* was well organized during the life time of Buddha. When they became skilled to defend themselves, Buddha withdrew *Garudhammas* observing their ability to run the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* progressively more. Keeping pace with men, they contributed Buddhism in many ways. The contribution of *Gautami*, *Visakha*, *Patachara*, *Sujata*, etc. will be highly appreciated always. Among the *Bhikkhunis*, many were learned in religion and philosophy. *Therigatha* is a strong evidence to eradicate the confusion about the role of women in early Buddhism. Women in Buddhist societies have enjoyed a much higher degree of freedom, independence and more often than not even equality of status.

Keywords: women, empowerment, Buddhism, *Bhikkhuni Sangha*, *Garudhammas*.

Introduction

The arrival of Buddhism in the 5th century B.C., created a minor rouse against Brahmin dogma and superstition. Buddhism rejected the caste structure, excessive ritualism and sacrifice. The basic doctrine of

Buddhism which is salvation by one's own effort, presupposes the spiritual equality of all beings, both male and female. In ancient India, the first women's disruption was seen after the advent of Buddha under the leadership of Buddha's foster mother *Mahaprajapati Gautami*. Men used to ignore women due to their lesser physical vigour. But according to Buddha, women too had the same potential to accomplish enlightenment as men. The Buddha saw the spiritual potential of both men and women and founded after lot of hesitation the order of *Bhikkhunis* or Nuns, one of the earliest organizations for women in the ancient world. The Buddha Sasana consisted of monk (*Bhikkhu*), nun (*Bhikkhuni*), layman (*upasaka*), and laywoman (*upasika*). In early Buddhism women contributed to society and religion in two ways: the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* (disciples of the Buddha) and lay women (followers and devotees of the Buddha). Thus, Buddhism accorded to women a position of absolute equality. It is generally believed that the Buddha was a great social reformer, a believer in the equality of all human beings, and a democrat. His efforts for the emancipation of women and lower castes created a sort of social revolution in society. Before Buddhism, women were also participating in religious activities, but their participation was not so independent like Buddhism. In the Buddhist texts, women were always named before men.

During the time of the Buddha, there was in Indian society the widespread belief that woman was inferior to man. The Buddha pointed out that woman had an important and dignified role to play in society. He had defined the role of woman in society with great insight, fitting her harmoniously into the social fabric. He also showed woman as a lovable member of the household. He stressed that sex did not matter, and in character and in her role in society, she may even be rival to men. The Buddha raised the status of women and made them realize their importance in society. He did not humiliate women but only regarded them as somewhat physically weak by nature. He saw the innate good of both men and women and assigned to them their due place in his teaching. According to a Buddhist historian, Buddhism along with Jainism but unlike Brahmanism gave equal opportunity in religious culture to women. According to Ambedkar also, the Buddha was an upholder of the doctrine of the equality of sexes. Men and women were placed by the Buddha on the same footing of equality.

Nature of Women

According to the Buddha, daughters are as good as sons. Buddhism does not consider women as being inferior to men. Though Buddhism accepts the biological and physical difference between the two sexes, it considers men and women to be equally useful to the society. The Anguttara Nikaya contained some valuable advice which the Buddha gave to young girls prior to their marriage. They were requested to honour and respect their husband's relatives and friends, thus creating a congenial and happy atmosphere in their new homes. They were also advised to study and understand their husband's nature, ascertain their activities, character and temperament, and to be useful and co-operative at all times in their new homes. They should be polite, kind and watchful in their relationship with the servants and should safeguard their

husband's earnings and maintain all household expenditures properly. The Buddha emphasises the role of a woman as a good wife, a good mother in making the family life a great success. The Pali term used to denote women is "Matugama" which means mother folk. The mother holds an honourable position in Buddhism. So does the wife. She is regarded as the best friend or "Paramaskha" of the husband. In the family both husband and wife share equal responsibility and discharge their duties with equal dedication. The husband considers the wife as a friend, a companion, a partner. In family affairs, the wife was expected to be a substitute for the husband. In fact, a wife was expected even to acquaint herself with the trade, business, or industries, in which the husband was engaged, so that she would be in a position to manage his affairs in his absence. This shows that in the Buddhist society the wife also occupied an equal position with the husband.

The Buddha's advice to the king Pasenadi of Kosala, who was close devotee of his, clearly shows that Buddhism does not consider the birth of a daughter as a cause for worry and despair. Buddhism does not restrict either the educational opportunities of women or their religious freedom. Buddhist practice is generally gender-neutral. This practice is contained in the "Noble Eightfold Path", which is usually divided into three groups – *paññā* (wisdom), *sīla* (morality), and *bhāvanā* (mental development). Of these the first and third do not involve any differentiation between males and females. The practice of morality may, in some respects, involve different kinds of conduct for the two sexes, particularly when it comes to sexual morality. But in the practice of the path gender has no relevance. The highest achievement of Buddhism, supreme enlightenment, is available to both men and women. The Buddha recognised women abilities and talents, and gave them responsible positions in the Bhikkuni Sangha. The Buddhist texts recorded some eminent saintly Bhikkunis, who were very learned and expert in preaching the Dhamma. Dhammadinna, Kema and Uppalavanna were such Bhikkunis. The Buddha allowed full participation of women in the field of religion by making them eligible for admission to what was known as the Bhikkuni Sangha, the order of Nuns, and that truly opened to women a new adventure of culture and social service and big opportunities of public life. This brought to women recognition of their importance to society, and thus greatly enhanced their social status.

Buddha's advice to Married Women

Women in early Buddhist society got married at the age of sixteen or later. It was considered that women were mature at the age of sixteen. For example: *Vodra*, *Kundolkeshi*, *Ishidashi*, *Potachara* and *Mallikadevi*, some famous women of Buddha's time, were all married at the age of sixteen. These were the women who had great contribution for the development of Buddhism during Buddha's life time. In ancient India there were eight categories of marriage systems, but in the Buddhist Era only three types of marriage

systems were in trend. The life of widow was not clear in *Pali* literature but it is true that no specific custom was in vogue, and the social dignity of a wife was not grieved at all after the death of husband.

In advising women about their role in married life, the Buddha appreciated that the peace and harmony of a home rested largely on women's shoulders. His advice was realistic and practical when he quoted a good number of day-to-day characteristics which a woman should or should not emulate. On diverse occasions, the Buddha counselled that a wife:

- a) Should not harbour evil thoughts against her husband;
- b) Should not be cruel, harsh or dominating;
- c) Should not spend thrift but should be economical and live within her means;
- d) Should jealously guard and save her husband's property and hard-earned earnings;
- e) Should always be virtuous and chaste in mind and action;
- f) Should be faithful and harbour no thought of any adulterous acts;
- g) Should be refined in speech and polite in action;
- h) Should be kind, industrious and hardworking;
- i) Should be thoughtful and compassionate towards her husband and her attitude equate that of a mother loving and protecting her son;
- j) Should be modest and respectful;
- k) Should be cool, calm and understanding, serving not only as a wife but also as a friend and adviser to her husband when the need arises.

In the days of the Buddha, other religious teachers also spoke about the duties and obligations of a wife towards her husbands, particularly stressing the duty of wives in bearing off-spring for their husbands, rendering faithful service, and providing conjugal happiness and heavenly bliss. The teachings of Buddha did not have such bias towards the husbands. In the Sigalovada Sutta, the Buddha also clearly mentioned the duties of a husband towards the wife and vice versa. A husband should be faithful, courteous and not despising. It is the husband's duty to hand over authority to his wife and from time to time to provide her with adornment.

Women Education

The Buddha, the Enlightened One, understood the potentiality and power of women. Buddhism did not restrict either the educational opportunities of women or their religious emancipation. They are free to take their education in Buddhist Monastery. Buddha established that women were capable of realizing the reality, just as men were. Buddha had great contribution to make women free from darkness. Among the founders of major religions, Buddha was the first who gave importance on education both universally and religiously. Buddhist monasteries became the centre of all kinds of education. For example, Taxila and

Nalanda were the famous educational institutions in the world where great scholars from all over the world used to come for education.

In the fields of education and culture, women at that time on the Indian subcontinent acquired amazing achievements in the Buddhist Era. During this period, Bhikkhunis attained the highest stage of Arthathood. *Therigatha*, the Lyric poetry in Buddhist Literature, is a splendid instance of freedom and glory of early women. It all glorifies the Buddhist ideals of renunciation and attainment of Nirvana. By reading stories and actions of preceding birth as well as their last life, women of present time can see the light of wisdom. By following their lifestyle, thoughts and dedication, women of present time can move forward. So, Buddhist literature is a light house for women too. By following the teachings of 'Theris' (Bhikkhunis), modern women can utilize it to build up their spiritual life. Thus, *Therigatha* may have great impact on the present lifestyle and thoughts of women. These women became flourishing to achieve the highest goal of Buddhism i.e. Nirvana. They were born in different levels of culture and fought against the complicated circumstances. These women proved that women can do anything if they practice dogma and morality properly. Though their contribution is little in literature but it was striking as it was the beginning of Buddhist literature. The position of woman was not equal to that of a man in the ancient Vedic culture; still they fought vigorously in the battlefield being compared to men.

The Order of Bhikkhunis

Buddha preached the Dharma not only patronized by kings and merchants but also by women who had right of entry to the *Sangha* and persuaded the people by their candour, eloquence, and sensitivity. Some women came to the *Sangha* and were ordained after facing social bitterness, a negative family life, hatred from their caste, and unfair class treatment. Some women from aristocratic families also joined the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* at the same time. Buddha emphasized the parity of men and women in early Buddhism by giving permission to women to gain access into the *Sangha*. Women from loyal families, trustworthy housewives, and prostitutes all got shelter in Buddhism and got equal right to practice *Dhamma* [Bhikkhu Silabhadra:1951]. From that time women started to lead their life with their own personality. The Buddha himself recognized the foundation of *Bhikkhuni Sangha* in *Vaishali* considering the appeal of Ananda and by the ardent wish of Buddha's foster mother *Gautami*. She wanted to get the ordination of Bhikkhunis under eight *Garudhammas* (the eight conditions for Bhikkhunis to access *Sangha*). The eight states of affairs were:

1. *Bhikkhus* were always to have precedence over *Bhikkhunis* in matters of salutation, etc. irrespective of any other consideration.
2. Bhikkhunis could not observe the annual retreat (*vassa*) in a district where there were no *Bhikkhus*.
3. *Bhikkhus* had to set the dates for *Bhikkhuni Uposatha* ceremonies.

4. Confession transgression by *Bhikkhunis* had to be done before the assembly of both *Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis*.
5. Certain judicial processes in case of *Bhikkhunis* had to be undertaken by both the *Sanghas*.
6. *Upasampadâ* initiation of *Bhikkhunis* should be given by the *Bhikkhu sangha* as well.
7. A *Bhikkhuni* should never abuse a *Bhikkhu*.
8. *Bhikkhus* can officially admonish *Bhikkhunis*, but not vice versa.

It is that Buddha made women inferior to men by enforcing these eight *Garudhammas*. But it is not true that Buddha enforced eight *Garudhammas* to keep women inferior to men. Buddha understood long before that the permission of giving ordination of women will create complexity in the *Sangha*. Buddha enforced the eight rules for the welfare of *Bhikkhunis* and it was only for time being. When many *Bhikkhunis* became accomplished to teach *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, he withdrew the eight conditions from them. But the question arose why Buddha laid down such conditions for the first time. These were imposed on them because there were not any *Bhikkhuni* who had sufficient skill regarding *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*. This was why, to wipe out their ego in learning *Dhamma*, he ascribed the first condition. Later he accepted the request of Gautami regarding the salutation to take place equally to both *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* according to seniority. Buddha thought not to make the *Bhikkhunis* guardian less all of a sudden. This is why, he introduced the second rule. Most of the women of that time used to depend on men for their work in mundane life. Rule three was introduced so that it becomes easier for *Bhikkhuni* to maintain program schedule. Later Buddha amended this rule and gave right to *Bhikkhunis* to maintain program schedule by themselves. Rule four was introduced so that people would not get scope to condemn *Bhikkhunis* or would not get scope to arise any difficulty against confession of *Bhikkhunis* later on. For this, Buddha gave rules three and four to save the reputation of *Bhikkhuni Sangha*. Rule five was introduced so that if any *Bhikkhuni* offence *Āpatiya* (violation of rules from *Vinaya*), it can be judged cautiously. The new *Bhikkhunis* would not be capable to judge that kind of difficulty. To establish the unity between two *Sanghas*, Buddha applied rule six, where it was mentioned that *Bhikkhuni* would take *Upasampada* before both *Sanghas*. To control the behaviour of *Bhikkhuni*, rule seven was introduced. And rule eight was introduced so that new unskilled *Bhikkhuni* cannot say anything negative to the *Bhikkhu* who would teach them *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*. From the above discussion, it was just to introduce *Garudhammas* in that time by Buddha. When Buddha realized that *Bhikkhunis* could run their *Sangha* efficiently and became skilled enough to teach *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, Buddha withdrew the *Garudhammas* for all *Bhikkhunis*. So, Buddha introduced *Garudhammas* to save the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* but not to keep them subordinate to men. Buddha accepted women's access to *Sangha* because he couldn't ignore the potentiality of women who can become enlightened if he gives the chance. That was definitely a great sacrifice of Gautama for women [Ven. Shilalankar Mahathero, 1979]. Buddha tried to make *Bhikkhuni Sangha* skilled enough to work independently. The *Bhikkhunis* were allowed to

preach the Dharma like the *Bhikkhus*. Buddha considered *Bhikkhuni Sangha* like as *Bhikkhu Sangha*. The Buddha gave woman an independent status and places her on a footing of equality with men. According to Ambedkar, “no caste, no equality, no superiority: all are equal. That is the Buddha stood for”. Buddhism is a religion of humanity and is a religion of welfare of human beings (*Bahu jana hitaya and bahu jana sukhaya*). He gave his teachings to human beings so that their suffering can be removed. The main motto of his teachings was to bring happiness for human beings and make them free from sufferings. Being ordained in Buddhism, women developed themselves not only in spiritualism but also in creativity in the early Buddhist era.

Religious Freedom for Women

The establishment of the *Bhikkhuni Sangha*, the Order of Nuns, had really paved the way for full religious freedom for women in the days of the Buddha. Buddhist practice has no place for ritual. It is in the conduct of rituals in most religions that sex-typing becomes important and questions of precedence, ritual purity and the like arise. Later developments, in some Buddhist countries, have seen the emergence of some ritual, but even this kind of simple ritual has not involved any typing by the sex of the devotee. Buddhist ritual usually involves simple forms of worship or chanting or symbolic offerings, and all these are available to men and women on equal terms. In this connection it must also be mentioned that Buddhism has no place for a priestly class. Buddhist monks are sometimes mistakenly referred to as “Buddhist priests”. The role of the priest in religious life is to officiate between the faithful and the God, and Buddhism being essentially atheistic has no place for God or priest. In practice Buddhist monks have assumed some kind of priestly role as when they recite stanzas of blessings to the lay followers. This is part of the process by which Buddhism has been made into a religion, but it was not one in its original form.

There were many eminent nuns who shone brilliantly in the study and practice of the Dhamma. The Buddha did not place any restrictions on the nuns in the matter of teaching and preaching of the Dhamma. The *Bhikkhuni Order* produced a remarkable number of brilliant preachers and exponents of the Dhamma e.g. Sukha, Patachara, Khema, Dhammadinna and Maha Pajapati (the foster mother of the Buddha). Buddhism never supported the Brahmin's view that a son was essential for the father's passage to heaven. Daughters became quite as good as sons and marriage was no longer a compulsory necessity. Women under Buddhism had the liberty to lead an independent life and go through their own business. The Buddha by granting women an active share in the religious life also helped to raise their status in secular life as well. However, the admission of women into the Order was a step in advance for the period. Whenever an innovation or improvement was in advance of the thinking and development of a people during a particular era, the people were unable to adapt themselves to the improved conditions and tended to regress back to the society that they were used to.

Women movement in Early Buddhist Society

Women through their work and efforts become prolific in Buddha's time. The stories of some women of Bhikkhuni Sangha, who had significant contributions in establishing the rights of women in the society of Buddha's time, such as, *Mahaprajapati Gautami*, *Visakha*, *Kondhol Keshi*, *Sanghamitra*, *Patachara*, *Bhikkhuni Chala* etc., proved that women could achieve Nirvana and work independently with dignity.

The first important woman was *Mahaprajapati Gautami*, foster mother of Buddha. After the death of her husband, King Suddhandana, she was determined to leave home, and consequently prayed for ordination. Buddha denied her proposal for the first time. Some also criticized Buddha for not approving the proposal of Gautami the first time. But Buddha knew that he had to grant authorization in future to allow women access into Sangha.

After being refused, Gautami became very upset but did not lose heart. When five hundred women of Shakkya dynasty heard that Gautami went to Buddha for ordination, they also requested her to include them with her. *Yasodhara*, the Buddha's wife, also entered the Order of Monks and Nuns, after Buddha left his home for enlightenment. She was ordained as bhikkhuni, attained the state of an arahata, and also followed with five hundred women. Then, Gautami got back her courage and was confident that Buddha would not discard the request of so many women. To prove that how strong they were in their will, she included the five hundred women of Shakkya dynasty who shaved their heads and wore yellow dresses and started for Vaishali bare foot. They became exhausted walking such a long way and their feet were bleeding but, they didn't move from their aim. At last, they all reached to the monastery of Buddha safely. Ananda became very upset seeing their condition. Gautami again pleaded with Buddha for authorization, but Buddha remained unmoved and refused her proposal for the second time. Hearing this, Gautami became very upset. Seeing no hope, Gautami requested Ananda to plead with Buddha again for the third time on their behalf. This time, Buddha permitted their prayer on eight conditions (Garudhammas). Gautami knew well that Buddha was omniscient and well-wisher for all beings. He would not give any terms that would let them suffer. So, she accepted eight conditions without any hesitation for entering into the Sangha. And thus, they got access into Bhikkhuni Sangha. The stamina and temperament of Gautami was amazing. She did not care that the journey was long and her bleeding feet also could not stop her. This made Gautami the pioneer of women's revolution in early Buddhist period, and Bhikkhuni Sangha was established as the first social organization. Mahapajapati Gautami after ordination took to meditation under the direct supervision of Buddha and soon attained perfection. She lived up to the age of one hundred and twenty and was declared by Buddha to be the oldest and the most experienced of ordained nuns (*rattannunam*).

Visakha was another pioneer woman among the patrons of early Buddhism. She was a very prominent upasika (housewife) and portrayed in Vinayapitaka and Nikaya. She patronized Buddhism with all her efforts and contributed to the welfare of Sangha. She used to serve many Buddhist monks with food and other necessities daily. Her tremendous contribution was the 'Purbaram Monastery' which cost 270 million gold coins to build. Buddha spent more than sixteen years in this sacred temple and used to preach Dhamma there. Rahul Sankrityayana pointed out that she had also made a charity worth of twenty seven crores in the cause of Sangha. Besides such philanthropic deeds she vigorously took interest in the activities of the Sangha. She was the first and perhaps the last lady in the Buddhist community to promulgate eight laws, for the monks which were sanctioned by the Buddha and incorporated in the Vinaya laws. Visakha helped the Buddhist monastery in various ways and became part of Sangha. She was not only respectful to Sangha but also encouraged other women to be respectful to Sangha. She always helped other women to perform Dana with perfection. Whenever any woman comes to her for help or advice, she used to help them with all her efforts. She also performed social work. Buddha gave her the highest position among all female devotees and for her endless gifts she was complimented as the foremost women donor.

Kondhol Keshi was a woman of intellect, wisdom and equivalent to the quality of men. She was born in the house of royal treasure guard. One day, some town watchmen were carrying a young, handsome thief to the slaughter house to kill him by the order of king. The young pretty girl, Kundol Keshi fell in love at first sight. She forced her father to make him free otherwise she would die. By seeing no other alternative way, her father saved the life of thief by offering huge amount of bribe. But the thief was wicked in nature and planned to kill Kundol for her gold and money she brought with her. Kundol realized it and killed him by means of wisdom and got ordained. She also dared to challenge men in knowledge at that time. She became so skilled in debate that she declared open challenge to everyone and defeated many learned persons in debate. At last, she was defeated by *Sariputra*, the chief disciple of Buddha, and ordained as *Bhikkhuni*. She achieved her goal by listening only one verse from Buddha.

Another famous Buddhist lady was *Sanghamitra*, daughter of the emperor, Asoka. He requested her to renounce the world and she became a nun. She became a very successful nun and she was a well wisher of all the people and cared for their benefit and happiness. She was the first women missionary of India who went abroad to propagate the religious teaching at Sri Lanka. During her stay in the island she did many religious works for the propagation of Buddhism. The credit goes to Sanghamitra for establishing Bikkhuni Sangha of a very high order. She became a very popular figure and everyone respected her. She died at the age of fifty nine and King Uttiya of Lanka constructed a stupa over relics. This stupa was known as Thuparama puratha.

Patachara was a useful example for the women of all ages. She got married against the will of her parents and wanted to be happy. But she suffered a lot after the marriage which is indescribable in words. One by one, she lost her husband, two sons and her parents in different natural disasters. Her life story taught us that we can't be happy in conjugal life if we marry against the will of our parents. This kind of incident continues to occur today. After losing all of her family members she became abnormal and started to move here and there in nude. Then she took protection under the supreme tranquillity of Buddhism and understood the unsteady worldly life. She became a Bhikkhuni under the great compassion of Buddha. She achieved the highest place in Bhikkhuni Sangha as the expert in the rules of Vinaya and was praised by Buddha as the foremost of the female Vinaya reciters. Her name Patachara — *patu* (proficient) in *achara* (duties) — was very likely given for her strict adherence to the Vinaya rules. She had great contribution in teaching Vinaya to the Bhikkhunis. She trained thirty nuns and guided them in the way in which she attained perfection. Her movement in the quest of happiness was superb. She is a figurative example to all the women of all ages and her life story shows how one can get freedom from sufferings and wishes.

Bhikkhuni Chala was the younger sister of Sariputra, chief disciple of Buddha. One day, Bhikkhuni Chala entered into a forest after taking her meal and then Mara, the devil one, tried to persuade her to leave monk life. He used to come to her frequently and tried his best to tempt her to leave the Bhikkhuni Sangha. He told her that it was useless to lead a nun life because it was full of sacrifice. He advised her to marry and enjoy life. In response to his proposal, Chala recited attributes of Buddha and Dhamma. By this, being disappointed, Mara left the place and Chala came into victory over the devil. Her story teaches us if we practise true teaching of Dhamma, Mara can't win over us. She also became successful to achieve nirvana.

The above mentioned women played a great role in social change and mobility. They were able to show that the role and contribution of women in social reform is optimistic and praiseworthy.

Women's entrance to the Monastic Life

In the early Indian society the status of men and women was not equal. Manu was liable to hamper the dignity of women and this was the actual situation of the women of pre-Buddhist period. Dr. Ambedkar quotes, "Who was responsible for their (woman's) fall? It was Manu, the law giver of the Hindus. There can be no other answer" [Dr. Satyapal Bhikkhu: 2006]. In the Indian teaching method bearing unique features and extra ordinary personality Gautama appeared before this universe and he removed the false notions from the mind of people. In Samyutta Nikaya (Combined Nikaya), Buddha said, "Voriacha Porama sokha" i.e. wives are faithful friends. Moreover, in Anguttara Nikaya it is said that wives are trustworthy in keeping mysteries and secret [Dr. Satyapal Bhikkhu: 2006]. 'It was the first time in the history of world religions that Buddha proclaimed spiritual equality of all races, castes, classes and genders' [Dhammananda Bhikkhuni: 2009]. Buddha was the first founder who dared to give highest honour to the women by giving

them permission to enter into the monastic life. In establishing Bhikkhuni Sangha, the contribution of Gautami is immense. Being refused for the first time, she did not lose patience and ultimately in co-operation with Ananda, she became successful. The effort of Gautami is ever memorable because if Buddha would expired prior to giving permission to establish Bhikkhuni Sangha; this would have never been possible. Hence in establishing Bhikkhuni Sangha, Gautami was the pioneer. At first, women's access to monastic life was a troublesome task but when it was established, all the earlier complexities were over. Women's access to the monastic life was a realistic and just decision of Buddha. Thus, all women got inspired from her and since then they have been trying to keep the balance till today. In many cases, they were able to eradicate superstition from human society and Vishaka is a splendid example. Under the leadership of Gautami, the Bhikkhuni Sangha lasted for many years. Indeed many ups and downs in Bhikkhuni Sangha are noticed from Buddha's existence to till today.

Women's Position in Buddhist Societies

Buddhism evoked considerable interest irrespective of gender. There is ample historical evidence to establish the participation of women in all religious observances and activities from the very inception of Buddhism without any hindrance. Several rulers honoured their mothers and wives by naming temples and monasteries after them. The naming of temples and monasteries after females apparently did not bother the resident monks. There were also no restrictions on female employment in monasteries up to the medieval times. There were no religious taboos with respect to women. So, it is clear that women did not lead protected lives. While the women of the upper classes took part both in politics and religion; all women rich or poor took part in religion freely and devoutly. In Buddhism death is considered to be a natural and inevitable end. As a result woman suffers no moral degradation on account of her widowhood. In Buddhist societies a widow was not called upon to advertise her widowhood by shaving her head and relinquishing her ornaments nor was she required to undergo self mortification or pay any penances. There was no barrier to her remarriage. They also had the right to remarry after divorce. It is, therefore, clear that Buddhism saved women from suffering various indignities, granted them near equality with men and retrieved the widow from misery. Another important status that the women in Buddhist societies enjoyed was the non segregation of the sexes. Segregation of the sexes in many non Buddhist societies has resulted in the seclusion and confinement of women behind veils and walls.

The Buddhist injunctions on the marital relationship are reciprocal containing mutual rights and obligations. Among Buddhists, marriage is a contract between equals. However, in Buddhist societies, there is a facade of husband domination. On the subject of terminating a marriage contract it is seen that in most cultures the woman is irretrievably bound by the chains of matrimony while the man can shed his shackles easily. In Buddhism marriage received no religious sanction and in the absence of a Buddhist legal code like

the laws of Manu of the Hindus or the Sharia law of the Muslims, the dissolution of the marriage contract was settled by the individuals concerned or their families. Down the ages women in Buddhist societies have enjoyed equal status as Buddhism does not consider women to be inferior to men. In fact, the husband is admonished to consider the wife as a friend, a companion and a partner.

The present day liberal attitude towards women is a trend that has continued from the remote past obviously under Buddhist influence. The position of women in many Buddhist countries especially in Thailand and Myanmar has been as favourable as in Sri Lanka. This is in direct contrast to the position of women in several non-Buddhist societies as evinced by the veiled women of Islamic societies, the zenanas where high class Indian ladies lived in seclusion, the harems of imperial China in which thousands of concubines lived guarded by eunuchs and the devadasis of India who in the name of God were forced into a life of prostitution. Thus, compared with the neighbouring Hindu and Islamic society's women in Buddhist societies have enjoyed a much higher degree of freedom, independence and more often than not even equality of status.

Buddhist Contributions to Feminist Philosophy

Generally, empowerment of woman means the self-realization of woman and her active participation in decision making, in her social and personal life. At the level of theory, it is possible to think that woman can realize herself and play a significant role in personal and social life, but at the level of practice it is not possible because at this level, empowerment is not only related to her abilities and capacities but also to the customs, traditions and religious practices that either provide or restrict the space for her to bloom. They are the decisive factors which not only do not allow her to participate in decision-making but to play an important role in her social life. This shows that although empowerment is theoretically possible, it is not possible practically due to some problems. Buddhist philosophy helps to solve these issues.

Buddhism seems to be the first system of thought, which has given importance to the spiritual and intellectual development of society and woman. Generally it is believed that in male-centred society, a woman is subordinate and a man is dominant. It is further believed that in this society all social and ethical norms, rules and sanctions have been formed out of male interest and hence if we bring certain changes in social structure then woman will not have problems. For example, in this context, it may be argued that if we go from patriarchal society where a man is the central figure to matriarchal society where a woman is the central figure, then woman will not have problems.

But this is not acceptable in the Buddhist system. Buddhists believe that social structure is not necessarily responsible for woman's problems but the *jneyavarana* and *klesavarana* of the society and that of woman are responsible for her problems. In the Buddhist system of thought, if the woman and society

have *jneyavarana* and *klesavarana*, then woman will have problems even if we go from patriarchal to matriarchal society. So, from the Buddhist perspective, if we want to solve the woman's problem, it is not enough to make a change in the social structure, but it is also necessary to remove the *jneyavarana* and *klesavarana* of the woman and the society. In Buddhism, there are two *avaranas* or perspectives, namely, *klesavarana* and *jneyavarana*. *Klesavarana* is that sort of perspective which is related to the individual's knowledge about herself and *jneyavarana* is that sort of perspective which is related to the individual's knowledge about the external world on the one hand and to the external world's knowledge about the individual on the other hand. From the Buddhist perspective, due to the *klesavarana* and *jneyavarana*, there is a gap between theoretical and practical aspects of empowerment. If the *klesavarana* and *jneyavarana* is removed then the gap between the two aspects of empowerment may be removed, and a woman can enjoy her empowerment in the true sense of the term.

This is the important contribution of Buddhism to feminist philosophy that it does not give much importance to making certain changes in the society but it gives importance to making mental and spiritual changes in woman and society. Whereas the former are superficial and hence temporary, the latter are fundamental and lasting.

Further, it is also believed that the woman can be empowered if education is given to her and if she will be economically independent. However, the empirical evidence has shown that it is not the case. This is because she is still a slave of customs and traditions. Hence mere education and economic independence of woman are not sufficient. It is suggested in Buddhism that if woman has to empower herself it is necessary to make changes in her mind so that she can have enough confidence to break traditional and social barriers. She should take enough efforts to remove cultural and social bondage by realizing her true nature. This thought is not only advocated in Buddhism, but it is also actualized in it. *Therigatha* is its striking example. *Therigatha* is a collection of the poems written by Buddhist nuns. These nuns have described the social and family background from which they have come. They have explained how they have realized the ultimate truth and have made themselves free from suffering. Thus, this shows that Buddhism has not only advocated that woman should be empowered but it has also provided the opportunities for her self-realization. Buddhism seems to be the first religion where woman's right for self-realization has not only been accepted in principle but has also been actualized in practice.

Buddhism, by accepting that every human being is composed of five elements, has advocated the equality between man and woman and thus transcended their gender difference. It treats man and woman on par with each other. This shows that Buddhist thought does not believe in the dualistic model of man and woman for solving the problems of woman. The dualistic model accepts that there is a gender difference between man and woman, which is imposed by male-dominating culture. It means gender difference is a cultural construction and whatever is constructed or imposed is not accepted as the real nature of the object

in Buddhism. Buddhists accept that whatever is real is free from any sort of constructions. Construction is a sort of *jneyavarana*.

Hence, within the framework of Buddhist thought, it can be said that instead of solving the woman's problem through attempts based on a dualistic model, it is better to transcend this difference and accept that each individual is an aggregation of *panchaskandha*, he is a unique individual. Each individual, either man or woman has good as well as bad qualities. Accordingly, he or she is morally good or bad. Buddhism has not only advocated this thought but through the dialogues between Mara, one of the symbolic men, and the Buddhist nuns, Buddha has shown that it is possible.

Conclusion

Thus, we may conclude that the advent of Buddha and the emergence of Buddhism opened a new horizon for women in society. By the inspiration of all women and with the counter-plea of Buddha, the women got the right of doing the work according to their will. In fact, the establishment of *Bhikkhunis Sangha* was very important to bring social change for women. Buddhist Era is the golden age for women's education and movement. But after the great passing of Buddha, *Bhikkhunis* again started to face the problem and slowly it was extinct in 11th and 12th century.

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