

Liberation of Women Religion Historical Study Age of Buddhism

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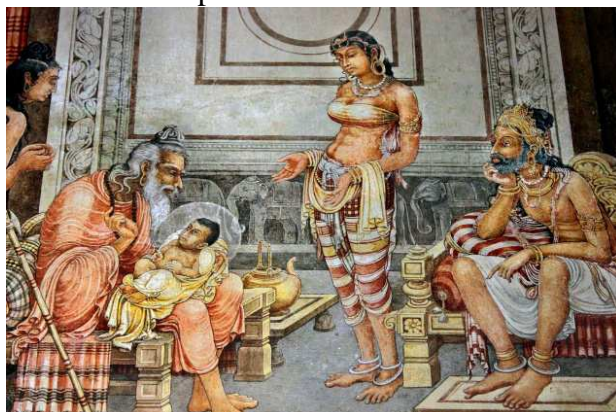
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Abstract

Buddhism is not a pop religion” Scholar of religious studies Perry Schmidt-Leukel of the Cluster of Excellence presents a comprehensive introduction to the history of the present Buddhism – author refutes many Western clichés – “take off rose-coloured glasses” – Buddhism was and is less peaceful than thought – not a religion “without god” discrimination against women – environmental protection ambivalent – tense relationship towards Western principles such as liberalism and human rights. Buddhism too much through “rose-coloured glasses” it “Whereas perceived as pessimistic and nihilistic before and to a certain degree still today, many clichés now prevail of Buddhism as an easy pop religion, peaceable and tolerant, as a spirituality without dogmas and beliefs, even without god,” the scholar of religious studies and Anglican theologian Prof. Dr. Perry Schmidt-Leukel of the University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics“ describes in his new introductory volume “Buddhismus verstehen Understanding Buddhism”, now published in German by Gütersloher Verlagshaus. Buddhism is often not even considered as a religion in the West, but “as a psychology of wisdom, a lifestyle or a stylish worldview, particularly suited for the somewhat slackened, but wealthy, post-modern intellectual.”

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This may also be attributed to the dissatisfaction ecclesial forms of Christianity, but has nothing to do with the reality today’s Asian Buddhism and classic Buddhism, the scholar explains, who does research on the relationship of the world religions towards each other at the Cluster of Excellence. At the Cluster of Excellence Prof. Dr. Perry Schmidt-Leukel heads the project C2-16 “Interreligious Theology”. He has published many works on this subject. Recently a compendium on the relationship between Buddhists and Christians in Asian countries marked by Buddhism, “Buddhist-Christian Relations in Asia”, was published in English by EOS Editions in Sankt Ottilien. (dak/vvm) The role of women in Buddhism is ambivalent according to Schmidt-Leukel. “Whereas the Buddhist teaching does allow the equal treatment of men and women in religion, this has not been the practice for a long time.” Early Buddhism established the order of nuns and thus enabled women to take a religious path of life. “The nuns however it subordinated to the Buddhist monks in almost every respect and were even made responsible for the decline of Buddha’s teachings.”

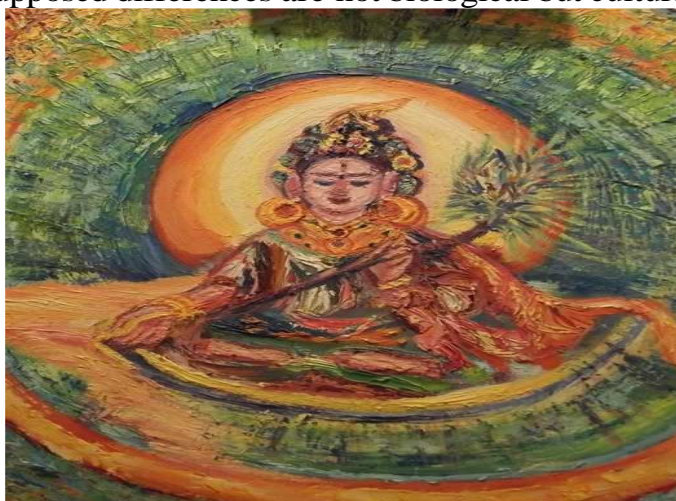


Women of means Mother & Child with Celikatte (Servant made) Sri Lanka along with the Bodhi tree in the 3rd century BCE. Today, both the faith and the venerated tree continue to flourish there. Text and photographs by BENOY K. BEHL

The Buddhist tradition also asserts “a Buddha needs be male”. A woman thus can only become a Buddha after being reincarnated as a man. “From today’s perspective, this male bias is conflicting with the Buddhist principles of ‘detachment from all forms’. It is a fact that Buddhism is one of the oldest religions of the world. It represents a very profound philosophical system of central and eastern Asia.⁸⁶ It has been known as one of the most peaceful religions, which brings out the message of love, wisdom, and liberation of the Buddha for all living beings. Buddhism retains about influence of the previous currents of thought and culture, especially the Sama a (Sanskrit, drama). According to Y. Masih, Buddhism is truly a non-Vedic Indian religion accepting the fourfold pillar of karma-sa s raja na-mukti.⁸⁸ Buddhism revolves around the life and teachings of Lord Buddha and is widely known to hold that liberation achieved through one’s efforts without appealing to any supernatural agency.

Woman’s liberation and her social role are questions often discussed today. Therefore it is not impertinent to see how early Buddhism looked at woman and her liberation in general and how it defined her social role in particular, against the contemporary social milieu in North India. Every culture in the world expects men and women of that culture to play their respective gender roles assigned to them by that culture. Because the human species also, just as other species, is divided into two fundamental divisions: ‘male and female or ‘man’ and ‘woman’, on biological grounds based on sex distinction. But as we know, ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are secondary non-biological classifications, resulting in individual effect of what one has become due to the socialization process. As accepted in every culture, social roles of males and females are gender roles defined in relation to their behavior, dressing, hairstyle, occupation, department, duties and obligations.

Gender roles may differ from culture to culture. Sociologically, the social status of males and females are unequal and based on the social norms of that particular culture. Because of this fact, today, women’s movements throughout the world, basing their arguments on scientific findings, challenge the feasibility of roles assigned to them traditionally and assert that supposed differences are not biological but cultural.



Women in Buddhism

The Buddhist concept of liberation may be deeply illustrated through the life of The Buddha and His teachings (Dhamma). In order to highlight it the present chapter is subdivided into four parts, namely, (1) the Enlightenment of the Buddha, (2) The Buddhist concept of liberation, (3) Three Characteristics of Buddhism, and (4) the Doctrine of Dependent Origination. I. The Enlightenment of the Buddha 1. The Social Condition Before the Arising of Buddhism In order to understand the Enlightenment that the Buddha attained, the understanding of the social condition is necessary. During the sixth century B.C., Indian society, politics, and especially religions faced certain changes. **Unequal Treatment and Discrimination of Women in Traditional Indian Society.** In any society where the male plays the dominant role, the female is given a subordinate position. Victory in battle and heroic sons to fight enemies, were two of the aspirations of the Ancient Indo-Aryans. It has been said in the Buddhist texts that the Buddha won a deadly battle with Māra before he became a Buddha. There are five kinds of Māra as described in the Buddha's teachings, namely (i) Deity (devaputta), (ii) Passion (kilesa), (iii) Kammic activities (abhisankhara), (iv) Aggregates (Khandhas), and (v) Death (Maccu) along with their ten armies of sense-desires, aversion, hunger and thirst, etc. According to some scholars most of the battles with Māra were really a psychological struggle with secular temptations.¹⁰⁸ Every genuine Buddhist must realize the fact that the path of liberation is likened to be the struggle against the forces of one's own evil desires.

The deeply venerated tree is at Anuradhapura in central Sri Lanka and it may be the oldest recorded living tree in the world. It stood at Bodhgaya since at least the 6th century BCE. The cutting brought by Sanghamitra was planted in Anuradhapura in 249 BCE by the king of Sri Lanka who called himself Devanampiyatissa, meaning "Beloved of the divine". He was following a tradition of not using his name. This was a time when no portraits were made in Indic art and the names of artists were not put on their works. Our ephemeral personalities were not considered important. The higher purpose of life was to lose the sense of the self, the ego, and to recognise the 'maya' or 'mithya', the world of illusory forms, around us. The Bodhi tree marks a most wonderful and unique interaction between two countries. In fact, when the tree at the original site in India was no more, it was grown again from a cutting of the tree in Sri Lanka. The two countries have jointly kept the tree and its tradition alive.

The ideology of Sexism versus Changing Social Roles: What we see today is something different from what had been attributed to each sex from the time of recorded history. The traditional status assigned to the sexes has been violated to a greater extent; specially the traditional gender role of females has been challenged and changed today, due to the participation of many women in economic activity.

Place of Women in Buddhism

The place and role of women in Buddhism may be considered in several ways.

1. The doctrinal statements relating to gender in the Buddhist teaching (which Buddhists call Dhamma/Dharma

2. The position of women in the religious and the secular life in India before the Buddha's time with that after;
3. Whether the Buddha's teaching accords to women a position different to that accorded to men, as is the case in some other religions;
4. 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;
5. The part played by women in the early history of Buddhism, notably during the Buddha's own time;
6. The circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Order of Nuns (*Bhikkhunis*);
7. The influence of Buddhism on the position of women in the countries where Buddhism became a living presence. It is not possible to consider all these questions in an article, of this length, so the treatment of the subject has to be selective.

The new Order had its own rules of discipline (the Vinaya) which for the most part corresponded to the Vinaya for Bhikkhus, but there were eight special rules which have remained contentious and which are seen as making the Bhikkhuni Order subordinate to the Bhikkhu Order. These rules were:

1. Bhikkhus were always to have precedence over Bhikkhunis in matters of salutation, etc.
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 Uposatha ceremonies (convocations of the Order).
4. Confession transgression by Bhikkhunis had to be done before the assembly of both Orders.
5. Certain judicial processes in case of Bhikkhunis had to be undertaken by both Orders.
6. The higher initiation (Upasampad) of Bhikkhunis should be given by both Orders.
7. A Bhikkhuni should never abuse a Bhikkhu.
8. Bhikkhus can officially admonish Bhikkhunis, but not vice versa.

These rules related to the internal administration of the Bhikkhuni Order, and made it in some respects subordinate to the Bhikkhu Order. 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.



Importance of Group Women

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 Bhikkhnis considered separately, any individual Bhikkhuni would rank lower than any Bhikkhu however junior the latter may be. It is not surprising that it was from this rule that Prajapati Gotami sought exemption (unsuccessfully despite the support of Ananda). There were distinguished exponents of the Dhamma like Dhammadinnā, scions of noble or merchant families like Bhadda Kuṇḍalkesa, Sujāta, and Anopama, not to mention those of humbler origins like Punnika the slave girl, or Chanda the daughter of a poor Brahmin. The actual numbers of Theras involved is not known. Paṭācāra is credited with having 500 personal followers, and there are several unnamed Theras to whom sayings are attributed it was continued from the ancient traditional Buddhist impotence for women.

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