



Gender Equality in Buddha's Teaching

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Abstract: Buddhism emerged in the 6th century BCE in India, during a period of rigid social hierarchies, including gender-based inequalities. While many ancient traditions denied women spiritual agency, the Buddha introduced radical ideas that challenged patriarchal norms. His decision to ordain women as bhikkhunīs (nuns) and his insistence that women were equally capable of attaining enlightenment signified a revolutionary step in religious history. This paper explores gender equality in the teachings of the Buddha, examining scriptural sources, historical developments, debates on monastic roles, and the contemporary relevance of his vision.

Keywords: Ancient India, Sangha, Bhikkhunīs, Therīgāthā, Eight Garudhammas, Nirvana,

1. Introduction

The issue of gender equality has been a major concern among human beings over the centuries. In many cultures and in the context of most religious practices, the sphere of women has been limited to their roles of domestic, social, and family duties, whereas roles of power, both spiritual and temporal, were considered the preserve of men. The Indian subcontinent of the sixth century BCE has had a social structure that was largely patriarchal and hierarchical with the Brahmanical system confining the education of women, their ritual attendance and social participation. It is in this socio-cultural environment that the Buddha emerged whose lessons completely changed the attitude to spiritual possibilities and human dignity. The Buddha proposed a doctrine of spiritual democracy unmatched during his time, by insisting that liberation (nirvana) was accessible to everyone, regardless of the caste, gender or social status.

Unlike most religion practices, Buddhism establishes that enlightenment is a matter of personal effort, moral behavior and understanding of the real sense of existence, but not birth or sex. The fact that the Buddha accepted women into the

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monastic community (sangha) was ground-breaking, given that women were not otherwise permitted any formal spiritual avenues. His schooling of the bhikkhuni-sangha (order of nuns) gave women a means of entering renunciation, learning and liberation in an orderly way. It did not only defy patriarchal orthodoxy, it also formed the basis of some of the earliest documentation of female voices in spiritual literature, the most famous of which was the Therigatha (Verses of the Elder Nuns).

Nevertheless, the tale of gender equality in Buddhism is not clear. The introduction of the garudhammas, eight “heavy regulations” that place nuns under monks, has been seen by several other scholars to be an effort to compromise with the social norms of the day and, as a result, whether the Buddhist vision of an egalitarian society was ever achieved as an institution or was institutionally watered down. In addition, the eventual degradation of the bhikkhuni order in various Buddhist traditions, particularly, in Theravada Buddhist countries, has continued to create disparities in the roles and status of women in the Buddhist communities.

The problem of gender equality within the teachings of the Buddha therefore poses a paradox: the scriptures on the one hand confirm the ability of women to reach the highest spiritual realms, whereas, on the other, historical and institutional traditions tended to support the domination of males. This strain has been maintained in the discourse of Buddhism today, especially in the process of feminist reinterpretations and reformist movements to renew the place of women in the Buddhist practice.

The importance of reconsidering this theme is not just related to the comprehension of the past of Buddhism but also the realization of its applicability to the current fight to achieve gender justice. With the world struggling to overcome the equality, inclusion and empowerment challenges, the teachings of the Buddha are both inspiring and challenging. At the philosophical level, religious teachings like anatta (non-self) break up fixed identities including gender, which point in a direction that leads to liberation that goes beyond worldly differences. At the practical level, the acknowledgment of women as being able to enlighten and lead offers a precedent that can be used to redefine spiritual communities that recognize equality.

The article attempts to discuss gender equality within the teaching of Buddha in a multi-dimensional context: the historical status of women in ancient India, the acknowledgement of spiritual potential of women in Buddhist teachings, the formation and the struggles of the bhikkhuni-sangha, the role of female exemplars in Buddhist scriptures, and the more recent application of the teachings in a contemporary context to enhance gender justice. Through the dimensions, it is hoped that the study will

help to point out the progressive vision of the Buddha as well as the long-standing difficulties in the interpretation of this vision into institutional reality.

2. Historical Context of Women in Ancient India

In order to comprehend the revolutionary character of the fact that the Buddha acknowledged the spiritual potential of women, one should first place his teachings in the context of the socio-cultural realities of ancient India. The sixth century BCE period was a time when the Indian society was highly influenced by the Brahmanical orthodoxy and Vedic traditions that stressed on purity of rituals, caste system, and patriarchal control. The social role of women was solely based on being daughters, wives and mothers and they were not judged by their social value but rather on their child bearing capabilities.¹

Women were at least partially involved in philosophical arguments, spiritual searching in the Vedic period (there is some evidence of women in the Vedic period, including Gargi and Maitreyi), but by the later Vedic and early Brahmanical period (c. 800-500 BCE), the autonomy of women had greatly diminished. Only men received education in the sacred texts (the Vedas), and women were more and more excluded in the religious sacrifices and rituals. Later but extremely influential legal texts like the Manusmṛti codified the subordination of women by stating the woman must be under the protection of her father when a child, under the protection of her husband when a young woman and under the protection of her son when old.²

This was a common cultural belief that women were spiritual inferior beings who could not gain liberation. Most orthodox schools saw women as hindrances to ascetic effort, incarcerations of temptation, creatures with whom they had to be reborn as men before they could attend to higher spiritual purposes.³

Other contemporary traditions, like Jainism and the Ajivikas, also bore the marks of the prejudices of the day, but the Buddha's move to grant full status to women as truth-seekers and his creation of the bhikkhuni-sangha are nonetheless radical steps out of the ordinary. The Buddha extended the definition of human dignity and spiritual democracy in ways that had not previously been seen by giving women a religious and intellectual life beyond domesticity.

3. The Buddha's Stand on Women and Spiritual Equality

The attitude of the Buddha towards women was a practical acknowledgement of the social conditions of his period with a deep philosophical dedication to spiritual equality. His teachings also stressed that enlightenment can be attained by all human

beings not dependent on birth, caste, or gender and this doctrine came to confront established hierarchies.⁴

The gift of enlightenment belongs universally, without any distinction, to the human mind.

The key idea of the Buddha doctrine is that liberation (nirvana) is not determined by the gender or social status of a person but by the development of their moral virtues (sila), concentration (samadhi), and wisdom (panna).⁵ It is documented in the Pali Canon that there are many examples of women who reached the highest levels of realization. Even Mahapajapati Gotami, the foster mother of the Buddha; Khema, the sage of wisdom; Uppalavanna--the queen of the meditative art--were recognized as arahants--fully enlightened individuals.

The Buddha acknowledged the voice of women as commanding, as the Therigatha (Verses of the Elder Nuns) is one of the earliest collections of female spiritual poetry in world history, in which women conquer grief and social stigma, widowhood and the oppression of domestic duties in order to realize spiritual freedom. These examples literally conflict with the doctrine of the day or age that put women in the spiritual lowest rungs or dependants.

The order of Bhikkhuni was established.

Bhikkhuni-sangha (order of nuns) was one of the most radical initiatives of the ministry of the Buddha. The first woman who requested ordination was Mahapajapati Gotami. At first the Buddha hesitated perhaps because he feared social opposition and the viability of a women order in a patriarchal world.⁶ It was only then that he agreed upon the persuasion of his close disciple Ananda.

This foundation of the bhikkhuni order established the first institutionalized community of women renunciants in the world who had equal access to the path of liberation, monastic discipline and spiritual achievement without the limitations of family responsibilities. Though trained with some other guidelines (the garudhammas), the existence of the order per se was a revolutionary claim of the right to religious life among women.

The equal treatment of teachings recognizes that all individuals are created equal regardless of their religious beliefs or moral principles. Equality in Teachings All individuals have been created equal irrespective of their religious orientation or moral values.

In addition to institutional acknowledgement, Buddhist teachings of the Buddha recognize women with spiritual power. The Therigatha is one of the best remembrances of the women power in the early Buddhism, as it displays their voices as a representative of spiritual truth.⁷

The importance of these recognitions is that they challenge the patriarchal belief that the religious lives of women were the lesser or the lesser. Rather, the Buddha depicted women as extraordinary and able role models of the Dharma. The Buddha legitimized the experiences women lived through and made them spiritual leaders and thus created a basis of gender equality many centuries before others.

4. Challenges to Gender Equality in Buddhist Monasticism

The fact that the Buddha acknowledged women as able to achieve spiritual enlightenment and the creation of the bhikkhuni-sangha was radical. Nonetheless, the history of Buddhist monasticism is also characterized by compromises, contestations and institutional practices that made the concept of equality more complicated. Three key problems, which are the introduction of the garudhammas, the deterioration of the bhikkhuni order, and the difference in interpretation between the traditions, exemplify the problems that had been experienced by the women practitioners over centuries.

4.1. The Eight Garudhammas

Eight special rules (garudhammas literally: heavy rules) are said to have been placed on women during the ordination of Mahapajapati Gotami. These regulations were such that even the most senior nun was kept in the subjection of the most junior monk.¹ In one garudhamma a nun who has been ordained a hundred years must bow down to a monk ordained on the same day.

There is a debate among scholars on whether these rules are genuine and intentional or not. Early feminists argued that they were an institutionalization of patriarchy within the Buddha, that they were later interpolated into the canon to suit the interests of the male monastic editors, or that the Buddha pragmatically adapted them to keep the order of nuns alive in a patriarchal community.

The garudhammas have left a hierarchical order, despite the origin, which still determines the discussion of gender equality in Buddhism. In the modern era, numerous reformers and women Buddhist organizations have challenged their legitimacy, giving greater emphasis to the repeated statement of the Buddha that wisdom, morality and concentration are the only means to have spiritual emancipation, not gender.⁸

4.2. Fall of the Bhikkhuni Order

Despite the formation of the bhikkhuni-sangha, it never had smooth sailing. In Theravada schools, the ordination lineage of fully ordained nuns went extinct in about

the eleventh century CE, especially once Buddhism had faded in India, and the politics of Sri Lanka had collapsed into civil war (also forced into secondary roles as *dasa-sil matas*, ten-precept nun).

This degeneration is in sharp contrast with the succession of the *bhikkhu* (monks) line, and it highlights the precariousness of institutional modifications towards gender equality. The loss of the *bhikkhuni* order also implied that women lost both organized education and power in the *sangha* and were deprived of the status of absolutely equal partners in the Buddhism path.

However over the past several decades, revival movements have cropped up. In 1998 women in Sri Lanka were again ordained as *bhikkhunis* with the help of Mahayana nuns in Taiwan and Korea who had preserved an uninterrupted lineage.⁹ There has been both support and opposition to these ordinations, with some conservative Theravada authorities refusing to acknowledge them. However, the revival shows that there is a continuous battle to restore the initial vision of inclusiveness by the Buddha.

4.3. Interpretations Across Traditions

The role of women is being interpreted in diverse ways by different Buddhist schools and cultural backgrounds. Some Mahayana texts seem to reinforce stereotypes of female inferiority, portraying women as impediments to the spiritual development of male practitioners. Mahayana texts do challenge these, though. As an example, the *Vimalakirti Sutra* tells of a goddess who changes her gender to show that enlightenment is beyond all male and female distinctions.¹⁰

Indian monastic codes were strong in Tibetan Buddhism whose women were not fully ordained with novice vows being the best a structure could give them; this left women with structural inequality that was to endure centuries. However, recent changes, including the public affirmation of *bhikkhuni* ordination by the Dalai Lama and the increasing number of Tibetan women undergoing advanced training in philosophy, point to a slow change.¹¹

In East Asia, however, the *bhikkhuni* order has never died out, particularly in China, Korea and Taiwan where women are hold a significant role in the monastic, social, and educational life of the Buddhists. The successful nunneries in Taiwan are an example of what a well established women order can do in Buddhist life.

5. Gender Equality in the Philosophical Sense

On top of the institutional and social practices, the philosophy of the Buddha places a deeper basis on gender equality. At the heart of his doctrine is the doctrine of *anatta*

(non-self) which states that the self lacks permanent or absolute existence, thus gender, just as caste, class, or ethnicity, is not an absolute truth but a category.

This value erodes the fixed identities that patriarchal hierarchies are founded on. In Buddhism, spiritual development is not gauged by social affiliation but the development of sila (morality), samadhi (concentration), and panna (wisdom).¹² Accordingly, gender does not play an ultimate role in the enlightenment.

This philosophical equality is also confirmed in canonical texts. The Lotus Sutra, in particular, features the daughter of the Dragon King becoming Buddha immediately, as a challenge to the common idea that women should be reborn as men to achieve enlightenment.¹³ The Vimalakirti Sutra shows a goddess changing her identity with that of Sariputra to show that enlightenment is not restricted to any gender.

Combined, the doctrine of anatta and Mahayana stories teaches that biological sex cannot help in liberation. They instead highlight the annihilation of all dualities, including the gender duality, on the way to ultimate truth.

6. Modern Relevance and Reform Movements

The issue of Buddhist gender equality is not a debate of ancient or medieval times. The modern world of Buddhism still struggles with the institutionalized heritage of patriarchy, yet gets inspired by the philosophy of inclusivity of the Buddha. A Bhikkhuni Order is now being revived. The movement of reviving the bhikkhuni order has been one of the most important reform movements of the recent decades. Women had been reintroduced to full ordination in 1998 in Sri Lanka, with lineages that extended back to East Asian Buddhism,¹⁴ and since that time, hundreds of women have been ordained as bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka, becoming officially recognized and part of the monastic education.

In Thailand and Myanmar, these attempts have been more disputed, with conservative monastic councils not recognising the ordination of bhikkhuni, although women have gone overseas, most notably to Sri Lanka and Taiwan to have the ordination, and come back to their countries as reformers. Full ordination has been becoming more widely accepted in the west, in countries like the United States and Australia, as well as in wider global efforts to promote gender equality.¹⁵

These movements are an indication of the mass effort to revive the egalitarianism of the Buddha teaching, even at the cost of the traditions.

6.1. *Buddhism and Feminism*

In modern Buddhist theory, women and academics tend to read the teachings of the Buddha as empowering in nature, and they resonate with the feminist principle of equality, independence, and expression. Early Buddhist feminist Rita Gross proposed that because the Buddha rejected caste, and advocated universal enlightenment, it follows that gender inclusivity is also encompassed by this argument.¹⁶

These groups have been at the forefront in ensuring gender justice in Buddhist circles in the world, with Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women (established in 1987) among others facilitating women to be ordained, educated and even hold leadership roles in Buddhism traditions worldwide through global conferences, publications and grassroots activism.

This has been an intersection of Buddhism and feminism that reclaims a sense of agency to communities, stressing that even though the patriarchal structure has influenced the past, the philosophy of Buddha discourages inequality.

7. *Critical Reflections*

Although the Buddha himself provided women with space never before seen before, the institutionalized patriarchy and historical realities restrained the extent of gender equality. The *garudhammas* are controversial, and most interpretations are usually biased towards the culture as opposed to the principles of Buddhism. According to a critical reading, the key point of equality is the main doctrine of Buddhism- liberation is not based on the social status or the gender.¹⁷

The issue of gender equality in Buddhism should be viewed in two dimensions: the philosophical nature of the teachings of the Buddha and the history of the development of Buddhist institutions. At the doctrine level, the spiritual potential of women as recognized by the Buddha was ground breaking. He clearly stated that the enlightenment can be achieved by everyone that develops morality, concentration (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*panna*), regardless of caste, class, and gender. This dogmatical universality is reflected in the recognition of the female *arahants* and the maintenance of their voices in the *Therigatha*.

But at the institutional level, there was severe restriction of gender equality. The *garudhammas* implemented a structural order where the nuns were placed under the monks irrespective of the spiritual level. Other scholars also think that these rules were compromises with the social facts of ancient India where it might have been necessary to tolerate female monasticism at the cost of protection. However, they are perceived

by other people as signs of the infiltration of the Buddhist community by patriarchal forces, which does not conform to the egalitarian vision of the Buddha. The question of the authenticity of the garudhammas is also a subject of debate among scholars as textual criticism has indicated that they were possibly interpolations later on to justify hierarchies in existence¹⁸.

The situation is also worsened by the fact that the bhikkhuni order in most Theravada countries has been on the decline. Similar to women being marginalized by having their spiritual agency eliminated, the loss of women institutional ordination placed them in subordinate positions. This deterioration was not based on canonical tradition, but more on sociopolitical and patriarchal relations throughout the centuries. Therefore, the discrepancy of the theoretical inclusivity of the Dhamma and the reality of the exclusion of women depicts how the religious ideals are distorted by cultural contexts.

When carefully considering these tensions, one can see that the religion of Buddhism as taught by the Buddha should not be compared to the institutional practices of the Buddhism of the later days. Going back to the fundamental teachings of the Buddhist the tenet of anatta, impermanence, and the non-essentiality of gender, provides the best foundation to restore gender equality in Buddhist societies today.¹⁹

Conclusion

When we analyze the teachings of Buddha in their substance, they say that there is an equality of genders since women are equally able to attain enlightenment. Although the institutional barriers arose subsequently, the radical call of equality left by the Buddha is an equal one. Nowadays, when discussions on gender justice are still ongoing, Buddhism can help to fight against the patriarchal system and imagine spiritual communities founded on compassion, wisdom and non-discrimination.

When free of cultural and historical distortions, the teachings of the Buddha show a radical understanding of gender equality. The Buddha defied the firmly held social norms in his era by stating that women are also capable of achieving the most coveted end nibbana. The introduction of the bhikkhuni order, the incorporation of women into the text of the canonical and the recognition of female arahants all combine to make a solid doctrinal base of equality.

However, the history of Buddhism in centuries shows that institutional structures were frequently not up to this egalitarian spirit. The loss of the ordination of nuns, the loss of the naming of the garudhammas, the narrow interpretations of the scriptures demonstrate how the power of patriarchy influenced the practice of Buddhism.

However, the continued existence of inspiring female personalities- both historical and present- indicates the strength of the original vision of the Buddha.

In the modern world, with the growing momentum of gender justice movements, the philosophy of Buddhism can be of great use. The theory of anatta confronts all the essentialist classifications, such as sex, and the concept of compassion (karuna) requires everybody to be included and treated with respect. The revival of the bhikkhuni order by reform movements, and feminist re-reading of Buddhist texts, herald the restoration of the original meaning of Buddhism: liberation is not based on gender but on personal practice and realisation.

Therefore, the influence of the Buddha remains to inspire the vision of a spiritual community based on equality, wisdom, and compassion and can provide eternal guidance to fight gender-based discrimination.

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