

# The Place of Women in Buddhism

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## **1. Introduction**

The position of women has been a subject of considerable interest in recent decades. In all societies, particularly in the West, there has been a rethinking of the position accorded to women in all spheres of activity. This has resulted in a significant change in the role played by women in social, economic and even political life. This reappraisal has also touched on the question of the position accorded to women in the main religious traditions of the world. In Christian countries the issue of the ordination of women has become a highly controversial topic, and some Churches are facing the prospect of dissension, and even schism, on this question. It is therefore opportune to consider the place accorded to women in Buddhism.

Sanghamittâ Day is particularly appropriate topic to reflect on concerning this question. This day, which falls on the full-moon day in the month of Unduwap of the Sinhalese calendar (November-December in the Western one), is particularly important for Sri Lanka Buddhists. It marks the anniversary of the arrival of the Bhikkhuni Sanghamittâ, reputedly a daughter of the Emperor Asoka of ancient India, in Sri Lanka on a historic mission. Sanghamittâ brought with her two treasures. The first of these was the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka, thus complementing the work of her brother Mahinda Thera who not only introduced the Order Bhikkhus into Sri Lanka but is also credited with the introduction of Buddhism itself to Sri Lanka. The second of the treasures

brought by Sanghamittâ was a sapling from the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha had attained enlightenment. It is ironic that whereas the Bhikkhuni Order (which because of its self-sustaining nature could have continued indefinitely) has disappeared in Sri Lanka, the Bodhi tree (a much more transient entity subject to the law of *anicca*) still flourishes in Sri Lanka. There is perhaps a lesson here on the difficulty of perpetuating a Buddhist institution which has to be based on human endeavor of a high quality, than in looking after and venerating a non-human object, which is unfortunately all too common with many Buddhists.

The role of women in Buddhism could be considered in several ways. We can, for instance, compare the position accorded to women in both the religious and the secular life in India before the Buddha's time with that after the establishment of Buddhism, and consider whether the Buddha's teaching resulted in a change radical or otherwise. We can see whether the Buddha's teaching accords to women a position different to that accorded to men, as is the case in many other religions. We may consider whether the accident of the sex of one's birth helps or retards progress on the Buddha's path, and indeed whether gender is itself a chance event or caused by pre-existing factors. The part played by women in the early history of Buddhism, notably during the Buddha's own time, could be considered as providing a clue to the place accorded to women in Buddhism. In this connection the events surrounding the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order need to be re-examined, as there is a measure of misunderstanding on this question. The influence of Buddhism on the position of women in the countries where Buddhism became a living presence could be highlighted. In this connection the significant facts pertaining to the mission of Sanghamittâ to Sri Lanka deserves notice. Finally the position of women in Buddhism could be contrasted with that accorded to women in the other great religious traditions of the modern world.

While the attitude of the Buddha to the role of women was an enlightened one, even when judged by the standards of the modern age, it must not be thought that everything that is said on this subject in Buddhist writing, even in the Pali Canon itself, measures up to the high standard expected of a Buddha. There are many explanations for this, not least of which is the fact that most of these works were written down several centuries after the Parinibbâna of the Buddha, and that during this time the teachings were sustained by monks, some of whom might not have been entirely free from the prejudices of the age. It is interesting to note that such "backsliding" occurs most commonly in the later works, e.g. in the prose sections of the Jataka (which incidentally are non-Canonical). And popular Buddhism took liberties of its own with this aspect of Buddhist teaching as it did with several others.

It is not possible to consider all these issues in a talk of this length. Only a few comments can be made on each of these questions. In particular it is not possible to comb the Buddhist texts to collect all the relevant issues relating to the position of women in Buddhism. Fortunately this is not necessary as a small literature on this subject has accumulated since the late Ms I. B. Horner wrote her book *Women under Primitive Buddhism* well over 50 years ago. This book presents a comprehensive account of this question, and is still in many ways the best source on this question.

But no apology is needed to revive this question at a time when the position of women in religious life is undergoing a critical re-examination in many places.

## **2. The Pre-Buddhist Position of Women**

The social matrix in which Buddhism arose was one which accorded to women an inferior position. In this regard Indian society did not differ radically from that in other places, and in some respects its treatment of women may actually have been more liberal. Indian religion in the Buddha's time is

usually designated as "Brahmanism" to distinguish it from Hinduism, which in its classic form was a post-Buddhist development.

The position of women under Hinduism is well-known. Some idea of this position could be gleaned from the classic Hindu Dharmashâstras of which the Manu-smirithi, popularly known as the "Laws of Manu", is the best known. This work describes the duties of women as follows"

"By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent". (Laws of Manu, V, 147-8).

Women were prevented from performing religious rites, and even the knowledge of the Vedas was to be kept away from them (IX, 18). The question for historians is how far these laws were in force at the time of the Buddha. The Hindus claim a divine origin for the laws of Manu, but they were probably compiled later when Hinduism had assumed its rigid form centuries after the Buddha's time. However the Brahmanical religion of the Buddha's day, though somewhat better in this respect, did not accord spiritual parity to women. The primordial principle in the Vedic-Upanishadic philosophy which was dominant in the Buddha's time, was the male-principle (purusha), and this provided justification for the exclusion of women generally from social and spiritual activity.

It was in contrast to this attitude which reserved spiritual achievement for males that the Buddha proclaimed a message that was to be universal, one designed for the good of humanity as a whole without exception as to race, caste or sex. One of the classic titles given to the Buddha is "sattâ devamanussanam" or "teacher of gods and humans". If the Buddha had been regarded as a teacher of men, as opposed to women the term "purisa" (which is the Pali counterpart of "itti", woman) would have been used in this classic description, rather than the generic term manussa. More generally the teaching of the Buddha is referred to as one that could lead all beings (sattâ) to liberation, in whatever realm they lived and whatever form they assumed. However another of the classic descriptions of the Buddha describes him as "Purisadammasârathi", or "charioteer of men to be tamed". Some might see in this sexist language, but what it probably means is precisely what it says, viz that men are subject to more violent misdeeds and have to be "tamed" to a greater extent than women.[\[1\]](#)

While the change in attitude towards women brought about by the Buddha has to be appreciated it must be remembered that he was not alone in this regard. The Jains too took a more enlightened attitude towards women when compared to the dominant Brâmanical religion. But Jainism unlike Buddhism did not concede the possibility of ultimate spiritual liberation to a woman, although a woman could become a man. Some, but not all, Jain sects extended their religious orders to women.

### **3. Women and the Buddha's Path**

There is very little, if any at all, in Buddhism that identifies it with a particular sex. The Buddha himself was historically a man, but the essence of Buddhism does not involve any extolling of the personality of the Buddha (unlike say the Christian extolling of the person of Jesus in his capacity as the Son of God). What the Buddha discovered was a universal law which existed independently of all the Buddhas, and which others, male or female, can discover by following the directions of the Buddha. The cult of the Buddha's person, the worship of relics, the conduct of the "Buddha pûjâs" and the like, were all later developments, both in the Theravada and the Mahayana, and have scant justification in the discourses of the Buddha.

Later academic speculation has raised the question whether a female could become a Buddha or a Bodhisattva. Mahayanists have taken an affirmative position (e.g. the cult of Kwan Yin as a Bodhisattva who heeds the pleas of those in distress), but the Theravadan position is less clear. Some have claimed that the Buddhas have to be males, others have taken a more ambiguous position. The correct way to approach this question is to regard it as another of those profitless questions which the Buddha left unresolved (*avyākata*), as it is irrelevant to the question of release from *samsāra*. There can be only one Buddha in a given Buddha-era (despite what some of the *Jātakas* may imply), and the present era happened to have been inaugurated whether by necessity or coincidence, by a male, Siddhata Gotama.

Another way to regard this question is that even though the male-female identity is set at birth, this is only true of a particular birth. The Buddhists doctrine of rebirth asserts that gender can change over successive transmigrations. Thus in the *samsaric* sense there is no male or female, but only a single karmic stream. This is hardly surprising given that the *anattā* doctrine ensures that there is not even a persisting personal identity over the *samsaric* stream. This is another reason why the Dhamma for the most part ignores the sexual identity of persons.

Unfortunately a contrary view has gained some popularity in Buddhist countries, mainly due to the influence of the *Jataka* stories. In these stories men tend to be men and women tend to be women (e.g. Siddatta and Yasodarā are said to have been consorts over countless births). [2] As mentioned earlier, these stories are later accretions to the Buddhist tradition meant for popular consumption, and as we have them the essence of the stories seem to run counter to the fundamental Buddhist principle of *anattā*. Only the stanzas in the *Jatakas*, which are bereft of narrative material, are considered canonical in the Theravada tradition. Another popular misunderstanding in many Buddhist countries is that negative ("unskillful") karma results in a man being reborn as a woman, and positive ("skillful") karma has the opposite effect. There does not seem to be any authoritative basis for this belief. In fact, the workings of the law of *kamma* is one of the unknowable questions for those who have not reached enlightenment. What factors result in a person becoming a male or a female were not discussed by the Buddha. Thus popular beliefs with regard to this are without foundation in the Buddha-dhamma.

On his deathbed the Buddha exhorted his followers to abide by the teaching, the Dhamma, which was to be the supreme guide. The Dhamma, of course, has no gender; the question is whether gender has anything to do with making the pursuit of the Path easy or difficult. The answer to this again is clear - the Buddha's path could be practiced by anyone, male or female. The eight components of the Noble Eight Fold Path are usually collected into three groups - *Sila* or Morality, *Bhāvanā* or spiritual growth, and *Paññā* or Wisdom. The practice of morality may in some minor respects involve different kinds of conduct for the two sexes, 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. This was stated categorically by the Buddha, well before there were any female *Arahants*, when he answered Ananda's question as to whether women could reach enlightenment in the affirmative. The point made here is so self-evident that it would not justify any more elaboration.

Buddhist practice, in its purest form, has no place for ritual. It is in the conducting 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 rituals, but even this kind of simple rituals have not involved any typing by the sex of the devotee. Buddhist rituals usually involves simple forms of worship, chanting or symbolic offerings, and all of these are available for 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", but this is wrong use of terminology and should be avoided by all Buddhists. 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 a God or priest. Thus Buddhism has been spared the problem now all too evident in theistic religions of women protesting their exclusion from the priestly circle. The position of monks and nuns in Buddhism will be considered in a later section.

The disciples of the Buddha, especially the more perceptive of the female followers, appear to have grasped very well the principle that the Dhamma was neutral with respect to the gender of the person following its dictates. There are not many direct references to this question, but an incident reported twice in the Sutta Pitaka is very relevant to this and must be considered. This records the taunt of Mara to the Theri Soma that no woman could reach "the high ground of the wise" because she has only the "two-finger knowledge (*dvangulapaññā*)", an allusion to cooking where the consistency of the cooked rice is tested by pressing it between the fingers. The refutation of Māra, as given in the Sanyutta Nikāya, is worth quoting in full:

<i>ittibhāvo kim kiyirā</i>	What matters being a woman
<i>cittamhi susamāhite</i>	If with mind firmly set
<i>ñānamhi vattamānamhi</i>	One grows in the knowledge
<i>sammādhamma.m vipassato</i>	Of the Right Law, with insight?
<i>yassa nūna siyā eva</i>	Any one who has to question
<i>itthāham puriso ti va</i>	Am I a woman or am I a man
<i>kiñci va pana asamīti</i>	And does not oneself really know
<i>tam Maro vattum arahatīti</i>	Over such a one will Mara triumph

The version given in the *Therigāthā* preserves the essential first stanza which asserts the irrelevance of the "female condition" (*ittibhāvo*) to spiritual progress, but replaces the second with a more conventional stanza:

<i>sabbattha vihatā nanadi</i>	With pleasures overcome everywhere
<i>tamokkhadho padālito</i>	And the mass of ignorance torn away
<i>evam janāhi pāpima</i>	Know this, O Defiled One,
<i>nihatō tvam asi antaka</i>	Driven out art thou at last!

Whether this involves some later reworking by monk compilers we shall never know. It is however a fact that the *udānas* recorded in the *Therigāthā* are somewhat disappointing if we were to look in them for evidence on the question that is considered here. In most respects what the Theris see as the travails of life from which they seek escape into the ineffable, are not different from those identified by the theras in the *Theragāthā*.

## **4. The Secular Position of Women in Buddhism**

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

religions where private and public affairs were brought within the gambit of religious regulation.

Thus Buddhism does not take such things as marriage (where the position of women is important) as a religious "sacrament".. as it is, for instance, in Christianity or Hinduism. The Buddhist position was that these matters have to be regulated by society through some kind of social, political or legal process. It is only required that such arrangements should not be in fundamental conflict with the Dhamma. It is possible to have many different kinds of social and family arrangements which are compatible with the broad framework of the Dhamma. Thus matters like divorce, inheritance of property, etc. are entirely regulated by social processes, and there is considerable freedom for individuals in these arrangements. In matters like marriage, divorce, ownership of property, personal political or religious beliefs, etc. wives were allowed considerable liberty, and this was something that was to astonish Christian missionaries to Buddhist countries.

Nonetheless in his discourses to the lay person the Buddha does express views, and recommend practices which he considered as compatible with the Dhamma. Sometimes the Buddha's views happened to coincide with commonly accepted social principles, sometimes they were contrary to these views.

Thus for instance, in a society which considered male children to be more desirable than female ones, the Buddha held a different view. When King Pasenadi of Kosala, while still an adherent of the Brahmanical religion and thus shared its values, was disappointed that his Queen Mallika bore him a daughter, the Buddha told him: "A woman-child, O Lord of men, may prove to be a better offspring than a male" (San. Nik, iii, 2, 6). It is possible to see in this a kind of diplomatic response to prevent the King developing an aversion to his Queen who was a Buddhist, but the sentiment expressed is genuine, and in keeping with the rest of the Buddha's teaching.

A few discourses given to householders emphasize the more worldly aspects of living, and of these the Sigalovada Sutta is the best known. This Sutta has been dissected to get actual rules of conduct on a wide variety of secular matters. This is a wrong way to approach the question. In this Sutta the Buddha was not laying down a code of domestic jurisprudence but instructing the Brahmin Sigala on certain basic principles. Of these the ones that are relevant here are the duties of wife to husband and vice versa. The Buddha lays down rules in this regard that could be considered common sense and eminently sensible. They conform to the mores of the time. The actual details are not important, but what is important is that the Buddha emphasizes the principle of reciprocity. Thus just as the wife has duties prescribed vis-a-vis the husband, so has the husband towards the wife. The equal burden of responsibility and duty laid on both husband and wife is the hall-mark of the Buddha's attitude to the role of women in the family life. In this Sutta the Buddha identifies qualities in women (beauty, wealth, kin, sons, virtue) which would make them the superior partner in a marriage, but these qualities are those generally accepted in society in the Buddha's time. The Sigalovada Sutta presupposes a monogamous system, but some of the royal patrons of the Buddha practiced polygamy having large harems, but they were not admonished for this by the Buddha. This was a matter belonging to social convention, and the Buddha preferred not to pontificate on it.

At other places in the Pali Canon there are references to the position of females that might not satisfy a modern exponent of "women's liberation". Thus the Dhaniya Sutta of the Sutta Nipata extols obedience in wives (reminding us of the Christian marriage vow imposed on wives to "obey" their husbands). Then there are the various lists of kinds of wives that appear in the Vinaya and the Sutta Pitaka, with the occasional hint that the more docile the kind of wife the better. But it must be remembered that these opinions do not have any kind of binding force, and are not always consistent with statements elsewhere. In a compilation as large as the Pali Canon such inconsistency on relatively minor matter is to be expected.

If one were to get a general principle on the question of the relation between the sexes it is the principle of reciprocity and non-dominance that emerges in the Buddhist writing. Even in the later

Jatakas it is sometimes stated that woman who live in fear of their husbands are not true wives (No.537).

## **5. The Order of Bhikkhunis**

This is often regarded as crucial to the evaluation of the role of women in Buddhism. What can be concluded is that while Buddhism passes this test it does so with a few minor qualifications.

Every religion has jealously guarded entry into its innermost sanctum. In many religions the doors of this sanctum are barred to women. In Buddhism one could consider the Sangha as forming part of the core of the Buddha Sāsana (Dispensation of the Buddha). It is part of the Triple Gem to which all Buddhists go for refuge. There is some argument as to whether the Sangha consists of those who have formally undertaken to follow the rules of the Vinaya, or consists of those who have "entered the stream" be they monk or lay, but we shall not consider this questions here, and take the popular view that the Sangha consists of the former.

As is well-known that the Buddha established the Order for Bhikkhus a few months after his enlightenment, and established the Bhikkhuni Order only five years later. The facts relating to the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order are well known and need not be recounted here in full. We have Maha Prajapati Gōtami, the foster mother of the Buddha, expressing her wish to enter the Order; we hear of the Buddha's rejection of this request; we see Prajāpati Gotami persisting in her request, and even following the Buddha over long distances; we then hear of Ananda's pleas to the Buddha on her behalf; and we have the Buddha's final consent.

The establishment of the Bhikkhu Order is considered as something revolutionary in religious history. It is the first time that we have a body of men coming under a strict discipline not discharging a priestly function, all earnestly engaged in seeking a way of release. Previously ascetics were individual wanderers (*samanas*), not belonging to a body corporate. The Jains are sometimes credited with first establishing a religious Order but the Jain orders were something intermediate between the isolated Hindu ascetic and the organized body of samanas that constituted the Bhikkliu Sangha.

The extension of the monastic principle to women was even more revolutionary. Involvement of women in the religious life has at most times been either non-existent or dubious (as for instance in the case of the Indian devadasis and their counterparts in other countries). In course of time Prajāpati Gotami's wish to become a Bhikkhuni became the common aspiration of many women. Perhaps they saw in the Bhikkhuni order a freedom that they could not find in the secular life, where they were bound down by the rules of a society which accorded little importance to women.

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

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. Confessing transgressions 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

That these rules involve a subordination of Bhikkhunis to Bhikkhus cannot be denied. Some of the rules may be explained in terms of practical necessity. Thus Rule 2 recognized the dangers to which Bhikkhunis would be exposed to if they spent the long period of retreat in isolated areas. Rules 3 and 6 might have been set up to see that the procedures in the newly established Bhikkhuni Order would correspond to and benefit from similar procedures in the already established Bhikkhu Sangha. Rule 7 seems to be a restatement of the precept regarding "wrong speech". But Rules 1 and 8 cannot be seen in any other light than a concession to male superiority. In practical terms Rule 1 must have been the most irksome, and even humiliating in a society where the protocol attaching to salutation was very strict. The usual Buddhist rule which guided seniority was the number of years a person had spent in the Order, and while this continued to apply to Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis considered separately, any individual Bhikkhuni had always to pay respect to any Bhikkhu however junior the latter may have been. It is not surprising that it was from this rule that Prajâpati Gotami sought exemption (unsuccessfully despite the support of Ananda).

Yet whatever be the explanation the rules lack reciprocity between males and females, and would not suit the present age. Unfortunately the extinction of the Order of Bhikkhunis must mean that this question has to remain an academic one. On his deathbed the Buddha gave permission to revise the less important rules of the Vinaya, but the offer was never taken. Whether this contributed to the extinction of the Bhikkhuni Order we shall never know. A few more comments will be made in connection with Sanghamittâ and Sri Lankan Buddhism.

The special rules for Bhikkhunis have come for criticism from certain Western observers. In Christianity there were no female priests, and therefore no equivalent to Bhikkhunis. The closest that we have are the various orders of Christian nuns (whose equivalents in Buddhist countries are the women who take the ten precepts). The position of Christian nuns vis-a-vis monks and male laity is distinctly worse than the position of Bhikkhunis under the Vinaya rules. At least the Bhikkhunis did not have to acknowledge (after the death of the Buddha) a male person as the spiritual head (as for instance Christian nuns would have to acknowledge the Pope or the Bishop).

The subordination of Bhikkhunis to Bhikkhus could be seen as one relating to protocol rather than to spiritual progress. Even amongst monks it does not follow that a more senior monk is necessarily more spiritually advanced than another who is a junior in terms of years spent in the Order. Similarly while Bhikkhunis may rank lower than Bhikkhus in terms of formal position they can be more advanced in terms of spiritual attainment.

## **6. Women in Early Buddhism**

Once the order of Bhikkhunis was founded a large number of distinguished women from various social backgrounds came to adorn this Order, attracted by the power of the Buddha's teaching and the freedom which the new Order offered them. Many of these Bhikkhunis attained to the supreme bliss of enlightenment. The stories, sayings and deeds of these distinguished Bhikkhunis are recorded in many places in the Pali Canon, most notably in the *Therigâtha*, a compilation of verses uttered by these Theris when they saw the clear light of the Dhamma, and which constitutes a part of the Khuddaka Nikaya of the Sutta Pitaka.



Amongst those in the *Udâna* are recorded in the *Therigâthâ* are some of the best known names in early Buddhism. They include Prajâpati Gotami, who was the first Bhikkhuni, Uppalavannâ and Khema, who are traditionally regarded as "foremost of the Bhikkhunis", Kisâgotami and Patacâra, who figure in the best known stories in early Buddhism. The members of the order belonged to all walks of life. Some were former courtesans like Ambapâli and Vimala, others were of royal lineage like Sumeda and Sela. There were distinguished exponents of the Dhamma like Dhammadinnâ, scions of noble or merchant families like Bhadda Kundalkesa, Sujâta, 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 Theris involved is not known. Patacâra is credited with having 500 personal followers, and there are several unnamed Theris to whom sayings are attributed.

The accomplishment of these Theris of old is that they gave living proof of the Buddha's utterance (Sam.Nik., 1, 5, 6):

<i>yassa etâdisa.m yâna.m</i>	This is the only vehicle
<i>ittiyâ purisassa va</i>	Be it a woman or be it a man
<i>sa ve etena yânena</i>	The one who takes this vehicle
<i>nibbanasseva santike ti</i>	Can reach the peace of Nibbâna

where the chariot referred to is the Buddha-Dhamma.

Apart from these Theris and Arahants there were many women from all walks of life who embraced the Buddha's teaching. They became upâsikâs and sâvakas, students and servitors of the Buddha and the Sangha. Their names have gone down in Buddhist legend and their piety is well known. These stories do not need repetition here.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

By way of conclusion we may reflect on the heritage of Sanghamittâ and compare the Buddhist position on the role of women in religious life with that of the other dominant religions.

However strong was the role of women in the Buddha's day once the charismatic presence of the Buddha ended with his death, the Bhikkhuni sangha too appeared to have entered into decline. While the Bhikkhu Sangha has continued in unbroken succession in many parts of the world (though not in the land of its birth) the fate of the Bhikkhuni Sangha is less well recorded.

The Buddha is credited with the prophecy that the lifespan of the Buddha Sâsana would be curtailed because of the creation of the Bhikkhuni order. Whatever value be added to such prophecies, it is a fact that after the period foreseen by the Buddha (500 years) Buddhism saw the great bifurcation between the Mahayana and the Theravada streams. Even the Theravada which is the closest of these two streams to the original views of the Buddha, developed numerous tendencies which were not seen in the Buddha's day. The rise of the Mahayana has had some implications for the role of women in Buddhism. It has been claimed that the Mahayana entertained a more positive attitude toward the role of women than the Theravada. However, the early Mahayana masters were all male. Indeed it is the claim of some Mahayana sects that the Buddha established a line of patriarchs with Maha Kassapa as the first. This line of patriarchs naturally all consisted of males. When Chinese orders of Bhikkhunis were finally established this was done with the aid of Theravada bhikkhunis from Sri Lanka.

While the Mahayana bhikshuni orders still survive the fate of the bhikkhuni order in Theravada countries has been different. In India itself not only the bhikkhuni order but also the bhikkhu order came to an end. But before this happened both orders were established in Sri Lanka which henceforth became the source of Theravada Buddhism. There is no evidence that a Theravada bhikkhuni order has existed in any country other than India and Sri Lanka. Whereas the Bhikkhu order was exported to countries in South-East Asia this does not seem to have been the case with the Bhikkhuni Order.

Sanghamitta's role in bringing the Bhikkhuni Order to Sri Lanka has been noted earlier. She seems to have had a great initial success with many of the leading ladies of the country including those of royal blood taking to the monastic life. From Sri Lanka the Bhikkhuni Sangha was taken to China in the fifth century by enterprising Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis. Other than this very little is recorded of the activity of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka. We do not even have the exact date as to when the Order vanished in Sri Lanka. This also meant the extinction of the Theravada Bhikkhuni order in the current dispensation of Gotama.

The question for the modern age is whether the Bhikkhuni order should be revived, and if so how this could be done. In Sri Lanka and other Theravada countries women who want to play a more active role than that of lay followers of the Dhamma can only take the Ten Precepts [\[3\]](#).

The dominant opinion amongst the Sangha in Theravada countries is that there is no possibility of resuscitating the Bhikkhuni Order. This follows from the traditional requirement of an appropriate lineage for the perpetuation of a particular Order. Thus Bhikkhunis have to be ordained by other Senior Bhikkhunis although the Vinaya also requires the participation of Bhikkhus. Those who argue for the revival of the Bhikkhuni Order argue that technically the lineage of Sanghamitta Theri still continues to flourish in a few places where Chinese Buddhism still flourishes. True, the Mahayana practices differ from those in the Theravada. But if the technical requirement of an unbroken lineage is what is needed to revive the Bhikkhuni Order a way could be found by using this curious survival of the heritage of Sanghamitta Theri in a foreign land. But that Bhikkhus must also participate and the conjunction of Mahayana Bhikshunis with Theravada Bhikkhus to re-establish a Theravada Bhikkhuni Order will run into serious difficulty from both sides.

But even without a Bhikkhuni order there is ample scope for the participation of women in Dhamma work. The Buddha has not said that enlightenment can come only from formal adherence to a monastic order. Both laymen and laywomen have become arahants in the past. Thus the door to the highest goal of Buddhism is not barred to women simply because the Bhikkhuni order has become extinct.

A few comments of the Buddhist position of women with that of other religions may be made. We have had occasion to make a few remarks on the position of women under classic Hinduism. Modern Hinduism has not changed much, although there has been some elevation in the social position of women. Women cannot still officiate as priests in the Hindu religion.

Christianity has traditionally been a masculine religion mainly because its main dogma relates to a God considered as a male ("Father") and a prophet-teacher Jesus who is considered as his "Son". The centerpiece of the religion is the Father-Son relationship, and it is not surprising that women have been relegated to a secondary place and denied spiritual equality with men. Jesus considered himself to be a Jewish Messiah, and did not challenge Jewish views on this subject. His comments on the role of women are at best ambiguous. None of the 12 original disciples were women. The modern Christian Church was constituted out of the claims of Jesus by St Peter, who is well-known as a misogynist, and the subsequent record of Christian Churches has reflected this quite well. Now there are moves to ordain women priests in some Christian denominations but these moves have led to much dissension.

The position of women in Islam is well known. They too are denied full access to religious functions, and in some countries even access to the mosque. It is disturbing that the revival of Islamic fundamentalism is threatening to undo some progress that has been made in some Islamic countries.

Thus whatever comparison we may care to make with other religions the Buddhist view on this question is not only enlightening but unique.

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## NOTES

1. In the Pali texts the term *puriso* is often used not in its strict meaning of "man" but to denote a human being in general, just as the term *putta* is used to denote "child" rather than "son" that it literally means. This is also true of many languages, and it is only now that language is coming to be used in a strict non-sexist manner.

2. Even though none of the Jâtaka tales in the Pall Canon represent the Bodhisattva as a woman some of the iconographic representations of Jâtaka scenes at the Sanchi stûpa represent the Bodhisattva in a female form. Thus the Buddha was not a male person in all his previous births.

3. Some Western ladies who have become Buddhists and wishing to play a deeper role than that possible by being lay disciples have donned the yellow robe and have called themselves "nuns". There does not appear to be a justification for this in the Theravada tradition. The terms "monk" and "nun" have usually been used to denote Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni, and as the latter has become extinct the term "nun" must now refer to those who undertake the 10 precepts. Usually those who follow these rules wear a white robe rather than a yellow robe. To prevent confusion it is best to restrict the yellow robe to those who have been ordained into Sangha orders following the currently prevailing methods.

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