




Buddhism: The Religion For The Equality of Gender

Sitthiporn Khejoi^{[a]*}, Woratep Weiangkae^[a], Worrachat Thasa^[a], Saccarak Raisa-ngeuan^[a], Chatchawan Jankhoon^[a]

^[a] *Mahamakut Buddhist University Isan Campus,
Khon Kaen 84000, Thailand.*

**Author for Correspondence Email: piakealexander@yahoo.com*



[Abstract]

It is universally accepted that like all human beings, women too, have a right to freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom to live in dignity as their male counterparts do, all over the world. Yet, the position of women has always been a subordinate one. Despite protests, movements, agitations and other means of resistance, there has been no respite from this social evil. Gender discrimination continues even in the present times. There has been a steady decline in the proportion of the female sex all over the world as well as in India. Though the number of working women is increasing, there are certain fields in which the entry of women is still barred. In the world of sports, the female players are paid less than their male counter-parts. In the higher jobs too female diplomats, female politicians, female judges and female executives have a long way to go to attain the equality in proportion. The span of longevity, the rate of mortality and the range of immunization among the females are still the negative indicators. The slogans of equality are constantly raised but in actual practice, the situation has remained as grim as ever.

Keyword: Buddhism, Equality ,Gender, Religion.

Introduction

The increasing influence and relevance of Buddhism in a global society have given rise to a vibrant and evolving movement, particularly in the West, loosely called Socially Engaged Buddhism. Today, many look to Buddhism for an answer to one of the most crucial issues of all time—eradicating discrimination against women. There is general agreement that Buddhism does not have a reformist agenda or an explicit feminist theory. This paper explores this issue from a Theravāda Buddhist perspective using the scriptures as well as recent work by Western scholars conceding that there are deep seated patriarchal and even misogynistic elements reflected in the ambivalence towards women in the Pāli Canon and bias in the socio-cultural and institutionalized practices that persist to date in Theravāda Buddhist countries. However, Buddha's acceptance of a female monastic order and above all his unequivocal affirmation of their equality in intellectual and spiritual abilities in achieving the highest goals clearly establish a positive stance. This paper also contends that while social and legal reforms are essential, it is meditation that ultimately uproots the innate conditioning of both the oppressors and the oppressed as the Dhamma at its pristine and transformative core is genderless.

Over the last few decades Buddhism, environmentalism, the ecological movement and feminism have been the subject of much interdisciplinary work. Buddhist philosophy, ethics and its system of meditation have found common ground with the movements known as Eco-Buddhism and Deep Ecology with the core acknowledgement of the interrelatedness of all beings and their intrinsic value for the health and survival of the planet and all its inhabitants. Macy makes a case for integrating Eco-feminism and Buddhist perspectives for a transformation that would lead to a more compassionate attitude and protection of the planet.¹ Kaza explored about Acting with Compassion: Buddhism, Feminism, and the Environmental

¹ Macy, Joanna, *World as lover, world as self*, (Parallax Press: Berkeley, CA. Mahasatipatthana Sutta (D II 294), 2003).

Crisis' in several areas where American Buddhism and feminism intersects. As they and several other scholars point out, first and foremost is experiential knowledge gained through both the cultivation of the mind and interactions with others.

The second is the observation of the conditioning of the mind pertaining to one's attitudes, emotional barriers and assumptions. The third is the understanding of how everything is interconnected in terms of society, nature and the planet. He also examines the emotional energy gained through reflection, its therapeutic potential and also the key role that interacting positively with society plays in wellbeing.² From a Buddhist perspective, the mind is the forerunner and source of everything in existence, and Buddhism is best described as an ethico-psychological system rather than a religion in the conventional sense of the word.³ Therefore, its ethical framework is inextricably interwoven with its meditative practice and its salvific Path. While its more compassionate and inclusive system of ethics is embraced by the ecological and feminist movements, its meditative practice has come to have a significant impact on Western psychology. Thus, as yet the influence of Buddhism in the West is somewhat fragmented and in the case of meditation, specifically mindfulness has been adapted, largely disengaged from its original Buddhist source.

The Problems of Gender:

Gender discrimination continues even in the present times. There has been a steady decline in the proportion of the female sex all over the world as well as in India. Though the number of working women is increasing, there are certain fields in which the entry of women is still barred. In the

² Kaza, Stephanie, "Acting with compassion: Buddhism, feminism, and the environmental-crisis," *Environmental philosophy in Asian traditions of thought* (2014): 71-98.

³ De Silva, Padmasiri, *Buddhist and Freudian psychology*. (NUS Press, 1992).

world of sports, the female players are paid less than their male counterparts. In the higher jobs too female diplomats, female politicians, female judges and female executives have a long way to go to attain the equality in proportion. The span of longevity, the rate of mortality and the range of immunization among the females are still the negative indicators. The slogans of equality are constantly raised but in actual practice, the situation has remained as grim as ever. Health care, education, literacy rate, income ratio and social status are the different parameters by which the position of women is gauged to be lower than that of men. In every walk of life, women were and are still marginalized and of lower than status than men because women always have been subjugated to subordinate status by men. This problem of subordination and marginalization of women needs a solution. This happens because the relation between human being and society are governed by the social and ethical norms. Each person including a woman is designated a certain position in the community. Social rules stipulate a woman to be in the lowest situation, reducing participation and enforcing subordination and inferiority on women. The fact that she belongs to the other sex makes her situation blocked. She is marginalized in all the prevailing social systems. The gender bias presumes that the female has weaker position with all seriousness and sincerity. Hence, in order to change this situation, it is necessary to change the ideology that is patriarchy, on which the social structure is based.

Patriarchy here means the male dominance, the general ever-fixed mentality of the society which has been cultivated and developed among men in society right from their childhood. Man thinks that he is superior to woman and gives subordinate status to her, which in turn is reason for sex discrimination. Hence, in order to solve the problems of women and in order to make them empowered, it is necessary to change the mentality and psychology of the society. Such mentality of the society can be changed only if society and people both realize the exact and accurate knowledge of nature of woman, man and society.

Buddhism and Gender Equality:

Dhammananda K. Srihas explained the women's position in Buddhism in his book titled "What Buddhists Believe" that the Buddha gave women full freedom to participate in a religious life. The Buddha was the first religious Teacher who gave this religious freedom to women. Before the era of the Buddha, women's duties had been restricted to the kitchen; women were not even allowed to enter any temple or to recite any religious scripture. During the Buddha's time, women's position in society was very low. He was criticized by the prevailing establishment when He gave this freedom to women. He moved to allow women to enter the Holy Order was extremely radical for the times. Yet the Buddha allowed to prove them and to show that they too had the capacity like men to attain the highest position in the religious way of life by attaining Arahantahood⁴.

Blackstone Kathryn R. has expressed her views on the struggle for liberation in her book entitled "Women in the Footsteps of Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā" She brings out the fact that the quest for liberation begins with the renunciation of material life. It is stated that the life of renunciation is a stepping stone to the quest of liberation. Without renunciation, liberation is not possible. Blackstone Kathryn R. mentions that the life of renunciation is intrinsic to the quest for liberation. There are rare occasions in Pālī texts in which a person attains liberation prior to renouncing, but, overall, renunciation is viewed as a prerequisite to liberation. Doctrinally, the rationale for this insistence on renunciation is clear: the secular world of family, kinship, occupation, and possessions is seductively attractive. In order to realize the deceptiveness and futility of that attractiveness, women and men must separate themselves from it. It is simply too difficult to 'see things as they really are' while one is immersed in secular life. The process of attaining liberation itself can be viewed as the successive renunciation of the assumptions, attitudes, and evaluations

⁴ Sri Dhammananda, K., "What Buddhists Believe," *Taipei, Taiwan: Buddha Educational Foundation* (1993), 227-228.

that characterize the human condition. In attaining liberation, one must disentangle oneself from the emotional, intellectual, and social habits of mind that perpetuate one's continuing existence in the cycle of saṃsāra. The first step in this process is the physical act of renunciation. One must initiate the process by transforming one's life-style and behavior. In the process of the transformation of one's consciousness first comes the external change, then the internal⁵.

If we take an insight into the history of Indian philosophy, we find that many attempts have been made to solve, dissolve and resolve the problems that are part of human life. Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism was not an exception to this. He also had tried to solve the problem of suffering that comes to life. While solving the problem of suffering, he had pointed out that Tṛṣṇā or uncontrolled and unlimited desire of man is the basic cause of suffering. He further said that man can make himself free from suffering by eradicating the Tṛṣṇā. Here what Gautama Buddha advocated that it is the human nature that is responsible for both suffering and also eradication of suffering. Although this is the case, Gautama Buddha was quite aware of the fact that social customs and practices are also responsible for the suffering of the individual especially, women's suffering. That is why he said that a woman's life is full of suffering. When her husband dies, she becomes unhappy. When her husband marries with another lady, she becomes unhappy, when her child dies, she becomes unhappy.

Understanding the social reasons behind the suffering that comes to woman's life, the Buddha had insisted on the equality between man and woman and tried to convince the people to behave with women impartially. These thoughts of the Buddha are abundantly reflected in the Pālī literature.

It is accepted in the Buddhism as well as reflected in the Buddhist literature that there is a biological difference between women and men,

⁵ Blackstorn, Kathryn R., *Women in the Footsteps of Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā*, (Routledge, 2013), 37.

but they have similar intellectual, mental as well as spiritual capabilities. The Buddhism accepts that every human being, independent of the consideration of sex, gender, class etc. is composed of five elements (Pañcakkhandhā); namely rupa skandha, samjña skandha, vedanā skandha, saṃskāra skandha and vijñanā skandha. On this basis, Buddhism has advocated the equality between man and women and thus has transcended the gender difference.

It treats man and woman at par with each other. For example;

1. In the Kosala Saṃyutta, the Buddha contradicts the belief that the birth of a daughter was not as much a cause of joy as that of a son. This was a belief which the ritualistic Brahmin had contributed in strengthening. The Enlightened One, on the other hand, says that a daughter as well as a son both are givers of joy to their parents and other members of the family. This event shows that the Buddha does not discriminate between genders.⁶

2. His teachings have always been directed towards the removal of sorrows and sufferings in the cycle of human life. Ignorance poverty, ill-will and disease cause sorrows and bring sufferings like sickness, depravity, pains and ultimately death through the phases of growth from childhood, to youth and old age. The end of life is death and these phases of life are common to both men as well as women.⁷

3. The right path of conduct is the key to understand the place of sorrows and sufferings in human life. The Buddha teaches the Eight-fold path of righteousness. Training both a boy as well as a girl to follow the path of righteousness is necessary. These events in the Buddhist literature show that the undue importance given to the male child as the redeemer of

⁶ Paranjape, Sucheta., Position and Role of Women in Rgveda, eds. Meena Kelkar and Deepti Gangavane, Feminism in Search of an Identity: The Indian Context, (Rawat Publications, 2003), 27.

⁷ Lata, Chhatre, *Empowerment of Women: The Buddhist Perspective*, eds. Meena Kelkar and Deepti Gangavane, Feminism in Search of an Identity, (The Indian Context Rawat Publications, 2003).

his parents does not find any relevance in the teachings of the Buddha

4. Further, the daughter is as much the source of joy as is the boy in a family. The Buddha gave high social status and respect to women. According to him, the woman had a dignified and an important role to play in the society, and he defined it with great insight, fitting her harmoniously into the social fabric. She was a lovable member of the household, held in place by numerous relationships, and respected above all, as the mother of worthy sons⁸.

5. Further, the Buddha recognizes the fact that these duties do not constitute the whole of her life, but to serve as a complement to the good life already enjoined in his religion to all his followers, irrespective of their sex.⁶ With regard to the spiritual potentialities, her capacity to attain the religious goal is not inferior to man. According to the Buddha, woman holds the equal position. Such a virtuous lady who possesses religious devotion, cultivates virtue, is endowed with wisdom and learning and is given to charity makes a success of her life in this very existence.

All these references show that the Buddha accepted that men and women are equal with regard to their spiritual capacity and their personality development. This in fact he tried to convey to the people. Here a question arises; why was it necessary for the Buddha to convey this fact to the people? Answer to this question within the Buddhist philosophical framework is that people of those times were not aware either of their personality or their nature. This ignorance about one's own nature determined their action in the society. That is why instead of understanding the equality between man and woman with regards to the personality; they gave importance to the biological difference. It is because of this ignorance, they could not make the distinction between sex and gender.

Throughout his discourses related to woman and her problems, Gautama

⁸ Gross, Rita M., *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993)

Buddha intended to expose this fact and tried to remove the ignorance of the people regarding woman. As it seems the Buddha believed that when man, woman as well as society have real knowledge about themselves, then they will be empowered to solve their problems.

Gender Inequality Resolution

The solution to the problems of women in the present-day world are 1) the removal of ignorance, and 2) empowerment of women in the contemporary time. The removal of ignorance involves two types of ignorance; women's ignorance about they themselves and women's ignorance about the society around and the society's ignorance about the women.

In order to change the norms and reform the social institutions, it is essential to remover the ignorance of the society towards women. Biased attitudes prejudices views and actions and wrong judgment towards the nature of women have produced such ignorance in the society about women. Traditionally, a woman was supposed to be weaker individual. She was called a member of the fair sex. She was considered a better half of a married person. As an individual, the full stature of her personality was not properly grasped by the conventional social codes that the society adopted to treat women. This wrong and biased view is the result of the society's ignorance of woman. It is necessary that the society changes its perspectives towards women. For this, fair vision, balanced attitude, impartial judgment and enlightened thinking are needed. The twenty-first century cannot afford to neglect this vast strength of womanhood through its unfair treatment to women. For the first time in the history of the world, Buddhism has shown the fair impartiality of not discriminating between the genders. Far-sighted vision and the compassionate wisdom are displayed in the teachings of the Buddha. This will enable women to remove their ignorance about the society around them and also the society's ignorance about the women. The two types of

ignorance, if removed, will enable women to view the world fairly, justly and rationally/ the problems of women in the present-day world will be solved through the first solution of the removal of the two types of ignorance – the ignorance of the women about themselves - Klesāvaraṇa and the women's ignorance of the society around them and the society's ignorance about women – Jneyāvaraṇa. Removal of ignorance will definitely lead to the enkindling of the light of knowledge.

Empowerment is solution to the problems of women in the present-day world. The concept of empowerment in the sense it is used at present was not known in the Buddhist period, although Buddhism brought equality and liberality in various aspects of empowerment. The spiritual, religious and ethical empowerment of women in the days of Buddhism enhanced the status of women to the levels of equality and of highest status and fairest opportunities of honorable progress. The social empowerment and legal empowerment entrusted women to the fair dealings in the social transactions and legal affairs. Economic freedom and political liberty was enjoyed by them. In the Buddhist period the levels of these empowerments were considerably high. The Buddhist period is remarkable in respect of women's empowerment on account of clear vision of life as it is and as it ought to be in the compassionate prospective of Buddhism. Empowerment in the current sense means giving more control over their own life or the situation they are in. It is illustrated through a sentence like: the women's liberation movement actively empowered women and gave them confidence in themselves. The concept of empowerment is a modern concept that relevant in the twenty-first century, the present study deals with the empowerment of women during Buddhism – the period that spans between 500 B.C. to 1000 A.D. – a period of approximately fifteen hundred years. The periods before this period and later this period are marked by the lack of power for women. The Buddhist religious and literary texts provide an ample evidence of empowerment of women in all the aspects of empowerment in those days. The lack of power is the cause of the problems of women in

the present-day world. Buddhism was the first ideology to make women empowered throughout the long span of the history of mankind of many millennia. All types of empowerment – social, political, economic, cultural, legal, ethical, religious, and even spiritual – were allotted to women by the compassionate and the Enlightened Buddha. He brought light in the darkness of ignorance of two types. The light of knowledge removed all forms of ignorance. The same cycle needs to be repeated now through the knowledge – self-realization, realization of the social world and the society’s realization of the lot of women. Empowering will do away with the cause of women’s present-day problems – lack of power. Lack of knowledge that is ignorance causes lack of power.

Conclusion

Buddhism about twenty-five centuries ago inculcated the values of equality, justice and moral strength and spiritual energy by making woman empowered. The concept of women’s empowerment has gained more and more significance in the present times. The present study about women’s empowerment in the Buddhist period carries a contemporary significance. It offers the right path to remove ignorance and powerlessness among women. The right path is that of empowerment. Empowerment brings enlightenment. Enlightenment in the individual – both female and male – and social life enables humanity as a whole to tread the path of righteousness, truth, peace, progress, prosperity and justice. Empowerment of women mean empowerment of the entire mankind as in the present times, women are at the center of the world inside home and also hold the nucleus of the world outside home. Women have become the center that holds all the parts together and does not allow any disintegration to happen. The ceremony of innocence is celebrated by women, the flag of fair dealing is held by women, the march of non-violence is continued by women and therefore women have become the path finders of latest advances and record-breaking performance. Women have really proved themselves to be the solace for all the ills, all the pains, all the sorrows, all the sufferings and all the woes of men. In the woman lies the womb of progress, in her lies the cradle of prosperity, in her lies

the hearth of peace and in her lies the throne of saintliness and she holds the key to happiness all over the world, peace in all the continents, brotherhood among all races and religious and woman will certainly in her reign of empowerment bring on this planet the Kingdom of Heaven.

Bibliography

Blackstone, Kathryn R. *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therigatha*. Routledge, 2013.

Padmasiri, De Silva. *Buddhist and Freudian psychology*. NUS Press, 1992.

Sri Dhammananda, K. "What Buddhists Believe." *Taipei, Taiwan: Buddha Educational Foundation* (1993), 227-228.

Rita M., Gross. *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Stephanie, Kaza. "Acting with compassion: Buddhism, feminism, and the environmental crisis." *Environmental philosophy in Asian traditions of thought* (2014): 71-98.

Lata, Chhatre. *Empowerment of Women: The Buddhist Perspective*. Edited by Meena Kelkar and Deepti Gangavane. *Feminism in Search of an Identity. The Indian Context*, Rawat Publications, 2003.

Macy, Joanna. *World as lover, world as self*. Parallax Press: Berkeley, CA. Mahasatipatthana Sutta (D II 294), 2003.

Sucheta, Paranjape. *Position and Role of Women in Rgveda*. Edited by Meena Kelkar and Deepti Gangavane, *Feminism in Search of an Identity: The Indian Context*. Rawat Publications, 2003.