

# Women and buddhism

Literature



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The feminist movement has now become universal, affecting almost all areas including religion. One result of this movement has been an examination of the position of women in the various world religions. Unlike Christianity and other religions, Buddhism has in general shown a lesser degree of interest on this question. One can say that this may be because of the fact that, unlike most religions in the world, Buddhism had given spiritual equality to both gender. Even in other respects, this religion has generally maintained a favorable disposition to women.

For one, the mother or nurturing role of women is highly regarded in Buddhism. However, there are some criticisms of the Buddha and Buddhism regarding the role of women. This paper briefly describes the inclusive spirit and the rejection of class distinctions that foster gender equality in Buddhism. It also discusses maternal metaphor in Buddhist literary and visual iconography. In addition, this paper presents and examines some criticisms made.

Inclusive Spirit and Rejection of Class Distinctions Buddhism, in its origins, was a theory of liberation that sought to free humanity from suffering, first by thoroughly analyzing the fundamental human predicament and then by offering a practical method or path for eliminating the afflictions, cognitive and dispositional, that are perpetuated as greed, hatred, and delusion (Comstock 2). In his reflections on human suffering and liberation, the Buddha was frequently critical of conventional views, including those carrying the authority of the Brahmanic tradition.

In marked contrast to the sacerdotal ritualism of the Brahmins, the Buddha offered a path that was open to all. The earliest Buddhists clearly held that one's sex, like one's caste or class, presents no barrier to attaining the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering. Women can, we are told by the tradition, pursue the path. Moreover, they can become arhats or Buddhist saints who had broken completely the suffering of the cycle of death and rebirth.

Whatever limitations women might conventionally be held to have had, they were not excluded from any of the forms of Buddhist practice or from the ultimate goal of those practices (i. e. , liberation from all the forms of human suffering). This position was consistent with the basic philosophical principles of the Buddha's teaching, indeed one can understand it as a corollary of the doctrine of " no-self", understood to mean that the individual has no ultimately fixed or determinant nature.

To understand better the complexity of the inclusive spirit with regard to women in Buddhism, it is important to consider its relation to the Buddha's rejection of caste or class distinctions. Both of these social views are derived from the same philosophical principles. Just as the Buddhist goal was not limited to those born in a certain social group, so it was not limited to those born as males. Both assertions reflect an attempt to locate virtue and spiritual potential beyond conventional social and gender distinctions.

Both can be seen as evidence of a newly emerging sense of individuality that began to take precedence over narrower biological and social constraints. Sources within the Canon cite numerous instances of arhats among the

women who had renounced worldly life and even a few cases of women became fully enlightened even before leaving lay life. Many women followers seem to have held positions of great respect: many were known for their ability to teach the Dharma; others were praised for the depth of their understanding (Cabezon 6).

Some of these women teachers apparently had their own followings, moreover, and were capable not just of introducing the Dharma, but of bringing new aspirants to full liberation without the intercession of the Buddha or some other senior male teacher (Cabezon 6). The Maternal Metaphor in Buddhism While Theravada's emphasis on the value of gift-giving provided opportunities for any woman to display her religious devotion, as mothers or future mothers individuals could equally identify with the maternal/nurture metaphor.

The "cult of the mother" was strongly entrenched in early India, and a mother's protective love had been held up by the Buddha as a kind of standard for the monk's feelings toward the entire universe (Murcott 76-77). A mother's loving kindness is frequently invoked as a paradigm for human relationships in Buddhist literature, where the association between the Buddha and an individual was conceptualized in very personal terms. It can be said that supportive relationships between child and parents, and especially between a son and his mother, were depicted as essential for progression along the spiritual path.

The mother-nurture theme that emerges in Buddhist writings may cast some light on the appeal of Theravada Buddhism, where the mother-child link was

well established as a vehicle for religious symbolism. History tells that Ta Prohm was dedicated to the mother of Jayavarman VII (1178-c. 1220 CE) who is venerated in the form of Prajnaparamita, the mystic mother of the Buddhas. Literary and visual iconography of maternal care is also manifested in different Buddhist contexts.

For example, some of the earliest reliefs found in Myanmar depict the story of Maya and the Buddha's miraculous birth, an episode which has never lost its appeal to lay followers. Also, one of the most common topics in Buddhist literary writings on family relationships is a son's indebtedness to his mother because of her kindnesses, particularly giving birth and breast-feeding. The powerful Earth Goddess serves as a further reminder of the contradictions inherent in representations of “femaleness” in Buddhism (Stadner 63).

In this often ambiguous iconography, where even the womb could be depicted as a place of fetal angst and discomfort, the most potent and unassailable symbol of protectiveness and loving kindness was that of a woman nursing a baby at her breast. While the offering of milk has a special place in Buddhist texts, where it is often associated with a gender-neutral moral goodness, in practical terms it was the quintessential symbol of motherhood. The imagery of maternal nurture could also be translated into powerful religious parallels.

One early Pali biography composed in India around the first or second century BCE relates the life of Buddha's aunt, Gotami Mahapajapati, who reared him after the death of his natural mother, Maya. It can be suggested that Gotami, the founder of the Buddhist order of nuns, is presented both as

Buddha's female counterpart and as his mother (Walters 370). Since she nurtured the Buddha's physical body with her breast milk she greets him as his mother, and a son's indebtedness is conveyed in the final stanzas, when he praises Gotami's achievements while holding her corporeal relics in his hands.

Encoded in such metaphors was also a belief in the regenerative and healing power of mother's milk. The earliest extant Pali version of the Vessantara Jataka, which served as the model for countless vernacular renditions in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, provides a graphic description: Criticisms of Buddhism on the Role of Women Extensive references on what are considered offensive to women in the Buddhist scriptures come from various parts of the Canon, the Digha Nikaya, the Aguttara Nikaya, the Sayutta Nikaya, the Dhammapada, and the Vimanavattu.

In Digha Nikaya, it is adduced to show that Buddha refers to women in derogatory way. In this part of the Canon, the Buddha is asked why women do not generally participate in politics or do business. The Buddha ascribes this to four qualities then generally considered to characterize women: (1) angry or kodaho, (2) jealous or issuki, (3) selfish or maccari, and (4) weak in insight or dupanno. Here the Buddha merely articulates the conventional reasons that were adduced to show why women did not engage in politics and business; Buddha was not making a general statement on womanhood.

Another criticism is that women are seen in Buddhism as being captivated by the sound, form, touch, smell, and taste of men. This reference may be damaging to the image of women. However, one must also point out that the

Buddha also speaks in identical terms with reference to men. Thus, Buddhism is not misogynist in this respect. In the Dhammapada, there is a statement on how monks should should behave in the presence of women and resist any temptations.

Here, the Buddha says that bhikkhus should not look at the women; or they should not talk to them if “ seeing” them is not possible. Monks should be wide awake if talking to the women is not possible. This advice was made amid accuses of Buddhist monks and nuns as having improper relationships amongst themselves. It must be noted that the Buddha did not proscribe monks from talking to women; rather, the Buddha states that the monks should be careful about what they say to the women. Clearly, this cannot be taken as an anti-women statement. Conclusion

Observers of Buddhism, both sympathetic and critical, often are struck by the apparent ambivalence toward women that one finds in Buddhist literature and tradition. While a number of criticisms have been made against the role of women in Buddhism, many observers give a favorable view of the position of women in Buddhism. It must be considered that, unlike theistic religions where it is God's will that makes a person a man or a woman, gender is not eternally fixed in Buddhism. In a sense there is no man or woman in Buddhism since, throughout samsara, the sex of a person may change.