

BUDDHISM AND WOMEN-THE DHAMMA HAS NO GENDER

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Abstract:

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 Theravada Buddhist perspective using the scriptures as well as recent work by, conceding that there are deep seated patriarchal and even misogynistic elements reflected in the ambivalence towards women in the Pali Canon and bias in the socio-cultural and institutionalized practices that persist to date in Theravada 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.

Keywords: Buddhism, women in religion, religious discrimination, meditation.

Introduction:

The increasing influence and relevance of Buddhism in its various forms in the global society of the 21st century have given rise to a vibrant and evolving movement, Buddhism or the Fourth Yana with its roots in traditional Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand (Queen 2000). From a Buddhist perspective, the mind is the forerunner and source of everything in existence and Buddhism is best described as an ethno-psychological system rather than a religion in the conventional sense of the word (De Silva 1992). Therefore, its ethical framework is inextricably interwoven with its meditative practice and its salvific Path. While it's 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.

As Buddhism becomes more influential in the West, many practitioners, academics and activists look to Buddhism for answers to two of the most urgent and crucial issues of our time the protection of the planet and eradicating discrimination against half its population. Recently a Buddhist declaration on climate change was made as a result of a book, (A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency), and in a pan-Buddhist response to the many contributions to it, *The Time to Act is Now. A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change* was formulated in an attempt to create a global and non-sectarian awareness and response to what some scientists call the greatest threat to human life. Buddhism and women. Gross (1993) in her *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* makes a crucially important and extensive study of all the main sects of Buddhism from a cross-cultural, religious and feminist point of view stating her principal objective as “a feminist revalorization of Buddhism”, analyzing the key Buddhist concepts and attitudes that shape its world view. She as well as other scholars are divided about whether there is a case for feminism in Buddhism, especially in Theravada or early Buddhism seen largely as shaped by patriarchal attitudes as opposed to the later developments in the Mahayāna and Vajirayāna traditions more favourable towards women. While there is general agreement among Western scholars that there is no explicit feminist theory in Buddhism, material that points to less discriminatory gender attitudes and even a positive stance towards women have been explored. Also, as a belief system that promoted a homeless life discarding attachments to family to reach its salvific goal of liberation from suffering, early Buddhism had little to say about women’s issues and reproduction (Keown 1995). Overall, however, compared to the other major religions, from the outset women have always played a significant role in Buddhism as lay disciples as well as monastics later on influencing the Order and societies where Buddhism took root (Dewaraja 1994). Dewaraja (1994) also notes that unlike in the other major religions, marriage is a purely secular matter in Buddhism, and also cites where the marital relationship is described as a reciprocal one with mutual obligations, and as there is no central creator in Buddhism and hence no sacredness attached to the human body (Gross 1993) nor a strong differentiation of what is natural or Unnatural, Buddhism has nothing against contraception (Hughes & Keown 1995; Harvey 2000) or homosexuality (De Silva 2003; Hughes 2007). Most of all, the mere fact of women being included in the teachings and practices was remarkable given that this took place over 2,500 years ago in a patriarchal society where women had few rights with regard to education and religious practices as Halkias.

Ambivalence in the Theravada stance:

My paper looks at the issue of entrenched discrimination against women and achieving equality for them from a Theravada Buddhist perspective citing the Pali Canon as well as the work of recent scholars. This paper concedes that the Pali Canon, or more specifically some of the commentaries, display an ambivalent attitude towards women – at times displaying patriarchal and even misogynistic views, and also acknowledges that there is discrimination of varying degrees in institutional and societal practices in Theravada countries that persist to date. However, there is a strong case for saying that the Buddhist doctrine, at its core, once the societal and cultural trimmings are discarded, is free of any type of gender bias. Central to this argument is the momentous fact of the Buddha's acceptance, albeit with hesitation, of a female monastic order and his unequivocal affirmation of their equality in intellectual and spiritual capabilities in achieving the highest goals in the purification of the mind leading up to enlightenment and his nurturing and praise of their advancement on the Path. In addition, Buddha is said to have stated several times that his disciples consisted of both males and females of lay and monastic communities. Furthermore, female disciples are depicted overall in a positive manner in the Pali Canon as strong, intelligent beings who are flawed as well but are transformed by the Buddhist teachings they encounter (Hecker 1994). Women have also played a key role in supporting and disseminating the Dhamma both in the time of the Buddha up until the present. In addition, the doctrines of kamma and dependent origination as well as core ideals such as harmlessness (*ahimsā*) and universal loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*) and the precepts all make any type of discrimination or harm towards others totally unacceptable. Finally, the ultimate salvific goal of the entire system of meditation in Buddhism is geared towards the seeing and realization of the three characteristics of all existence (*samsarā*) – Impermanence (*anicca*), Satisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and Non-self (*Anattā*) (Khin 2011). *Anattā* is the unique concept at the core of Buddhism and negates the existence of any abiding soul or personhood at the deepest level in any sentient being (SN 22.59) – hence the cultivation of the mind targets the eradication of all conditioning including the stereotypical attitudes and role of gender. Thus, this paper asserts that while social reform and laws are essential foundations for eradicating discrimination towards women, it is the cultivation of the mind (*bhāvanā*) that ultimately uproots the innate conditioning of all genders.

Negative attitudes towards women:

Some scholars point to the misinterpretation and warping of the Buddhist ethos to suit socio-cultural attitudes and prejudice in Theravada Buddhist countries (Dewaraja 1994, para. 19): Conflicting with the Buddhist ethos and negating its effects in varying degrees is the universal ideology of masculine superiority. So that in all three societies—Sri Lanka, Thailand,

Burma—there is an ambivalence in the attitudes towards women. The view that early Buddhism displays a strong patriarchal and even misogynistic attitude towards women is based mainly on the recount of the Buddha's initial refusal to grant the request of his aunt and foster mother, PrajāpatiGautami and her women to become monastics three times. The PaliCanon reports that it was Venerable Ananda who finally convinced the Buddha through presenting a logical case on behalf of the women as the Buddha himself admitted that they were fully capable of attaining the highest goals on the Path to enlightenment. Also, the Buddha is also said to have declared that his original prediction of the teachings lasting for 1000 years would be halved if women were allowed to ordain. In addition, it is also said that he introduced extra 85rules for the bhikkhunis (nuns) including eight special rules ensuring that they would always be subordinate to the monks (BDEA/Buddha net 2008).

A case for equality of genders in Buddhism: As the teachings of the Buddha were only committed to writing long after his demise, there is debate about the veracity of the accounts regarding negative attitudes towards women. Some scholars believe these were the writings of disciples prejudiced towards women in a society that became more discriminatory towards them. Others present possible pragmatic reasons for Buddha's reluctance such as the sheer revolutionary nature of the idea of women as homeless mendicants, the very real dangers inherent in such a life and the wrath of a patriarchal society already critical of world renunciation and Buddha's rejection of the caste system, avoiding gossip and the need to pacify both society and monks rather than being prejudiced towards women on his part (Gross 1993; Sponberg 1992). Critics also cite the ongoing belief in Theravāda countries that a female birth is the result of inferior kamma, and women are urged to pray for male births in the future, which however is a societal issue rather than based on the Canon as mentioned earlier. This belief, however, can be justified to a limited extent as in general women's lives were indeed filled with more suffering than men's due to both societal and biological factors at the time of the Buddha, and even today as the high numbers of female embryos being terminated, girls denied education, forced marriages, violence and sexual exploitation of girls and women, barriers in the labour market and lower wages demonstrate.

However, the real societal issue is, as Dewaraja (1994, para. 17) points out, the way this idea of inferior kamma has been used in patriarchal societies: However, it does not necessarily follow that social practice conforms to theory. The egalitarian ideals of Buddhism appear to have been impotent against the universal ideology of masculine superiority. The doctrine of Karma and Rebirth, one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism, has been interpreted to prove the inherent superiority of the male. According to the law of Karma, one's actions in the past will determine one's position of wealth, power, talent and even sex in future births. One is reborn a woman because of one's bad Karma. Thus the subordination of women is given a religious sanction. The role of meditation in eradicating conditioning Without a doubt social

and legal reforms are essential for eradicating discrimination against women. This paper asserts, however, that it is meditation that can ultimately uproot the innate conditioning of both the oppressors and the oppressed with regard to harmful gender stereotyping and discrimination. As Gross (1993, p. 24) states, “the Dharma is neither male nor female” and what is needed is “an androgynous approach” in the sense of being inclusive of male, female, transgender and intersex people, which is also reflected in the two truths in Buddhism the concept of gender existing only in the mundane world and truth and not in the super mundane truth. Theravāda Buddhism has little interest in reproduction or sexuality - not having a Creator there is no ‘sacredness’ attached to the human form and norms of sexual behaviour. De Silva AL (2003) discusses the implied attitude of Theravāda to LGBT sexuality stating that the same rules apply as to heterosexual misconduct – the intention (*cetanā*) (see Appendix A) is paramount as always and that as long as sex is between consensual adults and does not involve adultery, and is an expression of love, respect and loyalty, there is no negative kamma involved. He also points out that the same prohibitions apply as for heterosexual misconduct (sex with underage persons, prisoners and other helpless people). Thus, gender does not play an overweening significant role in the context of Buddhist teachings. As with all other types of discrimination such as racism and ethnocentrism and wrong doing, laws and social reforms, while setting up crucially important foundations, do not necessarily eradicate deep-seated cultural and personal attitudes. The evidence for this can be observed in many Western countries, in particular countries like Sweden, with firmly established legal and social rights and equality for women, yet with a hidden dark layer of violence against them that is often ignored (Lundgren, Heimer et al 2001). Australia too has a proud history of pioneering efforts in the women’s suffrage movement and the rights of women are enshrined in law. Nevertheless, the glass ceiling is still in existence in the highest rungs of power and business and women’s wages lag behind men’s in some industries. In addition, the scrutiny afforded to female leaders in any sphere seems to have an extra judgemental dimension that scrutinizes their personal lives critically, and often women too are complicit in this. Also, an unacceptably large number of women are the victims of domestic violence, rape and even murder each year (whiteribbon.org.au).

2016). Thus, the uprooting of deep-seated individual and societal conditioning cannot necessarily be carried out only through formal education and laws. Instead deep personal transformation through mental cultivation advocated in Buddhism is the key to eradicating discrimination against women just as with other enduring scourges of humanity such as racism.

Conclusions:

Without a doubt the intersection between Buddhism and feminism is a growing field of interest as shown by the numerous studies done in recent years. In addition, an international forum for issues connected with the many challenges that Buddhist women face has been the series roles, it is inevitable that outdated prejudice and barriers begin to crumble, which is essential for the flourishing of Buddhism in the 21st century. Finally, the various scriptural sources may present an ambiguous view of women, and discriminatory practices and attitudes still exist in Buddhist countries just as elsewhere. There may also be doubts about the accuracy of the scriptures themselves, as well as their misrepresentations viewed through the opaque prism of each culture as Buddhism incorporated many of the existing beliefs and cultural norms as it spread across different regions. However, meditation is not only the highest and most crucial stage of the Buddhist soteriological Path but also its truly practical, experiential and educational aspect that is timelessly and universally open to everyone to test. The Dhamma that promotes the eradication of all negative attitudes and false views is genderless at its pristine and transformative core.

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