

Position of Women in Buddhism: Spiritual and Cultural Activities

Belu Rani Barua, *PhD**

The Buddha is a great benefactor of humanity. After the attainment of the Enlightenment in *Bodhgaya* and preaching First Sermon in *Sarnath*, the Buddha founded the order of Monks (*Bhikkhusangha*). This order of Monks increased and within forty five years of Buddha's ministry it had spread throughout ancient India. But groundless belief of Brahmins is that woman is inferior to man. The position which the woman lost under the dominance of the Brahmins of the day evidently showed little sympathy for her. In this article I will explore the position of women considering their spiritual and cultural activities.

In the *Manu Smriti* we witness the cruel infliction of domestic subservience on woman. The road to heaven is barred to her and there is hard bargaining with her for the offer of an alternative route. Matrimony and obedience to the husband are the only means whereby a woman can hope to reach heaven.

*Nasti strinam prithag yajno na vratay napyuposatham,
Patim susrusate yena tena svarga mahiyate. (Jha 123)*

“Women do not need to perform any sacrifice or follow religious rites or observances on their own. Obedience to the husband alone would exalt the woman in heaven.” (Translation)

This hostile attitude to women both in religion and in society was repeatedly criticized and challenged by the Buddha on numerous occasions. In the *Kosala Samyutta sutta* the Buddha contradicts the belief that the birth of a daughter was not as much a cause of joy as that of a son, a belief which the ritualism of the Brahmins had contributed to strengthen. The Buddha pointed out clearly that a woman had a dignified and an important part to play

* Associate Professor, Dept. of Pali & Buddhist Studies, University of Dhaka

in the society and he defined it with great insight, fitting her harmoniously into the social fabric. She is a lovable member of the household, held in place by numerous relationship and respected above all, as the mother of worthy sons. The sex did not matter, he argued and added that in character and in her role in the society, she may rival man.

*Itthi pi hi ekacceya seyya posa janadhipa
Medhavini silavati sassudeva Patibbata,
Tassa yo jayati poso suro hoti disampati
evam subhagiya putto rajjam pi anusasati.*

(Feer and Davids 86)

A woman child, o lord of men, may prove
Even a better offspring than a male.
For she may grow up wise and virtuous
Her husband's mother reverencing, true wife.
The boy that she may bear do great deeds,
And rule great realms, yea, such a son
Of noble wife becomes his country's guid.

(Translation, Davids and Woodward 111)

Buddhism, with its characteristic note of Realism, also recognizes the inherent qualities of woman which make her attractive to the opposite sex. Nothing else in the world, it is said, can delight and cheer a man so much as a woman. In her, one would find all the fivefold pleasures of senses. The world of pleasure exists in her.

*Pancakamaguna ete itthirupasmim dissare,
rupa sadda rasa gandha photthabbo ca manorama.*

(Morris and Hardy 69)

“Shape, sound, flavor, smell and close-touch-all these five-fold pleasures of the senses which gratify the mind are centered in the feminine form.” (Translation).

In spite of this fact, the Buddha was at first unwilling to admit women into the *Sangha* (Hastings 799). Why was the Buddha inclined to admit women into the religious order? Because, three things require secrecy, namely- 1. Woman, 2. Priestly Knowledge and 3. Fake Doctrine. Through his intuitive knowledge He knew men's nature. On the other hand, the Buddha was thinking for the benefit of women. Buddha's love and sympathy for women knew no bounds. History shows him to have been the greatest benefactor of women, even born to India" (Journal) Venerable Ananda Thera, a great disciple of him, also had placed the same view to the Buddha and requested him to make the religious order open for women. At that time, Mahapajapati Gotami, the aunt and foster mother of Gautama had sacrificed everything terrestrial to embrace the homeless life. The Buddha therefore acceded to Ananda's proposal and opened the religious order of women (*Bhikkhuni sangha*) on the condition of following the Eight Chief Rules (*Atthagarudhamma*) (Oldenberg 313) for maintaining the dignity and purity of both the monks and nuns. With the great intensity to become a nun Gotami accepted all these conditions laid down by the Buddha and thus she received Upasampada Ordination (Vinaya Pitaka 255) along with her hundred companions. She was the first lady to receive the ordination in the Buddhist order of nuns. Thus, admission to the *Sangha* was open to all women irrespective of caste or social position. Even a courtesan or a woman who lived a low life was admitted to the order and treated in the same way as the other women without any disrespect. As a result, from the Sixth century B. C. the Buddhist order of Nuns also constituted a strong and vitalizing force in religious and cultural history of India.

The power of man if rightly used can give strength, freedom, better life and in this matter there is no discrimination between male and female. After the admission of women into the Buddhist *Sangha* and their achievement in the field of spiritual and cultural progress bear sufficient proof of that statement. Though the nuns were always considered inferior to the monks, yet their spiritual achievement had recognition. The cultural achievement of the nuns can be highly understood if we study the *Psalms of the Sisters (Therigatha)*. Mrs. Rhys Davids utters, "In spite of their various defects, their contents are substantially interesting as the expressions of the religious mind- the mind expressed in it was

intensely alive because it knew what it was and prepared itself instead of depending upon others merely saying “A man”. (Davids xxiii) It tried to realize what should be known. There are many stanzas in the Psalms of the Sisters which describe the mental commotion (*Samvega*), produced not so much by a sense of guilt as that of insight into real nature of the Universe. Considering the deliverance from the suffering of mental, moral, domestic and social life, Mrs. Rhys Davids remarks:

*The bereaved mother, the childless widow are emancipated
from grief and insolence; the Magdalen from the remorse,
the wife of a king or rich man from the satiety and emptiness
of an idle life of luxury, the poor man's wife from care and
drudgery, the girl from the humiliation of being handed over
to the suite who bids the highest, the thoughtful woman
from the ban imposed upon her intellectual development
by convention and tradition. (Davids xxiv)*

Although the Psalms of the Sister are poorer with the descriptions of the worldly experience than those of the brethren, yet emancipation won by them was greater than that of the opposite sex. Most of the women became nuns out of worldly troubles. They wanted peace and intellectual development by getting away from the Shackles of social tradition and time- old conventions. Many of them achieved success. Such women were Patacara, Kisagotami, Ambapali, Kundalakesi, Isidasi, Addakasi, (Davids xxiv) Bimala (Davids 172) and Abhaya's mother.

Some of the ladies mentioned above joined the monastic order out of disgust for their lives, filled as they were with bitterness and remorse. They were converted to Buddhism which regenerated in them a new faith that led to an adjuration of their degraded life. The sermons of the Buddha were the most instructive to them. They aimed at elevating the humble and evangelical touch to the tender chords of the proletariat heart. The life stories of the courtesans prove that they were most successful in their pursuits and became prominent through their spiritual attainments. The *Theri-Apadana* (Lilley 339-615) give the wonderful episodes of the minds of distinguished Theris who attained bliss through their exertions. They seemed to be glad to have escaped the tremendous hardships and drudgery of family life (*gharavasa*). They were free

from household barriers and enjoyed complete freedom of movement. One of the Bhikkhunis expressed her in the following words. “O woman, well set free, how free am I”. (Psalms 25)

Another woman who bid down all social positions and domestic success, said:

*With shaven head, wrapped in their robes-
a dress distinguishable, it would seem
from the swathing toga and swathed under
garments of the male religious- sister
was free to come and go.
Wood or climb aloft.*

(Psalms of the Sisters, xxvi)

Another woman expressed how she was victorious over pain and sorrow:

*In that I now can grasp and understand,
the base on which my miseries were built.*

(Davids T.W. 38)

Here we find that they never tried to explain their emancipation in terms of positive or negative conceptions. Their expressions implied that with the attainment of *Nibbana* (Enlightenment), repeated births and deaths ceased. The *Nibbana* is inexpressible in words. It is something like the safest place of residence which is found after a long journey through the perilous road.

There are so many instances where broken-hearted Ladies expressed how they got consolation after renouncing the family life. One Bhikkhuni said:

*O free indeed, a gloriously free,
Am I in freedom from the crooked thing,
From quern, mortar, from my crooked lord,
Ay, but I'm free from rebirth and from death,
And all that dragged me back is hurled away.*

(Psalms of the Sisters, 40)

The most interesting story is that Ambapali was a celebrated prostitute of Vesali. She was very charming and beautiful. The kings, nobles and rich men would come to visit her. So after that she had to refuse some of them. Once while walking, the Buddha came to Vesali. Ambapali met him and offered all her resources including her mango garden for the use of the Buddha and his disciples. She gave up her profession and embraced the life of *Bhikkhuni*. Ultimately she became an Arhant when she had heard the sermon preached by her son Thera Bimala Kondanna. (Davids T. W. 30-33) In her old age she wrote about her religious experience in beautiful verses which are known as the Gathas of Ambapali in Pali literature. The poem shows Ambapali at her best making us feel and understand her joy in the pursuit of spiritual attainment. In several places Ambapali states that the Buddha was the source of inspiration to her. She achieved spiritual attainment due to the noble admonition of the all-enlightened Buddha. Her mind is peaceful and happy. Through many hardships all her hopes and aspirations are fulfilled- What Ambapali discovered from her vast experiences is that everything is transitory – this life, youth etc are decaying and unsubstantial. The story of Bhikkhuni Subha is also very interesting. She tears out her eyes and gives these to him who is in love with her. For she is fascinating to him due to her beautiful eyes. She rejects the man with these words:

*Lo, thou art wanting to walk where no path is;
 thou sickest to capture
 moon from the skies for they play.
 Thou would jump over the ridges of Meru,
 Thou who presumes to lie in wait for
 A child of the Buddha.*

(Psalms of the Sisters, 152)

The frail of Kisagotami who roamed with her dead child and found consolation by becoming a nun was released from sorrow, grief and lamentation by experiencing Enlightenment. *The Samyutta Nikaya* gives a vivid account of Kisagotami, Soma, Vijaya, Upphalavanna, Cala, Upacala, Sisupacala, Sela, Vajira and tells

how they were tempted by Mara,¹ the evil one and they at last subdued him.

The greater portion of *Therigatha* deals with meditation. Nearly all the *Bhikkhunis* vanquished *Mara* and realized the truth through strenuous exertions. The description of the *Therigatha* may be mingled with extreme religious fervor and poetic imagination, but the historical aspects of the stories are more realistic and precise than those of the *Nikayas*. A comparative study of both the sources may help us to find out the true picture of the cultural progress of the nuns. If we leave aside the question of some of physical disabilities from they suffered, the nuns were not in any way inferior to the monks. They spent the greater part of their times in meditation, training novices and study of Patimokkha. Teaching of the Vinaya and Dhamma to the novice was one of the foremost duties of the *Bhikkhunis*. To take care of education for spiritual progress of the nuns was not a Very easy job. So distinguished *Theras* and *Theris* were selected to take up that job. In determining the competence of a teacher the spiritual advancement of an ideal *Bhikkhuni* was also considered. According to Mrs. Rhys Davids, Bhaddhamata was one of the foremost motherly nuns.²

In addition to their spiritual attainments, the *Theris* contributed greatly to the development of art and literature. A study of the *Therigatha* reveals that this Indo-Bangladesh-Pakistan subcontinent in those days had not only produced courtesans but also woman poets, philosophers, commentators and wits. (Davids 147) The *gathas* of Ambapali exhibit wonderful poetic excellence.

1. The word 'Mara' is derived from the root 'mr' which means to kill, to destroy or to 'bring death'. The Mara is usually personified as the god of death, 'the evil one, the tempter, 'the Devil' or 'the principle of destruction.' Sometimes the word is used to imply the whole of the worldly existence or the realm of rebirth, as opposed to Nibbana. The other epithets of Mara are Kanha, Antaka, Papima, namuci and Pamattabandhu. Mara is personified as lust or craving, sloth and indolence, cowardice, doubt, hypocrisy and stupidity as mentioned in the Buddhist Literature.

(*Samyutta Nikaya*, vol. 1, op. cit; pp. 128-133)

2. Baddhamata was the maid servant of queen Khema. She renounced the world when she heard that her mistress, the queen of Bimbisara had become a nun. She said, 'if she as a queen, can renounce then surely I can.' Not long after that she attained arhatship.

The *gathas* of Sumedha and Isidasi are not less interesting. Both of them describe the Philosophy of life in which a splendid manner is that their sermons may be treated like romantic poems. *The Samyutta Nikaya* (Samyutta Nikaya 212-213) mentions that *Theri Subha* was a celebrated orator. She delivered a sermon in a big gathering at Rajagaha. *Baddha Kundalakesa* was an eloquent debator. There was none equal to her except the great disciples – *Sariputta* and *Moggallana Thera*.

The *Dipavamsa* refers to *Khema*, the former queen of *Bimbisara* of *Magdha* as the Master of *Vinaya* discipline. She was intelligent, ready witted and eloquent debater. *The Theri Dhammadinna* was the great master of Buddhist philosophy. Most of the *Theris* wandered from place to place for propagating Buddha's teaching. *Theri Bhadda Kundalakesa* says, "I traveled through *Anga*, *Magadha*, *Vajji*, *Kasi* and *Kosala* preaching the *Dhamma* to the people for nearly 50 years" (*Bhagawat* 12). Nuns showed that women could attain dignified position like monks and they were quite eligible for spiritual emancipation and cultural development if they made effort as males (*Barua Subra* 74).

The formation of the order of Nuns in *Srilanka* and the part played by *Sanghamitta*, the daughter of emperor *Asoka* is highly appreciated. *Dipavamsa* (*Oldenberg* 97) mentions that the *Theris*, headed by *Sanghamitta*, went to the Island of *Ceylon* during the reign of king *Devanampiyatissa* and recited the five *Vinaya* Books and the Seven *Abhidhamma* Treatises at *Anuradhapura*. The *Bhikkhuni* *Dhammapala* was the preceptor of *Sanghamitta* and *Bhikkhuni* *Ayupala* was her teacher. In due course she gained full ordination and attained *Arhatship*. *Theri* *Sanghamitta* on her arrival to *Srilanka* initiated *Anula* and five hundred other women into the order. With the ordination of *Anula* and her followers, the order of female disciples was founded in *Srilanka*. King *Devanampiyatissa* erected a nunnery for *Sanghamitta*. There she remained till death "working for the progress of the doctrine and mindful of the good of the nuns" (*Geiger* 78).

Visakha was the chief among the female lay followers of the Buddha. She was a daughter of *Dhananjaya*, son of *Mendaka*, a

renowned Banker in the city of Bhaddiya of Anga. Visakha was married to Punnavaddhana, son of Migara, a Banker of Savatthi. At the time of marriage Dhananjaya the father of Visakha gave her ten admonitions³ which are highly interesting and instructive for the women irrespective of caste and creed. All the family-members of Visakha would bow to the Buddha and His disciples and pay respect to them. Visakha would go to the Monastery of Jetavana at Savatthi three times in a day to see the Buddha. She donated them eight kinds of donations with water, rice-gruel and food and served them with her hands, a most excellent meal. She would always hear the admonitions of the Buddha. The other female followers were Sumanadevi, the daughter of Anathapindaka; queen Mallika, the chief wife of king Pasendi; Samavati, the queen of Udayana of Kosambi; Uttara, the daughter of Punnasinha; Suppiya of Varanasi and others also. All of them possessed high knowledge in the doctrine and observe the *Upasatha Sila*.

It is evident from the above discussion that the nuns not only attained spiritual progress but also made their mark in scholarship and disputation. The psychological analysis given by Khema, Uppalavanna, Dhammadinna are excellent examples of female erudition. Buddhism has introduced radical changes in the doctrinal as well as in the practical side of the religious life. Buddha's teachings are mainly meant for the Monks and Nuns. They are expected to work diligently and they were guided by a canon ideal of virtuous life based on clear Knowledge. As soon as the women received permission from the Buddha to enter into the order a new and experimental world and a novel life-style opened before them.

3. The ten admonitions given to Visakha by her father are as follows: (i) Not to give away fire from within the house; (2) Not to take into the house fire from outside; (3) To give only to those who give in return, (4) Not to give to those who do not give in return; (5) To give to him that gives and not to him gives not; (6) To sit at ease; (7) To eat at ease; (8) To sleep at ease; (9) To tend the fire and (10) To honor the household deities. 'Fire' here is meant troubles and tribulation.

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