

**BUDDHIST WOMEN AND THEIR GENDER IDENTITY:  
A CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST APPROACH**

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**Introduction:**

The scope of this paper advances the positive attitude of the Buddha to womenfolk in his time in India. It cannot be repudiated that Buddha did not effort to innovate the entire system of the society during his time apart from changing some peculiar systems like caste one which were strictly held by the Hinduism since the pre-Buddhist period. On the other hand, one should notice that among the innovations of some social systems by the Buddha, the considerable welfares of the womenfolk are involved. Making his followers pay obeisance, the parents put in the place of Great Brahma, extolling the monks who look after mother (*Mātuposaka Bhikkhu*), setting the proper duties of women for a household and repudiating the ones who philosophically assume that there is no mother and father are obvious evidence for that statement. Till Buddha did not turn down the entire social system of his time in India, he managed to completely collapse the wrong views of ultimate spiritual attainment which is held by the *Brahmana* caste. Buddha actually revolved the system of *Brahmana* in both aspects of social and spiritual. Women could completely enjoy, at that time, the fruits of the spiritual revolution of the Buddha. Buddha said that he opens the door to the liberation (*Nibbāna*) for those who have confidence (*Saddhā*). So, if a woman has such confidence (*Saddhā*) as Buddha mentioned, she can also enter the door to the liberation Buddha opened using her own key of wisdom (*Pañña*). Buddha's spiritual teachings are free from all secular things while his social instructions depend on the cultures, customs, and environmental society. That is why men, as well as women, cannot have their content regarding Buddha's social instructions, except the spiritual one.

The position of women has been an essential topic of interest or concern in this modern age. In all areas of activities that women played, assumed and acted upon or took action such as economic, social and even political life, have resulted in significant paradoxical outcomes that led the society to rethink the controversial subject of the position appointed to women in the religious traditions of the modern age. Most of the times, the involvement of women in religious life and rituals has been doubtful and non-existent; performing, carrying-out and fulfilling religious rites

were forbidden to women and some of the important religious knowledge was kept away and secret from women. Women were considered a worshiper at home, meaning they can be good religious and devotees at home. Females were given less fame and males were the prestigious' one, the teachers and the leaders. This paradoxical issue had induced a significant amount of pressure that motives me to decide to examine the role of women in Theravada Buddhism. The Buddha himself supposedly proclaimed a universal message without exception of sex or caste and race, the one designated for the genuine, virtue, health and righteousness of the whole humanity is stored in the males' spiritual achievement. For this reason, the work begins with examining the early stage and the role of Theravada Buddhism's women and also by tracing and keeping track of this historical role of women up to the present day.

In spite of ambivalence regarding the spiritual standing and community role of women even during the Buddha's own lifetime, ultimately Theravada Buddhism, traditionally acknowledged by most historians and scholars as based on the earliest most authentic records of the Buddha's teachings (i.e., the Tipitaka or Pali Canon) established precepts and institutions that ultimately recognize women as spiritual equals in the Buddhist community. The qualitative perception of women practitioners of Theravada Buddhism depends on several influential factors. The cultural framework including the history (if any) of the order of the Bhikkhunis in the particular country is important, including the attitude and support of the surrounding lay Buddhist practitioners. Also of importance is the frame of reference of the Bhikkhunis themselves – whether they are from the ranks of the more traditional Theravada Buddhism based on the teachings of the Pali Canon or if they belong to orders in countries such as China or the United States where the traditional teachings have been added to and amended in ways that reflect the values and mores of the particular culture. The Zen Buddhist orders in the United States reflect Western influence in that the liberties accorded the order of the Bhikkhunis are (not surprisingly) among the least restrictive and most liberal. In spite of the diversity factor, it will be evident that there are some outstanding examples of quality and attainment when it comes to Buddhist women monks.

### **The Nature of Duality:**

The duality: good and bad, positive and negative, optimistic and pessimistic and inferiority and superiority are inherent in every circumstance viz. in every nation, religion and in any society. Therefore, such duality can also be found in Theravada Buddhist society. The discussions about the duality of men and women including *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* regarding their general similarity in relation each other have already been completed now. Then, the analytical exposition of the duality exists among particular women without pertaining any special comment on men is going to be advanced. “Although they (women) cannot establish on their own without men in the society at the time of the Buddha they can keep abreast with men in the Buddhist society whereas the women in other religious society cannot. “Until they cannot stand alone in the society at that time, spiritual progress can be achieved by their own independent practice.” It is interesting to study the dual nature of women who really exist over 2500 years ago in India at the time of the Buddha and as to how they behave bodily and verbally and how they generated their mental attitude. In the Theravada texts, we can find the particular portions in which only about the women-centered aspects are described. Those portions are, according to the Canonical Order,

*Mātugāmaṅga*\_Salāyatanaṅga of *Samyuttanikāya*,  
*Bhikkhunīpācittiya*\_Pācittiyaṅga and *Bhikkhunīkhandhaka*\_  
*Cūlavaggaṅga* of *Vinayaṅga*, *Therīgāthāpāli* and *Atthakathā*,  
*Therīpadana* of *Khuddakanikāya* and *Itthivagga*\_Ekakanipāta  
*Jātaka* of *Khuddakanikāya*.

“In other Nikāyas also we often find about them. However only in the above portions, they can be mainly found. Various types of women in different social status are exactly advanced in those portions viz. the donor of the temple”, lady-in-waiting of Siddhartha Bodhisattva, Brahman, and wife of wealthy man, family member of the king, courtesan, and daughter of wealthy man, queen, mother of *Bhikkhus*, converter from other religion, personnel, mendicant, poor one, slave and goldsmith. All these types of women become the same when they enter “*Bhikkhuni Order of Buddhist Sangha Community*”. The theme of the topic is to discuss the women setting under the title of inferiority and supremacy. When the women are condemned, they will be categorized as the inferiority and when they are extolled, nominated as the supremacy. In *Mātugāmaṅga* of *Samyuttanikāya*, Buddha advances the nature of women which are in duality of good and bad. The qualities of women expressed by

the Buddha are very interesting. Then there may be arisen a question that ‘why Buddha talks about the women and can it not be a “*Tiracchānakathā*.”

Swarna de Silva in the 1994 edition of her lecture on “*The Place of Women in Buddhism*” is quick to point out that the social context for women before the Buddha began teaching was not different from the position of women globally at that time – women were generally accorded an inferior and more servile position. At that time (sometimes referred to as pre-Buddhist or “Brahmanism”) other religions practiced in India such as Hinduism also emphasized a role for women that involved subjection to male authority and a discouragement of independence. In Buddha’s day, before Buddhism was practiced, women did not have spiritual purity with men but were not distained or disregarded as much as in other religious sects such as Hinduism. The patriarchal (*Purusha*) philosophy was dominant, however, and provided the foundation and justification to exclude women from many social and religious activities.

Naturally this cultural climate gave rise to an attitude that women could not achieve the same spiritual attainments as men. The Buddha actually turned this strict and prejudicial attitude on its ear by proclaiming a “universal” message, without exclusion due to race, caste, or gender. And he also carried this concept one step further in his teachings:

One of the classic titles given to the Buddha is "Sattā Devamanussanam" or "teacher of gods and humans". If the Buddha had been regarded as a teacher of men, as opposed to women the term "Porisa" (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 (Sattā) to liberation, in whatever realm they lived and whatever form they assumed. However another of the classic description of the Buddha describes him as "Purisadammasārathi", 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.

In fact, Buddha never speaks about anything initiated by him. “Even his very first sermon to the five ascetics: *Khundañña*, *Vappa*, *Baddiya*, *Mahānāma*, and *Assajita*, emerge because of the initiative request of *Sahampati*, the Brahma.” Suggesting that, Buddha never utters even a word without any reason. Here we can utilize the two types of speeches as a yardstick of Buddha’s speaking. “The two types of excellent speeches of the Buddha are:(1) the words of truth, advantageous but not

pleasing to other and (2) the words of truth, advantageous and pleasing to others.” Then the real purpose of every word of the Buddha is to be right and to be profit. As Buddha’s teaching or speaking lead only to the being right and profit, personal sentiment will not be cared. Buddha never teaches or speaks his sermons to get the favor of any people. Therefore, it is possible that someone is not pleased with his teachings. “Also Buddha himself will not upset in failing to get the favor of somebody regarding his teaching or speaking.” That is the steadfast mind condition of the Buddha.

Likewise, he will not care anybody’s criticizing him with regard to his speaking about women. That is why we can deduce that Buddha does not omit the affair of the women. Still we have to remember that Buddha would not have ever being spoken about them without any initiation of someone or something. Not only about them (women), as above mention, but also about all secular affair will not come out of the Buddha’s mouth without initiation or requesting of someone. Therefore, the people of this modern age should express their gratitude to the ancient people who initiate and put questions to the Buddha to get the precious teaching, speaking and answering of the Blessed One.

“In *Mātugāmasaṃyutta* of *Samyuttanikāya* we can find mostly, initiative request of the Ven. Anuruddhā to the Buddha to talk about the inferiority and superiority characteristics of women.” It is interesting that why Ven. Anuruddhā engages in questioning about the women. It is clear that in the mind of some elders (*Thera*) the role of the women in the society as well as in spiritual progressiveness is not very much inferior. Ven. *Ānanda*’s sentiment over women also should not be neglected here. He initiated or requested the Buddha to let the women enter into the “*Sangha Order*”. “Here Ven. *Ānanda* highlights the superiority of Mahapajapati Gotamī. Even just before *Mahāparinibbāna* of the Buddha Ven. *Ānanda* ask about the women.” “Again, after *Mahāparinibbāna* of the Blessed One, he gives the women permission to pay firstly respect to the remains of the Buddha before the men.” However, on the other hand, some elders like Ven. *Mahakassapa* do not seem like to give favor to the women. “That’s why they blame Ven. *Ānanda* with regard to his commitment in favor of women and his initiation to become Bhikkhunis in Buddha’s *Dhammavinayasāsanā*.” Then we can find the different attitudes of the elders

assigned to the affair of women. Although many *Theras* considers that the women are inferior, Thera Ānanda does the opposite.

**Women Progressive Life in the Society:**

“In the Buddhist society at the time of the Buddha, women characterized as mother and wife, were taken an important role in the Buddha’s attitude.” Without them, the society cannot run properly. However, because Buddha is a spiritual realist, he cannot effort to be socially radical due to the situation at that time. That is why in some parts of social context they may appear to be inferior. Anyway, Buddha would extol her if she is worth to be extolled and condemn her if she is worth of condemnation. That is Buddha’s equitable attitude towards all people including monks and nuns. Additionally, we have to remember that Buddha’s teaching is not the socially-centered kind of sermon. Therefore, it is not wonderful that Buddha cannot manage to socially radicalize. That is why some statements of the Buddha regarding women do not specifically champion women.

According to the *Jātaka* commentary on *Itthivagga* of *Ekakanipāta*, Buddha suggests many defects of women in various ways. But we must remember Buddha’s discourse is always in response to someone or something. “In fact, Buddha talks about the unsavory qualities of women for the sake of foolish monks who fed up with being in attachment to them.” In order to discourage their tension of attachment to those women, Buddha points out some bad points of the women though they possess the good points as well. One aspect we should notice is that Buddha talks about the negative traits of womenfolk only in the presence of men especially in front of the *Bhikkhus*. Therefore, it is clear that Buddha merely tends to reduce the defilement that persisted in some *Bhikkhus* regarding “their criticism of the appearance (*Vanna*), voice (*Sadda*), and smell (*Gandha*) of women. Good appearance (*Itthivanna*) is included as one in five powers of women.”<sup>3</sup>

Pointing out the negative qualities of women for *Bhikkhus*, on the other hand, Buddha highlights some qualities of the women in that very *Itthivagga* of *Jātaka* commentary. “Queen Mudulakkhana who can manage to show the right path to the Buddha-to-be hermit and an extraordinary woman who can effort to show her qualities in front of the king are illustrated here. Then, between this context of inferiority and supremacy a monk should establish his attitude to the women according to “the Buddha’s saying Oh monk, you should consider the woman in the

age of mother as your own mother, in the age of sister as your own sister and in the age of daughter as your own daughter.” Such attitude can help one not only for not falling into defilement or lustful thinking regarding the women but also for cultivating loving kindness (*Mettā*) to them. In fact, Buddha always tends to condemn one’s emotion of attachment to women’s appearance (*Vanna*) voice (*Sadda*) and smell (*Gandha*) rather than the existence of women. “That’s why Buddha himself says that don’t grasp with craving any senses when you experience those senses. In fact, this Buddha’s instruction of restraining the senses faculties is common to both men and women. Women also should apply this instruction by maintaining morality (*Sīla*), establishing confidence (*Saddhā*) and cultivating wisdom (*Pañña*). “Buddha says that the women who possess these three qualities can overwhelm the husband.” Thus, “*Sīla* is basically very important for oppressing the attachments. Then, of five powers of women, Buddha extols the women with the power of morality (*Sīla*).”

“Moreover, the women who appease the husband are also extolled by the Buddha.” “It does not mean that wife is always in service for a husband, because the appeasing of the husband by the wife should be good according to the Buddha.” But we cannot find anywhere that Buddha extols virtuous men who provides service for women. In this light, one might consider that women are inferior. Here again, the role of social context at the Buddha’s time play as a discriminator. In fact, the essence of Buddha’s teachings does is not in parallel with the social context.

Accordingly, in the society, families do not prefer to bear a female child. On one occasion, king Pasenadi of Kosala was very upset as he was informed that his queen gives birth to a daughter. “When the Buddha know about that, he consoled the king saying that Oh king, raise that daughter, if she is wise, endowed with morality, pays respect for father-in-law and serves her husband she can be a noble woman.” Suggesting that, Buddha, knowing the inferior situation of women in the society and uplifts the position of women whenever the situation permits him. Even if he finds some commitment of the women which deserve censure, he never violently condemns them like men. Buddha usually applies violent usage ‘*Moghapurisa*’: the man who is vain from the path and fruit (lit. foolish man) whenever he violently condemns a man or a Bhikkhus. But Buddha never applies the similar sense ‘*Moghaitthiya*’ in condemning a woman or a *Bhikkhuni*. This shows Buddha’s sympathetic attitude toward the women.

Besides, Buddha thinks much of the prestige of women. “Therefore, he goes to the *Tavatimsā* heaven, according to Theravada tradition, to preach *Abhidhamma* to his former mother, *Mahāmayā* as returning her gratitude.” Then Buddha is a pioneer who highlights the prestige of the woman as a mother and shows the people the way how to return the gratitude of the mother. “Buddha himself says that the excellent way of returning the gratitude of the parents is by preaching *Dhamma*.” “That is why Buddha said that ‘*Yathāvādi Tathā Kārī*’ and ‘*Yathākārī Tathā Vādi*’.” And also “Buddha even extols the monks who give back the gratitude of the mother including father by looking after them.” Subsequently, the mother as a woman takes a very superior role even in the spiritual context. “Buddha’s granting permission Mahapajapati Gotamī to enter the *Sangha Order*, taking action on Yasodayā by going her room himself and preaching *Dhamma*, taking such mad women as “*Patācārī*” and “*Kisāgotamī*” into consideration enough to address sermon and accepting the alms offering of the Ambapālī, the courtesan prove that women are not very much inferior in Buddhism. As a matter of fact, the very inferior status of women in ancient Indian society became elevated to the higher level because of the emergence of Buddhism.

#### **Status of Women in the Society:**

There seems to be an undercurrent of discrimination running through most of the world’s recognized religions. Whether intrinsic to Buddhism or a byproduct of the primarily Asian cultures surrounding Buddhist communities, the role and status assigned to women retains as an ambivalent quality. One huge enigma from the lifetime of the Buddha has to do with the Buddha’s reaction to allowing women into the Sangha. i.e., his pronouncement that the introduction of females into the monastic life would cause his teachings to survive only half as long: 500 years as opposed to the thousand years they were destined to survive. Buddha would not, however, renounce his assertion that there was no reason based on their gender, that women could not attain enlightenment as well as men. The Buddha is quoted as saying to his cousin Ananda, “Women, Ananda, having gone forth, are able to realize the fruit of stream-attainment or the fruit of once-returning or the fruit of non-returning or Arahantship”.

Many argue that the Bhikkhunis were put in an inferior position to the male Buddhist monks from the beginning the Vinaya Pitaka section of the Tipitaka (Pali Canon) is the original record of the discipline and rules for both monks and nuns. The

rule of discipline for the Buddhist nuns outnumbers the rules for the monks. Many rules refer to the subordination of nuns to monks. A Bhikkhuni who has lived the monastic life for years are considered to be juniors of even a novice monk. This is a perfect example of subordination but it does not necessarily constitute a position of inferiority. Subordination does infer being submissive to, or controlled by an authority. Usually, it means being subject to the control of another. ‘Inferior’ on the other hand denotes being “lower in rank, importance, quality, value or position”. It also means “lower grade” or “less important, valuable or worthy”. So it is easy to discern that subordination is not necessarily a value judgment of the worthiness of Bhikkhunis. It must also be mentioned that the original version of rules regarding monks and nuns as presented in the Pali Canon are different from the rules presented in later texts. Amendments included in later versions are clearly intended to undermine the ordination of women into the Buddhist monastic life. For example in India, once the orders of Bhikkhuni had died out, a period of time went by during which no new nuns were ordained, since the newer rules required both monks and also nuns to be present at an ordination of a nun – and there were none to attend.

#### **Gender Identification in Buddhism:**

Unlike many other religions that are fundamentally patriarchal in nature – the primary example being Christianity in which man is created in the “image of God” and Jesus Christ is lauded as ‘the Son of God’<sup>4</sup> – Buddhism does not identify its teachings and principles with a particular sex. Even though the Buddha himself was certainly a man, but neither the Buddha’s sex or even his personality play any significant role in Buddhism. Buddhism's focus is predominantly on Universal Laws that are genderless and the pursuit of the enlightened state which is also beyond both the self and the sex. The Dhamma basically ignores the sexual identity of the individual, since the gender identity, through transmigration and rebirth. Therefore, the individuals’ current gender in a particular lifetime has very little import. The personal identity is also not thought to persist over many incarnations and is also viewed as unimportant. In Theravada Buddhism, the path of Buddha may be practiced by anyone. Buddha gave no comment or discourse on the subject of gender and whether there were any karmic factors in play that determined whether a person would be born male or female. Especially in modern times, non-Theravada Buddhist practitioners have stories (e.g. the Jakarta stories) in which males and

females have delineated roles. A popular misperception persists that being born as a female may be seen as a negative consequence of “unskillful” practices and conduct although there is absolutely no basis for this perception it has become prevalent in many Buddhist lay communities.

Although Dhamma is the ultimate guide to the practice of Buddhism and is a path open to males or females. Morality (*Sila*), Spiritual Growth (*Bhavana*) and Wisdom (*Pañña*) are categories covered by the components of the Noble Eight Fold Path. Of these three, only morality (*Sila*) makes any reference to different rules of conduct for males and females, and these are relatively minor and do not involve any spiritual aspects. Ritual is another aspect of world religion in which Buddhism is set apart. This is very important because most religious rituals involve giving authority to males as far as performing ceremonial rituals or acting as a liaison between the lay religious community and God (e.g. Catholicism). Buddhism is basically an atheistic religion that lacks central Godhead as its focal point. In this way it skirts and avoids many sexist practices. Many Christian missionaries were surprised to discover that in matters of divorce, beliefs, political leanings and inheritance of property, women were allowed the same liberties as their husbands.

The Buddha does express views on occasion that are compatible with social views and seem to be in agreement with the broad framework of the Dhamma. Buddhism leaves many civil, legal and private matters to social regulation. Although society in Buddha’s time valued male children over female children, Buddha voiced a view in direct opposition to societal norms when he counseled the King of Kosala who was disappointed not to have a male heir by his wife “A woman-child, O Lord of men, may prove to be a better offspring than a male”. Largely, Buddhism espouses rules of reciprocity within the household of lay Buddhist members, emphasizing that although certain tasks may be best suited to certain genders, each sex has their own duties to look after. Buddha was very clear that the wife has duties to the husband and vice versa. Buddha extolled certain qualities in a woman, among them are beauty, virtue, and wealth. Chanting or symbolic offerings are the main ritualistic practices in Buddhism, and both men and women are able to practice these in the same manner, without restriction. Even rituals developed after the Buddha’s passing are not exclusionary to one sex because of gender. It is also worth pointing out that there are no “priests” in Buddhism. This is an important difference because most religions have

a male official assigned as a liaison between a deity and a lay practitioner. Buddhism is essentially atheistic and has no such appointed official. Religions that do priests are often confronted with the fact that they exclude women as officials. There is no doubt that the Dhamma is neutral to the gender of the follower. One recorded response, a response of a follower ‘Mara’ to the Their Soma reads as follows:

<i>Ittibhāvo kim kiyirā cittamhi susamāhite ñānamhi vattamānamhi sammādhamma.m vipassato yassa nūna siyā eva itthāham puriso ti va kiñci va pana asamīti tam Maro vattum arahatīti</i>	What matters being a woman If with mind firmly set One grows in the knowledge Of the Right Law, with insight? Anyone who has to question Am I a woman or am I a man And does not oneself really know Over such a one will Mara triumph
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Some argue that Buddhism does little to refute the lay Buddhist position established in the community for women which involved servitude to husband and children, but this is not true. In Buddhism, the focus is on the individual attaining spiritual emancipation and no principles of Buddhism recognize the marriage rituals and rules as a spiritual dogma that interferes with the Dhamma.

#### **Impact of Buddha Teaching in Women Life:**

Freedom was definitely the main attraction for women who came in large numbers to join the newly created order of the Bhikkhunis. Many were wealthy and distinguished, and great numbers of them were recorded as being able to attain the enlightened state. In the Therigatha, a compilation of verses that were spoken by these women as they beheld the light of the Dhamma and were enlightened by the stories of these women who passed down from generation to generation. There is also a frequent mention of them in the Pali Canon, giving them an elevated status. The original Bhikkhunis came from diverse backgrounds. Some were of royal blood. Others were the daughters of nobles or merchants. Others were courtesans, slaves, or daughters of poor families. Yet their stories are immortalized, their sayings have been passed down and even one of these, Patacara, is credited with having 500 personal followers. The Buddha himself is quoted as saying:

*This is the only vehicle Be it a woman or be it a man  
The one who takes this vehicle Can reach the peace of Nibbana*

The “vehicle” referred to is the Buddha Dhamma. Furthermore, the opinions expressed in the Dhaniya Sutta of the Sutta Nipata are merely that – opinions. Their overall tone that views obedience as a central characteristic of a virtuous wife has no

bearing on the role of either lay Buddhist women or Bhikkhunis with regard to their propensity for spiritual practice. As previously mentioned, Buddhism is quite unique in that the strictly disciplined Bhikkhus do not act in the role of a priest, i.e. a liaison between the lay practitioner and a higher diet. The establishment of the order for Bhikkhus was a radical departure from the tradition of the “wandering aesthetic” and was established by the Buddha only a few months after his enlightenment. Five years later the Buddha established the order for the Bhikkhunis.

The inclusion of women in Buddhism the religious life, was extraordinary for the times in which Buddha lived. It was an elevation of women from inferior roles accorded them in secular life and an affirmation that women were as worthy as men when it came to spiritual attainment. There are eight special roles eventually incorporated in the Bhikkhuni Vinaya, which is an indication that women were somehow inferior to men in the Buddhist orders. Two schools of thought predominate on this issue. On one hand, given the climate of the times (particularly in India) the subjection and oversight of Bhikkhunis by Bhikkhus provided a protection, especially in isolated areas, of the sort of persecution acted upon the Buddhist nuns. This persecution often times ran the gamut of vile name calling to actual beatings, sometimes resulting in death. “The eight rules were 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. Upasampada initiation of Bhikkhunis should be given by the Bhikkhus Sangha as well.
7. A Bhikkhuni should never abuse a Bhikkhus.
8. Bhikkhus can officially admonish Bhikkhunis, but not vice versa”<sup>5</sup>

Theravada Buddhism in actuality elevated the status of women over the centuries, particularly in the lay Buddhist community. This has largely been through the acceptance of the Buddha, who came to realize and legitimize the potential spiritual equality of women as well as through the effort and moral uprightness of the Bhikkhunis themselves. At the time of the Buddha, women had a well defined

inferior status that was commonly reflected in the duties and tasks assigned to them. Women's lower status caused them to be the servants of the entire household, serving and being at the beck and call of all family members, not eating until others had eaten, taking over the cleaning and care of the household. It is only because the Buddha was questioned concerning women and women's roles that Buddha has provided detailed discourse on the role of women. Buddha was not a crowd pleaser and he was very meticulous in his analysis of women's status. He was also honest and, being detached from worldly judgments, traditions, and drama was oblivious to criticism. Ven. Mahakassapa was an early proponent of the spiritual equality of women and because he lived at the time of Buddha and he was able to influence Buddha's commitment to allow women to enter into the Sangha order. Buddha's influence ultimately achieved more than the creation of the monastic order of the Bhikkhunis for women; it also elevated their status in the Theravada Buddhist lay community as well.

**Conclusion:**

Siddhartha Gautama, known famously as the Buddha, was a timelessly influential spiritual leader whose spiritual wisdoms and insights has brought peace and enlightenment to countless generations in the past – and continues even more strongly to do so today. The role of women in Buddhism continues to evolve along with Buddhism itself. Whether Buddhist women are lay persons or ordained Bhikkhunis, the influence of the societal mores' and values, especially as concerning the status of women, cannot be overestimated. Buddhism began in India and the status of women at the time in which he lived was deplorable. Women had few rights, most women were married off by their fathers to a man they did not choose, and forced immediately into a subordinate role. Women were expected to serve not only their husbands but also their husbands' parents and to care for and serve their children as well. If a woman were fortunate enough to reside in a wealthy household she did have the right to order and manage the servants but a Buddhist wife (or any wife) was in a precarious position. At any point in time should she anger displease or disappoint her husband or his relatives she could be divorced or thrown out of the household? The husband had a right to beat his wife and make demands, though the women had no such rights.

Similarly, the husband could come and go as he pleased, but the wife lacked any similar freedoms. It should come, therefore, as no surprise that when first approached by his cousin Ven Ananda about allowing Buddhist women to be ordained his initial decision was a negative response. This may have been due partially to severe societal strictures surrounding preconceived female roles. Through a series of argumentative conversations, Ananda was eventually able to have the Buddha admit that there was no reason that a woman could not achieve enlightenment as well as her male counterpart. This pivotal conversation became the vehicle through which Buddhist women could achieve Sangha. The freedom that ordination into the Bhikkhunis brought to Buddhist women was unprecedented and attracted many women to become nuns. The ordination provided Buddhist women with the choice of living free from societal restrictions and not required to serve and wait on others hand and foot until their dying day.

Most importantly it gave Buddhist women the opportunity to study the teachings of Buddha and journey on the path of enlightenment. The teachings of Buddha encouraged detachment from ego, desire, and all early circumstances, opening the door to fulfillment and joy for thousands of females formerly doomed to a life of servitude. Being ordained delivered Buddha's female followers from their households, but the gift of being able to live a life of dedication to Buddhist principles came with strings attached. Although no one knows exactly what Buddha was thinking when he formulated the rules for Bhikkhunis – 98 more rules for Bhikkhunis than the male Bhikkhus – there are different schools of thought on how these differences came to be. One school of thought finds the different treatments of monks and nuns sexist and problematic, questioning whether the extra rules applying to Bhikkhunis were actually necessary.

One school of thought recognizes the wisdom of the Buddha, feeling that Buddha sanctions the extra rules for nuns was both a protection and security for the Bhikkhunis who not only had to survive in their communities but also depended on the acceptance and generosity of the lay Buddhist community for their sustenance. The other scholarly view is that having disparate sets of rules, particularly conduct rules, for monks and nuns constituted (and continues to constitute) unequal treatment due to gender differences. Perhaps the most important and accurate view is taken by scholars quick to point out that overall, Buddha recognized that different rules for

Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis were part of the worldly concourse and were beside the point. The fact that the Buddha recognized the equal potential in women for attaining enlightenment overshadows any minor contrivances to assure order and protection in the Vinaya.

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