

Gender and Women Empowerment as Female Buddhists Based on Buddhism Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Woman status in Buddhism was well-reaccepted as the female Buddhists. Women are not more inferior than men in the role of religious practices in anyway. Furthermore, the roles of supporting and practicing the Buddha's teachings, in fact, female Buddhists help to foster and care Buddhism from the Buddha's lifetime to today. Because Buddhism is open to women in general; they have equality in many ways of practicing. Women must not be framed in any roles; they are able to act as the missionary; it does not differ from other men and women in terms of the teachings. All these harmonies are within the context of Indian society under Brahmanism beliefs. But in Buddhism, Gautama Buddha, and his disciples did not agree with those Brahmanism concepts. Buddhism provides opportunities for women to participate in religious freedom; therefore, this leads the disciples to achieve the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teaching as equality.

Keywords: Gender, Women Empowerment, Female Buddhists

1. Introduction

The roles of female in Buddhism, classifying from gender consists of two genders as Bhikkuni (laywoman becomes to Bhikkuni or female priest through ordination) and Upasika

(laywoman). (Duan Kamdee, 2001:45) As the Lord Buddha imparted orderliness to the four Buddhist Communities :

“After the demise of the Teacher, the Bhikkhus, Bhikkhunis, lay disciples male and female lead a docile life respecting the Teacher, the Teaching, the Community of Bhikkhus, the training and becoming docile respecting each other. Kimbila, this is the reason for the good Teaching, to stand long after the demise of the Thus Gone One.” (A.III. 22/201/220)

All four statuses could classify briefly as two types, priest and lay disciple. However, the existence of Buddhism is not dependent upon priest alone, it also needs the cooperation of lay people, Upasoks and Upasikas who can take action even they are not the priest. In the inheritance process of Buddhism, they could have their role as assistance, maintaining, protection and spread the Buddha’s teaching then Buddhism still exists.

Female, the gender of lay disciples also be able to study and support Buddhism by becoming Upasika, a part of the four Buddhist Communities. Upasika could be able to make merit through Dhamma Puja, such as meditation and following the Buddha’s teaching and Amisa Puja, as offering the four necessities of life to Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis to support their Dhamma practice. This could say, they are spreading Buddhism, indirectly. However, the status of a female disciple in the aspect of Buddhism is equal to male disciple by the law of Karma. According to the law of Karma in Buddhism, all human beings as males, females, lay disciples, and priests are equal by their own actions, doing good deeds then being rewards, doing bad deeds then being punished as states in Majjhima Nikaya Culakammavibhanga Sutta :

“Young man, a certain woman or man destroys living things, is fierce with bloody hands, engaged in destroying living things without compassion. On account of that action, accomplishment, and undertaking, after death he decreases, is born in hell. After death, if he does not decrease and is not born in hell, and if born with humans, wherever he is born in short life. Young man the behaviour of destroying living things, being fierce with bloody hands, engaging in destroying living things without compassion, is conducive to be born with a short life.” (M.III. 14/290/350)

According to the opinion above, males and females are equal by their own actions. Thus, women in Buddhism, therefore, are able to express the role of their gender. This article will display the role of female lay disciples or Upasika that took the role in Buddhism in the past. Obviously, female disciples were capable to develop their potential to achieve the goal of Buddhism as well as male.

2. Female in Buddhism

The status of the woman at that time in India before the Buddhist Era influenced by Brahmanism then they were in lower status than male due to the religious rule that established by Brahman. Status of women that time was equal to Shudra Varna, the lowest class of Hindu society. Such an attitude caused people to look down on women as they were objects that belong to men. It became the tradition that women were only staying in their house under the pleasure of their husband. Their duties were serving everyone in the family and did all housework as the legendary story that pointed women as sinners. The only way to made women free from sin was by letting them be a good mother and working for a family forever.

When the Lord Buddha appeared in India among the society with the highest level of discrimination and harsh attitude toward women, his teaching about the truth of life and death, law of Karma and transmigration led to the huge alteration in society. The attitude of the woman had changed to the better side. Lord Buddha offered a new perspective that completely against the old one. Male and female were equal. One can be a good person because of his or her knowledge, ability and action, not gender. A daughter could be equal or better than a son. Hence, in the Buddhist Era, the status of women in Indian society was better than ever. They were no longer counted as objects or goods without the right to deal with their own life. According to Tipitika, there are pieces of evidence about how women were allowed to have freedom. The permission of ordination for women was the way that the Lord Buddha paved to them in order to complete freedom in religious practices. This could count as a true success because accepting women into Sangha was an opportunity for women to practice religion and doing religious ceremonies by themselves. They did not rely on others to reach religious destinations. Women in the view of Buddhism, therefore, have the freedom to live freely and were able to destine their lives. Not only Buddhism helped women to participate in celibate life but also raised their secular status. Obviously, Buddhism gave the right to women in both social and spiritual levels. Buddhism also played an important role in giving spiritual freedom to women. This role was seen clearly when compared to women in Hindu society. Moreover, Buddhism acknowledges that women have equal abilities to men in achieving Dhamma. This attitude emphasizes that Buddhism has long accepted the equality of two genders, male and female, without discrimination.

3. Characteristics and Duties of Female in Buddhism

There are two types of female related to Buddhism. Firstly, “Bhikkuni” who is a woman who admires and ordains in Buddhism and lay female disciple called “Upasika”. According to the exegete, Upasika is a female lay disciple who takes the Triple Refuge as the Buddha teaching. Definition of Upasok is the same as Upasika Besides, exegete also explains more about the label of Upasok (also means Upasika) by asking the questions. What kind of person could call an Upasok? How about Upasok’s precepts? What is Upasok’s occupation? What is Upasok’s treasure? (Montri Sirarojanana, 2013: 82)

However, Lord Buddha declared the qualifications of good Upasok (and Upasika) in Tipitika, Candala Sutta. According to the Blesses one, “endowed with five things the lay disciple becomes an outcast of lay disciples, a stained lay disciple, a miserable lay disciple. What five? Lacking in faith, unvirtuous, fond of festivals, takes for granted the auspices, searches for outside gifts, and does the preliminary things for it.” (A.III. 22/175/184)

All these qualifications of Upasok and Upasika are simple, not complicated. The first three aspects focus on themselves. Upasika must have faith in the triple gems and holds precepts. Hence, Upasika must have a right livelihood, not illegal and not immoral. Furthermore, Upasika should not engage in five specific occupations. Upasika should believe in the law of Karma and their actions rather than faith, destiny, and ignorance. Another two aspects are about loyalty in Buddhism. As the Buddhist disciple, Upasika should support this religion, not the others.

However, Lord Buddha did not monopolize the people who used to be a disciple of other religions to make merit only in Buddhism. He also gave the freedom to them to patronize priests in other religions as well. This openness made Buddhists can live in peace with other religions context.

4. Role of Female as Upasika

This article will provide the role of Upasika who had crucial action toward Buddhism. Before heading to details of Upasika’s role, I would like to present about Etathakkha or master that the Lord Buddha acclaimed them as the specialist in a specific one. Not only Upasika had become the master but the Buddha also acclaimed specialists from each group of the four Buddhist Communities. The Lord Buddha declared ten Upasikas as the master or specialist in a specific field as below:

1. Sujata, to expert in specialists as the first reaching the Triple Gem.
2. Visakha, to expert in specialists as the best Donor.
3. Khujjuttara, to expert in specialists as possessing general knowledge.
4. Samavati, to expert in specialists as living with the practice of loving-kindness.
5. Uttaranandamata, to expert in specialists as absorbed in the Jhana.
6. Suppavasa (Koliya) Sakyana, to expert in specialists as donation an excellent thing.
7. Suppiya, to expert in specialists as look after the sick persons (Bkikhu).
8. Katiyani, to expert in specialists as believing in the Buddha's teaching only.
9. Nakulamatu, to expert in specialists as friendly conversation with the Buddha.
10. Kali-kuraraghara, to expert in specialists as attainment of Ariyahood by hearing.

(A.I. 20/152/27)

Information about female lay disciples above portrays an overview of their role in various fields. However, women's roles toward Buddhism could summarize into four ways as the role in supporting Buddhism, Dhamma practicing, expanding Buddhism and other miscellaneous roles.

4.1 Role in fostering Buddhism

The main role of the female as Upasika is fostering Buddhism. Although the supporting duty is for both Upasok and Upasika, it becomes a crucial role for Upasika more than Upasok. In the past, there were three Upasikas that the Buddha acclaimed as the master of donator due to the similar role in offering Dhana to Buddhist communities. Visakha, Miagra's mother the master of the offering. She was superior to other female disciples in willing offer. (Vin.I. 5/350/223) Suppavasa (Koliya) who was superior to other female disciples in giving fine things. (A.II. 21/57/95). Suppiya was superior to other female disciples in caring for the sick. (Vin.I. 5/280/60-63)

Not only those five masters who had a role in supporting Buddhist Sangha, according to Buddhist scriptures, there also have many Upasikas who acted the same role. Nevertheless, this role facilitated the Bhikkhus and Bukkunis, and novices then they can easily practice Dhamma without difficulty with the four requisites i.e. food, residence, clothes, and medicines. It was necessary to have lay disciples to support Buddhist Sangha in Theravada school because the priest of this school cannot earn the living. Therefore, priests must rely on lay disciples, Upasok, Upasika. In this way, priests rewarded their supporters by training and giving knowledge as a guideline of life to them. Thus the role of sides, Sangha and disciples supported each other. They performed each other's duties as the principles

that the Lord Buddha had placed. This structure made balancing in Buddhist society. Although the one of import duty of Upasok and Spasika was supporting Sangha, the Lord Buddha also allowed them to do other Dhamma activities such as Dhamma practice and spreading Dhamma to the others.

4.2 Role in Dhamma Practice and Meditation

The role of Upasika in Dhamma practice and meditation various found in Buddhist canon alongside with support role. Practically, when Upasikas offered objects to the Lord Buddha or monks, the receivers always suggested those Upasikas practice meditation and doing Dhana simultaneously. As the principle Dhamma practice of Buddhism are precepts or virtues, concentration and wisdom or Giving, virtues and concentration, initially, most Buddhists hold precepts and practice meditation meanwhile teaching monks instructed them to a higher level of Dhamma practice. However, the capability to succeed in achieving higher Dhamma level depends on the character, intention, and patience of practitioners.

Among worship by material or hospitality offerings (Amisa Puja) and practice offerings (Patipatti Puja), the Lord Buddha praises Patipatti Puja rather than Amisa Puja. These states in Buddhist canon as below:

“It is not by this, Ananda, that the Tathagata is respected, venerated, esteemed, paid homage and honored. But, Ananda, any Bhikkhu or Bhikkhuni, layman or laywoman, remaining dhammanudhmma patipanna, samicip patipanna, living in accordance with the Dhamma, that one respects, venerates, esteems, pays homage, and honors the Tathagata with the most excellent homage. Therefore, Ananda, you should train yourselves thus: ‘We will remain dhammanudhmma patipanna, samicip patipanna, living in accordance with the Dhamma’ (D.II. 10/199/148)

The Lord Buddha sermon this Sutta before his Parinibbana when he saw worship objects that human beings, Deva, angels, and the surrounding nature brought to him but he was not willing to receive. Thus, the four Buddhist Communities, Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, Upasok, and Upasika, whoever wants to worship to the Lord Buddha should do Patipatti Puja rather than Amisa Puja.

The evidence of the fruitful meditation practice of male and female disciples states in Maha-vacchagotta sutta when Vacchagotta Paribbajaka asked a question to the Lord Buddha as; in addition to Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, and Upasok who already achieved the fruit of Dhamma practice, was there any Upasika who received the same result after meditation practice? The Lord Buddha then replied:

“Other than Bhikkhus, and Bhikkhunis. Is there a single lay disciple of Gotama, who wear white clothes had led the holy life, has destroyed the five lower bonds to the sensual world and is born spontaneously, not to proceed?” ‘Vaccha, not one, not one hundred, not two hundred, not three hundred, not four hundred, not five hundred. There are many more lay disciples of mine, who have destroyed the five lower bonds to the

4.3 Role in Spreading Buddhism

There were only a few Upasikas in the role of spreading Buddhism due to the context of ancient India that women were treated like objects then they had no opportunity to play this role. Instead, females who had faithful in Buddhism typically became to Bhikkhunis through ordination then took the role of spread Buddhism. Therefore, just a few numbers of Upasikas who worked in the dilation of the Dhamma. However, there were examples of Upasika who had an outstanding role in Dhamma study as the Lord Buddha declared Khujjuttara as a master who was very learned. Khujjuttara was praise as a scholar. She studied Dhamma and taught others. Although she was disabled, people accepted her teaching. This case shows the fact that Buddhism offers female lay disciples the opportunity to be a success even it look incompetent in some ways. If an Upasika was capable enough then they will get acceptance from the four Buddhist Communities. (A.I. 20/152/27)

There were pieces of evidence about the feeling of unprejudiced toward a female in Buddhist Sangha. In the Buddhist era and afterward, Khujjuttara who was a disabled woman had the important role in written down Tiritipika by recited from her memory. In this way, her actions could count as spreading Buddhism and show her inestimable knowledge in Dhamma. This also stated the capability of women in teaching Dhamma to the opposite gender or even to Bhikkhu.

4.4 Another Roles

Not only the roles as the patron, meditation practitioner and spreading Buddhism, Upasika in the past also took another role such as Suchada Upasika, daughter of Sena Ni-Kadumbii whom the Lord Buddha declared as the fastest Upasika in achieving Dhamma. Before his enlightenment, Suchada offered rice milk on a golden plate to Bodhisattva. He separated rice milk into forty-nine cubes then meditated until attaining the enlightenment after seven weeks. Afterward, the Lord Buddha went to see Yasa who was Suchada’s son and taught Dhamma to him and his family. The whole family achieved a level of Dhamma called Sodapatipala. Suchada and her daughter in law articulated themselves to the triple gems. Suchada’s offering was a part of the Buddha’s enlightenment. Her rice milk gave

energy to Bodhisattva's body when he was able to meditate until attaining Bodhi Yana. (Nd. 70/1/137-152)

5. Conclusion

The story of a female that found in Buddhist canon as Upasika took many roles as previously mentioned. All evidence claim that Buddhism accepts female's status and their roles. Female status was equally accepted as male in the role of donator, Dhamma practitioner and spreading Dhamma. Although the outstanding role of Upasikas was donator, the canon claimed that they always simultaneously made donation and practice meditation.

Since the Buddhist Era to the present, there has been the fact that women as Upasikas have contributed greatly to religion due to the wild acceptance from Buddhist communities. Buddhism has never blocked women from any social class from freedom to do their merit activities. Consequently, females from every social class had the same right in every role equally. They, therefore, were able to spread Buddhism as the male can do even those women were in female oppression context under the influence of Hinduism. However, Buddhism, driving by the Lord Buddha and his followers denied that opinion. In contrast, Buddhism has provided an opportunity for women to be part of the community, to lead all followers achieving the aim of life i.e. the end of suffering.

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