

# The Role of Women in Buddhist Religion-A Philosophical Study

**Limisha Bora**

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy,  
Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon

Email: [limishabora2017@gmail.com](mailto:limishabora2017@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

*Women are seen as having an equal chance at enlightenment in Buddhism, which represents a profoundly humanistic viewpoint that acknowledges the intrinsic worth, potential and dignity of all people. Women have an important position in Buddhism, both as lay adherents and as monastic order members. Their enlightenment is regarded as equivalent to that of males, and they are encouraged to engage in spiritual activities. Women's standing was raised by the Buddha himself, who acknowledged their value in family life and in contributing to society. The complicated and varied roles that women played in early Buddhism were a reflection of the dynamic interaction between the Buddha's liberating teachings and the social institutions. Buddhism provided women with chances to engage in lay and monastic life develop spiritually and make substantial contributions to the Buddhist community. Although their roles were frequently shaped by the social standards of the time, women actively participated as viewers, promoters and intellectual searchers. Buddhism views gender as a transient component of life rather than a hindrance to spiritual development, and it preaches equality in the capacity for enlightenment. This research paper examines how women's participation has changed throughout time, highlighting both their achievements and difficulties. The position of women has been interpreted in a variety of ways, often in conflicting ways, among Buddhist traditions and schools. Even though Buddhism first acknowledged women's capacity for enlightenment and ordained them as nuns, their status and roles were shaped by patriarchal social norms. This paper will be come to the concluding point that the empowerment and education of women are intrinsically supported by Buddhist concepts, interconnection and universal freedom with continuing consequences for equitable practice and social reform in worldwide*

## **Keywords:**

*Buddhism, Women,  
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The Buddha acknowledged that women may acquire the same levels of awakening as males and confirmed that they had an equal chance to become enlightened. Though interpretations and practices range among various schools and traditions, Buddhism usually focused on the equality of women and men in spiritual achievement. The Buddha himself founded an order of nuns because he saw that women may become enlightened. The Buddha took a revolutionary step for the time when he founded the Order of Bhikkunīs, a formal monastic order for women. Although the fundamental idea of equality is maintained, different Buddhist traditions may have distinct ideas and customs about the roles and obligations of women. Women were capable of achieving spiritual freedom, as evidenced by the many accounts of enlightened women at the time of Buddha. The Bhikkhunīsaṅgha, which was revolutionary at the time, was established when the Buddha permitted the ordination of women. Although women were permitted to become nuns, they were subject to additional regulations, which put them beneath monks. In addition to Buddhism, it is tried to analyse the role of women in the three primary traditions of Buddhism, named -- Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna in this paper. Women are playing an important role in the preservation, practice and transformation of Buddhism in the contemporary world. This study aims to demonstrate how Buddhist philosophy may function as a live resource for true equality in both religious and social contexts by looking at the positions of women during the earliest Buddhism, their position in contemporary Buddhist groups, and the encouragement of Buddhist philosophy for the attainment of liberation.

### **Methodology:**

The method of this present study is analytical and descriptive in nature. This paper is based on qualitative research by using secondary sources. Analysing textual data from various books of Buddhism, journals and also various research papers related to the concept of gender equality and the position of women in Buddhist philosophy .

### **State of the Problem:**

Buddhist thought firmly maintains that as individuals have the same capacity for awakening, gender is not a barrier to spiritual freedom. However, in reality, women have often encountered institutional challenges, such as extra monastic rules in the past, the centuries-old disappearance of complete authorization for women in a number of traditions, and enduring opposition in certain societies in granting the same rights and positions of power for women. The gap of this research study promotes a more cogent approach for

equality for women in Buddhist practice by connecting ancient texts with contemporary worldwide movements.

### **Significance of the Study:**

The study supports current attempts for creating Buddhist communities more inclusive and equitable by looking at contemporary ordination revivals, educational programs, and feminist reinterpretations. By providing insights that can guide educational improvement, and social action in nations with a majority of Buddhists as well as internationally, it adds to larger discussions on equitable treatment of women in religious contexts. In order to assist Buddhism continue to be an alive, dynamic religion that meaningfully responds to contemporary goals of equality and empowerment, this study shows how the Buddhists fundamental principles can direct practical transformation.

### **Objectives:**

The main objectives of this paper are to study about:

1. To analyze women's contributions to religion, society, and education in early Buddhism.
2. To examine women's status and role in modern Buddhism while taking into account current attitudes and behaviors.
3. To explore the Buddhism's historical and contemporary contributions to women's education and empowerment.

### **The Role of Women in Early Buddhism:**

Women in early Buddhism were not merely passive adherents; they were active members of the monastic community, becoming prominent instructors and nuns. Women were given the opportunity to become nuns and established their own order, known as the Bhikkunīs. For women in ancient India, who were frequently confined to household duties, this was a major stride. Women's status did not significantly change during the Buddhist era, but it did slightly improve. There was a relaxation of some of the caste system's structures and limitations. Buddha advocated equality and worked to elevate women's place in society, education and religion.

Women are often the main upholders and supporters of a religion or faith or movement. This was certainly so with Buddhism when it was at its beginnings and hence we are able to find a good deal about them in those portions of the Pāli Canon known as the Vinaya-piṭaka and the Sutta-piṭaka. The Vinaya, which comprises the rules and regulations for monastic discipline, contains two sections: the Bhikkunī-vibhaṅga and the Bhikkunī-

khandhaka, both of which deal with the conduct nuns, or Bhikkhunīs, and female probationers should observe and with the legislation that was laid down for the proper management of their order, now unfortunately extinct. In the Buddha's times, however, it seems that quantities of women became nuns, so as to seek for peace, inner and outer, self-mastery, the light of knowledge, and so on and perhaps especially for various forms of that freedom which lies at the very heart and centre of the Buddha's Teaching: "As this great ocean has but one taste, that of salt, so has this Dhamma but one taste, that of freedom."<sup>1</sup>

In the realm of religion, women began to hold a clearly higher position. They allowed women to become Sanyasis. In Buddhist monastic life, women played a significant role. They had their own Saṅgha, known as the BhikkhuniSaṅgha, which followed the same laws and guidelines as the monks. The Saṅgha provided them with a wealth of chances for public life, social service and cultural activity.

The three main Buddhist traditions take a distinct stance on gender and women, reflecting its unique institutional culture, historical trajectory, and doctrinal objectives. Mahāyāna feminist thought is more comprehensive and completion-oriented, Theravāda feminism is primarily restorative and institution-focused, and Vajrayāna feminism is theoretically rich in symbolism while yet attempting to bridge the gap between symbolic valuing and institutional actuality.

### **The Women's Position in Modern Buddhism:**

Women's status in contemporary Buddhism varies throughout traditions and nations, but in general, there is a shift towards more equality and an appreciation of their spiritual potential. Though women were occasionally seen as inferior in traditional viewpoints, contemporary Buddhist movements oppose these ideas and support women in assuming leadership positions and obtaining ordination. Buddhism has seen an increase in institutional support for women in recent years. In promoting women's rights and opportunities in Buddhist practice and scholarship, groups like the Sākyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women have played a crucial role.

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1. I.B. Hornor, *Women in Early Buddhist Literature*, pp.4-5

Buddhism is to be relevant on a worldwide scale it needs to start addressing certain important gender related issues, both for Asian and Western women. Buddhism must discuss liberation as an immediate, attainable social and intellectual freedom rather than merely as a

far-off ideal. Feminist viewpoints can support these objectives. These debates have led to a greater understanding of women's issues globally since women are now driving change in all branches of Buddhism. All around the world, they are compelling educators and practitioners to reconsider long-held beliefs about women's responsibilities in Buddhism.

The essential nature of a Bodhisattva is to assume the suffering of others in order to eliminate the hardships of others. Every living being, male or female, is considered a potential Bodhisattva, capable of eliminating all egoistic desires and passions. This path represents the highest religious development for a Mahāyāna Buddhist practitioner. Accessible to both men and women, the Bodhisattva path provides the means whereby all humans can reverse the degenerative state of ordinary human existence and realize their spiritual potential.<sup>2</sup>

Buddhism has always portrayed women in a variety of ways, both positively and negatively, but contemporary Buddhism is seeing a major movement in favour of greater gender equality. The resurgence of the BhikkhuniSaṅgha, feminist interpretations and the ascent of female leaders are all paving the way for a more equal and inclusive future for women in Buddhism. But there are still issues, and more work is required to remove the legacy of patriarchal standards and provide equitable opportunity for all practitioners.

### **Women Empowerment and Women Education in the Perspectives of Buddhism:**

The foundation of empowerment is self-realization, which is made possible in the end by how society views women. As the Four Class Caste Groups structure was abolished during the Buddhist era, the social structure underwent a significant transformation. Social attitudes towards women were very different from those of pre-Buddhist times, as seen by the acceptance of women's equality, recognition of their spiritual empowerment and cessation of discrimination against them. In Buddhist times, women are completely empowered in both religious and ethical spheres. Economic independence and social equality were achieved, but conventional circumstances persisted in the political sphere and in domestic duties.

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2. Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, p.106

Compared to earlier eras, women in Buddhism often enjoyed higher status, more freedom, equality and a more liberal environment. The Buddhist era gave women greater power.

Buddhist does not intentionally behave differently or disrespectfully toward women, much less to nuns. Instead, different behaviour toward female and male monastic appears to be

largely unconscious and the result of gendered patterns of childhood socialization. People are often completely unaware that they behave differently towards nuns than they do toward monks, and would probably be surprised, even incredulous, if this was pointed out. When Buddhist nuns notice these inequalities, they generally ignore them, since it may be awkward or appear self-serving to point them out. Gendered behaviours are so common that many people fail to recognize them at all. Culturally appropriate training in gender awareness is therefore essential in Buddhist cultures, for both men and women. Women can take the lead by developing an awareness of their own gendered attitudes and behaviours and by devising ways to correct inequalities in Buddhist society.<sup>3</sup>

Buddhist literature does not contain any reference to unmarried girls being sent to school or being schooled at home. But there are references to many educated women. The verses in the Therīgāthā are attributed, in the tradition of the Pāli canon, to certain saintly sisters; and we are not entitled to entertain any doubt about Indian women's education.<sup>4</sup>

Women's potential and power were recognised by the enlightened one, the Buddha. Neither women's access to education nor their religious freedom was restricted by Buddhism. In Buddhist monasteries, they are allowed to further their studies. Buddha demonstrated that women, like men were capable of realising reality. Buddha made a significant contribution to realising women from darkness. The Buddha was the first of the main religious leaders to place a universal and religious value on education. Buddhist monasteries developed as hubs for various forms of education.

### **Conclusion:**

Buddhism provided women with a nuanced combination of historical and modern accomplishments and constraints on their position and roles. In addition to offering chances for spiritual practice within the Saṅgha and advocating equality in the potential for enlightenment, Buddhism also mirrored prevailing society prejudices, especially with regard

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3. Karma LeksheTsono, *Buddhist Women and Social Justice*, p.05

4. Bimala Churn, *Women in Buddhist Literature*, p.61

to leadership positions and the perceived intrinsic distinctions between men and women. Buddhist communities now are making a concerted effort to rectify these historical injustices and advance greater inclusivity as well as equal opportunity for women.

This study shows that the interdependence and universal capacity for awakening revealed in Buddhism's primary teachings offer a strong and convincing philosophical basis for gender equality. While contemporary advancements, particularly the resurgence of bhikkhunī integration and increased educational access, demonstrate the tradition's capacity to rectify historical constraints and live more consistently its own precepts, early women not only actively participated but also attained the ultimate level of liberty. The main contribution is demonstrating that full incorporation of women is a natural result of returning to Buddhism's most profound teachings rather than a modern imposition. The implications for the future are clear: continued dedication to equitable ordination, the promotion of fair authority, and funding for women's education will build up the sangha, support the tradition's legitimacy, and transform Buddhism into a more genuine force for justice and compassion in the modern world.

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