

Role, Rituals, Practices and Beliefs about and for women in Buddhism.

This is a complex issue to lay down in 10 minutes, as there are numerous sects and traditions of Buddhism but I will start with the roots, approximately 2500 years ago in the time that Buddha was alive.

Buddha declared the equality of women as just as capable as men to become enlightened, to reach the same ultimate spiritual attainments. Therefore, if we go back to the teachings and path before it became an 'ism' (ie: Buddhism) there are no differences in the roles, practices and beliefs about and for women. He expounds this upon his own enlightenment when Mara beseeches him not to teach the Dhamma, he expounds this to Ananda years later when he is asked to create the order of Bhikkhunis (nuns), and again upon his deathbed (Parinibbana) at Kusinagar. The spiritual path comprised of practices, meditations and teachings leading to ultimate enlightenment was and remains identical for nuns as for monks, likewise the spiritual path for lay women is the same as for lay men. The community of monks, nuns, lay women and lay men are known as the 4 pillars of Dhamma or the 4-fold Sangha.

In Buddha's time Nuns, known as Bhikkhunis, managed their own monasteries independently and these flourished. At that point in history women joined the order of Bhikkhunis for many reasons: because the teachings made sense to them and thus they desired liberation; because their husbands or other family members had ordained or died; because it was seen as a preferable alternative to marriage; because they wanted to live an autonomous life not controlled by the strict societal pressures which saw women as a means of labour, reproduction and objects for men's fancies; etc. The words of many fully enlightened nuns from this time are recorded and show the delight and self-confidence in their freedom from traditional women's positions. These stories and poems are known as the Therigathas.

Buddha was very aware of the culture of that time and established this Nuns order carefully taking into consideration that most people would reject and not respect women in an equal role. For those who were to become followers of Buddha, this wasn't going to be as much of a problem, but for the society at large that they lived in who neither accepted nor believed in Buddha's teachings, Buddha had to design the order of Bhikkhunis taking this into account. There were instances where nuns were ridiculed for being celibate

as this was thought to be unnatural for women widely regarded as evil temptresses of man, and times where they were abused and even raped. The order of nuns therefore ended up with more rules than monks, mostly to protect them but also to convey that they were not considered inferior to men and to prevent them from having a role of subservience, or service to monks or any male. Monks were to regard nuns as their younger sisters who needed to be protected from discrimination and abuse from society. Nuns inherited all the 227 vows of the monks plus these additional ones for their "protection".

Buddha's Order of Nuns opened up opportunities both in religion and society for women that had not previously existed. At that time women were not even considered to have any spiritual worth other than to pray for their husbands, They had responsibilities and positions in the Bhikkhuni Sangha that garnered them great respect. Many were very learned and experts in teaching the Dhamma, many were eminent saintly Bhikkhunis who were fully enlightened, and many were both. The first nun ordained into the Order of Nuns was Buddha's own step-mother, Maha Prajapati Gotami, the sister of Buddha's birthmother who died seven days after giving him life. She was immediately joined by 500 other women of the society with a deep commitment and desire to liberation and social service. Approximately 250 years later in the time of Indian Emperor Asoka, his own daughter Sanghamita and son Mahinda were ordained as Bhikkhuni and Bhikkhu (monk) and sent to Sri Lanka, where they ordained several of the royal family members as both Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis.

There should be no dispute to these facts, yet after the time of Buddha however, when the teachings were written down, some of the biases from the men crept back in. The teachings were oral until about 400 years after Buddha, when they were recorded in Sri Lanka by 500 monks and not a single nun. Since these texts are regarded as the words of Buddha many accept them verbatim as such, even though some of these biases are contradictory to these other instances where it is written down that women are equal. These ancient texts known as the Pali Canon or Tipitaka are the common root texts for all the traditions, and as time went on, these were elaborated on and these initially small biases sometimes took on a life of their own because discrimination of women has been a feature common to most societies for all of history. One such instance of this is the portrayal of Buddha being hesitant to ordain women as nuns, and predicting that there

would be trouble for the Sasana if he did so. Another such instance is requiring women to be Novice nuns for 2 years prior to being allowed to be ordained fully as Bhikkhunis, and placing restrictions on a Bhikkhuni to only be permitted to ordain 1 nun per 2 years.

Another problem is that Buddhism and the order of monks and nuns died out in many places. For mostly societal reasons re-establishing the nuns order has encountered obstacles. The order is still alive and thriving in China, Korea and Taiwan through the Dharmagupta lineage, who is a lineage guru common to both Mahayana (a later version or split of Buddhism which includes Zen and Tibetan) and Theravadin (which is the orthodox lineage of elders). So there is the possibility of re-establishing the order in other places and in fact in California last summer (2010) was the first re-establishing of the order with the ordination of 4 new Bhikkhunis under Venerable Ayya Taathaloka Bhikkhuni and other fully ordained Bhikkhunis as well as Bhikkhus of Theravada tradition.

These biases and restrictions have played out over time and cultures and today Bhikkhuni or full nun ordination is not recognized or available in most sects of Buddhism including in Tibetan Buddhism, Theravadin Buddhism of Thailand, Sri Lanka and Burma. Although there are several ordained novice nuns flourishing in most traditions, their roles are limited. Some have received full ordination in China or Taiwan, but have kept this secret from the community they are a part of. Zen Buddhism in general, is most liberal and as such has appealed most to both male and female westerners, with a very large number of both ordained and lay female teachers. However, the ordained nuns and monks are neither Bhikkhunis nor Bhikkhus, and have evolved their own system independent of this one. And as we have seen with the recent ordinations in California, the Theravada lineage does recognize full nun ordination and is expanding and re-establishing it.

In nearly all traditions, here in the west we have nuns and lay women as teachers and this trend will continue. There are many working to see equal women's rights in Buddhism re-established while others simply continue to practice and teach without adhering to strict and perhaps antiquated systems of the past. The path and instructions to full spiritual attainment, liberation, itself is clear and unambiguous and available to everyone, male, female, ordained or not.