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Woman In Buddhism

*Studies on Her Position
and Role*

Professor Dhammavihari Thera



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(Studies on Her Position and Role)

by

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Professor Dhammavihari Thera

*To the loving memory of
Nanda Senanayake
this gift of DHAMMA is made by
Malinee and the sons
Sharanga and Shalitha*

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Preface

Does woman need to be a subject of ceaseless controversy and debate? Thousands of years ago, back in Indian history, the *Manusmṛti*, the Grand Law Book of India, recorded that

women were created for the generation of humanity

[*Prajānārthaṃ striyaḥ sṛṣṭāḥ*]. It was argued therefore that she was entitled to equal justice with man [*Tasmād sādharmaṇaḥ dharmāḥ saha patnyā udīritaḥ* (Manusmṛti IX.96). This means: “Therefore an equal *dharma*, to be shared with the wife, has been laid down.”

We also know that in early Vedic India the woman was entitled to attend to the *gārhya-patya* [i.e. the domestic sacrificial fire] in the absence of her husband from the home. But she was not to remain there long and enjoy that justifiably owned position. It was soon widely made known to people that it was unpleasant to the gods to see women at the sacrifices. She could not on her own make offerings to the gods [*Nāsti strīnāṃ pṛthag yajtaḥ: Na vrataṃ nāpyupoṣathaṃ*. Manu V. 153]. There was no religiousness for woman, apart from humiliating subservience to her husband, which could do her any good [*patiṃ śuśrūyate yena tena svarge mahīyate*. Ibid.].

Buddhism ceaselessly challenged these religious inroads to social attitudes and approaches. Gender difference is not to stand in the way of women in religion or society. *Itthibhāvo no kiṃ kayirā?* “**What will our being women matter?**” The Buddhist nun **Somā roared back in this manner** at a heckling Māra. Spiritual profundity of nuns like **Dhammadinnā** and **Vajirā** should remain undiminishing sources of inspiration to women anywhere in the world.

Know ye the culture of your past - your achievements and

the heights you have reached. In these essays, I have endeavoured to give you an insight into them. With your vision clear and aware of the goal you wish to achieve. **“Go ye forward and retrace not your steps”** - *Mā nivattha, Abhikkama.*

May the generous contributors to this *dhamma-dāna*, living and dead, receive their blissful rewards.

Dhammavihāri 2002

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Woman In India: Discriminated Against Or Not?

1Concepts like women’s liberation and feminist activists are nothing new in the world which we have inherited. This part of the world where we live is unquestionably known to have had a highly developed culture of its own, dating back to more than two and a half millennia. Where bondage

exists and wields a crushing power, the concept of liberation, associated with or without violence in speech and action, seems necessarily a must. In ancient India, through various epochs of its history, with diverse religious and cultural traditions having their impact on society, both liberation and domination are equally well known. Through a very rigid vertical division of society into what was then known as the four castes or *catur varṇa* in the Puruṣa Sūkta of the Rig Veda, with its unjustifiable [except through doctrinaire religious teachings] social gradations, those who were higher up in the human community thus placed through religious sanctions, did definitely dominate over those below them. This clearly did happen with the Brahmins dominating over the Śūdras.

Likewise, men and women were separated apart, with serious gradations of high and low, superior and inferior, and stupidly enough at times, even clean and unclean [with an antithesis between male and female and high-castes and low-castes]. Any one who has enough patience to study the relevant literary sources of this period, from the early to the late, together with their religio-cultural emphases, should also have enough honesty to lay bare their contents with regard to these very vital sociological considerations. Re-writing of ancient history has become a very fashionable art today [more in support of very parochial aspirations and a measure of obviously necessary self-defence]. At the same time, there is also the very clearly evident new interpretations of theological positions. But these are by no

means adequate to make amends for some of our mistakes of the past. That is why some of the old garrisons of religion are being assailed and their walls are seen crumbling down. And today, even people who attempt to formulate universal value systems for the benefit of humanity, seem to lack an adequate knowledge of the past which they plan to analyze and assess. They also seem to go more by hearsay and wishful thinking. Obviously, some of this background knowledge of the ramified past is either not known to them or is deliberately shut out from them.

My endeavour before this august assembly today is to pick out a few unquestionable authenticated positions in history, irrespective of the faiths and creeds to which we belong, and analyze them with dignified detachment, in order to be able to serve the cause of humanity at large. We are well aware that in this area we cannot have computer-designed products to sell to the world. They must naturally emerge from history, through revision and modification of some, and perhaps a total rejection of other patterns of thinking and social institutions which we have set up and inherited. Let me begin with ancient India, with more than two thousand year old traditions, even prior to the birth of Gotama in India in the sixth century B.C. As Buddhists, we begin by paying the highest tribute to the woman as the mother in the home. Literally, that is where we begin. As for the need of test-tube babies, even if we can get them without a mother, let us adequately be honest about our own motivation.

Woman in India / her position of respect and recognition

Perhaps it may be said with a fair degree of accuracy that the oldest and boldest statements regarding the glory of the woman in the human community had their origin in India, and that even more than two thousand years before the commencement of the Christian era. They are traceable back to the contents of those venerated volumes of the Rig Veda where we are told that in the unbroken continuity of the domestic sacred fire or the *Gārhyā-patya*, the wife of the householder had to rightly step in and keep tending it until his return. There were no known grounds then, religious or social, on which to keep her out. The world apparently had not yet come to such a state of decadence to necessitate the setting up of a CEDAW - Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

In the sociology of that part of the then known world [i.e. in the sub-continent of India], a cataclysmic event of the magnitude of the glacial age was being set in motion about this time. Human institutions where women held honoured and elevated positions, well founded on justice and fair play, were being assailed by sectarian groups with vested interests. These seem to have come out like volcanic eruptions, with or without warning rumblings, we do not know. Unknown and unseen authority of religion was being invoked and was good enough for any of these anti-humanist actions. Historians have studied what happened

during this process. Their observations need to be studied with due detachment, unmindful of the invariable chastisement we are liable to get in the process for the sins of those who preceded us.

Here is Professor Altekar, an eminent historian, analyzing this social disaster which came upon women via a religious tornado.

The prohibition of *upanayana* amounted to spiritual disenfranchisement of women and produced a disastrous effect upon their general position in society. It reduced them to the status of Śūdras.... What, however, did infinite harm to women was the theory that they were ineligible for them [Vedic sacrifices] because they were of the status of Śūdras. Henceforward they began to be bracketed with Śūdras and other backward classes in society. This we find to be the case even in the Bhagavadgītā [IX. 32].

The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, p, 204.

Religious discrimination on the basis of sex

In the Manusmṛti which is a work of the Dharma Śāstra literature of India, we witness the cruel infliction of domestic subservience on the woman. The road to heaven is

barred to her and there is hard bargaining with her for the offer of an alternative route. She can have no worship or prayer on her own [*Nāsti strīnām pṛthag yajño na vratam nāpyupoṣatham*]. Matrimony and obedience to the husband [*patim suśrūyate yena*] are the only means whereby a woman can hope to reach heaven [*tena svarge mahīyate*].

*Nāsti strīnām pṛthag yajño na vratam nāpyupoṣatham
patim suśrūyate yena tena svarge mahīyate.*

Manu. V. 153

No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women [apart from their husbands]. If a wife obeys her husband, she will for that [reason alone] be exalted in heaven.

The Laws of Manu Tr. by G. Buhler
SBE. Vol. XIV. p.196. Ch.V. v. 155

The above is a beautiful study in historical contrast. The Vedas and the Manusmṛti we quoted above both belong to what we would in India call the Brahmanic tradition. But what a cleavage from the Vedas to the Dharma Śāstras and what a sharp contrast in attitudes. The woman is mercilessly and perhaps jealously, dragged down from her pedestal and virtually spat at. This calculated degradation of woman is seen being openly worked out even through the Brahmanas. She is ruthlessly reviled as being impure in the eyes of the gods, both physically and religiously. Painfully humiliating

rituals [being treated as a draught animal with straw wrapped round her waist] are prescribed for her admission to the sacrificial ritual and restoration to the normal society of men and women. It is said to be the gods who seem to make the fuss about it. Or it is more likely that the masters of the rituals seem to compel the gods to do so.

One of the most atrocious acts of discrimination against the woman, man being placed in a very highly privileged position, is seen once again in the Manusmṛti [SBE. XXV quoted above, p. 196. vv. 157, 168].

Women are also said to be very much circumscribed in their intellectual and spiritual capacities. In their social life, stunning blocks have been placed on their way. On the death of her husband, a widow is not allowed, according to the Dharma Śāstras, even to think of the name of any man.

Na ca nāmā'pi gṛhṇīyāt patyau prete parasya tu.

Manu.

At her pleasure let her emaciate her body by [living on] pure flowers, roots and fruit; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband has died.

Manu. SBE. XXV.p.196. Ch. v. v.157

But a man is told that he is free to re-marry.

Punar dārakriyām kuryāt punar ādānam eva tu.

Manu once again.

Having thus, at the funeral, given the sacred fires to his wife who dies before him, he may marry again, and again kindle [the fires].

Manu quoted above. Ch. v. *v.*168

Protestant Reforms and New Thinking

But both Pārśva Nātha of Jainism [a senior of Gautama] and Gautama the Buddha, as non-Brahmanic protestant leaders, appear to have totally rejected this position. They both opened the doors of their monastic communities, of course with strict provisos at times, for the admission of women. Hundreds and hundreds of women perfected their spiritual pursuits under Gautama. One single peep into the Psalms of the Sisters [Therī Gāthā] alone will provide much more evidence of this than one needs. Widows, bereaved mothers grieving over infant mortalities, victims of sexual assaults and exploited women of many other sorts, all appear to have had solace in the religion of the Buddha. Rejoice over the restoration to glory of the vast segment of the community of India's women whom these stories bring before us.

It is around this time, the sixth century B.C. or even a little earlier, that protestant movements like Jainism and Buddhism had to appear on the Indian scene to do quite a bit of violent clean up and restore lost rights of many social

groups, sex wise as well as class and caste-group [*varṇa* and *jāti*] wise.

Buddhist women, young as well as old, are emboldened through their own religious convictions and awakening to challenge the existing Indian social and religious conventions on these matters. They were absolutely retrograde and misogynous. The Bhikkhuni Somā fires back at a challenger, a doubting Thomas of pre-Christian origin, who tells her that as a woman, with only her two-finger wisdom [*dvaṅgulapaññā*], she could never aspire to get anywhere near true sainthood [*yaṃ taṃ isīhi pattabbaṃ*]. This is what she bravely tells him at Thig. v. 61.

“What does it matter our being man or woman, when our minds are perfectly under our command? Our wisdom and judgement are wholly mature and the Truth of the Norm [*dhamma*], we clearly see.”

In the Indian context of the sixth century B.C. Somā’s reply indeed would be the highest point of emancipation in the ladder of the women’s lib. Spiritual emancipation was one of the major hurdles to clear.

A few observations from the Buddhist angle

On the other hand, Buddhism’s contribution to the liberation and uplift of the Indian woman in the social

sector was equally immense. Here again the elevation of the woman in the Buddhist set up was conceptually much nobler. It was much more than a question of 'rights' or 'duties'. The Buddhists have to seriously respect inter-personal relationships so much that it would be painful for them to tear away any portion of society and isolate it from the rest on any basis like duties or rights. To the Buddhist, it is an achievement in the total integration of the woman [i.e. all females in the social set-up of the home] into the social fabric of the human community, the family being the smallest unit from where one should [and could] make the start. In Buddhist thinking, the male's respect for the female had to be so high that we could say with a deep conviction that the Buddhists perhaps knew the full connotation of *apres vous*, in the presence of ladies, well before the French. Even on the occasion of the Buddha's passing away, the Buddha's steward monk Ananda is said to have given the first offer to the females who had assembled to pay their respects to the dead Buddha on this understanding that they were ladies and therefore had to be treated with courtesy and consideration.

Buddhists refuse to forget that the mother is the highest symbol of respect in the home. She is after all the progenitor, the one who begat us. Biologically, she is the one who is nearest to us. It is the increased warmth of her body [conditionally generated at child-birth for our sake], during the earliest phase of our life here, that gave us infants the sense of safety and security. So we call the mother the

Friend in the Home -- *Mātā mittam sake ghare* SN. I. p. 37.

Along with the father [if it does not turn out to be a miserable single parent home], she takes her rightful place as our first teachers, guiding us and ushering us into the new world of ours. As she gets older, as the mother of a mother, she becomes the patron of the extended family. This being her very wholesome domestic position, she does not need as a rule to defend herself with the use of a fire-arm [privately owned and secretly kept in a handbag] against a heartless husband or cruel boy friend, as it does happen often in many parts of the world. These, we know, are very much realities round the world, in the developed and less developed countries. These are regular news items in daily papers. Today, the degradation has fallen so low that aged mothers can even become victims of their own child-murderers. These, we feel, are areas where women's prestige, rather than rights, have to be restored.

Through years of investigation and research, we have gained the conviction that wherever a woman tends to entertain the idea that she is more the wife of a husband than a mother of children, there is evidence of a misdirection of priorities. This invariably leads to a really serious rot in the main emotional trunk of the family. This applies to the misplaced role of a father as well. Firstly this leads to frustration and discontent in the minds of growing up children, generated through a sense of neglect and inadequate care and love. This in turn leads to deep-seated bitterness, jealousies and rivalries and even violent

challenges.

Next take a look at the Indian woman as the wife in the home. The Rig Veda, perhaps among our oldest literary records, places the newly-wedded young woman in a very prestigious position [Rig Veda. X. 85. 46]. She is invoked to be a queen - *Rājñī* - among the in-laws in the household. Her role as mother of children is extolled. But latterly, by the time of the Dharma Śāstras, she is stigmatized as being ritually impure. No matter from where the insult or the assault came, the woman in society in the Buddha's day was thoroughly crushed and was literally on the mat. In Buddhist literature, the Buddha's own challenging statements, clearly reveal this. If she is a wise and virtuous girl, she must know how to keep her household in proper gear, with due respects to her husband and her in-laws in her new home. She must also take good care of her children and handle the household management well, with her domestic aids happy and content. Then all the success she needs for this world and the next are all within her command. One of the best in this area of counselling comes in the Buddha's advice to King Pasenadi Kosala who is said to have turned a little sour in the very presence of the Buddha, on hearing the news of the birth of a daughter. The above observations are a brief summary of the Buddha's words of advice to the king [See Samyutta Nikaya I. p.86. and Kindred Sayings I. 110 f.].

In the light of these, let us try to understand a few modern stresses in the re-defining of the status of woman in our

society. If any harsh or unsympathetic curbs are really found to be placed on her today, in this tradition or that, let us view them with a total understanding of her real place in the human community, as a part fitting into a whole, effectively contributing to the total functioning. Highly finished and polished parts are of very little avail if they are not going to be parts of a whole. However, there may still be the need to respect differences in religio-cultural traditions, as long as they do not blatantly ride roughshod over basic human values.

I wish to add a few comments here on the question of **women's employment** [Article 11].

Buddhist thinking unequivocally defines the vital role of the female in relation to her domestic setting as 1. the young growing up daughter, a girl to be adequately equipped, through the mediation of her parents, with wisdom and virtue [*medhāvinī sīlavatī*] to steer clear in her journey through life, in the midst of temptations, threats and trepidations which a challenging world hurls at her, and 2. a newly-wedded wife, safely and securely established in her home, with delightfully warm-hearted relationships with every member of the homestead to which she has newly arrived [including all her in-law relations: *sassu-devā*], and well secured on the foundations of conjugal fidelity [*patibbatā*]. Finally 3. she is the large-hearted loving mother who is the friend-in-the-home [*mātā mittam sake ghare* SN. I.37], a friend to everyone, including the domestic aids of the household.

With that understanding of the position of woman within the fundamental social unit of the home, it should not be difficult at least for the vast majority of people in Asia who have had a distinctly Buddhist cultural background to determine as to what should be the priorities in the determination of the day to day activities of a female in society, and to align her in relation to the male members of the community. The separatist and splitist tendency within the family unit in terms of male or female rights would be most abhorrent to such a society. It would not only be theoretically hostile, but would in practice be disruptive and destructive.

Before concluding I would take one single instance to illustrate a point. Let us take into consideration a woman's capacity to be a wage-earner and her need to do so. Anywhere in the world today money has reached a very high position. It is the most efficient basis of buying power, of anything and at any time. At the same time, the world today has not been educated with regard to regulating the buying needs. With a devastatingly competitive market economy, producers and manufacturers continually stimulate the world at large to step out and buy, unmindful of their need to do so. That is the producer's own formula for their survival.

In the world of today, what is referred to as the concept of 'delay gratification' is a thing of very recent origin. In such a set up, where needs and the choice of needs are not regulated, everybody feels it necessary to possess money,

his or her own, and that in unlimited quantities. It is that unlimited buying power which is believed to get one today higher and higher in the social ladder. This is what generates the need to create more and more avenues of employment, the need being for more and more avenues for earning money, even by fair or foul means. Whether it be that of the drug-peddler, or the one who sells illicit fire-arms or the sophisticated professional who ventures to carry out unauthorized abortions. Being employed in this manner is certainly no part of occupational therapy.

That being so, we would make bold to say many people irresponsibly desert their posts in quest of more opportunities to earn more and more money. In this quest, everybody would agree, the sky is the limit. Teachers would teach less in their regular class rooms and turn up with far greater enthusiasm at their pre-planned tuition sessions. Top-ranking medical practitioners would work less at their regular clinics and be more readily available as specialist consultants at a pre-determined higher rate of consultant fees.

Mothers would leave their younger children at state-run or privately owned day-care centres and be working in all manner of places, from daily-paid labour hands to high-ranking specialists at scientific and technological jobs. Our concern is about this latter and their absence from homes where their presence, we feel, would be more primarily needed. A stubborn defence of the one or the other is not what we are interested in. We need an honest approach to

an essentially human problem. The question is ‘Whose cause are we serving?’ Can we honestly answer this, internationally? Or have we got to be reminded of the line ‘Never the twain shall meet ‘.

[A paper presented at the UNICEF Conference in Kathmandu - 1996].

Dignified Position of Woman in Religion and Society

- as seen through Buddhism

Indian culture, from very early times, appears to recognize woman as the matrix of society. Even the Rig. Veda [X. 85 . 46] recognizes her rightful place in the home as the newly-wedded wife. In the Sūrya’s Bridal Hymn, a prayer is offered that she may reign supreme over all her in-laws, father, mother, sister and brother. Her role as mother of children is extolled and it is wished with eagerness that she presides over the arrival of grandchildren too. Even in India she does not appear to have been divorced from her

position as progenitor. Being stigmatized as ritually impure, the woman is nevertheless drawn in to participate in sacrifices, even through humiliating concessions, for in her absence the very existence and perpetuation of mankind is threatened.

The first expression of fair play towards woman as an equally privileged member of the human community is seen in the Manusmṛti [IX. 96] where it is said that woman was created as the progenitor and man as the perpetuator of the human species and as such a common dharma has been laid down for man and woman: *Tasmād sādharmaṇo dharmah saha patnyā udīritah*. With the growth of so-called religious institutions and the build-up of priestly power, it is true that the social and religious position of woman in India has witnessed a lamentable corrosion. She has come to be ranked with the *Caṇḍāla* [i.e. the socially most despised] and the ill-omened raven. Surprisingly enough, even the Manusmṛti we quoted above, rejects a woman's right to ascend to heaven by her own religious striving. A woman has no right of religious observances, it is said, no fast, no sacrifices. The glory of heaven is only for the woman who subserves her husband [*Patim suśrūyate yena tena svarge mahīyate*. Manu. 5. 153].

At the time of the appearance of Buddhism in India, these fluctuations in the fortunes of woman were a reality and the exploitation of woman had reached an irritating high water mark. A rebuking Mara, reflecting the contemporary non-Buddhist views about the social and religious standing of

woman, scoffs at Bhikkhuni Somā who as a nun was striving for self-liberation [SN. I. 129]. Spiritual heights are to be attained only by sages [*isīhi pattaḅbaṃ*], says Mara, implying specifically a male domination in the sphere of religion. This is unmistakably indicated in the rest of the remarks which say that a woman with her two-finger wisdom cannot ever hope to reach such spiritual heights [*na tvam dvaṅgulapaññāya sakkā pappotum itthiyā*].

Thus, at the time of the appearance of Buddhism, the Indian woman who earlier had occupied, on her own right, a prestigious position had sunk to a lamentable low. In childhood, in marriage and even in widowhood, the female in society was under the vigil of the male, thus most often being robbed of her initiative and originality, This was unquestionably an unwarranted subordination. This attitude had swept thorough the entire Indian society, reaching as high as the social elite. Even King Pasenadi Kosala had to be reminded by the Buddha of the fallacy of this assumption. This King who was saddened on the news of the birth of a daughter was told by the Buddha that if a girl were properly groomed to play her role in society efficiently, on that skill of her alone she would outshine men.

*Itthī pi hi ekacchīyā seyyā posā janādhipa.
Medhāvīnī sīlavatī sassudevā patibbatā.*

SN. I. 86

Some women would, in their perfected feminine role, even excel men. Endowed with wisdom and virtue, she is chaste in her domestic behaviour as loyal wife, observing conjugal fidelity as the highest virtue in her married life, and holds in high esteem her husband's parents as her own [*sassudevā*].

Chastity of woman, both pre-marital and within marriage is a solemnly guarded virtue in Buddhism, both in terms of lay Buddhist society and the Buddhist religion. But some students of religion and culture, apparently lacking in a basic academic discipline, turn so wild in their generalizations as to declare: "For example, virginity and chastity in females are not associated with Buddhist ethics or doctrine. One consequence of this is that marriage is a secular affair in Buddhist Sri Lanka, whereas it is a sacrament according to Brahmanic values." [Gananath Obesekera: *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, Chicago, 1984. p.445]. Any Sri Lankan who is not denuded of his cultural heritage through any process of alienation, has to be aware of the fact that virginity and chastity in females, coupled with the idea of conjugal fidelity [for all of which the males in the society are equally held responsible] are all well saddled in the five basic precepts or *pañcasīla* of the Buddhists. Thus it is very much associated, or better say contained in Buddhist ethics and doctrine. One has to be adequately guarded against such situations of misdirection and misrepresentation generated by groups of neo-scientific analysts who at times appear to be playing with far too many words.

Thus according to Buddhism the woman is respected and loved as an indispensable component of society, starting from her basic role as progenitor and spreading over leadership and guidance in the bringing up of children, care of the total household including the domestic aids, and the administration of finances. One needs only glance through a text like *Mātugāma Samyutta* [SN. IV. 238 ff.] to appreciate the full role a woman is expected to play in religion and society, a role which is complementary to that of man.

In the service of religion, it is once again the exemplary life of those who have opted to renounce the world and take to a full-time religious career in earnest, whether they be male or female which should be held out as a model. They alone, and not the propgandists, serve the cause of religion. They teach by example, with a convincing depth of understanding. What *Vaḍḍhamātā* [Thig. v. 204 ff.] tells her son about the unending stresses and strains of life or what *Uppalavaṇṇā* tells about the ensuing foulness in the pursuit of sense pleasures [Ibid. v. 224 ff] are eternal sermons which can be repeated and reproduced without any loss of their charm and vibrancy. A few such women must emerge in society. To make the men more gentle, that is to make gentlemen of them, to wean them from such corrosive habits like proneness to drinking and gambling, the women of this country could play a marvelously efficient role. They must reaffirm the adequacy of pleasure in the home, in terms of food and drink, sex and emotional gratification as parents of growing up healthy and promising children. We

consider a resetting of the approach to cooking and eating in the home, what one cooks and how one does it, how one serves it and eats it, delightfully and dexterously, would go a long way in this direction. Now is the time to re-tap and re-harness the resourcefulness of our women in its totality for the good of everyone. We need them very much today. We have to appreciate the possible leadership they could provide. Such women would be the *primus inter pares* even in a society where people speak of women's lib, not only for equality with men for women but also for the possibility to outdo the male of the species, when and wherever he nods at his desk.

These brief remarks are made with a view to introducing the true Buddhist concept of woman, what she should symbolize and what she should stand up for, with the primary awareness that everyone of these champions should first qualify themselves for the task.

*Attānaṃ eva paṭhamam patirūpe nivesaye
athaññaṃ anusāseyya na kilisseyya paṇḍito.*

Dhp. v. 158

Let one first establish oneself in what is proper, and then instruct others. Such a wise one will never be defiled.

We need a few more seminars on this subject, undertaken with honesty and a sincerity to serve a cause. Being aggressive and vindictive, and ill-equipped with regard to necessary information, only leads to misanthropy. Let us

help each other, with gentleness and restraint to reach, with the necessary detachment, the data bank on these subjects which well deserve careful and closer scrutiny.

Woman Within the Religious Frame of Buddhism

At the time the Buddha set up his Order of Bhikkhus, there was in Indian society the widespread but groundless belief that woman is inferior to man. The position which the woman lost under the dominance of the Brahmanas had not yet been retrieved. The brahmins of the day evidently showed little sympathy for her sad lot. Altekar describes the position of woman in India at the time as follows: “ The prohibition of *upanayana* amounted to spiritual disenfranchisement of women and produced a disastrous effect upon their general position in society. It reduced them to the status of Śūdras. What, however, did infinite harm to women was the theory that they were ineligible for them [Vedic sacrifices] because they were of the status of the Śūdras. Henceforward they began to be bracketed with Śūdras and other backward classes in society. This we find to be the case even in the Bhagavadgītā (IX.32) [.Altekar,

A.S., *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, p. 204f]. In the Manusmṛti 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.

*Nāsti strīnām pṛthag yajño na vrataṃ nāpyupoṣaṭhaṃ
patim suśrūyate yena tena svarge mahīyate.*

Manu.V.153.

Women have no sacrifices of their own to perform nor religious rites or observances to follow. Obedience to the husband alone would exalt the woman in heaven.

This hostile attitude to woman both in religion and in society was repeatedly criticised and challenged by the Buddha on numerous occasions. In the Kosala Samyutta 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 Brahmanas had contributed to strengthen. The Buddha pointed out clearly that woman had a dignified and an important part to play in 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 relationships, 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 society, she may even rival men.

*Itthī pi hi ekacchīyā seyyā posā janādhīpa medhāvīnī sīlavatī
sassudevā patibbatā. Tassā yo jāyati poso sūro hoti
disampati
evaṃ subhagiyā putto rajjam pi anusāsati.*

SN. I .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
rev'rencing, true wife. The boy that she may bear
may do great deeds, And rule great realms, yea, such
a son Of noble wife becomes his country's guide.

Kindred Sayings, I.p.111

But it is not unusual to find scholars who have missed this singular virtue of Buddhism. It would be grossly unfair to say that the Buddha did not devote much attention to the duties and ideals of lay women or that he showed indifference to or contempt of women. Speaking of Buddhism and Jainism Altekar unjustly says: 'Both these were ascetic religions, and they have not devoted much attention to the duties and ideals of lay women. The founders and leaders of both these novements showed the indifference to, or contempt of women, which is almost

universal among the advocates of the ascetic ideal.”

[Altekar, A.S., op.cit. p.208].

The instances are numerous where the Buddha defines and describes the duties of woman in society [AN. IV. p. 265 f]. Further, the Buddha recognises the fact that these do not constitute the whole of her life. It is not with a view to limiting their life solely to the secular affairs of the household that the Buddha laid down a code of good living for women, but to serve as a complement to the good life already enjoined in his religion to all his followers, irrespective of their sex. A host of these considerations as they are addressed to women are grouped together in the Samyutta Nikaya in a chapter solely devoted to them [SN.IV. 328f]. A good lay woman endowed with religious devotion, moral virtue and liberality as well as wisdom and learning, makes a success of her life in this world. For it is said:

*Saddhāya sīlena ca y'idha vadḍhati Paññāya cāgena
sutena cūbhayaṃ etādisī sīlavatī upāsikā
ādiyati sāram idheva attano ti.*

SN. IV. 250

Such a virtuous lady who possesses religious devotion, cultivates virtue, is endowed with wisdom and learning and is given to charity makes a success of her life in this very existence.

Her virtuous character gives to her life in the household poise and dignity [*Pañcahi bhikkhave dhammehi samannāgato mātuḡāmo visārado agāram ajjhāvasati. Katamehi pañcahi? Pāṇātipātā pativirato ca hoti. surāmeraya-majjapa-mādaṭṭhānā paṭivirato ca hoti.* SN. IV. 250]. The following are also given as virtues by means of which she can make her life fruitful, both here and hereafter: *Saddho* (religious devotion), *hirimā ottappī* (sense of shame and fear), *akkodhano anupanāhi* (not given to anger), *anissukī* (not jealous), *amaccharī* (not niggardly), *anaticārī* (chaste in behaviour), *sīlavā* (virtuous), *bahussuto* (learned), *āraddhaviriyo* (zealous), *upaṭṭhita-ssatī* (mentally alert), *paññāvā* or wise [ibid. 243-44]. We notice that all these virtues enumerated so far are within the reach of a woman living in the household. She is not rooted out of her domestic setting. The good and successful life of the laywoman, as much as of the layman, seems to have loomed large in the ethics of Buddhism. In the Anguttara Nikaya two sets of virtues are given whereby a woman is said to strive for success in this world as well as in the other: *idhalokavijaya* and *para-lokavijaya* [*Catūhi kho Visāka dhammehi samannāgato mātuḡāmo idhalokavijayāya paṭipanno hoti ayam sa loko āraddho hoti. Katamehi catūhi? Idha Visāka mātuḡāmo susamvihita-kammanto hoti saṅgahitaparijano bhattu manāpaṃ carati sambhatam anurakkhati. Catūhi kho Visāka dhammehi samannāgato mātuḡāmo paralokavijayāya paṭipanno hoti parassa loko āraddho hoti. Katamehi catūhi? Idha Visāka mātuḡāmo saddhāsampanno hoti sīlasampanno hoti cāgasampanno hoti paññāsampanno hoti.* AN. IV. 269f.].

It is also worth noting here that the Buddha accepts the reality and significance of the institution of marriage for woman. But, unlike in Hindu society, it was not the only means for the social elevation of woman. In Hinduism, a woman is supposed to become a *dvija*, a truly initiated member of the religion and the society, only after her marriage [Prabhu, *Hindu Social Organisation*, p. 284].

The virtues referred to in the Anguttara Nikaya [AN. IV. 269f] are household duties of a woman as wife which lead to domestic peace and concord. They are also calculated to keep the family administration in gear and secure for the family economic stability. This significant part which she is called upon to play is meticulously defined and it reveals neither indifference to nor contempt of women on the part of the Buddha.

The good laywoman has also her duties for the development of her religious life. It is a course of graduated training which does not conflict with her household life. It is, in fact, smoothly woven into it. Religious devotion (*saddhā*), moral virtue (*sīla*), and a generous disposition (*cāga*), for instance, form part of it. This healthy combination of social and religious virtues of woman is further witnessed in the Anguttara Nikaya where it is said that the following eight virtues pave the way for her to proceed to heaven.

*Susamvhitakammantā saṅgahita-parijjanā bhattu
manāpaṃ carati sambhataṃ anurakkhati.*

*Saddhāsīlena sampannā vadaññū vītamaccharā
niccaṃ maggaṃ visodheti sotthānaṃ samparāyikaṃ.
Icete aṭṭhadhammā ca yassā vijjati nāriyā
taṃ pi sīlavatiṃ āhu dhammaṭṭhaṃ saccavādinīṃ.
Soḷasākārasampannā aṭṭhaṅgasusamāgatā tādisī
sīlavatī upāsikā upapajjati devalokaṃ manāpam.*

AN. IV. 271

They are:

1. organises the work of the household with efficiency,
2. treats her servants with concern,
3. strives to please her husband,
4. takes good care of what he earns,
5. possesses religious devotion,
6. is virtuous in conduct,
7. is kind,
8. is liberal.

The first four items of this list are identical with the first four of the five good qualities ascribed to the virtuous wife in the Singālovāda Sutta, the fifth being general efficiency (*dakkhā*) and enterprise (*anlasā sabbakiccesu*) DN. III. p. 190 .

It was also held in Indian belief that woman was intellectually inferior to man and therefore had no capacity to man and therefore had no capacity to reach higher

spiritual attainments. This idea clearly echoes in the Samyutta Nikaya where Mara, as the personification of the forces of evil, strives in vain to dissuade a Bhikkhuni from her religious endeavours.

*Yaṃ taṃ isīhi pattaḃbaṃ ṭhānaṃ durabhisambhavaṃ
na taṃ dvaṅgulapaññāya skkā pappotuṃ itthiyā.*

SN. I. 129.

No woman, with the two - finger - wisdom which is hers, could ever hope to reach those heights which are attained only by the sages.”

These words of Māra are undoubtedly resonant of the beliefs of the day and the Buddha was vehement in contradicting them. Bhikkhuni Somā to whom Māra addressed these words answered. Illustrating the Buddhist attitude to the spiritual potentialities of woman she said:

*Itthibhāvo no kiṃ kayirā cittaṃhi susamāhite ñāṇaṃhi
vattamānaṃhi sammā dhammaṃ vipassato.*

SN. I. 129

‘When one’s mind is well concentrated and wisdom never fails does the fact of being a woman make any difference?’

However, there is evidence that this age-old scepticism

about the spiritual potentialities of woman died hard. Even in the face of success achieved by Bhikkhunis in Buddhism, a groundless belief seems to have prevailed which distrusted the capacity of woman for spiritual perfection. On the eve of her final passing away, when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī visits the Buddha to bid him farewell, he calls upon her to give proof of the religious attainments of the Bhikkhunis in order to convince the disbelieving sceptics, the men in society.

*Thīnaṃ dhammābhisamaye ye bālā vimaṭṭiṃ gatā
tesaṃ diṭṭhipahānatthaṃ iddhiṃ dassehi Gotamī.*

Ap. II. 535

‘O Gotami, perform a miracle in order to dispel the wrong views of those foolish men who are in doubt with regard to the spiritual potentialities of woman.’”

Buddhism, with its characteristic note of realism, also recognises 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 the senses. The world of pleasure exists in her.

*Pañcakāmaguṇā ete itthirūpasmimṃ dissare
rūpā saddā rasā gandhā phoṭṭha-bbā ca manoramā.*

AN. III. 69

All these five-fold pleasures of the senses which gratify the mind are centered in the feminine form.

The power which the woman derives through this may, at the same time, extend so far as to make man throw all reason to the winds and be a pawn in her hand, under the influence of her charm. Thus, it is even possible that a mother may err in relation to her son or vice versa.

Kin nu so bhikkhave moghapuriso maññati na mātā putte sārājati putto vā pana mātari ti.

AN. III. 68

What, O monks, does that foolish man think that a mother would not feel lustfully attached to her son or the son to his mother."

See *Gradual Sayings*, III. p.55 for a different translation of this passage which we consider to be incorrect.

Nāhaṃ bhikkhave aññaṃ ekarūpaṃ pi samanupassāmi evaṃ rajanīyaṃ evaṃ kamanīyaṃ evaṃ madanīyaṃ evaṃ bandhanīyaṃ evaṃ mucchanīyaṃ evaṃ antarāyakaraṃ anuttarassa yogakkhemassa adhigamāya yathayidaṃ bhikkhave itthirūpaṃ. Itthir@pe bhikkhave sattā rattā giddhā gadhitā mucchitā ajjhopannā te dīgharattaṃ socanti itthirupa-vasānugā.

[AN. III. 68].

Therefore a man might say without exaggeration that woman is a trap laid out on all sides by Māra [*Yaṃ hi taṃ bhikkhave sammā vadamāno vadeyya samantapāso mārassā ti mātugāmaṃ yeva sammā vadamāno vadeyya samantapāso mārassā ti. ibid*]. These observations are made, however, not as a stricture on their character but as a warning to the men, who in seeking their company, might err on the side of excess. It is true that at times they tend to be overstressed, but obviously with no malice to women. There is pointed reference to the unguarded nature of the man who falls a prey to these feminine charms.

*Muṭṭhassatiṃ tā bandhanti pekkhiteṇa mihiteṇa ca
atho'pi dunnivatthena mañjunā bhaṇiteṇa ca
ne'so jano svāsaddo api ugghātito mato.*

AN. III. 69

‘Women ensnare a man of heedless mind with their glances and smiles or with artful grooming [*dunnivattha*] and pleasing words. Women are such that one cannot approach them in safety even though they may be stricken and dead’

[G.S. III. 57].

Thus it becomes clear that it is not in the spirit of Buddhism to brand woman as a source of corruption for man. Note the

words 'a man of heedless mind' in the above quotation. It would be interesting to contrast here the words of Manu who says, 'It is the nature of woman to seduce men in this world': *Svabhāva eva nārīṇāṃ narāṇāṃ iha dūṣaṇaṃ*. Manu. II .213. The Jains too in spite of their admission of women into the Monastic Order, do not seem to have differed very much from the Brahmins in their attitude towards women. The Ācaranga Sutra, in the course of a religious admonition known as the Pillow of Righteousness, makes the following comment which stigmatises woman completely: 'He to whom women were known as the causes of all sinful acts, he saw the true state of the world. [Jaina Sūtras I., SBE. XXII. p.81]. The position of woman in Jainism is summed up as follows: "Right in the earliest portions of the Canon woman is looked upon as something evil that enticed innocent males into a snare of misery. They are described as 'the greatest temptation', 'the causes of all sinful acts'. 'the slough', 'demons' etc. Their bad qualities are described in exaggerated terms. Their passions are said to destroy the celibacy of monks 'like a pot filled with lac near fire'." [Deo.S.B., History of Jain Monachism, p. 493]. In Buddhism, on the other hand, the caution which men are called upon to exercise in their dealings with the opposite sex springs solely from the Buddhist attitude to *kāma* or the pleasures of the senses. *Kāma* are described in Buddhism as leading to grief and turbulence. *Kāma* thwart the path to transcendental happiness. This attitude is eloquently manifest in the counsel given to Ariṭṭha in the

Alagaddūpama Sutta [MN. I.130].

Of this vast field of sense experience of man, sex is only a segment but it is admittedly one with irresistible appeal and thus required a special word of warning, particularly to those who are keen on the pursuit of mental equipoise. The Buddha says that if it were left unbridled, it would, in expressing itself, shatter all bounds of propriety [*Kin nu so bhikkhave moghapuriso maññati na mātā putte sārājati putto vā pana mātari ti.* AN. III. 68].

Hence the desire to lead a chaste and moral life, eschewing, even completely, the gratification of sex desires, can as much be the aspiration of a woman as of a man. Besides this philosophic attitude to the pleasures of the world in which the woman admittedly plays a dominant part, there seems to be nothing in Buddhism which looks upon sex or woman as being corrupt in themselves.

Thus it becomes clear that the philosophy of early Buddhism had no reservations whatsoever regarding the spiritual emancipation of woman. In the ocean of samsāra her chances of swimming across to the further shore were as good as those of man. Emancipation of the mind through perfection of wisdom which is referred to as *cetovimutti paññāvimutti* was the goal of religious life and for this the way which had proved most effective was the life of renunciation. The woman was as much encumbered by household life as man and in her spiritual earnestness she would have equally well echoed the words of the man who

chooses renunciation. She would say with him that the household life is full of impediments and contrast it with the life of *pabbajjā* [*Sambādho gharāvāso rajopatho abbhokāso pabbajjā*. MN. I. 179].

But according to the evidence of the Pali texts [AN. IV. 274 ; Vin. II.253] the admission of women into the life of *pabbajjā* in Buddhism does not seem to have been effected with as much ease as one would expect. According to these, the Buddha appears to have shown some reluctance to admit women into the Order. When Mahāpajāpati Gotamī requested the Buddha to consent to the entry of women into his Order he is said to have put her off three times, saying: ‘Do not be interested O, Gotamā, about the entry of women into my Order” [Ibid]. This does seem to imply that the presence of women in the monastic institution of *brahmacariya* was considered, for some reason or other, to be detrimental to its well-being. In an atmosphere where women were considered a danger to spiritual life, their presence in the inner circle of religious life as members of the monastic community would have naturally called for serious comment. However, there is evidence that Jainism had already broken through this barrier against women. But the vicissitudes of the Jaina monastic community, in the relations between the two orders of monks and nuns, as well as of nuns and laymen, could not apparently have been very heartening to the Buddha. Speaking of the reforms introduced by Mahāvīra with the addition of the fifth vow of chastity to the earlier *catuyāma samvara* of Pārśva, Jacobi

says, ‘The argumentation in the text presupposes a decay of morals of the monastic order to have occurred between Pārśva and Mahāvīra.” [Jaina Sūtras, II, SBE. XLV. 122 n.3]. There is also evidence from another quarter of the promiscuity in the behaviour of male and female mendicants in the Buddha’s day. The Buddha takes note of this in the Culladhammasamādāna Sutta.

He speaks of Samaṇas and Brahmanas who repudiating the view that sensual pleasures are detrimental to spiritual progress, mingle freely with female mendicants, vociferously enjoying their company. They are reported as saying:

‘Whatever can be the basis for pleading for future calamity can lie in wait for us? Blissful indeed is the contact of the soft and tender hands of these young female mendicants.’

[MN. I.305].

However, the Buddha concedes to Ananda that women, having taken to the life of pabbajjā in Buddhism, are capable of attaining the higher fruits of religious life as far as Arahantship. [*Bhabbo Ānanda mātugāmo tathāgatappavedite dhammavinaye agarasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajitvā sotāpattiphalam pi sakadāgāmiphalam pi anāgāmiphalam pi arahattaphalam pi sacchikātun ti.* AN. IV. 276 ; Vin. II. 254]. The considerations which seem to have weighed heavy in the mind of the Buddha regarding the admission of women into the Order

are concerned more with the wider problem of the monastic organization as a whole. He would have been undoubtedly most averse to stand in the way of the personal liberty of woman. But in the interests of the collective good of the institution of *brahmacariya*, which was the core of the religion, women had to make certain sacrifices, surrendering at times even what might appear to have been their legitimate rights. This is evident from the following eight conditions [*aṭṭhagarudhammā*] under which the Buddha granted them permission to enter the Order.

1. A nun who has been ordained (even) for a hundred years must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but that day.
2. A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there are no monks. [See Bhikkhuni Pācittiya 56: Vin. IV .313].
3. Every halfmonth a nun should desire two things from the Order of monks: the asking the date of the Observance day, and the coming for the exhortation. [See Bhikkhuni Pāc.59: Ibid. 315].
4. After the rains a nun must “invite” before both Orders in respect of three matters: what was seen, what was heard, what was suspected.

[See Bhikkhuni Pāc. 57: Ibid.314.].

5. A nun, offending against an important rule, must

undergo mānatta discipline for half a month before both Orders.

6. When, as a probationer, she has been trained in the six dammas for two years, she should seek higher ordination from both Orders.
7. A Monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun.
8. From today admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden, admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden.

Book of the Discipline, V.354-55

The insistence on these aṭṭha-garudhammā is the most vital issue, much more than the delayed consent of the Buddha, in the founding of the Bhikkhuni Sāsana. The delay, it may in fact be argued, would have proved useful to emphasise the conditions which he was going to lay down. It is these conditions alone which gave the women access to the monastic life in Buddhism [*Sace Ānanda Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī aṭṭhagarudhamme paṭigañhāti sā va'ssa hotu upasampadā. Vin. II .255*]. The Dharmagupta Vinaya in the Chinese version compares them to a bridge over a great river by means of which one is enabled to cross over to the further bank [*Taisho Vol.22. p. .923 B.*]. These *garudhammā* are observances which pertain to monastic propriety and procedure in the Order of Bhikkhunīs in relation to the Bhikkhus. The women are not to violate these as long as they remain in the monastic community. In the establishment of the Bhikkhunī

Sāsana, these conditions seem to have engaged greater attention than even the formulation of the code of moral precepts, which incidentally is not even mentioned at this stage. There is no doubt that in maintaining the vigour and vitality of the Sangha, whether of the Bhikkhus or of the Bhikkhunis, the code of the Pātimokkha played a vital part. But it seems to be equally true to say that in bringing the newly inaugurated Bhikkhunī Sangha into a healthy relationship with the older institution of the Bhikkhu Sangha, the aṭṭha-garudhammā were calculated to play a greater role. They take no note of moral considerations. A perfect functioning of the latter, in the case of the Bhikkhunis too, was apparently taken for granted at this early stage of their Sāsana. That a similar state of affairs did exist even in the Bhikkhu Sangha in its early history is evident in the Kakacūpama Sutta [MN. I. 124].

On a closer examination of the *aṭṭha-garudhammā* we are led to make the following observations. According to these the Bhikkhu Sangha is looked upon as the more mature and responsible body, evidently on account of its seniority, which is capable of leading the way for the Bhikkhunī Sangha. This is clearly evident from the garudhammas 2 and 3 [Vin. II .255]. The Bhikkhunis are expected to recognise the spiritual leadership of the Order of Bhikkhus. At least at the outset, the Bhikkhunis had to seek the assistance of the Bhikkhus in such vital monastic rituals like the Pātimokkhuddesa and Bhikkhunovāda. But it is also evident that, as circumstances necessitated and experience

proved opportune, the Buddha did transfer some of these powers to the Bhikkhunis themselves [Ibid.259]. However, the recognition of the leadership of the monks over the community of nuns and this position of the Bhikkhus *in loco parentis* to the Bhikkhunis seem to have continued much longer. Even when the authority to recite the Patimokkha by themselves was finally transferred to the Bhikkhunis, the Bhikkhus were still left with the right to instruct them on its proper performance [*Anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhunīnaṃ ācikkhituṃ evaṃ pātimokkhaṃ uddiseyyāthā'ti.* Vin. II. 259]

There is also evidence of a similar reservation of power in the transference of authority to the Bhikkhunis to impose penalties and punishments on their fellow members. The Bhikkhus who carried out these acts at the outset are latterly barred from doing so and are authorised only to explain to the Bhikkhunis the proper procedure. [*Anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhunīnaṃ ācikkhituṃ evaṃ kammaṃ kareyyāthā'ti.* Vin. II. 260.]. In the matter of *bhikkhuṇovāda* too, it was a Bhikkhu who was appointed to remind the Bhikkhunis regularly of the proper observance of the aṭṭha-garudhammā [Vin. IV. 51.f]. Thus on account of this complete dependence of a bhikkhuni on the leadership of a bhikkhu the second of these eight garudhammā forbade the bhikkhunis from going into residence for the rains-retreat in a place where there were no Bhikkhus. The third garudhamma too, implies the reliance of the bhikkhunis on the Order of Bhikkhus in the performance of the two

functions of *uposathapucchaka* and *ovādaupasan-kamana*. Both the Bhikkhus and the Bhikkhunis seem to have been vigilant about the proper observance of these functions which they considered, no doubt, to be vital for the healthy progress of the newly established Order of nuns. At the first sign of slackness with regard to these there is a storm of protests and we notice that the authorities take immediate action to remedy it.

These considerations are brought within the legal framework of the Bhikkhunī Sāsana and the failure to observe these come to be declared punishable offences [Ibid.313, 315 .See Bhikkhunī Pācittiya 56, 59]. In other words they become part of the Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha. In the study of the sikkhāpadas of the Bhikkhu Pātimokkha we have already noted this interesting phenomenon of the change over into legal statutes of what was once observed as honoured conventions.

The garudhammā 4, 5 and 6 concern themselves with some of the other major items of administration in the Buddhist monastic community, viz. (i) the performance of the *pavāraṇā* at the end of the rains retreat, (ii) the imposition of necessary penalties on the commission of a grave offence, and (iii) the conferment of *upasampadā* or higher monastic status. As far as the Bhikkhunīs are concerned, they are barred under these garudhammā from performing any of these acts within their own Order of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. These acts of the Bhikkhunīs are not considered valid unless they are carried out jointly together with the monks.

However, practical considerations soon necessitated amendments to these and we see in the revised version of these conditions the sanction given to the bhikkhunis to perform these acts, in the first instance, by themselves. Then they are expected to bring their decisions before the Bhikkhu Sangha for ratification. The following is the amended procedure for the conferment of upasampada on a Bhikkhuni by the Bhikkhu Sangha: [*Anujānāmi bhikkhave ekato upasampannāya bhikkhunīsaṅghe visuddhāya bhikkhusaṅghe upasampadan ti. Vin. II. 271, 274.*]. It shows that the candidate had been already approved by the Bhikkhuni Sangha. The Bhikkhunis were also allowed to perform their *pavāraṇā* in two stages before the two assemblies, first among themselves and then before the Bhikkhu Sangha [*Anujānāmi bhikkhave ajjatanā pavāretvā aparajju bhikkhusaṅghe pavāretun ti. Ibid. 275.*]

Thus, from the manner in which the Buddha directed the activities of the Bhikkhunīs it becomes clear that he did realise that as the Bhikkhunis formed a part of the single body of the Sangha, their decisions would affect not only themselves, but also the rest of that vast organization. Hence the Bhikkhus were given the right to advise and assist the Bhikkhunis in their affairs, and thus regulate the destinies of the Sasana. Public opinion must have played a considerable part in bringing Bhikkhunis under the wing of the Bhikkhu Sangha. At any rate, it appears to have been considered wise to have all the important monastic activities of the Bhikkhunis linked up with the more established and

senior group of the Bhikkhu Sangha. However, when and wherever this advisory role had to be transferred from the collective organization of the Bhikkhu Sangha to a single individual, the Buddha took every necessary precaution to avoid possible abuse of privilege.

He has laid down a very comprehensive list of eight requirements which should be satisfied before a monk could be selected to the role of a *bhikkhuṇovādaka* to give counsel to the congregation of nuns. There seems to be little doubt about his anxiety and his foresight regarding the safety and well-being of the female members of his Order. A monk who is entrusted to preside over their welfare should conform to perfect standards of moral virtue. He should also possess a thorough knowledge of the teaching of the Master and know well the complete code of the Pātimokkha covering both the Bhikkhus and the Bhikkhunis. He should be of pleasant disposition, mature in years and acceptable to the Bhikkhunis, and above all, should in no way have been involved in a serious offence with a Bhikkhuni [Vin. IV.51].

The three remaining garudhammā 1, 7 and 8, appear to have baffled some students of Buddhism as being contrary to the Buddha's general attitude to women. However, if these are examined carefully in their context, this apparent contradiction becomes less glaring. They all strive to see that the Bhikkhunis do not, under any circumstance, assert their superiority over the Bhikkhus. We notice that even in the observance of sikkhapadas, the Bhikkhunās are to follow the lead of the Bhikkhus wherever the sikkhapadas are

common to both groups. The Buddha advises the Bhikkhunās to follow the Bhikkhus in the practice of such sikkhāpada [*..yathā bhikkhū sikkhanti tathā tesu sikkhāpadesu sikkhathā “ ti. Vin. II 258.*] But referring to the sikkhāpada which are peculiar to the Bhikkhunis, he suggests that they should be followed, as they are laid down, according to the letter of the law [*...yathāpaññattesu sikkhāpadesu sikkhathā ti. Ibid. 258*]. What seems to follow from these words of instruction to the Bhikkhunās is that even if there was a difference between the text of the sikkhāpada laid down for the Bhikkhus and their practice at the time, the Buddha did not think it wise, for purposes of communal harmony, to leave room for the Bhikkhunis to be critical of this discrepancy. Such a challenge would have completely undermined the prestige and the authority of the older institution of the Sangha, quite out of proportion to any degree of moral good it could bring about by the correction of Bhikkhus by the Bhikkhunis.

There is evidence to show that the Buddha was always concerned with the esteem in which the public held his monastic organization. Such a consideration was vital for its existence and prosperity. The first remarks which he made to his erring disciples as he criticised their conduct always pertains to this [*N’etaṃ mogha purisa appasannānaṃ vā pasādāya pasannānaṃ vā bhiiyyobhāvāya. Vin. I.58 ; II.2 ; III. 21, 45.*]. As much as the Buddha wanted his disciples to correct their mistakes and be of faultless conduct he did not want any of them to divulge to any one other than a Bhikkhu or a

Bhikkhuni the more serious offences of their fellow members. Such an intimation was allowed only with the approval of the Bhikkhus [*Yo pana bhikkhu bhikkhussa duṭṭhullaṃ āpattiṃ anupasampannassa āroceyya aññātra bhikkhusammutiyaṃ pācittiyaṃ*. Vin. IV. 31.]. One who violates this injunction is guilty of a Pācittiya offence [Pāc.9]. This provision was undoubtedly made with the best of intentions and should not be misjudged as contributing in any way to the perpetuation of monastic offences. On the other hand, it is in fact repeatedly declared that it is irregular for a monk to conceal intentionally an offence of one member from the rest of the community. Pācittiya 64 of the monks and Pārājikā 2 and Sanghādisesa 9 of the nuns are all calculated to avoid such a possibility [Vin. IV. 127, 216, 239]. All these precautions, therefore, seem to be a part of a system of internal security set up by the Buddha in the interest of the monastic organization. They emphasise the Buddha's concern both for the public esteem and for the moral soundness of his Order.

There seems to be a general agreement about the fact that the eight garudhammā were laid down by the Buddha as a condition governing the establishment of the Bhikkhunī Sāsana. However, strange as it may seem, after the Bhikkhunī Sāsana was instituted under the leadership of Gotamī, she appears before Ananda to make the request that the Buddha should remove the first garudhamma and allow Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis to pay courtesies to each other according to seniority alone [ibid.257-58]. This is

hardly true to the spirit in which Gotami accepted the garudhamma [Ibid. 255 -56]. We are inclined to think that she was here undoubtedly subjected to the pressure of her own group.

This dissentient note which we find recorded in the Cullavagga does not seem to have found general acceptance elsewhere. Of the Chinese Vinaya texts it is only the Mahīśāsaka who record it and that too with a different emphasis [*Taisho*. Vol. 22 p.186 A]. According to their text Gotamī, prior to her being ordained, sends Ananda to the Buddha to request him to make this change. The Buddha refuses to do so and says that since he has now allowed women to enter the Order they should follow what has been laid down and not go against it. In the Cullavagga too. the Buddha declines to make this concession. But in trying to give a reason for this attitude of the Buddha the Theriya tradition attempts to make out that in the organization of the Sasana social considerations, as much as moral and ethical values, loomed large in the mind of the Master. In the Cullavagga he is reported as saying: ‘ Not even the Titthiyas who propound imperfect doctrines sanction such homage of men towards women. How could the Tathāgata do so?’ [Vin. II. 258].

We should also here consider the fact that any concession for the abrogation of what had already been laid down after careful deliberation would be grossly contradictory to the ideal which the Buddha and his early disciples appear to have upheld regarding the observance of the rules and

regulations laid down for the guidance of monastic life [Ibid. III. 231]. The reply which the Buddha seems to have given to Gotami in the Chinese version of the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya is definitely more in keeping with this spirit. But we should take note of the fact that this reply would run contrary to the Theriya tradition, which at some stage, seems to have accommodated the idea that the Buddha conceded the abrogation of the minor rules [DN. .II. 14 ; VIn. II. 287].

As far as we are aware there is one other Vinaya tradition which records a challenge of the garudhammā. The Chinese version of the Dharmagupta Vinaya has a chapter entitled Bhikkhunī Khandhaka wherein the question is asked whether the Bhikkhunis cannot accuse the Bhikkhus under any circumstances [*Taisho*. Vol. 22 p. 927 A]. The Buddha replies to say that they could not do so even if the Bhikkhus violated the rules of discipline or were guilty of offences. These two protests on the part of the Bhikkhunis seem to show that the Bhikkhuni Sangha, or at least a section of it, resisted what it considered to be harsh legislation unfavourable to them.

At the same time one has to view dispassionately the position of the Buddha, who as the head of the Bhikkhu Sangha which was already a well groomed institution, had to safeguard against its disintegration through dispute and discontent. The fifth accusation levelled against Ananda at the First Council, that he agitated for the admission of women into the Order [Vin. II. 289], is a clear indication that

even after the recognised success of the Bhikkhuni Sasana [Apadāna II. 535 v.79] there was a section of the Bhikkhus who formed as it were a consolidated opposition against it. The motive for such an attitude could have been generated by the fear of being eclipsed by the newer Order. The Chinese version of the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya includes a statement which is ascribed to the Buddha which seems to lend support to this assumption. The Buddha says that if there were no Bhikkhunis in the Sasana, then after his death the male and female lay-devotees [*upāsaka* and *upāsikā*] would have honoured the Bhikkhus in diverse ways. But now that the Bhikkhunis had entered the Order it would not happen so [*Taisho* Vol. 22. p.186 B]. It is difficult here to decide how and why the presence of Bhikkhunis in the Sāsana brought about such a radical change in the attitude of laymen towards the Bhikkhus.

Why were the Bhikkhus deprived of the honour that would have been theirs had not the Bhikkhunis appeared on the scene? Are the Bhikkhunis to be held responsible for the loss of prestige of the Bhikkhus? At any rate, this record of the Mahīśāsakas was undoubtedly representative of the opinion of the day regarding the Bhikkhuni Sāsana.

The Pali records of the Theriya tradition which belong to an earlier phase of the history of the Sāsana give expression to a similar feeling in the chastisement of Ananda in whom ultimately lay the responsibility for the admission of women into the Order. An echo of this is felt in the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya where Ananda apologises to the Buddha for having

requested him to permit women to enter the Order. But the Buddha absolves him saying that he did so unwittingly under the influence of Māra [*Taisho* Vol.22 p.186 A]. The Theriya tradition is not alone again in expressing the fact that the presence of women in the Sasana would reduce its life span by half. We find it recorded in the Chinese version of the Dharmagupta Vinaya that the Buddha told Ananda that if women did not enter the Order it would have lasted 500 years longer [Ibid. p.923 C. See also Vin. II. 256].

It becomes clear from what has been said so far that at the time of crystalization of Theriya traditions two ideas regarding the establishment of the Bhikkhunī Sāsana stood out clearly. A section of the Bhikkhu Sangha was reproachful of Ananda because he interceded with the Buddha for the sake of the bhikkhunis. The admission of women was also considered a categorical danger to the successful continuance of the Sasana. In the light of all this evidence a study of the garudhammā reveals to us the fact that the Buddha was keenly conscious of the need to steer clear of the possible rivalries of the Bhikkhus and the Bhikkhunis and maintain healthy and harmonious relations between the two groups.

For the Love and Care of the

Woman

We feel we would be failing in our obligation to the lay community if we do not include in this collection of *Studies on Women in Buddhism* a special one we make on the Angulimāla Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya [MN. II. 97-105]. Long before the initiation of worldwide movements like Women's Liberation and Feminist Activists, the Buddha appears to have felt the need to pay serious respect to the role the woman plays as mother of children. This was, of course, more than twenty-five centuries ago and was introduced to mankind in the eastern theatre of the world, namely India.

To assign to the woman the dignified role of mother comes from a much more-to-be respected conservatism attitude that the Buddha adopted regarding a total growth [i.e. physical, moral and intellectual] of humanity. The concept of mother [*mātā*], in an age of pre-test-tube babies, looms large in Buddhist thinking: *Mātā mittam sake ghare*, i.e. **The mother is the friend in one's own home** says the Samyutta Nikaya [SN. I. 37]. The woman, as the growing up young girl in the home, is guarded with serious concern as the future wife and would-be mother. She must be fit and qualified enough to stand up to the count down before being launched into the challenging role of multi-purpose womanhood. Whichever be the century we live in or the

millennium we have moved into, these roles cannot be, with any degree of sanity in our heads, be underrated or underestimated. The Buddhists are not oriented to labour too much to accommodate unmarried mothers or fatherless children. These are believed to be lapses which are to be conscientiously guarded against. They rightly visualise the dangers and deficiencies of single-parent homes.

This respect for motherhood in a civilized social set-up has directed Buddhist thinking to prepare for preliminaries of maternity care. Physical ease and comfort of a pregnant would-be mother and her clinical mental grooming for motherhood are very much part and parcel of a well-run household with generous and well-meaning in-laws. Sri Lanka of more than fifty sixty years ago knew of many miniature domestic ceremonies of the white magic type which were quietly carried out in the home for the security and well-being of expectant mothers. The morn to evening day-time ceremony of *Māṭi-ata-perīma*, *Atta-gaha-metirīma* or *Ambakola-atten-metirīma* were delightful rituals carried out in our village homes on the advent of the arrival into the family of new-born babies. We all rejoiced over it. Everyone of us in the home, the young and the old, made our contribution towards it by carrying messages to the master of the ritual in his own home [not through calls on the mobile telephone], by gathering from the nearby woods the fruits and leaves needed for the creation of the associated artifacts. They included ant-hill clay for moulding the sun-disc, tender coconut leaves for numerous types of

decorations, creepers like *hīressa* and leaves of the *tolabo* lily plant, perhaps to be used as mock weapons of offence and defence of various divinities associated with the ritual.

Besides these, there is also maternity care coming to the Sri Lankan Buddhists via religious considerations. In the category of Buddhist *parittas*, we have the Angulimāla Sutta [M.II. 97 - 105] referred to above, the use of which for this purpose appears to date back to the time of the Buddha himself. This sutta tells that Angulimāla, the erstwhile bandit, after his ordination as a disciple under the Buddha, reported to him of a woman whom he had seen during his alms round, suffering severe pains owing to her pregnancy. Seeing Angulimāla's anguish and concern, the Buddha admonished him to go to that woman in pain and to wish her well and pray for the safety of her unborn babe through the asseveration of his personal purity. Angulimāla immediately pointed out to the Buddha his pre-ordination crimes and the Buddha promptly advised him to make the asseveration from the time of his admission to the noble order [*ariyāya jāiyā jāto*]. Angulimāla acted accordingly and she is said to have been immediately relieved [*Atha kho sotthi itthiyā ahosi sotthi gabbhassa*. op. cit. p. 103]. It is undoubtedly the pre-arahant spiritual prowess of Angulimāla that did it. All that happened is described as *sotthi itthiyā ahosi*, i.e. "To the woman there was security and well-being". There is not a word about the delivery of the baby.

It appears that in the years that followed, this incident has

been simulated in its entirety. In the manner of other *paritta* recitals where the monks in congregation emphatically assert the power of the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha [as in the Ratana Sutta], and thereby invoke blessings on those in need of them, in the case of Angulimāla *paritta* too, the monks in congregation appear to repeat the words of Angulimāla which are no more than a record of his own spiritual prowess, and invoke blessings thereby on the pregnant mother and her unborn babe. However, in the Angulimāla *paritta* as recited today we discover ten additional lines as a preface to what Angulimāla himself recited under the direction of the Buddha.

Stories associated with the Sutta discloses the manner in which the Angulimāla *paritta* appears to have developed itself to a high-powered pregnancy [or we should say more precisely **child-delivery**] *paritta*. Those ten lines in translation are as follows.

Whosoever shall recite this *paritta*, the seat on which he sits,
The water with which it is washed shall eliminate
all labour pains. With ease shall there be delivery, that
very moment it shall be done.

This *paritta* which the Lord-of-the-World had given
unto Angulimala, Is one of great majesty which shall
keep its efficacy for a whole eon.

That *paritta* we shall now chant.

The growth of this legendary process is witnessed in the Commentary to the Angulimāla Sutta [MA. III. 337]. The

Commentary elaborates it in this manner. Angulimāla learnt this asseveration procedure or *saccakiriyā* from the Buddha and went to the woman to provide her comfort and security. As males were not allowed within the labour room, the monk was accommodated behind a curtain from where he did his chant. That very moment the woman is said to have delivered her baby with perfect ease.

In recognition of the very great efficacy of this sutta, a seat is said to have been constructed at the place where the monk did the chant. This seat is believed to have acquired such a reputation for its power and potency for easy delivery of offspring, it is said that even animals with difficulty of delivery benefit by being placed on it. In the case of feeble ones who cannot make the journey there, the water with which the seat is washed is to be applied on their head. This enables easy delivery. Even other diseases are said to be cured thereby [*Yā dubbalā hoti na sakkā ānetuṃ tassā pīṭhaka-dhovana-udakaṃ netvā sīse siñcanti taṃ khaṇaṃ yeva gabbhavuṭṭhānaṃ hoti. Aññaṃ pi rogaṃ vūpasameti. Yāvakappā tiṭṭhanaka-pāṭihāriyaṃ kir'etaṃ. MA. III. 338*]. Thus in Sri Lanka, the Angulimāla *paritta* today has changed its original rightful place in **being a pre-natal child-and-mother care chant**, to one of **easy delivery in the labour room**. The role of **chanted water** has reached its highest ascendancy.

This same Buddhist concern for pre-natal maternity care of both the mother and the unborn child [which would be deemed a basic and fundamental humanitarian concern] in seen to exist in the Mahayana countries of the Far East like

China and Japan as far back as the 8th century A.D. With the profusion and proliferation of *Bodhisattvas* in the Mahayana to serve in specialised capacities the needs of worldlings, it is not surprising to discover one like Koyasu Kwan-non [Kwan-non of Easy Deliverance], a lady-like Goddess of Mercy, holding a child on her lap. Alice Getty thinks ‘she was unquestionably brought to Japan from Northern India via Central Asia and China’. She also further says: ‘We know from reliable texts that in the eighth century there existed a Kan-non cult in Japan, and that the Kan-non was called Koyasu or the Kan-non who brings about Easy Deliverance’. [Alice Getty - Gods of Northern Buddhism, p. 96 f.].

For purpose of comparison with the obviously earlier genesis of the **mother-care** concept in the Angulimāla Sutta, we reproduce here a statement from Alice Getty’s Gods of Northern Buddhism.

In the *Bukkyo Daiji-ten* is the following legend: The Empress Komyo (710-760), being with child, invoked the Shinto goddess Amaterasu, and prayed that she might have an easy deliverance. One night she saw in a dream the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara standing at her bedside, and when she awoke she found a small image of the Bodhisattva lying beside her. She kept it preciousy until after her deliverance, and then ordred it to be placed inside a statue of the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara which she had enshrined in the Taisan-ji [Temple of Easy Deliverance] in Kyoto. According to popular belief, the Empress Komyo

founded the Taisan-ji and dedicated it to the Koyasu Kwan-non, and it has remained up to this day one of the most flourishing centres of devotion in Japan. [p. 97].

With due deference to the traditions of both the Theravada and the Mahayana on this subject, we therefore wish to add to this collection of **Studies of the Woman in Buddhism** the text of the Angulimāla, indicating what the original canonical version was and how it was used as a **simple pre-natal mother-and-child protective chant** [*sotthi te hotu sotthi gabbhassa*] as well as its apparently more developed **Easy Delivery** concept [*sotthinā gabbha-vuṭṭhānaṃ yañ ca sādheti taṃ khāṇe*], with its **Pregnancy Care** parallel in Koyasu Kwan-non of Japan. We are **more inclined to popularise** what we consider to be the earlier canonical tradition of **pre-natal care of the mother and the child** [*sotthi te hotu sotthi gabbhassa*] which can quite harmlessly begin from the earliest indications of pregnancy, thus **building up confidence and comfort in the mind of the would-be-mother**. That kind of religious solace, the **presence of comforting religious grace of the *tisaraṇa*** must necessarily come to all areas of life in society, **well before the outburst of crisis situations**. This would eliminate the not very honourable last minute rush to wayside-shrine-divinities for guard and protection through the local *bāra-hāra* type of supplication.

Āṅgulimāla Parittaṃ

[Paritta as recited today, with the **added-on introductory preface** and the original text.]

Preface:

*Parittaṃ yaṃ bhaṇantassa nisinnaṭṭhāna-dhovaṇaṃ
udakam'pi vināsesi sabbameva parissayaṃ. sotthinā
gabbha-vuṭṭhānaṃ yañ ca sādheti taṃ khaṇe
therassa'ṅgulimālassa lokanāthena bhāsitaṃ
kappaṭṭhāyi-mahātejaṃ parittaṃ taṃ bhaṇāmahe.*

Translation:

Whosoever shall recite this *paritta*, the seat on which he sits, The water with which it is washed shall eliminate all labour pains.

With ease shall there be delivery, that very moment it shall be done.

The *paritta* which the Lord-of-the World had given unto Āṅgulimāla, That *paritta* we shall now chant.

Original Text:

Yato'haṃ bhagini ariyāya jātiyā jāto nābhijānāmi
sañcicca pāṇaṃ jīvitā voropetā. Tena saccena sotthi te
hotu sotthi gabbhassā'ti.

Translation:

O, Sister, from the moment I entered this noble life of a recluse, I reckon not having deprived any living thing of its life.

By the truth of this, may there be happiness and well-being To you and to your unborn babe.

Note: The original text with which the Buddha is said to have commissioned Thera Angulimāla to go to the woman in pregnancy discomfort and make an asseveration [*sacca-kiriya*] to relieve her of her agony consists only of the eighteen words given above, beginning with *Yato'ham. bhagini* and ending with *sotthi gabbhassa*.

[See MN. II. 102 and MA. III.337 f.]. These alone tell us of Thera Angulimāla's pre-arahanant spiritual prowess whereby he was able to provide comfort [*sotthi*] to the pregnant mother in pain. The ideas expressed in the apparently later composed preface reduces the force of the directly communicated power of the *sacca-kiriya* and brings it down to the level of a mere water-powered ritual. **It is time we retrieved the worth of the original.**

We suggest that all those who are closely connected with a pregnant mother, like the husband, the mother and the mother-in-law, all lovingly chant this *paritta* to her

whenever they can, morning and evening, no matter how early or late she is in her pregnancy. This invariably introduces even to the unborn child the feeling of love and care which is so much needed at this stage of pre-natal human growth. Let it be known by all and sundry, both medical and non-medical, that even those well learned in the field of medical science admit today that an unborn baby in the mother's womb begins to be aware of sounds outside world by the twentieth week.

May this magnanimous attitude of love, share and care towards a pregnant mother and her unborn child spread island wide in Sri Lanka.

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