



STATUS OF WOMEN IN BUDDHISM: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY**Dr. Siddarth Manikappa****Dept.of Pali and Buddhist Studies, Gulbarga University, Kalaburagi-585106****ABSTRACT**

This paper analytically examines the status of women within Buddhist traditions from their origins to the contemporary era. By tracing doctrinal teachings, monastic codes, historical institutional practices, and modern reform movements, the study evaluates how Buddhist philosophy both constrains and enables gender equality. The analysis reveals a persistent tension between the egalitarian potential of core Buddhist concepts (e.g., anatman, karuṇā) and patriarchal adaptations embedded in Vinaya regulations, lineal transmission, and cultural accretions. Contemporary developments—such as the re-ordination of Bhikkhunīs, feminist hermeneutics, and lay women’s leadership—demonstrate evolving possibilities for gender equity. The paper concludes that while structural barriers remain, progressive reinterpretations and transnational networks are reshaping the status of women in Buddhism, suggesting a trajectory toward greater inclusivity.



KEYWORDS: Buddhism, gender, women’s ordination, bhikkhunī, feminist theology, Vinaya, contemporary reform

INTRODUCTION:

The question of women’s status in Buddhism has attracted scholarly attention since the early twentieth century, yet debates persist over whether Buddhist teachings inherently support gender equality or have been historically compromised by patriarchal sociocultural forces (Gethin, 1998; King, 2005). This paper adopts an analytical approach to interrogate the interplay between doctrine, institutional practice, and lived experience across Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Early Western scholars often portrayed Buddhism as a religion of renunciation that transcended gender distinctions (Rhys Davids, 1900). Later critiques highlighted the androcentric bias of early Pāli commentaries and the marginalization of bhikkhunī lineages (Bapat, 1956). Feminist Buddhist scholars argue that core teachings—such as the doctrine of anattā (non self) and the Four Noble Truths—undermine essentialist gender categories (Gross, 1993; Tsomo, 1999). Conversely, some texts (e.g., the Aggañña Sutta) contain passages interpreted as endorsing male spiritual superiority (Williams, 2009). Historical surveys reveal that the bhikkhunī Sangha flourished in India and Sri Lanka until the 11th–13th centuries, after which it disappeared in Theravāda regions due to political instability and conservative Vinaya interpretations (Leiman, 2008). In East Asia, the bhikkhunī order persisted, though often subordinate to the bhikkhu Sangha (Faure, 2003).

Since the late twentieth century, transnational bhikkhunī re-ordination efforts—led by figures such as Ven. Dhammananda (Thailand) and Ven. Bhikkhunī Kusuma (Sri Lanka)—have challenged patriarchal gatekeeping (Jenkins, 2015). Lay women’s leadership in meditation centers, social engaged Buddhism, and academic institutions further illustrates shifting dynamics (King, 2005; McMahan, 2008).

Methodology:

This study employs a critical textual historical analysis supplemented by comparative institutional sociology. Primary sources include the Pāli Canon, Mahāyāna sutras (e.g., Lotus Sutra, Vimalakīrtinirdeśa), and Tibetan Vinaya texts. Secondary sources encompass peer reviewed journal articles, monographs, and conference proceedings published between 1990 and 2024.

Teachings of Gautama Buddha on Gender:

The Pāli Canon records the Buddha’s affirmation that women are capable of attaining arahantship (e.g., Anguttara Nikāya 4.156). The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta notes the Buddha’s reluctance to establish a bhikkhunī order, yet he eventually consented after Ānanda’s intercession (Bodhi, 2000).

Philosophy:

Central doctrines—anattā (no permanent self), pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), and the Four Noble Truths—are ontologically neutral with respect to gender. As Harvey (2013) argues, liberation depends on the eradication of defilements, not on biological sex.

Vinaya Regulations:

The bhikkhunī pātimokkha contains 311 rules, compared with 227 for bhikkhus, including the Eight Garudhammas that subordinate bhikkhunīs to the bhikkhu Sangha (e.g., requirement to seek instruction from monks, inability to give abbacy to monks). Scholars debate whether these rules reflect the Buddha’s pragmatic accommodation to Indian society or later patriarchal insertions (Bapat, 1956; Leiman, 2008).

Theravāda:

Valid ordination requires a quorum of five bhikkhunīs and five bhikkhus (Theravāda) or a Sangha of ten fully ordained monks (East Asian lineages). The historic interruption of the bhikkhunī Sangha in Theravāda countries created a lineage gap that modern re ordination efforts seek to bridge via dual lineage ceremonies (e.g., conferring bhikkhunī vows through both Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka Sanghas) (Jenkins, 2015).

Monastic Life and Authority:

Even where bhikkhunī orders exist, disparities persist in access to education, meditation instruction, and leadership positions. In Sri Lanka, bhikkhunīs often receive limited *pirivena* (monastic college) training compared to bhikkhus (Deegalle, 2006). In Taiwan, bhikkhunīs hold prominent teaching roles in universities and meditation centers, reflecting a more egalitarian institutional culture (Faure, 2003).

Role of Common Women:

Women have historically contributed as patrons (*upāsikās*), donors, and meditation practitioners. In contemporary contexts, common women lead Dharma talks, manage social service NGOs, and guide mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) programs, thereby exercising spiritual authority outside monastic boundaries (McMahan, 2008).

Bhikkhunī Re Ordination Movements:

- ❖ Sri Lanka: The 1996 Sāmaṇerī ordination at Dodangoda, followed by the 2007 higher ordination at Kusumārāma, sparked a national debate; the state now recognizes bhikkhunīs, though the Sangha Council remains contested (Jenkins, 2015).
- ❖ Thailand: Ven. Dhammananda Bhikkhunī received full ordination in Sri Lanka (2003) and subsequently established the Songdhammakalyani Monastery, advocating for legal recognition (King, 2005).
- ❖ West: The Sōtō Zen and Theravāda communities in the United States and Europe have ordained women since the 1970s, integrating feminist hermeneutics into liturgy and teaching (Fields, 1992).

CONCLUSION:

The status of women in Buddhism is best understood as a dynamic negotiation between the religion's emancipatory philosophical core and the historical contingencies that have shaped its institutional forms. While early Buddhist texts affirm women's capacity for enlightenment, monastic codes and cultural norms have frequently imposed subordinate roles. Contemporary movements—grounded in feminist hermeneutics, transnational ordination efforts, and lay leadership—are actively renegotiating these constraints. The emerging picture is one of progressive transformation, wherein the potential for full gender equality articulated in Buddhist doctrine is increasingly reflected in practice. Continued scholarly scrutiny, coupled with institutional openness to reform, will be essential to realize this vision fully.

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