

# What the Buddha Said about Women



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Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

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Until fairly recently almost all societies considered women to be inferior to men, some still do. This lower status was reflected in the teachings of most religions as well. The Bible holds women responsible for the fall of humankind (1 Timothy 2,11-15) and the pain of childbirth was seen as divine punishment on women for this offence (Genesis 3,16). Confucianism taught that women should live by what was called 'the three subordinations', i.e. being subordinate to their father before marriage, to their husband after marriage, and to their oldest son when they become a widow. Men whose wife had died were encouraged to remarry but widows were forbidden to do so. One of the two branches of Jainism, the Digambaras, believe that a woman must be reborn as a male in order to attain enlightenment. Apparently this notion is a later development and was probably not taught by Mahavira, the founder of Jainism. According to Hinduism's *Manusmṛti* women are to be honoured but kept subservient in every way. They were not allowed to read the Vedas, the sacred scriptures. Although the *Manusmṛti*'s authority was not universally accepted and even those who did accept it did not necessarily follow all its strictures, its influence on the Indian attitude to women has been profound. One of the few religions that from its inception considered women to be equal with men is the Baha'i faith, which is particularly significant given that it had its origins in 19<sup>th</sup> century Persia.

At the time of the Buddha Indian women had considerably more freedom than in later centuries and there is little evidence that purdah, widow burning, female infanticide or child marriage had become widespread, as they did in later centuries. Widows could re-marry, although a collection of verses in the Jataka show that they were starting to be looked upon with contempt (Ja.VI,508), an attitude that later led to enforced widowhood. The verses express great sympathy for the widow's predicament suggesting that Buddhists did not approve of it.

The main criticism of the Buddha's attitude to women are the ideas attributed to him that; (1) a woman cannot become a Fully Perfected Buddha (M.III,65), and (2) that nuns must abide by eight special rules (*atta garudhamma*) that makes them inferior to monks (Vin.II,254). Concerning this first idea, the appearance of a Fully Perfected Buddha is an event so rare, only occurring once in many eons, that the chances of anyone, whatever their gender, becoming one are extremely remote. This being the case the objection would seem to be moot.

The eight special rules incumbent on nuns give them a second place to monks and in several matters make them dependent on monks. This would have been uncontroversial during the Buddha's time although it does not accord with modern ideas of gender equality. Today, numerous Vinaya rules are disregarded because they are irrelevant or at odds with modern norms and the eight special rules would be an example of this and thus need not be adhered to. The other text that always gets a mention when the Buddhist attitude to women is being discussed is the Kunala Jataka. To say that this tale is outrageously misogynistic is not an exaggeration. It accuses women of a broad range of vices. But in doing so it is also more than a little hypocritical given that other Jataka stories depict males as guilty of murder, theft, scheming, skulduggery, treachery, ingratitude, avariciousness, stupidity and a few other vices we don't have words for. The only consolation is to keep in mind that the Jataka was not taught by the Buddha and clearly post-dates the *suttas* by several centuries.

The Buddha seems to have had an ambiguous attitude towards women, sometimes praising them, at other times disparaging them. However, concerning the essentials of the Dhamma, he asserted that there are no significant differences between males and females. He said: "Having gone forth from home into homelessness in this Dhamma and training taught by the Tathagata, women are able to realize Awakening and the stages leading up to it" (Vin.II,254). And again: "Whether it be a man or a whether it be a woman, whoever travels in the Chariot of Dhamma shall draw close to Nirvana" (S.I,33). The nun Soma made the same point only perhaps more emphatically. "A woman's nature is unimportant when the mind is still and

firm, when knowledge grows day by day, and she has insight into Dhamma. One who thinks such thoughts as 'I am a woman' or 'I am a man' or any other 'I am...', Mara is able to address that one" (S.I,129).

The Buddha said that he expected all his disciples, including nuns and lay women, to be "accomplished and well-trained, learned and erudite, knowers of the Dhamma, living by Dhamma and walking the path of Dhamma... and to pass on to others what they have received from their Teacher and teach it, proclaim it, establish it, explain it, promote it and clarify it... and use it to refute false teachings and impart this wondrous Dhamma" (D.II,105). Some of the nuns in the scriptures are described as being learned (*bahussuta*), reciters of the *suttas* (*bhanika*), confident (*visarada*) and outstanding at teaching the Dhamma (*patta dhammim katham katum*, Vin.IV,290).

The *Dhammasangani* of the Abhidhamma Pitaka says that gender is a characteristic of matter (*rupa*) not of consciousness (*citta*, Dhs. 633-4), which certainly makes sense. Thus while the consciousness of a being who had a female body in this life would be the same as the consciousness in the next life even if it reanimated a male body.