

BUDDHA AND WOMEN

The women's Liberation movement is nothing new; over 2500 years ago, the Buddha helped women to secure an honoured place in society. He helped to revive the status of women beyond the expectations of the ancient Indian tradition. He brought women to realize the importance and usefulness to the society. Before the Buddha's time, Indian women did not enjoy sufficient freedom and were deprived of the opportunities to display their spiritual nature and their knowledge. For example, even the birth of a daughter was considered as an unwelcome addition to a family. Yet on one occasion when the King of Kosala was displeased on hearing that a daughter was born to him, the Buddha consoled him by saying, "A women child, O Lord of men, may prove even a better offspring than a male."

Women were encouraged to play a prominent role as lay disciples of the Buddha. At least twelve of the eighty great disciples of the Buddha were women. Arahats Khema and Uppalavanna were made the chief disciples in the Order of Nuns. The Buddha also named other female disciples as amongst the most distinguished and pious followers.

Why were women interested in becoming followers of the Buddha? To women who were placed under such unfavourable circumstances, this establishment of the new Order of Nuns must have no doubt been a great blessing. In this Order, queens, princesses, daughters of noble families, widows, bereaved mothers, helpless women, courtesans – women of all castes and ranks – met on a common platform and breathed the free atmosphere which was denied them in their cloistered cottages and palatial mansions. Many who otherwise would have fallen into oblivion distinguished themselves in various ways and gained their emancipation by seeking refuge in the Order.

Of course, not all women could enter the Order. Yet many lay ladies were interested in being devotees of the Buddha. Perhaps they sensed his respect for them. The Buddha did not humiliate women, but only regarded them as feeble by nature. He saw the innate good of both men and women and he assigned to them their due places in his Teachings. In the Sigalovada Sutta, the Buddha speaks of woman as the husband's best friend.

The Buddha knew that sex is no barrier to the attainment of Sainthood. When speaking of the Chariot of the Dhamma, the Buddha once said, “And be it woman or be it man for whom such a chariot does wait, they will go into Nibbana’s presence by the same chariot.”

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