

BUDDHISM AND WOMEN

By Ven. Dampalle Gunasiri Thera

In ancient India women were ranked below men in status and they had no part to play at all in public affairs or activities in society. We as Buddhists feel happy to think that it was Buddha about 2557 years ago in North India who gave complete independence for women. He raised their status and brought them on level with men in society. He saw the innate good of both men and women and assigned to them their due place in his teaching.

Men in those days regarded their wives as mere chattels and only fit for child bearing and household work, fit for little else than the daily drudge of maintaining the home. This was the hypocritical and narrow-minded outlook at the time and women were of no account.

Sex was in no way an obstacle to attain sainthood. The Buddha founded an Order of Nuns. Women named Khema and Uppalavanna were made two disciples in his Order. In His Order of Nuns, queens, princesses, daughters of noble families, widows, bereaved mothers, helpless women all despite their position in life, enjoyed perfect consolation and peace. They breathed the free atmosphere which was so denied to them. Women, who perhaps may have fallen to oblivion, distinguished themselves in various ways and were happy as Buddha's disciples.

A story to illustrate this is told of the Nun Soma, the daughter of Bimbisara, Chaplain to the King of Magada. One day Soma sat meditating under the shade of a mango tree not far from Savatte. Gradually after some moments she obtained Diyaana. Suddenly, Mara the evil one appeared before her in the guise of a youth on disturbing her mental tranquillity, being unaware that Soma has already attained Arahantship. Mara, said to her "Are you aware that Arahantship can only be obtained by the wise, and that too only with much difficulty. It is far beyond the reach of a mere woman like you who has no wisdom." The Nun turning her gaze upon Mara and answered "What should the state of a woman mean to me, if she with mind tranquillised sees with perfect intuitive, wisdom and the true nature of all things. Mara, go your way and see those in whom evil thoughts arise, and make the statement you have just made to me".

During the Buddhist epoch there was a definite change due largely to the acceptance of the Buddha's teaching by many of the intellectuals and members of the ruling classes, and women too came to enjoy more equality and greater

respect and authority than ever before accorded to them. This improvement which was of great sociological significance was in no small part a direct result of the fact that the new teachings of the Buddha had opened the doors of organized religious life equally to women as well as men.

It is clear now that a great step forward was taken, women at last given the opportunities, before only accorded to men, soon proved that they could be just as learned and wise, a large number of them attaining the final goal of Arahant hood. It may be of interest to know that some of the most distinguished names of women at the time were: Prajapati Gotami; Khema; Patacare and Dhammadinna. Outside the Order, women such as Sujata; Visakhe and Samavatei attained positions of some eminence in the social order of the times.

Just as in those distant times there were those who were opposed to this doctrine of equality for women, so today there are people who deny women their rights. Whatever the reasons may be, there is no place for this type of thinking in modern society, where the contribution of women can be, and always has been, of great importance to the modern world.

It must be remembered that the upbringing of the generation of tomorrow is often left entirely in the hands of the women of today, and it is just, that the effort and work that they put into this upbringing is properly recognized and given due respect.

Women be they, daughters, mothers, wives, sisters in whatever social position they may be, they have a very important place in this world of today. They can make themselves worthy of this place, by maintaining their self-respect and honour and ensuring that whatever they do to the best of their ability.

Remember, our present is the result of our past actions and deeds, and our future is made here and now.