



BUDDHIST ETHICS AND GENDER EQUALITY

Biplab Chandra Sarkar

Assistant professor

Department of Philosophy

Maharani Kasiswari College , Kolkata

ABSTRACT

The philosophy of Buddhist ethics includes such values as compassion, wisdom, non-violence, and moral responsibility. In addition, this philosophical paradigm considers the possibility of enlightenment as the equal attribute of all people independently of their gender. The current research explores the connection between Buddhist ethics and gender equality through analyzing the history of development of women's role in Buddhism, formation of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, the phenomenon of Buddhist feminism and the role of teachings on ethics of Buddhists in modern world for promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women. The current research uses the methodology of the qualitative review and analyzes only secondary data taken from primary sources of Buddhism including Tipiṭaka, Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka and peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and scholarly reports devoted to the topic under discussion. The gathered literature was analyzed with the help of thematic content analysis in order to detect the themes connected to Buddhist ethics, gender equality, women's leadership and institutional reforms. It can be stated that although Buddhist philosophy recognizes the equal ability of men and women to become enlightened, historically certain difficulties were created due to some cultural and institutional aspects preventing women from complete participation in the religious sphere. However, in spite of the fact, certain tendencies towards gender equality are developing now, including Bhikkhunī ordination revival, the appearance of Buddhist feminist scholarship and more possibilities for women to get the leadership positions.

Keywords: *Buddhist Ethics; Gender Equality; Buddhist Feminism; Women in Buddhism; Bhikkhunī Ordination; Social Justice.*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the earliest religions and philosophies that still exists today is Buddhism; it was developed by Gautama Buddha about 2,600 years ago. This religion incorporates such moral values as Karuṇā

(compassion), Mettā (loving kindness), Ahimsa (non-violence), Paññā (wisdom) and moral responsibility as its basis, which helps people eliminate suffering and attain enlightenment. While other moral codes and ethical theories are based on divine commands, Buddhist ethics focuses on personal behavior and deeds, as well as their results (karma). The theory also promotes dignity, respect and moral equality for everybody, offering an intellectual background that promotes equity and social harmony. In modern times, when gender equality becomes one of the global issues, it is important to consider the points of view offered by Buddhism in terms of morality.



Figure 1: Buddhism

In spite of the principle of equality of all individuals in their ability to achieve enlightenment that Buddhism promotes, the historical experience of women in the Buddhist community has been affected by various factors. Even though Buddha organized the order of Bhikkhunīs and recognized the ability of women to become enlightened, there have been numerous problems in the religious authorities, leadership, and complete involvement in monastic life among women. The contradiction between the Buddhist ethics and institutions has resulted in debates in the disciplines of Buddhist studies, gender studies, and religious ethics. Movements for revival of the Bhikkhunī ordination, Buddhist feminism, and female leadership have raised questions concerning the relationship between Buddhism ethics and gender equality.

In light of this background, this paper aims at analyzing the basis of Buddhism in terms of its ethics and their connection to gender equality both historically and currently. This includes examining the status of women within Buddhism, the development of the Bhikkhunī tradition, the development of Buddhist feminism, as well as the application of Buddhist ethics to promote social justice and gender equality. Through the examination of current scholarly literature on Buddhism, as well as classical teachings of Buddhism, the goal of the analysis is to identify how far Buddhist ethics promote gender equality, what problems exist, and what possibilities there are for building more open-minded Buddhist communities. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader understanding of Buddhist ethics, religious studies, and gender justice while offering insights for future academic research and policy discussions.

1.1. Research Objectives

The main research objectives are:

- To examine the role of Buddhist ethics in promoting gender equality.
- To analyse the historical development of women and the Bhikkhunī ordination in Buddhism.
- To evaluate the contribution of Buddhist ethics to women's empowerment and social justice in contemporary society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gross (2018) explored the interconnection between the Buddhist philosophy and gender by refuting the traditional presuppositions related to gender identity in Buddhism. According to the author, the teachings of Buddhism on detachment, impermanence, and the lack of self constituted an effective philosophical justification for overcoming gender differences. It was stressed in the article that equality between men and women in Buddhism could be attained through spiritual exercises and ethics rather than biological sex. The barriers preventing the gender equality were analyzed in the context of Buddhism and the necessity to reconsider Buddhist traditions in order to achieve the same status of women was mentioned.

Khetjoi (2020) studied the concept of Buddhism as a religion that practiced gender equality based on the core beliefs of the religion. According to the research findings, the Buddha acknowledged the spiritual equality of women and men by establishing the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, which enabled women to practice their faith. The researcher noticed that although there were historical and cultural practices that hindered the participation of women in some aspects of Buddhism, these did not arise from Buddhist beliefs. The

conclusion drawn from the study is that Buddhist ethics, which include compassion, equality and non-discrimination, form an important foundation for gender justice and women rights.

Mitra (2019) explored the impact of the Buddhist philosophies on achieving gender equality and sustainable development in the current era. The study contended that the core philosophies of Buddhism such as compassion, non-violence, equality, and ethical responsibility could serve as a sound moral foundation for establishing a just and sustainable society. The researcher stressed that the Buddha believed in the spiritual equality of women and men and emphasized respect for human dignity regardless of their genders. The study further discussed that applying Buddhist ethical principles to present-day social and institutional structures can help empower women, establish inclusive leadership, ensure social harmony, and attain sustainable development goals. It concluded that Buddhist ethics remained highly relevant in addressing gender inequality and promoting a more equitable and peaceful global society.

3. METHODOLOGY

The current study utilized qualitative review methodology with the use of secondary data only. The primary sources used were the Tipiṭaka, Vinaya Piṭaka, and Sutta Piṭaka, while the secondary sources used were journal articles, books, book chapters, and academic reports from various sources like Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, and Sage Journals. Relevant scholarly publications in English that had anything to do with the study of Buddhist ethics, gender equality, Buddhist feminism, women in Buddhism, and Bhikkhuni ordination were considered, but duplicate sources or any non-scholarly material was excluded. The collected literature was analysed using thematic content analysis to identify and synthesise key themes concerning Buddhist ethics and gender equality.

4. FOUNDATIONS OF BUDDHIST ETHICS AND GENDER EQUALITY

Buddhism ethical theories are based on moral values, wisdom, compassion, and the search for liberation from suffering. Unlike other religions whose ethical codes are based on divine commands, Buddhist ethical doctrines are premised on taking responsibilities and engaging in activities that benefit all sentient beings. The Four Noble Truths discuss the origin and nature of suffering, its cause, cessation of suffering, and the way out of suffering, while the Noble Eightfold Path outlines the means of reaching liberation through right knowledge, intention, speech, action, profession, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Additionally, the Five Precepts are designed to instill a sense of ethical behavior in people through abstinence from activities such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consumption of alcohol.

The ethics of Buddhism are further reinforced by the concepts of Karuṇā (compassion), Mettā (universal love), and Ahimsa (non-violence). Compassion involves taking steps towards reducing the pain felt by others without any prejudice. On the other hand, loving-kindness entails universal kindness, understanding, and respect to all beings. Non-violence does not only mean refraining from causing injury but also includes showing respect for the dignity and rights of all persons. Such qualities help in establishing mutual respect, harmony, and morality in society.

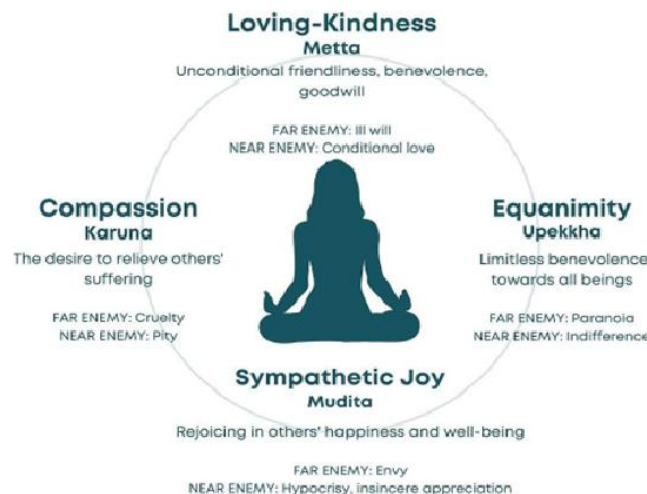


Figure 2: The Four Brahmavihāras in Buddhist Ethics

Buddhist philosophy upholds that all human beings possess equal potential to attain enlightenment through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom, regardless of gender, caste, or social status. The Buddha consistently emphasised that spiritual progress depends on one's actions and moral discipline rather than birth or identity. Consequently, the ethical principles of Buddhism provide a strong philosophical foundation for gender equality, recognizing women and men as equally capable of achieving spiritual liberation and contributing to religious and social life. These teachings continue to inspire contemporary discussions on women's rights, social justice, and inclusive leadership within Buddhist communities.

5. WOMEN IN BUDDHISM: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND BHIKKHUNI ORDINATION

The women have contributed significantly to the growth of Buddhism throughout history by participating in its spirituality, ethics, and social practices amidst numerous obstacles that they have faced. The study of the history of women's position and the Bhikkhunī ordination is extremely important to comprehend the Buddhist attitude towards the equality of genders.



Figure 3: Women in Buddhism

- **Position of Women before Buddhism:** Women in ancient Indian society prior to the rise of Buddhism were typically subservient figures in a patriarchal setup. They were not accorded rights in respect of education, religion, or any other aspect of public life, as their role was primarily that of fulfilling domestic duties within the house.
- **Women during the Buddha's Lifetime:** The Buddha provided an enlightened approach in realizing that women were equally capable of achieving enlightenment as men in terms of practicing ethicality, meditating, and gaining wisdom. Women belonging to various strata of society accepted Buddhism, and many of them attained great spiritual heights. While certain monastic rules did embody the customs of the society, the philosophy of Buddhism confirmed the spiritual ability and moral equality of women.
- **Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha:** Mahapajapati Gotami, who served as Buddha's foster mother, was ordained as the first ever Buddhist nun and contributed greatly to the formation of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. As per the approval of Buddha, thanks to the intercession of Ananda, Buddha allowed the entry of women into the monastic community, and thus formed one of the first ever religious orders of women.
- **Contributions of Buddhist Nuns:** Buddhist nuns have made immense contributions to the promotion and propagation of Buddhism in terms of education, meditation, and charitable works. Some early Buddhist nuns like Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, and Dhammadinnā received recognition for

their spiritual attainments and wisdom. In today's era, Buddhist nuns strive towards education, social work, environmental concerns, and empowering women.

- **Decline of Bhikkhunī Ordination:** This decline happened in many Buddhist countries due to wars and political upheaval. Consequently, in many Theravada countries, the tradition of full ordination of women has been lost. Women have been denied equal opportunities in Buddhism even though Buddhism preaches equality.
- **Revival Movements:** In the latter half of the twentieth century, many Buddhist orders have tried to reintroduce the Bhikkhunī ordination practice. This has been achieved by countries like Sri Lanka but at the same time there are also international organisations and Buddhist scholars who strive for gender equality and representation in Buddhism.
- **Present Status across Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna Traditions:** Buddhist women's status differs from one school to another. In Mahayana Buddhism, there is continuity of the Bhikkhuni order and more leadership roles are open to women. In Theravada Buddhism, the ordination of women has been restored in some countries, though not in others. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the education and leadership of women have greatly developed over the past few decades.

6. BUDDHIST FEMINISM AND GENDER EQUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

The rise of Buddhist feminism during the twentieth century has been an important step in re-interpretation of the Buddhist philosophy using the perspective of gender equality and social justice. According to Buddhist feminists, Buddhism, as taught by the Buddha himself, advocates for compassion, wisdom, and equality of everyone spiritually, although most of the gender disparities seen in Buddhist institutions have been the products of history and culture, not the teaching of Buddhism. The goal of this movement is to abolish discrimination within Buddhist institutions, ensure equal rights of women and their engagement in leadership and education.

A number of scholars and organisations have been very significant in ensuring that Buddhist feminism and women's rights gain momentum. Rita M. Gross, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā) are some of the scholars who have done an analysis of gender concerns within Buddhism as well as promoting the revival of Bhikkhunī ordination, equal educational opportunities in Buddhism, and the importance of women's contribution. International organisations like the Sakyadhita

International Association of Buddhist Women have been instrumental in creating dialogue, carrying out research, developing leadership, and international networking among Buddhist women.

In modern society, women have started assuming the position of leadership roles such as teaching, scholarly work, meditation training, social activism, and monastic leadership in various schools of Buddhism. The increasing accessibility of education has allowed women to study and research Buddhism at advanced levels, participate in academic activities, and be actively involved in religious organizations. In terms of human rights, the ethics of Buddhism promote the values of dignity, compassion, equality, and non-discrimination that match well with the ideas of gender justice in the modern world. At the same time, the process of introducing gender equality in Buddhism differs from one school to another. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, women get wider institutional chances due to the continuity of the Bhikkhunī tradition, while Theravāda Buddhism makes slow but steady progress by reviving female ordinations in some countries. In Vajrayāna Buddhism, the introduction of reforms takes place in the form of providing wider educational possibilities and admitting women into high-ranking religious positions.

7. BUDDHIST ETHICS, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

The Buddhist ethics is a robust ethical framework which can be applied for the promotion of social justice, equality, and respect for human dignity based on such concepts as Karuṇā, Mettā, and Ahimsa. The ethical norms state that everyone irrespective of their sex, caste, or social position has the same chances of spiritual development. Thus, in Buddhism, the same rights are provided to both men and women regarding education, religious practices, leadership, and social participation.

However, in spite of all such ethics, there have been many challenges that have impacted the position of women in Buddhism. The following points list some of the key issues:

- Gender inequality in monastic ordination and leadership roles.
- Continuing patriarchal influence in religion and society.
- Issues of religious and institutional power that limit women's involvement in decision making.
- Gender differences in education and leadership within some Buddhist sects.

Such difficulties mostly emerge due to historical and cultural reasons rather than from the original teachings of Buddha. Hence, academics and Buddhist institutions support changes in order to ensure equal participation and recognition of women and their compatibility with Buddhist ethics.

However, modern Buddhism has seen many positive changes which have improved the positions of women in religious and social sphere. Among such positive trends the following should be noted:

- Restoration of Bhikkhuni ordination in some countries.
- Popularity of Buddhist education among women and their participation in religious leadership.
- Creation of social, peace and environment activities by women.
- Advocacy of gender equality by Buddhist international organizations and scientific works.

All these reforms show that Buddhism and its ethics are quite able to be the basis for development of social justice and women's rights. Even though there is still much work to be done, the involvement of religious leaders and the scholarship of Buddhists will make sure that women get equal chances to develop and succeed.

8. DISCUSSION

the findings of this research show that the ethical system of Buddhism offers a solid philosophical foundation for gender equality through the use of such notions as compassion, wisdom, non-violence and equal spiritual capacity of all people. Indeed, the historical formation of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and the role played by Buddhist women prove that the Buddha acknowledged women's potential to become enlightened and fully take part in spiritual activities. Yet, from the literature review, one may conclude that the development of history, culture and institutions had a negative effect on the involvement of women into religious life and created an obstacle between the ethical system and its practical implementation. The present activities aimed at revitalizing the Bhikkhunī ordination, the rise of Buddhist feminism and provision of educational and leadership positions for women indicate the process of transformation towards gender equality. Therefore, the study suggests that continued institutional reforms, scholarly engagement, and the application of Buddhist ethical principles are essential for strengthening women's empowerment, promoting social justice, and ensuring more inclusive Buddhist communities in the future.

9. CONCLUSION

This research shows that Buddhist ethics is a powerful philosophical and ethical framework that can be used in order to enhance gender equality and justice as well as empower women because of its core elements of compassion, wisdom, non-violence, and moral responsibilities. It is seen from the review that Buddha saw the same spiritual capacities in women and men, which is supported by the formation of the Bhikkhunī

Saṅgha and numerous activities of Buddhist women in the past. Nevertheless, various historical, cultural and institutional factors restricted the full involvement of women into religious activities and leadership, thereby creating some gap between Buddhist ethics and institutions. The formation of Buddhist feminism, the revival of the Bhikkhunī ordination, as well as the broadening of educational and leadership opportunities for women suggest some positive change toward increased gender equality among the Buddhists in contemporary times. Thus, the development of institutional changes, religious inclusiveness, and further academic studies are needed in order to ensure the contribution of Buddhist ethics in a more just society.

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