

L'auteure a interviewé une abbesse bouddhiste, la Révérende Wing Ming de Hong Kong, sur le statut de la femme dans le bouddhisme. L'abbesse note que leur statut en Inde s'est beaucoup amélioré, pendant la période bouddhiste et que Bouddha lui-même ne faisait pas de distinction entre homme et femme. C'est ainsi que l'état idéal (le Nirvana) peut être atteint par l'un et l'autre sexe, et que la situation des femmes dans le bouddhisme est très respectée.

Aujourd'hui, les ordres de religieuses bouddhistes ont disparu, sauf en Chine, en Corée, au Vietnam et à Hong Kong. L'abbesse attribue leur disparition au fait que le statut des femmes dans les autres pays est peu élevé et que plus le système répressif est fort plus elles ont de difficultés à s'organiser.

On August 2, 1983, at the World Council of Churches Assembly, the Reverend Wing Ming, a Buddhist Abbess from Hong Kong, talked in an interview about women and Buddhism. Before Buddhist time (6 B.C.), she said, the position of women in India was generally low and without honour. For example, a daughter was generally a source of anxiety to her parents if they could not marry her off. A woman was cared for by her father, then her husband, and then her eldest son. A woman's position as wife was merely that of child bearer, and one of those children had better be male. As a mother of sons she was more respected than women who were unmarried or widowed women who had no sons. However, women were allowed no part in public activities.

Women's position improved during the Buddhist time and in Buddhist thought. During the Buddhist epoch (during the 6th century BC), the Abbess pointed out, the exclusive supremacy of man began to give way to the emancipation of women. This movement was fostered and accelerated by the innate intelligence of women themselves until the fact was acknowledged that women were silently claiming to be responsible, rational creatures with intelligence and will. It

NOTES FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH A BUDDHIST ABBESS

Nancy Jackman

was also true that Buddha made no distinction between male and female; therefore sex differentiation was not that important.

The change in Indian culture started in the Buddhist order and its teaching which showed no distinction between male and female, but it also did not make distinction in the caste system of India. Buddha's aunt, who raised him, was the first Buddhist nun, and she was of a high caste. It is hard to tell whether this influenced Buddha to declare that Nirvana can be reached by both sexes. Women began to become priests during this time.

The Reverend Wing Ming explained that the Buddha said that his religion depended on four groups of his disciples: monks, nuns, lay men, and lay women. Therefore the door of Buddhist activity and Buddhist religious practice and the Buddhist ideal state Nirvana is equally open to both men and women. Women were considered to have the same ability to get rid of all delusions and to reach the holy state as indeed do men. Women's wisdom and intelligence were acknowledged by Buddha on several occasions. Once the Buddha commented on an answer

given by Dhamma Dinna Theri, "Had you asked me, I should have made the answer as precisely as she did. Her answer was correct and you should treasure it accordingly."

According to the Reverend Wing Ming, there is a story in Saddharanapundarik Sutra (the Lotus Sutra) of a female Buddhist disciple teaching in a Lotus assembly. Hearing what she was preaching, hundreds and thousands of the audience were able to achieve their enlightenment and went into the perfect state — Nirvana. From this story we can see that women's position in Buddhism is very high and women's contributions and influence on the Buddhist order in society were greatly acknowledged and respected.

The Abbess pointed out that for Buddhism equality to join the Buddhist order and preach Buddhist teaching, as well as to recognize that women have the same ability to reach the holy state, Nirvana, was to take up a challenge (or a revolution) at that time in Indian society.

Woman's position today: her role and influence in Buddhism

In Thailand and Sri Lanka a female order of nuns has not existed for many hundreds of years. The nuns first disappeared from India, then Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Women in Thailand and Sri Lanka's Buddhist societies are lay women and their support to Buddhism is through food and material needs. At present the Buddhist female order still survives in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Hong Kong.

The Reverend Wing Ming thinks that the disappearance of the female order is partially the result of the cultural background of countries where women's position is generally low and without honour. It is also partly the result of the fact that Buddhist women have not yet organized into a religious sisterhood. Sisterhood is often generally looked down on by the society because of traditional thought, despite the fact that sisters are sup-

posed to keep the moral precepts of Buddhism better than monks or lay men do! The fact that women have not yet organized results in further degradation. Some Buddhist sisters, especially the elderly sisters, have no financial support from their family or any other means of livelihood. The source of recruitment for Buddhist nunneries has also disappeared.

In Hong Kong, maybe because of the Chinese and British cultural background, women have more freedom and less pressure. The concept of equality of women and man is more acceptable on the one hand, and, on the other hand, women of these countries have more opportunities or have been allowed to organize themselves better than the women in Thailand or Sri Lanka.

Much research still has to be done on the disappearance of women's orders in Thailand and Sri Lanka and the difficulty of organizing in these countries. As far as the Abbess knew, there was a Thai woman who wished to revive the female order in Thailand. So she went to Taiwan to have her ordination. Then she returned to Thailand and with some public support she established a nunnery. Because Thailand recognizes only one denomination (Theravada Bsun) and hers was another (Mahayana Bsun), her starting an order was made almost impossible. For the last eleven years now she has been the only nun in Thailand, and it has been impossible for her to recruit others and create a movement in Buddhism. The Reverend Wing Ming thinks that the reason also may be, as some perceive, that women in Sri Lanka and Thailand have low status. There is some assumption that, as suppression gets stronger, the ability of women to organize becomes more and more difficult and they cease to try.

Nancy Jackman is an active feminist and is particularly interested in the implications for women of the Charter of Rights.

The Journey*

*I listen to the agony of God —
I who am fed,
who never yet went hungry for a day.
I see the dead —
the children starved for lack of bread —
I see and try to pray.*

*I listen to the agony of God —
I who am warm
who never yet lacked a sheltering home.
In dull alarm
the dispossessed of hut and farm
aimless and transient roam.*

*I listen to the agony of God —
I who am strong
with health and love and laughter in my soul.
I see a throng
of stunted children reared in wrong
and wish to make them whole.*

*I listen to the agony of God —
But know full well
That not until I share their bitter cry —
earth's pain and hell —
can God within my spirit dwell
to bring the Kingdom nigh.*

*I was hungry not just for food
but for peace that comes from a pure heart.
I was thirsty not for water
but for peace that satiates the passionate
thirst for war.
I was naked not for clothes
but for that beautiful dignity of men and
women for their bodies.*

*I was homeless not for a shelter made of bricks
but for a heart that understands, that covers,
that loves.*

*I was hungry; I was thirsty; I was naked;
I was homeless.
Yet I found peace, peace and dignity and
a heart that loves.*

Nancy Telfer
Toronto, Ontario

This poem is an excerpt from a major choral work commissioned by Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada for its conference, "The Female Connection."

*Reprinted from *No Longer Strangers: A Resource for Women and Worship*, ed. I. Gjerding and K. Kinnamon. Ecumenical project of Lutheran World Federation, World Council of Churches, World Student Christian Federation, and World Young Women's Christian Association, 1983.