

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM: A PERSONAL NOTE



Swarna Sugunasiri

Fille unique parmi sept garçons, l'auteure, enfant, avait droit à un régime de faveur et à des attentions particulières. Dans la société bouddhiste de Sri Lanka, les rites accordent aux filles une position de respect. L'auteure fut encouragée à s'inscrire à l'université où la majorité des étudiants étaient des filles.

Le bouddhisme enseigne que l'ignorance cause souffrance et qu'elle est un obstacle à la réalisation des buts spirituels les plus élevés. Il n'y a pas, dans cet enseignement, de distinction entre les sexes: la femme est appelée la "camarade suprême".

En évoquant brièvement les positions de Bouddha à l'égard des femmes, l'auteure montre que leur statut dans la religion bouddhiste, un statut de respect et presque d'égalité, remonte à l'époque de Bouddha.

The earliest memory I have of myself as an individual is as an only girl among seven boys. Basically they are very pleasant memo-

ries. As I look back on why these memories are pleasant, it appears that I felt that I was wanted, loved, and cherished. For example, I remember my father going out of his way to satisfy my idiosyncratic behaviour of not eating meat, unlike the rest of the family. Is this simply an idiosyncratic behaviour of an individual father, or is it reflective of a value system in a Buddhist society? It could well be an individual idiosyncrasy, but then why did I hear my family, relatives, and the community hoping, after four boys and one girl, that each of the next three babies in the family be a girl? Indeed, my husband and I always wanted, and luckily got, both a boy and a girl. The preferential treatment I received was by no means restricted to my father. Everybody referred to me as "the lamp" in the family. Perhaps the use of the term "lamp" is not accidental, since the Buddha's last words were "Be a lamp unto yourself." Though this phrase has traditionally been taken

to mean self-reliant, it can also perhaps be taken to mean lustrous and illuminative. This certainly seemed to be the significance with reference to me, and also to girls in other families, as I came to know later.

Initiation into maidenhood was a significant event in my life. It was surrounded by rituals that launched me from a position of mere preferential treatment to one of respectful treatment. The fanfare, the auspiciousness, and the enjoyment surrounding the event — referred to as "the auspicious event of Kotahalu," as I discovered in later life — pervades the entire Sri Lankan Buddhist society and, significantly, cuts across social class (and caste — a Hindu carry-over, although I do not know whether it extends into Sri Lankan Hindu society). Rich or poor, all Sinhalese Buddhist girls are assured of the launching!

My entry to the University of Sri Lanka marked yet another significant event in my life. I always wanted to go to the university. Although my parents were not people of higher education, their attempt was not to marry me off — or shall we say "to get rid of a burden," as seems to be the case in some societies — but rather to encourage the fulfilment of my desire to maximize my potential, just as they encouraged the boys to achieve their life's desires. If the lamp is to illuminate, it had to be bright! So there was perhaps a special reason why I was encouraged to go to university. Indeed, many other parents seemed to have had the same value orientation, for more than half the university students were girls. They were in all faculties, including medicine, but perhaps mostly in the Arts faculty. Buddhism teaches that ignorance (*awijja*) is the root cause of suffering, and that it stands in the way of achieving the highest goal of *Nibbana* (Nirvana). By contrast, the facilitative process toward achieving this higher goal is wisdom (and compassion). Clearly this value orientation, which cuts across sex barriers, is pervasive in Buddhist Sri Lanka.

As I entered the work world, perhaps not ironically as a teacher in an all-boys' collegiate (contrary to the advice of my family to be a civil servant), I had no reason to be lonely. There were many other women on staff, and I had other women friends in various other professions and careers — teaching, medicine, law, politics. Thinking back from a Canadian base after twenty years, I recall now that indeed women worked alongside men on the roads and in the fields! Though unquestionably there were more men than women in our work force, it may be conjectured that it is perhaps the presence of a large work force of women (and a Buddhist value system that encouraged such a presence) which served as the impetus to give the world its first woman prime minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranayaka. After all, Sri Lankan women have been voting since the thirties and are high on the literacy scale, as part of the wide high level of literacy that marks Sri Lankan Buddhist society.

From my own experience described above, it would be difficult to conclude that the position of women in Buddhist society is one that women need be or can be bitter about. Just as we did when we were children, when our children pay homage to us now — a traditional Buddhist custom — they still go to the mother first and then on to the father. The inspiration for this maternal priority can be traced directly to an admonition contained in the Great Auspicious Discourse (*Maha Mangala Sutta*) that it is an auspicious activity to "attend to one's mother and father," with the mother coming first.

The respectable if not entirely equal position enjoyed by women under Buddhism seems to date back to the time of Buddha himself. For example, the very first alms the Buddha received after his Enlightenment was, according to tradition, from a woman named Sujatha. We are also told that the Buddha had a great benefactress in the person of Vishaka. At the urging of Maha Pajapati Gatami, the missing mother to Prince Siddharta

(who later becomes the Buddha), we find the birth of the *Bhikkani Sasana* (Order of Nuns) under the Buddha's own guidance, even though it is said that he acceded to the request rather reluctantly. Among those who attained the states of "stream-winner," "once-returner," "non-returner," "the completely detached one," and indeed *Nibbana* itself, were whores like Ambapali and destitute and distressed women like Patanchara.

In fact, one of the treatises of the Buddhist canon (*Tipitaka*) is called "The Strophes of the Elder Nuns" (*Theri Gatha*), made up of sets of verses attributed to seventy-three women. Two other treatises include works by or biographies of over fifty other Elder Nuns. Finally, the teachings refer to at least two women whose expositions of the Dhamma were so true to the Buddha's words that their work was referred to by the Buddha as the "words of the Buddha himself" (*Buddha Dhamma*). These are but a few of the women who find a place in early Buddhism.

To find some evidence closer to home of the position held by women in a Buddhist community, we can look at the Canadian Sri Lankan Buddhist community. Wife beating, found in native Canadian and immigrant communities, is a phenomenon rarely heard of in the Sri Lankan Buddhist community; the same is true of divorce. (Buddhist marriages are civil ceremonies, without any religious association.) I know of no examples of the former and only a handful of the latter. Another observation one may make is that the educational level of women in the community is, in general, compatible with that of their husbands, even in arranged marriages. That is to say, a professional husband is usually married to a professional wife and a blue-collar husband to a blue-collar wife. Indeed, the wife is referred to in the Teachings as "comrade supreme," in addition to being "a wife-wife," "a mother-wife," "a sister-wife," and so on, all in one at different times.

What I have outlined above are my personal experiences, observa-

tions, and my formal and informal opinions. Though I have no way of making the claim that women in Sri Lankan society are a "liberated" lot (in whatever sense the word is taken), my sense is that, in comparison to men or in comparison to women in any other society, they are not an oppressed, suppressed, or downtrodden segment of society. They were not so in Buddha's time either, as we see in Dr. I. B. Horner's *Women in Early Buddhist Literature* (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Ceylon, page 22):

"In conclusion, I hope to have presented you with some material for thinking that in the Buddha's times women were not despised and looked down on but, on the contrary, were respected and had a place of honour in the home. The difficulties they had to face and overcome were no more than normal for women in any time or country, even if their life was, at the worldly level, more restricted than it has come to be in the last decades, as women go in more and more for public work and hold professional posts. At the higher, more spiritual level, however, they had the great advantage and great joy of entering the Order of Nuns either because they wanted to get free of worldly sufferings or, more positively, and above everything else, because they wanted to find the way to the peace and bliss of *Nibbana*, all their former craving for sense-pleasures rooted out, tranquil and cool. Many of the women I have mentioned here, whether they have been nuns or the lay-devotees, by their response to the majesty of the Buddha's Teaching, have made an imponderable contribution to its strength, vitality, expansion, and longevity. It is as well to survey again from time to time the lives of these ardent contemporaries of the Buddha. Indeed, the Buddhist world owes them a large debt of gratitude."

Swarna Sugunasiri teaches at Vaughan Road Collegiate in Toronto. Originally from Sri Lanka, she has travelled in China, Japan, India, and the United States.