

Gender and Peace: The two Phenomena and Their Presence in Buddhism

*¹ Dr. Namramita Bhuiya

*¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Kishore Bharati Bhagini Nivedita College (co-ed), Behala, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore a connection between Gender and Peace in Buddhism. Buddhism is especially an ethical path that can be explored by the hand of Gautama Buddha. Gautama Buddha, upon attaining enlightenment, became renowned as the Buddha. The teachings given by the Buddha to both his female and male disciples open the path to the same main aim, which is liberation. Buddha can never create a distinction between a male and a female person. In Buddhism, there are primarily two major groups: the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna. Buddha himself acknowledged that women are quite capable of becoming arhats, that is, persons who have attained *nirvāna*. On the other hand, in Mahāyāna, Bodhisattvas who aspire to become a Buddha are not bound by gender. *Therīgāthā, Ānguttara Nikāya*, the two most important texts, also explore the fact that women are capable of attaining *nirvāna*. In *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, the most important Mahāyāna text, it is conveyed that the bodhisattva becomes male and female. Only an unenlightened person can make a distinction between male and female. Gautama Buddha established a bhikunni sanga where the first monastic nun was his aunt and foster mother, Mahapajapati Gotami. She follows the eight rules of respect. Apart from that, there are various bhiksuni samgha established outside India. In China and Japan, various Zen masters, nuns, are women, and they preach to other nuns. In Vajrayāna Buddhism, various famous siddhis are female. In the Vajrayāna tradition, we find the concept of yoginis who are assimilated with dākinī. There are two types of dākinī: inner dākinī and outer dākinī. These external dākinīs are found in human form as women dedicated to yoga, and they also perform their role as consorts of yoginis with great powers (mahasiddha). The whole Buddhist tradition conveys the truth that Buddhism is above sex, caste, creed, and gender, through which they can propagate the message of peace, where all are equal, all are the same.

Keywords: Gender, Peace, equality, women, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, Bhiksuni samgha, Dākinī.

*Corresponding Author

Dr. Namramita Bhuiya

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Kishore Bharati Bhagini Nivedita College (co-ed), Behala, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Introduction

The famous French Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote that—"One is not born but rather becomes a woman."^[1] Through this quote, it is very clear that there is no extra quality of femininity. The term "woman" actually derives from the manufacturing process, which is influenced by society. The term "gender" primarily refers to our social roles. This social role indicates our masculinity or femininity. This is Gender. It is not something that one is born with. So when one child is born, he or she does not decide to be a man or a woman; it is rather the society that decides it. The only identity that applies to both men and women is Human. Humanity is the only equality that is the essential characteristic for men and women. This Human quality, which is equal identity for both men and women, is also accepted in the area of Buddhism. The term Buddha simply

indicates an enlightened being. There are several Buddhas who came in this world, and Siddhartha Gautama was one of the Buddhas who established a religion that became popular as Buddhism. But Gautama believes that he has established certain ethical rules, and through these ethical rules, Buddha mainly established a peace that surrounded our society. Peace is coming when we tolerate each other and do not resort to violence towards anyone, and have faith in the concept that gives the message that no one is different from each other; all are equal, all are the same. Anyone can attain the highest realization; it is not only surrounded by a particular biological group of male people.

Throughout the entire life of Gautama Buddha surrounded by exemplary women. Starting from his mother, Mahāmāyā, then Mahāprajāpati Gautamī, who is the foster mother of Gautama, Gautama's wife Yosodharā, and Sujātā, who at first served

milk rice to Buddha at the time of salvation. Various women have become enlightened through the connection with Buddha. Buddha established the monastic order (*saṅgha*) and also founded *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, the community of fully ordained Buddhist nuns, the world's oldest documented women's organization. The first Buddhist nun in this organization was Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī. It was her initiation that helped to establish this *bhikkhunī saṅgha*. Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her followers were advised by the Buddha to shave their heads, don the robes of renunciants, and practice at home rather than adopting the lifestyle of homeless wanderers. So Buddha taught a path to liberation for women also. The attainment of liberation helps to free them from the delusions of the mind, from suffering, from rebirth in cyclic existence. There are several examples of Buddhist literature, especially those that are proof of the voices of women. These are *Therīgāthā*, the first anthology of women's literature, which is mainly a collection of seventy-three verses ascribed to seventy female *arhats*, the *Apadānas* (biographies of the Buddha's disciples, including forty women), the *Avadānaśataka* (stories of realization, including several women), and the *Ānguttara Nikāya*, which mainly contains stories of eminent nuns and laywomen.

It is true that at the time of the Buddha in India, women were associated with reproduction and fecundity. These are simply a contrast of Buddhist goals. The aim of Buddhism is nothing but renunciation and liberation. This is very hard for a woman to maintain her celibacy, and in that time, celibacy is not her natural state. A woman's natural inclination is attached to her motherhood. Women are happy to lead this type of life under the dominance and protection of men. But there are also some opposite sides which are found in the Buddhist canon, where some stories portray women as utterly disinterested in sexual exploits and fully confident in rebuffing the advances of men. The most common story the beautiful nun Subhā Therī, who was accosted by an admirer, plucks out her eye, and later it reported in the presence of Buddha and the Subhā Therī herself through application of their supernatural power. Gaining supernatural power is the fruitful result of liberation. Due to this power, women can especially change their gender into another form, and this power is known as *siddhī*. Through this power, it not only explores that gender is changeable but also gives the power to exchange their own sexual identity.^[2] Women are allowed to lead a monastic life that began with the Mahāprajāpatī and still continues today. It is true that *bhikkhunīs* were undoubtedly major factors in the context of Buddhism, but lay women also played a great role because lay women can transform their spiritual knowledge into their children, which they can gain from the *bhikkhunīs*. The spiritual balance is ensured by the *bhikkhunīs* as they are one of the important parts of monastic discipline, and it is also proven that men and women are equal in the area of spiritual journey.

Through this spiritual journey, one can also attain the highest realization, which is *nirvāna*, where the end of suffering happens. It is the state of eternal peace. That is why it is referred to as "Nibbana paramam sukham."^[3] So in this way, we find Gender and peace to be the two phenomena, and their presence in Buddhism.

Objective

The objective of the research work is to explore the studies of Gender and peace: the two phenomena and their presence in Buddhism through Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Tantra.

Statement of Research Problem

The main problem or the focused area is: Does Gender and Peace, the two phenomena, and their presence in Buddhism? If it is possible, then how is this present in Buddhism?

- Literature Review a vast literature helps to conduct this study, and a few of these can be reviewed in this regard.
- Arvind Sharma (1995) *Women in World Religions*, Sri Satguru Publications, New Delhi. This book critically discusses women and their connection with Buddhism. This book also displayed the concept of bodhisattva and the role of a female to become a bodhisattva, and they change their female body for the attainment of Bodhisattva.
- June Campbell (2003) *Gender, Identity and Tibetan Buddhism*, Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, New Delhi, where June Campbell exclusively discusses Women's role in Tibetan Buddhism and especially the appearances of Dakini.
- Karma Lekshe Tsomo (2023). *Women in Buddhist Traditions*, New York Press, New York. Karma Lekshe discussed very properly women in early Indian Buddhism, Buddhist women in South and Southeast Asia, and many more insightful discussions that help me to bring an idea on Gender, and especially women's role in Buddhism

Research Gap

However, there is a gap in the research regarding the idea that gender is not a barrier to achieving the highest realization. Usually, researchers focus on different types of monastic rules and rituals that can be performed by the nunneries. But there is still a gap that has not been extensively discussed-the path of attainment where gender is not an issue and the principle of equality, which is also fruitful in the religious context.

Proposed Method

In this research work, I would like to use the qualitative research method. As my research area is related to Gender and Peace: the two phenomena and their presence in Buddhism that is why I first used content analysis. So, I have gone through books, journals, and articles to find out the connection between Gender and peace.

I have also used Aśtasahāsrikā Prajñāpāramitā, Lotus Sūtra Vimaladattasūtra; all these are the primary sources of my research. Besides that, there are other useful texts, like Buddhist women saints of India, the Bodhisattva doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit literature that will also be used in my research as a secondary source.

There are other steps which also follow:-

- Using Footnotes
- Bibliography

Discussion: Women's liberation is accepted not only as coherent from the very beginning of Buddhism, but also this aspect is found in the branches of Buddhism. The most prominent three branches are Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Tantra. All these branches deal with the aspect of women's liberation.

Women's Liberation in the Theravada Buddhist Tradition

Theravāda Buddhism is mainly a Buddhist tradition that is based on the Pāli recension of the Buddhist texts in the *Tipiṭaka* (three baskets). *Tipiṭaka* mainly contains three important things:

1. *Suttas* (the discourses of the Buddha)
2. *Vinaya* (code of monastic discipline) and
3. *Abhidhamma* (higher teachings).

Theravāda schools mainly mean the school of elders, but their roots are located in the *Sthaviravāda* tradition. All the believers of Theravāda maintain certain ethical rules that strictly follow the monastic precepts or rules of ethical conduct. Lay men and women, and the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* follow the ethical rules. The Theravāda Buddhist tradition agrees on the fact that the ultimate goal is *nibbana*. Theravāda adopts certain features that connect with women, and these are meditation, education, and ordination. It was noticed that lay meditation practice is widely adopted in the area of Theravāda Buddhism. Theravāda Buddhism mainly spread in Burma, Srilanka, Vietnam, and many other places in the world. Several lay meditators, especially women, have been noted since early times. Ten days of meditation practices have been taught by teachers in the Burmese lineage. There are some famous meditative teachers like Ledi Sayadaw U ba kin, Mahasi Sayadaw, and so on. From the Burmese lineage, these meditation retreats are also popular in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia. Through this practice and retreat sessions of meditation help for women can gain confidence and thus help to go the path of spiritual upliftment. All these retreat sessions provided the practitioner with the opportunity to meet other women practitioners, share information, and tacitly or explicitly inspire each other in their practice.

The second important factor that is growing in Theravāda is that among women is to seek out a Buddhist education programme. Theravāda Buddhism is based on some ethical rules, and there are eight or ten precepts or moral conduct that are followed by the Burmese nun as known as a *thilashin*, and in Thailand, following the eight and ten precepts is known as *mae chee*. They are all now studying Pali. Nuns are becoming teachers of Pali and Buddhist studies. Some nuns in Sri Lanka and Vietnam are pursuing advanced degrees in Buddhist studies, and some nuns are becoming dharma teachers and university professors. Besides that, they also join some professional gatherings such as the International Conference on Buddhist women, where they share their ideas and insights. All these things indicate that women's empowerment enhances their knowledge, meditative experiences, and solidarity.

The third and most important thing is to create opportunities for full ordination for women as *bhikkhunīs*. Although several monks sometimes oppose the increasing presence of *bhikkhunīs*. Many women in traditional Buddhist communities still regard offering alms to monks. The offering of alms to monks is the highest means of accumulating merit. Monks also accept the dedication of women. Thus, traditional ideas are changing, and women have the opportunity, which indicates the breakdown of stereotypical ideas. Certain movements are encouraged by the Sakyadhita (Daughters of the Buddha) International Association of Buddhist Women, giving a new direction for women that connects and interacts among Buddhist women it creating a new sense of community solidarity and a social activistic approach.^[4]

Women's Liberation in the Mahayana Tradition

Mahāyāna Buddhism is based on several sūtras. *Aśṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* is one of the important sūtras that also explores the concept of the *Bodhisattva*. So *Bodhisattva* played an important role in the context of *Aśṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. The term *Bodhisattva* is also

valuable in the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is mainly a Sanskrit term that contains two words. The two words are- *Bodhi* and *sattva*. *Bodhi* comes from the root word *Budh*. *Budh* means to wake. It is simply performed as "Knowledge or Intelligence".^[5] *Sattva* means—"State of being."^[6] So, *Bodhisattva* means—"A being of intelligence or a being whose essence is intelligence."^[7] A *bodhisattva* aspires to become a Buddha, not for her or his own sake. Rather, the *bodhisattva* recognizes that the universe is full of suffering beings in bondage and unable to help themselves, and she or he ardently wish to help them become free. Therefore *Bodhisattva* is very compassionate towards every living being for their enlightenment. A *bodhisattva* is a compassionate being whose aim is to become a Buddha. Although *Bodhisattva* is a prior attaining state of Buddha, there were some Buddhists who were concerned that a woman could not become a Buddha. They asserted that certain marks absolutely disqualify one from becoming a Buddha. The *Saddharmapundarīka*, which is also known as the Lotus Sūtra where proves in a dramatic sequence of events that a woman can indeed become a Buddha. These dramatic sequences are also known as "changing the female body." So changing the female body is proof that a woman can become a Buddha. For example, the 8-year-old daughter of the dragon king is said to be superior in knowledge, but several non-Mahāyānists, who are mainly the opponents, charge that even if she has accomplished so much, the girl cannot become a Buddha. There are several physical difficulties, especially her female body prohibit her from attaining Buddhahood. But the girl cannot bother it, and she presents herself in front of the Buddha with a precious jewel and says, "Now I shall achieve supreme enlightenment even more quickly than the Buddha accepted my jewel." From saying these words, actually she changes himself into a male *bodhisattva* and then at once becomes a Buddha (Schuster 1981,43; Paul 1979,187-90).

There is another most important example, which we find in the *Vimaladattāsūtra*, where mainly found a 12-year-old girl, whose name is Vimaladattā. She was so wise, but again, due to her being female, she cannot become a Buddha. That is why Mahāmaudgalyāyana asks Vimaladattā why she had not changed her female body to male long ago if she was so wise. She replied that true enlightenment cannot be attained with either a female body or a male body, which is why the differences between male and female bodies have nothing to do with the perfect enlightenment of the Buddhas.

In this way in the *Vimaladattā Sūtra* explains the fact that the

change of sex theme cannot be accepted in the context of

perfect enlightenment. The change of sex, age social class is

irrelevant to life in religion. The change of sex is only an

illusion. *Bodhisattva* is simply genderless. There is no need

for any attachment to the conventional role of a woman or of a man.

Both males and females lead a spiritual life. It is not true that only the male body is pure, and that they can attain enlightenment. It is also not true that a female cannot attain enlightenment because the female body is not pure. It is a fact that most females can choose a life of *samsāra* where she leads a life of producing and nurturing life, but she is not bound to it. She can also choose a spiritual life. A man can also have the same choices.^[8]

From all the analysis of the fact, it is accepted in Buddhism that all worldly unhappiness comes into our lives due to our ignorance. If we try to overcome all that suffering, then we must overcome ourselves to the concepts that this is myself and this is mine. Sexual identity is not everything. That is

why women are breaking their sexual identity and transforming themselves. Here, a male who clings to his maleness is not an enlightened being. But a woman who does not worry about changing her sex is genuinely enlightened. It is also an explanation of emptiness. Emptiness has a great value in the aspect of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Mahāyāna Buddhism believes that everything in this world depends on something, which is why everything is relative; they are conditioned, not real in nature. This is the literal meaning of the term emptiness. But in the context of gender, especially in the attainment of enlightenment, the same emptiness is also applicable, but in a dramatic sense. There are no differences between male and female nature for the attainment of enlightenment. *Bodhisattvas* are neither male nor female; they are above gender.

In *Aśtasahāsrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, which is earlier known as *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, explores the fact that the term *prajñāpāramitā* is presented as the female personification of liberating wisdom. Although *Prajñāpāramitā* is a Sanskrit word that is a combination of two terms, *prajñā* and *pāramitā*. *Prajñā* means wisdom, and *pāramitā* means perfection. So *Prajñāpāramitā* means perfection of wisdom. Several concepts are opined in *Prajñāpāramitā*, and one of the concepts is-The *Prajñā* as the mother of the *Buddhas* and *Bodhisattvas*. Without perfect wisdom, there would be no perfectly enlightened beings and so as teacher and what is taught, *prajñāpāramitā* is the mother who bears and nurtures the enlightened ones. She is the source of light.

Although *Aśtasahāsrikā* focused on the concept of the mother of the *bodhisattva* but it is also that the *bodhisattva* is not bound in the boundary of female territory, rather it transcends the boundary and accepts the fact that the *Bodhisattva* becomes both male and female. That is why the *bodhisattva* in this literature reflects the most intense experience of both sexes. *Aśtasahāsrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, the concept of *bodhisattva* is a “peculiar and sometimes bizarre fluidity of sexual identification.”(Paul 1979,170) So, *Bodhisattva* is either male or female, and that *Bodhisattva* is only masculine is misguided.

Women’s Liberation in the Vajrayāna Tantra

Vajrayāna or Tantric Buddhism is one extended version of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the Vajrayāna tradition, there is a large number of female practitioners and teachers accepted. One of the major reasons for the notable acceptance of women within the Vajrayāna is no doubt the clear recognition that women and men not only have the same human nature but also share the same psychological traits. Usually, the traits are normally balanced in males and females as part of their psychological makeup, but in enlightened persons, these traits are usually balanced; thus, in every enlightened individual, maleness and femaleness must both be present.

As Vajrayāna is a part of Tibetan tantra, and Tibetan tantra is not different from Indian tantra, where we find the concept of *Yoginī*. The *yoginīs* are assimilated with the *Dākinī*. In Tibetan, the word *khandroma* indicates *Dākinī* or *Yoginī*. *Khandorma* is a combination of two words: *kha*, meaning sky or space, and *dro*, meaning goer or traveller. So the literal meaning of the term *khandroma* means “those who fly in the sky.” [9] There are two types of *dākinīs*: one is the inner *dakini* and another is the outer *dakini*. Inner *dākinī* is the reflection of transcendental wisdom who acts as a spiritual guide during meditation, the outer *dākinī* who acts on the practitioner’s subtle body, and the completely external *dakini* found in human form as a woman dedicated to yoga or as

consort of *yoginīs* with great powers. Similarly, iconographic representations tend to show the *dākinī* as a young naked figure in a dancing posture, usually holding menstrual blood in a skull cup in one hand and a curved knife in the other, wearing a garland of human skulls and with a trident staff leaning against her shoulder. Her hair is usually wild and hanging down her back, her face wrathful in expression, and she dances on top of a corpse to represent her complete mastery over ego and ignorance. *Dākinīs* may also be represented in different colours to show their association with the five different “Buddha families” that represent the purified wisdom of a certain aspect of emotional defilement. [10]

So *dākinīs* are the same as the Tibetan deities because *dākinīs* are represented through colour stance, demeanour, and accoutrements. Tibetan deities are also represented through colour, stance demeanour. Because *dākinī* and deities signify certain things like emptiness and others. The Heart Sūtra, for example, was personified as the *prajñāpāramitā* and worshipped in direct form as a female deity who was connected with emptiness and transcendence. In the case of a *dākinī*, it was the particular aspect that was also connected to emptiness.

The word *dākinī* has been expressed wider sense, which is used to represent many concepts. Such as-dynamic energy, a female deity, and a woman who has achieved status either as a practitioner or through sexual involvement with a high lama. A human *dākinī* is a practitioner associated with a male yogi who attempts to further his own practice through sexual acts, or who requires the intervention of a wise woman to clear his spiritual path of obstacles or to awaken him from the tendency to intellectualize.

Tibetan perspective, no textual example to show that a male *dākinī* could be represented as a sexual consort to a woman practitioner. However, there is a masculinized term that is used is *dakā*, but there are no such connotations of the *dākinī*. Male consorts to renowned female practitioners are usually considered to be either the Buddha or some other deity or some other deity or mythological being. If Buddha is a male gender and all the lamas of the lineage from there might be a greater possibility of reaching an understanding of the emptiness of all gender categories, and it is not simply those that relate to women. From a Tibetan viewpoint, it is clear that the non-static figure of the *dākinī* has been handled as a transformational symbol in which gender may be used as an expedient means of either fixing or refuting particular concepts. [11]

Apart from gender and sexual identity, it must be noted that from the Tibetan context *Dākinī* does not create fearfulness; rather, the *dākinī* offers attainment of the ultimate realization. This realization involves certain steps, which begin with the master or guru whom the adept needs to take the first step on the path of truth, and then proceed with the support of a deity (*devata*), and finally conclude with a *dakini*, who helps to attain the final destination. There is a very important text that is *Yangzab*, it is a text of the Dzogchen School, where the interior levels are associated with the three roots. Where the guru is simply placed as Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), the *devata* (*yidam*) is that of Hayagrīva, and the *Dākinī* is that of Vajravārāhi, an esoteric aspect of the goddess who can be found in the area of Pemako. Pemako is the most important hidden land (*beyul*) in the Vajrayāna tradition. So *dākinīs* are deities, they are the *sakti*, they belong in the hidden land. They are not only the symbolic representation of the female, rather they also help to attain wisdom. [12]

Conclusion

Throughout the overall analysis of this paper, the outcome that comes is that Buddhism believes in the concept of egalitarianism. From this egalitarian perspective, women can also get equal opportunities like men. For example, in December 2016 in a celebration which held at Drepung monastery in South India, where the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyasto, himself present. He himself gave the first twenty women among the thousands who applauded to earn the geshe degree, which is the highest scholarly achievement in Buddhist Philosophy in the Tibetan tradition. It is not only noticed in the field of education but also in the area of scholarship, leadership, and the Buddhist practice field; this equality principle is noticeable. Another example I gave here Tushita Meditation Center, which is located in Dharamsala, India, where both female and men lamas can preach the scriptures, conduct courses, and also live a monastic life. It is the True reflection of Gender equality. Gender equality is related to one thing, and that is peace. In Buddhism, the main theme is peace. Peace means equality, compassion. In Buddhism, these two concepts are very much rooted in their philosophy. Compassion towards others is one of the chief aims of Buddhism. The compassionate feelings towards all beings, sympathy towards those in distress who need help, are all attached to peace. Peace is not surrounded by outer inner peace or inner happiness is also important. Inner peace and inner happiness are only possible through the practice of mindfulness; only then can one realize that all are the same, all are equal, and there is no discrimination between men and women. Buddha's mind is present in all. This is the true understanding approach to peace. Although many things are associated with peace. Among them, one of the important things is human rights. Buddhists are becoming aware of equal religious rights after the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. According to the Buddhist human rights perspective, gender discrimination must be removed from the path of Buddhism. There are many new works for gender equality in Buddhist societies that have started, and that is the huge transformation that is happening in Buddhist society.

Lastly, Women can indeed have equal importance in so many places; they are not inferior at all. They have the potential to become a Buddha, they are *devī*, they are *yoginī*, and they are *ḍākinī*, they are the *mahāsiddha* –

*“Thus, she is the ultimate, unified śakti
The Parameśvari
Triple Tripurā
The very self of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Iśa
The being who is jñāna śakti kriyā śakti and icchā śakti” –
Vāmakeśvarīmatam IV.10-11*

All the power is embedded in her, whether it is explained from the Hindu tantra or from the perspective of Buddhism. The aim is to resolve the gender discrimination, and a perfectly awakened Buddha should be beyond such distinctions and therefore be free from all gender bias, and make a peaceful, happy society, apart from all differences.

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