

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN EARLY BUDDHISM

D. M. K. Dharmasiri¹

Introduction

Throughout the history of world, religions play a commendable role for the dawn of egalitarian attitude for both men and women. However, such an egalitarian attitude has changed from region to religion because of social, political and cultural diversities. The Buddhism, the finest flower which was bloomed at six century BC in India had assigned new roles and responsibilities for men and women. However, the Buddhist teaching was very much influenced to reinterpret the traditional notion of sex and gender. Specially, the Buddhist teachings show a very clear picture on sex and gender as socially and linguistically constructed matter. From a Buddhist philosophical point of view, when we remove all the fetters of linguistic barrels, at the end, there is nothing to identify somebody as man or woman. The both categories are possible to identity as a combination of psycho-physical structure. The early Buddhist teachings do not have taught any role or responsibility that was to be extremely practiced by man or woman. The entire responsibilities are commonly grounded on both men and women in human society. The most of feminists criticize Buddhism as a male dominated and patriarchal power structured religious institution and women are seriously placed under the dominance of male-monks power structure. The scholars such as Mary Daly and S.R Goyal have criticized the Buddhist teachings under patriarchy. Moreover, Alan Sponberg pointed out that the Buddhist notion of women can be identified under the different contexts such as Soteriological Inclusiveness, Institutional Androcentrism, Ascetic Misogyny and Soteriological Androgyny etcon the other hand why does the teaching of Bahudhatuka Sutta illustrate the fact that woman cannot attain to the Buddhahood ? Why do not have any reference regarding the white cloth female enlightenment (Gihi Arahant)

¹ Lecturer, Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Kdhammasiri@yahoo.com

character in the teachings of Buddha. Does this indicate that women are less capable than men?

Research problem

How does early Buddhist teachings analysis the notion of women? Do the Buddhist teachings have egalitarian attitude towards both men and women? Is the female birth an obstacle for the attainment of Buddhahood? Although the Buddhism does not consider the validity of sex and gender for the final liberation but the sex (Male organ) is very crucial factor for the practice of Bodhisatva aspiration and among the thirty two marks of Buddha.

Methodology

This is an analytical study and it is mainly based on Buddhist canonical sources and other scholarly works.

Analysis

Here, main objective is to analyze the term "gender and women" within Buddhist context and where the position of gender and women stand on Buddhism and does Buddhism lead mankind for gender discrimination or an egalitarian direction?

Conclusions

The Buddhism does not hold any sort of women discriminatory attitudes. The notion of women from Buddhist point of view is just mere a mental creation as well the Buddha has shown a new path and new direction for womankind when they were embraced by the traditional Hindu culture. Therefore, it is possible to note that the first feminist movement was started by the Buddha for the liberation of women community in the history of humanity.

Keywords: Buddhism, Gender, Egalitarian, Society, women