



Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche Teachings

The Role of Women in Buddhism

Tonight's topic is the role of women in Buddhism. In this context I will discuss three points: what the Buddha himself said; what is written in the teachings, and how this topic is dealt with at present.

To properly grasp the Buddha's teachings, we must understand the society of his time, even though the meaning of the teachings far surpasses the historical context. Keeping this balance in mind is especially important for a topic like ours.

The main point of the Buddha's teachings is that women are just as capable of achieving Buddhahood as men. He recognized no difference at all. At the Buddha's time, however, women had a much lower social status than men. Women had little influence within society and were considered to be inferior to men. We may think that saying women have an equal opportunity to succeed on the spiritual path is simply a modern-day interpretation of Buddha's teachings. But the texts explain this very clearly. From today's perspective the equality of women might sound like an easy stand to take, but the Buddha as an individual actually directly opposed the common beliefs of his time. He even went further -- he admitted women into his spiritual community and bestowed upon them full ordination. The first nun was his stepmother, who had cared for him after his mother's death, and who eventually gained a great spiritual following. This was an extraordinary and historically noteworthy event.

We might wonder what Indian society was like during the Buddha's lifetime. The Buddha's father was naturally deeply rooted in the Hindu system, with its many religious beliefs and ideologies. Society was divided into four castes: 1) the priests, teachers and so on, who were responsible for spirituality and its execution; 2) the nobility and soldiers, who were in

charge of the government, administration, and defence; 3) the farmers and business people, who owned their own land or businesses, or who had other resources at their disposal; and 4) the workers and service providers, who depended on someone else giving them work. Outside of the caste system were the untouchables, who took care of the 'dirty' jobs, like cleaning toilets or tanning leather. The caste system was considered to be a pre-destined order, prescribed by a sacred law that ensured the smooth functioning of the universe and the society.

The Buddha paid no heed to caste within his spiritual community. He said: Neither caste, bloodline nor family background are of any importance -- only wisdom is crucial. This teaching antagonised many influential people such as kings, ministers, priests and the like, and created a very difficult situation for Buddha and his followers.

Not only did the Buddha defy the contemporary social order; he went even further by admitting into his community outcasts like criminals, women, and disabled people. Many onlookers considered that the Buddha was completely disregarding both the divine and the man-made social order. One sutra quotes a priest mocking the Buddha by saying that he was so keen to build up his sangha that he'd admit anybody -- even a monk on crutches whose begging bowl had to be hung around his neck since he couldn't hold it in his hands during his daily aim rounds.

Throughout his entire life the Buddha never wavered and never gave into social pressure. Considering that today, in the 21st century, full equality between men and women has still not been achieved, we can appreciate how revolutionary and visionary the Buddha was. I personally find this truly remarkable.

In early 2017 I visited the USA for the first time. I had thought that racial tensions were in the past, and that gender equality was the norm. For that reason I always had a lot of respect for the country. I found the reality quite different. Racism still thrives. One day I visited a ceremony held by a Native American community about twenty minutes by car from the upscale neighbourhood where I stayed in Santa Fe, New Mexico. As a child, I had watched cowboy movies that made me think that Native Americans were primitive people who lived in wild nature. I knew this was a made-up and over-simplified picture and I was very interested to learn the truth. Everyone in the community was extremely kind and welcomed me warmly. However, the living standard was in stark contrast to the neighbourhood where I lived. For example there were no paved roads a mere 20 minutes away from a luxury enclave! Seeing this, I was most impressed by the Buddha's inclusive actions of 2600 years ago and my initial respect for him deepened further.

To return to the story of the Buddha's stepmother, during her quest to become a nun she was at first very arrogant due to her queenly status. She thought she could simply appear and the Buddha would immediately admit her into his community. But he first had to face the social reality, in which a woman dedicating her life to a spiritual path was almost unheard of. His approach was most skillful. When Queen Mahapajapati Gotami arrived with her large entourage of servants, assuming that her stepson would immediately grant her ordination, he ordered the community to vote on whether to admit nuns.

Introducing democracy within the community was another revolutionary act. Whenever an important decision had to be made, the monks -- and later the nuns -- cast their votes in the form of small wooden sticks that each sangha member possessed. Nowadays we think voting this is quite a modern concept, but it dates back to the Buddha's time. Through the voting process, the Buddha gained some time and the proud queen had to wait, unsure whether she would be admitted. This helped subdue her ego.

The waiting period stretched over several weeks until the monk Asanga approached the Buddha in the name of the women and requested their ordination. He asked whether women were capable of achieving enlightenment and the Buddha answered that they were. Then Asanga asked if women were allowed to practice in the same way as men and again the Buddha confirmed this. Why then should the women wait any longer? Asanga argued strongly that the women should be ordained as soon as possible. By acting in such a way, the Buddha enabled the male sangha members to consider the question of accepting women into the community and to explore the question of whether women had the same capacity to achieve enlightenment. Eventually the men asked why the women should wait any longer. Some acceptance had already occurred.

The Buddha then proceeded with his plan to admit his stepmother and her retinue. Had the women been granted ordination right away, some doubts might have later arisen amongst the monks about whether the women were fit vessels for a spiritual path. Through his skillful method, all questions were answered and the monks agreed to their admission. The Buddha then ordained the queen Mahapajapati Gotami and 500 other women. She became a famous and influential nun together with two others -- Lakshmi and Upal -- who were crucial actors in Buddhism's development. The queen was an important figure in the area of women's rights, dating from 600 B.C. and not a mere 200 years ago.

The Buddhist teachings reached Tibet between the sixth and the eighth centuries. During the eighth century especially, many Indian texts were translated into Tibetan from Pali and Sanskrit. Padmasambhava, Guru Rinpoche, was a major figure in these efforts. Yeshe Tsogyal, his consort, also played a vital role in disseminating the teachings. Up to the present day she is the subject of many research projects and books.

Padmasambhava had 25 main disciples in Tibet, among whom three were extraordinarily important -- Tibet's King Trisong De'utsen, Yeshe Tsogyal, and the translator Vairochana. They brought the teachings from India to Tibet and established them firmly. Yeshe Tsogyal gained particular fame because she collected and preserved all the texts. Without her efforts many would have simply disappeared.

These days Larung Gar, located in Eastern Tibet, is the largest monastery in the Himalayan region. Here reside 10,000 nuns and 10,000 monks. The throne holder is a nun -- Khandro Mumtso Rinpoche. She sometimes teaches the entire sangha at one time, an audience of 20,000 people. While within contemporary culture and society, Himalayan women are clearly still not equal to men, the Buddhist teachings recognise no difference between their potential and capabilities. Women and men are considered equally able to travel the spiritual path and act within the spiritual context.

Do you know the Heart Sutra? One line says: "Son or daughter of noble birth, whoever wants to practice, should practice in this way." The text mentions men and women, sons and daughters of a noble family, as equals in practising these teachings. As for deities, both male and female deities are present and complementary. For example the goddess Tara is just as enlightened as the Buddha.

If we examine social reality, however, everywhere in the world women are disadvantaged when compared to men. That is most regrettable. Although the Buddha gave women equal rights and the laws of many countries guarantee the same opportunities for men and women, the reality is different. Even in the United States, the UK, and Germany, women must still fight for rights such as equal pay. We should all work together to solve this.

Many people criticise certain Buddhist texts for their views on women. Some clips on YouTube for example complain about "The Way of the Bodhisattva", written by Shantideva in the 6th century. Shantideva actually taught this text to monks. The eighth chapter on meditation teaches about the impurity of the female body. This is because contemplating this thought weakens desire. Scientists and others have critiqued these passages. However, reading the entire book carefully, one finds in the fifth chapter a description of the impurity of one's own body. The reason is that we are all attached to our own bodies, thinking they are most precious, and must be protected at all costs. But we are often unaware of what we should do to maintain this body, our health, looks etc. Thus we need to understand the context in which certain texts, such as Shantideva's, were composed. Even so, in some contexts he does treat the bodies of men and women equally.

The Buddhist tantric system stipulates 14 main rules of conduct. The last states that one should never disregard women or harbour wrong views towards them. This is because women not only have nothing negative about them, but their nature is essentially wisdom. I could take the side of men and ask why no rule states one should not disregard men, but this teaching was especially designed for the social reality of India over 2000 years ago, where the universal belief was that women were less capable than men. Women's rights were unheard of. Here again we can acknowledge how revolutionary were the Buddha's actions in his time.

Questions and answers

Question 1: I have read that there is still a difference in the treatment of men and women in Tibetan Buddhism as women are not allowed to take full ordination.

Answer: Receiving full ordination has nothing to do with being a man or a woman, but with the presence of an uninterrupted lineage. In the case of Tibet, the nuns' lineage was broken and has not continued. Unfortunately this situation persists today, but it has nothing to do with gender. In China an uninterrupted lineage of full ordination for women has continued unbroken and many women receive it there. Nothing in the texts prevents women from being ordained as long as the lineage is intact.

In history, the biography of Choegyal Pagpa -- an 11th century Tibetan king -- frequently mentions fully ordained nuns. This was also true during the 5th Dalai Lama's lifetime. Thus the problem is not within the Tibetan Buddhist system itself. Once the lineage was interrupted, however, it was difficult to reinstate it. Someone like me cannot simply go ahead and bestow the full ordination. That would not constitute an authentic lineage. Authenticity requires an actual connection to the Buddha. For that reason, turning towards the Chinese lineage and taking that ordination is better. Many women have done just that. It is a valid option.

Looking into different Buddhist schools worldwide, Tibetan Buddhism seems to have the most female teachers. These teachers also have many male students, who bow to them and study under them. The Chinese tradition also has some female teachers, but in other countries I have not witnessed so many.

Question 2: Can women reach nirvana or go to paradise?

Answer: Yes, women are just as capable as men of reaching enlightenment. But we must understand that names like nirvana or paradise do not refer to distant places. Nirvana is

not a place we go to and physically enter. Nirvana and paradise actually refer to mental states. Nirvana is the state free of mental affliction. We reach a state of mind where everything is peaceful, everything is okay, and we can deal with anything. Paradise can be exactly where we are right now.

For example, if we become angry while staying in a five-star hotel, we won't be able to appreciate our luxurious surroundings. But if we are happy and content, the place where we are staying is not so important. We will still be okay even in a quite simple room. This is essentially what liberation from negativity means. Women can realise this just as well as men can, with no difference whatsoever.

In the past lived a woman called Machig Labdrön, whose biography can be found on the internet. She reached enlightenment by practising a kind of meditation based on the Heart Sutra. She transformed into a deity still practised by many Tibetan Yogis up to the present day. When I was a child Machig Labdrön was the main support for my father and my grandfather's meditation practice. When my brother was born, I was sent to live with my grandfather since there were no kindergartens in the Himalayas. I stayed with him in his meditation cave. On his altar stood a female statue of Machig Labdrön as a support for his practice. The female element in Buddhism is thus very natural for me.

When I lived in Dolpo, I never heard about women's rights. I became aware of this issue only when I moved to India. I always knew that female deities were equal to male ones. My grandfather spoke to me of the Tibetan Buddhist saint Milarepa and of Machig Labdrön with the same reverence. Therefore I've never doubted that men and women should have equal opportunities as practitioners on the spiritual path.

Socially speaking, women in Dolpo are responsible for all the chores in and around the house, while men do the outside work. Outside does not mean that they have office jobs, but they engage in quite strenuous physical labour such as herding yaks, and carrying heavy loads of grain or salt to put on their animals' backs. With their pack animals they cross high mountain passes to trade with other Himalayan regions. During these journeys they might face attacks by wild animals and the weather is unpredictable. This work is very challenging and not at all comfortable.

The women stay close to home and enjoy some free time to drink tea and occasionally socialise with other women. If anyone had offered my mum the chance to trade places with my father, she would have certainly said no. Staying in the warm house was definitely the better option. In addition, the status of the woman in the house used to be quite high. This might be changing now, but during my childhood women were in charge of all the house keys and dictated the daily schedule. If any request was made on the household, the woman

of the house was the one to turn to. She was very well-respected. I am sure things are different these days. In Europe as well the social reality is changing fast. When most people were still farmers there might have been a similar dynamic. These days most people in Europe and the US have office jobs, drive cars and so on. Many new possibilities have opened up, which have created new realities.

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