

## WOMEN AND NIBBĀNA: An Analysis of Early Buddhist Texts

Abhinav Anand and Ajit Kumar Behura ♦

**Abstract:** *Pāli* Buddhist texts present a mixed basket of egalitarian and non-egalitarian, and soteriologically inclusive and androgynous Buddhist worldviews towards women. Despite the institutional androcentrism and ascetic misogyny these texts teach that Gotama, the Buddha gave teachings to all human beings irrespective of their caste and gender, and also taught that women are equally capable of realising fruits of stream-attainment (*sotāpanna*), once-returning (*sakadāgāmi*), non-returning (*anāgāmi*) and the highest spiritual goal (*nibbāna*, *arahant*). The *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* narrate the stories of Buddhist men and women, who realized perfection during the lifetime and after the death of historical Gotama the Buddha. The paper argues that in spite of the negative portrayal of women in some of the texts, early Buddhist worldviews were progressive with regard to the gender issue, though sexual difference is affirmed, a common *saṅgha* is not provided for both sexes, and additional rules are given for nuns. The social and institutional patriarchy does not exclude women from realising *nibbāna*.

**Keywords:** *Bhikkhu/Bhikkhunī-Saṅgha*, Gender, *Nibbāna*, *Paṭicca-samuppāda*, *Therīgāthā*, Soteriological Inclusiveness.

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## 1. Introduction

Buddha began his teachings with the existential problem of human suffering (*dukkha*), caused by *tanhā*/craving (*dukkha-samudaya*), taught that it is possible to stop suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*) and preached the path to remove suffering (*dukkha-nirodha-gāminī-paṭipadā*), consisting of the eight-fold paths (*ariya-aṭṭhaṅgiko-maggo*): right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), right conception (*sammā-sankappa*), right speech (*sammā-vācā*), right action (*sammā-kammanta*), right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*) and right concentration (*sammā-samādhi*). Buddha<sup>1</sup> gave his teachings equally to both men and women<sup>2</sup> to overcome suffering and get out of *saṃsāric* existence by means of moral behaviour and meditative practices. Early Buddhism clearly held that one's sex, like one's caste or class presents no barrier to attaining the liberation from suffering.<sup>3</sup> The early Buddhist tradition affirms the ideal of

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<sup>1</sup>In this study Buddha is the historical Gotama the Buddha and they are used as synonyms. In the *Mahāpadāna-sutta*, Gotama the Buddha refers to previous six Buddhas, i.e., Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa. Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha-nikāya*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, 199. However, *Buddhavamsa* refers twenty eight Buddha's names. For details see I. B. Horner, *The Minor Anthologies of the Pāli Canon: Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavamsa) and Basket of conduct (Cariyāpiṭaka)*, Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1975, 2000, xl-xlii.

<sup>2</sup>According to the *Samyukta-āgama* discourse and the (*Mūla-*) *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the Buddha himself taught the *dhamma* to nuns. However, according to the *Nandakovāda-sutta*, when Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, followed by a group of nuns, approached Buddha and requested him to give teachings and *dhamma* to nuns, he appointed *bhikkhu* Nandaka to teach *dhamma* to *bhikkhunī*-s. See Ven. Anālayo, "Attitudes Towards Nuns: A Case Study of the Nandakovāda in the Light of its Parallels," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 17 (2010), 331-400, footnote no. 15; *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya*, Vol. 2, Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing Corporation, 2011, 832.

<sup>3</sup>Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism" in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992, 3-36.

equality: a complete equality between all human beings irrespective of their gender and others in all respects. Buddha taught a path of salvation equally to both men and women, the same path to realise the fruit of *nibbāna* for both sexes. This was revolutionary to the then prevailing social situation where women were subordinate to men. It is true that in spite of the Buddhist teachings, patriarchy did not completely vanish but women became conscious of their spiritual capability and rights. While making a path of salvation to women Buddha helps them to overcome their social injustice, and they joined Buddhist *saṅgha* and some of them became *arahant*.

Buddha *dhamma* is given to all who join the *saṅgha* – *upāsaka* (male follower), *upāsikā* (female follower), *bhikkhu* (monk) and *bhikkhunī* (nun) community – without any prejudice to remove their *dukkha*. To get rid of their *dukkha* *upāsaka*-s and *upāsikā*-s practice *dhamma* within their household lifestyle under supervision of monks/nuns, while *bhikkhu*-s and *bhikkhunī*-s renounce their household life and lead a chaste life within the *saṅgha*. Ordained followers follow *Vinaya* rules designed to lead the followers to *nibbāna*. In the *Vinaya-piṭaka* there are 227 rules for monks and 311 for nuns. Additional 84 rules for nuns<sup>4</sup> can be interpreted as given for the well being of *saṅgha* and women. However, it shows inconsistency in the Buddha's attitude towards women. Instead of the ideal equality to both sexes that he had taught, he has imposed special rules and regulations for nuns. The early Buddhist vision of women was soteriologically inclusive but institutionally androcentric: nuns are subordinated to monks. Some of the early Buddhist texts portray women very negatively, and considered women rebirth as a consequence of *akusala kamma* of previous lives.

Buddhist fourfold community expect to observe Buddha's teachings for *nibbāna*, which is given in the *Pāli-tipiṭaka*, consisting of *Sutta*, *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. The *Sutta-piṭaka* contains

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<sup>4</sup>According to Lee Chi-Ran, "the additional rules are not an added burden, but only elucidate other rules. As for the unnumbered rules, there are many more for monks than for nuns" <<http://ibei.hq.net/files/documents/11.pdf>> (22.08.2015)

religious doctrines and philosophical principles based on psychological ethics.<sup>5</sup> The *Vinaya-piṭaka* (VP), consisting of *Pārājika*, *Pācittiya*, *Mahāvagga*, *Cūlavagga* and *Parivāra* mainly deals with rules and regulations of the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. And the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, recognised as the higher doctrine of the Buddha, expounds the quintessence of his profound teachings.<sup>6</sup> Though, there are eleven texts in which women are as protagonists - *Vinaya-piṭaka*, *Therīgāthā*, *Samyutta-nikāya*, *Apadāna*, *Avadānaśataka*, *Divyāvadāna*, *Dhammapadaṭṭha kathā*, *Maṇimēkalai*, *Paramatthadīpanītherīgāthaṭṭha kathā*, *Āṅguttara-nikāya* and *Manorathapūraṇī*<sup>7</sup> - this study is limited to the *Sutta* and *Vinaya piṭakas*<sup>8</sup> selected discourses to examine spiritual capability of women and early Buddhist egalitarian and non-egalitarian worldviews towards women.

(i) *Sutta-piṭaka*: all five *nikāya*-s speaks about women. In the first *nikāya Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (DN II. 141), Ānanda asked Buddha how to act, behave and speak towards women.<sup>9</sup> The second *nikāya Bahudhātuka-sutta* (MN III. 65), says it is impossible for a woman

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<sup>5</sup>*Sutta-piṭaka* comprises of *Dīgha-nikāya* (DN), *Majjhima-nikāya* (MN), *Samyutta-nikāya* (SN), *Āṅguttara-nikāya* (AN) and *Khuddaka nikāya* (KN), consisting of fifteen individual texts, i.e., *Khuddakapāṭha*, *Dhammapada*, *Udāna*, *Itiouttaka*, *Sutta-nipāta*, *Vimāna-vatthu*, *Peta-vatthu*, *Theragāthā*, *Therīgāthā*, *Jātaka*, *Niddesa*, *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, *Apadāna*, *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka*.

<sup>6</sup>It is composed of seven texts, i.e., *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, *Vibhaṅga*, *Dhātukathā*, *Puggala-paṇṇatti*, *Katthāvatthu*, *Yamaka* and *Paṭṭhāna*.

<sup>7</sup>Alice Collett, "Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, 2 (2006), 55-84.

<sup>8</sup>Among the remaining texts, *Avadānaśataka* and *Divyāvadāna* contain stories of conversion with female protagonists. These may have been part of the vinaya of the *Mūlasarvāstivādin* School. The *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* is a commentary on *Dhammapada*, which contains stories of women disciples. The *Maṇimēkalai* deals with the story of a woman who renounces life as a courtesan to become a Buddhist nun. *Paramatthadīpanītherīgāthaṭṭhakathā* is a commentary on the *Therīgāthā*, the lives of the elder nuns, and *Manorathapūraṇī* is a commentary *āṅguttara-nikāya* that contains stories about thirteen eminent nuns.

<sup>9</sup>Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 264.

to be a fully awakened Buddha.<sup>10</sup> Third *nikāya* contains *bhikkhunī-samyutta* (SN I. 281-297) refers to ten short *sutta*-s about eminent nuns, i.e., Ālavikā, Somā, Mahāpajāpatī-Gotamī, Vijayā, Uppalavannā, Cālā, Upacālā, Sīsūpacālā, Selā and Vajirā.<sup>11</sup> Fourth *nikāya* contains *Etadagga-vagga* (AN I. 25-26), lists foremost followers, who were known in early Buddhism for their special skills. The ten foremost *upāsikā*-s named in the list are Sujātā (daughter of Senānī), Visākhā Migāramātā, Khujjuttarā, Sāmāvatī, Uttarā Nandamātā, Suppavāsā (the Koliyan daughter), Suppiyā, Kātiyānī, Nakulamātā and Kālī of Kuraraghara.<sup>12</sup> The thirteen *bhikkhunī*-s named in the list are: Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavannā, Paṭācārā, Dhammadinnā, Nandā, Sonā, Sakulā Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā, Bhaddā Kāpilānī, Bhaddā Kāccanā, Kisāgotamī and Sigālamātā.<sup>13</sup> The fifth *nikāya* text, *Therīgāthā*<sup>14</sup> contains 522 verses recorded by a group of at least seventy one nuns declaring their successful attainment of *arahant*. Another text of the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, *Apadāna* contains *therī-apadāna* that refers forty elder *bhikkhunī*-s who have attained state of *arahant*. Moreover, all *nikāya*-s of the *Sutta-piṭaka* are significant and important to understand early Buddhist worldviews on women.

(ii) In the *Vinaya-piṭaka*, there are rules for *bhikkhu*-s and *bhikkhunī*-s to regulate the life within the community as well as their relation to the laity. *Pāḷi Vinaya* contains two texts for nuns: the *Bhikkhunī-khandhaka* and *Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga*. According to *vinaya* literature the Buddha at first refused (three times) women

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<sup>10</sup>I. B. Horner, *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-nikāya)* Vol. III, Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1999, 109.

<sup>11</sup>Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A new Translation of the Samyutta-nikāya*, Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2000, 221-230.

<sup>12</sup>Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara-nikāya*, Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2012, 112-113.

<sup>13</sup>Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 111.

<sup>14</sup>The text is a unique testimony on women in Buddhism, women authors describing their religious experiences.

(Gotamī)<sup>15</sup> to be ordained, but his decision was changed later and women were admitted to the *saṅgha* subject to (i) special eight rules known as *garudhammā-s*,<sup>16</sup> and (ii) rules regarding *bhikkhunī* ordination. These additional rules of nuns made them institutionally subordinate to monks.

Both *piṭaka-s* present inconsistent Buddhist positions to women. Before going into the textual analysis of selected discourses of these *piṭaka-s* texts, we shall investigate the theoretical basis in *paṭiccasamuppāda*, *anattā*, *anicca* and *kamma*.

## 2. Buddhist Theory of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* and Women

The term *paṭiccasamuppāda* is a combination of two terms *paṭicca*, 'having come on account of,' and *samuppāda*, 'arising', which affirms that nothing exists on its own: everything (except *nibbāna*) including *dukkha* and rebirth, arise and exist due to the presence of certain conditions. According to the *Majjhima-nikāya* (MN III, 63), "... if this is, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises. If this is not, that does not come to be; from the stopping of this, that is stopped."<sup>17</sup> The fourfold formula says nothing is permanent and unchangeable; B arises because of A, and C arises

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<sup>15</sup>His initial refusal to Gotamī is interpreted differently by scholars. For example, Kate Crosby, (2014, 219-220), in her book *Theravāda Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity*, argues Buddha's rejection of Gotamī is not a rejection of her following a celibate spiritual life, but her home into homelessness. Moreover, Analayo (2011, 289) claims that Buddha refuse to Gotamī may seen as his suggestion to her, she could live a celibate life but at home, in a more protected environment. Analayo, "Mahāpajāpatī's Going Forth in the Madhyama-āgama," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 18, (2011), 267-317.

<sup>16</sup>The term *garudhammā* is ambiguous, word *garu* means "heavy, weighty, grave," as for example in the expression *garukāapatti*, a grave or major offense. But *garuṃkaroti*, refers "to make weighty," means "to respect," and *garukāta*, "respected." Thus, *aṭṭhagarudhammā* can mean either a heavy, grave rule or a rule to be respected, a principle of respect. Or "The *garudhammā-s* are principles that are to be treated with respect by the *bhikkhunī-s* who accept them." Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, endnotes no 1733.

<sup>17</sup>Horner, *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings* Vol. III, 107.

because of B; when there is no A there is no B and when there is no B there is no C. Cause and effects are interlinked; all factors are mutually responsible for the existence of others.

Buddha gave this in defence of acceptance of *ātman* as permanent and unchangeable entity. Moreover, *paṭiccasamuppāda* should be understood to no more than an inquiry into the nature of the self (or better, the lack of a self).<sup>18</sup> Buddhist scriptures reject *ātman* as a permanent entity and advocate *anattā-vāda*: the argument that there is no permanent and unchangeable self. It is argued that existence of *ātman* as a permanent entity in *micchā-diṭṭhi*, which is one of the most powerful sources of *dukkha*. To the view that the negation of a subjective spiritual entity will produce great anxiety in ordinary human beings (MN I, 136),<sup>19</sup> Buddha has given a psychophysical analysis of an individual:

Everything he did so he stumbled upon one or the other of the different aspects of experiences such as feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), disposition (*sankhārā*) or consciousness (*viññāna*). If there was anything other than these psychic elements that constitutes the human personality; it was the body (*rūpa*).<sup>20</sup>

Each of these aggregates is subject to change, transformation and destruction; they all are impermanent (*anicca*) and there is neither any inherent permanent quality of existence nor any permanent entity. The *pañca-khandha*-s construct an individual personality in which there is no room for gender, because none of *khandha*-s are identical with any sexes. Human life begins at the moment of conception (MN I, 265-66),<sup>21</sup> and sex of a person is determined at that moment of conception, and it continues till death. Buddhism thus affirms both *anattā-vāda* and gender. It is argued that if all phenomena are impermanent and insubstantial

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<sup>18</sup>Eviatar Shulman, "Early Meaning of Dependent Origination," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 36, 2 (2008), 297-317.

<sup>19</sup>Cited in David J. Kalupahana, "The Concept of Self and Freedom in Buddhism" in *Indian Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 13, eds., Roy W. Perrett, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, 93-113.

<sup>20</sup>Kalupahana, "The Concept of Self and Freedom" 94

<sup>21</sup>Horner, *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings* Vol. I, 321-322.

then there should no self-existent entities with inalienable and unchanging characteristics such as maleness or femaleness.<sup>22</sup> However, a separate *saṅgha* and extra rules in the *Vinaya-piṭaka* for women show Buddhist belief in the true existence of gender.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, absence of common *saṅgha* to men and women and true existence of gender is contrary to the Buddhist principles of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, *anicca*, *śūnyatā* and *anattā*.

Sex segregation within early Buddhism by the enforcement of rules, laws, order, etc., can be seen as societal pressures, historical practices and socialized preferences. The social and religious climate of ancient India in which the Buddha lived, male hierarchy was prevalent. Women identities were dependent on their male companions such as, father, husband, brother and son. There are stories of nuns recorded in the *Therīgāthā* that show the social patriarchy and andocentric social structures. For example, Kisā-gotamī (*Therīgāthā* 215-221) became *bhikkhunī* out of great suffering (*atidukkha*) that came to her after deaths of her all male companions and family members.<sup>24</sup> The young women who wanted to join *saṅgha* encounter resistance from their families, and were regarded as failing in their duty to sustain the family and bear children.

Perhaps it is this prevailing social patriarchal system that made Buddha reluctant to open *saṅgha* door to women. For example, Buddha refused thrice the request of Gotamī to home into homelessness (VP II. 252).<sup>25</sup> Not only that Buddha was reluctant to open *saṅgha* door to women, he was not able to challenge

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<sup>22</sup>Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna, Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, 217.

<sup>23</sup>Authors like Alan Sponberg (1992), Kathryn R. Blackstone (2000), and Karma Lekshe Tsomo (1998) discuss whether Buddhism has maintained a clear distinction between women and men throughout its history.

<sup>24</sup>Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2000, 43.

<sup>25</sup>I. B. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-piṭaka)* Vol. V (Cullavagga), Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2001, 352-53.



prevailing attitudes about gender roles in society. For example, when Gotamī wanted to amend the first rule of *garudhamma* "nuns must greet monks" so that the monks and nuns would greet each other, Buddha refused it, though, saying that other sects, with less concern for guarding their discipline, did not allow the greeting of women, so how could he? (VP II. 257).<sup>26</sup> Buddha was well aware of the social customs of male hierarchy and did not want a reform on the matter. It shows that though Buddha held an optimistic view about female capacity for enlightenment and taught the ideal of the equality of genders, due to social and institutional patriarchy of the time he failed to put the teachings into practice.

### 3. Buddhist Theory of *Kamma* and Women

Gender continuity across lives are reported and discussed in Buddhist scriptures, men are normally reborn as men and women as women. For example, Sāriputta, one of the main disciples, was always born as male in his previous lives. Buddha's wife Yasodharā was always reborn with female sex.<sup>27</sup> Beside this according to Buddhist scriptures a specific gender male or female appears in a body as an effect of past *kamma*, which can be switched to another in next rebirth. Gender identity like class identity is subject to impermanence, and *dukkha* across lives is based on *kusala* (wholesome) or *akusala* (unwholesome) *kamma*. For example, *Sakkapañha-sutta* (DN II. 271), says a Sakyan girl called Gopikā who had faith in the Buddha, *dhamma* and *saṅgha*, and who observed the precepts (*sikkhāpada*) scrupulously rejected the status of a woman, and developed the thought of becoming a

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<sup>26</sup>Horner, *The Book of the Discipline* Vol. V, 358-359.

<sup>27</sup>According to Naomi Appleton (2010) Buddha's wife was bound to him in birth after birth. There are other women who choose to be reborn as women for the sake of *saṅgha*. Many women made offerings to past Buddhas and resolved to become prominent nuns or laywomen in the *saṅgha* of Gotama the Buddha. Moreover, whether these women as Gotama's wife was bound to rebirth as his female companions or they choose their life to reborn as his (Buddha) female companions is not very clear within Buddhist scriptures.

man, reborn in a heaven-state among the thirty-three gods, known as Gopaka, the *deva-s'* son. Further *sutta* reports that there were three other monks who, having observed the holy life under the Buddha had been reborn in the inferior condition of *gandhabba-s*, because they lived indulging in the pleasures of the five senses.<sup>28</sup> Fifth century Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa's in his *Dīgha-nikāya* commentary claims how the male sex and the female sex arise in the being out of their *kamma*:

Those who were women formally, at the time of human being, of these the female sex appeared, of these who were men, the male sex. For really when women obtain the state of manhood, they do so having fulfilled the *dhamma-s* [that are] conditions for manhood. Man obtains the state of womanhood dependent on sensual/sexual misconduct. Then, usually, the female sex of the women appears, and the male sex of the man appears.<sup>29</sup>

According to Buddhaghosa, a woman may be reborn as man if she fulfils the *dhamma* conditioned for manhood. On the other hand, indulging in sexual misconduct or not observing the third precept cause for rebirth as women. Vasubandhu teaches that a woman who attains the level of supreme mundane qualities will receive a male form in her next life, and a man who reaches this level of realization is guaranteed that all of his future bodies will be male.<sup>30</sup> It shows that the men is superior and disappears through grossly immoral conduct and the women is inferior and appears through weak moral conduct. Rebirth as women is an unfortunate birth, and the result of negative *kamma* of previous lives makes women inferior to men. Indeed, Buddhist literature demands women to accept the patriarchy: "Being a good girl usually means accepting and fostering male dominance as necessary, just, and adequate. Such good girls can then be reborn

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<sup>28</sup>Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 325.

<sup>29</sup>Buddhaghosa, *Sumāṅgalavilāsinī* D.III-a 869, cited in Pascale Engelmaier, *Women in Pāḷi Buddhism: Walking the Spiritual Paths in Mutual Dependence*, Oxford: Rutledge, 2015, 30.

<sup>30</sup>Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, cited in John Powers, "Gender and Virtue in Indian Buddhism," *Cross Currents* 61 (2011), 428–440.

as men in future lives, in which they will enjoy all the privileges and perks that go with having a penis."<sup>31</sup> Birth as women is considered as opportunity to repay their bad *kamma* of previous lives by enduring extra sufferings during childbirth and other such occasions.<sup>32</sup> Buddhist tradition advises mothers to encourage her beloved son to emulate the best *upāsaka* or *bhikkhu*, and her beloved daughter to emulate the best *upāsikā* or *bhikkhunī* (SN XVII, 3 § 23.3, 24.4).<sup>33</sup> It is said that a woman may gain merit and reduce suffering by encouraging their children to be *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī*. This is, however, would be contrary to the understanding that women are reborn to repay the *kamma* of previous lives by facing great suffering such as during childbirth. Without facing such great sufferings one may again be reborn as women or get less valuable rebirth.

#### 4. Ambivalent Views of Women in *Pāḷi* Buddhist Literature

According to Buddha, women are able to attain *arahant*-ship:

Women, Ānanda, having gone forth from home into homelessness in the *dhamma* and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, are able to realise the fruit of stream-attainment (*sotāpanna*), or the fruit of once-returning (*sakadāgāmī*), or the fruit of non-returning (*anāgāmī*), or perfection (*arahant*).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Rita M. Gross, "The Suffering of Sexism: Buddhist Perspectives and Experiences," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* Vol. 34 (2014), 69–81.

<sup>32</sup>Naomi Appleton, "Temptress on the Path: Women as Objects and Subjects in Buddhist Jātaka Stories," in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate*, eds., Pamela Sue Anderson, New York: Springer, 2010, 103-115.

<sup>33</sup>Rhys Davids, *The Book of the Kindred Saying (Saṃyutta-Nikāya)* Vol. II, Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1922, 159-160.

<sup>34</sup>*Sotāpanna* is the first stage of spiritual attainment. One who possesses the qualities of righteousness such as abiding by the eightfold noble path and has full confidence in the *Buddha*, *dhamma*, *saṅgha* and the virtuous behaviour dear to the noble ones is known as a stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*). *Sakadāgāmī* is the second stage of spiritual attainment; they engage in spiritual practices to minimize emotions that results in *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*. *Anāgāmī* is the penultimate stage of spiritual attainment, wherein one becomes a non-returner to the

Since both sexes are recognised in the *Vinaya-piṭaka* (II. 255) to be able to attain *arahant*-ship, indeed, there would have been no need to aspire for a male rebirth. The state of *nibbāna*, thus, is beyond the gender and sexes. Human birth is as a noble birth; all human beings are born with the innate possibility to reach enlightenment is of utmost importance.<sup>35</sup> However, though a woman can achieve the state of awakening known as *arahant*-ship, they cannot achieve the complete Buddhahood: "it is impossible; it cannot come to pass that a woman who is a perfected one could be a Fully Self-Awakened one (MN III. 65)."<sup>36</sup> A woman could, of course, successfully practice the precepts and be reborn as a man and then through successful living a man could become a Buddha.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Buddhist' ambivalence toward women continue with regard to the supreme goal of realising Buddhahood. On the one hand Buddhism affirms that women can realise complete cessation of suffering through observing Buddha dhamma, on the other hand, women cannot become a Buddha. It means birth as a female sex is not as worthy as a male.

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world-desire realms. *Anāgāmi* should engage their practices to give up five lower fetters: (i) belief in a permanent self-identification views (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*); (ii) sceptical doubt or uncertainty (*vicikicchā*); (iii) obsession with rules and rituals (*śīlabata-parāmāsa*); (iv) sensual passion (*kāma-rāga*); (v) resistance (*vyāpāda*). The last stage of spiritual attainment is perfection that can be achieved by the practice of eightfold path and eradication of all ten fetters. The five latter fetters are, i.e., (vi) passion for form (*rūpa-rāga*); (vii) passion for the formless phenomena (*arūpa-rāga*); (viii) conceit (*māna*); (ix) restlessness (*uddhacca*); and (x) ignorance (*avijjā*). After the eradication of these ten fetters one attains the complete cessation of suffering. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline* Vol. V, 356.

<sup>35</sup>Naomi Appleton, "In the Footsteps of the Buddha?: Women and the Bodhisatta Path in Theravāda Buddhism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, 1, (2011), 33-51.

<sup>36</sup>Horner, *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings* Vol. III, 109.

<sup>37</sup>A. Sharma, "Can There Be a Female Buddha in Theravāda Buddhism?" *Bucknell Review: Women, Literature, Criticism* 24, 1 (1978), 72-79.

Spiritual attainment of *arahant* and becoming a Buddha are two different goals. An *arahant* is a 'worthy one'; a person who has destroyed the afflictions (*kilesa*) and attained awakening. According to *Samyojana-sutta* (AN V. 17) an *arahant* is one who has completely put aside ten fetters that bind human beings to the cycle of rebirth, and the destroying all causes for their *samsāric* existence. The Buddha is the 'awakened one', one who is rightly self-awakened. The *Pāli* scriptures characterise Buddha as 'supreme being'; the perfectly 'enlightened one' arises in the world out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare and happiness of *deva*-s and human beings. *Tathāgata* Buddha is one person arising in the world who is unique, without a peer, without counterpart, incomparable, matchless, unrivalled, unequalled, without equal and the foremost of bipeds.<sup>38</sup> Gotama the Buddha was not born as a Buddha; but became a Buddha by his own efforts. He realised Buddhahood after taking many births as Bodhisattva<sup>39</sup>. To become a Buddha one has to find one's own path as the historical Buddha did, and a person must previously have experienced the most powerful roles in the *samsāra*.<sup>40</sup>

Both stages are thus different; an *arahant* received spiritual attainment by observing teachings of the Buddha, whereas, the Buddha realises the truth by himself and teaches it to others. Buddhism does not show path to anyone, male or female, to become a Buddha; it shows a path to become an *arahant*. One has to find one's own path to become a Buddha. If anyone is inspired to Buddhahood she/he may join the Buddha path, and by the observing Buddha path one may become an *arahant*.

Indeed, women can (and did) achieve the '*arahant*-ship' that was not possible before Gotama the Buddha. There are number of references in the *pāli-tiṭṭaka* about women who became *arahant* by practicing the Buddha's teachings or listening *dhamma* by the Buddha. For example, *Dhammadinnā* a woman became a *bhikkhunī* and a respected teacher of Buddhism. She chose a solitary life in

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<sup>38</sup>Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 101-108.

<sup>39</sup>Animal and human beings intend to achieving enlightenment.

<sup>40</sup>Gross, "The Suffering of Sexism," 72.

the forest and realized enlightenment and became an *arahant*. The texts, thus, show that women are able to realise fruits of four qualities of spiritual attainment same as *upāsaka-s* and *bhikkhu-s*. The fact that the same path to *arahant*-ship is equally open to men and women affirms Buddhist soteriological inclusiveness. The differences of gender are soteriologically insignificant.<sup>41</sup> Despite this soteriological inclusiveness, the presentation of women in early Buddhist texts is often less than egalitarian.

Though the path to liberation is open to all irrespective of gender difference, in practice, men and women were not treated equally; *bhikkhu-s* were superior to *bhikkhuni-s*, *upāsaka-s* to *upāsikā-s*. Moreover, monastic institution was favoured over lay life, and "they would receive more merit for supporting more-prestigious male monastic institution than less-prestigious female monastic."<sup>42</sup> As a result of this discriminatory attitude, nun monastic institutions struggled to survive, and disappeared.<sup>43</sup>

As Kate Crosby pointed out "recognizing women as having the same potential as men for spiritual liberation is not the same as advocating equality between the sexes."<sup>44</sup> Social equality between both sexes was not practiced within/outside of *saṅgha*. *Bhikkhu-s* and *bhikkhuni-s* are sufficiently separated to give no excuse for accusation of improper conduct between them. The nuns, however, did not become an autonomous community of women without any control by male authority.<sup>45</sup> Women could choose and practice a full time religious life only under the "carefully regulated institutional structure that preserves and reinforces the

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<sup>41</sup>Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the," 3-36.

<sup>42</sup>Gross, "The Suffering of Sexism," 70.

<sup>43</sup>The Chinese pilgrim Yijing, who travelled in India in the late 7th century, reports the existence of *bhikkhuni-s* in India. Inscriptional evidence indicates that *bhikkhuni-s* existed in India in the 8th century. In Sri Lanka the *bhikkhuni* order appears to have disappeared at some point around the 11th century. For details see Bhikkhu Anālayo, "The Revival of the Bhikkhuni Order and the Decline of the Sāsana," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 20 (2013), 109-193.

<sup>44</sup>Crosby, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 218-237.

<sup>45</sup>Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine" 24.

conventionally accepted social standards of male authority and female subordination."<sup>46</sup> It shows that nuns should be subordinate to monks.

Initially the doors of *saṅgha* were not opened for women until the Buddha's stepmother Mahāpajāpati Gotamī wanted to join it. According to Oskar Von Hinüber Buddha did neither institute the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, nor involve in the ordination of any *bhikkhunī*.<sup>47</sup> The "order of nuns instituted at the end of the period of early Buddhism, not too long after the death of the Buddha."<sup>48</sup> The *Dīgha-nikāya* shows, however, the availability of *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* and nuns within the lifetime of Buddha. When the Buddha reached Nādikā, he was informed by Ānanda regarding the death of *bhikkhu* Sālha and *bhikkhunī* Nandā (DN II. 91).<sup>49</sup> Buddha himself states that he would not take *parinibbāna* until he had accomplished his mission of having disciples from each of the four assemblies:

I will not take final *Nibbāna* till I have monks and disciples who are accomplished, ... I will not take final *Nibbāna* till I have nuns and female disciples who are accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, knowers of the *Dhamma*, trained in conformity with the *Dhamma*, correctly trained and walking in the path of the *Dhamma*, who will pass on what they have gained from their Teacher, teach it, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyse it, make it clear; till they shall be able by means of the *Dhamma* to refute false teachings that have arisen, and teach the *Dhamma* of wondrous effect. ... till I have laymen followers ... till I have laywomen-followers ... (DN II. 104-06).<sup>50</sup>

Thus *bhikkhunī*-s were considered in early Buddhism as integral to the Buddha's dispensation. Though Liz Williams argues that

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<sup>46</sup>Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine" 16.

<sup>47</sup>Oskar Von Hinüber, "The Foundation of the Bhikkhunīsamgha – A Contribution to the Earliest History of Buddhism," *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 2007*, 11 (2008), 3-29.

<sup>48</sup>Hinüber, "The Foundation of the Bhikkhunīsamgha," 27

<sup>49</sup>Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 240.

<sup>50</sup>Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 246-247.

there may have been existence of *bhikkhunī*-s within Buddhist tradition before Gotamī,<sup>51</sup> she does not give any names. Gotamī is venerated within the Buddhist tradition as the first woman who entered the *saṅgha*, established by the Buddha.

Opening *saṅgha* door to women cannot be considered Buddhist attitude as sufficiently egalitarian because he made *bhikkhunī* ordination to depend on *bhikkhu* ordination by giving eight rules: "If, Ānanda, the Gotamī, Pajāpati the Great, accepts eight important rules that may be ordination for her" (VP II. 254).<sup>52</sup> The eight rules of *garudhammā*-s are:

(i) A *bhikkhunī* who has been ordained (even) for a century must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a *bhikkhu* ordained but that day.

(ii) A *bhikkhunī* must not spend the rains in a residence where there is no *bhikkhu*.

(iii) Every half month a *bhikkhunī* should desire two things from the order of *bhikkhus*: (a) the asking (as to the date) of the observance day, and (b) the coming for the exhortation.

(iv) After the rains a *bhikkhunī* must 'invite' before both Orders in respect of three matters: what was seen, what was heard, and what was suspected.

(v) A *bhikkhunī* offending against an important rule, must undergo *mānatta* (discipline) for half a month before both orders.

(vi) When, as a probationer, she has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek ordination from both Orders.

(vii) A *bhikkhu* must not be abused or reviled in any way by a *bhikkhunī*.

(viii) From to-day admonition of *bhikkhu*-s by *bhikkhunī*-s is forbidden, admonition of *bhikkhunī*-s by *bhikkhu*-s is not forbidden.

Each rule is followed by the statement: This rule too be honoured, respected, revered, venerated, never to be transgressed during her life (VP II. 254).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Liz Williams, "A Whisper in the Silence: Nuns before Mahāpajāpati?" *Buddhist Studies Review* 17, 2 (2000), 167-173.

<sup>52</sup>Horner, *The Book of the Discipline* Vol. V, 354.

<sup>53</sup>Horner, *The Book of the Discipline* Vol. V, 354-355.



With the acceptance of these eight rules Gotamī became the first *bhikkhunī*; she followed the spiritual path and achieved the same bliss of *arahant*-hood as her male counterparts, and became, according to Jonathan Walters, "the Buddha for women."<sup>54</sup> When Gotamī accepted these rules, she also agreed that once a nuns' order has been established, the only way to receive an ordination was through an ordination ceremony in both communities. This meant that *bhikkhunī* ordination depends on *bhikkhu* ordination as a *bhikkhunī* alone cannot ordain *bhikkhunī*, but *bhikkhunī* needs to be ordained also by *bhikkhu* to be valid. This shows that though in Buddhism women are soteriologically equal to men, institutionally they are treated inferior. *Garudhammā*-s are the earliest and foremost noticeable discrimination against women in the Buddhist tradition. These rules effectively subordinated *bhikkhunī*-s to *bhikkhu*-s.<sup>55</sup> Buddha was just following the social patriarchy of time that prescribed that a woman must always be subject to some man.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, it is quite clear from above discussion Buddhist attitudes towards women neither purely a soteriological inclusiveness nor complete institutional androcentric. It was ambivalent: on the one hand women are capable to achieve *arahant*-hood but first they need to submit their self to the male authority.

The texts speak about the physical fragility of women for ascetic life and their inability to hold leadership roles. Women are

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<sup>54</sup>Jonathan S. Walters, "A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha's Mother's Story," *History of Religions* 33, 4 (1994), 358–379.

<sup>55</sup>However, some of these additional rules do prevent nuns from servitude and protect them from wild animals and criticism from society and other monastic groups. At that time, if women forsake the comfort and protection of their homes and move to solitary places in the wilderness, mountain caves, woodlands, or open air, there are threats to their lives and good name. The *Majjhima-nikāya* (I. 16-18) and *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (III. 389) speak about the need to 'avoid a wild elephant, a wild horse, a wild bull, a wild dog, a snake, and a stump'. Thus Buddha made some rules, perhaps, to make both communities inter-dependent.

<sup>56</sup>Gross, "The Suffering of Sexism," 72.

portrayed negatively as obstacles to men's progress on the spiritual path, and their inclusion in the *saṅgha* is not for wellbeing of the Buddha *Sāsana*. In the *Vinaya-piṭaka* Buddha predicted that by establishing of *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* Buddhist *dhamma* will endure only for five hundred years that would have endured for a thousand years (VP II. 255).<sup>57</sup> However, this prediction did not come true, for *bhikkhunī* order and the *dhamma* in general survived far beyond the period of five hundred years in India and outside.<sup>58</sup> According to the *Samyutta-nikāya* (SN II. 224-25) it is not the existence of any one of the four assemblies that would bring the decline of *saṅgha*; rather it is the lack of reverence and deference towards the Buddha, *dhamma*, *saṅgha*, *vinaya* (discipline) and *samādhi* (concentration) that would cause the decay and disappearance of the true *dhamma*. On the other hand reverence and deference towards the Buddha, *dhamma*, *saṅgha*, *vinaya* (discipline) and *samādhi* (concentration) would lead to the longevity of the true *dhamma*, to its non-decay and non-disappearance.<sup>59</sup>

However, there are other passages in which women are held responsible for men's diversions from the spiritual path; women were seen as agent of destruction,<sup>60</sup> and the cause of all *dukkha*.<sup>61</sup> For example, once when Ānanda asked Buddha how a monk should act, behave and speak towards women, his answers were not favourable to the equal in dignity ideal. A textual analysis of *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (DN II. 140-41) three passages (these passages are recorded in order) shows that this text was interpolated later by monks:

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<sup>57</sup>Horner, *The Book of the Discipline* Vol. V, 356.

<sup>58</sup>See footnote no. 48 for details.

<sup>59</sup>Dauids, *The Book of the Kindred Saying* Vol. II, 152.

<sup>60</sup>Ria Kloppenborg, "Female Stereotypes in Early Buddhism: The Women of the Therīgāthā," in *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, eds., Ria Kloppenborg & Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Leiden: Brill, 1995, 151-69.

<sup>61</sup>Claudia Romberg, "Women in engaged Buddhism," *Contemporary Buddhism* 3, 2 (2002), 161-170

*Scene One:* 'Ānanda, there are four places the sight of which should arouse emotion in the faithful. Which are they? "Here the Tathāgata [Buddha] was born" is the first. "Here the Tathāgata attained supreme enlightenment [knowledge]" is the second. "Here the Tathāgata set in motion the Wheel of *Dhamma* [first sermon]" is the third. "Here the Tathāgata attained the Nibbāna-element [Kusināra] without remainder" is the fourth. And, Ānanda, the faithful [monks and nuns, male and female lay] followers will visit those places. And any who die while making the pilgrimage to these shrines with a devout heart will, at the breaking-up of the body after death, be reborn in a heavenly world (DN II. 140-41).<sup>62</sup>

*Scene Two:* 'Lord [Tathāgata/Buddha], how should we act towards women?' 'Do not see them, Ānanda.' 'But if we see them, how should we behave, Lord?' 'Do not speak to them, Ānanda.' 'But if they speak to us, Lord, how should we behave?' 'Practise mindfulness, Ānanda' (DN II 141).<sup>63</sup>

*Scene Three:* 'Lord, what shall we do with the Tathāgata's remains?' 'Do not worry yourselves about the funeral arrangements, Ānanda. You should strive for the highest, devote yourselves to the highest goal, and dwell with your minds tirelessly, zealously devoted to the highest goal. There are wise Khattiyas, Brahmins and householders who are devoted to the Tathāgata: they will take care of the funeral' (DN II 141).<sup>64</sup>

There are similarities' between the *Scene One* and *Scene Three*. The both passages are talking about the devotion of Buddhists into the Buddha, *dhamma* and *saṅgha* (*Tiratana*). But *Scene Two* has a different question. *Scene One* and *Scene Three* are concerning the death, funeral and *parinibbāna* of Buddha but *Scene Two* concerns monks' attitude to women. While *Scene One* and *Scene Three* celebrate Buddhists' devotion towards the *tiratana*, *Scene Two* is worried about celibacy of monks that contradicts *garudhammā-s*.

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<sup>62</sup>Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 263-264.

<sup>63</sup>Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 264.

<sup>64</sup>Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 264.

According to *garudhammā-s*, *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is dependent on monks for training and ordinations. Therefore it is impossible to practice strictly the precepts of not seeing and talking to women; a *bhikkhunī* candidate's interaction with monks is well required by *garudhammā-s*. However, celibacy was very important; monks are warned against lust:

Bhikkhus, while walking, a woman obsesses the mind of a man; while standing ... while sitting ... while lying down ... while laughing ... while speaking ... while singing ... while crying a woman obsesses the mind of a man. When swollen, too, a woman obsesses the mind of a man. Even when dead, a woman obsesses the mind of a man. If, bhikkhus, one could rightly say of anything: 'Entirely a snare of Māra/it is precisely of women that one could say this (AN III. 68).<sup>65</sup>

The text that preceded the passage speaks about the natural bond between a mother and son growing into a sinful relation of incest. It is a great warning for all who are serious about the following of the Buddha and practice of the dhamma. Even a relationship between a mother and son could be dangerous. According to *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (AN III. 67):

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvattḥī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. Now on that occasion a mother and a son, being respectively a *bhikkhunī* and a *bhikkhu*, had entered the rains residence at Sāvattḥī. They often wanted to see one another, the mother often wanting to see her son, and the son his mother. Because they often saw one another, a bond was formed; because a bond formed, intimacy arose; because there was intimacy, lust found an opening. With their minds in the grip of lust, without having given up the training and declared their weakness, they engaged in sexual intercourse.<sup>66</sup>

Respected *bhikkhunī* and *bhikkhu* disregard their training and indulge in complete prohibited action, because they were greedy to see each other; that create a bond, which indirectly caused for

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<sup>65</sup>Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 683.

<sup>66</sup>Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 682-683.

their sexual intimacy. Both mother (nun) and son (monk) were tempted with sexual lust and became cause for spiritual destruction of each-other. It is not that "only women are portrayed in Buddhist literatures as obstacles to men's progress on the spiritual path."<sup>67</sup> In this episode both are responsible for their downfall.

Buddhist scriptures sometimes depict women as sexually insatiable and as perversely driven to seduce ascetics who are devoted to religious pursuits. Restraining sexual temptations and avoiding such circumstances are important parts of the training within *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. In order to avoid such incidents, *bhikkhus* were taught to meditate upon women as female corpses, a practice that mirrors the difficulty men had in pursuing the strict practice.<sup>68</sup> Because, sexual lust is *dukkha*, even having concern for sexual conduct causes for *dukkha* and one (especially monks) may get rid of it by virtues and meditation practices.

## 5. Conclusion

Gotama the Buddha and the other twenty-three Buddha's were male and thus it could be concluded that one has to reborn as male to become Buddha. However, it is argued that Gotama the Buddha does not preach a path to become a Buddha; he gave his teachings to achieve liberation from *dukkha*, not to become a Buddha. Buddhism believes that anyone can be liberated by their own efforts. It is explicitly stated in the *Dhammapada* (165), "By oneself,<sup>69</sup> indeed, is evil done; by oneself is one injured. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity belong to oneself. No one can purify another."<sup>70</sup> No one can escape from the consequences of their actions, and all need to purify their actions by their own efforts. All human beings are capable of achieving liberation from suffering by their own

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<sup>67</sup>Appleton, "Temptress on the Path" 103.

<sup>68</sup>Romberg, "Women in Engaged Buddhism" 163.

<sup>69</sup>Here one affirms selfless self or selflessness.

<sup>70</sup>The *Dhammapada*, S. Radhakrishnan, eds., New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013, 114.

efforts; no one else can help others to remove consequences of their past deeds.

Buddhism recognised equality and dignity of women and their spiritual potential,<sup>71</sup> and declared, '*nibbāna* is beyond the gender': sexes are irrelevant for spiritual attainment '*arahant*'. There are no limitations set on women's spiritual potential; Buddha made no sexism when he was discussing the goal of human perfection<sup>72</sup> but his 'ideal equality' failed in social and institutional practices, due to influence of the customs and worldviews of the time. Sexism is part of *dukkha* not enlightenment. To get rid of such *dukkha* one should understand Buddhist notion of selfless self (*anattā*), and to observe *anattā* carefully one's has to liberate first from the prison of gender roles. Buddhists were advised to transcend from the gender-hood by dedicated practice of the *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* (eight-fold path). Theoretically Buddhism rejects any fixed essence of an individual and gender is ultimately irrelevant and non-existent for the immediate goal of cessation of *dukkha*. Though the equal path for salvation does not affirm a complete absence of patriarchy, Buddhist teachings could be seen as progressive proponents of the gender issue.

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<sup>71</sup>Rita M Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993, 20-27.

<sup>72</sup>Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha*, Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1998, 22.