

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message:

Examination of Misunderstandings of Buddhism – 14 Women and Buddhism – (7)

QUESTION: "Why did the monastic females have more conduct guidelines than the monastic males had?"

ANSWER: "It was because women required more precautions and protections to live the homeless life than men."

Question (1):

Some people also claim that the Buddha treated women unequally since he gave a greater number of "Rules of Conduct" to women than to monks. How do you respond to this claim?

Answer (1):

First of all, it is important to know that in the Order, there were no "Rules of Conduct" from the beginning. Guidelines of behavior began to be laid down (the commentary says about 20 years after establishment) by the Buddha as the Order grew larger and many disciples entered not having the purest of motives, or with weaknesses in their characters, leading to a corrupt life. The Buddha slowly and gradually made disciplinary rules whenever the occasion arose to do so. (*Misunderstandings regarding precepts, ethical guidelines, and rules of conducts will be discussed in the later newsletters.)

Karma Lekshe Tsomo realistically observes this issue, saying that when the Order of nuns began, it inherited the rules that had already been laid down for the Order of monks, and that the number of rules formulated on the basis of a nun's misbehavior is only about half the number of rules formulated on the basis of a monk's misbehavior (*Sakyadita: Daughters of the Buddha*, Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1988, p. 22). The excessive number of additional disciplines are assigned specifically to nuns not because of prejudice toward women, but for their protection and the need for precaution because of their segregated situation in that particular society.

Question (2):

Are you talking about the biological issues?

Answer (2):

Yes. The reality of femininity is directly related to the potential for pregnancy and it cannot be ignored.

Question (3):

I have also heard of the strict conduct rules specifically given to monastic women. What are they?

Answer (3):

You must be talking about Gurudhammas or Eight Important Rules. They were laid down for nuns with the acceptance of women into the Order. The most "blamed" among those eight is the lower standing of nuns to monks who were even junior to themselves. It is often viewed as degrading nuns and forcing them into submissive roles in the Order.

Question (4):

Did the Buddha assign such rules?

Answer (4):

Whether they were assigned by the Buddha himself or contrived later is under discussion today. Some think that once we recognize the old tradition in which the women were living, "the humiliation of the women would have been more bitter, had they also not been imbued with the conventional conception of the relation of the sexes" (I. B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, p. 121). Others think that since the society itself was based on a rigid structure of discrimination against women, assignment of these rules was a clever and practical approach to solving the problem in the existing conventional manner, without creating unnecessary and meaningless conflicts in the society.

Some others, however, think Gurudhamma itself is a later creation of the monastic males who subjugated the monastic females. Considering not only the fact that the Buddha did not take any discriminatory stance toward women, but also a similar story that the Buddha was reluctant to establish a nunnery, I find this position to be more credible.

Namu Amida Butsu
Shoyo Taniguchi, Ph.D.