

# WOMEN IN BUDDHIST LITERATURE

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# PREFACE

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The subject of women as depicted in the Pali literature is an interesting one. I have been long contemplating of writing something about this topic. I have attempted in this treatise to do justice to the subject; but how far I have succeeded, it is for the public to judge. I have made use of all original Pali books. This work is, I believe, the first of its kind.

I am grateful to Messrs. W. E. Bastian & Co. for speedy publication of this work.

24, Sukea Street,  
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BIMALA CHURN LAW.

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# Women in Buddhist Literature

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## INTRODUCTION

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Buddhism in spite of its catholic ideas did not at first place women on a level with men. Nevertheless women played not an inconspicuous part in the early history of Buddhism. And we quite agree with Mrs. Rhys Davids that through and in Buddhism the Indian women secured a real advance. But the advance was the work of the women themselves. "Women fought their own battle along the line all the time and forced the hand of the good but reluctant saviours of women." It was women who made men and their churches recognise them (women). It is true that the nuns by the rules of their order rank lower than monks. A nun of even a hundred years standing was to rise and respectfully salute even the youngest monk; she must submit to receive admonition from him. Further a nun may not keep vassa in a district in which no monk is resident (Cullavagga, X., I., S. B. E., XX., 323). It is probable that the ordination of women as bhikkhunīs and the establishment of nunneries are in reality due to a later age than that of the founder of Buddhism. The institution has never become popular or gained a strong hold in any Buddhist country and the number of the nuns has always been small relatively to the number of monks. Buddha was never tired of describing the defects and vices of women and warning the monks

to guard against them. (Hastings, *Encyclopadia of Religion and Ethics*, V., p. 453). But it should not be ascribed merely to contempt for the weaker sex, for similar warnings are given to women as regards the wickedness of men (cf. A. N., IV., 196-197). Prof. Hopkins has recorded his views about women in his well-known work, "Ethics of India." He says that women are reviled as being "torches that light the way to hell," and even the popular teaching of the Jātakas is full of diatribes against them, not only wicked women, but, as is expressly said, "all women." The Bodhisatta himself calls a great congregation together, and he and other saints recount all the stories against women that they can remember, proving that women in general are a debauched and worthless set of beings, some of these stories being heightened by deliberate falsification of traditional material. The burden of these exhortations is that "all women go wrong if given opportunity." Nārada, a great saint, says that oceans, kings, Brāhmaṇas and women are the four insatiables. (Cf. *Kunāla Jātaka*, Fausböll, No. 536). At the same time, duty to parents is imperative and the "mother is the way to heaven." She must always be tenderly cared for. Moreover nuns were soon admitted into the Buddhistic Order, and though they were not allowed to be autonomous they were highly respected. The diatribes seem to be intended for monkish recluses, to guard them in the main against losing their accumulated merits by unholy imaginings. (pp. 162-163). Again we read of females in the higher ranks who never stepped upon the ground for delicateness; but when individuals are brought before us as Mahāmāyā or Visākhā we see them moving freely in general society

and speaking to men without restraint. It was the custom for certain classes of women to wander about from place to place and challenge even men to enter into controversy with them apparently without any sense of impropriety on their part or of condemnation in the minds of others. These criteria are confessedly indefinite; but yet, in the absence of more authoritative demonstration, they are of some value, as they seem to fix the era of the commencement of Buddhism in some age previous to the oldest of the philosophies now received on the continent of India. (Spence Hardy, *Legends and Theories of the Buddhists*, pp. XXIV-XXV). Sir Charles Eliot points out that Buddhism has done nothing to support or commend the system of the harem. In some Buddhist countries such as Burma and Siam, women enjoy almost the same independence as in Europe. In China and Japan their status is not so high, but the period when Buddhism was powerful in Japan (800-1100 A. D.) was marked by a number of female writers, and among the Tibetans women enjoy considerable freedom and authority (Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, I. 248). Recently our attention has been drawn to an article in the *Buddhist Chronicle* on "Women in Buddhism" which seems to be a popular rather than a learned treatise on the subject. In the following pages we have attempted for the first time a systematic and comprehensive treatment of the subject.