

# The Position of Women in Buddhism

Dr. (Mrs.) L.S. Dewaraja



E-mail: [bdea@buddhanet.net](mailto:bdea@buddhanet.net)  
Web site: [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net)

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# *The Position of Women in Buddhism*

by

DR. (MRS.) L.S. DEWARAJA

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P.O. Box 61

54, Sangharaja Mawatha

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TODAY, WHEN THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY is an issue of world-wide interest it is opportune that we should pause to look at it from a Buddhist perspective. In the recent past, a number of books have been written on the changing status of women in Hindu and Islamic societies, but with regard to women in Buddhism, ever since the distinguished Pali scholar, Miss I.B. Horner, wrote her book on *Women under Primitive Buddhism*, as far back as 1930, very little interest has been taken in the subject.

It seems, therefore, justified to raise again the question whether the position of women in Buddhist societies was better than that in non-Buddhist societies of Asia. We will look briefly into the position in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and Tibet, at a time before the impact of the West was ever felt.

Hugh Boyd who came as an envoy to the Kandyan Court in 1782 writes,<sup>1</sup>

The Cingalese women exhibit a striking contrast to those of all other Oriental Nations in some of the most prominent and distinctive features of their character. Instead of that lazy apathy, insipid modesty and sour austerity, which have characterized the sex throughout the Asiatic world, in every period of its history, in this island they possess that active sensibility, winning bashfulness and amicable ease, for which the women of modern Europe are peculiarly famed. The Cingalese women are not merely the slaves and mistresses, but in many respects the companions and friends of their husbands; for though the men be authorized by law to hold their daughters in tyrannical subjection, yet their sociable and placable dispositions, soften the rigor of their domestic policy. And polygamy being unknown and divorce permitted among the Cingalese,

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I. *The Miscellaneous Works of Hugh Boyd with an account of his Life and Writings* by L.D. Campbell (London 1800), 54-56. Boyd was sent in 1782 as an envoy to the Kandyan court by the British Governor at Madras.

the men have none of that constitutional jealousy, which has given birth to the voluptuous and unmanly despotism that is practiced over the weaker sex in the most enlightened nations, and sanctioned by the various religions of Asia. The Cingalese neither keep their women in confinement nor impose on them any humiliating restraints.

The above quotation is just one selected from a series of comments which European observers have made on the women of Sri Lanka. Many of these European visitors to our shores came during the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries. There were among them, envoys, missionaries, administrators, soldiers, physicians and ship-wrecked mariners. They had first-hand knowledge of the women in Europe and many of them came through India having observed the women in Hindu and Islamic societies

Hence their evidence is all the more valuable. The recurring comments made by these widely traveled visitors on the women of Sri Lanka have evoked our curiosity to conduct this inquiry. The discussion that follows will deal with condition that prevailed up to the middle of the nineteenth century. Prior to this our sources are so meager that we cannot detect any major social changes. After this, due to the impact of Western imperialism, commercial enterprise and Christian missionary activity, incipient changes in the traditional structures become perceptible.

It is only in European writings that one finds lengthy accounts of the social conditions prevailing in the island. The indigenous literature, being mainly religious, lacks information regarding mundane topics like women. But from circumstantial evidence one could surmise that the liberal attitude towards women in Sri Lanka is a trend that has continued from the remote past. When one thinks of women in the traditional East, the picture that comes to our minds is that of the veiled women of Islamic societies, the zenanas where high class Indian ladies lived in seclusion, the harems of Imperial china where lived thousands of royal concubines guarded by eunuchs, the *devadasis*

who in the name of God were forced into a life of religious prostitution; all manifesting different aspects of the exploitation of women in the East. It is little known that there were societies in Asia where the position of women was a favorable one, judging even from modern standards. Thailand and Burma too belong to this category. In those instances also we have based our conclusions mainly on the observations of Europeans who lived in these two countries in various capacities in the 19th and 20th centuries. R. Grant Brown, who was a revenue officer for 28 years in Burma (1889-1917) has remarked,

“Every writer on Burma has commented on the remarkable degree of independence attained by the women. Their position is more surprising in view of the subjection and seclusion of wives and daughters in the neighboring countries of India and China...”<sup>2</sup>

A British envoy to the Court of Ava was struck by the equal treatment accorded even to royal ladies.

“The queen sat with the king on the throne to receive the embassy. They are referred to as ‘the two sovereign Lords’. It is not extraordinary to the Burmans for with them, generally speaking, woman are more nearly upon an equality with the stronger sex than among any other Eastern people of consideration.”<sup>3</sup>

Lieutenant General Albert Fytche, Late Chief Commissioner of British Burma and Agent to the Viceroy and Governor General of India, wrote in 1878, “Unlike the distrustful and suspicious Hindus and Moham-medans, woman holds among them a position of perfect freedom and independence. She is, with them, not the mere slave of passion, but has

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2. R. Grant Brown, *Burma as I saw it 1889-1917* (London 1926). Grant, who was a member of the Indian Civil Service, was a magistrate and revenue officer in Burma for 28 years.

3. *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava* by John Crawfurd, 2nd ed. in 2 vols. (London 1824), I, 243.

equal rights and is the recognized and duly honored helpmate of man, and in fact bears a more prominent share in the transactions of the more ordinary affairs of life than in the case perhaps with any other people, either eastern or western.”<sup>4</sup>

Further inquiries have revealed that in Thailand too, though not to the same extent, the women enjoyed considerable liberty. For instance, J.G.D. Campbell,<sup>5</sup> Educational Adviser to the Government of Siam wrote in 1902,

“In Siam at any rate whatever be the causes, the position of women in on the whole a healthy one, and contrasts favorably with that among most other Oriental people. No one can have been many days in Bangkok without being struck by the robust physique and erect bearing of the ordinary woman... It can be said of Buddhism that its influence has at least been all on the right side; and when we remember the thousand arguments that have been advanced in the name of both religion and morality to degrade and debase the weaker sex, this is indeed saying much to its credit.”

Sir Charles Bell, British Political Representative in Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim, writes in 1928, “When a traveler enters Tibet from the neighboring nations of India and China few things impress him more vigorously or more deeply than the position of the Tibetan woman. They are not kept in seclusion as are Indian women. Accustomed to mix with the other sex throughout their lives, they are at ease with men and can hold their own as well as any women in the world.” Bell continues, “And the solid fact remains that in Buddhist countries women

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4. *Burma Past and Present*, Lt. General Albert Fytche, 2 vols. Vol. II London 1878.

5. *Siam in the Twentieth Century, Being the Experiences and Impressions of a British Officer*, by J.G.D. Campbell (London 1902) 112-113. Campbell was Inspector of Schools and later Educational Adviser to the Siamese Government.



hold a remarkably good position. Burma, Ceylon and Tibet exhibit the same picture.”<sup>6</sup>

These comments on the freedom and independence enjoyed by the women in certain pre-industrialized and sometimes isolated Asian societies are startling. It is not suggested that in any of these countries, Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, the women are on a par with the men both in theory and practice. But they have been favorably compared with the women of the neighboring countries of India and China, where Hindu, Confucian and Islamic doctrines held sway. This statement may appear contradictory for Burma and Thailand were synthesis of Indic and Sinic civilizations. In Sri Lanka too the impact of Hinduism was very strong. The question arises as to how the situation with regard to women in those three societies should be different from the major cultures of Asia. The common feature predominating in those countries is that they are intensely Buddhist. It is tempting therefore to conclude that Buddhism has helped to better the position of women in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

This conclusion would take us back to the question of the Buddhist attitude towards women and how it differs from that of other religions. Examining the position in ancient India it is clear from the evidence in the Rigveda, the earliest literature of the Indo-Aryans, that women held an honorable place in early Indian society. There were a few Rigvedic hymns composed by women. Women had access to the highest knowledge and could participate in all religious ceremonies. In domestic life too she was respected and there is no suggestion of seclusion of women and child marriage. Later when the priestly Brahmins dominated society and religion lost its spontaneity and became a mass of ritual, we see a downward trend in the position accorded to women. The most relentless of the Brahman law givers was Manu whose Code of Laws<sup>7</sup> is the most anti-feminist literature one could

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6. *The People of Tibet*, Charles Bell, Oxford 1928, p. 147.

7. *Laws of Manu*, trans. G. Buhler, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXV (Oxford 1866).

find. At the outset Manu deprived woman of her religious rights and spiritual life. "Sudras, slaves and women" were prohibited from reading the Vedas. A woman could not attain heaven through any merit of her own. She could not worship or perform a sacrifice by herself. She could reach heaven only through implicit obedience to her husband, be he debauched or devoid of all virtues. Having thus denied her any kind of spiritual and intellectual nourishment, Manu elaborated the myth that all women were sinful and prone to evil. "Neither shame nor decorum, nor honesty, nor timidity", says Manu, "is the cause of a woman's chastity, but the want of a suitor alone".<sup>8</sup> She should therefore be kept under constant vigilance: and the best way to do it was to keep her occupied in the tasks of motherhood and domestic duties so that she has no time for mischief. Despite this denigration there was always in Indian thought an idealization of motherhood and a glorification of the feminine concept. But in actual practice, it could be said by and large, Manu's reputed Code of Laws did influence social attitudes towards women, at least in the higher rungs of society.

It is against this background that one has to view the impact of Buddhism in the 5th century B.C. It is not suggested that the Buddha inaugurated a campaign for the liberation of Indian womanhood. But he did succeed in creating a minor stir against Brahman dogma and superstition. He condemned the caste structure dominated by the Brahman, excessive ritualism and sacrifice. He denied the existence of a Godhead and emphasized emancipation by individual effort. The basic doctrine of Buddhism, salvation by one's own effort, presupposes the spiritual equality of all beings, male and female. This should mitigate against the exclusive supremacy of the male. It needed a man of considerable courage and a rebellious spirit to pronounce a way of life that placed woman on a level of near equality to man. The Buddha saw the spiritual potential of both men and women and founded after considerable hesitation the Order of Bhikkhunis or Nuns, one of the earliest organizations for women. The Sasana or Church consisted of

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8. *Ibid.*, IX, 10.

the Bhikkhus (Monks), Bhikkhunis (Nuns), laymen and laywomen so that the women were not left out of any sphere of religious activity. The highest spiritual states were within the reach of both men and women and the latter needed no masculine assistance or priestly intermediary to achieve them. We could therefore agree with I.B. Horner when she says Buddhism accorded to women a position approximating to equality.<sup>9</sup>

Moving from the sphere of philosophy to domestic life one notices a change of attitude when we come to Buddhist times. In all patriarchal societies the desire for male offspring is very strong for the continuance of the patrilineage and, in the case of Hindus, for the due performance of funeral rites. For only a son could carry out the funeral rites of his father and thus ensure future happiness of the deceased. This was so crucial to the Hindu that the law allowed a sonless wife to be superseded by a second or a third one or even turned out of the house.<sup>10</sup> It is said “through a son he conquers the world and through a son’s son he attains immortality.”<sup>11</sup> As a result of this belief the birth of a daughter was the cause for lamentation. In Buddhism future happiness does not depend on funeral rites but on the actions of the deceased. The Buddhist funeral ceremony is a very simple one which could be performed by the widow, daughter or any one on the spot and the presence of a son is not compulsory. There is no ritual or ceremonial need for a son and the birth of a daughter need not be a cause for grief. It is well known that the Buddha consoled king Pasenadi who came to him grieving that his queen, Mallika, had given birth to a daughter. “A female offspring, O king, may prove even nobler than a male...”<sup>12</sup> a revolutionary statement for his time. Despite the spiritual quality of the sexes and the fact that a son is not an absolute necessity in securing

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9. I.B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen* (London 1930), XXIV.

10. *Laws of Manu*, IX, 81.

11. *Ibid.*, IX, 137.

12. Quoted by I.B. Horner in *Women in Early Buddhist Literature*, The Wheel Publication, No. 30 (Colombo 1961), 8-9.

happiness in the after life, yet even in Buddhist societies there is a preference for male offspring even today, so potent is the ideology of male superiority.

Marriage and family are basic institutions in all societies whether primitive or modern and the position of woman in a particular society is influenced by and expressed in the status she holds within these institutions. Has she got the same rights as her husband to dissolve the marriage bond? Has she the right to remarry or is this a man's privilege? The answers to these questions will undoubtedly determine the position accorded to women in any society. Let us examine the Buddhist attitude to the question. In Buddhism, unlike Christianity and Hinduism, marriage is not a sacrament. It is purely a secular affair and the monks do not participate in it. In Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma there is a good deal of ceremony, feasting and merry-making connected with the event but these are not of a religious nature. Sometimes monks are invited to partake of alms and they in turn bless the couple. Although there are no vows or rituals involved in the event of a marriage, the Buddha has laid down in the Sigalovada Sutta the duties of a husband and wife:

“In five ways should a wife as Western quarter, be ministered to by her husband: by respect, by courtesy, by faithfulness, by handing over authority to her, by providing her with ornaments. In these five ways does the wife minister to by her husband as the Western quarter, love him: her duties are well-performed by hospitality to kin of both, by faithfulness, by watching over the goods he brings and by skill and industry in discharging all business.”<sup>13</sup>

The significant point here is that the Buddha's injunctions are bilateral; the marital relationship is a reciprocal one with mutual rights and obligations. This was a momentous departure from ideas prevailing at the time. For instance Manu says, “Offspring, the due performance of

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13. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, trans. C.A.F Rhys Davids, part III, 181-182.

happiness and heavenly bliss for one's ancestors and oneself depends on one's wife alone."<sup>14</sup> Confucius, an older contemporary of the Buddha, spoke in the same tone: "in this way when the deferential obedience of the wife was complete, the internal harmony was secured, and a long continuance of the family could be reckoned with."<sup>15</sup> Confucius gives in detail the duties of the son to the father, the wife to the husband and the daughter-in-law to the mother-in-law but never vice-versa; so that the wife had only duties and obligations and the husband only rights and privileges. According to the injunctions of the Buddha given in the Sigalovada Sutta, which deals with domestic duties, every relationship was a reciprocal one whether it be between husband and wife, parent and child, or master and servant. Ideally, therefore, among Buddhists, marriage is a contract between equals.

However it does not necessarily follow that social practice conforms to theory. The egalitarian ideals of Buddhism appear to have been impotent against the universal ideology of masculine superiority. The doctrine of Karma and Rebirth, one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism, has been interpreted to prove the inherent superiority of the male. According to the law of Karma, one's actions in the past will determine one's position of wealth, power, talent and even sex in future births. One is reborn a woman because of one's bad Karma. Thus the subordination of women is given a religious sanction. It is not unusual even in Sri Lanka for women, after doing a meritorious deed, to aspire to be redeemed from womanhood and be reborn as a man in future. Despite the remarkable degree of sexual equality in Burman society, all women recite as a part of their Buddhist devotions the following prayer: "I pray that I may be reborn as a male in a future existence."<sup>16</sup> In Thailand in 1399 A.D., the Queen Mother founded a monastery and commemorated the event in an inscription in which she

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14. *Laws of Manu*, IX, 28.

15. *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, trans. James Legge (Oxford 1879) Sacred Books of the East, Vol. XXVIII. 431.

16. Quoted by Melford E. Spiro in *Kinship and Marriage in Burma: A cultural and Psychodynamic Analysis* (London 1977), 260.

requested, “By the power of my merit, may I be reborn as a male...”.<sup>17</sup> Several examples could be quoted from the popular parlance of all three societies to show that even women, whatever their station, have accepted the idea of female inferiority and this has influenced the husband-wife relationship in varying degrees in the societies concerned. In Sri Lanka where this idea is least perceptible, it is considered becoming even in modern times to maintain a facade of husband domination. The wifely control is unobtrusive and subtle. This ambivalent attitude is more pronounced in Burma where women are a specially privileged lot. They control the family economy; socially, politically and legally they are on a par with men. But the wife makes a show of deference to the husband which in itself is no measure of male dominance but an adaptation to a cultural norm. On the other hand, the fact that men could have multiple spouses whereas the women were restricted to one, placed the husband in a privileged position. The reverse was true in Sri Lanka where polygamy was unknown except in the royal family, polyandry was practiced (though not widespread) till recent times. In traditional Thailand the subordination of the wife in the family hierarchy was sanctioned by law. Till 1935 polygyny was legally recognized.

“Fundamental to the family law in the Law Code of 1805 was the conjugal power of the husband, which meant that he managed the property held jointly by the spouses, that he could sell his wife or give her away and that he could administer bodily punishment to her, provided the degree of punishment was in proportion to the misdeed.”<sup>18</sup>

From the nature of the marriage contract one passes on to the question whether both parties had the same facilities for terminating the contract. It is seen that in most cultures the woman is irretrievably bound

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17. Quoted by C.J. Reynolds in “A Nineteenth Century Thai Buddhist Defence of Polygamy and some Remarks on the Social History of Women in Thailand”, a Paper prepared for the Seventh Conference International Association of Historians of Asia, Bangkok, 22-26 August 1977,3.

18. *Ibid.*, 6-7.

by the chains of matrimony while the man can shed his shackles with ease. The Confucian code of discipline provides the husband with several grounds for divorce. Not only leprosy and sterility, even disobedience and garrulity were valid reasons to get rid of a wife. Among the Hindus marriage was an indissoluble sacrament for the woman, while the man had the right to remarry even when the first wife was alive. Says Manu, "A barren wife may be superseded in the 8th year. She whose children all die in the 10th, she who bears only daughters in the 11th, but she who is quarrelsome without delay."<sup>19</sup> In addition a man could abandon a blemished, diseased or deflowered wife.<sup>20</sup> Under Islamic law the contract may be dissolved by the husband at his will without the intervention of a court and without assigning any cause. But a wife cannot divorce herself from her husband without his consent except under a contract made before or after marriage. If the conditions of the contract are not opposed to Muslim law then the divorce will take effect.<sup>21</sup>

In Buddhism marriage received no religious sanction and in the absence of a Buddhist legal code comparable to the Laws of Manu or the Sharia Law of the Muslims, the dissolution the marriage contract was settled by the individuals concerned or their families. With regard to Sri Lanka, there is a document dated 1769 which gives an orthodox and official view on the subject. The Dutch who were ruling the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka wished to codify the laws and customs of the island. The Dutch Governor I.W. Falck sent a series of questions to the eminent monks of Kandy and the answers to these are given in the document known as the *Lakrajalosirita*. The governor raised the question whether divorce was permitted among the Sinhalese. The reply was,

"A man and a woman who have been united in marriage with the knowledge of their parents and relations and

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19. *Laws of Manu*, IX, 81.

20. *Laws of Manu*, IX, 72.

21. D.F. Mulla, *Principles of Muhammedan Law* (Calcutta 1955). 264.

according to the Sinhala custom cannot become separated at their own pleasure. If a man wishes to obtain a divorce it must be by proving that his wife, failing in the reverence and respect due to a husband, has spoken to him in an unbecoming manner; or that she has lavished her affection on another and spends his earning on him, and if her improper conduct is proved before a court of justice he will be permitted to abandon her.”

The next question is for what faults on the part of the husband may the wife sue for and obtain a divorce from him. The Bhikkhus reply,

“If being destitute of love and affection for his wife, he withholds from her the wearing apparel and ornaments suitable to her rank; if he does not provide her with food of such a quality as she has a right to; if he neglects to acquire money by agriculture, commerce and other honorable means; if associating with other women, he squanders his property upon them; if he makes a practice of committing other improper and degrading acts such as stealing, lying or drinking intoxicating liquors, if he treats his wife as a slave and at the same times behaves respectfully to other women, on proof of his delinquency before the above mentioned court, the wife may obtain a divorce.”<sup>22</sup>

The significant point is that even in theory the Sinhala laws were equally applicable and binding to both husband and wife. One clearly sees the influence of the injunctions of the Sigalovada Sutta in the development of these institutions.

However, litigation being a tedious process then as now, it is unlikely that the average Sinhalese of the 19th century resorted to this lengthy judicial procedure. The *Lakrajalosirita* was written by Buddhist monks

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22. *Lakrajalosirita*, ed. and trans. Bishop Edmund Pieris, Published by the Ceylon Historical Manuscripts Commission, 10 and 11.



for the information of a foreigner, and judging from the rest of the document they tried to depict ideal conditions. Only the very well-to-do could afford the luxury of a court case. A more realistic account has been left by Robert Knox who spent 19 years in the company of poor peasants:

“But their marriages are but of little force and validity for if they disagree and dislike one another they part without disgrace. Yet it stands firmer for the Man than for the Woman: howbeit they do leave on the other at their pleasure.”<sup>23</sup>

According to Sinhala laws of the 18th century the wife was treated very liberally at the time of divorce. She got back all the wealth that her parents gave her at the time of marriage and half of all the property acquired by the couple after marriage. Also she was given a sum of money sufficient to cover her expenses for the next six months. It is worthy of note that in Sri Lanka prior to European occupation both sexes had equal facilities for divorce, both in theory and in practice. The situation changed, however, with the impact of Christianity and the introduction of Roman Dutch Law by the Hollanders in the areas under their control.

In traditional Burma too a code of divorce provided for ill assorted unions. Where there was a mutual desire for separation due to incompatibility or other causes, parties can divorce each other by an equal division of property. If one is unwilling the other is free to go provided all property is left behind. A woman can demand a divorce if her husband ill-treats her or if he cannot maintain her; and a man in case of sterility or infidelity of the wife. Another method, not uncommon, is for the aggrieved party to seek refuge in monastic life; for this would at once dissolve the marriage bond. This easy availability of divorce in Burma has been condemned by Father Bigandet, the Roman Catholic

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23. Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of Ceylon* (Glasgow 1911), 149. Knox was a ship-wrecked British sailor who spent 19 years from 1660 to 1679 as a prisoner in the Kandyan Kingdom.

Bishop of Rangoon as “damnable laxity”. Despite this censure, it is said that this easy and equal facility for divorce has rendered the Burman spouses more forbearing and that serious connubial quarrels are rare among them.<sup>24</sup>

In Thailand although women had legal disabilities, they could initiate divorce proceedings which enabled them to escape from a tyrannous husband. As far back as 1687 the French envoy to the Siamese court observed,

“The Husband is naturally the Master of Divorce but he never refuseth it to his wife when she absolutely desires it. He restores her portion to her and their children are divided among them in this manner...”<sup>25</sup>

Although the conjugal power of the husband was fundamental to the 1805 Code, yet the wife’s right to divorce was preserved and she was treated generously when the marriage was annulled.

Moving on to the question of the remarriage of widows and divorcees, one notices that in certain societies the wives were regarded as the personal property of their husbands. As such the custom of slaying, sacrificing or burying women alive to accompany their deceased husbands along with their belongings has been found in many lands as far removed as America, Africa and India. The best known example is the *soti puja* or self immolation of high-caste Hindu widows. This custom which was unknown in the Rigveda, developed later: it was never very widespread but there were isolated instances continuing even up to early British times. The British had to introduce legislation to prevent it. Among the Hindus a widow was expected to lead a life of severe austerity and strict celibacy for she was bonded to her dead husband. Further she lost her social and religious status and was considered an unlucky person. The question of the remarriage of divorcees did not

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24. Fytche, Vol. II, 75.

25. Simon de la Loubere, *The Kingdom of Siam: With an Introduction by David K. Wyatt* (London 1968) 53. De la Loubere was an envoy sent to Siam by Louis XIV of France in 1687. He was in Siam for four months only.

arise because a Hindu wife could not repudiate her husband; even if she was rejected by the latter she had to remain celibate.

In Buddhism death is considered a natural and inevitable end. As a result a woman suffers no moral degradation on account of her widowhood. Her social status is not altered in any way. In Buddhist societies she does not have to advertise her widowhood by shaving her head and relinquishing her ornaments. She is not forced to fast on specific days and sleep on hard floors for self-mortification has no place in Buddhism. Nor does she have to absent herself from ceremonies and auspicious events. Above all there is no religious barrier to her remarriage.<sup>26</sup> The remarriage of rejected wives is also known in Buddhist literature.

Women whose marriages break up were free to remarry with no stigma attached,...”But if they chance to dislike one another and part asunder... then she is fit for another man, being as they account never the worse for wearing.”<sup>27</sup> Even the *Lakrajalosirita* which gives an orthodox Buddhist view, permits the remarriage of women after separation from their spouses. It was common even in the highest rungs of society. In Burma and Thailand too women had the right to remarry after divorce. As far back as 1687 La Loubere the French envoy noticed that in Thailand, “After the Divorce both can remarry and the woman can remarry on the very day of the Divorce.”<sup>28</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that Buddhism has saved the daughter from indignity, elevated the wife to a position approximating to equality and retrieved the widow from abject misery.

The social freedom that women enjoyed in Buddhist societies, above everything else, has evoked from Western observers the comments that we have quoted earlier in this paper. It is not so much the equality of status but the complete desegregation of the sexes, that has distinguished the women in Buddhist societies from those of the Middle East, the Far East and the Indian subcontinent. Segregation of

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26. I.B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, 72 sqq.

27. Knox, 149.

28. De la Loubere, 53.

the sexes only leads to the seclusion and confinement of women behind veils and walls. The Confucian code lays down detailed rules on how men and women should behave in each other's presence. Manu went to the furthest extreme of segregation by warning that one should not remain in a lonely palace even with one's own mother and sister. Sexual segregation pervades all aspects of life in Islamic society.

In early Buddhist literature one sees a free intermingling of the sexes. The celibate monks and nuns had separate quarters, yet the cloister was not cut off from the rest of the world. It is recorded that the Buddha had long conversations with his female disciples. The devout benefactress Visakha frequented the monastery decked in all her finery, and accompanied by a maid servant she attended to the needs of the monks. Her clothes and ornaments were the talk of the town, yet neither the Buddha nor the monks dissuaded her from wearing them. It was after she developed in insight and asceticism that she voluntarily relinquished her ornaments.

This free and liberal attitude certainly had its impact on the behavior of both men and women in Buddhist societies. In Sri Lanka in the 17th century, "the Men are not Jealous of their Wives for the greatest Ladies in the land will frequently talk and discourse with any Men they please, although their Husbands be in presence."<sup>29</sup> It has been remarked that the women visited places of worship always dressed in their best attire. This is quite a contrast to the stand taken by Manu according to whom the love of ornamentation was an evil attribute of women; and the Koranic injunction that the pious woman should hide all beauty and ornamentation behind the veil. Burmese women of all ranks went unveiled and ornamented and added color to all occasions, though flanked by India and China, where customs such as purdah and foot binding prevailed. In Thailand it has been noticed that the women of the upper classes, though by no means confined to lives of strict seclusion, did not appear much in public.

In conclusion we could say that the secular nature of the marriage

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29. Knox, 104.

contract, the facility to divorce, the right to remarry, the desegregation of the sexes and above all else the right to inherit, own and dispose of property without let or hindrance from the husband, have all contributed to the alleviation of the lot of women in Buddhist societies. Conflicting with the Buddhist ethos and negating its effects in varying degrees is the universal ideology of masculine superiority. So that in all three societies — Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma — there is an ambivalence in the attitudes towards women. Yet their position is certainly better than in any of the major cultures of Asia.



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