

## **Asian Buddhist Women, Lecture 6:**

### **Buddhist Women in Sri Lanka**

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Buddhism and its Impact on Women:  
Thumbnail sketches from texts and personal observations

Buddhism is fundamentally a religion for the individual – a path or a means for an individual to achieve equanimity and peace of mind when faced with the exigencies of *samsaric* existence.

Thus generalizations regarding ‘Buddhist women’ – as a group or entity – are difficult to make.

However certain general characteristics can be observed—which evolved within the broad parameters of the Buddha’s Doctrine.

Buddhism introduced a certain fundamental egalitarianism between the sexes –

- a. Doctrine specifically stated that women could achieve the highest goal of the religion – as *arahats*.
- b. Established an Order for nuns – in the time of the Buddha. [6<sup>th</sup> century BCE]
- c. Their writings given recognition and inclusion in the Buddhist canon. Women’s writing not given such acceptance in any other religion of the time.

[This gave an enormous boost to the status of women, especially among Buddhists in early Indian and Sri Lankan society  
The chronicles record the establishment of the Order of Nuns in Sri Lanka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.]

- d. Nuns achieved fame and influence over the centuries. Chronicles also refer to individual nuns of great repute and learning, and special mention of good preachers among them.<sup>1</sup>
- e. Education and learning became accessible and readily taken to by lay women.
- f. With education came acceptance of women's rights to own and control their land and property –first in large monastic complexes and later as individual ownership in secular life.
- g. Access to education meant freedom for women to take employment outside the home -- moving into the professions with no glass ceilings and equal pay for equal work..
- h. The support from husbands, parents and extended family was solidly behind working women both in the past and present, enabling them to pursue their multi- tasking activities.

[As Buddhism developed over time and spread over large parts of the world, it has necessarily affected secular social life and customs, and developed structures and norms. They may vary from country to country, and person to person. However, the openness to education for women was a defining character of Buddhist societies -- over the world.]

Female religiosity may take different forms and expression. It has changed too over the years.

Buddhist religiosity has taken on a public performance aspect especially since it was made the state religion and so is part of all public ceremonies. Women are very much a part of this public religiosity and participate in all such activities at all levels of society.

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<sup>1</sup> Dipavamsa chapter 18.

Their sense of independence and freedom to involve themselves in such activities, and their enthusiastic participation in the public sphere is a mark of that same openness and egalitarianism that has always characterized the religion.

