

Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

The Buddhist Perspective on Women's Rights

Buddhism in Every Step C11

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The Buddhist Perspective on Women's Rights

I. Overcoming Discrimination and Discrepancies in Work and Society

In this world, everything expresses itself on its own terms and in its own way. For example, water is soft, yet it can also be extremely powerful. Flowers are delicate and beautiful, but this is precisely why they are appealing. When young children cannot get what they want, they often cry to persuade their parents; crying is the way that children express their point of view. Men wear business suits, fine leather shoes, and stride forth charismatically. Women also want to express their innate appeal, their beauty.

Beauty is not just a superficial view of the physical. A woman can express her beauty through her gentleness, meticulousness, and industriousness. Each of these traits can be an

expression of the uniqueness and inner substance of a woman. The important thing is to know how to express these traits. The situation is similar to someone who cultivates Buddhist practice; that person must also learn how to express his/her compassion and patience because both compassion and patience are his/her strengths.

The capacity in women for both compassion and patience is immense, and this is precisely why they have been able to endure the inequalities that have existed in society for so long. In the past, it was quite common for women to be paid less than men for doing the same amount of work. Nowadays, however, this kind of thing has gradually changed for the better; indeed, many company managers and CEOs are now women. According to the president of Commonwealth Publishing Co., women are in fact more cooperative, more patient, more meticulous, and more open-minded to the opinions of others. He also says that women are more law-abiding and, for these reasons, he prefers using women as managers in his company.

There was a report in *USA Today* that the number of women in management positions is climbing, even though the economy has stalled, and many people are being laid off.

Sixteen percent of the top managerial positions in Fortune 500 companies in the U.S. are now held by women. While in 1992 there were only one and a half million women in management or major professional positions, in just ten years, this number grew to over two million women. Experts also point out that as the position of women in the workforce stabilizes, more companies will realize the value of placing women in management positions. This trend tends to lower the level of stress in the workplace and enhance the quality of collegiality in the office.

The truth is I am not trying to take the side of women here, for I believe that among both women and men, there are always going to be both good and bad people. However, within society, women have certainly been wronged far more than men. In my own life, I have always had a great feeling of gratitude toward my maternal grandmother, for she truly was a compassionate bodhisattva. Since it was she who taught me and took care of me much of the time, I have a very deep impression of her compassion. One of my grandmother's younger sisters became a Buddhist nun. It seemed that her compassion was so great, it could melt the heart of anyone, no matter how violent or stubborn they

may have been; in her presence, even the roughest characters would lower their heads and defer to her.

Yet, in the past, not only did women have very low social status, but monastics were also discriminated against by many. In those days, as soon as a monastic would open his or her mouth to speak, someone would pipe up and say, "Hey monk, what do you think you are saying?" Monks were not allowed to talk, and if they went to buy something—even something as insignificant as a fountain pen or a wristwatch—there would always be someone who would say something like, "Hey, what does a monk need a wristwatch for? Why do you need a fountain pen?" This may all sound very strange today, but when I was young, this was the social norm. The situation compelled me to later write an essay titled "Weakling, Your Name Is Monk!"

In those days, not only were monks considered "weaklings," but so were women. Just because you were called a "woman," it seemed that by virtue of your birth, you were meant to be part of an inferior group. Nowadays in Taiwan, it is very common to protect groups of people who are underprivileged or disadvantaged. I have always thought that I should speak

for women, and I have done my best to advocate gender equality, but because I am a monk, I am often limited in assuming such a role.

Most people in China will not care much if a monk does not follow the precepts, has little or no virtue, drinks alcohol, or eats meat. But if a monk is seen to interact with a woman, then everyone will make a big deal out of it. Most people in Chinese society view women as some sort of pollutant of a monk's purity. If you touch them, you will be tainted and no longer considered pure. For these reasons, most Buddhist monks have to be very wary of women.

However, I believe that people should have moral courage, a sense of justice, and fair-mindedness that we should use to view humanity. In the past, I used to organize many activities that always provided ample opportunity for people to perform. Whenever we had symposiums on Buddhism, I asked bhiksunis such as Ven. Tzu Hui to do the translation and Ven. Tzu Jung to lead everyone to sing and dance. In this way, many other women also found more opportunities to demonstrate their talents.

Eventually other monks within the Buddhist community in Taiwan began calling me the "leader of a women's labor team." This is a

pretty unpleasant thing to have said, but my conscience was clear, for I knew that I was not expending my efforts solely for women but for all sentient beings. Beyond the issue of unequal pay for the same work, there are many other gender inequality problems in society. Although the situation has changed since then, thirty years ago when I went to Koyasan in Japan, there was a sign in a temple that said "All Women Stop Here," meaning that women were not allowed to go beyond that point. In the past, Hyde Park in England did not allow Chinese people or dogs inside. These are forms of gender and racial prejudice and a violation of human rights.

Whether it is a matter of racial discrimination or gender inequality, we can say that those times have gradually become a remnant of the past. In each sector of today's society, women are able to develop their talents in many ways and to compete with men on many different levels. For example, the former chairman of the board of the China Development Financial Holdings Corp., Chen Minxun, was a woman who had six able men as her assistants. Now, do you think her pay was less than a man's?

Furthermore, in advanced democratic countries, there are many governmental regulations

protecting the rights of women, such as paid maternity leave. Nowadays in Taiwan, women of this new "electronic age" are pressing for equal rights between genders. In this endeavor, they are calling on the government to protect women's access to employment opportunities, to increase the quota for women in government positions, and to financially support women's groups that are fighting for equality. We can see that the main trend of society today is toward even greater gender equalization, and this shows that the value of women is increasingly being recognized and that the goal of attaining full gender equality cannot be far off.

The truth is, in terms of democratic ideals, even the ancient autocratic society of China stressed the importance of equality. In the anthology of classical texts, *Guwen Guanzhi*, there is a piece titled "Queen Wei Inquires of the Ambassador from Qi." In this piece, the ambassador from the Qi state approaches the throne of Queen Wei of Zhao state with a letter from his king. Before she even opens the letter, the queen asks the ambassador: "Is the yearly grain harvest good in your state? Are the people of your state well? And is your lord also well?" Upon hearing these questions, the ambassador is perplexed and

inquires: “Why is it that your first question was not about my lord, but rather about our yearly harvest and our people? Why do you first inquire about the lowly and then about our lord?”

Queen Wei was impressive in her response: “If a country does not have a good harvest, how can it feed its subjects? And without subjects, how can there possibly be a ruler?” This kind of democratic thinking—that the people are more important than their lords—was already present very early in Chinese history. Compared to that time, today’s women’s rights movement has spread around the world like wildfire. It has been reported that women now account for some forty percent of government officials in Northern Europe, and they are even heads of state in some of those countries. So for the question of inequality between the genders, all that needs to be done is for women to seize this momentum, effectively develop their strengths, and overcome disadvantages. In time, we can certainly expect to witness gender equality throughout the world.

For these reasons, I encourage women to step out of the home because only when they do so can they create their domain, their world, and their future. But when I encourage them to step out of the home, I am not encouraging them to

go out skimpily dressed, all covered with make-up, or to behave in a seductive manner aimed at appealing only to men's sexual instincts. Instead, they must fully exhibit their qualities of meticulousness, patience, gentleness, compassion, and wisdom.

Women should display an aura of compassion and modesty. I believe as long as women can increase their sense of self-respect and self-esteem, as well as their independence, gradually they will gain greater respect in today's society.

II. Women and Household Life

Society in general should also completely reexamine the social standards that may keep men controlling that which is outside the home, while women are confined to that which is inside the home. Which is more important, the inside or the outside of the home? This whole concept simply needs to be rethought.

Should working women, who work as much as their husbands at their jobs, do domestic chores when they return home? Is that fair? The truth is, when it comes to work, we are all equal, and there is no such thing as superior or inferior work or work that is inside or outside the home.

There are always people who are more capable than others, but for the most part, it is correct to say that all people should work diligently if they want to live a satisfying life. Many families today enjoy double incomes because both the husband and wife have jobs. When women return to their homes after work, of course they should do some domestic chores, but their husbands should help. I agree with the discontented women who cannot accept the attitude of some men returning home from work and just sitting on the couch, smoking cigarettes, and watching TV.

Outstanding men today should voluntarily undertake household chores when they return home from work. For example, General MacArthur and President Eisenhower were both accustomed to helping their wives with cooking. In Australia, it is already considered a cultural norm for a man to share the responsibility for domestic work or even to be a "homemaker" without raising any eyebrows.

However, in cases where women still stay home as homemakers, there should be more understanding cultivated within families. If we actually compute how much time women spend on domestic chores and compare that to how much

time most men spend working outside of the home, we will find that women spend far more time working than men. There was a story about a woman who wanted to go visit her mother for one day. During that day, the other members of her family were to do her daily household chores for her. The father would cook, the oldest son would wash the vegetables, and the younger son would sweep the floor while the little sister would wipe the tables and water the plants.

Normally, when they returned home—the father from his office and the children from school—they would all complain that they were very tired. Each of them thought that since mom was relaxing at home all day, she had no idea how tired each one of them was. None of them understood how difficult her chores were until they had to do her work for a day, which made them all tired and sore in the end. Only then did they realize how hard she had to work each day.

So if a man really loves his wife, it is not merely the amount of money he brings home each month that is important. He should also be cheerful at home, have a sense of humor, compliment his wife, and look upon the household chores that she does as being something that is

very important. This is the sort of responsibility and magnanimity a good husband should have.

Men should especially be considerate of their wives, help tidy up the house, do some of the cooking, or take plates of food to the table. Sometimes, even if they are not helping out at all, they can at least go into the kitchen and look around, check out what their wives are making for dinner, and savor some of the dishes. They can compliment their wives on the way they look and say a few nice things to them, for learning how to compliment people is also a skill. I feel that these sorts of behaviors are more useful than simply earning money for the family.

If a husband wants to eat wonderful, well-cooked meals, he should learn to compliment his wife. Similarly, if a wife wants her husband to buy her gifts such as cosmetics and clothing, she too should learn how to appreciate her husband. Mutual praise is more important to a home than money.

But now, with the increasing awareness of women's rights, beyond simply giving compliments, a man should not expect his wife to do everything in the home, for household chores are something that all members of the family

must be concerned with, equally sharing in the responsibility in order to be truly fair.

In the past, when we held meetings of the Women's Dharma Group, the attendees were generally women. Now, however, we are seeing more and more men in the audience. In order to allow their wives to attend, some sit on the side and take care of their small children. From this, we can see that the era of male chauvinism is rapidly becoming outdated in modern society.

The achievements of women today have been more and more impressive. According to the August 9, 2003 edition of *Businessweek*, for the first time among people between the ages of 25–35, more women than men now hold college degrees. The article also said that women make-up forty-six percent of students enrolling in law school, forty-two percent of medical school graduates, and forty percent of all PhDs. The magazine especially emphasized that, with the accelerating pace of technological advancements and the rapid trend toward globalization, the economy will undergo radical restructuring. This will significantly elevate the status of women in the 21st century. As the sophistication and critical mass of female intellectuals and professionals increase, a better and more beautiful world will be created.

Thus, I feel that women today should seize the chance to step out of the home, for it is better that they contribute to the whole of society and not just spend time serving their husbands and children. Only when men and women all learn to assume social responsibility and actively participate in community service with mutual respect, tolerance, and support can we expect to build a world in which men and women are truly equal.

III. Women in the Workforce and out in the World

Sometimes I am asked what place in the world is most suitable for women. I always wonder why I get asked this question: Women should know what is suitable for them better than I do!

Women can do many things, and they definitely do not have to keep being someone's wife as their only option! Nowadays, there are many women who choose not to marry, but prefer to live an independent lifestyle. In the past, nearly all women expected to marry, and their marriages were looked upon as being something like a job. In that kind of arrangement, many women spent their entire life in the kitchen, busy all day long with cooking, washing clothes, and taking

care of children, as if these were simply their lot as decreed by heaven. Indeed, one still often hears people in Taiwan say that women are supposed to do those sorts of things.

I personally do not believe in that sort of thinking. A woman does not necessarily have to be someone's wife and spend all of her life cooking and washing clothes. Women are no less wise than men, and their qualities of thoroughness, fastidiousness, gentleness, and compassion make them well-suited for many professions. There already are women in high positions in publishing, education, medicine, the news and entertainment industries, and customer relations —society already has powerful women in many different areas.

Women's perseverance and fidelity can far exceed that of men. Women can be especially good at using gentleness to overcome rigidity. For this reason, intelligence agencies often prefer to use women. For example, Kawashima Yoshiko was a top female spy for Japan during the Sino-Japanese War. The passion, alacrity, accountability, and quick-wit of women can be very important traits for a diplomatic career; for example, the Israeli ambassador to China, Ora Namir, who held her post from 1996 to 2000,

was recognized by all as an "iron woman" type of top diplomat.

A woman can do anything a man can do. In the past, jobs like military service and flying planes were all the exclusive domain of men. Yet nowadays, we not only have female soldiers and pilots, but we also have female officers, police, investigators, and even presidents. In the past, agricultural and business work mostly belonged to men, but women can also do these jobs very well.

The alacrity and wisdom of women, as well as their purity and refinement, add color and splendor to this world. The patience of women is a virtue that is life's greatest strength. This world cannot do without women, for if there were no women, our lives would be half a world, filled with deficiencies.

The compassion of a gentle person knows no enemies. As the saying goes: "No one strikes a smiling face." When men encounter problems, they typically exert themselves and confront the issues head-on with an imposing manner. In contrast, women typically are more patient and modest, and their capacity to defuse explosive situations is something that very few men can equal. This often allows women to make up for

the mistakes caused by male rashness. When they complement each other in this way, women and men can accomplish a lot together.

Most people believe that men exhibit the beauty of strength and vigor. Even though there are some handsome men who are romantic and dashing, generally speaking, the fair demeanor and natural appeal of women are qualities that men cannot match. Throughout history, poets and painters have repeatedly tried to capture for posterity the graceful style of women with pen and brush.

Take traditional Chinese opera as an example: in the past, the roles of young men that are supposed to be played by men were filled by women instead because these women looked much fairer than men, and their every gesture was more dashing and appealing to the audience. So eventually, folk operas and even many historical operas on television used women to play these young male roles, mostly because women are by far the fairer gender.

Women are attractive to others not just because of their beauty, but also because of their compassion. The Catholic nun Mother Teresa is an example of this, as she sacrificed her whole life to help the poorest and most disadvantaged

people. For this reason, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Within Buddhist circles, Ven. Cheng Yen of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Foundation and Ven. Yung Sheng of Fo Guang Shan have both been recognized nationally in Taiwan for their good deeds.

In Chinese history, there were quite a few women who took up the life of wandering warriors. They were like Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, roaming around the world looking to help people in distress. Especially today, women must be able to broaden their perspectives and carry the world in their hearts. They should try to eradicate their deficiencies, especially the propensity of some for jealousy and pettiness. Whether it is a matter of fostering harmony with family members at home, cultivating closeness with relatives and neighbors, or following conditions with modesty and respect within society itself, women should fully apply their compassion and wisdom. They can volunteer their time providing aid for the sick, caring for children or the old. They can also work in the teaching professions or as writers, pursuing endeavors that are rooted in cultural awareness, and in the process, enrich the world and make

it more luminous. Women should have vision. With vision, they will also be able to assume greater responsibilities and spread the radiance of their life.

IV. Preventing Abusive Relationships

The demographics of modern societies are changing very quickly. In Taiwan, we have been seeing more and more men marrying women emigrating from other countries, such as mainland China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. These types of couples have different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, expectations, and habits. Of course, there are some who end up with happy marriages, but it is also true that many of these unions produce very unhappy couples who sometimes behave violently toward one another. Domestic violence has already become a major social problem.

The term "domestic violence" generally refers to abusive or violent behavior among people who are related by blood or marriage, but it can also include non-family members who live in the same home, such as boyfriends, girlfriends, and common law partners. All these scenarios are within the parameters of "domestic violence."

Violence threatens safety and lives and is something that is detested by people. Nonetheless, women and children may still become the victims of abuse within the home regardless of their nationality, cultural background, class, race, or living environment.

If there is physical violence or verbal abuse on the part of the male or on the part of the female in a home, the result is always an unhappy family. This is especially true since domestic violence almost always leads to a tragic end. In some of the worst cases, a wife who is abused might even be pushed to kill her husband, or a man might abuse his wife to the brink of death. What is even more frightening is the negative impact that domestic violence can have on the children's personality and emotional development. Children who grow up in such abusive homes may repeat the abusive behavior when they become adults. Thus, all women, men, and children have the right to a non-violent home, and it is something that we should all pray for in our society.

How do we solve the problem of domestic violence? The core of the problem is each member of the family must learn to love one another in a way that is consistent, generous, forgiving,

respectful, and tolerant, for only by working harmoniously together can a family expect to maintain a peaceful and happy family life.

The family is a basic unit of society, and it should be a haven that is safe and warm for its members. Many social problems arise from homes in which the husband and wife do not get along well. If there is violence in the family, such as the murder of a mother or father, physical violence between husband and wife, or abuse of the children, this becomes a problem for the rest of society. This is the reason why the Buddhist tradition emphasizes the importance of a husband and wife showing mutual respect and love to each other.

Of the many Buddhist sutras, the *Srigalaka Sutra* teaches men how to be good husbands, while the *Yuye Sutra* teaches women how to be good wives. Both sutras say that a husband must know how to love his wife if he is to be called a real husband, while a wife must know how to respect her husband if she is to be called a real wife.

These sutras say that a married woman must be both a mother and a wife at the same time. She must in some respects play many other roles, such as minister, servant, and master. She

must also pamper her husband sometimes as if he were her child. But husband and wife should also respect each other as such and uplift each other as brother and sister. For his part, the husband must be tender with his wife. He must protect her bravely and work for her as a laborer. He must bring humor and good cheer into the home like a Chan master, and he must fulfill his duties to support his family.

The reality of today's world is that there are many issues and problems that can develop in relationships. I believe that, especially when people from different countries or cultural backgrounds are planning to get married, they should at least spend some time getting to know each other beforehand. This way their marriages will have a greater chance of becoming happy ones.

If things are not going well, though, is it possible for a couple to divorce if their personalities are not compatible? What if they cannot get along or their differences have led to violence within the home? From the point of view of Humanistic Buddhism, there is of course a wish that all homes be fortunate and happy. Indeed, we desire that all people in love will end up forming a family.

In most cases, Buddhism does not approve of divorce. Nonetheless, if a marriage becomes unfeasible and incompatible like a mixture of fire and water, there may be a need for people to go their own separate ways. We must recognize that huge personality differences can make living together impossible. In such cases, it is better for people to go their own separate ways in good will than to stay together against someone's wishes: "let the water go back to being water and the fire to being fire." Nowadays, there is a large number of young people and intellectuals who divorce and remain good friends with each other. I believe that this is much better than forcing people to stay together in marriage till the bitter end. Because relations between men and women are so important to the well-being of society, they must show respect for one another and become partners only if they are willing, for these are the conditions that will make society a happier place and the world more beautiful.

V. Abortion

It is reported that the number of abortions in Taiwan has gone up every year since the

Legislative Council passed a law to legalize abortion in 1984. In 2003, there were over 400,000 abortions in Taiwan, which is actually greater than the number of births. That is why the government began to amend the law to legalize abortion. One of the most contentious issues is whether the husband of the married woman should have a say in the decision to have an abortion.

In fact, issues such as abortion are very complex and cannot be decided simply on the basis of laws, religion, or morality. They touch on questions of life itself, human rights, ethics, religious beliefs, and even the law of cause and effect.[1] Abortion never involves only one person and is never just a simple decision, but involves husbands, wives, relatives, and of course the unborn child as well, so some religions choose to oppose it. But in order to find some way to protect young, unmarried women who become pregnant, some groups have established single-parent families for these unwed mothers. In this regard, we can see yet another way to address a social problem.

1. The law of cause and effect, also known as the law of karma, states that everything we say, think, and do, whether it is wholesome or unwholesome, will have a like effect in the future.

The Buddhist position on abortion is that the unborn child is also a sentient life and, therefore, having an abortion is a form of killing. However, although this may be true in principle, there are occasions when there are few, if any, alternatives to abortion. For example, if a woman is pregnant with a fetus that will surely be severely handicapped, can a third party tell her that she must not have an abortion? After she bears the child, she will spend decades raising it, and will any of those people be around to help or even care about her then?

Then there are some women who are raped and become pregnant as a result—if we believe that compassion means that we must oppose all kinds of killing, including abortion, then how are we going to handle the mother's potential lifelong mixed feelings of love and animosity toward her child? Some questions cannot be easily answered from the standpoint of laws or morality alone, as there are just too many complex factors present in nearly every case. Thus, it is best to allow the person who is most affected by the abortion to have the right to decide what she wants to do, which means the pregnant woman should have the right to make the decision for herself. The woman in question is the person in the best

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position to weigh the consequences, since her decision will be subject to the law of cause and effect, for which she herself has to account.

Fundamentally, women do not get abortions out of hatred or anger, but rather to protect their reputations, their safety, their future, and so on. Thus, even though Confucianism says, "heaven cares for every living being," the question of abortion is not one that can be solved solely by legislation. Nor can it be answered by interference from those who want to protect traditional values. The person who has the most right to decide the question is the mother of the fetus. It should be up to her to make the decision, and everyone else should respect it because, more than anyone else, she must bear all the consequences.

There is a saying: "All families have their own difficulties." Everyone has to face adversity, but because Humanistic Buddhism is based upon human rights, it advocates the right of women to decide their own fate. This now brings up a second matter: In society today, other problems stem from the guilt often felt by women who have had abortions. In Taiwan, unscrupulous business people often convince them to spend a great deal of money on an altar plaque for the spirit of the

deceased infant. They claim that this will assure the child of a good rebirth. Some women who had abortions may find comfort in this rationale of spending money to dissolve the karmic consequences. The truth is, all these business people are just taking advantage of the emotional vulnerabilities of these women. This problem can only be corrected through social education.

There are many reasons why women get abortions. If the pregnancy is the result of rape, many women will decide to get an abortion. In these cases, the rest of society should sympathize with them and help them recover from their ordeal. If an abortion is the result of unmarried teenagers trying to "taste forbidden fruits," well, this sort of thing should really have been prevented in the first place by the family and society at large through reinforcing their awareness of responsibility, propriety, and sex education.

One thing that I want to emphasize here is that a young couple that is not married, but faced with an unexpected pregnancy, must not allow abortion to become a second mistake piled on top of the first. Instead, they should courageously face reality and fulfill their responsibilities as parents.

Master Yinguang once said, "The karma produced from sexual desire and killing is the basic reason sentient beings are trapped within the cycle of birth and death. The hardest to eradicate is sexual desire. The easiest to commit is killing." Again, abortion is still killing. *The Great Collection Sutra* says, "Due to the desire of love, the four elements come together; a single sperm and egg come together and are as large as a bean; this is called kalala. Kalala is a mixture of defilements; after it has been in the womb for seven days, it becomes a round, smooth cluster of cells. Now there are three factors that come into play here: the first is independent life, the second is warmth, and the third is consciousness. When there is breathing, there is independent life. When there is nothing rotten or putrid, there is warmth; if the karma is right to support a large fire element, then the form will not decay. Within this, the presence of a mind is called consciousness. If the smooth cluster of cells is deformed, what consciousness depends on also decays, and then this warmth or an independent life will end. Then the precept against killing will have been transgressed." Therefore, the best way to avoid an abortion is not to transgress in our sexual conduct in the first place.

If the abortion is chosen under unavoidable circumstances, then the complexities of the karma incurred may be overcome through wholesome behavior, repentance, cultivating virtue, and other merits. Nonetheless, the most important thing is to cultivate good behavior so that something like this can be avoided in the first place. It is always better to prevent the problem than to have to spend time repairing the damage.

VI. Changing the Patterns of the Past: the Role of Women in Buddhism

In the past, during the feudal period of Chinese history, men were respected, while women were thought of as being rather contemptible. The birth of a son was compared to fashioning an ornament as precious as jade, which not only made everyone happy, but also raised the status of his mother. In contrast, the birth of a girl was compared to fashioning a tile as lowly as dirt. Clearly, this kind of thinking was deeply flawed.

It seems that throughout history there has always been a sense of inequality between men and women. Even within the Buddhist tradition—a tradition that stresses the equality of

the Buddha nature of all sentient beings—it was necessary in the earliest formation of the order of female monastics to accommodate a patriarchal society that saw all women as inferior. For this reason, the "Eight Precepts of Respect" were put in place which made nuns respect even the most recent novice monk as their senior and created over two thousand years of inequality within Buddhist circles. The predicament still exists, such that many well-educated and talented women are unwilling to become Buddhist nuns because they do not want to have to deal with this outdated group of precepts. This is truly a great loss for all Buddhists. A female professor in England said that she would never become a Buddhist nun if the "Eight Precepts of Respect" are still practiced within Buddhist circles.

I feel that gender equality and equal rights are part and parcel with social change. Today, as the status of women is finally on the rise, the Buddhist world should work more generally to place monks and nuns on an equal footing, beyond simply addressing the problem of the "Eight Precepts of Respect."

From ancient times, there have been heroic women who undeniably exceeded men in both wisdom and ability. Whether we are talking

about family, religion, or community service around the world, it is women who tend to contribute the most. Even in often assuming a role backstage as wife, mother, or devotee, women have provided the greatest source of strength. For example, during the time of the Buddha, Queen Mallika turned her palace into a place of faith for people to congregate and worship. Dharma talks and sutra discussions became her chief vocation. Queen Srimala vowed to propagate the Mahayana Buddhist teachings, to replicate the "lion's roar" of the Buddha, and to spread the concept of the essential purity of the Tathagata. The mother of Kumarajiva, Jivaka, not only relinquished all the riches and comforts of her life in the palace, but also inspired her son to leave the household life. She raised him as a major force in Buddhism, who left behind an unparalleled legacy in his translations of the sutras.

The Buddha's aunt, Mahaprajapati, raised the young Prince Siddhartha, and after he attained enlightenment, she personally led 500 Sakya clan women to leave the household life and relinquish their royal positions and privileges. In accepting the vows for female monastics, she gave substance to the spirit of the Buddha's

proclamation: "In following the Buddha, the four castes become equal as Sakya." The bhiksuni order would not have been formed if not for the pioneering efforts of Mahaprajapati.

In today's Buddhist monastic circles, too, there are also some outstanding bhiksunis, who have earned significant roles in recent Buddhist history. For example, Venerable Tzu Chuang has established temples all across the world, carving a global path for Chinese Buddhism. Venerable Tzu Hui was instrumental in creating the University of the West, Nan Hua University, and Fo Guang University. Aside from shouldering the major responsibility of overseeing matters of education and culture, she was also chosen to be the vice-chair by the assembly at the 18th World Buddhist Society in 1992.

Venerable Tzu Jung devotes herself to philanthropic endeavors and excels in organizing activities and expanding the Buddha's Light International Association, which now has over a hundred chapters around the world. Venerable Tzu Yi oversaw the publication of the Fo Guang Dictionary, while Venerable Hsiao Yun helped establish Hua Fan College. Venerable Yi Fa has taught as a professor at major universities in many countries. Venerables Heng Ching and

Hui Yen teach at National Taiwan University and Chung Hsing University, respectively. Venerable Cheng Yen founded the philanthropic Tzu-Chi Foundation and Venerable Chao Hui has worked ardently to protect the Dharma and guard the faith. All of the above are exemplary bhiksunis of high ethical standards and scholarship. They are all representative of today's outstanding women.

We can see that women are no less wise or capable than men. Women can take part in government, education, cultural activities, and various philanthropic and public affairs within society, whereby they can actively expand their scope and opportunities in service of others. Generally speaking, women surpass men in terms of their enthusiasm, compassion, and sincerity. Thus, women should develop their own unique traits such as gentleness, compassion, meticulousness, and diligence, just like Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, who graces the world with compassion and beauty. Women should not underestimate themselves, and bear in mind that outer appearance is not all that is crucial. The most important thing is mutual respect and support between men and women. Only this will make the world a kinder and more loving place.

VII. The Intrinsic Nature of Women's Rights and Equality in Buddhist Philosophy

Equality is a truth of human life within the universe, it is an aim of humanity, and it is also the basis of Buddhism. *The Avatamsaka Sutra* says: "All sentient beings are equal." *The Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise* says: "From the very highest level of all Buddhas to the lowest level of animals, all are equal, and there are no differences between them." *The Diamond Sutra* says: "All dharmas are equal with no lofty or lowly."

A world of equality is the truest and most beautiful world. When they are put together, the Buddha's teachings on the Middle Way and dependent origination can be understood as a teaching on "equality." Buddhist teachings on the relationship between emptiness and existence provide us with the clearest explanation of what equality really means. These teachings say that "emptiness" is not necessarily empty, and "existence" is not necessarily existent; each contains the other and, as such, existence and non-existence are ultimately equal. Thus, in this world we should not argue about who

is greater or who is better. All people equally possess "Buddha nature."

There is another saying in the Buddhist tradition: "give thought neither to what is wholesome nor unwholesome." Sometimes, even bad things can be considered good. For example, a recent article told the story of a teacher at a tutoring program who was so popular with the students that the other teachers rejected him. Though the director of the program tried to retain him by raising his salary, the man still ended up deciding to pursue a different path. Many years later, reflecting back on the experience, this same teacher realized his old colleagues at the school abandoned their dreams due to the trappings of their high salaries. He thought to himself that if it had not been for them—and the unpleasantness they created—he might never have left and learned to find even deeper fulfillment doing something else.

In the Buddhist tradition, when something bad is turned into something good, we call it "improving through negative conditions." This concept is illustrated by the mud and filth that is necessary for a beautiful lotus flower to grow. The enlightened and the afflicted minds may seem realms apart, but is it not true that a sour and unripe fruit

only becomes sweet through the harsh wind and blazing sun? In *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, Vimalakirti says: "If we do not dive into the deep sea, we will never attain the invaluable pearl. And if we do not dive into the great sea of human afflictions, we will never attain supreme wisdom."

Some people say that men are more solid and stronger than women and that women will never be able to shoulder as much; however, women are compassionate and supple, and since suppleness can overcome solidity, it too has its advantage. There is a saying that "If a bow is strung too tight, the bowstring will break. If a blade is too sharp, it may chip too easily." Take our teeth and tongue as an example. Our teeth are very hard, and as we age, our teeth come loose and fall out one after another. However, our soft tongue remains with us even until we die. All things within this world have their own special strengths—the most important thing is for everyone to show their strengths and make good use of them.

When we gaze upon a tall building, we normally associate it with a sense of grandeur, but if it were not for the many small rivets that hold the structure's steel beams together, it could never have been so imposing and tall. This is the

reason that Buddhists often say a grain of sand can contain a three thousandfold world system. There is also a Buddhist temple that has a poetic couplet posted on the front gate: "Mount Sumeru can contain a mustard seed, yet that same mustard seed can conceal Mount Sumeru." When we first hear statements like this, they may seem unrealistic, but if we give it more thought, we will realize that they express a deep and profound truth.

This means that there is a rational principle underlying all phenomena and that all phenomena are an expression of this principle. The principle and the phenomena encompass each other and are interconnected.

This is why when Buddhists speak of "a synthesis between principles and phenomena," it is about not just seeing things from their phenomenal side but, more importantly, approaching them from the point of view of the principles that underlie them. From the point of view of the material manifestations in this world, there are men and women, young and old, rich and poor, high and low. But from the point of view of the principles underlying these differences, all are equal because all sentient beings possess Buddha nature. The only catch is that the

ordinary person tends to focus on the distinctions between manifestations. For them, the universe appears to be full of differences. But when a sage looks upon this world, he sees oneness everywhere.

When we speak of gender equality, we might consider the saying: "When the mind enters right perception, why bother being of female form?" (*The Connected Discourses*, Ch. 45). From the Buddhist point of view, all sentient beings have Buddha nature and all people are equal and beyond duality. By viewing human rights from a Buddhist angle and within the context of the Buddha's original teachings, we can further foster a spirit of equality and provide a true space for that equality.

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