Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism has, throughout its history, slowly moved east, from India through China, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Korea and Japan. Recently, it has begun its jump across the ocean to the Western countries also. With each move, the expression of Buddhism has changed to suit the culture of the people.

One of the areas of traditional Buddhism which we find the most problematic is the area of gender. In most of the Asian Buddhist traditions, the leaders and teachers are all males, while females are given less roles.

Therefore, I thought I would start by examining the role of women in early Buddhism, and trace the historical role of women in Theravada Buddhism to the present. In order to understand the current situation, it is necessary to understand the historical setting.

In pre-Buddhist era women seem to have held an extremely subordinate place in the society. Women spent their whole lives serving. A typical woman spent her youth serving and obeying her parents; at middle age serving and obeying her husband and his parents; and at her old age serving and obeying her grown up children. Once married women were supposed to obey their husbands and their parents. Wives cooked, cleaned and raised children, and looked after the servants. Women ate only what was left after the men had finished
eating. If a husband was displeased with his wife, he could beat her or throw her out of the house.

In all their roles, women were less powerful than men. As Janice Willis says. "They were help mates at best and burdens at worst, but always they were viewed as being inferior, second class citizens" ^

It, then, is the society in which the Buddha grew up and taught. Into this culture, the Buddha made what would have then been a radical statement on the potential of women. When asked by Ananda the Buddha said that women were capable of becoming Arhants. If women follow the path of renunciation, they can become completely enlightened just as men can. The Buddha acted upon his conviction that women and men could pursue liberation in the same way. He established both an order of Bhikkus (monks) and an order of Bhikkunis (nuns). The Buddha also preached both men and women.

In any case, Buddha opened the doors for women’s entrance to monastic life. Women flocked by the thousands joined the order of Bhikkunis. Women had more freedom and independence within the order of Bhikkunis than anywhere else in society. And many women became liberated (Arhants.)

So, the position of women has been a subject of considerable interest in recent decades. In all societies, particularly in the West, there has been a rethinking of the position accorded to women in all

spheres of activity. This has resulted in a significant change in the role played by women in social, economic and even political life. This reappraisal has also touched on the question of the position accorded to women in the main religious traditions of the world.

1.1 IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY:

Women in Buddhism could be considered in several ways. We can for instance, compare the position accorded to women in both the religious and the secular life in India before the Buddha's time with that of established Buddhism, and consider whether the Buddha's teaching resulted in a change radical, or otherwise. We can see whether the Buddha's teaching accorded to women a position different from that accorded to men, as is the case in many other religions.

The part played by women in the early history of Buddhism, notably during the Buddha's own time, could be considered as providing a clue to the place accorded to women in Buddhism. In this connection the events surrounding the establishment of the Bhikkhuni order needs to be re-examined, as there is a measure of misunderstanding of their question. The position of women in Buddhism could be contrasted with that accorded to women in the other great religious traditions of the modern world.

During that time the position of women under Hinduism is well–known; some idea of their position could be gleaned from the classic Hindu Dharmashastras of which the Manu – Smriti, popularly known as the “Laws of Manu “is very popular.
During that time Hindu women were prevented from performing religious rites, and even the knowledge of the Vedas was to be kept away from them. The question for historian is: how far these laws were in force at the time of the Buddha. The Hindus claim a divine origin for the laws of Manu. But they were probably completed later when Hinduism had assumed its rigid form centuries after the Buddha’s time. However the Brahmanical religion of the Buddha’s days, though somewhat better in this respect, did not accord spiritual parity to women. The primordial principle in the Vedic – Upanishadic philosophy which was dominant in the Buddha’s time was the male principle and they provided justification for the exclusion of women generally from social and spiritual activity.

The position of women in ancient India is clear from the evidence in the Rigveda, the earliest literature of the Indo-Aryans, that women held an honorable place. In fact a few Rigvedic hymns were 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 here a downward trend in the position accorded to women.

The most relentless of the Brahmin law giver, as already said was Manu whose code of laws\(^1\) is the most anti feminist literature one could find. At the outset Manu deprived woman of her religious rights and spiritual life.

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When we consider the position of women in ordinary life we have to note that the Buddha’s teaching was primarily concerned with individual spiritual emancipation. This emancipation would be manifested in the worldly conduct of individuals; but the Buddha was not interested in establishing and perpetuating a particular worldly order, for whatever actual regime that would be put in place would in a Buddhist sense be unsatisfactory. In this respect Buddhism differs from other religions where private and public affairs were brought within the gambit of religious regulation.

Most studies on Thai Women reveal the equal status of the wives to that of their husbands as per the Sukhothai period of Thai history. The male roles were similarly placed. He is the bread winner, the head of the family, the ruler and the protector of the country; While the women looked after the home the children, the men folk, managed the family budget.

During the Ayudhya period in the fourteenth century, the status of women began to deteriorate. In the 1361 Law on Husband and wives, men were allowed to practice polygamy and wives were divided into different classes. Husbands could punish their wives physically. In this period, the status of women was characterized by the saying “Women are buffaloes, Men are humans.”

In terms of education, except for women in royalty and aristocracy, Thai girls rarely had any access to education. Before the introduction of the universal secular education by king Rama VI in the early twentieth century, education was conducted mainly in the
monasteries by the (male) Buddhist monks who, in Theravada Buddhist tradition, were not allowed to have any contact with women.

This leads us to an area where the status of Thai women is perhaps the most inferior. It is believed in Theravada Buddhism by at least some segments of such countries as Thailand and Burma that women are ritually and spiritually inferior to men. For instance they cannot attain Nirvana like men.

Theravada Buddhists are very important to understand the current status of women in India and Thailand. Especially today, social economical political and religious matrix in Buddhism are one of the leading designed attitudes in determining the role of women in the contemporary age of equality.

Most of the traditional works misinterpreted the concept of Buddhist woman. It is interesting to study on such backsliding matters, occurring most commonly in the later works, in the prose sectors of the Jatakas.
1.2 HYPOTHESIS:

1) The position of women in Buddhism on historical lines is comparatively an inferior status to men.
2) Women had more freedom and independence within the order of Bhikkunis than anywhere else in society.
3) The economic and social status of women in early Buddhist time, both in India and Thailand was comparatively controlled by religious orders.
4) Social attitudes significantly shaped and narrowed the educational framework for women limiting it to one purpose; that is to mould women to be good housewives as well as good citizens of a country.
1.3 STATUS OF THE PROBLEM OF THE STUDY:

The present study is intended to focus on the attitude of the Theravada Buddhism towards women in terms of all aspects and to find out the roles of women in the field of religious practice. Specially an attempt is made here to understand and determine the position of women as taught by the Buddha. Several years after the monks' order was established in India in the sixth century B.C the Buddha set up the nun's order. Three levels of ordination exists for nuns; Sramanerika (Novice), Siksa (Probationary), and Bhikshuni (full ordination) The Bhikshuni ordination lineage is important, for one becomes a nun by taking the ordination from those who have received it, and in this way, the purity of the transmission is traced back to the Buddha himself.

The current study focuses on the problems of women and their status in early Buddhist and post Buddhist period. As Buddhism spread in ancient India, various Vinaya schools developed the eighteen initial schools. Three are extinct today. The Theravada is widespread in Srilanka, Thailand and South East Asia. The study mainly compares the present and past position of women in Theravada Buddhism and the pre Buddhist period of Indian society.

In response to the developments of status of women, it is required to study more on the problems in different angles of historical perspective.
1.4 THE OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH:

1) To study the views of the Theravada Buddhism towards women from ancient to the present period.
2) To understand the important role of women in Theravada Buddhism in the propagation of the Buddha’s teachings and practice.
3) To study the impact and changing behaviour of women in the practice of religious life and the practical advantages as an individual and community.
4) To study the attitude of Theravada Buddhism towards women’s status in terms of socio-religious equalities.
5) To study the differences between Thai Buddhism and Indian society; the status of Indian women in ancient and modern history. The effects of the rules and regulations of Indian Society on women. This study will focus on existing rights and duties of Indian women, as compared to Buddhist women.
1.5 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to the texts, the Buddha told Ananda that “women are selfish, poor in wisdom, and therefore unable to assume a seat in the assembly, and that they cannot work and cannot travel to distant lands”.

However, the most positive passage regarding women in the texts relates to the Buddha’s saying that both men and women have equal spiritual potential and that woman’s spiritual development does not depend on her husband or son. And yet, as mentioned elsewhere in this work, woman’s most important merit - making act is to give a son for ordination and whenever possible make resources available for her husband to make merit.

There are also many positive passages in Buddhist texts pertaining to women, which have been adopted from ancient Indian scriptures. The Buddha admonished his followers that they should look upon and treat every woman as if she was their mother or sister. In almost all cultures motherhood holds an exalted position and the brother-sister relationship has a bond of affection, respect, protection, and sacredness. Buddha also stressed the importance of respecting one’s wife. Buddhist texts also mention, in a positive way, the following five powers women have: form, wealth, relatives, sons and morality.¹

¹ Anguttara Nikaya Vol I, Thaipitaka, P. 1.
According to Kularb Saipradit and Jit Bhumisak in order to understand the position and problems of Thai women in Buddhism, it is necessary to examine the social and cultural roles of women generally in Thailand. Historically, the training and social conditioning of Thai women has been aimed at producing “good women” who are well-equipped in the traditional “home sciences”. Cooking, carving fruit into beautiful offering for their husbands, and maintaining the home. It has been accepted for many years that Thai women did not have critical or intellectual capacities, and that women are the “weaker sex,” “flowers of the world” to serve and please men. It is, of course, absurd to say that women are the “weaker sex.” In traditional village life, women have always worked side by side in the fields with men. Then, while the men relax after returning from a day of working in the fields, women cook the meals, take care of children, clean, and weave. During the last thirty years, agricultural failure resulting from backward or inadequate technology has forced many village women to seek employment in urban industrial areas, primarily in the capital, Bangkok. Many textile factories prefer to hire women because they produce better work, are less troublesome to control or manipulate, and are paid less than men. Thai women continue to be suppressed in economics, politics, and culture. It is rare to find mention of the endurance and self-sacrifice of Thai women in the pages of my country’s history. Women are doubly exploited, both in the class structure of Thai society and in the gender bias within that structure.¹

Boonsue Kornvibha, who studied women in Jataka tales, felt that although the Buddha was enlightened, he was still not entirely free of certain social conditions and contradictions. In the teachings attributed

to the Buddha he reminded the monks that “woman is a stain on celibacy”. Accordingly, in his conversation with Ananda he counselled that monks should not look at women or spend any time with them because “nothing blinds men as strongly as women”. Although there was a similar admonishment for the women, it is seldom referred to or discussed. Women are the means of distraction and disruption for men who are attempting to realize their spiritual growth.  

Kisa Gotami, a cousin of the Buddha, also renounced the world because of very tragic circumstances. Her infant son was bitten by a snake and died in her arms. She was wandering about with grief and despair when she happens to meet the Buddha, who tells her that he can bring back her child if she would bring him a mustard seed, but only from a house where no one has ever died. Kisa Gotami goes from house to house with no success, when she suddenly realizes that the Master was only trying to teach her the great truth of the universality of death. She found comfort in her realization of this truth and joined the Order.  

Although women who joined the Order came from different strata of the society, all of them had to submit to the same living conditions and daily routines. There were no exceptions. The life in the Order was very disciplined and severe, and not everyone who joined could survive its rigour. Good physical health, strong will and determined attitude were absolutely essential.  

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1 Boomsue Komvibha, "Buddhism and Gender Bias: An Analysis of jataka Tale" (unpublished M.A. Thesis, The Hague University, the Netherlands).  
Arvind Sharma (Ed), in his book *Women in World Religions* makes interesting points. This book represents the application of the phenomenological stance, with its respect for the insider’s view, to the study of women in world religions. If scholarship on women and religion is coming of age in the form of methodological sophistication, its growth towards maturity is also reflected in its treatment of history. The lack of correlation between the gender of the deities and male dominance in world religions may be explained by suggesting that there was once such a correlation of male deities and patriarchal social structure at a formative stage of the religion or the dominant religion in the area. This is a book by women about women in the religion of the world. It presents all the basic facts and ideological issues concerning the position of women in the major religious tradition of humanity.¹

*Julia Leslie, The Perfect Wife:* Translation and commentary made on Tryambakayajvan work. Tryambaka is interested in women not as individuals but as parts that fit into and strengthen the whole in dharma. He has therefore combed the scriptures for rulings related to women and rearranged them in such a way that all who read will be encouraged to conform.

In this book the rare attempt had been made on a woman’s day in detail; therefore it deserves careful consideration. For everything the good Hindu wife should do from the moment she wakes up in the morning to the moment she sleeps at night is discussed from the point of view of the sacred norms of religious law (dharmasastra).²

¹ Arvind Sharma (Ed), *Women in World Religions* (Indian Book Centre 1995)
VrindaNabar: Caste as Woman. This work is a stimulating original assessment of the Indian woman today. The issues dealt with in this illuminating book are those that connect female awareness and its struggle against patriarchy with specific Indian situations and problems. Indian religious task and Shartras are used to reinforce the argument that gender in many ways has become a curious equalizer with respect to Indian women even though the conventional caste-structure continues to dominate social structure.¹

Kumkum Roy (ed.): Women in Early Indian Societies. As daughter, wife, mother and in other capacities, women constitute a practically undifferentiated group, with a set of norms and duties they are seen to have adhered to. The historical perspective in their discourse is in tracing their fall from an ideal exalted position in Vedic times, reflected in their participatory scholarly and ritual status, to stages of decline of that status. The historical experience of India in combination with contemporary ethno-sociological realities, does indeed point to the need to explore plurality and to strive towards fresh perspectives on gender relations.

In a sense, this is best illustrated by Altekar’s the Position of Women in Hindu Civilization (1938, 1978), which represents the culmination and consolidation of a definition of the "woman question" which was designed to meet the requirements of a specific historical agenda. Altekar locates the history of women along two areas of comparison, one, within Indian history, and second, with other known societies or civilization.²

¹ VrindaNabar Caste as Woman (Penguin book India. 1995)
²Kumkum Roy (ed.) Women in Early Indian Societies (Asia publishing House Bombay 1956)
Weininger said; A woman who had really given up her sexual self, who wished to be at peace, would be no longer “woman”. She would have received the inward and spiritual sign as well as the outward form of regeneration “He asks.” Is it (then) possible for woman really to wish to realize the problem of existence, the conception of guilt (Dukkha)? Can she really desire freedom? This can happen only by her being penetrated by an ideal, brought star…. In that way only can there be an emancipation (nibbana) of woman. To this question the Buddhist replies that it is possible for women to really desire freedom, and that no small number of women amongst that Buddhist sisters attained it. It may be left to the advocates of woman’s “emancipation” on the one hand, and to feminine idealists on the other, to debate how far these views involve the honour or the dishonour of “woman”

Ananda Coomaraswamamy wrote about woman, in his book Buddha and the gospel of Buddhism; On the other hand we find that Gautama did not disdain to accept the hospitality and the gifts of devout laywomen. Such a one is represented to us in the honourable matron Visakha, “a rich citizen commoner at Savatthi, the chief town of Kosala, the mother of many blooming children, the grandmother of countless grandchildren”. This lady makes provision on a liberal scale for the Buddha and his disciples while they reside at Savatthi. One day she approaches Gautama and makes eight requests, and these are, that she may be allowed to furnish the brethren with clothes for the rainy season, food to the brethren who reach Savatthi, or pass through Savatthi, or who are sick, or who reside there, medicine for the sick, and bathing-dresses to the sisters. She sets forth the desirability of such alms in detail. The Buddha replies with words of approval, and is

1 Weininger’ sex and character (1906) P.347-9
pleased to grant the eight favours. It should be remarked, that in accordance with the Indian view of charity, there are so many favours bestowed upon Visakha,—not, as Western readers might think, upon the Order; for the religious mendicant, by accepting gifts, confers upon the giver the opportunity of a meritorious deed. Accordingly the Holy One praised Visakha as one who walks the shining, commendable path, and will joyfully reap for a long period the reward of her charity, in heaven above.

It is justly remarked by Professor Oldenberg: “Pictures like this of Visakha, benefactresses of the Church, with their inexhaustible religious zeal, and their not less inexhaustible resources of money, are certainly, if anything ever was, drawn from the life of India in those days: they cannot be left out of sight, if we desire to get an idea of the actors who made the oldest Buddhist community what it was.”

Gautama, however, did not merely accept the offerings of the respectable, but also those of ‘sinners.’ It is recorded that upon a certain occasion he accepted for himself and his followers an invitation to dinner from the courtesan Ambapali, and refused the alternative invitation of the Liccachavi princes, to their great annoyance. He also for some time took up his residence in her mango pleasance, of which, moreover, she made a gift to the Order, The Sutta says:

“The Exalted One accepted the gift; and after instructing, and rousing, and inciting, and gladdening her with religious discourse, he rose from his seat and departed thence.”

It is worthy of note that neither Visakha nor Ambapali is represented to have left the world as an immediate result of his
teaching, or even to have changed her mode of life; their gifts were accepted by Gautama simply as those of pious laywomen. Each would receive in some heaven the immediate reward of her generosity, and in some future life the fruit of perfect enlightenment.

Buddhist thought gives honour to woman to this extent that it never doubts the possibility of her putting off her women’s nature, and even in this life becoming, as it were, a man. The case is given of the lady Gopika who, “having abandoned a woman’s thoughts and cultivated the thoughts of a man” was reborn as a son of Sakka in heaven. There was also, and more conspicuous, the great body of the Sisters-initiated, though under protest, with the consent of Gautama himself-of whom many attained to Arahatta, to Nibbana; and of these last, the beautiful songs of triumph are preserved in the Psalms of the Sisters. And although these Sisters were technically appointed juniors in perpetuity to the brethren, “it is equally clear that, by intellectual and moral eminence, They might claim equality with the highest of the fraternity.”\(^1\)

\(^1\) C.A.F Rhys Davids. Psalms of the sisters.p.xxvi.
1.6 Methodology:

This research work is carried out by a suitable research methodology. Basically this research follows historical, analytical and critical methods to find out origin, growth and development of chronological steps of status, position and problems of women in general and the role of religious laws in particular.

This study also uses the comparative methods between religious practices of Indian women and Theravada Buddhist practices of Thai women from pre-Buddhist society to modern Buddhist world.

To support this study, the primary data and secondary data will be used in a systematic way. Related websites from Internet are also used as secondary sources of study.