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Buddhism and Gender: Spiritual Equality, Institutional Challenges, and Contemporary Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Gender has become a significant area of inquiry in contemporary Buddhist studies, particularly in discussions concerning spiritual equality, institutional authority, and religious leadership. Although Buddhism emerged within the patriarchal social context of ancient India, its foundational teachings introduced a transformative vision by affirming that liberation (*nibbāna*) is attainable by all human beings regardless of gender, caste, or social status. Early Buddhist scriptures, especially the *Therīgāthā*, provide compelling evidence of women's spiritual accomplishments and demonstrate that female practitioners attained arahantship through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. Nevertheless, the historical development of Buddhist institutions has often reflected prevailing patriarchal norms, resulting in unequal opportunities for women, particularly within monastic communities. This article critically examines the relationship between Buddhist doctrine and gender by analyzing canonical teachings, the establishment of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, the controversial Eight *Garudhammas*, and the historical decline of the *bhikkhunī* ordination lineage in several *Theravāda* countries. It further explores contemporary movements for the revival of *bhikkhunī* ordination and evaluates the contributions of women in both *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* traditions. Drawing upon primary Buddhist texts and contemporary scholarship, the study argues that while the Buddha's teachings fundamentally support spiritual equality, institutional practices have frequently been shaped by historical, cultural, and social conditions rather than by doctrinal principles alone. The article concludes that the ongoing dialogue concerning gender, ordination, and leadership reflects Buddhism's dynamic engagement with modern concerns for equality, justice, and human dignity. Understanding both the liberating ideals and historical limitations of Buddhist traditions contributes to a more balanced interpretation of Buddhism as a living religion capable of responding constructively to contemporary discussions on gender and social transformation.

Introduction

Gender has become one of the most significant themes in contemporary religious studies, attracting increasing scholarly attention across disciplines such as theology, history, sociology, anthropology, and Buddhist studies. Discussions concerning gender are no longer limited to biological distinctions between men and women but also encompass the social, cultural, institutional, and religious constructions that shape human identity, authority, and opportunity. Within Buddhism, gender has emerged as an important field of inquiry because the tradition presents both inspiring ideals of spiritual equality and historical examples of institutional

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inequality. Consequently, Buddhism offers a rich context for examining the relationship between religious doctrine and social practice.

Buddhism originated in northern India during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, a period characterized by strong patriarchal social structures in which women generally occupied subordinate positions within both family life and religious institutions. Brahmanical traditions largely restricted women's participation in religious education, public leadership, and independent spiritual practice. Against this social background, the Buddha introduced teachings that challenged many prevailing assumptions concerning birth, caste, social status, and gender. Rather than defining an individual's spiritual potential according to biological sex or social rank, Buddhism emphasized moral conduct (*sīla*), mental cultivation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) as the essential conditions for liberation from suffering (Anālayo, 2016; Gethin, 1998).

One of the defining characteristics of Buddhist philosophy is its rejection of permanent identity through the doctrine of *anattā* (non-self). Since no permanent self exists, attachment to fixed identities—including gender—becomes another form of ignorance (*avijjā)* that binds beings to the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). From this doctrinal perspective, enlightenment (*nibbāna*) is not determined by one's sex but by the eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion through ethical living, meditation, and insight. Early Buddhist texts therefore present liberation as universally attainable, regardless of gender, social class, or ethnicity (Harvey, 2013).

The *Pāli* Canon contains numerous accounts demonstrating that women attained the highest stages of spiritual realization. The *Therīgāthā*, one of the oldest surviving collections of women's religious literature in the world, preserves poems composed by enlightened Buddhist nuns who describe their struggles, renunciation, meditation, and liberation. These verses reveal that women were not merely passive followers of the Buddha but active participants in shaping the early Buddhist community. Eminent figures such as *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī*, *Khemā*, *Uppalavaṇṇā*, *Paṭācārā*, and *Kisāgotamī* became respected teachers and exemplars of wisdom whose achievements challenged contemporary assumptions regarding women's spiritual capacities (Blackstone, 1998; Murcott, 1991).

The establishment of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* represented one of the most remarkable developments in ancient Indian religious history. For the first time, women were provided with a formal institutional framework through which they could pursue full-time religious life independent of marriage and domestic responsibilities. The Buddha recognized four pillars of the Buddhist community—the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha*, the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, male lay followers (*upāsakas*), and female lay followers (*upāsikās*)—thereby acknowledging the importance of both women and men in preserving and transmitting the Dhamma. This fourfold community became a defining characteristic of Buddhism and reflected a broader vision of religious participation than was common in many contemporary traditions (Bodhi, 2009).

Despite these progressive developments, the historical evolution of Buddhist institutions presents a more complex picture. Shortly after the establishment of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, Buddhist texts record the introduction of the Eight *Garudhammas*, a set of disciplinary rules requiring nuns to maintain formal subordination to monks regardless of seniority. Traditional interpretations regard these regulations as protective measures designed to ensure the stability of the newly established community within a conservative social environment. However, many contemporary scholars question both the historical authenticity of these rules and their compatibility with the broader Buddhist principles of compassion, justice, and spiritual equality. Consequently, the Eight *Garudhammas* have become central to modern discussions concerning gender hierarchy within Buddhist monastic institutions (Anālayo, 2016; Tsomo, 2019).

The decline of the *Bhikkhunī* ordination lineage in several *Theravāda* countries further complicated women's participation in monastic life. Political instability, warfare, institutional dependence upon the Bhikkhu *Saṅgha*, and deeply rooted patriarchal customs contributed to the disappearance of full ordination for women in countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand. Although women continued to practice as lay renunciants or members of alternative religious communities, they were frequently denied equal institutional recognition and educational opportunities available to monks. By contrast, *Mahāyāna* traditions in China, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam preserved uninterrupted *Bhikkhunī* ordination lineages, enabling women to continue full monastic practice and assume leadership roles within Buddhist education, social welfare, and religious scholarship (Gross, 1993).

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, movements advocating the revival of *Bhikkhunī* ordination have significantly reshaped discussions of Buddhism and gender. International cooperation among Buddhist communities has led to the re-establishment of *Bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka and growing recognition of ordained women in many parts of the world. Contemporary Buddhist leaders and scholars have argued that restoring full ordination is consistent with the Buddha's original vision of the fourfold assembly and reflects Buddhism's commitment to compassion, ethical justice, and universal liberation. Nevertheless, official recognition remains contested in several *Theravāda* countries, illustrating the continuing tension between scriptural interpretation, institutional authority, and cultural tradition (Tsomo, 2019; Bodhi, 2009).

The study of Buddhism and gender therefore requires a balanced and critical approach that distinguishes between foundational Buddhist teachings and the historical development of Buddhist institutions. While canonical doctrines consistently affirm the equal potential of all beings to attain enlightenment, historical practices have often reflected the patriarchal cultures in which Buddhist communities evolved. Understanding this distinction is essential for avoiding simplistic conclusions that either portray Buddhism as entirely egalitarian or dismiss it as inherently patriarchal. Instead, Buddhism should be understood as a dynamic religious tradition whose teachings have continually interacted with changing social, political, and cultural contexts.

Against this background, this article critically examines the relationship between Buddhist teachings and gender through five interrelated themes. First, it explores the concept of gender in Buddhist studies and its relevance to contemporary scholarship. Second, it examines the doctrine of spiritual equality in early Buddhism, demonstrating how canonical teachings affirm women's capacity for enlightenment. Third, it analyzes the establishment of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, with particular attention to the Eight *Garudhammas* and debates concerning women's religious authority. Fourth, it investigates the historical decline and contemporary revival of the *Bhikkhunī* ordination in *Theravāda* Buddhism. Finally, it critically evaluates the continuing relationship between gender equality and patriarchal structures within contemporary Buddhist communities. Through an examination of both canonical sources and modern scholarship, the article argues that Buddhism contains enduring doctrinal foundations for gender equality while acknowledging that its institutions have often reflected the social realities of their historical contexts. This critical perspective contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Buddhism as a living religious tradition that continues to engage with contemporary questions of equality, leadership, and social justice.

Concept of Gender in Buddhist Studies

Gender has become a central analytical category in contemporary Buddhist studies because it provides a framework for examining how religious teachings, institutional structures, and cultural practices shape the experiences of women and men within Buddhist communities. While the term sex refers to biological differences between males and females, gender encompasses the socially and culturally constructed roles, expectations, identities, and power relations associated with being male or female (Gross, 1993). Consequently, the study of gender in Buddhism extends beyond biological distinctions to explore how religious authority, monastic discipline, education, leadership, and social participation have been influenced by historical and cultural contexts.

From a Buddhist philosophical perspective, gender is not regarded as an essential or permanent identity. One of the foundational doctrines of Buddhism is *anattā* (non-self), which teaches that no unchanging self or soul exists within any individual. Human identity is understood as a dynamic combination of the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*): form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Since these aggregates are impermanent (*anicca*) and devoid of an independent self, attachment to identities such as gender, social status, ethnicity, or caste becomes another manifestation of ignorance (*avijjā*) that perpetuates suffering (*dukkha*) within the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*) (Harvey, 2013). In this doctrinal sense, gender possesses no ultimate significance in determining one's capacity for spiritual awakening.

Early Buddhist teachings consistently emphasize that liberation depends upon ethical conduct (*sīla*), mental concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) rather than biological sex. The Buddha repeatedly taught that all sentient beings possess the potential to attain enlightenment through diligent practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. This universal approach represented a significant departure from many religious

traditions in ancient India, where women's access to education, ritual authority, and religious life was often restricted by patriarchal social structures (Gethin, 1998). By placing moral and spiritual qualities above inherited status or gender, Buddhism introduced a more inclusive understanding of human spiritual potential.

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between Buddhist doctrine and the historical development of Buddhist institutions. Although canonical teachings emphasize universal liberation, Buddhist communities evolved within societies that were deeply influenced by patriarchal values. As Buddhism spread throughout South and Southeast Asia, East Asia, and later the modern world, monastic institutions frequently reflected prevailing social norms regarding gender roles and authority. Consequently, opportunities available to women often differed considerably from those available to men, particularly in relation to ordination, education, ecclesiastical leadership, and institutional decision-making (Tsomo, 2019). This distinction between doctrinal ideals and historical practice remains one of the central themes in contemporary Buddhist scholarship.

Modern scholars therefore approach Buddhism and gender from multiple perspectives. Historical studies investigate the lives of Buddhist women in early canonical literature and examine the evolution of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*. Textual scholars analyze canonical sources such as the *Vīnaya Piṭaka*, the *Therīgāthā*, and various suttas to evaluate the authenticity and interpretation of passages concerning women. Sociologists and anthropologists explore how Buddhist women negotiate religious authority within different cultural settings, while feminist scholars critically assess the relationship between Buddhist teachings and institutional patriarchy. Rather than viewing Buddhism as either wholly egalitarian or inherently discriminatory, contemporary scholarship generally recognizes the complexity and diversity of Buddhist traditions across different historical periods and geographical regions (Anālayo, 2016).

An important methodological consideration is the distinction between normative Buddhism and lived Buddhism. Normative Buddhism refers to the ideals expressed in canonical texts and doctrinal teachings, whereas lived Buddhism examines how those ideals are practiced within everyday religious life. This distinction helps explain why Buddhist scriptures frequently affirm women’s spiritual capacity while certain monastic institutions have historically limited women’s religious opportunities. The gap between doctrine and practice reflects not only religious interpretation but also the influence of political authority, economic conditions, cultural traditions, and social expectations.

Today, the concept of gender in Buddhist studies continues to evolve alongside broader discussions concerning human rights, social justice, and gender equality. Contemporary debates surrounding the revival of the *Bhikkhunī* ordination, women's leadership within Buddhist organizations, inclusive religious education, and reinterpretations of monastic discipline demonstrate that gender remains an active and significant field of scholarly inquiry. Examining gender through both doctrinal and historical perspectives enables a more balanced understanding of Buddhism as a living religious tradition that has continually adapted to changing social realities while preserving its fundamental commitment to the universal possibility of liberation for all beings.

Spiritual Equality in Early Buddhism

One of the most distinctive features of early Buddhism is its affirmation that spiritual liberation is attainable by all human beings regardless of gender, caste, ethnicity, or social status. Unlike many religious traditions of ancient India, which often restricted women's participation in religious life, the Buddha emphasized that enlightenment (*nibbāna*) depends on personal effort, ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom rather than biological sex. This doctrinal position established a foundation for spiritual equality that remains one of Buddhism's most influential contributions to discussions of gender and religion.

The principle of spiritual equality is closely connected with the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* (non-self). According to this teaching, no permanent or independent self exists within any living being. Human identity consists of the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*): form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhārā*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Since these aggregates are impermanent (*anicca*) and subject to suffering (*dukkha*), attachment to identities such as gender, caste, or social position is regarded as a form of ignorance (*avijjā*). Consequently, the attainment of liberation depends not on one's physical characteristics but on the cultivation of wisdom (*paññā*), morality (*sīla*), and concentration (*samādhi*) through the Noble Eightfold Path (Harvey, 2013).

The Pāli Canon provides numerous examples demonstrating that women were fully capable of attaining the highest stages of spiritual realization. The Buddha explicitly declared that women possess the same potential for enlightenment as men when they practice the Dhamma diligently. Many female disciples attained arahantship, the complete eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion, thereby achieving liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Their attainments confirm that spiritual awakening in Buddhism is based upon insight into reality rather than gender identity (Gethin, 1998).

Among the most prominent examples is *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī*, the Buddha's foster mother and the first woman to request admission into the monastic order. After persistent requests and the intercession of the Venerable *Ānanda*, the Buddha established the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, thereby enabling women to pursue full-time religious life. *Mahāpajāpatī* later attained arahantship and became a respected leader of the community of Buddhist nuns. Her life illustrates both the challenges women encountered within ancient Indian society and the transformative opportunities made possible through the Buddha’s teachings (Anālayo, 2016).

Other eminent female disciples further demonstrate the principle of spiritual equality. *Khemā Therī*, renowned for her profound wisdom, was declared by the Buddha to be foremost among the *bhikkhunīs* in wisdom. *Uppalavaṇṇā Therī* was recognized as foremost in supernormal spiritual powers (*iddhi*), while *Paṭācārā Therī* became celebrated for her mastery of the *Vinaya* and her compassionate guidance of other nuns. *Kisāgotamī*, whose personal tragedy led her to realize the universality of death and impermanence, became an enduring symbol of wisdom arising through suffering. These women were not merely devoted

followers but influential teachers whose spiritual achievements earned the Buddha's highest praise (Murcott, 1991).

The *Therīgāthā* ("Verses of the Elder Nuns") provides some of the strongest evidence for women's spiritual authority in early Buddhism. As one of the oldest surviving collections of women's religious literature in the world, it contains seventy-three poems composed by enlightened nuns describing their struggles, renunciation, meditation, and realization of liberation. The verses reveal that women from diverse backgrounds—including queens, mothers, widows, courtesans, and ordinary householders—were able to transcend suffering through the practice of the Dhamma. Their personal testimonies challenge the assumption that religious authority in ancient Buddhism belonged exclusively to men and demonstrate that women actively contributed to the preservation and transmission of Buddhist teachings (Blackstone, 1998).

The Buddha also established the Buddhist community as a fourfold assembly (*catuparisā*), consisting of *bhikkhus* (monks), *bhikkhunīs* (nuns), *upāsakas* (male lay followers), and *upāsikās* (female lay followers). This structure acknowledged that both women and men played indispensable roles in sustaining the Buddha's dispensation (*Sāsana*). Laywomen such as *Visākhā Migāramātā* became exemplary supporters of the Saṅgha through acts of generosity, religious devotion, and community leadership. Their contributions demonstrate that spiritual progress in Buddhism was not confined to monastic life but was accessible to all sincere practitioners regardless of gender or social position.

Despite these affirmations of spiritual equality, early Buddhist literature also contains passages that reflect the patriarchal social environment of ancient India. Debates concerning the Eight *Garudhammas* and other disciplinary regulations suggest that institutional arrangements did not always correspond fully with the egalitarian implications of Buddhist doctrine. Consequently, contemporary scholars distinguish between the Buddha's fundamental teachings on liberation and the historical development of Buddhist monastic institutions. While the latter often reflected prevailing social conventions, the doctrinal foundation of early Buddhism consistently maintained that enlightenment is equally attainable by women and men through ethical living, meditation, and wisdom. This distinction remains central to modern discussions of Buddhism and gender, providing the basis for contemporary movements advocating greater equality within Buddhist communities (Gross, 1993; Tsomo, 2019).

The *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*: The Eight *Garudhammas* and Women's Religious Authority

The establishment of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* was one of the most significant developments in the history of Buddhism and represented a remarkable transformation in the religious landscape of ancient India. At a time when women's opportunities for independent religious life were severely limited, the Buddha's decision to establish an order of fully ordained nuns provided women with an institutional framework for pursuing spiritual liberation through monastic discipline, meditation, and the study of the *Dhamma*. Although the creation of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* demonstrated the Buddha's recognition of women's spiritual potential,

it also introduced complex questions regarding religious authority, institutional hierarchy, and gender equality that continue to be debated by scholars and Buddhist communities today.

According to the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī*, the Buddha's foster mother and maternal aunt, was the first woman to request full ordination. Initially, the Buddha declined her request on three occasions. However, after the Venerable *Ānanda* respectfully questioned whether women could attain the four stages of enlightenment, the Buddha affirmed that women possessed the same spiritual capacity as men to achieve arahantship. Following this acknowledgement, he permitted the establishment of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, making Buddhism one of the earliest religious traditions to create a formal monastic order for women (Anālayo, 2016). This decision reflected a revolutionary recognition that liberation depended upon spiritual practice rather than biological sex.

The admission of women into the monastic community significantly expanded opportunities for female religious education and leadership. *Bhikkhunīs* devoted themselves to the study of the *Dhamma*, meditation, teaching, and the observance of the *Vinaya*. Many attained arahantship and became highly respected spiritual teachers. Distinguished nuns such as *Khemā*, *Uppalavaṇṇā*, *Paṭācārā*, and *Dhammadinnā* were praised by the Buddha for their wisdom, meditative attainments, mastery of discipline, and ability to teach profound doctrinal principles. Their achievements demonstrate that women exercised genuine religious authority within the early Buddhist community and contributed substantially to preserving and transmitting the Buddha's teachings (Blackstone, 1998).

Despite these progressive developments, the foundation of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* was accompanied by the introduction of the Eight *Garudhammas* (garudhamma literally means "weighty" or "important rules"). According to the traditional Vinaya accounts, these eight special regulations became conditions for the establishment of the order of nuns. They required, among other provisions, that even a senior *bhikkhunī* ordained for many years should pay respect to a newly ordained *bhikkhu*, that ordinations involve both the *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhunī Saṅghas*, and that disciplinary matters be conducted under the supervision of monks. These rules established a formal institutional relationship in which the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* remained subordinate to the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* regardless of seniority.

Traditional Buddhist commentators generally interpret the *Garudhammas* as practical measures intended to protect women within the social conditions of ancient India. During the Buddha's lifetime, women travelling independently or living outside family protection often faced considerable social insecurity. According to this interpretation, the regulations were designed to preserve harmony within the *Saṅgha*, promote public confidence in the newly established order of nuns, and ensure its long-term stability in a predominantly patriarchal society. Rather than expressing spiritual inferiority, the rules are understood as administrative arrangements reflecting the historical realities of the period (Bodhi, 2009).

In contrast, many contemporary scholars question both the historical authenticity and ethical implications of the Eight *Garudhammas*. Textual analysis has identified inconsistencies between different *Vinaya* traditions concerning the wording and placement of these regulations. Some scholars, including Bhikkhu Anālayo (2016), argue that at least some of the *Garudhammas* may represent later editorial additions rather than the direct words of the Buddha. Others maintain that the regulations reflect institutional developments that emerged after the Buddha's lifetime as the monastic community adapted to changing social and political circumstances. These scholarly debates suggest that the historical formation of *Vinaya* was more complex than traditional narratives sometimes indicate.

From a feminist perspective, the Eight *Garudhammas* have become one of the principal symbols of gender hierarchy within Buddhist institutions. Scholars such as Rita M. Gross (1993) argue that while Buddhist doctrine proclaims universal spiritual equality, institutional regulations frequently reinforced male authority and restricted women's leadership. The requirement that senior nuns defer to junior monks appears difficult to reconcile with the Buddhist emphasis on wisdom, ethical conduct, and seniority as the true measures of spiritual accomplishment. Consequently, feminist Buddhist scholarship distinguishes between the Buddha's liberating teachings and later institutional practices shaped by patriarchal social norms.

Nevertheless, the religious authority exercised by early Buddhist women should not be underestimated. The Therīgāthā preserves the voices of enlightened nuns who taught the *Dhamma* with profound insight and personal authority. *Dhammadinnā Therī*, for example, delivered sophisticated doctrinal explanations in the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*, which the Buddha himself praised as entirely correct. Similarly, *Khemā* and *Uppalavaṇṇā* were publicly recognized by the Buddha as foremost among his female disciples in wisdom and meditative powers, demonstrating that women were respected not merely for their devotion but also for their intellectual and spiritual excellence (Murcott, 1991).

Today, the relationship between the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, the Eight *Garudhammas*, and women's religious authority remains an important topic in global Buddhism. Movements advocating the revival of Bhikkhunī ordination often argue that restoring full opportunities for women reflects the Buddha's original recognition of their equal spiritual capacity. At the same time, traditional communities continue to emphasize fidelity to *Vinaya* and historical continuity. These ongoing discussions illustrate the dynamic interaction between scripture, tradition, institutional authority, and contemporary understandings of gender equality. Ultimately, while the Eight *Garudhammas* continue to generate debate, the early Buddhist record provides compelling evidence that women attained the highest levels of spiritual realization and exercised meaningful religious authority within the Buddha's dispensation. The continuing challenge for contemporary Buddhism is to harmonize its institutional structures with its enduring doctrinal commitment to universal liberation.

The Decline and Contemporary Revival of the *Bhikkhunī* Ordination

The history of the *Bhikkhunī* ordination reflects both the achievements and challenges of women in Buddhist monasticism. Although the Buddha established the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* as an integral part of the fourfold Buddhist community, the continuity of the *bhikkhunī* lineage was not maintained in every Buddhist tradition. Over the centuries, political instability, warfare, social patriarchy, institutional dependence on the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha*, and differing interpretations of the *Vinaya* contributed to the disappearance of full *bhikkhunī* ordination in many *Theravāda* countries. In recent decades, however, international efforts to revive the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* have generated renewed scholarly and religious interest, making women's ordination one of the most significant contemporary issues in Buddhism.

According to the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* flourished during the Buddha's lifetime and in the centuries that followed. Numerous nuns attained arahantship, taught the *Dhamma*, and contributed to the preservation of the Buddhist tradition. Historical records indicate that the bhikkhunī lineage was successfully transmitted from India to Sri Lanka during the reign of *King Devānampiya Tissa* through the efforts of *Saṅghamittā Therī*, the daughter of Emperor Aśoka. Her arrival in Sri Lanka marked a turning point in Buddhist history, as she established the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* and ordained Sri Lankan women, creating a strong monastic tradition that endured for many centuries (Anālayo, 2016).

Despite this promising beginning, the *Bhikkhunī* lineage gradually declined in South Asia. The decline was not caused by a single event but resulted from a combination of political, social, and institutional factors. Repeated foreign invasions, civil conflicts, and economic decline weakened Buddhist monasteries throughout India and Sri Lanka. During periods of warfare, monastic communities suffered significant losses, and many monasteries were destroyed or abandoned. Because the *Vinaya* requires a dual ordination ceremony conducted by both the *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhunī Saṅghas*, the disappearance of the community of ordained nuns made it increasingly difficult to confer valid ordination upon new candidates. Consequently, the *Theravāda bhikkhunī* lineage eventually became extinct in Sri Lanka around the eleventh century (Bodhi, 2009).

The decline of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in Sri Lanka had profound consequences for *Theravāda* Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia. Since Sri Lanka served as the principal center for *Theravāda* monastic ordination, countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia inherited traditions in which no functioning *bhikkhunī* lineage existed. Women who wished to dedicate themselves to religious life continued to practice as lay renunciants or semi-ordained ascetics, but they generally lacked the legal recognition, educational opportunities, and institutional authority granted to fully ordained monks. In Sri Lanka, women commonly observed the *Dasa Sil Mātā* tradition, while in Thailand women entered religious life as Mae Chi, and in Myanmar as Thilashin. Although these communities have made significant contributions to Buddhist education, meditation, and social welfare, they do not enjoy the same ecclesiastical status as fully ordained bhikkhus (Gross, 1993).

Patriarchal cultural attitudes also contributed to the decline of women's monastic opportunities. In many traditional societies, religious leadership was regarded primarily as a male responsibility, and women were often expected to fulfil domestic and family roles. These social expectations influenced the interpretation and implementation of Buddhist monastic regulations. Consequently, institutional barriers rather than doctrinal principles frequently limit women's participation in religious leadership. Modern scholars therefore distinguish between the Buddha's teachings, which affirm women's capacity for enlightenment, and historical institutional practices shaped by prevailing cultural norms (Harvey, 2013).

During the late twentieth century, international Buddhist communities began to reconsider the possibility of restoring full *bhikkhunī* ordination. Scholarly research on the *Vinaya*, together with growing awareness of gender equality and human rights, encouraged renewed examination of the historical foundations of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*. Many Buddhist leaders argued that since the Buddha had established a fourfold assembly consisting of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, restoring the Bhikkhunī order would be consistent with the original vision of the Buddhist community (Anālayo, 2016).

The most significant revival occurred in Sri Lanka during the 1990s. With the cooperation of *Mahāyāna bhikkhunīs* from East Asia and *Theravāda* monks, Sri Lankan women received full ordination, thereby re-establishing the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* after nearly one thousand years. Since then, hundreds of Sri Lankan women have entered the fully ordained monastic life and have become active in Buddhist education, meditation, community development, and humanitarian work. Although some traditional authorities continue to question the legal validity of these ordinations, many scholars and senior monastics regard the revival as both historically justified and doctrinally consistent with the Buddha's teachings (Bodhi, 2009).

The revival movement has also influenced Buddhist communities in Thailand and Myanmar, although official recognition remains controversial. In Thailand, Bhikkhunī *Dhammanandā* became the country's first modern *Theravāda bhikkhunī* and has played a leading role in promoting women's ordination and Buddhist education. Despite lacking formal recognition from the Thai *Saṅgha* Supreme Council, she has inspired many women to pursue monastic life and has become an internationally respected advocate for gender equality within Buddhism. Similarly, in Myanmar, discussions concerning *bhikkhunī* ordination continue among scholars and monastic authorities, although official acceptance has not yet been achieved. These debates illustrate the continuing tension between traditional interpretations of *Vinaya* and contemporary aspirations for greater inclusivity (Tsomo, 2019).

Prominent Buddhist teachers have also contributed to the revival movement. Ajahn Brahm, an Australian *Theravāda* monk, publicly supported the ordination of *bhikkhunīs* in Australia in 2009, arguing that women possess the same spiritual capacity as men and should therefore have equal opportunities for monastic life. His actions generated considerable controversy within traditional *Theravāda* circles but also stimulated global discussion concerning the interpretation of the *Vinaya*, institutional authority, and gender

equality. Such developments demonstrate that the revival of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* is not merely an administrative issue but also a reflection of Buddhism's engagement with contemporary ethical values.

The contemporary revival of *bhikkhunī* ordination represents more than the restoration of a historical institution; it signifies an effort to reconcile Buddhist practice with its foundational teachings on universal liberation. While differences of opinion continue among Buddhist traditions regarding the legality and procedure of ordination, the revival movement has encouraged renewed scholarly dialogue, greater educational opportunities for women, and broader participation in religious leadership. As Buddhism continues to evolve in the twenty-first century, the restoration of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* remains a significant example of how ancient religious traditions respond to changing social realities while remaining rooted in their canonical heritage.

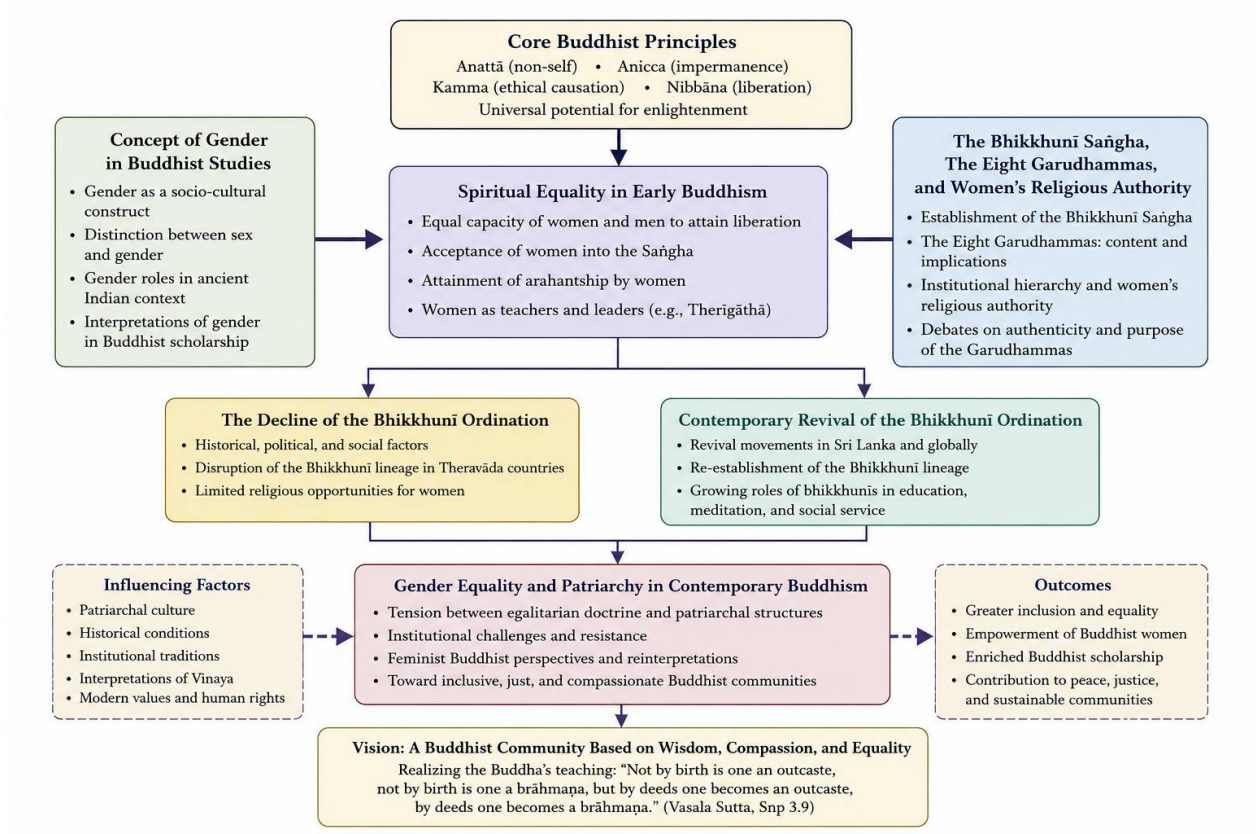


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Buddhism and Gender: Spiritual Equality, Institutional Challenges, and Contemporary Perspectives.

Gender Equality and Patriarchy in Contemporary Buddhism: A Critical Discussion

The relationship between gender equality and patriarchy remains one of the most debated issues in contemporary Buddhism. Although Buddhist doctrine emphasizes the universal potential for enlightenment regardless of gender, historical and institutional developments have often reflected patriarchal social structures. This apparent contradiction has generated extensive discussions among Buddhist scholars, monastic leaders, and practitioners concerning the extent to which gender inequality arises from the Buddha's original teachings or from cultural and historical influences that shaped Buddhist institutions over time. A

critical examination of this issue requires distinguishing between the normative teachings of Buddhism and the lived realities of Buddhist communities.

At the doctrinal level, Buddhism provides a strong foundation for spiritual equality. Central teachings such as *anattā* (non-self), anicca (impermanence), and the Four Noble Truths affirm that all sentient beings possess the capacity to attain liberation through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. The Buddha consistently emphasized that enlightenment depends upon individual practice rather than birth, caste, wealth, or gender. The *Therīgāthā* and numerous discourses in the *Pāli* Canon record the spiritual achievements of enlightened women, demonstrating that female disciples attained arahantship and became respected teachers of the *Dhamma*. These canonical sources suggest that Buddhism, at its doctrinal core, recognizes the equal spiritual capacity of women and men (Harvey, 2013).

Despite this doctrinal commitment, Buddhist institutions have frequently reflected the patriarchal values of the societies in which they developed. Throughout much of Buddhist history, religious leadership, monastic administration, scriptural interpretation, and institutional authority have been predominantly exercised by men. In many *Theravāda* countries, women have historically been excluded from full monastic ordination, limiting their opportunities to receive advanced religious education, participate in ecclesiastical governance, and assume positions of leadership. Consequently, many scholars argue that institutional inequality results more from historical and cultural circumstances than from the Buddha's original teachings (Gross, 1993).

The Eight *Garudhammas* continue to occupy a central place in this debate. Traditional interpretations regard these regulations as practical rules intended to preserve harmony and protect women within the patriarchal environment of ancient India. From this perspective, the *Garudhammas* should be understood within their historical context rather than judged according to modern social values. However, feminist scholars question whether permanent institutional subordination can be reconciled with the Buddha's affirmation that women are equally capable of attaining enlightenment. Bhikkhu Anālayo (2016) and other textual scholars have also argued that some of the *Garudhammas* may have been incorporated into the Vinaya during later editorial developments, thereby inviting renewed examination of their authority and interpretation.

Contemporary Buddhist feminism has significantly influenced discussions concerning gender equality. Rather than rejecting Buddhism, many Buddhist feminists seek to recover and emphasize the egalitarian dimensions of the Buddha's teachings while critically examining institutional practices that have marginalized women. Rita M. Gross (1993) argues that Buddhism possesses rich doctrinal resources for supporting gender equality because its central teachings reject permanent identities and emphasize universal liberation. Similarly, Karma Lekshe Tsomo (2019) maintains that greater participation by women in Buddhist education, leadership, and scholarship strengthens rather than weakens the Buddhist tradition by making it more inclusive and representative of the fourfold community envisioned by the Buddha.

The revival of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* has become one of the most visible expressions of this movement toward gender equality. In countries such as Sri Lanka, Australia, Taiwan, and the United States, fully ordained *bhikkhunīs* now contribute to Buddhist education, meditation training, social welfare, environmental activism, and interreligious dialogue. Their growing presence demonstrates that women can exercise effective religious leadership while faithfully observing the *Vinaya*. Nevertheless, resistance remains in several Theravāda countries where questions concerning lineage, monastic legality, and institutional authority continue to shape official policies regarding women's ordination (Bodhi, 2009).

The discussion of gender equality in Buddhism also extends beyond monastic ordination. Increasing numbers of Buddhist women serve as university professors, meditation teachers, translators of canonical texts, social activists, and leaders of humanitarian organizations. Buddhist women have played prominent roles in promoting peacebuilding, education, healthcare, environmental conservation, and community development throughout Asia and the West. Their contributions illustrate that religious authority can be expressed not only through formal ecclesiastical positions but also through scholarship, ethical leadership, and compassionate social engagement. These developments reflect an expanding understanding of leadership within contemporary Buddhism.

At the same time, caution is necessary when evaluating Buddhism solely through modern concepts of gender equality. Contemporary ideas concerning human rights, democracy, and gender justice emerged within historical contexts that differ significantly from those of ancient India. Applying present-day social values directly to early Buddhist texts without considering their historical background may oversimplify complex issues. Therefore, many scholars advocate a contextual approach that recognizes both the progressive dimensions of the Buddha’s teachings and the limitations imposed by historical circumstances. Such an approach allows for critical reflection without dismissing the historical significance of Buddhist institutions (Gethin, 1998).

Furthermore, the diversity of Buddhist traditions should be acknowledged. *Mahāyāna* communities in China, Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam have maintained uninterrupted *bhikkhunī* ordination lineages for centuries, enabling women to occupy influential positions in education, administration, and religious practice. In contrast, Theravāda communities have experienced greater institutional challenges due to the historical disappearance of the *bhikkhunī* lineage. These regional differences demonstrate that the status of women in Buddhism is not uniform but varies according to historical development, cultural context, and institutional interpretation.

In conclusion, contemporary discussions of gender equality in Buddhism reveal both continuity and transformation. Buddhist doctrine continues to provide a powerful theological foundation for spiritual equality through its teachings on non-self, compassion, wisdom, and universal liberation. At the same time, historical institutions have often reflected patriarchal social systems that restricted women’s opportunities for leadership and ordination. The ongoing revival of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, the emergence of female Buddhist

scholars and teachers, and increasing dialogue concerning gender justice indicate that Buddhism remains a dynamic religious tradition capable of engaging constructively with contemporary social concerns. Rather than viewing Buddhism as either completely egalitarian or entirely patriarchal, a balanced critical perspective recognizes the interaction between timeless doctrinal principles and historically conditioned institutional practices. This understanding enables Buddhism to continue contributing meaningfully to modern discussions of equality, human dignity, and social justice while remaining faithful to its central aim of liberating all beings from suffering.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between Buddhism and gender by exploring the concepts of spiritual equality, women's religious authority, the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, the Eight Garudhammas, the historical decline of the Bhikkhunī ordination, and its contemporary revival. The findings indicate that the Buddha's teachings fundamentally affirm the equal spiritual capacity of all human beings regardless of gender. Core Buddhist doctrines, including *anattā* (non-self), *anicca* (impermanence), and the Noble Eightfold Path, emphasize that liberation (*nibbāna*) is attained through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom rather than biological sex. Early Buddhist literature, particularly the Therīgāthā, provides compelling evidence that women attained arahantship and exercised significant religious authority within the early Buddhist community.

However, the historical development of Buddhist institutions reveals a more complex reality. The Eight *Garudhammas*, the disappearance of the *Bhikkhunī* lineage in several *Theravāda* countries, and the predominance of male monastic leadership demonstrate how Buddhist institutions were influenced by the patriarchal social and cultural contexts in which they developed. Consequently, many contemporary scholars distinguish between the Buddha's original teachings and later institutional practices that reflected historical conditions rather than doctrinal principles.

The contemporary revival of the *Bhikkhunī* ordination and the increasing participation of women in Buddhist scholarship, education, meditation, and social engagement demonstrate that Buddhism continues to respond to contemporary concerns regarding equality and justice. Therefore, Buddhism should be understood as a living religious tradition that possesses both enduring doctrinal foundations for spiritual equality and the capacity for institutional renewal. A balanced and historically informed interpretation enables Buddhist communities to preserve the authenticity of the *Dhamma* while promoting greater inclusivity and equal opportunities for women in the twenty-first century.

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