

# Chinese Women and the Family from the Buddhist Tradition

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In speaking from the Buddhist tradition, I would like to begin by defining the word Buddha. Some of you probably know its meaning already, but others may not yet be familiar with the term. The word Buddha simply means enlightenment, and so it is not a name exclusive to Sakyamuni Buddha who is credited as being the founder of Buddhism, but rather it is the state of perfection that all men and women can reach if they make progress through their successive existences and discover the divinity which is inherent in each of them. Buddhism, therefore, is not a religion per se in the same way that Christianity is. I see it, rather, as a philosophy of life, a wisdom of life which prepares each individual to become a fully integrated and self-realized human being in their present lifetime.

Buddhism was founded by a man—a prince—in the primitive agrarian society which was India about 2500 years ago. At that time there was simply no equality to speak of between men and women. Women were probably no more than second or third class citizens. Even to this day if any one of us were to visit India, especially the poorer states, we would still find that women have a very low social status. That's just simply because in a society

which lacks science and technology, the roles of men and women are more separate because they take care of very different chores in life.

The Buddha was exceptional in the way he broke with tradition. He did away with all these traditional definitions, these boundaries between the worlds of men and women, because the greatest discovery of the Buddha was that all living beings have the Buddha nature. This means that all living beings, whether they be men or women or other beings, all have this nature, this enlightenment, or self-realized divinity. From this viewpoint men and women are absolutely equal even though their station in their present life may have taken on very different manifestations; none the less their inner core is the same. That was what was most revolutionary about the Buddhist teaching. It was received with mixed reactions when the Buddha first taught it in India.

There is a very moving story about his aunt, who was a court lady, asking for permission to leave the home life to become a nun. When the Buddha began his order of monks, he did not allow women to leave the home life and he did not want women in the Buddhist clergy. The trouble, he said, was that women were more emotional and their bondage was heavier and he felt that introducing them into the order might jeopardize the cultivation of the monks. However, the aunt persisted saying "I thought that any great man that came into this world would feel indebted to the people who gave him life; and who was it who gave birth to you?" On hearing this the Buddha became very reflective and after three pleadings, he finally succumbed to his aunt's wish and allowed women to enter the order. It was then that he made this declaration: That no matter what bondage, or heavy habits, or habitual karma people may carry in this life, if they are able to follow his precepts of purity and live a righteous life, then whether this person is a man or woman, they'll be guaranteed liberation.

Rather than look at the role of the Buddhist woman from a totally social or historical context, my own preference is to look at a very emancipating, very liberating view of the Buddhist woman which is really the core of the Buddhist teaching. Now, all of you may have seen the statue of Guan Yin, they say Kun Yam in China, the Goddess of Mercy. This bodhisattva or enlightened being is generally considered a woman; but what's interesting is that before, in India, and when the tradition first came to China, this bodhisattva was always depicted in male form. It was not until the Tang dynasty in China that we see this gradual transformation from male images to female images, especially in the Dun Wa grottoes and the art that came along the Silk Road. Perhaps the reason for this was the Chinese people felt

a greater empathy with women because woman is representative of compassion and this all embracing love for the universe and her fellow beings. What's interesting, however, is that to this day, when we look at the Guan Yin statue, it is very often depicted with very feminine facial features, but a male body. If you look at Guan Yin's body, very often her torso is entirely exposed—though there may just be some robes criss crossing in the Tang style across the chest— but the body is male while the face is female. Yet somehow the figure is presented in such a harmonious way that not many people even notice that there is this discrepancy. What we can pick up from this whole image, this visualization, is that beyond the obviously male and the obviously female characteristics, there is something that is universal which transcends both male and female. It is that essence of humanity which the Buddha is trying to point to and it is within all of us whatever our gender happens to be.

When Buddhism came to China, it incorporated a lot of Confucianist and Taoist elements especially the Confucian elements, because they constituted the central philosophy in China, and therefore, the Buddhist woman was probably taught docility, subservience and so forth. None the less, in modern times in Hong Kong as well as in other countries, a lot of young women—working women and professional women—are turning to Buddhism and the Buddhist ideal. They don't do so for the traditional values of being a subservient mother and wife to husband and family; rather they turn to Buddhism seeking a multi-dimensional personality, a totally centered and integrated life, and the ability to fulfill their role not only as wife and mother, but also as their own person, very much their own master. However, it remains true that the modern Buddhist woman in Hong Kong still has a long way to go before being able to break with the traditions that are hampering her development as a whole.

Even more difficult for the Hong Kong woman is finding the strength to deal with the challenges of the time in a way which does not result in her suffering from the split personality that was referred to before—where women with very confused orientations and goals find themselves split between traditional and modern values. The Buddhist woman can find her orientation if she lives a righteous life; what the Buddha taught as the

eight-fold proper path: righteous knowledge; righteous vision; righteous speech; righteous livelihood; righteous work; righteous vigor; righteous concentration and righteous mindfulness. If a woman were able to integrate all of those qualities in her life, then whether she's leading a very secular life or she's living a very reclusive life up in the mountains, she would still be able to merge with her environment and live in harmony with other beings and develop the wisdom and compassion that are innate in herself.