Chinese Women and the Family: the Buddhist Tradition

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I would like to preface these brief remarks on the role of women and the family in the Buddhist tradition by defining what is meant by the term 'buddha' itself. Quite simply, 'buddha' means 'enlightenment' and, therefore, cannot be used exclusively to designate Sakyamuni Buddha, who is credited with founding Buddhism. The term in its proper sense describes a state of perfection which can be attained by all men and women who, after passing through a succession of previous existences, have discovered the divinity inherent in each of them. (He or she who has attained this state is also referred to as 'a buddha' or 'an enlightened one'.) Buddhism unlike Christianity is not then a religion *per se*, but rather a philosophy of life, a way of wisdom that prepares each individual to become a fully integrated and self-realizing human being in his or her lifetime.

The Status of Women

The founder of Buddhism was born of noble parents, a prince who lived in the primitive agrarian society which existed in India about 2,500 years ago. In those days there was no sexual equality to speak of, and, at best, women were classified as second or third rate citizens. Even today in certain parts of rural India, especially in the poorer provinces, we find little change in the lowly social status of women.

In such societies, devoid as they are of modern scientific and technological development, men and women continue to play distinct and separate roles based largely upon the different chores they are called to perform in society.

The Buddha was unique in the manner in which he broke from tradition. He did away with role distinctions and broke down the barriers that separated men and women into different worlds. And he did this by his discovery and subsequent teaching that all living things have and share the Buddha nature in common. What this means in practise is that all living beings, be they men, women or any of the other creatures under heaven, are by nature ordered to enlightenment and self-realized divinity. Men and women then are essentially equal. Although their different stations in life may reflect dissimilarities, their inner core is fundamentally the same. This, the Buddha's most revolutionary teaching, was received with mixed feelings and diverse reactions by the people of his own time.

Women Allowed to Become Buddha's Disciples

There is a most moving story told of the Buddha's aunt, a woman of the court who asked for permission from the Buddha to leave home and become a nun. When the Buddha first began to gather disciples into a religious order, he did not allow women to join their ranks. The problem, he said at the time, was that women were too emotional and bore a heavier burden of bondage, and he felt that to allow them to enter monastic life would only serve to disrupt and jeopardize the spiritual formation of the monks. His aunt, however, persisted in her ambition to become a nun. "I would have thought," she said to her nephew, "that any great man born into this world would feel some indebtedness to the one who gave him life. And who, pray tell, gave birth to you if not a woman?" This silenced the Buddha and he withdrew into a reflective mood. His aunt made her plea again and yet a third time. Only then did he give in to her wishes and allow her (and other women) to become nuns in the order. At the time he made the following announcement: "No matter how great their bondage, how burdened with bad habits, or what karma they may have carried with them into this life, if they

can follow my precepts of purity and live righteously, be they male or female, their liberation will be guaranteed."

Guan Yin, the Male-Female Image of Mercy

Rather than viewing the role of the Buddhist woman from a purely social or historical perspective, I prefer to see her in her inner identity, which is the more liberating and emancipating point of view, and, in fact, is one at the very core of Buddhist teaching. I am sure all of you have seen statues or paintings of the Goddess of Mercy, who is known in China as Guan Yin or Kun Yam. This well-known bodhisattva, 'enlightened being', is generally represented as a woman. What is interesting is that in her country of origin, India, she has always been represented as a male. After entering China, her transformation into a female is gradual and only made complete during the advent of the Tang dynasty. All this is graphically illustrated in the grottoes of Dunhuang and can be seen in the works of Chinese artisans who have left her image in drawings and carvings all along the Silk Road. We may wonder why the gender change. Perhaps a reason can be found in the psychology of the Chinese, who tend to see woman as more symbolic of the virtue of compassion and especially of the kind of all embracing love of the universe and human beings for which Guan Yin is famed. Even more interesting, however, is that when you observe carefully a statue of Guan Yin, while her face strikes you as definitely feminine, you will also notice that she retains a masculine physique. And yet somehow artists are able to render the figure of Guan Yin to convey such peace and harmony that few observers take notice of this major discrepancy. There is a lesson for us here, which is that beyond the physical differences of men and women there is something universal in each of us that transcends gender and is held in common by both. It is that particular essence of humanity the Buddha points to, that core which is inherent to all no matter what specific gender we might happen to be.

Women Meeting the Challenges of the Times

When Buddhism came to China, it adapted itself to

China's central philosophies, incorporating into its teaching many elements of Taoism and Confucianism. This was especially true of Confucianism, which caused Buddhist women to be indoctrinated in such Confucian female attributes as docility, subservience, and the like. In spite of this, however, many of Hong Kong's young women from the working and professional classes are turning today to Buddhism and embracing its ideals. What these modern young women are searching for is not the role values of the traditional wife and mother which made them subservient to their husbands and families in the past, but rather a centered and integrated life that allows for a multi-dimensional approach to personality growth and expression. Nor are these women backing away from their responsibilities as wives and mothers, but they are fulfilling these roles very much as their own persons and as masters of their own destiny. However, it is also a sad fact of life in modern Hong Kong society that the Buddhist woman still has a long way to go before she will be able to break with the traditions of the past that continue to hamper her development as a whole person.

Even more difficult for her is finding the strength to deal with the challenges of the times, with its confusion of roles and often contradictory demands that threaten to make of her a split personality, pulling her in many directions as she finds herself torn between traditional values and modern necessities. The Buddhist woman, however, will find her centre in a life dedicated to righteousness, which the Buddha has taught as the Eight-fold Path. It consists in: righteous knowledge, righteous vision, righteous speech, righteous livelihood, righteous work, righteous vigour, righteous concentration, and righteous mindfulness. It is the integration of these qualities into her practical life that allows her to merge with her environment and live in harmony with others. And whether she lives amid the noise and bustle of secular urban society or as a recluse on a mountaintop, she will be able to activate and realize the kind of wisdom and compassion that are innate to her very being.
