

# Empowerment of Women Through Buddha's Teachings: Life Story of Selected Women during Buddha's and Current period

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## Abstract

This study investigates the empowerment of women through the lens of Buddhist teachings, focusing on the life stories of selected women from both the Buddha's time and the modern era. In a historical setting where women were largely marginalized, the Buddha's acknowledgment of their spiritual capacity represented a radical redefinition of gender roles within the religious and social spheres. Drawing upon figures such as Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Dhammadinnā, Bhaddā Kaccānā, Paṭācārā, and Kisā Gotamī, the research highlights the prominent roles these women played as leaders, teachers, and exemplars of spiritual liberation. Their narratives, preserved in texts like the *Therīgāthā*, illustrate how Buddhist teachings offered women avenues for intellectual authority, moral influence, and emancipation from societal constraints. The paper further contextualizes these historical accounts by examining contemporary Buddhist women, including Bhikkhunī Dhammananda and Tenzin Palmo, who embody the continuity of this legacy by applying Buddhist principles to advance education, leadership, and social reform. By juxtaposing ancient and modern experiences, the study underscores the enduring relevance of the Dhamma as a catalyst for women's empowerment. The findings reveal that both in the Buddha's era and today, women have utilized Buddhist teachings not only to achieve personal enlightenment but also to challenge structural inequalities, thereby contributing to broader discourses on gender, spirituality, and social transformation.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Women's Empowerment, Bhikkhuni, Pāli Canon, Gender, Religion, Contemporary Buddhism

## Introduction

The role and status of women have been subjects of continuous evolution across cultures and religious traditions. In ancient India, prior to the time of the Buddha, women were largely confined to domestic roles, with limited access to education, spiritual practices, or public life. However, the emergence of Buddhism in the 6th century BCE introduced a transformative shift in the perception of women's spiritual capacity and societal roles. The Buddha's teachings emphasized that liberation (Nibbāna) was equally attainable by both men and women, regardless of social status or gender. This was a radical departure from the norms of his time

and marked the beginning of a more inclusive spiritual path.

Through the establishment of the Bhikkhunī Sangha (order of nuns), the Buddha provided women with the opportunity to lead monastic lives dedicated to meditation, ethical discipline, and the pursuit of enlightenment. The verses of the *Therīgāthā*, composed by early enlightened nuns, stand as enduring evidence of the spiritual empowerment of women during the Buddha's time. These stories reveal how women were able to rise above grief, oppression, and social stigma through inner transformation grounded in the Dhamma.

This article seeks to explore the empowerment of women through the teachings of the Buddha by analyzing the life stories of selected women from both ancient and modern periods. While focusing on early figures such as Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, Khemā, and Kisa Gotamī, the study also examines contemporary Buddhist women like Bhikkhunī Dhammananda, Tenzin Palmo, and others who have drawn inspiration from the same teachings. These life stories reflect the continuing relevance of the Buddha's message and demonstrate that the path of Dhamma remains a source of resilience, leadership, and inner strength for women across generations (Narada, 19987).

### **Analysis of the Status of Women in Pre-Buddhist Time**

Understanding the status of women during the pre-Buddhist or Vedic period is essential to analyzing their position in early Buddhism. In those times, women held a low and undignified status in society. Their roles were largely confined to bearing children and ensuring the continuation of the family lineage. Women were excluded from participating in important social and religious activities. Major cultural and religious rites were dominated exclusively by men. The sacred Vedas, which were the most revered religious texts, were accessible only to men, while women were denied access. Vedic beliefs held that only sons could open the gates of heaven after death, further emphasizing the limited spiritual status of women (Honer, 1999).

Several incidents reveal the status of women in pre-Buddhist times. On one occasion, King Presejit was listening to the Buddha's Dhamma discourses when a messenger arrived with news that his queen, Malika, had given birth to a daughter. Immediately, a look of displeasure appeared on the king's face, reflecting the high social value placed on having a son. In another instance, five hundred women from Savatthi visited the Pubbarama Vihara to observe the Uposatha Sīla vows. Visakhā, the donor of the Vihara, was present and asked women from different age groups why they wished to observe the vows. Their answers varied: the older women sought to earn merit for this life and the afterlife; middle-aged women had come because their husbands mistreated them, and they wanted to free themselves from their suffering; young married women hoped to have a son as their firstborn; and young unmarried women desired to marry good husbands. These responses reveal that women at the time lacked self-identity and held a low status in society (Dhakhwa, 2023).

Polygamy was common during the pre-Buddhist period, especially among kings, nobles, and merchants. For example, King Presejit had five wives: Mallikā, his chief queen,

along with Vāsabhā, Ubbirī, Somā, and Sakulā (Dhakhwa, S. 2023). King Udena also had multiple wives, including Sāmāvati, his chief queen, Vasuladattā, and Magandiyā. Similarly, King Bimbisāra had three wives, with Khemā as the chief queen. However, during the Buddha's time, this practice began to change as monogamy became more widespread. This shift was influenced by the Buddha's emphasis on the **Pañca Sīla**, a basic code of conduct for lay followers, one of whose precepts is to remain faithful to a single life partner and avoid sexual misconduct.

In the pre-Buddhist period, slavery was also practiced. Many slave women joined the Bhikkhunī (nuns') order during the Buddha's time. The Buddha allowed slave women to enter the order, but only with the consent of their masters. For instance, Punnā (Malalasekera, 2022), a slave girl and daughter of the domestic slave of Anāthapindika, was named so because her birth brought the number of children in the household to one hundred. Another slave girl, Punnīkā, belonged to Pokkharasāti. Both Punnā and Punnīkā achieved Arahantship (Nanda, 2024) after ordination. It is also recorded that families who followed the Buddha's teachings often released their slave women if they wished to practice the Dhamma freely.

Visakhā, a notable female lay follower, was given gold ornaments, silver, animals, and five hundred slave girls by her parents on her wedding day. Her father also gave her ten pieces of advice, one of which was to "treat the fire carefully," meaning she should respect her parents-in-law and husband carefully, just as one tends to a fire. Neglecting a fire causes destruction, and this advice reflects the subordinate and cautious role expected of daughters-in-law at that time. However, Visakhā transformed the religious and cultural environment of her husband's household by applying the Buddha's teachings. These practices and incidents from that period clearly show the low status of women in society before and during the early Buddhist era.

### No Recognition of Woman's Role in the Male Dominated Society

During the time of the Buddha, society was largely male-dominated. Women had limited rights and were expected to follow traditions set by men. Many women faced pressure and injustice, and only a few dared to challenge these norms. One such example is **Isidāsi**, whose life clearly reflects the struggles women endured during that era. Isidāsi was the only daughter of a wealthy merchant from **Ujjenī**. When she came of age, her parents arranged her marriage to the son of another merchant in **Sāketa**. As a devoted and well-mannered young woman, Isidāsi showed great respect and affection toward her husband and in-laws. She soon won the hearts of her new family and fulfilled all her duties as a faithful wife. However, despite her good character and dedication, her husband unexpectedly abandoned her and sent her back to her parents. Hoping for a better future, her parents arranged a second marriage—but once again, the result was the same. Isidāsi was rejected without reason. Her story highlights the unfair treatment and challenges women often faced, regardless of their virtues. Even when they lived according to societal expectations, they could still be cast aside. Isidāsi's life serves as a powerful example of the struggle women endured in a male-dominated world and the resilience they needed to survive it (Malalasekera, 2002). Burdened by sorrow and rejection, Isidāsi once considered ending her life. However, after meeting Therī Jinadattā, and with her

parents' support, she chose to follow the Dhamma. She joined the Order of Nuns and, under Jinadattā's guidance, eventually became an arahant. Later, Isidāsi shared her story including past lives with Bodhi Therī, expressing her journey in forty-seven verses, originally in Pāli (Dhakhwa, 2023), some of which have been translated into English (Norman, 1995).

*Pāsādikāsi ayye Isidāsī vayopi te aparihīno,*

*Kim disvāna vyākulikam Athāsi nekkhammamanuyuttā.*

You are lovely, noble Isidāsī, your youth has not yet faded. Having seen what fault (in household life) are you then intent on renunciation (of the world)?

*Sayameva odanam sādhayāmi Sayameva bhājanam dhovantī, Mātāva ekaputtakam Tadā bhattāram paricarāmi.*

I myself prepared the rice-gruel; I myself washed the bowl; as a mother her only son, so I looked after my husband.

Allowed to go, he departed. I for my part, all alone, thought, 'Having asked leave, I shall go to die, or I shall go forth (as a wanderer).

*Atha ayyā jinadattā Āgacchi gocarāya caramānā, Tātakulam vinayadharī Bahussutā sīlasampannā.*

Then the noble lady Jinadattā, an expert in the discipline, having great learning, possessed of virtue, on her beginning round, came to my father's house.

*Mātāpitū abhivāsayitvā Sabbam ca nātigāṇavaggam, Sattāham pabbajitā Tisso vijjā aphassayiṇ.*

Having saluted my mother and father, and all the group of my relatives, (then I had) gone forth for seven days I attained the three knowledge. The above Isidāsī's verses show the women's role and status in the male dominant society at that time. They have to perform household chores like cooking, washing, taking care of their husband and family members, etc. Isidāsī's husband offended her although she had done no wrong. She was ready to commit suicide. The event shows the low status of women at that time. Her mode of life changed by listening to the discourse of Jinaddatā Bhikkhunī.

### **Status and Struggles of Women in Ancient Society**

Kīsā Gotamī was born into a poor family in Sāvatthi. Though her given name was Gotamī, she was called Kīsā because of her thinness. At a young age, her parents arranged her marriage to a wealthy man, but she was initially treated with disrespect by his family due to her humble background. However, when she gave birth to a son, her status and respect within

the family improved (Bhikkhu Thanissaro, 2009). Tragically, her only child died, but she refused to accept his death. Desperate, she sought medicine to revive him but found none. Finally, she was directed to the Buddha, who told her he could help if she brought mustard seeds from a household untouched by death. As she searched from door to door, she realized that death had touched every family. This led her to understand the universality of death and the uncertainty of life. Returning to the Buddha, she asked to be ordained as a nun. After hearing his teachings, she attained arahantship. Upon realizing the true nature of the Dhamma, she composed verses that reflected the hardships faced by herself and many women of her time. Some of these verses, in Pāli and English translation, are as follows:

*Dukkhaṭca vijāneyya dukkhassa ca samudayam nirodham  
Aṭṭhangikaṭca maggam cattāripi ariyasaccāni.*

One would know pain, and uprising of pain, and its cessation, and the eightfold way, even the four noble truths.

*Dukkho itthibhāvo akkhāto purisadammasārathinā,  
Sapattikampi dukkham̄ appekaccā sakiṇ vijātāyo.*

The state of women has been said to be painful by the charioteer of men who are to be tamed; even the state of being a co-wife is painful; some, having given birth once

*Galake api kantanti sukhumāliniyo visāni khādanti,  
Janamārakamajjhagatā ubhopi vyasanāni anubhonti.*

even cut their throats; (some) tender ones take poisons; gone into the midst of the people-killers, both suffer misfortunes.

*Bhāvito me maggo ariyo aṭṭhangiko asakagāmi.*

*Nibbānam̄ sacchikatam̄ dhammādāsam̄ apekkhīham̄.*

The Noble eight-fold way leading to the undying has been developed by me; quenching has been realized; I have looked at the doctrine as a mirror.

*Ahamamhi kantasallā ohitabhārā kataṇ hi karāniyam̄,  
kisajaGotamī therī vimuttacittā imam̄ abhaṇiti.*

I have my dart cut out, my burden laid down; that which was to be done has been done by me. The *therī* Kisā Gotamī with a mind completely released, has said this.

The uncomfortable situations of women at that time were described in the above verses. She mentioned the sufferings of being a co-wife and giving childbirth. She also stated that even some women cut their throats; (some) tender ones take poisons due to painful social conditions. The five kinds of additional sufferings of women that males do not have to face, were described in the verses.

### **Women's Five Unique Forms of Suffering as Identified by the Buddha**

The Buddha explicitly recognized that women face unique additional sufferings (Kramer,2020) beyond the general sufferings of life. He pointed out five specific challenges that women traditionally endure, which add to their burden in samsara (the cycle of birth and

death):

1. **Menstruation:** This natural biological process causes women physical pain and discomfort on a regular basis. In many traditional societies, menstruation was often viewed as a source of impurity or social limitation, adding psychological and social burdens.
2. **Pregnancy:** Carrying and nurturing new life within the womb involves physical strain, vulnerability, and emotional challenges. Pregnancy can be a time of uncertainty and suffering due to health risks and societal expectations.
3. **Childbirth:** The process of giving birth is physically demanding and dangerous. Historically, childbirth was a major cause of mortality among women, contributing to fear and suffering.
4. **Leaving her own family:** In many traditional cultural contexts, women are expected to leave their natal home and live with their husband's family after marriage. This separation can cause emotional pain, feelings of alienation, and loss of support systems.
5. **Living with her husband and in-laws, and having to serve a man:** Women often face pressures to conform to the expectations of their husbands and in-laws, which can include subservience, lack of autonomy, and the need to prioritize others' needs above their own.

Despite these additional layers of suffering, the Buddha's teachings offer a path to spiritual liberation and empowerment that transcends these worldly hardships. One notable Buddhist woman expressed her deep gratitude and relief upon encountering the Buddha and his Dhamma. She said that without the Buddha, her life would have been filled with distress, highlighting how profound an impact his teachings had on her. She acknowledged that the Buddha's guidance unveiled the Noble Eightfold Path (Bodhi, 2010) the practical framework for ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom—which enabled her to see clearly the nature of suffering and the way out of it.

In her poetic reflection, she stated:

*"I have looked at the doctrine as a mirror."*

This metaphor conveys her realization that the Dhamma allowed her to see herself truly and clearly, without illusion or self-deception. The mirror symbolizes self-awareness and insight, qualities essential for spiritual progress. Through this self-reflection and the practice of the Buddha's teachings, she attained self-reliance in the Dhamma a state of inner strength and confidence where she no longer depended on external validation or worldly conditions for her peace and liberation. These words are spiritually powerful because they demonstrate that despite the social and physical sufferings specific to women, true empowerment arises from insight and practice. By following the Buddha's path, women can overcome suffering not only externally but internally, gaining freedom from mental afflictions and cultivating lasting happiness.

The lives of women during the Buddha's era and today reveal both continuity and evolution in the empowerment process through Buddhist teachings. Ancient Buddhist women broke new ground by attaining enlightenment and forming a monastic order, setting a precedent for female spiritual authority. Modern Buddhist women build upon this foundation by expanding their roles into leadership, scholarship, and social activism while continuing to embody the Buddha's message of equality and liberation.

Both historical and contemporary life stories underscore that, despite ongoing challenges, the Buddha's teachings remain a profound source of empowerment for women—enabling them to transcend societal constraints and contribute meaningfully to spiritual and social spheres. The main objective of this research is to explore how Buddha's teachings contributed to the empowerment and status of women, through the life stories of selected women during the Buddha's time, and to compare these insights with the experiences of women in the current period.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design employing descriptive, analytical, and exploratory approaches. The research investigates the empowerment of women through the Buddha's teachings, with a specific focus on gender perspectives within Buddhist literature. Primary sources include canonical Pāli texts such as the *Piṭaka*, *Atṭhakathā* (Commentaries), and *Tīkā* (Sub-commentaries), with particular emphasis on the *Sutta Piṭaka* and *Vinaya Piṭaka*. Secondary data were drawn from scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, and other academic resources to complement the primary textual analysis.

The study centers on ten prominent women from early Buddhist texts, categorized into two groups: five *Bhikkhunīs* (female monastics) and five *Upāsikās* (laywomen devotees). Selection was guided by three criteria: (1) *Etadagga*—women recognized by the Buddha as foremost in specific domains of Dhamma practice; (2) attainment of higher spiritual fruits (*Maggaphala*); and (3) notable spiritual or societal contributions. Additionally, six modern Buddhist women (three *Bhikkhunīs* and three laywomen) from national and international contexts were studied. Selection was based on advanced knowledge of Buddhism, contributions to practice or scholarship, societal impact, and recognition by reputable institutions. To deepen the inquiry, semi-structured interviews were conducted with contemporary Buddhist women and key informants (scholars and practitioners), thereby triangulating textual analysis with lived experiences and expert perspectives.

### **Sources of Data**

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources:

1. Pāli canonical literature (original and translated texts)

2. Commentaries and sub-commentaries
3. Scholarly books, journals, and magazines on Buddhism
4. Theses and dissertations related to Buddhist studies and gender
5. Life histories and case studies
6. Semi-structured interviews with Buddhist women and scholars
7. Online academic resources and institutional publications
8. Manuals and canonical interpretations from the Buddhist tradition

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Teachings related to gender equality and women's empowerment were identified and translated from Pāli into English. The study specifically analyzed components of the *Navanga-Buddha Sāsana* (the ninefold classification of the Buddha's teachings) with emphasis on *Sutta*, *Geyya*, *Veyyākarana*, *Gāthā*, *Jātaka*, and *Vedalla*. The *Pātimokkha* rules from the *Vinaya Piṭaka* were also examined to assess the monastic code from a gender perspective. Life stories of early Buddhist women were primarily derived from the *Therīgāthā* (verses of elder nuns) in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* and selected *Suttas* from the *Sutta Piṭaka*. For modern women, data were collected through published biographies, academic literature, and interviews. Semi-structured interviews explored the application of Buddhist teachings in shaping empowerment and leadership. Key informant interviews with scholars further contextualized interpretations of gender equality in Buddhism.

### **Data Analysis**

Collected data were thematically analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The study examined how the Buddha's teachings contributed to promoting gender equality and reducing gender-based constraints, with results organized into thematic categories supported by textual evidence. Comparative analyses were undertaken to contrast the roles of women in pre-Buddhist, early Buddhist, and modern contexts. Tables were developed to present gender-based rules, spiritual attainments, and contributions of Buddhist women. Furthermore, the study aligned Buddhist teachings with Gender and Development (GAD) frameworks to highlight their contemporary relevance. The researcher's expertise in Gender and Development and Buddhist studies informed both data collection and interpretation, ensuring contextual accuracy and analytical rigor. This methodological integration provides a comprehensive understanding of women's empowerment through Buddhism across historical and contemporary periods.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Analysis of the Status of Women in Buddha's Time**

The status of women during the time of the Buddha (6th to 5th century BCE) reflected a complex mixture of traditional patriarchal norms and emerging opportunities for spiritual and social empowerment, particularly within the Buddhist community. While women in broader society still faced many restrictions, Buddhism introduced significant changes that challenged

existing gender hierarchies and opened new paths for women's development.

**1. Social Context:** Like pre-Buddhist society, the general social framework of the Buddha's time was patriarchal. Women were often subject to the authority of their fathers, husbands, or male relatives, and their roles were largely confined to family and domestic duties. Marriage, motherhood, and obedience to male family members remained central to women's expected social functions.

**2. Spiritual and Religious Status:** One of the most groundbreaking contributions of the Buddha was his recognition of women's equal spiritual potential. He accepted women into the monastic order, establishing the Bhikkhunī Sangha—the order of fully ordained nuns—alongside the Bhikkhu (monks) order. This was a significant departure from many contemporary religious traditions that excluded women from formal spiritual training or ordination. The Buddha's teachings emphasized that awakening (enlightenment) was accessible to all, regardless of gender. This was a revolutionary idea in a society where spiritual liberation was often restricted to men, especially those of higher caste. Women like Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, the Buddha's aunt and foster mother, became the first ordained Bhikkhunī and served as an important spiritual leader.

**3. Education and Leadership Opportunities:** Through the Bhikkhunī Sangha, women gained access to monastic education, meditation practice, and scriptural study. This fostered the development of female spiritual leaders and teachers, many of whom are recorded in texts like the *Therīgāthā*—a collection of verses composed by enlightened nuns expressing their insights and experiences. These women's contributions demonstrate that women were capable of profound wisdom, spiritual insight, and leadership. Some nuns attained the highest spiritual states, including arahantship (full enlightenment), illustrating the Buddha's teaching that spiritual attainment transcends gender.

**4. Social Recognition and Challenges:** Despite these advances, female monastics faced certain institutional challenges. The Buddha introduced the Eight Garudhammas (McBrewster, Miller, & Vandome 2010), special rules that placed Bhikkhunīs under some degree of subordination to monks, reflecting ongoing social and cultural biases. These rules often limited the autonomy of nuns and highlighted the tension between radical spiritual equality and prevailing societal norms.

In lay society, women were still often seen as secondary to men, though the respect accorded to enlightened women and their moral authority increased significantly. Many laywomen supported the monastic community through donations and service, gaining spiritual merit and social influence.

**5. Examples of Empowered Women:** Several women from the Buddha's time exemplify this shift towards empowerment:

- **Mahāpajāpati Gotamī:** The first ordained nun and a key figure in establishing the Bhikkhunī order.

- Kisa Gotamī: Known for her journey from grief to enlightenment, illustrating Buddhist teachings on impermanence.
- Sujātā: Celebrated for her generosity and supportive role in the Buddha's early life

During the Buddha's time, while the broader social status of women remained largely constrained by patriarchal norms, Buddhism introduced unprecedented opportunities for spiritual empowerment and leadership for women. By founding the Bhikkhunī Sangha and affirming the potential for enlightenment regardless of gender, the Buddha paved the way for women to attain dignity, respect, and autonomy within the religious sphere. This period marks a crucial turning point in the history of women's status in South Asia.

### **Status of Women During the Modern Time in Buddhism**

In modern times, the status of women in Buddhism has undergone significant changes, marked by both progress and persistent challenges. While traditional Buddhist texts often reflect patriarchal norms rooted in historical and cultural contexts, many contemporary Buddhist communities have made strides toward gender equality, particularly in education, ordination, and leadership.

#### **Revival of Bhikkhunī Ordination**

One of the most significant developments in modern Buddhism is the revival of full ordination for women (Bhikkhunīs). Although the Bhikkhunī Sangha had disappeared in many Theravāda countries for centuries, efforts to restore it began in the late 20th century. Countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar have seen growing movements advocating for the full ordination of women. Notable figures like Bhikkhunī Dhammananda in Thailand have played a crucial role in challenging traditional barriers and inspiring new generations of women to enter monastic life.

#### **Increased Access to Education and Leadership**

Modern Buddhist women have gained broader access to scriptural education, meditation training, and leadership roles within their communities. In countries like Taiwan, women hold prominent positions in monastic and lay Buddhist institutions. For example, Venerable Cheng Yen (Ho, G. (2009), the founder of the Tzu Chi Foundation, has built one of the largest Buddhist humanitarian organizations in the world, demonstrating the leadership potential of women within a Buddhist framework.

#### **Contributions in the West**

In Western countries, Buddhism has often adopted more egalitarian models, with female teachers, scholars, and monastics playing central roles in spreading the Dhamma. Women such as Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo in Tibetan tradition (Palmo, 2023) and Ayya Khema in Theravāda

tradition (Khema, 2014) have contributed immensely to the development of Western Buddhism by emphasizing spiritual practice, gender equality, and accessible teachings for all.

**Ongoing Challenges**

Despite significant progress, women in many Buddhist traditions continue to face institutional and cultural challenges:

- In Theravāda countries, full ordination for women is still not universally accepted.
- Gender hierarchies persist in some monastic communities, where nuns are subordinate to monks regardless of seniority.
- In some cases, female monastics lack access to the same material resources, training opportunities, and recognition as their male counterparts.

## **Social and Cultural Impact**

Buddhist women today are active not only in monastic life but also in education, social reform, humanitarian work, and peacebuilding. Their roles have expanded beyond religious settings to broader society, where they contribute to the well-being of communities through Dhamma-inspired service. The status of women in modern Buddhism reflects a dynamic balance between tradition and transformation. While historical limitations still influence some Buddhist institutions, increasing numbers of women are reclaiming their roles as teachers, leaders, and fully ordained monastics. Through continued engagement with the Buddha's teachings and the efforts of pioneering individuals and communities, modern Buddhist women are reshaping the landscape of contemporary Buddhism toward greater inclusivity, equality, and spiritual empowerment

## **Life Stories of Selected Women During Buddha's Time and the Current Period in Buddhism**

The empowerment of women through Buddhist teachings is evident both in the historical context of the Buddha's time and in contemporary Buddhism. While separated by centuries, the life stories of selected women from both periods reveal remarkable continuities and changes in how Buddhist principles have facilitated women's spiritual growth, leadership, and social influence.

### **1. Spiritual Empowerment**

- **Buddha's Time:** Women such as Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, the first ordained Bhikkhunī, and Kisa Gotamī, who attained profound spiritual insight, exemplify early female disciples who overcame societal limitations to achieve enlightenment. Their stories, preserved in texts like the *Therīgāthā* (Lang, 1986) highlight how women accessed deep meditation, wisdom, and liberation, affirming the Buddha's teaching that spiritual awakening is gender-neutral.
- **Current Period:** Modern Buddhist women such as Bhikkhunī Dhammananda (Kabilsingh, C., & Dhammananda, B. 1998) in Thailand and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

in the Tibetan tradition continue this legacy. They pursue rigorous monastic education, meditation practice, and teaching, often breaking traditional barriers to become respected leaders and scholars. Like their ancient counterparts, they demonstrate that spiritual attainment transcends gender and social convention.

## 2. Social and Institutional Roles

- Buddha's Time: The establishment of the Bhikkhunī Sangha created an official monastic community for women, granting them formal recognition and religious authority. However, they faced institutional limitations, such as the Eight Garudhammas, which placed nuns in subordinate roles relative to monks.
- Current Period: While many contemporary Buddhist traditions still wrestle with institutional gender inequalities, there has been significant progress in reviving full ordination for women in Theravāda and other schools. Modern Buddhist women often take on roles as teachers, abbesses, social reformers, and educators, sometimes leading large monastic communities and lay organizations. Yet challenges remain, especially in countries where female ordination is restricted or unofficial.

## 3. Contributions to Society

- Buddha's Time: Women played vital roles as spiritual exemplars and supporters of the Buddhist community. Their enlightenment stories inspired lay followers, and their donations and service helped sustain the Sangha. Despite limited political or social power, their spiritual authority was respected.
- Current Period: Modern Buddhist women extend their influence beyond religious circles into education, social reform, humanitarian work, and interfaith dialogue. Figures like Mary Foster and Isaline Blew Horner contributed to Buddhist scholarship and global dissemination of Buddhist teachings. Others engage actively in peacebuilding, gender equality advocacy, and community development, reflecting a broader societal impact.

## 4. Personal Challenges and Resilience

- Buddha's Time: Women faced social stigma, familial opposition, and institutional restrictions but found empowerment through spiritual practice. Their resilience is evident in how they navigated these obstacles while attaining high spiritual states.
- Current Period: Contemporary Buddhist women often confront both traditional patriarchal norms and modern challenges such as balancing monastic discipline with social expectations. Their stories frequently highlight perseverance in advocating for women's rights within religious institutions and society at large.

**Table 1. Comparative Summary Table**

Aspect	Buddha's Time	Modern Times
Spiritual Status	Equal potential for enlightenment	Equal in principle (in many traditions)

<b>Religious Roles</b>	Nuns allowed but under strict rules	Women leading in some Buddhist sects
<b>Social Role</b>	Mostly domestic, subordinate	Broad participation in all fields
<b>Education</b>	Rare, limited to few	Widely accessible (varies by country)
<b>Legal Rights</b>	None	Enshrined in laws in most countries
<b>Cultural Respect</b>	Respected as mothers/wives; limited agency	Growing respect and independence

This paper examines the lives of ten women whose personal and spiritual development was significantly influenced by the teachings of the Buddha. By analyzing their life stories, the study highlights how Buddhist principles—such as mindfulness, detachment, moral discipline, and wisdom—enabled these women to overcome social oppression, personal suffering, and gender-based limitations. The selected women, both from the Buddha's time and the modern era, serve as powerful examples of how inner transformation through the Dhamma can lead to empowerment, equality, and leadership. Their journeys demonstrate that spiritual growth transcends gender and that true human dignity arises from virtuous conduct and awakened insight. This analysis affirms that the Buddha's teachings continue to be a source of strength, especially for women seeking liberation from both internal and external obstacles.

**Table 2, Prominent Bhikkhunīs During the Buddha's Time**

No.	Name	Background	Contribution	Achievement / Title	Special Notes
1	Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī	Buddha's aunt and foster mother	Requested female ordination	First Bhikkhunī; Founder of Bhikkhunī Sangha	Led women to 500 ordination
2	Khemā Therī	Former queen of King Bimbisāra	Dhamma realization and teaching	Foremost in wisdom among bhikkhunīs	Attained arahantship after listening to the Buddha
3	Uppalavaṇṇā Therī	Laywoman with spiritual inclination	Mastery in meditation	Foremost in psychic powers	Attained arahantship quickly
4	Dhammadinnā Therī	Former wife of Visākha (lay follower)	Dhamma instruction and debate	Foremost in Dhamma teaching	Featured in Cūlavedalla Sutta

5	Sīhā Therī	Devoted laywoman, later ordained	Devotion and discipline	Respected elder nun	Known for strong faith in Triple Gem
6	Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā Therī	Former wandering ascetic and debater	Dhamma debate and personal transformation	Arahant; verses in <b>Therīgāthā</b>	Converted after defeating a monk in debate
7	Bhaddā Kāpilānī Therī	Wife of Mahākassapa; renunciant	Spiritual partnership and renunciation	Arahant; calm and wise elder	Shared past-life stories; both she and husband were arahants
8	Sonā Therī	Weak and sickly in health	Determined meditation practice	Arahant; symbol of perseverance	Inspired those facing physical obstacles
9	Cittā Therī	Laywoman with deep insight	Dhamma reflection in poetic form	Arahant; verses in <b>Therīgāthā</b>	Expressed profound insight through poetry
10	Isidāsī Therī	Troubled past, reborn many times	Reflection on kamma and rebirth	Arahant; karmic reflections in <b>Therīgāthā</b>	Story highlights the path to liberation through Dhamma

The table 2 illustrates the diverse backgrounds and significant contributions of prominent Bhikkhunīs during the Buddha's time, highlighting their transformative journeys from laywomen, queens, ascetics, and even those with troubled pasts to esteemed spiritual figures. Figures such as Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, who pioneered the Bhikkhunī Sangha, and Khemā Therī, renowned for her wisdom, demonstrate how women attained positions of authority and respect within the monastic community. Others, like Uppalavaṇṇā Therī and Dhammadinnā Therī, were celebrated for their mastery of meditation, psychic powers, and Dhamma teaching, while Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā and Isidāsī reflected the potential for deep personal transformation through the Dhamma. Collectively, these life stories emphasize that the Buddha's recognition of women's spiritual capacity created space for them to achieve arahantship, exercise leadership, and leave enduring legacies of resilience, wisdom, and equality.

**Table 3, listing 10 prominent Bhikkhunīs in modern times**

Name	Country	Tradition	Key Contributions	Notable Facts
<b>Ayya Khema</b>	Germany / Sri Lanka	Theravāda	Promoted Bhikkhunī ordination, founded nunneries, taught widely	First Western woman to receive Theravāda Bhikkhunī ordination
<b>Ven. Dhammananda</b>	Thailand	Theravāda	Revived Bhikkhunī Sangha in Thailand, runs Songdhammakalyani Monastery	First modern Thai woman fully ordained as a Bhikkhunī
<b>Ven. Tenzin Palmo</b>	UK / India	Tibetan (Kagyu)	Advocated for equality, founded Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery	Spent 12 years in solitary cave retreat
<b>Ven. Bhikkhunī Kusuma</b>	Sri Lanka	Theravāda	Re-established Bhikkhunī ordination in Sri Lanka, scholar and teacher	Among first group ordained in 1996 revival
<b>Ven. Thubten Chodron</b>	USA	Tibetan (Gelug)	Founded Sravasti Abbey, author, global teacher	Works closely with H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama
<b>Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo</b>	USA / International	Tibetan / Inter-tradition	Founded Sakyadhita, scholar, promoted women's education	Professor of Buddhism, advocate for global Buddhist women
<b>Ayya Anandabodhi</b>	USA / UK	Theravāda (Forest)	Co-founded Aloka Vihara Forest Monastery, supports female ordination	Former student in Ajahn Chah lineage, later fully ordained

<b>Ayya Santacitta</b>	USA Austria	/ Theravāda (Forest)	Co-leads Vihara, teacher	Aloka Dhamma	Co-founder of Saranaloka Foundation
<b>Ven. Tathālokā Bhikkhunī</b>	USA	Theravāda	Historian Bhikkhunī ordination, supports Bhikkhunī ordinations	of India, key U.S. figure Western	Ordained in Theravāda Bhikkhunī revival
<b>Ven. Wu Yin</b>	Taiwan	Mahāyāna (Dharmaguptaka)	Modernized education, founded Luminary International Buddhist Society	nun	Trained thousands of nuns in Taiwan and globally

The table 3 presents ten prominent modern Bhikkhunīs whose leadership has shaped contemporary Buddhism across diverse traditions and geographies. Pioneers such as Ayya Khema, Ven. Dhammananda, and Ven. Bhikkhunī Kusuma played crucial roles in reviving and legitimizing Bhikkhunī ordination in Theravāda countries, while figures like Ven. Tenzin Palmo and Ven. Thubten Chodron advanced gender equality and spiritual training through innovative institutions such as Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery and Sravasti Abbey. Global advocates like Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Ven. Wu Yin expanded women's education and transnational networks, ensuring Buddhist women a stronger collective voice. In the West, Ayya Anandabodhi, Ayya Santacitta, and Ven. Tathālokā Bhikkhunī helped establish forest monasteries and ordination movements, linking Eastern traditions with Western contexts. Collectively, these Bhikkhunīs illustrate how the legacy of early Buddhist women continues to inspire empowerment, institutional renewal, and global solidarity in modern times.

In pre-Buddhist times, the status of women was generally low, with most confined to domestic responsibilities and excluded from spiritual or intellectual pursuits. However, the life and teachings of the Buddha brought about a significant transformation in the lives of many women. By embracing the Dhamma, women found new opportunities for spiritual growth, personal empowerment, and social recognition.

The lives of ancient and modern Bhikkhunīs collectively demonstrate both continuity and transformation in women's empowerment through Buddhism. During the Buddha's time, figures such as Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, Khemā, and Uppalavaṇṇā exemplified women's capacity for leadership, wisdom, and spiritual attainment, establishing a foundation for female participation in the Sangha. Their legacies are echoed in the efforts of modern Bhikkhunīs like Ven. Dhammananda, Ven. Tenzin Palmo, and Ven. Bhikkhunī Kusuma, who continue to challenge institutional barriers and advocate for equality within monastic and lay communities. While early Bhikkhunīs emphasized spiritual liberation and teaching, contemporary Bhikkhunīs expand this

role by engaging in global advocacy, education, and institutional reform, bridging traditional practice with modern contexts. Together, these two groups reveal that the Dhamma remains a timeless force enabling women to transcend societal limitations, affirm their spiritual authority, and contribute significantly to the evolution of Buddhist thought and practice across eras.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the empowerment of women through Buddhism reflects both historical continuity and adaptive transformation. The pioneering Bhikkhunīs of the Buddha's time—such as Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, Khemā, and Uppalavāṇṇā—established a precedent for women's spiritual authority, leadership, and attainment of arahantship, demonstrating that gender was not a barrier to liberation. Their contributions laid the foundation for women's inclusion in the Sangha and set enduring models of wisdom and resilience. In modern contexts, Bhikkhunīs such as Ven. Dhammananda, Ven. Tenzin Palmo, and Ven. Bhikkhunī Kusuma extend this legacy by revitalizing ordination movements, challenging institutional inequalities, and promoting education, social engagement, and global networks for Buddhist women. The comparison highlights a clear transformation: while early Bhikkhunīs focused primarily on spiritual realization and teaching, contemporary counterparts integrate these with activism, reform, and cross-cultural leadership. Collectively, the findings affirm that the Dhamma operates as a timeless catalyst for women's empowerment, enabling them to overcome societal constraints, assert spiritual authority, and shape both the preservation and future evolution of Buddhist traditions.

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