Meaningful Freedom

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When we talk about women’s emancipation, we must take into account the 2,500-year-old history of the Buddhist era. Binara Day holds immense significance for Buddhist females due to the establishment of the Bhikkhuni order on Binara or

August. This day is widely celebrated in all Buddhist countries, including Sri Lanka.

Mahā Prajāpathi Gōthami, the stepmother of Prince Siddhartha, along with 500 royal family mistresses, successfully persuaded Lord Buddha to ordain them as Bhikkhunis. Despite initial reluctance, the Buddha consented, and the ordination took place in the fifth year of Enlightenment.

During this period, Buddhism spread rapidly, leading to the flourishing of the bhikkhu order through the ordination of men. However, the absence of Bhikkhuni ordination deprived women of the opportunity to be ordained, causing significant unrest. Recognizing this issue, the Queen Mahā Prajāpathi Gōthmi and women discussed and formulated a plan to address this by introducing ordination for women.

On a full moon Pōya day, 500 women, led by Queen Mahā Prajāpathi Gōthmi, visited the Lord Buddha and requested to be ordained as Bhikkhunis. The Buddha chose not to respond when the same request was repeatedly made, maintaining silence on three separate occasions. Despite initially remaining silent, the Buddha eventually allowed the women to be ordained after the persistent request and laid down eight rules and regulations for them to follow. This decision provided an opportunity for many women to break free from the oppression and misogyny they had endured, marking a significant shift in societal norms.

> The Buddha laid down eight rules and regulations, known as the eight Garu Dharma, and granted permission for the women to be ordained as Bhikkhunis. This momentous decision provided liberation from the oppression and misogyny that many women had endured.

Hence, on a full moon Poya day, 500 women led by Queen Mahā Prajāpathi Gotami approached the Lord Buddha and expressed their desire to be ordained as Bhikkhunis. Initially, the Buddha remained silent in response to their request. After persistent appeals, Queen Mahā Prajāpathi Gōthmi accompanied by 500 grieving women, since their husbands had already been ordained, having shaved their heads

and wearing yellow robes, went to Visālā Mahanuwara to request the relevant matter to the Lord Buddha.

Following contemplation, the Buddha laid down eight rules and regulations, known as the eight Garu Dharma, and granted permission for the women to be ordained as Bhikkhunis. This momentous decision provided liberation from the oppression and misogyny that many women had endured.

It is essential to acknowledge a timeless story more than 2,500 years old, found in ‘The Character of Buddha’ authored by Venerable Balangoda Ananda Maythree Thera in 1951, concerning women’s autonomy and freedom. However, it is equally crucial to direct our attention to the complex and sorrowful circumstances surrounding women in today’s society.

It is pertinent to explore whether contemporary norms of femininity have evolved into a distressing state and whether women are able to fulfill their familial and societal obligations. This calls for a critical discussion on whether the society fulfills its responsibilities towards women, and reciprocally, whether women fulfill their duties to society.

Certainly, the ‘Kēsaputhiya Kālāma Sūtra in Angguttara Nikāya’ is a crucial doctrine when discussing the concept of ‘freedom’ within a society (Kēsaputhiya is a village and Kālāma means the villagers). This sutta, preached by The Lord Buddha to the noble people of Kēsaputtiya, conveys ten essential points. It was delivered in the sub-village of Kēsaputtiya in Kōsala, India, during a visit by The Buddha. The sutra provides valuable guidance on approaching skepticism towards individuals, incidents, or concepts of doubt.

Adhering to this advice is integral when addressing skepticism at any given time.

The Buddha advises to Kālāmas:

“Alang hi vō Kālāma kankhitun, alang vicikicchithun”

‘Do not doubt Kālāmas yourself, do not uncertainty or perplexity. If you were uncertainty Kālāma, think this way!

1. Do not accept anything just because you heard something.

2. Do not accept anything just because of that in the tradition.

3. Do not accept anything just because of that something had happened like this.

4. Do not accept anything just of that it is in our doctrine.

5. Do not accept anything just of that it matches the logic.

6. Do not accept anything just because because because of that it fits the theory.

7. Do not accept anything just because of that it matches to check facts.

8. Do not accept anything just because it matches our vision which we made up.

9. Do not accept anything just because of that he is a suitable person or our preacher.

10. Do not accept anything just because of that this priest is something we respect.

The Buddha urges Kālāmas to reflect upon the following:

“Yadā thumhē attanāwa jāneyyātha, imē Dhammā Kusalā, imē Dhammā Akusalā”
“Kālāmas, if you recognize for yourselves that these principles are virtuous, then accept them. If you perceive for yourselves that they are unwholesome, then abandon them.”

It is evident that societal norms play a crucial role in the well-being of any community. Adhering to these norms in contemporary society could potentially mitigate social and familial challenges. Upholding these norms is instrumental in advancing social welfare and ensuring the preservation of women’s rights.

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