



# GENDER EQUALITY IN BUDDHISM

**The Buddha taught that everyone, regardless of gender, has the capacity for enlightenment.**

Over the 2500 years, countless number of women have followed on the path as lay practitioners, teachers, and monastics. There are an estimated 300 million Buddhist women worldwide, including more than 130,000 nuns.

There are also many types of Awakened Women in Buddhism. These include bodhisattvas, historical figures, dakinis, yidams and dharma protectors in peaceful, semi-wrathful or wrathful form.

However, over the past 25 centuries, most Buddhist institutions have discriminated against women, some more severely than others.

Women's ordination is one of the most widely debated issues in Buddhist communities. According to tradition, the Buddha initially refused to ordain women, but his stepmother, Mahapajapati, and his disciple Ananda persuaded him.

The Buddha eventually established a "fourfold sangha," or community of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, with monks and nuns progressing from novice to full ordination as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, respectively.

However, additional rules known as the eight garudhammas ("heavy rules") were imposed on nuns, which kept them inferior to monks.



## The Sigalovāda Sutta

The Sigalovada Sutta offers advice for Buddhist couples on how to treat each other and have a happy and successful marriage.

It contains guidelines for both the wife and husband. The husband can ensure a good relationship with his wife by:

- being attentive and courteous to her
- not looking down on her
- being faithful to her
- sharing his authority with her
- providing her with clothing, jewellery etc that she wants

This ancient text assumes that a wife is not economically independent.

The wife can ensure a good relationship with her husband by:

- performing her household duties well
- being welcoming to all their relations
- being faithful to him
- budgeting properly within the household and protecting family resources

Elsewhere the Buddha advised that a married couple should not be harsh or oppressive with each other, and should be calm and compassionate.

# Ordination of Buddhist nuns....

Over the centuries, women's orders in the predominantly Theravada nations of Southeast Asia were weakened and wiped out by invasions, wars, famine, and the endemic subjugation of women, while in other regions, like Tibet, full bhikkhuni ordination was simply never introduced. Various forms of novice and lay ordination were the only options left for female renunciates in those traditions. However, Mahayana bhikkhuni lineages did survive in China and the places where Chinese Buddhism spread, mainly Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

In both Theravada and Tibetan traditions, barriers exist to women's full ordination. Women can fully ordain only in the Chinese Mahayana tradition and even then gender equality is often compromised by rules and practices that discriminate against nuns.

It is also ironic that Buddhist monastic code makes it nearly impossible to revive lineages that have largely died out by declaring that a nun can only receive full ordination from fully ordained monks and nuns: in other words, nuns must exist in order for new nuns to be made. This creates a dilemma for Theravada and Tibetan Buddhist nuns, since full ordination for nuns is available only in the Chinese Buddhist tradition. In an additional roadblock, members of some monastic hierarchies consider ordaining in another tradition to be invalid, and they believe nuns who have taken those vows are illegitimate.

A movement for the revival of women's ordination has changed this picture in recent decades. Hundreds of women in the Theravada and Tibetan traditions have taken full bhikkhuni ordination from Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Taiwanese officiants and preceptors. But as mentioned above, the validity of such ordinations is a matter of debate; conservative groups generally consider these ordinations to be invalid, while progressive corners support the effort.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and many other Buddhist leaders support the revival of full ordination for women. However, there is always backlash and resistance.

The controversy surrounding the Theravada bikkhuni ordination carried out by Ajahn Brahm in 2009 near Perth, Australia is an example of this. It led to Ajahn Brahm's excommunication from association with the Thai Forest Sangha.



**Buddhist women's leadership and contributions to maintaining centres, translating, fundraising, welfare, and teaching, are becoming increasingly prominent and valued, in both Asian and Western societies.**

**Emerging networks of online communities and online social movements for female Buddhists include the global association of Buddhist women, Sakyadhita, which has made achieving gender equity in ordination one of their main goals.**

