Are Buddhist Women Liberated? Knowledge Organiser

Key Words

Liberation: Freedom from limits on thoughts or behaviour

Women's Liberation Movement: Political movement of women/feminists (around 1960s-80s)

Enlightenment: Literally means 'to awaken'

Samsara: An endless cycle of rebirth

Ordination: The process of formally and fully becoming a monk/nun

Bikkhu/Bikkhuni: A fully ordained Buddhist monk/nun

Lay person: Someone who has not been ordained as a monk or nun

Householder: A traditional Buddhist role for women; essentially, it is the role of 'mother' and 'caretaker'

What do we mean by 'Women's Liberation'?

- The **Women's Liberation Movement** began in the 1960s to recognise inequalities in society and empower everyone to push for women's rights
- The fight for women's liberation can be dated back to before this, though! A famous example would be **Suffragettes** who fought for women's right to vote
- The **UN** claim that there have been many advancements for women over the 20th/21st centuries but also argue there are still "remaining obstacles to gender equality"
- They divide the work that still needs to be done into four main categories: ending gender based violence, achieving equal pay, gaining equal access to health care, and enforcing equal participation (in politics)

What is 'Enlightenment'?

- Enlightenment is a very complex Buddhist idea even to the most educated Buddhists! In order to understand it, we need to understand Buddhist ideas about rebirth and samsara
- Samsara is the Buddhist belief that we live in one of six different realms (human, animal, hungry ghost etc!) – if we live a good life, we can hope to be reborn into a 'good' realm after we die, but if we live a bad life, we might be reborn into a 'bad' realm
- However, according to Buddhists, even the 'good' realms really aren't all that good! They all have problems because they all involve some sort of suffering
- Therefore, Buddhists live their lives aiming to reach 'enlightenment'. This involves being a perfect Buddhist, gaining an understanding of all the fundamental truths of the universe and, therefore, being able to 'escape' or leave behind all of the realms, all of samsara, and all of that suffering upon death… existing in a perfect nothingness. It is this nothingness that is what Buddhists strive for!

Buddhist nuns

- There is a lot of debate in Buddhism about whether women should be allowed to be nuns or not!
- In China (Mahayana Buddhism), there are many Buddhist nuns. But in Thailand (Theravada Buddhism), women are not allowed to be fully ordained nuns
- The origins of this debate go back to early Buddhist scripture, where women are allowed to be nuns but are given **eight additional rules** which explain that experienced nuns still have less status than, and are answerable to, inexperienced monks
- Many women around the world have **ordained themselves** as nuns, but some groups and authorities say that they are not valid

The Buddha's aunt, **Mahapajapati was the first Buddhist nun**. She had to ask the Buddha several times before he allowed her to become a nun:
"If, Buddha, it would be possible for a woman to reach enlightenment, [and considering that] Mahapajapati had been very helpful to the Blessed One—having been his maternal aunt, wet-nurse, and foster mother — it would be good if women could become ordained."

Lay Buddhist women

- In traditional Buddhism, women are expected to take the role of 'householder' and produce and care for children and the Buddhist community
- Scholar Tomomi Ito explains that these expectations for women in Buddhism can be liberating – she argues that women have more responsibility and "prestige" than fathers in Thai Buddhist society
- Many modern Buddhist women don't stick so closely to these expectations! But they do make sure to try and follow the **Five Buddhist Precepts**

1. Refrain from wrong speech
2. Refrain from harming living beings
3. Refrain from sexual misconduct
4. Refrain from drink/drugs
5. Refrain from stealing