
MAHĀPAJĀPATĪ GOTAMĪ AND BHIKKHUṆĪ SAṄGHA

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ABSTRACT:

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was the stepmother and aunt of Siddhartha Gautama, who later became the Buddha. She played a crucial role in the Buddha's life, especially after his enlightenment. After the Buddha's mother, Queen Māyā, passed away, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī took on the responsibility of raising Siddhartha. She later joined the Saṅgha, becoming one of the first Buddhist nuns (bhikkhunis). Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī is best known for her determination to seek ordination for women in the monastic community. She approached the Buddha three times before he finally agreed to establish the Bhikkhuni Saṅgha, the order of Buddhist nuns.

The Bhikkhuni Saṅgha refers to the community of Buddhist nuns who follow the monastic discipline established by the Buddha. The establishment of the Bhikkhuni Saṅgha marked a significant step toward gender equality in the early Buddhist community. Before this, the monastic order consisted only of male monks (bhikkhus). The acceptance of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and other women into the Bhikkhuni Saṅgha highlighted the Buddha's teachings of equality and the possibility of spiritual attainment for both men and women. The Bhikkhuni Saṅgha played a crucial role in preserving and propagating the teachings of Buddhism. Bhikkhunis are engaged in study, meditation, and teaching, contributing to the spread of the Dharma.

KEYWORDS:

Bhikkhuni Saṅgha, Garudhamma, Nuns, Meditation, Dharma.

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Introduction:

What is the Holy Life? Why did Prince Siddhattha renounce the palace for seeking it? And today the same so many people also are going on this path. And which person can enter into it? What is the benefit from it? And finally, how was the origin of the Bhikkhuṇī Saṅgha and its *relative matter*?

For the first time, the Buddha was three times to refuse when Mahāpajāpatī to leave home to the homeless. And after, the Buddha agreed with the condition she had to receive *Gārudhamma* in a lifetime. Why did the Buddha refuse and hesitate about women into the Dhamma and Discipline? The reason for the refusal was that the Buddha decided not to allow women to become nuns easily, but only after they had shown many efforts to get permission to become nuns. When they first realize that becoming a bhikkhuni in the Dharma is difficult to achieve, they will always diligently maintain their bhikkhuni virtues. The Buddha wanted them to cherish the opportunity to become a monk after showing much effort.¹ And why the Buddha gave *Gārudhamma* to Mahāpajāpatī and told her to keep them for a lifetime? Of course, we cannot forget the elements in contemporary society and the custom systems inherent with them long time. And we also understand Buddhism's nature is loving-kindness (*mettā*) and wisdom (*paññā*). Moreover, the Buddha attained enlightenment so we should think that all His precepts to women about their life in Bhikkhuṇī Saṅgha had set up the basics of loving kindness, and sympathy countless of the Master to female disciples. Those precepts themselves are similar the armours cover all bhikkhuṇī living in the Saṅgha. So, we should not discuss women's position in Buddhism either high or low. What they do to help women escape from suffering into a noble life is something worth appreciating. And *Garud-*

hamma, that is the beautiful behavior of Bhikkhuṇī to Bhikkhu.

BIOGRAPHY OF MAHĀPAJĀPATĪ GOTAMĪ

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, a noble woman, was born into the Sakyan royal family in Devadaha as the younger sister of Princess Mahāmāyā. According to court astrologers, it was foretold that the sons born to the two sisters would become Universal Monarchs. Princess Mahāmāyā married King Suddhodana of Kapilavatthu, and after giving birth to Siddhattha Gotama, she passed away.

King Suddhodana then married Princess Gotamī, making her the Chief Queen. Despite being Siddhattha's aunt, she cared for him more than her own son, Nanda, who was born three days after Siddhattha. Mahāpajāpatī played a crucial role in Siddhattha's early life, nurturing him as if he were her own son.

Mahāpajāpatī also had a daughter named Sundarī Nanda. Notably, when Mahāpajāpatī's son Nanda was born, she entrusted his care to another nurse, emphasizing her significant role in Siddhattha's upbringing. Her selfless care for Siddhattha reveals her as a benefactor and, in a sense, a Bodhisattva even before her later role as a Bhikkhuni. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's story reflects her pivotal contributions to the life of Siddhattha Gotama, later known as the Buddha.²

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and King Suddhodana spared no effort to ensure Siddhattha's happiness in his palace life. However, Siddhattha's encounter with the realities of old age, sickness, death, and asceticism led him to renounce his princely existence. Despite their initial efforts, nothing could dissuade Siddhattha from his path to seeking enlightenment.

BHIKKHUṆĪ SAṄGHA

As depicted earlier, following the passing of Suddhodana, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī felt that her familial responsibilities were fulfilled. It was precisely at this juncture that she made the firm decision to dedicate the remaining portion of her life to the spiritual

path. She approached the Buddha, expressing her desire to renounce palace life and embrace homelessness. In this significant request, she was accompanied by the 500 women who had served as her companions in a previous life when they were all slaves. Reborn in the Sakyan state, these women found their husbands choosing the monastic life after the Buddha resolved a dispute and imparted Dhamma teachings on the banks of the Rohini River.

Pure life does not distinguish people's caste, nation, color skin, or age, etc,³ but for the first time, the Buddha himself does not accept females in homeless life. We can understand that matters with which the Buddha did not agree will have much reason, it completely was not simple because the status of women in ancient India has ever been bound by their family with many customs without easy take off. And if women are allowed into homeless life, they will be have to face of so many difficulties of living an ascetic. However, the Buddha wanted they respect the bhikkhuṇī virtues, because the bhikkhuṇī was not easy reach to.

The exemplary life of the Buddha and his disciples had a profound impact on Mahāpajāpatī, prompting her to eagerly await an opportunity to meet the Buddha and seek his permission for ordination. This chance arose when the Buddha visited Kapilavatthu to mediate a dispute between the Sakyan and neighboring Koliyan communities over the use of water from the Rohini River. In that pivotal year, at the request of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the order of nuns was established.

However, Mahāpajāpatī faced challenges in her quest to become a nun. Despite approaching the Buddha three times and expressing her desire to join the Saṅgha, each time the Buddha refused without providing a specific reason, simply instructing her not to persist. Some interpretations suggest that the Buddha's initial hesitation to accept Mahāpajāpatī into the Saṅgha led to misconceptions that he was reluctant to allow women to join. This misconception is sometimes linked to the eventual decline of the Bhikkhuṇī Saṅgha

in India about a thousand years later.

However, a more accurate understanding suggests that the Buddha intended to safeguard the sanctity of the Sangha. He instituted the Garudhamma, emphasizing the lifelong commitment of bhikkhuṇīs and emphasizing the importance of respecting their monastic life. Far from discouraging women from joining the Saṅgha, the Buddha's measures aimed to ensure longevity and reverence for the bhikkhuṇīs' holy life.

And then, when at Kapilavatthu, the Buddha journeyed back to Vesāli, Pajāpati Gotamī was a determined lady, and would not be so easily discouraged. She had a plan to get her way. She cut and shaved her hair, put on yellow robes, and, surrounded by a large number of five hundred Sakyan ladies, walked about 150 miles from Kapilavatthu to Vesāli. When she arrived at Vesāli, her feet were swollen and her body was covered with dust. She stood outside the hall where the Buddha was staying with tears on her face, still hoping that the Buddha would ordain her as a nun. Ānanda was really surprised to see her in this condition. "Gotamī, why are you standing here like this?" he asked. "Venerable Ānanda, it is because the Blessed One does not permit women to become nuns," From Kapilavatthu, when the Buddha returned to Vesāli, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, undeterred and resolute, devised a plan to pursue her goal. Defying discouragement, she took matters into her own hands. She cut and shaved her hair, donned yellow robes, and, accompanied by a sizable assembly of five hundred Sakyan women, embarked on a journey of approximately 150 miles from Kapilavatthu to Vesāli. Despite arriving with swollen feet and a dust-covered body, she stood outside the hall where the Buddha resided, tears in her eyes, still clinging to hope that he would ordain her as a nun.

Witnessing her determination, Ānanda expressed surprise and inquired about her condition. "Gotamī, why are you standing here like this?" he asked. She responded, "Venerable Ānanda, it is because the Blessed One does not permit women to become nuns."

Ānanda, moved by her plea, assured her, “Wait here, Gotamī. I will discuss this matter with the Blessed One.”

Upon approaching the Buddha with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s request, Ānanda faced three refusals. Undeterred, he altered his approach, respectfully questioning the Buddha about the capacity of women to attain various stages of enlightenment as nuns. The Buddha affirmed that women were indeed capable. Encouraged by this response, Ānanda proposed, “Lord, it would be beneficial if women could be ordained as nuns.” In response, the Buddha introduced the Garudhamma (eight important rules), suggesting that if Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī accepted these rules, she would be considered ordained as a nun.⁴

These eight important rules (Attha Garudhamma):

1. *A nun who has been ordained (even) for a century must greet respectfully, rise from her seat, salute with joined palms, and do proper homage to the monk ordained but that day. This rule is to be honoured, respected, revered, venerated, never to be transgressed during her life.*
2. *A nun must not spend the rain in a residence where there is no monk. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.*
3. *Every half month, a nun should desire two things from the Order of Monks: The asking of the Observance day and the coming for the exhortation. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.*
4. *After the rain a nun must invite before both Orders in respect of three matters: what was seen, what was heard, what was suspected. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.*
5. *A nun, offending against an important rule, must undergo manatta (discipline) for half a month before both Orders. This rule too is to be honoured... during her life.*
6. *When, as a sikkhamānā, she has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek ordination from both Orders. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.*
7. *A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.*

8. *A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun. From today, admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden*". [Book of the Discipline, V.354-355].

When Ānanda mentioned the Garudhamma to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, she gladly agreed to abide by those conditions and automatically became a nun. Thus, Mahāpajāpatī was the first to be admitted to the Order of the Bhikkhūnīs.⁵ The other women were admitted to the Order after her by the bhikkh as instructed by the Buddha. "I allow monks, nuns to be ordained by monks."⁶

Thus, all of them went to Vesāli, where the Buddha was residing, and eventually attained entry into the newly found Saṅgha, with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī being the first⁷, and thereby the most senior nun, being the female equivalent of the first monk in the Sāsana, Ven. Anna Koṇḍañña. This is told in brief here, but the elaboration comes from the story in the text. Then, after her higher ordination, Mahāpajāpatī, after approaching the Buddha and worshiping him, stood on one side, and the Teacher taught the Dhamma to her after taking a meditation subject in the presence of the Buddha, she attained Arahantship.⁸

In Therīgāthā, Mahāpajāpatī, the woman who is said to have composed this poem was Pajāpatī, the Buddha's stepmother and a Queen of the Sakyas. Her younger sister was Māyā, married to King Sudhodana only Pajāpatī herself was unable to conceive an heir. Queen Māyā died in childbirth, and it was Pajāpatī who raised Gotama as her own son.

The third stanza suggests that her attainment included the recollection of past lives, by which she was able to verify empirically the truth of continual rebirth the "flowing on" (samsara) from on life to another. This process, as she mentions in her poem, is fueled by craving and by "not understanding". In the second and fourth stanzas, Pajāpatī declares her attainment of *nibbāna*, of final and complete liberation in this very life.

It is remarkable to think that when Māyā is remembered in the

last stanza, the author has in mind not the icon of motherhood and sacrifice that Māyā became in the Buddhist tradition, but a dearly loved younger sister who died tragically young without ever seeing what her son had become.

All five hundred nuns after the Discourse on Nandaka's Advice also attained Arahantship. This is the story of what happened.⁹

So, also we were known as the Gotamī, Pajāpatī the Great ordained and directed by the Buddha.¹⁰ That was the origin of the Bhikkhūnī Saṅgha in Buddhism. This was one Community that only gained the highest sainthood of women of the religions of the previous time to the present. They had shaken Deva, Devi, humankind, and the Māra world.¹¹

Later, when the Buddha was sitting in Jeta's Wood when placing the Bhikkhūnīs in their different positions, he placed Mahāpajāpatī as the foremost amongst those who were senior: "*Etadaggaṃ bhikkhave mama savikanam Bhikkhūnīnam ratannunam, yad idam MahāpajāpatīGotamī...*" This is the foremost of my nun disciples, monastics, amongst those who are senior, that is to say, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī"¹²

The first of the texts concerning the Elder Nuns, "That is to say, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī," shows how the Elder Nun Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, amongst those who were senior, was said to be the foremost.

And then, before long she attained Arahantship. The other Sakyan ladies who were ordained with her also attained Arahantship. The establishment of the Bhikkhūnī Saṅgha with rules and regulations was an opportunity for women that Buddha offered for the first time in the history of the world. No other religious leader had given such a high religious position to women. These rules are related to the monk's and nun's life of ethics.

Conclusion:

We can see, that Mahāpajāpatī herself was very happy for receiving Gāru-dhamma, five hundred ladies Sakya also, and they became Arahants, established Noble Bhikkhuṇī Saṅgha, offered so many benefits to Indian women at that time. But after the Buddha Nibbāna, in the First Buddhist Council, Ānanda was blamed on his behalf Mahāpajāpatī requested the Buddha to allow women into the Saṅgha. And then, maybe because of that reason so now in some Theravāda traditional countries still do not revive Bhikkhuṇī Saṅgha, while Bhikkhuṇī Saṅgha of Mahāyāna still existed during they appeared today. In particular, almost they always keep Attha Garudhamma to Bhikkhu Saṅgha as the teaching of the Buddha to Mahapajāpatī for the first time.

Endnote:

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2. MA.i.1001,cp.
3. 2500 Years Of Buddhism, 23.
4. V, 20. Nuns (Bhikkhuṇī), The story of Mahapajapati Gotami, 2210.
5. The Great Chronicles Of The Buddha, VI 3, 272-274.
6. Ibid, 274.
7. AN 7.79
8. Therīgāthā, chapter 6.6
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12. Anguttara, The Book of the Ones, Women disciples, 21. Trans by F.L. Woodward, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited. Delhi, 2006.

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