

BHIKKHUNI AND GENDER EQUALITY IN THE VIHARA DHARMAKIRTI PALEMBANG

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Abstract

Gender equality remains a focus point of discourse to continue to be studied and is always associated with religious teachings, including Buddhism. The Buddha taught that women can play an active role in religious rituals and social activities. However, speculations by both religious leaders and Buddhists themselves take second place to women, lower than men. Therefore, this article focuses on explaining how gender equality is in the perspective of Buddhism and how the existence of Bhikkhuni at Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang is. This field research uses interviews, observations and documentation to obtain the necessary data. The results of this study indicate that the concept of gender equality in Buddhism is not contained in a clear text but the universal teachings of love serve as guidelines. The teaching of love for all creatures, especially humans, emphasizes that both men and women are entitled to equal respect and opportunities. In practice, the teaching on gender equality can be seen in the role of women who can become nuns and lead worship services. Even in social life, women can play an active role and work even as leaders in an organization.

Keywords: Bhikkhuni; Dharmakirti Vihara; Gender.

Abstrak

Kesetaraan gender tetap menjadi topik diskursus hangat untuk terus dikaji dan selalu berkaitan dengan ajaran agama, termasuk juga agama Buddha. Sang Buddha mengajarkan bahwa perempuan dapat berperan aktif dalam ritual keagamaan dan aktivitas sosial. Namun, spekulasi pemuka maupun umat Buddha sendiri meletakkan perempuan dalam urutan kedua dan lebih rendah dari laki-laki. Karena itu, artikel ini fokus untuk menjelaskan bagaimana kesetaraan gender dalam perspektif ajaran Buddha dan bagaimana eksistensi Bhikkhuni di Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang. Penelitian lapangan ini menggunakan interview, observasi dan dokumentasi untuk mendapatkan data yang diperlukan. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa konsep ajaran gender dalam ajaran Buddha tidak tertuang dalam bentuk teks yang jelas tetapi ajaran kasih yang universal menjadi pedoman. Ajaran tentang kasih kepada semua makhluk terutama manusia, mempertegas bahwa baik laki-laki maupun perempuan berhak mendapatkan penghormatan dan kesempatan yang sama. Dalam praktiknya ajaran tentang kesetaraan gender itu terlihat pada peran perempuan yang dapat menjadi Bhikkhuni dan memimpin kebaktian. Dalam kehidupan sosial pun, perempuan dapat berperan aktif dan berkarya bahkan sebagai pemimpin dalam sebuah organisasi.

Kata Kunci: Bhikkhuni; Vihara Dharmakirti; Gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

Differences between men and women in terms of physical appearance have been there since birth, these differences become real from day to day with age and practice (Shihab, 2005). Differences between men and women are biological events, not historical events such as differences between nations and classes in society. Although there are many differences, men and women have the same historical background in many major civilizations, such as the Greek, Roman, and Chinese civilizations (Yazid, 2003). According to Margeret Seed, the world would be better off if men and women recognized that each had superior abilities compared to others in different fields (Shihab, 2005).

The differences between men and women are fertile ground in the current gender equality discourse. Women are always positioned second after men (Mosse, 2003). Religious circles are not spared in the flow of the gender equality discourse. Throughout the history of religion, women have always been the subject of debate from various aspects. The position of women in various fields has always been a serious enough discussion so that it is inevitable that the women's movements are emerging. However, every religious person who is obedient to the teachings of his religion will of course think again to give a statement that is outside the path of their religious teachings.

According to most of the world's religious traditions, women are assigned a secondary and subordinate role. Many reasons point to the basic biological differences of women and their role in childbirth. For Hindu women, there is a history of negative and critical writing about their gender. The law-giver *manu dictum* that is widely quoted from the swing to the grave of a woman depends on the man. A girl's childhood depends on her father, youth on her husband and old age on her son (Mosse, 2003).

Many understandings and religious teachings are in line with the views above and then develop into a tradition and belief that is very detrimental to women. Not only in teachings and beliefs, but women are also discriminated in both religious and institutional settings. The caste and patriarchal system treat women like *sudras* and slaves. Manu's law deprived women of their rights in religion and spiritual life (Mukti, 2007).

Likewise in Buddhism, although initially there was no Buddhist teaching that emphasized any differences regarding the abilities, aspirations and religious practices between men and women, after the Buddha's death, his followers began to speculate about the application of his teachings, especially in the issue of women's spiritual abilities and efforts to prove theologically that women are inferior to men (Sharma, 2006).

In general, Buddhists speculate that women are inferior to men, regardless of situations and roles (Wijaya, 2020). However, at Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang, Mahayana Buddhists are known for their teachings of mutual help in achieving salvation and deliverance. In this sect, although there are men in the service, if there is a more senior woman, she will lead the service. Gender equality at Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang is also seen in the form of the altar which does not highlight one of the women and men, but all are equal, even though the place is shaped front and back, nothing is highlighted. In other cases, this equality can also be found, such as in family life, institutions, all of which show gender equality between women and men.

Based on the description above, it is important to conduct in-depth research to explain how gender equality is in the perspective of Buddhist teachings and how the existence of Bhikkhuni at Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang is.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Dharmakirti Temple Palembang

The establishment of Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang began with the arrival of a monk named Bhante Ashin Jinarakhhita across Ilir Palembang. At the beginning of the time, Bhante Ashin Jinarakhhita arrived on the shores of Musi, the remnants of Srivijaya's prestige as a maritime Buddhist state almost leaving no trace (Ripai, 2012). The place of worship for Buddhists before the Dharmakirti Vihara was founded was the house of Eddy Tan Chong Leng who is the director of the Buddhakirti Foundation. The house of Eddy Tan Chong Leng who is also a Cetya is the first Cetya in Palembang (Ripai, 2012). Only then, Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang was inaugurated by the next Governor of South Sumatra, H. Bastari on Sunday, July 8, 1962 under the Palembang Buddhakirti Foundation whose general chairman was Goel Kim Hock (Suryanto, 2012).

At first, the Dharmakirti monastery was not as luxurious as it is today. At that time, only Cetya Eddy Tan Chong Leng's house was made of boards. Dharmakirti monastery's original temple was grade 3 wood bought by Chung Hua School. Over time, the people of Vihara Dharmakirti tried to improve it. The income from the residents of Vihara Dharmakirti is used to repair and renovate (Suryadi, 2021).

Suryadi further explained:

This building was originally designed for Javanese architecture because it was based on the originality of the construction and the status of the natives at that time. Along with the times, Dharmakirti Vihara turned into Chinese-style architecture. Because the temple was financed by the majority of the population of Chinese and Pranakan, the Vihara was built and replaced with Chinese architecture of course according to the request of those who have donated. Eventually, the Dharmakirti Vihara building became what it is today (Suryadi, 2021).

Vihara Dharmakirti is located at Jalan Captain Marzuki No. 1579 RT. 09 RW. 04 Kelurahan 20 Ilir Timur III, Ilir Timur I District, Palembang. Dharmakirti Vihara has a building area of 3,216 M² (Herfin, 2017). Dharmakirti Vihara has two gates that can be crossed. The main gate passes through Captain Marzuki Street and another one passes through Papera Street. Each gate has a parking space for cars and motorbikes. In front of the gate of Vihara Dharmakirti Jalan Captain Marzuki, there are three white Buddha statues. The floor of Vihara Dharmakirti is decorated with the Borobudur temple to give the appearance of Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang a richer look. In front of Vihara Dharmakirti, a wire fence is installed as high as 1.5 m, with both sides of the fence 2 m high.

Dharmakirti Vihara has many buildings and rooms. The first building is the Dharmasala building. The Dharmasala is a place for Bhakti Puja and Dharma Practice. This building has two floors. It is used for weddings for Buddhists. Inside of the building is equipped with several prayer equipments such as altars,

lamps, oil and various offerings. There are also pillow mats for sitting meditation or for praying. This place usually accommodates about 700 people on the first floor. While on the second floor, the capacity to accommodate fewer people is around 300 people.

On the right, there are several offices, such as the mourning section office measuring approximately 4x4 meters, the MBI level one office known as the city MBI, the second level MBI office measuring 6x4 meters, the marriage registration office and many other offices which supports activities at the Vihara. Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang also has a library, dressing rooms, and toilets measuring approximately 2x2 meters. At Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang, there is also an Elementary School (SD) Manggala which is near the gate of the Vihara via Jalan Captain Marzuki. School facilities are also available to provide a comfortable environment for students.

There is also a Kuti which is a place for members of the Sangha or Bhante, Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni, as well as other classes used by Sunday school students to learn about religion from the high school, junior high, playgroup and kindergarten levels. In addition, there is also a special room for those who want to meditate which is located in the third room of the Dharmakirti Vihara. At the back of the building, there is a house called the Kwan Im Pagoda which has 7 levels symbolizing the 7 levels of purification carried out by a Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni. Kwan Im Pagoda is also used for meditation. Between the Pagoda building on the right, there are Sunday classes, namely for groups, playgroups, kindergarten, and elementary school (Suryadi, 2021).

Another building of Vihara Dharmakirti is the Ash House which is used to provide ashes for families who want their families buried, and some of the ashes are stored for the convenience of Buddhists in praying and praying for their families. This ash house is near the gate of Jalan Papera. It has two floors, the higher the floor, the higher the rent. Because it is believed that if the ashes are higher up towards the sky, the spirits of their ancestors will be better in the afterlife.

There is a kitchen room on the left of the Abu House. It is used to cook food for the members of the Sangha. In addition, it is also used for serving food for the staff and worshipers of Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang.

2.2. Gender Equality in Perspective Buddhism

All Buddhist schools rely on the Tripitaka as the main reference that records the words and teachings of Gautama Buddha. His followers then recorded and classified the teachings of Buddha in 3 books namely; Sutta Pitaka (discourses of the Buddha), Vinaya Pitaka (rules or order of monks) and Abhidhamma Pitaka (teachings of the laws of metaphysics and psychology) (Mansur, 2011). In Buddhism, it is explained that humans have the same rights. But what distinguishes it is the human activity itself. As explained in the Majjhima Nikāya: “Master Gotama, what are the causes and conditions why human beings are seen as lowly and noble? People are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sick and healthy, beautiful and ugly, influential and insignificant, poor and rich, low-born and high-born, stupid and wise. What is the cause and condition, Master Gotama, why do humans appear lowly and noble?” “Disciple, beings are owners of their

deeds, inheritors of their deeds, having their deeds as their protection. It is the act that distinguishes beings as inferior and noble." (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 2013).

The verse above explains that a person's glory and humiliation are not determined by gender, but by human behavior. Buddhism believes that all humans are equal and gender cannot be used to prove that men are better and more special than women.

During the Buddha's time, King Pasenadi Kosala was sad to hear the news that Queen Malika had given birth to a daughter while she wanted a son. The Buddha consoled and explained to the King of Kosala:

"Indeed a daughter can be a better descendant than a man, O king of the people: she can grow up to be wise, virtuous, respected by her husband's mother, as a dedicated wife. The son born to him will one day become a hero, ruling a great country. The son of an extraordinary woman who became the guide of all her people." (Mulyono, Santoso, & Liman, 2008).

When the Buddha came, there was a difference in the position of a woman who was very exalted and equated with men. The Buddha said: "A woman will not lose to a man, because a woman will give birth to another Buddha." The verse in the Tripitaka from the Anguttara Nikaya also explains that: "Women can become kings of rotation, women can occupy the position of Sakka, women can occupy the position of Mara and women can occupy the position of Brahma".

Women in Buddhism are not forbidden to work, as long as it is a good job. The Buddha did not teach economics, but the moral and religious principles he taught underlie economics for Buddhists. In this economic activity, there is no distinction between men and women who are looking for a proper livelihood as they only carry out their rights and obligations to seek the economy for survival. Right livelihood or livelihood is one of the eight elements of the noble path in Buddhism called the precepts consisting of the three elements, namely right speech, right action, and right livelihood (Piyadasi, 2003).

According to Buddhism, it is not justifiable to look down on women. In the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha said that in some respects, women were considered smarter and wiser than men. Women can attain the same level of chastity as men if they practice the Buddha's teachings and disciplines well. The Buddha blessed the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in 583 BC which paved the way for women in India at that time to practice Buddhism which was previously very restricted. The gender of male or female in Buddhism is not an obstacle to attaining holiness (Amin & Mashruchah, 1992).

The Buddha has appointed women to take on the role of role models and sources of enlightenment. Enlightenment is not limited to men but also women. The Buddha's fair attitude towards gender is seen in the establishment of the Sangha of Bhikkhuni who lead a holy life so that they have the freedom to make their life choices, whether they are ordinary housewives or even more like state leaders or religious leaders. In Buddhism, women who are ordained as monastics are called Bhikkhuni. If men are called monks or Bhikkhus, women are called Bhikkhunis or nuns. The union of the two makes the life of the Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis known as the Sangha.

A Bhikkhuni is a person who follows the teachings of the Buddha and is sworn in by his appointment. The life of a Bhikkhuni in the Sangha is governed by the Vinaya rules. The Vinaya offers Sikkhapada (instruction guides) for Bhikkhuni and Bhikkhus, as well as monastic and ritual life (Iron, 2008). In the

history of Buddhism, the woman who first became a Bhikkhuni was the stepmother of Prince Siddhartha, named Ratu Maha Pajapati (Rashid, 1997). Bhikkhuni's life is not involved in worldly affairs, has lived a holy and obedient life and is faithful to the Buddha Dharma, listens and obeys Pratomoksha's rules (Suwanto, 1995).

Bhikkhuni trains themselves to live the holy life taught by the Buddha to relieve suffering or can be interpreted as a woman who has been loyal to Buddhism. As stated in the "Vinaya Pitaka" Bhikkhuni must live a clean and holy life, which is carried out by rules, including rules for outward discipline, rules for wearing clothes, food and other necessities of life, how to overcome the nature of desire and mental stimulation, and how to acquire sublime inner knowledge to perfect oneself (Hadikusuma, 1993).

2.3. The Existence of Bhikkhuni at Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang

The Bhikkhunis cannot stay in one monastery alone as they move from one monastery to another on the terms of the leader of them. This is a form of travel as the life of an ascetic who does not focus on staying in one place. The activities carried out by Bhikkhuni at the Vihara are inseparable from sincere devotion to religion. A nun has a stipulation in her life that everything they do must be based on the teachings of the Dharma.

In addition to moving from one monastery to another, Bhikkhunis also have rules that must be followed, both inside and outside the monastery. First, a bald head, for women hair is a crown, when a woman decides to become a Bhikkhuni, then she must remove or throw away something she considers most valuable, namely her hair as a symbol of wanting to truly give up her life from the world.

This is the meaning of simplicity because baldness does not need to be combed, in dreadlocks and so on, it is a symbol to get rid of the worldly, attachment to worldly things. Therefore, to become a Bhikkhuni, one must renounce the world. One of the ways to let go of the world is by not dressing up. Bhikkhunis are not allowed to keep the hair on the head. Because they are not dressed up, they are automatically shaved. If someone has hair, they have to straighten their hair, and that is a prohibition (Bhikkhuni Khasanti, 2021).

Second, Bhikkhunis are only allowed to have three sets of robes: ritual robes, daily robes and spare robes. For daily wear, Bhikkhuni wears daily robes. As for ritual ceremonies, Bhikkhuni wears ritual robes or robes that are complete and neat. Another set of robes is used as a spare robe. It is not permissible for a nun to wear any form of clothing other than an ascetic robe.

If a Bhikkhuni takes off the robe and puts on another garment, that Bhikkhuni is no longer in the nunnery community. This was determined so that the nuns could understand the meaning of simplicity and so that the nuns would not waste time following the fashion, as this could distract the nuns from practicing (Bhikkhuni Khasanti, 2021).

Third, Bhikkhuni in speaking should be considerate, gentle and loving, and also must be firm not to offend others. Every word spoken must be guarded because every word will produce good and bad effects. Words are also a mirror for the personality of each person. "A nun should always be mindful of her words,

as for every word she utters contains honey and poison. Kind words can please others, and harsh words can hurt others” (Bhikkhuni Khasanti, 2021).

Fourth, wherever she goes, the Bhikkhuni should be able to watch her every step mindfully, walking in a calm and unhurried manner. In fact, every step that is passed is a journey full of self-confidence. While walking, nuns should be able to keep their eyes from the bad sight. According to Bhikkhuni Khasanti, the Buddha said: "whether walking, sitting, lying down or standing, one must be in a state of self-awareness and full awareness" (Bhikkhuni Khasanti, 2021).

Bhikkhuni's life at Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang is determined by her duty of being responsible to herself and socially responsible. Bhikkhuni is responsible for herself while trying to increase her ability to achieve enlightenment, become a saint, without Dukkha by acting as stated in the pattimokha teachings which is the morality or discipline of Bhikkhuni to be leaders and role models for her people. Bhikkhuni is also responsible for service to the community around the Vihara.

As explained by Bhikkhuni Khasanti who is a Bhikkhuni Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang revealed that:

The Bhikkhuni carried out activities at the Dharmakirti Vihara Palembang every Monday, Wednesday and Friday before the pandemic. After the pandemic only Wednesday at 18.00 WIB. Bhikkhuni also has wedding and death services, leading prayers for the dead, Buddhist holidays, but Bhikkhuni's holidays can have one day of prayer because there is a sangkung called offering to Buddha at 10.30 WIB. The activities carried out are not included in the schedule for the implementation of Puja Bhakti (prayer). Bhikkhuni has irregular activities, because they provide services for Buddhists, so that at certain times they are often visited by people who ask for help, such as: consulting and asking for prayers (Bhikkhuni Khasanti, 2021).

At Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang, even though there is a Bhikkhu in the service, if there is a Bhikkhuni who is more senior, she becomes the leader of the service. Gender equality at Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang is also seen in the form of the altar which does not highlight one of the women and men, but all are equal, even though the place is shaped front and back, nothing is highlighted. In other cases, this equality can also be found, such as in family life, institutions, all of which show gender equality between women and men.

In Buddhism, humans are high, low, weak, their strength is determined by the behavior of each person, not by gender, the Buddha has taught the Dharma to anyone who wishes to listen to it to men and women of any caste. The Buddha came to elevate and carry out the roles of both men and women. The nuns came to enhance the status and role of women in many ways.

Gender equality for women can also be a leader because many of our leaders are now women. So women can advance if given the opportunity. The status and role of women in Buddhism are the same as that of men. Equal, high, low and weak are determined by their character, not by their sexes. As explained by the Buddha as follows: "Kammam satte vibhajati yadidam hinappanitataya" "The distinction of every gross, or subtle being is determined by his behavior (Bhikkhuni Khasanti, 2021).

3. CONCLUSION

The Buddha taught that women can attain the same level of chastity as men if they practice the Buddha's teachings and disciplines well. The existence of Bhikkhuni at Vihara Dharmakirti Palembang shows that the Buddha's teachings on equality between men and women are still implemented in the lives of Buddhist leaders and followers. The rules applied to a Bhikkhuni are not something that demeans a woman; on the contrary, it shows that women have the same opportunity as men to be able to escape from the misery of the world to eternal happiness.

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