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Let's Sort This Out For Once

by Sri Daoruang

translated by Phaptawan Suwannakudt

Early this January, there was big news that did not cause much excitement. The government announced that Thai women will have basic rights equal to men. Some women are glad, some pay no attention, yet others oppose the decision.

The first group understood that from now on, women will have the right to sign contracts in property deals and make loan agreements without having to get permission from their husbands. They will be able to use their own last names, which may sound better than those of their spouses. Or if they want to be ordained, it will be as a true devotee of the faith. They will no longer be looked down upon as if they only did so for one reason: because they are failures in love. Women will now have the right to wear saffron robes. (Oh, what a dream!)

Another group understands the phrase 'equal by basic rights', specifically the word 'basic', to mean from *birth* only.

The venerable Buddhadasa has said, for a while now, that when human beings are born, men and women are all equal by nature. When they grow up and get taller, they go through many different stages that contribute to their inequality, all of which have been decided by males. Thus, when the law states that people are 'equal' only by 'basic rights', this group of women simply ignore the announcement because they don't believe that it will make any difference.

As for the last group, quite aside from not welcoming the statement, they are not pleased with it at all. This is because they are either not well educated or because they obey age-old beliefs that have taken root so deep that they are hard to undo. They have very high regard for male figures as the head of the family and they revere renowned monks (strictly men only) and place them

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in the higher orders of society. They are convinced that women could never be equal with men.

I, the author, am a woman who was born and raised to accept that men are superior, because I was not well educated and had a narrow world view. The attitudes passed on for generations are very slow to change. Those who are responsible for teaching the next generation have taken it upon themselves to follow what was passed on and handed down from their ancestors, from grandparents to parents. They often refer to folklore, literature and various sermons that glorify the male sex—which may or may not be true, or might have been modified. All of this has penetrated our mindsets regardless of our gender, for an entire lifetime. This is very hard to pull away and withdraw oneself from.

Nevertheless, it doesn't mean that it cannot be undone.

Most importantly, it is common practice in society to pay respect to the *sangha* (monks). I choose to use the word *sangha* and not *dharma*, because that is the word generally used by most people.

“Should those who bear the saffron robe behave badly, we can still regard the saffron robe which they wear with respect.”

There is never any mention that “in this case we should worship nuns instead”. This is because even when certain (male) persons have behaved disrespectfully, people still worship the robe worn by the (male) person, rather than the nuns who did not break any *sila* (Buddhist precepts). The other two common sayings that have remained unchanged are: “men can maintain family names and pass them down” and “for better or worse, they can be ordained and are therefore able to grant merit to their parents”. It is, in fact, very rare to see one re-examine the *sila* or five precepts, which we have learned to follow since childhood. Each time we celebrate an ordination ceremony, it always involves illegally brewed alcoholic drinks. This has continued until it has become a customary, sinful type of merit-making that has taken root in society. Moreover, the making of alcoholic drinks has been elaborated with frightening rituals. This includes rubbing insecticide into the pots used for brewing in order to produce a higher level of alcohol in the drink.

When we add superstitions to *all the sacredness of the entire world*, and weave these into the same thread with the ‘revered Buddhist monk’, what we get is a ‘hit’ phrase to use during auspicious ceremonies:

May the blessing of the three gems and sacred entities in the entire world protect you, bring you happiness and prosperity; may anything you wish for come true; if you wish for money, may money be granted; if you wish for gold, may gold be granted; may your life be completed by luck, rank and admiration [...]

That is to say, to some groups of people, the 'three Buddhist gems' are not enough to support their thinking, despite the teaching that you are your own *self-reliance*. They think that they can bribe their way or ask to pay for someone who is useful to them, or whom they admire, love or like, without thinking if it is *right* or *wrong*.

It is odd to think that monks and animistic spirits should work together, but there are some who still believe that they are able to mix the two.

At the same time, those who believe in the supernatural also believe that the female sex is identified with many taboos. These include the belief that women can demean sacred objects or make their sacredness invalid. On the other hand, it means that women must be so evil and powerful that they are capable of overruling sacred power. That is why men are so afraid and must use their bodily strength to overpower women, who could never have the same physical strength as them. One mustn't ever think that they can be equal.

Some of these problems could be resolved by people's willingness to cooperate with each other. However, some issues need to be addressed by those who have information and who must release this knowledge for people to get access to. We need to launch a campaign, such as the campaign that pointed out the bad effects of using plastic foam and persuaded people to replace it with biodegradable materials during the *Loi Kratong* festival. Or the campaign about the poisonous effects of cigarette smoke and the need to protect the rights of those who do not smoke. These are two of the issues which have had satisfactory resolutions.

Returning to the issue of 'women's rights', this author has referred to the conscience of both women and men, including myself, in order to point out the following: when nuns stop being monks' servants by leaving the monks to rely on themselves so that they can preach to us; when nuns stop making themselves disgusting, for example, by dressing in white garments to wander the streets and beg; when women have completely equal rights and are legally equal to men as stated in the law; and, most importantly, when a re-examination in religion takes place, this is when we could be convinced that we have eliminated women's inequality from the system.

However, this is only the author's view. I believe that the latter two issues I mentioned are the ones that have oppressed women's rights. When we get rid of these two problems, then the rest of the issues to be dealt with will be in regards to *mankind* and will not be seen as a problem of *gender* anymore.