

Bridging Society and Buddhism Through a Woman's Role in Teaching the Dhamma as Depicted in Selected Visual Art Works from Sri Lanka

*Dr. Leena Senheweera,
Department of Fine Arts,
University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka*

Introduction:

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the women's role in teaching the Dhamma and how it can bridge society and Buddhism. To study this phenomenon, I have selected some Sri Lankan Buddhist visual art works from Gampola and Kandy periods (18th and 19th centuries).

Art works provide a reflection of the powerful role women can play in teaching the Dhamma in society. A woman plays the roles of mother, wife, daughter, sister, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law etc. There is ample evidence to show how a woman has assisted the Bodhisatta and the Buddha to achieve Enlightenment. Among them Prajapathi Gotami, the foster mother of prince Siddharta, his wife Yasodhara and Madri, the wife of king Vessantara sacrificed their lives for a son or husband.

In ancient and modern society, a woman teaches counselling, advices and looks after family and conjugal affinities. These activities and roles are depicted in Buddhist visual images in ancient Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka. These visual images appear to have used as a method for the teaching and learning of Dhamma.

In general, a number of media can be used for teaching the Dhamma. Among these, I suggest visual art works as the most effective option for teaching and learning the Dhamma for the welfare of society. Even though in education, visual aids are generally used as a teaching and learning material, I have selected some visual art works such as paintings, sculptures and carvings as teaching and learning aid of Dhamma.

Most Sri Lankan Buddhist temples use the aforementioned art works to communicate a religious sentiment rather than aesthetic pleasure. Also, these visual images help to remind the devotee that the location at which he is present is a religious one¹. For instance, the theme of images depicted generally represent the *jataka stories* (Buddha's previous birth stories), *Mara yuddhaya* (Mara's battle) *Satsatiya* (seven week) etc. Actually, these art works do not manifest the wide range of the technique of visual arts such as perspective, composition colour texture and so on.

In my opinion, visual art works in Buddhist temples can be used as a teaching and learning material in the teaching of the Dhamma. The purpose was not to create visual deception but to send a message to the audience. The art works I have selected in this paper can be used as a tool to express the teachings of Dhamma as well as to encourage the use of imagination in the study of the Buddha's doctrine. At the same time, these Buddhist images help the devotee or the onlooker to be aware of spiritual realities.

Moreover, it is important that the visual images not only provoke religious sentiment but also become educational. For instance, if the devotee wishes to follow the Buddha's doctrine, he can read the traditional Buddhist texts. This is also a material that can teach the Dhamma without the help of visual images because the devotee can read the text and understand what it says. However, paintings, sculptures and carvings convey the same message more quickly to an audience because it is the nature of visual aids. In

¹ A visual object or experience consciously created through an expression or imagination (Britanica, Vol.1. 139p).

addition, anyone can read the visual images without language ability and irrespective of cultural orientation. Thus, even uneducated laymen can follow or realise the Buddha's doctrine through the images without any difficulty.

The selected visual images teach the devotees the relationship of Buddhism and human rights, Buddhism and culture, society, gender and stimuli for studying the Dhamma. Moreover, visual images have a higher tendency towards representing emotion. The Buddhist temple paintings, sculptures and carving create emotional stimulation and they enrich our understanding of the Dhamma.

Buddhist paintings, sculpture and carvings show clearly the path of a woman's religiosity and female authorship that can bridge society and Buddhism. Furthermore, it reveals a woman's contribution in both the religious and secular realms and her sentiment and sacrifice to change Buddhist society and culture.

Discussion

As a mother, wife, daughter and sister, a woman's smile or tears etc build a meaningful society. She constantly teaches her children, husband and brother etc the meaning of loving kindness, happiness, peacefulness and patience and so on. According to Damma, the woman as a mother holds an honourable position in society. The mother would always extend her loving kindness (*Metta*) to all living beings. She encourages her husband's and children's happiness by disciplining and counselling them. She is usually the first teacher of her children who teaches morality through the Five Precepts. She advises her young children of the disadvantages of killing, stealing, lying, drinking intoxicants and sexual misconduct. When preaching to the lay Buddhist people, the Buddha preached the five advantages of morality. This lesson is first taught by the mother to her young children.

According to the Buddha's preaching, layman relationships include that between husband and wife, and parents and children. The many suttas of *Tripitaka*, *Dhammapada* also refer to these intimate relationships, and we can identify the role of mother through of this suttas. However, the intimate relationship between the mother and child begins when the mother is pregnant with the child. In ancient Hindu culture as well as in modern Sinhala Buddhist culture, the pregnant mother can be seen near her time of delivery visiting her parents, particularly her mother. The culture in both the ancient and modern Sri Lankan culture is similar. The expecting mother wishes for her mother's love and encouragement before delivery. This shows a mother's powerful role to build up the human society. The best example of this can be seen in a painting at *Suriyagoda Rajamaha Vihara*. Queen Maha Maya go to her parents' palace to deliver her baby Prince Siddharta.

However, some visual images represent a close relationship between the mother and child. The example of *culadhammapala Jataka* at *Satkanduru Rajamaha Vihara* in Kandy district, Sri Lanka. This Jataka story represents the relationship between the mother and child as well as a misunderstanding between the husband and wife². This story teaches the mother's love for her child and the jealousy of her husband for his baby and wife. According to the story, this mother looks after her seven month old son by bathing, feeding and dressing him in rich cloths and playing with him. This is the duty of a mother in society. When the King sees this, he suddenly gets angry with the wife. He could not understand the close relationship between the mother and son.

² A king being jealous of his queen's affection for her child has the boy mutilated and killed, and is punished by being cast into hell (Jataka stories, Vol.iii, 117p)

He thought “*Even now woman is filled with pride on account of her boy and does not value me straw, as the boy grows up, she will think ,I have a man for my son, and will take know notice of me. I will have him put to death at once*”. (Vol iii. 118P).

The dialogue shows the mother’s love and the narrow-mindedness of the husband. However, this story explains her son’s death and her husband’s cruelty. First, the king orders the executioner to cut off the baby’s hands. At the time she said to the king:

“*The great king my boy is only a child, seven months old. He knows nothing. The fault is not his. If there be any fault, it is mine. Therefore did my hands to be cut off*”.(Vol iii. 118P).

She says the fault is her’s not her baby’s. This statement shows a mother’s affection for her baby and a mother’s sound understanding of her baby. When the baby’s hands are cut off, they fall on to the mother’s lap. Second, the king ordered to cut off the baby’s feet, and third, to cut off his head which also fell on the mother’s lap. The mother without losing hope, says: “I will wager and support my son, give him to me”(Vol iii. 119P). When the king ordered to cut her baby’s hands, feet and head, she offered instead her hands, feet and head.

In the Jataka text, any literate Buddhist follower will have to spend a considerable amount of time reading the story as it unfolds. In the sculpture I found at the *Sathkanduru Raja maha Vihara*, however, the climax of the depiction is as follows:



Figure 1: Picture of Dhammapala Jataka at Sathkanduru Rajamaha Vihara

This visual image depicts the human figures of the king, the queen, the prince and the Executioner. This sculpture shows the king ordering to cut off the baby’s head, hands and feet. The mother lies down on her son’s fallen hands and feet with blood and she weeps. The theme of the story is simplified in the image. When a devotee reads this image, he can at once understand the values of the Buddhist Doctrine such as non-aggressiveness, rationality, practicability, efficacy and universality. If the king understood the close relationship between mother and child, he would not have done what he had done. And the image reminds that no one has the power to destroy another person. This

doctrine represents the universal truth. The father of the family or husband should look after his children and wife with loving kindness. The queen understood the mistake and that her husband is someone who does not understand her relationship with her child. She repeats the following stanza:

“ no friendly counsellors advise the
‘slay not the heir that from thy loins did spring’
No loving kindness urge the tender plea
‘slay not the boy that owes his life to thee (Vol iii. 119P).

What is the lesson this sculpture teaches us? In my opinion, it can teach that the man is not always capable of understanding the intimacy between the mother and the child and that the woman through her suffering has been able to teach (or at least tried to teach) her husband of the value of the relationship between the mother and the child. This is a fundamental relationship emphasized in the Dhamma. All people in any society should be able to develop their morals emotionally and psychologically. And all people should improve the close mutual relationship between inner personal peace and outer social peace. Then everybody can develop the four ‘diving abidings’ - loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), joy at the happiness of the other (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).



Figure 2: Chattapani Jataka, at Satkan Duru Raja Maha Vihara



Figure 3: Chattapani Jataka at Satkanduru Raja Maha Vihara

There is another sculpture at Dimbulagala temple in the Polonnaruwa district. It depicts the *Ekapada jataka*. This sculpture was not made in ancient times but in the 20th century. It represents a father who listens to his son. According to the jataka story the boy asked a philosophical question and the father thought not everyone can answer his son's question and that he should ask from the Bodhisatta.

The composition of the image shows that the family is in front of the Bodhisatta asking him the question. It represents the father, mother and their children (sister and brother) as a united family. If it is a peaceful family, the family has a one common problem, not individual problems and they visit the Bodhisatta as a family, not individually. The image manifests the mother's happy facial expression and it appears that she at once has consented to her husband's decision to consult the Bodhisatta.

Furthermore, her willingness reveals how she encourages her children as well to learn the Dhamma.

There is another Jataka story in the paintings at the Degaldoruwa raja maha vihara in kandy district. This story tells us that women liked to follow the Buddha's doctrine of morals by listening to him preach. According to the story all of them were beautiful female musicians. One day they performed for his majesty in the park. The ascetic of *Khantivadi* also sat down in this park. The king slept on the lap of a beautiful woman, then all women thought that their king was sleeping and the performance was not necessary for him and they went to listen to the preaching of the Dhamma.

The king awaked with anger and he asked from the Bodhisatta "*what doctrine are you preaching*" Bodhisatta said "*The doctrine of patience your majestic*". (Vol.III, 27p). Finally, the king needed to judge the Bodhisatta's patience then the king cut off the Bodhisatta's hands, feet, nose, and ears etc. But the Bodhisatta didn't get angry with him. However, the women realized the value of patience and if anyone lives without patience, all people should suffer as a result of his negativity.

However, if we consider about the institution of family, the wife plays a powerful role in interacting with her husband and children. The wife's loving mind not only relates to all sentimental living beings with the welfare of the world in mind but also includes the natural fauna and flora of the environment. If the wife lives with a loving mind at her home she will be able to destroy harmful influences. Furthermore, she cannot feel fear, terror, hesitation and there is no grief of suffering in her home. This phenomenon is depicted through visual images at the Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka. A woman called *Madri* depicted at the *Vessantara jatala* at Degaldoruwa Temple is the example of the best woman.



Figure 4: Vessantara Jataka at Degaldoruwa Raja Maha Vihara

According to the jatakas, the Bodhisatta was the king *Vessantara* and his wife was *Madri*. The background of the story explains that the king *Vessantara* had to give his white elephant to the neighbouring country. Then the community got angry with him and finally, the Bodhisatta decided to go to the *Vangagiriya* (rocky forest). Although all the citizens got angry with him, his wife didn't abandon her husband. When the Bodhisatta

gave up family life, she also accompanied him and her two children. She lived in a separate chamber with her children and Bodhisatta lived in another chamber in *Vangagiriya*. She always thought about her husband's ascetic life and she helped him to get more involved in the religious life not only in the present life but in future lives as well.

One day she went to the forest for the purpose of gathering food for her family. When she returned home she didn't see her children. This, generally, is a difficult situation for any mother to face and gets impatient for her children. Madri also faced in this situation and she was weeping and asked for her children from her husband. This is again depicted at the Degaldoruwa temple.

She teaches us a good lesson - she sacrificed her love for her children for the sake of the Bodhisatta's Buddhahood. And she teaches to the women of the world how they can maintain mental balance, flexibility and spiritual life through sacrificing her own life. Also, gives a message to us of the achievement of a way of life through *sila* (ethical conduct), *Samadhi* (concentration) *panna* (wisdom). She informs us that the wife is the best friend of her husband and how the wife understands her husband irrespective of his changing mind.

The Buddha mentioned the code of discipline that should be followed by a wife in the *singalowada sutta* of *Diganikatya*. It mentions the five ways as follows:

- by doing her work well (susamvihita kammata)
- by hospitality to both her husband's relations and other associates.(sangahita parijana).
- by faithfulness (abnatikarini)
- by protecting what he earns (sambhatam anurakkata)
- by skill and diligence all her duties (dakkha ca analasa sabbhakiccesu).

These Five show the responsibilities of a wife in the Buddhist society, and the role of Madri gives the best example through the practically of following these five ways. She always devotes herself to her husband because she went to the forest with his husband for a religious life. She came from a royal family but she gave up her luxuries for her husband and she managed her family when they were living in the forest.

Furthermore, some visual images in Buddhist temples show a woman in disparaging terms. The *sattubhastha jataka* depicted at Degaldoruwa is a good example. Some images of this painting series show the destruction of the female mentality in the ancient and modern society. If somebody reads this painting which is located in the image house of the temple, he would not misunderstand these women and would rather think about her mentality in philosophical terms and with rationality. According to the story, the wife is very young and the husband is old. (Vol.iii, 210).

In family life, age difference between husband and wife can also create problems. Sometimes the wife cannot understand her husband's conjugal affinities and they cannot build a close relationship. If the wife finds another young person to have intercourse, it destroys the family and impacts the children. Such a situation teaches us the human mentality. They are not living with happiness and peacefulness. The wife doesn't need to build her family life continuously and reveals feminine mentality of unsatisfied intercourse. And she doesn't like to sacrifice her duties towards her husband. This can be understood in this dialogue: "*I cannot do the work of your house get me a maid*" (Vol. III, 211p).

If we compare of the attitude of Madri and this woman, it clearly reveals the wife's different feeling to her husband's mental construction as well as its destruction. In my opinion, the visual images of this kind of jataka stories reveal how the woman develops society using her flexibility, love, kindness and understanding of others.

The carving as a visual image represents a woman's role in society in Ambakka Vihara in Kandy district. There are many wood carvings in this temple which depict natural as well as mythical animals and birds, human figures, flowers, vegetative formations, inorganic elements etc. Female human figures represent the daily life of women. The theme of some carvings stimulate Buddhist religious sentiments and devotion. The figure of a 'woman feeding child expresses the loving kind sentiment and the close relationship between mother and child. As the result of the mother's love, the baby presents good reaction and sense to his mother and the society.

Conclusion

The above mentioned fact proves the visual images such as paintings, sculptures and carvings are useful media for teaching and learning Dhamma in ancient and modern society. Furthermore, a woman's contribution presents a powerful communicative method to build a meaningful society anywhere in the world. And the selected visual images reveal that a woman can develop the four 'divine abidings' - loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), joy at the happiness of the other (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*) to build society.

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