

Gender and the Soteriology Debate in Buddhism:  
Is a Female Buddha Possible in Non-Esoteric Buddhism?

Karma Sonam Palmo

Shastri (Bachelor of Arts), Acharya (Masters in Philosophy)

Central University of Tibetan Studies

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## **Abstract**

### *Is a Female Buddha Possible in Non-Esoteric Buddhism?*

Buddhism today can broadly be divided into two forms: Tantric (esoteric) and non-Tantric (non-esoteric) Buddhism. Tantric Buddhism's answer to the above question is unequivocally positive: it never questioned the possibility of a female Buddha. In non-Tantric Buddhism, this question has long been a subject of debate, and thus far, it is assumed that a female Buddha is impossible.

In my view, this latter conclusion is problematic and is not well supported in the traditional canonical literature. Therefore, the focus of this thesis is to further investigate the relationship between non-Tantric Buddhism's perspective on gender and soteriology. I will argue that the premises employed to rule out the possibility of a female Buddha in non-Tantric Buddhism are flawed, and that such a view cannot be attributed to the Buddha himself. I will advance my argument based on two pieces of evidence: (1) that the premises used to rule out a female Buddha are not supported by the Buddha's own teachings as recorded in canonical texts, and (2) such premises are employed only in the commentaries, and therefore in the hermeneutic works of later scholars.

Of an enormous corpus of literature representing the views of many different Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna schools in several languages, my research will focus on Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda sources to present the Śrāvakayāna perspective in the first half of the thesis, and non-Tantric Mahāyāna sources in order to present the Mahāyāna perspectives in the second half.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
PART I. Enlightened Nuns .....	6
Chapter One .....	7
Women's Spiritual Capability: Bedrock of the Buddhist Nuns' Order .....	7
Introduction .....	7
1. Historical Overview .....	8
a) Women in the Vedic Period .....	8
b) Women in the Brāhmaṇical Period .....	11
c) Women in Buddhism .....	14
2. The Nuns' Order in Buddhism .....	21
a) Traditional Accounts .....	21
b) Modern Theories .....	31
Concluding Remarks .....	40
Chapter Two .....	42
Gotamī, the Epitome of Buddhist Nuns and Female Spirituality .....	42
Introduction .....	42
1. Gotamī and her Nuns' Order .....	43
a) Going Forth .....	43
b) Full Ordination .....	45
c) Life in the Nuns' Order .....	48
2. Gotamī, the Role Model of Enlightened Women .....	50
a) Arhathood: Path and Result .....	50
b) The Spiritual Stages Leading to Arhathood .....	53

c) Gotamī, the Arhat.....	56
d) Grand Passing Away of Gotamī .....	62
Concluding Remarks.....	68
 Part II. Female Buddha in Śrāvakayāna.....	71
 Chapter Three.....	72
Enlightened Female Arhats versus ‘The Impossibility of a Female Buddha’ in Theravāda.....	72
 Introduction.....	72
1. Enlightened Women Arhats from the <i>Therīgāthā</i> .....	73
2. Critical Analysis of the Concept ‘The Impossibility of a Female Buddha’ ....	85
a) Somā and Māra .....	85
b) The Impossibility of a Female Buddha in Theravāda .....	90
c) Buddhaghoṣa on a Female Bodhisatta in Theravāda .....	97
d) Is the Passage on ‘The Impossibility of a Female Buddha’ Interpolation? ..	100
e) Somā’s Reply to Māra .....	102
Concluding Remarks.....	103
 Chapter Four .....	105
Female Arhats and Bodhisattvas versus ‘The Impossibility of a Female Buddha’ in Sarvāstivāda .....	105
 Introduction.....	105
1. Arhat Nuns in Avadānaśataka.....	107
2. Outstanding Arhat Nuns from Avadānaśataka .....	110
3. Women Receiving Buddhahood Prediction.....	115
4. Women and Buddhahood in Sarvāstivādin Canonical Texts.....	126
5. Vasubandhu on a Female Bodhisattva .....	129
Concluding Remarks.....	132

PART III. Female Buddha in Mahāyāna .....	134
Chapter Five .....	135
Transcending Gender .....	135
Introduction .....	135
1. Variegated Jewel, the Nāga Girl .....	137
2. Vimaladatta's Power of Truth .....	141
3. The Non-Dual Argument from the Goddess .....	144
4. Bodhisattva Stages .....	153
5. Bodies of a Buddha .....	159
Concluding Remarks .....	161
Chapter Six .....	162
Miraculous Transformations .....	162
Introduction .....	162
1. Sumati, the girl, versus Sumati, the monk .....	163
2. Candrottārā, the girl, versus Candrottārā, the monk .....	169
3. Asaṅga and his Bodhisattvabhūmi: a New Dimension of the Mahāyāna Tradition .....	174
4. The Three Body ( <i>tri-kāya</i> ) Theory .....	178
5. Tara, the Embodiment of Buddhahood .....	186
Concluding Remarks .....	195
Chapter Seven .....	198
Hermeneutics of a Female Buddha .....	198
Introduction .....	198
1. Hermeneutic of Two Meanings: Provisional and Definitive .....	200
2. Hermeneutic of Spiritual Dispositions ( <i>rigs, gotra</i> ) .....	211
3. Tathāgatagarbha, the Buddha Embryo as the Ultimate Doctrine .....	216

4. Śrīmālādevī, the Great Female Teacher of the Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine ...	219
Concluding Remarks .....	225
Conclusion .....	228
Bibliography.....	231



## Introduction

Buddhahood is the highest state of spiritual realization in Buddhism. It is the state of being fully awakened and perfectly enlightened. However, since Buddhism today comprises many different traditions, they do not share the same view regarding the attainment of Buddhahood. Broadly speaking, Buddhism at present is practiced in three different forms: Śrāvakayāna, Sūtra-Mahāyāna and Tantra-Mahāyāna. Buddhahood is not only the highest but also the only spiritual goal in Tantra-Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is of course also the highest goal in Sūtra-Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna, but not necessarily the only one. Similarly, while the aspirant's gender in Tantra-Mahāyāna is not relevant, different views exist within the other two traditions.

While the Śrāvakayāna and a fraction of Sūtra-Mahāyāna believe that Buddhahood is only one of the three inherently diverse spiritual goals within Buddhism, in general Sūtra-Mahāyāna believes that Buddhahood is ultimately the only spiritual goal. Regarding the aspirant's gender, an assumption exists within traditional Buddhist communities that a female Buddha is impossible within the entire Śrāvakayāna and Sūtra-Mahāyāna traditions. Therefore, while the possibility of a female Buddha is undisputed in Tantric Buddhism, the same is considered impossible in non-Tantric Buddhism. Although the notion of the impossibility of a female Buddha in non-Tantric Buddhism stems from classical

canonical and commentarial literature, within the same corpus are indications that this was not a matter of consensus.

There has been substantial research on women in Buddhism in general over the past few decades, one of the pioneering works being Isaline Blew Horner's *Women under Primitive Buddhism*, first published in 1930. Horner fully covers laywoman to ordained women in Buddhism during the time of the Buddha from a Theravādin Pali canonical perspective. The primary focus of her work is on the nuns and their life in the order. Although Horner does not deal much with the soteriological question of a female Buddha in Theravāda, it has been the subject of analysis in several subsequent journal articles by later scholars. However, since Theravāda is only one of the many schools of Śrāvakayāna, their view on women's inability to become a Buddha does not represent the entire Śrāvakayāna perspective.

Sarvāstivāda is another school belonging to the Śrāvakayāna tradition with sufficient literary sources available to determine their position on a female Buddha. While some studies on Sarvāstivāda's general position on women and nuns exist, none specifically examines their view on a female Buddha.

In terms of Mahāyāna, Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition*, published in 1979, is to date the most extensive survey of women in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Her work covers a range of topics on women in general based on Mahāyāna literature preserved in Chinese translation. Paul's book ends with a short chapter on the question of the possibility of a female Buddha, which she describes as "a question which had

continually vexed Buddhist scholars and commentators”.<sup>1</sup> Her discussion on the possibility of a female Buddha mainly focuses on the various ways of attaining Buddhahood found in commentarial works available in Chinese translation as well as commentaries by Chinese Buddhist scholars.

In spite of these pioneering works on women in Buddhism and many others from different perspectives such as feminist, anthropological and so on, specifically addressing the question of the possibility of a female Buddha in non-Tantric Buddhism requires further examination. Hence, this thesis attempts to explore this question from the textual perspectives of both the Śrāvakayāna and the Mahāyāna traditions.

I will argue that a female Buddha is not completely impossible in non-Tantric Buddhism, as widely believed. The corpus of Buddhist literature of various genres, canonical and commentarial works, is replete with multiple voices concerning a female Buddha. The many narratives embedded within the literature clearly indicate that the theory of the impossibility of a female Buddha has long been debated among the different Buddhist traditions. This thesis will demonstrate the diverse views of different Buddhist traditions regarding a female Buddha in three parts: I) Enlightened Nuns, II) Female Buddha in Śrāvakayāna and III) Female Buddha in Sūtra-Mahāyāna.

Part I, ‘Enlightened Nuns’ consists of two chapters: in chapter one, I discuss the formation of the nuns’ order which I claim relied heavily on the

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Y. Paul and Frances Wilson, *Women in Buddhism : Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979). 281.

question of women's spiritual capability. I dedicate my second chapter to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī / Mahāprajāpati Gautamī, the founder of the nuns' order, leader of the nuns and most importantly the epitome of female spirituality, as one of the foremost-enlightened women.

Part II, 'Female Buddha in Śrāvakayāna' also consists of two chapters: in chapter three, the biographical narratives of many enlightened women Arhats are contrasted with the Theravādin view that a female Buddha is impossible. I look at women Arhats in the light of the Theravādin belief that Arhathood and Buddhahood are in essence the same. In chapter four, the impossibility of a female Buddha notion is analyzed across the canonical, commentarial and Jātaka narratives belonging to the Sarvāstivāda tradition.

Under Part III 'Female Buddha in Sūtra-Mahāyāna', chapters five and six critically analyze certain narratives found in Mahāyāna sūtras centered on the debate surrounding the possibility and impossibility of a female Buddha. I contextualize the narratives with philosophical concepts regarding aspects of Buddhahood in the Mahāyāna traditions based on Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga's interpretations. In chapter seven, I bring into context the range of diverse views on the possibility and impossibility of a female Buddha in non-Tantric Buddhism and examine them within hermeneutic frameworks.

Due to the vast collection of Buddhist canonical and commentarial literature, extensively and thoroughly covering all the literature related to my subject is beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, the primary sources are limited to the Tibetan Buddhist canon for the majority of the thesis, i.e. for the

Sarvāstivādin and Mahāyāna perspectives, and the Theravādin section mainly relies on the Pali Text Society's translation of the Pali canon and digitized Pali Tipitaka of Vipassana Research Institute.

Regarding the use of non-English names, when the discussion is in the context of a Pali source, I use the Pali version of spelling and in the context of a Sanskrit source, the Sanskrit spelling, for example Gotamī in Pali and Gautamī in Sanskrit. In terms of terminologies too, following the same style, the non-English terms in Pali, Sanskrit and Tibetan are enclosed in parenthesis.

**PART I**  
**Enlightened Nuns**

# **Chapter One**

## **Women's Spiritual Capability:**

### **Bedrock of the Buddhist Nuns' Order**

#### **Introduction**

The nuns' order in Buddhism is one of the four communities of the historic Buddha Gautama's followers, namely: 1. monks' order (*bhikkhusaṅgha*) 2. nuns' order (*bhikkhunīsaṅgha*) 3. five precept holder lay-men (*upāsaka*) 4. five precept holder lay-women (*upāsikā*).<sup>2</sup> Members of the first two communities renounce household life and lead a celibate lifestyle in order to fully devote themselves to their practice, while the latter two groups practice within their household lifestyles. According to traditional accounts found in the Vinaya Piṭaka, the Buddha was initially reluctant to ordain women. It was only after repeated insistence by Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and a group of women that the Buddha finally ordained them, and thus the nuns' order was established. However, modern scholars have come up with different theories that are skeptical of the idea that the Buddha was reluctant to ordain women.

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<sup>2</sup>Besides these four groups of followers, there are others who do not hold any precepts but study and follow the teachings of Buddha.

I will be analyzing these new theories alongside the traditional account of the founding of the nuns' order. Regardless of the veracity of the traditional accounts, I will be arguing in this chapter that the initial reluctance regarding the ordination of women also involved a deeper issue, which is the women were grappling with the recognition of their spiritual capability. Hence, this chapter focuses on the foundation of the nuns' order, preceded by an overview of the status of women in ancient India in general. The different periods of ancient India that I will be briefly covering are Vedic (c.a. 1500-600 BCE), Brahmanical (ca. 900-600 BCE), and Buddhist (ca. 6<sup>th</sup> BCE-5<sup>th</sup> CE) periods.

## **1. Historical Overview**

### *a) Women in the Vedic Period*

I begin chronologically with the Vedic age. The Vedas are the canonical texts of Hinduism and the Brāhmaṇas are the commentarial texts in prose on the Vedas. Hindus believe that the Vedas, Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Atharvaveda and Sāmaveda, are divine words. The history of ancient India starts with the composition of the Ṛgveda (c.a. 1500-600 BCE). Most of the hymns in the Ṛgveda are praise and prayers to natural elements, such as sky, water, earth and trees, personified as gods and goddesses. There is minimal direct reference made to the status of women in the Ṛgveda. Although the birth of a girl child during



that time was not seen as undesirable, there seem to be prayers for a male child.<sup>3</sup>

It is said that during the Vedic time, the desire for a boy child was related to Aryans outnumbering the indigenous males, causing them to pray for more males on their side.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, during the R̥gveda time, women had a fairly good position. The Vedic age was the period when ancient Indian women enjoyed freedom of movement, the right to education, and the right to choose her husband and participate in sacrificial rites. During this time, the women could participate in all the religious ceremonies and make offerings. They studied and recited the Vedas and composed hymns, and could attend festivals and fairs.<sup>5</sup> As a wife, a woman was considered to be the guardian of the family, assuming all responsibility for the household. By the same token, both husband and wife participated equally in household work. There was no age stipulated for marriage, and no references to child marriage are found in the R̥gveda period.

In addition, unlike the later periods where the father decided the marriage of a girl, Indra observes that in the Vedic age, “marriages were contracted after

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Pinga, defend thou (the child) in process of birth; let them not make the male female.’ (R.V. VIII. 6, 25) ‘Prajapati, Anumati, Sinivali, hath shaped; may he put elsewhere woman birth, but may he put here a male.’ (A.V. VI.11,3) qtd. in Shakuntala Rao Shastri, *Women in the Vedic Age* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969). 42.

<sup>4</sup> Bader Clarisse, *Women in Ancient India* (London: Kegan Paul, 1925). 23.

<sup>5</sup> ‘The sister quitteth for the elder sister her place and having looked on her departeth. She decks her beauty, shining forth with sunbeams, like women trooping to the festal meeting.’ (Rigveda, 1-124-8), ‘Like women at a gathering fair, the streams of oil look on with gentle smile and recline to Agni.’ (Rigveda, IV-58-8) qtd in Indra, *The Status of Women in Ancient India* (Banaras: Motilal Banarasidass, 1955). 68.

courtship and were ordinarily dictated by mutual love.”<sup>6</sup> Marriage was not compulsory, as there were references to women such as the unmarried Ghosa.<sup>7</sup> In the two hymns attributed to Ghosa, she is depicted as unmarried and living in her father’s home. Nor were widows treated badly during the Ṛgveda time, and they could be remarried to the brother of their husband.<sup>8</sup> Women in the early Vedic period also participated in religious debates. Lopa, Mudra, Gargi and Maitreyi were known in this respect. Indra writes:

women could be capable of standing with men in discussions of abstruse metaphysical subjects is important evidence which indicates that so far as the attainment of religious wisdom is concerned, women were by no means lagging behind men. At least in the ages represented by the Upanishads, the religious status occupied by women was that of equality with men and not of inferiority, which it became in the later ages.<sup>9</sup>

However, after the composition of the commentaries on the Vedas known as Brāhmaṇas, strong discrimination of social castes started to appear.<sup>10</sup> Although the caste system had already started in the Vedic age following the arrival of the Aryans, discrimination against women was less marked. This is because the Vedic society, predominantly pastoral and nomadic, was equally balanced in

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>7</sup> Shastri, *Women in the Vedic Age*: 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>9</sup> Indra, *The Status of Women in Ancient India* 125.

<sup>10</sup> Probably after Dharmaśāstras written by commentators such as Manu, Yājñavalkya, Gautama, Śukra and Harita gained popularity over the Vedas. See *ibid.*, 143.

terms of production and was less hierarchical than the subsequent Brāhmaṇical period.

### *b) Women in the Brāhmaṇical Period*

In the Brāhmaṇical period (ca.900-600 BCE), Brāhmaṇ, the priests, were the highest class and they alone were entitled to carry out rites and rituals. Kṣatriya, the soldiers, were the second class, to which all kings and warriors belonged. The third class was the Vaiśya, or agriculturists and businesspersons. These three classes became the dominant social powers, while Śūdra was the lowest class of people, who worked for the other classes. During this period, women began to lose most rights enjoyed during the Vedic period. Whilst, for example, a woman could study the Vedas and perform sacrificial rites during the Vedic time, this was denied during the Brāhmaṇical period. It was believed that man could attain his 'mokṣa' or liberation from the cycle of rebirth, only if his son performed his funeral rites,<sup>11</sup> making the desire for a male child the most important aspect of a marriage and a girl child undesirable. During the Vedic period, a daughter could perform her father's funeral rites, hence the birth of a girl child was not undesirable.

Moreover, after the appearance of the text *Manusmṛti*, the *Law of Manu* (ca.1200-500 BCE or 200 BCE-200 CE), the status of women saw a further decline. Manu said a wife who does not bear a child could be refused and sent

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<sup>11</sup> Clarisse, *Women in Ancient India*: 28.

back after the eighth year, as well as a wife who bears only daughters in the eleventh year. A worse scenario was that a mother whose children died could be refused in the tenth year. “A barren wife may be superseded in the 8<sup>th</sup> year, she whose children all die in the 10<sup>th</sup> year, she who bears only daughters in the eleventh year, but she who is quarrelsome without delay.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Manu, the only duty of a wife was to serve her husband. A woman with access to a Vedic education during the Vedic time had now lost this opportunity. “Marriage of girls forms their initiation into the study of Vedas, serving the husband is their studying at an Āshrama and domestic duties are the substitutes for daily rites such as Sandhyavandanā and Agnihotra.”<sup>13</sup> A woman was forbidden freedom, remaining under male control; as a daughter under her father, a wife under her husband, and a widow under her sons. Widows during this time had a particularly low status. Considered inauspicious, they were not permitted to be seen at any public gathering, lived on a poor diet, and were forbidden from wearing ornaments or colorful clothes.

In contrast to the Brāhmanical period, in the earlier Vedic age there was no age restriction for the marriage of a girl, which can be traced from references to such as Ghoṣa, the lady-ṛṣi who married well beyond her youth.<sup>14</sup> Child marriages seem to have started later, becoming more prevalent after Manu declared a legal age limit for marriage. According to Manu, “A daughter should

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<sup>12</sup>(Manu, IX-81) qtd in Indra, *The Status of Women in Ancient India* 61.

<sup>13</sup> (Manu, II-67) qtd in *ibid.*, 143.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

be given for marriage at the proper time. A father is reprehensible who does not give his daughter for marriage at the proper time.”<sup>15</sup> Manu lays this out explicitly: “A man aged thirty years shall marry a maiden of twelve, who pleases him or a man of twenty-four, a girl, eight years age.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a girl or a married woman was forbidden to take part in any of the rites. Manu further states, “No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be observed by women apart from their husbands.”<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, women were not even permitted to recite Vedic hymns.<sup>18</sup> As time passed and many Dharmaśāstra (commentarial works) began to appear, more importance was placed on the caste system. Combining a higher and lower caste through marriage was not accepted, and to prevent this, girls were married off in infancy and barred from the freedom of marriage for mutual love. Indra observes, “In the succeeding ages of Brāhmaṇas and Sūtras however, woman’s liberty was restricted. She was allowed no choice in the selection of her husband and besides her marriage was treated as a matter of gift by her father.”<sup>19</sup>

The deterioration of the status of women most likely commenced with the onset of child marriage, as after marriage child brides were under the husband’s control and responsible for household duties, which eroded their freedom.

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<sup>15</sup> (Manu, IX-4) qtd in *ibid.*, 44.

<sup>16</sup> (Manu, IX-94) qtd in *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> (Manu, V-155) qtd in *ibid.*, 126.

<sup>18</sup> (Manu, II-66, IX-96) qtd in *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

Moreover, according to Manu, there is no more important duty for the wife than to serve and respect her husband and his family. As girls lost their freedom under child marriage, they lost the opportunity for education. Education at the time consisted of the study of Vedic literature, and as they were barred from studying this, they lost the right to participate in the sacrificial ceremonies. This led to treatment similar to the Śūdra, the lowest of the four castes.<sup>20</sup>

### *c) Women in Buddhism*

During the lifetime of the Buddha, the status of women within the Buddhist society was considerably higher than in the Brāhmaṇical society.<sup>21</sup> For instance, Clarisse Bader writes, “Buddhism, which expresses the revolt of the three lower castes against the long oppression of the Brāhmaṇ, could not forget in its task of liberation, a sex from which Brāhmaṇism had withdrawn all individuality” and further, “Women, therefore, received Buddha with enthusiasm for he was their liberator.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Indra observes:

Buddhism was a reaction against Hinduism, or to be more accurate against Brāhmaṇism. Both the isms, i.e. Buddhism and Jainism were instrumental in bringing about not only religio-philosophical upheavals in the country but sociological changes as well. Buddhism was essentially a moral religion, the moral precepts of which touched all classes, irrespective of any sex-consideration.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>22</sup> Clarisse, *Women in Ancient India*: 18.

<sup>23</sup> Indra, *The Status of Women in Ancient India* 183.

In contrast to the Brāhmaṇical belief in the son as able to liberate the father, Buddhism holds that anyone can be liberated from suffering when one sees the true nature of all things. Therefore, within Buddhist philosophy there was no discrimination between girl and boy children. Prior to Buddhism, daughters were always less desired in Indian societies. However, after the Buddha's teachings and particularly after the Buddha's attitude towards daughters became known, Buddhist society's outlook on daughters changed. The Buddha said thus of his daughter when king Pasenadi was not pleased with the birth of a girl child:

A woman, O lord of the people,  
May turn out better than a man:  
She may be wise and virtuous,  
A devoted wife, revering her mother-in-law.  
The son to whom she gives birth  
May become a hero, O lord of the land.  
The son of such a blessed woman  
May even rule the realm.<sup>24</sup>

However, Buddhist society could not completely forsake the preference for sons.<sup>25</sup> For instance, there are references to such an attitude in the Jātakas, where, for example, King Brahmadatta gave a ring and told the woman who bore his child that "if you beget a son, bring him to me with this signet-ring; but if you

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<sup>24</sup> *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, vol. I (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000). 179.

<sup>25</sup> The five reasons given in the Anguttara Nikāya regarding why a son is desired are: "Seeing five things, monks, parents desire a son born in the family. What five? (i) He that is hoping he will help us; (ii) for us he will do what must be done; (iii) long will he keep up traditions; (iv) worthily possess his heritage and (v) make offerings to the petas when we are dead." Matsuo Kenji, "Official Monks and Reclusive Monks: Focusing on the Salvation of Women," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64, no. 03 (2001): 35.

give birth to a daughter, then sell this ring and rear her.’’<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, a daughter was still more welcome in a Buddhist family than in a Brāhmaṇical one; her identity not confined to simply being married in a Buddhist household. At the same time, nor were pre-puberty marriages popular in Buddhist culture.

The two common forms of marriages were Brāhma (father giving his daughter) and Gāndharva (two young people marrying by mutual consent). The second form does not consider caste and creed, and many such marriages exist in the Buddhist literature, such as those of Paṭācārā and Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā. Paṭācārā was born into a wealthy family, and upon marriageable age, her parents were ready to marry her to a man of equal social status. However, she eloped with a servant of the family and lived with him. Another story concerns Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā from a wealthy merchant’s family in Rājagaha, the capital of Magadha. One day from the window of her house she saw a thief being taken for execution and instantly fell in love with him. She told her father she would be unable to live without him and asked him to help free the man. Subsequently, her father complied and she married the man. Such tales demonstrate that although marriages that benefitted the whole family were preferred, some degree of individual freedom was available to women in this period.

As wives, Buddhist women followed the same Brāhmaṇic Pativrata or husband worship, devoting themselves to serving their husbands. There are

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<sup>26</sup> Meena Talim, *Women in Early Buddhist Literature* (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1972). 121.



teachings by the Buddha on how a married couple should treat each other respectfully:

In five ways, young householder, should a wife as the west be ministered to by a husband: (i) by being courteous to her, (ii) by not despising her, (iii) by being faithful to her, (iv) by handing over authority to her, (v) by providing her with adornments.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, the wife who is thus honored by her husband should treat him as follows:

The wife thus ministered to as the west by her husband shows her compassion to her husband in five ways: (i) she performs her duties well, (ii) she is hospitable to relations and attendants, (iii) she is faithful, (iv) she protects what he brings, (v) she is skilled and industrious in discharging her duties.<sup>28</sup>

The Buddha considered married couples as the two pillars of the family, with husband and wife of equal importance according to the Buddhist teachings. The stories of wives such as Viśākhā Migramātā, Suppiyā, and Nakulamātā in this society show the freedom wives enjoyed during the period. Viśākhā was one of the most influential laywoman followers of the Buddha. She sold her valuable necklace and spent the money to make offerings to the Saṅgha. Lay-women in Buddhist society had the same rights as the lay-men in following the Buddha's

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<sup>27</sup> Sigalovada Sutta: The discourse to Sigala (DN 31), translated from the Pali by Narada Thera. *Access to Insight, June 7, 2009*, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.nara.html>. 11

<sup>28</sup> Sigalovada Sutta: The discourse to Sigala (DN 31), translated from the Pali by Narada Thera. *Access to Insight, June 7, 2009*, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.nara.html>. 11-12

teachings. Indeed, the Buddha himself has mentioned some of the famous laywomen followers in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*:

Monks, chief among my women disciples who are lay-followers, of those who first took refuge (in my teachings), is Sujātā, Senāni's daughter. ... who minister to the Order, is Viśākhā, Migāra's mother. ... of wide knowledge, is Khujjuttarā. ... who live in kindliness, is Sāmāvatī. ... of meditative power, is Uttarā, Nanda's mother. ... who give choice alms-food, is Suppavāsā of Koliyans. ... who nurse the sick, is Suppiyā, the lay-follower. ... of unwavering loyalty, is Kāṭiyānī. ... who converse intimately, is Nakula's mother. ... who believe, even from hearsay, is Kālī, the lay-follower of Kurara-ghara.<sup>29</sup>

While the first four women are widely referred to in other sources, others are rarely mentioned. Of the first four, Sujātā<sup>30</sup> is well known as the first lay-woman follower of the Buddha, and in fact her encounter with the Buddha occurred before the Buddha had attained enlightenment. Sujātā had once made a wish at a Banyan tree that if she was married in the same caste and her first child was a son, she would offer kheer (rice porridge) to the tree. When she came of age, she was indeed married within her own caste and her first child was a son named Yasa Kumāra. She remembered her wish at the Banyan tree and decided to make the promised offering. As she approached it, she saw someone meditating under the tree; Sujātā and her maid thought the tree god must have manifested to receive her offering. She gladly made the offering and said to the person, “my

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<sup>29</sup>The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikaya) Vol. I (Ones, twos, threes), trans. F. L. Woodward (Lancaster: Pali Text Society, 2006). 24-25.

<sup>30</sup> Piplayan Madhukar, *Great Buddhist Women* (New Delhi: Samyak Prakashan, 2006). 27-30.

wishes came true and so may yours too”. The Buddha changed his place after taking the offering of rice porridge. Sitting under the Bodhi Tree in present day Bodh Gaya in Bihar, India, he attained enlightenment the following morning. Later, Sujātā, her son Yasa, and all other members of her family became the Buddha’s followers.

Viśākhā<sup>31</sup> was well known for her generosity towards the ordained community of the Buddha and is known as the foremost of the women patrons of the Order. She had seen and received teachings from the Buddha when she was only seven and had attained the stage of Stream Entry. Viśākhā was married to Punyavardhana, the son of Migara, a rich man in Savatthi. Her in-laws were not followers of the Buddha, but she introduced them to his teachings. Her father-in-law Migara respected her as his mother for her great knowledge, and as such, she was also known as Migaramātā (Migara’s mother). Viśākhā is widely acclaimed for building a monastery named Purvarama, offered to the nuns’ order on the Buddha’s advice. Purvarama later became one of the two monasteries where the Buddha spent most of his rainy season retreats. Viśākhā subsequently pledged that throughout her life she would like to provide robes, food and medicines to both orders.

Khujjutārā<sup>32</sup> is well known for her role as a Dhamma messenger as a maid of queen Samāvātī through whom the queen heard the Buddha’s teachings.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 47-51.

<sup>32</sup> N. Thera, H. Hecker, and B. Bodhi, *Great Disciples of the Buddha: Their Lives, Their Works, Their Legacy* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012). 285-93.

Khujjutārā was sent by the queen to buy flowers every day, but initially kept some of the money for herself. One day as she was passing by to buy flowers she heard the Buddha teach on the five moralities of abstaining from killing, stealing, adultery, lying and intoxication. She was so impressed by the Buddha's teachings that she realized her wrongdoing of stealing money daily. From then on, she ceased doing so, spending the money only for flowers.

The queen was surprised to see so many flowers and Khujjutāra explained everything. The queen too was impressed by what she heard of the Buddha's teachings from Khujjutāra. She asked her to recite daily all the teachings heard on the way to buy flowers. Gradually the queen and many women in the palace listened to the teachings of the Buddha through Khujjutāra. Later, those teachings became known as the text *Itivutuka*, a part of the Khuddaka-Nikāya in Sūta Piṭaka of the Buddhist Canon preserved in Pali. At that time, Magandiya, the king's other wife, disapproved of the above situation, and succeeded in her plot to kill Sāmāvatī and others by starting a fire in the palace. However, Sāmāvatī had already attained the state of non-returner, and even in the fire she continued meditating and did not suffer. Thereafter, Sāmāvatī's meditative power was widely acclaimed and she became known as the foremost woman in loving kindness.

## 2. The Nuns' Order in Buddhism

Religious rights of women in Buddhism went beyond lay-woman practitioners. As the Buddha's teachings became popular, many men started following him by giving up their domestic lives. Soon there was an ordained community of monks among the followers of the Buddha. At the same time, women asked the Buddha for the opportunity to be ordained. Although the traditional accounts describe women joining the order only due to their persistence in spite of the Buddha's reluctance, modern researchers are skeptical of this account.

### *a) Traditional Accounts*

The formation of the nuns' order is a remarkable event in the history of Buddhism, documented in the Buddhist canon.<sup>33</sup> According to the Pali version of the text, it took place when the Buddha visited his hometown Kapilvattu, approximately five years after his attainment of enlightenment.<sup>34</sup> During this visit, a group of women led by Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, who was the Buddha's aunt as well as his foster mother, came to seek his permission to be ordained as nuns. They requested, "Lord, it were well that women should obtain the going forth from home into homelessness in this Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by

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<sup>33</sup> Cullavagga IX section of Vinaya Piṭaka of both Pali and Sanskrit version, Vinaya Piṭaka is one of the three canonical texts of Buddhism in which the code and conducts for the monks and nuns are explained. For Pali version, see *Vinayapiṭaka// Cūlavagga-pāli// 10. Bhikkhunikkhandhakaṃ* // <http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/>

<sup>34</sup> I. B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism : Laywomen and Almswomen* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989). 103.

the Truth-finder.”<sup>35</sup> The Buddha gave an ambiguous response saying, “Be careful, Gotamī, of the going forth of women from home into homelessness in this Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder.”<sup>36</sup> It is unclear whether the Buddha did not want women to be ordained at all or whether he simply wanted them to reaffirm their aspirations.

The Tibetan version of the Vinaya text translated from Sanskrit describes the women’s request to join the order as follows:<sup>37</sup>

At that time, the Buddha was residing in the Nyagrodha garden of Kapilvastu. Prajapati Gautami along with five hundred Sakyan women came to the Buddha. They prostrated the Buddha and sat down on one side. After they were seated, the Buddha gave them many teachings. Then Prajapati Gautami rose from her seat, with folded hands made prostrations to the Buddha and said thus: ‘Venerable! If there is a time of women achieving the four results of spiritual cultivation, I request you that may women be allowed to go forth in the Dharma of Vinaya and be ordained by the Buddha.’<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka). Volume V, (Cullavagga)*, trans. I. B. Horner (London: Pali Text Society, 1975). 352.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> This the Vinaya lineage passed down in the Sarvāstivāda tradition.

<sup>38</sup> *Vinaya-kṣudraka-vastu* // 'dul ba phran tshegs kyi gzhi // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 6) 'dul ba, da 1b1-509a7 (vol.11), f. 150b – 151a “sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das ser skya'i gnas shing nya gro dha'i kun dga' ra ba na bzhugs te/\_de nas go'u ta mi skye dgu'i bdag mo chen mo shAkya mo lnga brgya dang lhan cig tu bcom ldan 'das ga \_la ba der dong ste phyin nas/\_bcom ldan 'das kyi zhabs la mgo bos phyag 'tshal te/\_phyogs gcig tu 'khod do/\_phyogs gcig tu 'khod nas/\_go'u ta mi skye dgu'i bdag mo chen mo la/\_/\_bcom ldan 'das kyi chos kyi gtam yang dag par bstan/\_yang dag par bskul/\_yang dag par gzengs bstod/\_yang dag par dga' bar byas so/\_rnam \_grangs du mar chos kyi gtam gyis yang dag par bstan/\_yang dag par bskul/\_yang dag par gzengs bstod/\_yang dag par dga' bar byas te/\_cang mi gsung ba dang/\_go'u ta mi'i \_skye dgu'i bdag mo chen mo stan las langs te/\_bcom ldan 'das ga la ba der logs su thal mo sbyar te phyag 'tshal nas/\_bcom ldan 'das la 'di skad ces gsol to/\_btsun pa \_de ste bud med rnams kyi dge sbyong gi 'bras bu bzhi thob pa'i skabs mchis na/\_bud med rnams legs par gsungs pa'i chos 'dul ba la rab tu byung ste/\_bsnyen par rdzogs \_nas/\_dge slong ma'i dngos po spyod cing/\_bud med rnams bcom ldan 'das kyi drung na tshangs par spyad pa spyod du gsol zhes gsol pa dang”

Although the request is essentially that found in the Pali version, it differs from the former where Gotamī does not mention the four results. However, the response from the Buddha differs significantly from that of the Pali version:

O Gotamī, you may dress in white as a laywoman and as long as you live, in that only be fully perfected, fully purified, fully cleansed and lead a celibate life. This will bring you benefit and long lasting meaning.”<sup>39</sup>

This response is also not convincing for two reasons: first, the Buddha seems to be responding as if Gotamī was seeking permission to go forth for herself only. He does not say anything about the other women, although she seems to be speaking for herself and the group of women accompanying her. Secondly, to dress in white as a lay-woman and lead a celibate life may not be contradictory, however these factors involve different lifestyles according to Buddhist precepts. Dressing in white is symbolic of leading a lay life as opposed to a celibate life as an ordained monk or nun.

In addition, a different version of the Buddha’s reply is found in a fragment of a Sanskrit manuscript of the Vinaya text. In this, the Buddha actually allows Gotamī to go forth, saying, “Just you alone, O Gautamī, with shaven head, with robes of a nun, for as long as you may live, will be fulfilled, purified, and cleansed. This chaste and holy life will be for your benefaction and welfare

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid f. 151a – “*bcom ldan 'das kyis skyed dgu'i \_bdag mo chen mo la 'di skad ces bka' stsal to/\_go'u ta mi khyod 'di ltar khyim pa mo'i gos dkar po gyon la nam 'tsho'i bar du de 'ba' zhig la yongs su rdzogs pa/\_yongs su \_dag pa/\_yongs su byang ba/\_tshangs par spyad pa spyod cig dang/\_khyod la yun ring po'i don dang/\_phan pa dang/\_bde bar 'gyur ro/*”

over a long period.”<sup>40</sup> This is similar to the response found in the Tibetan version, where the Buddha addresses Gautamī alone. However, here we can deduce that the Buddha acknowledges the existence of others with Gautamī from his statement ‘just you alone’, while specifically addressing Gautamī, allowing her to go forth as an ordained.

The above versions of the Buddha’s response lead to various conclusions. According to the Pali version, the Buddha warns Gotamī about women taking such a step. In the Tibetan version, Gotamī is not warned but encouraged to practice as a lay-woman, while leading a celibate life. Strikingly differing from these two is the response found in a fragment of the Sanskrit manuscript where the Buddha explicitly permits Gotamī to go forth as an ordained nun with shaven head and robes. In the first two Pali and Tibetan versions, despite being cautioned and advised to continue leading a lay life, Gotamī and the group of women unrelentingly followed the Buddha when he left Kapilvattu for Vaiśālī. There again, they requested his permission to go forth, this time through Ānanda, the Buddha’s closest disciple and his attendant. Buddha’s response to Ānanda was as same as before. Ānanda reframed the request in the light of the following question regarding the spiritual capability of women:

Now Lord, are women, having gone forth from home into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, able to

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<sup>40</sup> Paul and Wilson, *Women in Buddhism : Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition*: 83.



realize the fruit of stream-attainment or the fruit of once-returning or the fruit of non-returning or perfection?<sup>41</sup>

‘Going forth from home into homelessness’ is a common Buddhist phrase for being ordained as a monk or nun. Stream-attainment (*sotāpanna*), once-returning (*sagadāgāmi*), non-returning (*anāgāmi*) and perfection (*arahant*) are the four results of spiritual realization leading to Arhathood. These spiritual results will be discussed in the next chapter in the context of enlightened women. What matters here is the Buddha’s response to Ānanda’s question, that women can attain all the stages of spiritual fruition:

Women, Ānanda, having gone forth from home into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, are able to realize the fruit of stream-attainment or the fruit of once-returning or the fruit of non-returning or perfection.<sup>42</sup>

This affirmation by Buddha of women’s capability is proved later by numerous accounts of ordained as well as non-ordained women who indisputably realized all the fruits of spiritual practice during the time of the Buddha. Hundreds of enlightened nuns whose songs of realization numbering over five hundred verses are collected in the text *Therīgāthā*, which is included in the Pali version of the Buddhist canon.<sup>43</sup> Following the Buddha’s affirmation of women’s spiritual abilities, Ānanda then asked the Buddha why he would not approve of women

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41 *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka). Volume V, (Cullavagga)*: 354.

42 Ibid.

43 It is indeed ‘soteriological inclusiveness’ as termed by Alan Sponberg. See Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender* (Albany N.Y.: State Univ. of New York Press, 1992), 8-13.

going forth to be ordained if they were spiritually capable. He added that Gotamī had been very kind to Buddha as his foster mother, after his mother passed away seven days after his birth. Following these two arguments from Ānanda, the Buddha is believed to have said that if Gotamī was prepared to accept a set of eight-heavy-rules known as (*garu-dhamma*), this would constitute her own ordination.<sup>44</sup>

Ohnuma argues that Ānanda advances two arguments: one of women's spiritual capability and the other of a debt to the mother of the Buddha, when requesting the Buddha to establish a nuns' order. She believes that although these two arguments are equally important, scholars have emphasized the spiritual capability argument and neglected the debt to the mother argument.<sup>45</sup> In spite of the importance of both arguments, I would argue that women's spiritual capability forms the bedrock of founding the nuns' order. The fact that women were seen as less capable spiritually in Brāhmaṇical society had carried over into Buddhist society. The Buddha's hesitation regarding ordained women could be construed as concurring with this view. However, when Ānanda raised this question, the Buddha demonstrated that he was not hesitant about ordaining women because he thought they were less capable spiritually, by declaring that women were able to realize all the fruition of the spiritual practice.

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<sup>44</sup> Generally, most of the Vinaya rules are not based on naturally inclined reasons but circumstantially intervened ones.

<sup>45</sup> Reiko Ohnuma, "Debt to the Mother: a Neglected Aspect of the Founding of the Buddhist Nuns' Order," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2006): 861-901.

Therefore, women's unequivocal spiritual ability meant the Buddha could not deny women the right to be ordained. There may be other reasons why the Buddha did not ordain women at the onset of their request. The eight heavy rules he wanted women to accept prior to ordination reflect his obligation towards societal etiquettes conforming to a male dominant institution as follows:

1. A nun has to pay salutation to the monks irrespective of their age or position.
2. Nuns cannot spend a rainy-season retreat where there are no monks.<sup>46</sup>
3. Fortnightly, nuns have to invite monks to perform the Uposatha ceremony.<sup>47</sup>
4. After the rainy-season retreat, Pavāraṇa is to be held before the orders of both monks and nuns.<sup>48</sup>
5. A nun guilty of a serious offence has to undergo Mānatta meted out by both orders.<sup>49</sup>
6. After a nun completes her first two years as a novice abiding by the six vows,<sup>50</sup> she has to ask for Upasampadā Initiation (Full Ordination) from both orders.<sup>51</sup>
7. A nun cannot abuse a monk.
8. A nun cannot warn a monk.

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<sup>46</sup> The rainy-season-retreat is a time when monks and nuns do not go to the villages for food. It is held for three months to avoid killing the insects that emerge during the monsoon time. Monks and nuns stay in their monasteries and nunneries practicing the Dhamma and the lay followers come to offer food.

<sup>47</sup> The Uposatha ceremony is held fortnightly on the full and new moon days, when monks and nuns have to confess any breach of their vows and recite the Pāṭimokkha Sutta, which is a set of codes, and conduct for monastics.

<sup>48</sup> Pavāraṇā is a confession ceremony held on the last day of the three-month long rainy-season retreat. Here, the monks and nuns confess their wrongdoings during the period, which also marks the conclusion of the retreat.

<sup>49</sup> Mānatta is a kind of penalty when one breaks certain vows, consisting of certain restrictions and loss of rights of seniority for a specified period. Initially, in case of Manatta for nuns, a nun had to undergo the same discipline before both the Sanghas. This was later modified and the nuns themselves could decide on disciplinary action without the monks' participation.

<sup>50</sup> Abstention from killing, stealing, sexual intercourse, lying, alcohol and evening meals

<sup>51</sup> Upasampada Initiation is the full ordination as a nun after completing two years as a novice nun.

As mentioned, the above rules are clearly in alliance with the norms of a typical patriarchal society, undermining the social status of women. The first and the last two rules express this, requiring no further explanation. Rules two to six stress the need for the participation of monks in the ceremonies held for nuns, again indicating a sense of male control. However, from the nature of these rules, it could also be argued that the participation of monks is necessary owing to the seniority of the monks' order. Over the years, modifications occurred in some of these rules and the nuns performed those ceremonies without the participation of monks. In the case of the sixth rule, full ordination (*upasampadā*) of a nun must still be conducted by both monks and nuns. Thus, even though women of the Buddhist period gained more opportunities, spiritual rights and equality compared to the preceding and co-existing Brāhmaṇical societies, complete equality of men and women was not established, probably due to prevalent social influences.

Traditionally, it is believed that Gotamī accepted all these rules and was subsequently ordained together with the group of women with her; thus the nuns' order was founded. However, Gotamī's acceptance of the rules is not to be regarded as her total submission, and she later attempted to amend the first rule – nuns paying respect to monks irrespective of age and status. Once again through Ānanda, she asked the Buddha that the first rule of paying salutation be amended based on seniority: “I, honored Ānanda, am asking one boon from the Lord; It were well, Lord, if the Lord would allow greeting, standing up for, salutation and

the proper duties between monks and nuns according to seniority.” When

Ānanda delivered Gotamī’s request to the Buddha, he replied:

This is impossible, Ānanda, it cannot come to pass, that the Truth-finder should allow greeting, standing up for, salutation and the proper duties between monks and nuns according to seniority. Ānanda, these followers of other sects, although liable to poor guardianship, will not carry out greeting, standing up for, salutation and proper duties towards women, so how should the Truth-finder allow greeting, standing up for, salutation and the proper duties towards women? <sup>52</sup>

It is clear from the reasons provided that the Buddha conformed to social customs other religious orders followed at the time. It does not seem to be his personal view; rather, he was being cautious to avoid criticism from other religious groups. Traditionally, it is also believed that the ‘eight-heavy-rules’ were proclaimed at the outset of the formation of the nuns’ order as a preventive method against future destruction:

If Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, the Brahma-faring,<sup>53</sup> Ānanda, would have lasted long, true Dhamma would have endured for a thousand years. But since, Ānanda, women have gone forth . . . in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, now, Ānanda, the Brahma-faring will not last long, true Dhamma will endure only for five hundred years.<sup>54</sup>

Following this, the Buddha is also quoted as invoking certain examples to show how allowing women to go forth as ordained would shorten the span of the

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<sup>52</sup>*The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka). Volume V, (Cullavagga): 358.*

<sup>53</sup> Dhamma Sasana – Buddha’s teachings and practice

<sup>54</sup> *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka). Volume V, (Cullavagga): 356.*

practice of his teachings. It is said that after the women's ordination, his community is akin to a household with many women but few men, facing the danger of robbers and thieves. It is also similar to rice fields attacked by pestilence such as 'mildew' and sugarcane fields destroyed by 'red rust'.<sup>55</sup> Hence, it is understood that the rules were created for the prevention of future obstacles resulting from an ordained community of women. Such rules were intended to act as a dyke preventing the overflowing of a water reservoir:

Even, Ānanda, as a man, looking forward, may build a dyke to a great reservoir so that the water may not overflow, even so, Ānanda, were the eight important rules for nuns laid down by me, looking forward, not to be transgressed during their life.<sup>56</sup>

Regardless of the veracity of these ascriptions to the Buddha, his hesitation over allowing women to be ordained is clearly not because women were spiritually less capable or intelligent. Indeed, what would the gender of an aspirant matter when Nirvāṇa is equally open to both men and women:

Resounding with a host of nymphs,  
Haunted by a host of demons!  
This grove is to be called 'Deluding':  
How does one escape from it?  
'The straight way' that path is called,  
And 'fearless' is its destination.  
The chariot is called 'unrattling',  
Fitted with wheels of wholesome states.  
The sense of shame is its leaning board,  
Mindfulness its upholstery;  
I call the Dhamma the charioteer,

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

With right view running out in front.  
One who has such a vehicle-  
Whether a woman or a man-  
Has, by means of this vehicle,  
Drawn close to Nibbāna. (Sagathavagga, 1. Devatasamyutta)<sup>57</sup>

### *b) Modern Theories*

Recent scholarship has challenged the authenticity and historicity<sup>58</sup> of the Buddha's hesitation over allowing women to go forth as ordained on the basis of logical as well as philological reasons.<sup>59</sup> Theories and hypotheses conflicting with the traditional accounts have emerged upon noting inconsistencies. Without dismissing the traditional account in its entirety, it is important to highlight inconsistent aspects:

1. Some of the eight-heavy rules are found in the general rules for nuns that were included only after relevant actions by nuns.
2. There were already nuns before Gotamī was ordained.
3. The Buddha expressed his vision of a nuns' order before women requested to establish it.
4. Shortening the span of the Buddhist teachings and practice may not result from women's ordination.

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<sup>57</sup> *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* I: 122.

<sup>58</sup> *Monastic Discipline for the Buddhist Nuns : an English Translation of the Chinese text of the Mahasamghika-Bhiksuni-Vinaya*, trans. Akira Hirakawa (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1982). 37. He says, "however their contents indicate that they were actually formulated later".

<sup>59</sup> Karma LeksheTsomo, *Buddhist Women Across Cultures* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publication, 2000). 27.

First, regarding whether the women were allowed to go forth as ordained on the proviso of those eight-heavy rules is certainly a matter for skepticism. According to *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*, a part of the Vinaya Piṭaka providing the detailed background stories of each rule of the ordained community, the second, third and fourth of the eight-rules were introduced later when there were already nuns in existence. The second rule, which prohibits the nuns from attending a rainy-season retreat where there are no monks, came into effect as the fifty-sixth Pācittiya rule only after it was reported that certain nuns had spent the rainy-season retreat without monks, which the Buddha forbid thenceforth.<sup>60</sup> Rainy-season retreat is a three-month period when monks and nuns do not wander through the villages teaching and begging for alms, so as to avoid killing insects emerging on the ground during the monsoon season.

Similarly, the third of the set of eight-rules obliges nuns to invite monks to perform the Uposatha ceremony, which is held fortnightly on the full and new moon days. It is a time for monks and nuns to confess any breach of their vows and recite the Patimokkha Sutta, a text listing all the precepts for monks and nuns. Again, according to *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*, this rule came into effect in the form of the fifty-ninth Pācittiya rule, only after some monks complained to the Buddha that the nuns did not invite them for the Uposatha ceremony.<sup>61</sup> The last

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<sup>60</sup> *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Piṭaka)*, trans. I B Horner, vol. 3 (London: Pali Text Society, 1975). 352.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.



recurrence is the fourth rule stating that after the rainy-season retreat, the nuns' Pavāranā ceremony should be held before both monks and nuns. Pavāranā is a confession ceremony held on the last day of the rainy-season retreat, where the monks and nuns confess breaches of any vows related to this period, as well as marking the end of the retreat. According to *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*, this rule once again came into effect in the form of the fifty-seventh Pācittiya rule only after the Buddha was informed that some nuns were not taking part in the ceremony.<sup>62</sup>

Occurrence of these identical rules is either because the nuns dishonored the original set of rules, or there was previously no such rule and it was introduced later when required. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the three identical rules were duplicated as a result of being broken, providing grounds to doubt the authenticity of the account of the Buddha's establishing the nuns' order on the condition of such rules. Moreover, it is accepted within Buddhism that initially there were no formal rules for the monks and nuns. It was only after twelve years of the Buddha's teaching period that certain events precipitated the need for rules for monks and nuns.<sup>63</sup> In fact, all the Vinaya rules were formulated when an event occurred that was incompatible with the teachings, place or time.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>63</sup> *Viśākhadeva // Vinayakārikā // 'dul ba tshig le'ur byas pa //* Derge (sde dge): (D 4123) 'dul ba, shu 1b1-63a6, f. 7a – “ston ka'i chu bzhin dri med par/\_/ston pa'i bstan pa bcu gnyis lor/\_/ltung ba med par legs gnas te/\_/nyon mongs spong bar byed pa yin/”

Liz Williams has constructed an alternative hypothesis about the formation of the nuns' order based on her critical study of two textual sources.<sup>64</sup> She argues that nuns may have existed before Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī,<sup>65</sup> and therefore believes that the argument "that the Buddha was reluctant to ordain women, is flawed. . ." Her claim is based on two key arguments: 1) the text *Dakkhiṇavibhaṅga Sutta* suggesting that there may have been nuns before Gotamī and 2) the Buddha told Māra that he would not pass away until all four groups of his followers were established, including the nuns' order. This interaction between the Buddha and Māra is widely believed to have occurred directly after the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment, when he had no followers. We will turn to the former first.

According to Williams, the evidence for the possibility of nuns before Gotamī is in the *Dakkhiṇavibhaṅga Sutta* (*The Exposition of Offerings*), in the Majjhima Nikāya of Pali canon (M.II. 253). In this text, when Gotamī once offered robes to the Buddha, he advised her to offer them to the ordained community of both monks and nuns. The Buddha does not accept the gift of robes even though Gotamī offers three times, advising her to offer them to the community on each occasion.

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<sup>64</sup> Liz Williams, "A Whisper in the Silence: Nuns before Mahāpajāpatī?," *Buddhist Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2000): 167-73.

<sup>65</sup> The possibility of not Gotamī but Yasodhara being the first nun according to Apadana is given in Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism : Laywomen and Almswomen*: 102.

On this occasion of Gotamī offering robes, we also find Ānanda's mediation. He suggests that the Buddha should accept the robes from Gotamī by citing the following reasons: 1) her kindness to the Buddha as a mother, 2) her having taken refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, 3) her being an observer of the **five precepts**,<sup>66</sup> 4) her having an unwavering faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, 5) her not doubting the four noble truths and so on.<sup>67</sup> Ānanda, while referring to Gotamī's various qualities, states that she is an observer of the five precepts, which are the precepts for lay followers of the Buddha. Celibate novices adhere to ten precepts while fully ordained nuns abide by more than two hundred. This indicates that Gotamī may not have been an ordained nun but a lay practitioner at the time of this event.

The Buddha's advice to Gotamī to offer the robes to the ordained community of monks and nuns suggests that there was already a nuns' community. It appears that when Gotamī attempted to offer robes to the Buddha she was probably a layperson. Despite Ānanda's suggestion that he should accept this gift from Gotamī, the Buddha does not, stating that an offering made to a community is far more meritorious than one to an individual. In other words, he is advising Gotamī to make the offering to the community rather than to him. On this occasion, the Buddha also discusses the degrees of merit accrued depending

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<sup>66</sup> (emphasis added)

<sup>67</sup> "Revered sir, it is due to the Lord, that Mahāpajāpatī the Gotamī refrains from onslaught of creatures, refrains from taking what has not been given, refrains from going wrongly among the sense-pleasures, refrains from lying speech, refrains from occasions of sloth induced by intoxicants."': *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings (Majjhimanikāya)*, trans. I.B. Horner, vol. 3 (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1996). 301.

on to whom the offering is made, listing groups of ordained communities

(*saṅgha*), explicitly including nuns:

And there are these seven kinds of offerings to the Order, Ānanda: One gives a gift to **both Orders** with the Awakened One at the head, this is the first offering to the Order. One gives a gift to **both Orders** after the Awakened One has attained final nibbāna, this is the second offering to the Order. One gives a gift to the Order of monks, this is the third offering to the Order. One gives a gift to the **Order of nuns**-this is the fourth offering to the Order. One gives a gift saying, ‘**May so many monks and nuns** be specified for me by the Order’-this is the fifth offering to the Order. One gives a gift, saying: ‘May so many monks be specified for me by the Order’-this is the sixth offering to the Order. One gives a gift saying, ‘**May so many nuns** be specified for me by the Order’-this is the seventh offering to the Order.<sup>68</sup>

In this list of different groups to whom one may present an offering, the nuns’ order is included. From this we can infer that nuns existed at the time of Gotamī’s offering of robes to the Buddha and that she was most likely not ordained. Therefore, if Gotamī was not a nun at this point, it also follows that she cannot be the first nun as generally believed, as the text refers to previous nuns. This suggests that the Buddha’s alleged reluctance to form a nuns’ order found in the Cullavagga section of Vinaya may have been added at a later stage. Recent research on the formation of Pali Buddhist literature supports the view that additions may have been made during the writing of the canonical texts. One such example is that of Bhante Sujato, who finds evidence in the Bhikkhunī

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.303-304 (emphasis added)

Vinaya that it “has been maintained less accurately ... than the Bhikkhu Vinaya.”<sup>69</sup>

However, it has also been noted that accounts surrounding Gotamī’s robe offering differ from that found in Pali *Dakkhiṇavibhaṅga Sutta*. In other texts, the discourse listing gift recipients is absent from Gotamī’s robe offering. Therefore, there are speculations that originally the *Dakkhiṇavibhaṅga Sutta* section consisting of the robe offering and the discourse on the list of recipients may have been two different texts, later merged as one.<sup>70</sup> However, it is also possible that the particular sections were not merged from two discrete parts and were originally one text.

The second argument Williams offers in support of her claim that the argument for the Buddha’s reluctance to found a nuns’ order may be flawed derives from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. In this text, the Buddha tells Ānanda what he said to Māra shortly after his enlightenment - that he will not pass away until all four groups of his followers are well established:

On one occasion, Ānanda, I was resting under the goatherd’s Nigrodha tree on the bank of the river Neranjanā **immediately after having reached the great enlightenment**. Then Māra, the Evil One, came, Ānanda, to the place where I was, and standing beside me, he addressed me in the words: - “Pass away now, Lord, from existence! Let the Exalted One now die! Now is the time for the Exalted One to pass away!” And when he had thus spoken, Ānanda, I addressed Māra, the Evil One, and said: - **“I shall not pass away, O Evil One! Until not only the brethren**

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<sup>69</sup> Conference Abstract. Australian Association of Buddhist Studies, 2009. 19

<sup>70</sup> Analayo, "Theories on the Foundation of the Nuns' Order: A Critical Evaluation," *Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies Sri Lanka* VI(2008): 4.

**and sister of the Order, but also the lay-disciples of either sex shall have become true hearers, wise and well trained . . .<sup>71</sup>**

The key point is that the Buddha envisioned four groups of his followers, including nuns, from the very beginning, as the Buddha clearly states that it was ‘immediately after having reached the great enlightenment’. According to this account, the Buddha has no hesitation in allowing women’s ordination. Therefore, the claim that he was reluctant may be questioned, as he had already anticipated including women in his ordained community (*saṅgha*) shortly after his enlightenment and prior to the women’s request to be ordained.

Furthermore, the Buddha’s statement forecasting that women’s ordination would shorten the period of his teachings and practice is implausible. Buddhaghosa comments that if the Buddha had not laid down the eight rules mentioned above as a condition for the formation of the nuns order, then the Dhamma or the true Teachings of the Buddha would have lasted only 500 years. Since the Buddha laid down those eight rules and the women accepted them, now the Dhamma or the true Teachings of the Buddha would last 1000 years.<sup>72</sup> This arbitrary reasoning by Buddhaghosa fails to explain how, over 2500 years since the Buddha’s passing away, his teachings are still alive.

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<sup>71</sup> *Dialogues of the Buddha (Part 2)*, trans. T. W. Rhys Davids and Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1992). 120. (emphasis added)

<sup>72</sup> Kusuma Devendra, "Establishment of the Order of Buddhist Nuns and its Development in Sri Lanka," in *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha*, ed. Karama Lekshe Tsomo (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1998), 261.

In addition, the Buddha in fact predicted that the actions of his followers would lie behind the decline of his teachings on the following five grounds:

What are the five? Here the Bhikkhus, the Bhikkhunīs, the male lay followers, and the female lay followers dwell without reverence and deference towards the Teacher; they dwell without reverence and deference towards the Dhamma; they dwell without reverence and deference towards the Saṅgha; they dwell without reverence and deference towards the training; they dwell without reverence and deference towards concentration. These, Kassapa! are the five detrimental things that lead to the decay and disappearance of the true Dhamma. (Samyutta Nikaya II: 225)<sup>73</sup>

This passage shows that all four groups of the Buddha's disciples are responsible for the decline of the Teachings.

Another question raised regarding the Buddha's reluctance in founding the nuns' order concerns the intervention of Ānanda in the event, and a conflict of timeline regarding him.<sup>74</sup> According to *Cullavaga*, the formation of the nuns' order occurred approximately five years after the Buddha's enlightenment, at the request of Gotamī through Ānanda. However, the historical records indicate Ānanda became the Buddha's attendant only after the Buddha had been teaching for around twenty years. In the Mahāyāna traditional accounts, it is also believed that Ānanda only became a monk during the latter half of the Buddha's teaching life. These are some of the critical questions raised against the Buddha's alleged initial reluctance to allow women to go forth as ordained nuns.

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<sup>73</sup> *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* I: 681.

<sup>74</sup> Cited in Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 385.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In spite of these questions, even if the traditional account of the Buddha's reluctance were true, it could be regarded as influenced by socio-cultural views rather than on soteriological grounds. Considering the socio-cultural norms of the time and place where the Buddha was emerging as a leader of a newly formed religion, it is not surprising that he is reluctant to grant women the same opportunity as men. Since the formation of a nuns' order as a community was then a new concept, it is possible that the Buddha was concerned about its acceptance by the wider society. This concern with the people's reaction was likely owing to the interconnection between the monastic order and the society, since Buddhist monastic orders are not completely cut off from society. In fact, the ordained and the laity are interdependent, since the laity supplies the ordaineds' physical needs of food and robes, and the ordained supports the laity's emotional needs by sharing their understanding and experience of the Buddha's teachings.

However, the traditional claim that defended the Buddha's initial reluctance concerning women's ordination is that the Buddha was worried about the enduring period of his teachings, purportedly expressing concern that his teachings would end prematurely if women's ordination were approved. Although the Buddha allegedly said that his teachings would now last only five



hundred years,<sup>75</sup> needless to say, over five hundred years have passed and the teachings are still alive and thriving.

With these conflicting textual accounts, it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion. It definitely raises the question of the veracity of the Buddha's reluctance to form a nuns' order. However, questioning the authenticity of all the canonical literature is not a straightforward solution to the issue of the formation of the nuns' order. On the other hand, to interpret the literature literally is neither practical nor justifiable. Hence, it is useful to bear in mind that all accounts in the canonical literature were originally transmitted orally for centuries prior to being transcribed. Therefore, reaching a definitive conclusion is highly problematic at this stage unless a very thorough study of every piece of literature is undertaken. Even so, there is always a possibility that it will remain unresolved. Thus, the overall ambivalence of the accounts contained in the canonical literature regarding the establishment of the nuns' order and women in general is indeed 'a rich multivocality'.<sup>76</sup> As such, a fair reading of these multiple voices, bearing in mind textual evolution theory and the circumstances under which these historical accounts have been transmitted, is essential.

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<sup>75</sup> "If Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, the Brahma-faring, Ānanda, would have lasted long, true dhamma would have endured for a thousand years. But since, Ānanda, women have gone forth . . . in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, now, Ānanda, the Brahma-faring will not last long, true dhamma will endure only for five hundred years.": *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka). Volume V, (Cullavagga)*: 356.

<sup>76</sup> Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," 3-4.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Gotamī, the Epitome of Buddhist Nuns and Female Spirituality**

#### **Introduction**

Regardless of the controversies surrounding the founding of the nuns' order, a successful and vibrant nuns' order led by Gotamī ran parallel to the monks' order during Buddha's time. Gotamī was undeniably the perfect role model for Buddhist women in the past and remains the most inspiring historical figure for Buddhist women throughout the world to this day. This chapter will argue that Gotamī was not only influential as the leader of nuns more importantly was the epitome of female spirituality. She became one of the foremost female Arhats and proved that women were by no means less capable spiritually than men. I will first briefly introduce Gotamī and her nuns' order, the process of ordination and life in the order, followed by a discussion of Gotamī as the role model for female Arhats.

## 1. Gotamī and her Nuns' Order

### a) *Going Forth*

Many women joined the nuns' order immediately after it was founded. In fact, it is said that five hundred women who accompanied Gotamī were all ordained at the same time as her. Among those who joined the order with Gotamī and whose songs of realization after their attainment of Arhathood are documented in the *Therīgāthā* are Tissā, another Tissā, Dhīrā, Vīrā, Mittā, Bhadrā, Upasamā, Viśākhā, Sumanā, Uttarā, Sanghā.<sup>77</sup> Little is known of their biographies apart from the fact that all were from the Śākyan clan of Kapilavatthu. This first group of women led by Gotamī was ordained by the Buddha and the monks.<sup>78</sup> After this initial ordination, the remainder of those who joined the nuns' order were ordained by both the orders of monks and nuns, with Gotamī as the preceptress on most occasions.<sup>79</sup> It was indeed a marvelous turn in the history of Buddhism, and the opportunity to become ordained was eagerly received by women.

Going forth to become ordained was not merely a means of avoiding the problems of domestic life, although cases may have existed where ordination did serve as an escape from unpleasant circumstances. In fact, however, during the

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<sup>77</sup> See Acariya Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, trans. William Pruitt, vol. 47 (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1999).

<sup>78</sup> See, *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka). Volume V, (Cullavagga)*.

<sup>79</sup> See *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47.

initial phase of the founding of the nuns' order many women who became ordained were already highly realized practitioners. According to the *Therīgāthā*, a collection of songs by realized nuns, among those reciting the verses were numerous women who were already great practitioners before ordination. While some of them became serious practitioners only after joining the order, several had in fact reached the stage of stream-entrant (*sotāpanna*) and non-returner (*anāgāmīn*) before joining the order.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, some had already achieved Arhathood at the time of their ordination.<sup>81</sup>

For some women such as Gotamī and her group, seeing the Buddha and listening to his discourses prompted a desire to become ordained. For others, hearing the teachings from one of the Buddha's disciples inspired ordination. Family members or friends encouraged some women to embrace the ordained life, as did grief over the death of children, which often triggered a change in lifestyle. Hence, while for many the Buddha's teachings attracted them to lead an ordained life, for others it was the travails they experienced in domestic life.<sup>82</sup>

The procedure for joining the order was relatively simple: one needed a genuine attitude of renunciation and a wish to pursue an understanding of the true

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<sup>80</sup> Paṭācārā, Kisā Gotamī, Punna, Rohini and Subha attained stream-entry (*sotāpanna*), Anopamā and an unknown nun attained the fruition of non-returner (*anāgāmīn*) prior to their joining the order of nuns. See *ibid.*, 10,148,224,178,252,69,99.

<sup>81</sup> Sujātā, Bhadda Kuṇḍalakesā and Sumanā attained Arhathood before joining the order. See *ibid.*, 35,140,76. According to Dhammapada aṭṭakathā and Manorathāpūraṇī, Khema attained Arhathood before going forth, but in the Apadāna she had attained stream-entry before her ordination. See *ibid.*, 167.

<sup>82</sup> See, Arvind Sharma, "How and Why Did the Women in Ancient India Become Buddhist Nuns?," *SA. Sociological Analysis* (1977).

nature of life and to achieve liberation from the cyclic existence of birth and death. Female aspirants initially developed such a wish either after listening to the Buddha's discourses or those of his monk disciples. Later sources of inspiration included the acclaimed women teachers of the time such as Dhammadinnā, Paṭācārā, Khemā and Sukkā, prompting many others to go forth as nuns and devote themselves fully to practicing the teachings.<sup>83</sup> Once a woman decided to go forth as ordained, she first expressed her wish to her family, since it is necessary to obtain the consent of one's parents or husband (if married) before joining the order.<sup>84</sup> In the case of women who were mature and not dependent on family members, consent was not required.

### *b) Full Ordination*

Several preliminary steps precede full ordination as a nun (*bhikkhunī*). First, as a layperson, one takes on the five precepts (*upāsikā*) followed by going from home into homelessness (*pabbajjā*). At this stage, one puts on the robe, shaves one's head and lives within the community of the ordained nuns, receiving the ten precepts of a novice (*samaṇeri*). These three steps apply to joining both monks' and nuns' orders. While a novice monk (*samaṇera*) can ask to be fully ordained monk (*bhikkhu*) after this stage, a novice nun (*samaṇeri*) has

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<sup>83</sup> See, Mabel Bode, "Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation (from Manorathapurani, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (New Series)* 25, no. 03 (1893).

<sup>84</sup> See the stories of the nuns in Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47.

an additional step to pass – probation (*sikkhamānā*). A probationer nun (*sikkhamānā*) undertakes no more precepts than a novice nun (*samaṇeri*), however they have to study and train themselves over a two-year period to be a fully ordained nun (*bhikkhunī*), who has hundreds of precepts to follow. Once determined to become fully ordained, only then may one request full ordination.<sup>85</sup>

A nun's complete ordination is granted in a ceremony led by a group of ten fully ordained monks and nuns. During the time of the Buddha, nuns were ordained in various ways. The first was Gotamī's acceptance of the eight-heavy rules which constituted her ordination. In another form, the group of women accompanying Gotamī was ordained by a group of monks. The third involved the two rare styles of ordination, wherein the Buddha called a person by name, as in Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā's ordination. In one of her songs of realization she recounts her ordination, where the Buddha said to her 'Come Bhaddā' which was deemed her ordination: "Having bent my knee, having paid homage to him, putting my raised hands together, I stood face to face with him. "Come Bhaddā," he said to me. That was my full ordination."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> This is one of the eight-heavy rules (*garudhamma*). See *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka). Volume V, (Cullavagga)*: 355.

<sup>86</sup> Verse No. 109, However, Dhammapala writes in the conclusion of his commentary on *Therīgāthā* that even though Bhadda says that she had been ordained in this way, it is not the case. He says, "Here, it is not possible to make a "Come, bhikkhuni" pair like the "Come, bhikkhu" pair. Why? Because for bhikkhunis, there was no full ordination of that sort, even if it is said by Subhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā in the verses of the Therīs." He in fact interprets Bhadda's verse in the following words: "Come Bhaddā! Go to the residence of the bhikkhunīs and in the presence of the bhikkhunīs go forth and be fully ordained." See, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 141,380,142.

The other special method of ordination was through a messenger, as in the case of Aḍḍhakāśī, a former prostitute. This occurred because she wished to visit Sāvatti where the Buddha was residing, in order to be ordained. However, some mischievous men, knowing of her trip to Sāvatti, planned to lie in wait for her along the way. Upon hearing of this, she sent a message to the Buddha through a messenger concerning this and the Buddha replying: “I allow you, bhikkhu, to ordain even through a messenger.”<sup>87</sup> These were some exceptional ways of giving ordination during the lifetime of the Buddha. Currently, the method prevailing is the compulsory dual participation of monks and nuns in a nuns’ ordination.

The lineage of the full ordination of monks has been transmitted in an unbroken manner from the time of the Buddha to the present in all the Buddhist traditions. By contrast, such lineage for the full ordination of nuns has not been maintained intact in most traditions, and is no longer available, except in the Dharmaguptaka tradition preserved in Chinese Buddhism. Recently, the Theravada tradition in Sri Lanka has reinstated the lineage from the Dharmaguptaka tradition.<sup>88</sup> Although this has not yet been officially reinstated in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, many nuns within this have received full ordination on an individual basis from the Chinese Dharmaguptaka tradition.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>88</sup> <http://www.bhikkhunikusuma.info/about.html>

<sup>89</sup> For ongoing process of reinstating the nuns full ordination lineage in Tibetan tradition, see Jampa Tsedroen, “Generation to Generation: Transmitting the Bhiksuni Lineage in

### *c) Life in the Nuns' Order*

Everyday life in the nuns' order focused on contemplative practice, and there were no domestic chores such as cooking, gardening and sewing. Fully ordained monks and nuns during the time of the Buddha took only one meal a day, eaten before mid-day. For which they went begging with their bowls, one of the few possessions permitted. (this practice of begging for food is no longer widely practiced in all Buddhist traditions except in areas of the Theravada Buddhist countries such as Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka). Occasionally during the time of the Buddha, rather than begging the laity invited monks and nuns to their homes for meals. Nor did begging for alms occur during the three-month rainy season retreat, when the laity came to offer food to the monks and nuns.

As the ordained were forbidden to undertake any work a layperson might do, they were not allowed to weave their robes, and these were either offered by the laity or made of rags collected from the garbage. All entertainment such as dancing or playing music was forbidden for ordained monks and nuns, and nor was a nun permitted to stay a night in a layperson's home or a layperson in the nuns' compound. Unlike within the contemporary setting of some Buddhist monasteries and nunneries, in ancient times there were no set hours for the practice of meditation or learning. Besides the alms round once before mid-day, the entire time was devoted to meditation and listening to teachings.<sup>90</sup>

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the Tibetan Tradition," in *Buddhist Women in a Global Multicultural Community*, ed. Karma Leksey Tsomo (Petaling Jaya: Sukhi Hotu Dhamma Publications, 2008).

<sup>90</sup> Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism : Laywomen and Almswomen*: 211-312.



Nuns did not lag in the task of teaching, and there were many great nun teachers such as Sukkā, Dhammadinnā, Khemā and Paṭācārā. In the later phase of the nuns' order when more young novices entered, another task for the elders was instructing and training them in the path to full ordination. The only ritualistic ceremony was the *uposatha*, a fortnightly occasion consisting of *patimokha sutta* recitation, the text detailing the codes and conduct of monks and nuns, and confession of any breach of the precepts occurring in the preceding fortnight. Initially, every fortnight nuns had to go and request that a monk come to the nuns' order to lead the ceremony, but later the nuns performed it themselves. This independence followed Gotamī's request of the Buddha:

The Blessed One has declared, 'Let the monks perform the monastic rites in assembly separately; let the nuns perform the monastic rites in assembly separately'. The Blessed One has expounded the Patimokkha sutta to the monks but has not expounded it to the nuns. I request the Blessed One to teach the Patimokkha sutta. I wish to learn it from the Blessed One.<sup>91</sup>

The Buddha subsequently taught the nuns the *Patimokkha sutta* and since then, they themselves performed the *uposatha* ceremony. Gotamī continued to take gradual steps in order to lead the nuns towards more independence.

As in any communal organization, the nuns' community was not devoid of mischief-making. The nuns Thulanandā and Caṇḍakālī and a small following were the cause of many of the hundreds of rules for fully ordained nuns. Initially,

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<sup>91</sup> According to Soma Avadāna in Sanskrit, Soma was the one who listened to the Buddha teach the entire *Bhikkhunī Patimokkha* and just by one hearing she learnt them by heart. See, Peter Skilling, "Esa Agra; Images of Nuns in (Mūla-) Sarvāstivādin Literature," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 24, no. 2 (2001): 145-46.

a few rules existed at the time of Gotamī and the group's ordination; however, there close to three hundred came into effect after Thulanandā and the group in most cases (and a few others in some), behaved inappropriately. Certain actions were forbidden to protect the monastics from external distractions and to abide by the moral and ethical codes. However, there was also a social dimension as many rules were in fact the result of criticism from non-monastics, and social expectations informing the rules for female monastics meant fully ordained nuns had more of them than monks, although the numbers differ in various recensions of the Vinaya text.<sup>92</sup>

## **2. Gotamī, the Role Model of Enlightened Women**

### *a) Arhathood: Path and Result*

Gotamī as one of the foremost of enlightened women was not only the leader of ordained women but the one who led women in general to spiritual enlightenment, which is known as Arhathood. This is the ultimate goal of spiritual practitioners as per the Śrāvakayāna tradition of Buddhism. Broadly speaking there are two Buddhist traditions: the Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna. According to the Śrāvakayāna version, most spiritual aspirants do not aim to become Buddhas owing to this tradition's belief that not all sentient beings can achieve Buddhahood. Therefore, Arhathood is the goal that most beings aspire to; a person who has achieved such a stage of enlightenment is known as an

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<sup>92</sup> Chaturman Kabilsingh, *A Comparative Study of Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha*, vol. 28 (Varanasi: Chaukhambha Orientalia, 1984). 47.

Arhat. In Sanskrit and Pali, the two Indian languages in which all the Buddhist teachings were recorded, ‘Arhat’ means either ‘the worthy one’ or the one who has destroyed all negative emotions. Thus, an arhat has achieved *nirvāṇa*, or the state of freedom from all negative emotions and suffering.

According to Buddhism, sentient beings are caught up in the cycle of birth and death from the beginning-less time, an experience known as ‘*saṃsāra*’ or cyclic existence. On the path leading to Arhathood, the state where one has triumphed over the suffering of the cycle of birth and death by overcoming mental negativity – the initial step entails realizing the nature of the truth of suffering. Suffering here is not merely physical pain and illnesses, but rather the sense of unhappiness or un-satisfactoriness often experienced in everyday life. In the practice of achieving *nirvāṇa*, the four noble truths are the focal point, which includes realization of the truth of suffering leading to the path of Arhathood.<sup>93</sup>

In the Buddhist teachings, three types of suffering exist: suffering of suffering (*sdug bsngal gyi sdug bsngal, duḥkhaduḥkhatā*), suffering of change (‘*gyur ba*’i *sdug bsngal, pariṇāmaduḥkhatā*) and pervasive suffering (*khyab pa* ‘*du byed kyi sdug bsngal, saṃskāraduḥkhatā*).<sup>94</sup> Suffering of suffering is

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<sup>93</sup> Vasubandhu // *Abhidharmakośakārikā* // *chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi tshig le'ur byas pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4089) mngon pa, ku 1b1-25a7, f. 18b –“/bden pa mthong dang bsgoms pa \_las|\_/nyon mongs spangs pa zhes bshad pa/”,

“It has been said that the defilements are abandoned through seeing the Truths and through Meditation” - Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, trans. Leo M Pruden, vol. 3 (Berkeley, Calif. : Asian Humanities Press 1988). 896.

<sup>94</sup> Vasubandhu // *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* // *chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi bshad pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4090) mngon pa, khu 1b1-95a7, f. 3a –“*sdug bsngal nyid ni gsum ste/\_sdug bsngal gyi sdug bsngal nyid dang/\_du byed kyi sdug bsngal nyid dang/\_gyur ba'i sdug bsngal nyid do/*”

identified with the gross feeling of suffering such as physical pain as in illness and mental pain such as attends the loss of a dear one or not having one's wishes fulfilled. Suffering of change refers to the moments in life that seem happy but eventually change to unhappiness. Lastly, the very nature of our being pervaded by suffering from birth to old age, old age to illness followed by death is known as pervasive suffering, considered the most subtle form of suffering.

The second step on the path to Arhathood is to recognize that the suffering related to the cycle of birth and death is not without cause. In other words, an individual's experience of suffering is caused by their own actions in previous lives. The Buddha said that craving/attachment is the source of suffering,<sup>95</sup> and that the root cause of attachment is momentary mental reactions of likes and dislikes. Such reactions arise due to one's attachment to the self, which leads to negative emotions such as anger, jealousy and so on, causing an individual to engage in a range of unwholesome acts. An unwholesome or non-virtuous action is one which harms others or disturbs their peace and harmony, whereas any action that benefits others or contributes to achieving peace and harmony is a wholesome or virtuous action.

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"There are three types of suffering: suffering which is suffering in and of itself (*dukkhaduḥkhatā*), suffering through the fact of being conditioned (*saṃskāraduḥkhatā*), and suffering which is change or transformation (*pariṇāmaduḥkhatā*)." - *ibid.*, 899.

95 *Suttapiṭaka//Khuddakanikāya//Dhammapadapāli//* 24. *Taṇhāvaggo//* "338. *Yathāpi mūle anupaddave daḥhe, chinnopi rukkhō punareva rūhati;Evampi taṇhānusaye anūhate, nibbattaṭi dukkhamidaṃ punappunaṃ.*" <http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/>

"If its root remains undamaged and strong, a tree, even if cut, will grow back. So too if latent craving is not rooted out, this suffering returns again and again." - "Tanhavagga: Craving" (*Dhp XXIV*), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight, 1 December 2012, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.24.than.html>

The third step involves embarking on the path that leads to wholesome actions. The ‘eightfold noble path’ is the path through which one can reach the state of *nirvāṇa*.<sup>96</sup> Specifically, these eight noble paths can be subsumed under ‘three trainings’ (*triśikṣa*); training in moral discipline (*śīla śikṣa*), in contemplation (*samādhi śikṣa*) and in wisdom (*prajñā śikṣa*). Of the eightfold noble path, 1. right speech (*samyag vāca*), 2. right livelihood (*samyag ājīva*), and 3. right action (*samyag karma*) fall within the training in moral discipline (*śīla śikṣa*), 4. right effort (*samyag vyāyāma*), 5. right mindfulness (*samyag smṛti*) and 6. right concentration (*samyag samādhi*) form part of the training in contemplation (*samādhi śikṣa*) and 7. right view (*samyag drṣṭi*) and 8. right thought (*samyag saṅkalp*) pertain to the training in wisdom (*prajñā śikṣa*).

### *b) The Spiritual Stages Leading to Arhathood*

Engaging in the eightfold noble path and eradication of ten fetters (*kun sbyor, saṃyojana*)<sup>97</sup> lead to Arhathood in three stages. Stream-entry (*rgyun zhugs, srotāpanna*) is the first stage of spiritual attainment. One who possesses

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<sup>96</sup> Suttapiṭaka//Khuddakanikāya//Dhammapadapāli// 20. Maggavaggo// “273. Maggānaṭṭhaṅgiko seṭṭho, saccānaṃ caturo padā; Virāgo seṭṭho dhammānaṃ, dvipadānaṃ cakkhumā.” - <http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/> “273. Of paths, the eightfold is best. Of truths, the four sayings. Of qualities, dispassion. Of two-footed beings, the one with the eyes to see.” - “Maggavagga: The Path” (Dhp XX), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight, 1 December 2012, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.20.than.html>

<sup>97</sup> “There are these ten fetters. Which ten? Five lower fetters and five higher fetters. And which are the five lower fetters? Self-identity views, uncertainty, grasping at precepts & practices, sensual desire, & ill will. These are the five lower fetters. And which are the five higher fetters? Passion for form, passion for what is formless, conceit, restlessness, & ignorance. These are the five higher fetters. And these are the ten fetters.” – “Sanyojana Sutta: Fetters” (AN 10.13), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight, 4 July 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an10/an10.013.than.html>

the qualities of righteousness such as abiding by the eightfold noble-path and has full confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings), the Saṅgha (Buddha's disciples), and the moral virtues dear to the noble ones is known as a stream-enterer. As a stream-enterer, one abandons three fetters, one of which is misapprehension of one's body (*'jigs lta, satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*), viewed as a transitory collection, as one's absolute identity. One must also give up any doubts (*the tshom, vicikitsā*) about the Buddha, the Dharma, the Saṅgha and their training, and extreme asceticism (*tshul khrims rtul zhugs mchog 'dzin, śīlabratprāmarśa*) must not be regarded as the supreme path of spiritual practice.<sup>98</sup>

Once-returner (*phyir 'ong, sakradāgāmin*) is the second stage of spiritual attainment leading to Arhathood. During this stage, in addition to the abandonment of the three fetters, the spiritual aspirant engages in a practice to minimize emotions seen as the root of all negative emotions: attachment (*'dod chags, rāga*), hatred or anger (*zhe sdang, dveṣa*), and delusion or ignorance (*gti mug, moha*).<sup>99</sup> A once-returner will be reborn once only before progressing to the next stage, known as the non-returner (*phyir mi 'ong, anāgāmīn*). However, this

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<sup>98</sup> "In this community of monks there are monks who, with the wasting away of [the first] three fetters, are stream-winners, steadfast, never again destined for states of woe, headed for self-awakening: such are the monks in this community of monks." - "*Anapanasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing*" (MN 118), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight*, 25 September 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.118.than.html>

<sup>99</sup> "In this community of monks there are monks who, with the wasting away of [the first] three fetters, and with the attenuation of passion, aversion, and delusion, are once-returners, who — on returning only once more to this world — will make an ending to stress: such are the monks in this community of monks." - "*Anapanasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing*" (MN 118), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight*, 25 September 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.118.than.html>

is only in case one has not attained the stage of ‘non returner’ within the same lifetime, as all the stages leading to Arhathood may be achieved in one lifetime.

Non-returner (*phyir mi 'ong, anāgāmīn*) is the third stage, wherein one becomes a non-returner to the world - desire realm (*'dod kham, kāma dhātu*).<sup>100</sup> A non-returner has given up the five lower fetters (*'og ma'i cha mthun lnga, pañcorambhāgiyāni saṃyojanāni*): 1) self-identity views (*'jig lta kun btags, sakkāyadiṭṭhiṃ*), 2) uncertainty (*the tshom nyon mongs can, vicikicchā*), 3) grasping at precepts and practices (*tshul brtul mchog 'dzin, sīlabbataparāmāso*), 4) sensual desire (*'dod pa la 'dun pa dang, kāmacchando*) and 5) ill will (*gnod sems, byāpādoti*).

Attainment of Arhathood means further practicing and eradication of all ten fetters. These are the five lower fetters mentioned above and the five higher fetters (*gong ma'i cha mthun gyi kun sbyor lnga, pañcuddhambhāgiyāni saṃyojanāni*). The latter five are: 1) passion for form (*gzugs kyi 'dod chags, rūparāgo*), 2) passion for what is formless (*gzugs med pa'i 'dod chags, arūparāgo*), 3) conceit (*nga rgyal, māno*), 4) restlessness (*rgod pa, uddhaccaṃ*) and 5) ignorance (*rmongs pa, avijjā*). After eradication of all ten fetters, one

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<sup>100</sup> "In this community of monks there are monks who, with the wasting away of the five lower fetters, are due to be reborn [in the Pure Abodes], there to be totally unbound, destined never again to return from that world: such are the monks in this community of monks." - "Anapanasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing" (MN 118), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight*, 25 September 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.118.than.html>

attains the complete cessation of suffering (‘*gog pa, nirvāṇa*) and thus becomes an Arhat (*dgra bcom pa*).<sup>101</sup>

### *c) Gotamī, the Arhat*

Gotamī achieved Arhathood soon after she was ordained as a nun and is probably the first female Arhat.<sup>102</sup> The Buddha recognized her as the foremost of the nuns in spiritual experience: “Monks, chief among my women disciples, who are nuns of long standing, is Great Pajāpatī the Gotamī.”<sup>103</sup> Gotamī’s attainment of Arhathood is one of her greatest contributions to Buddhist women apart from the formation of the nuns’ order. In fact, as discussed in the preceding chapter, according to traditional accounts it was the women’s spiritual capability argument that forged the foundation of the nuns’ order. It was only after the Buddha conceded that women are able to achieve all four levels of spiritual attainment, Arhat being the ultimate result, that the lineage of the ordained women was established.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> "In this community of monks there are monks who are arahants, whose mental effluents are ended, who have reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and who are released through right gnosis: such are the monks in this community of monks." – *Anapanasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing* (MN 118), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight*, 25 September 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.118.than.html>

<sup>102</sup> Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 180-201.

<sup>103</sup> *The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikaya) Vol. I (Ones, twos, threes)*: 183.

<sup>104</sup> See, *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka). Volume V, (Cullavagga)*: 354.



As the first nun and the one behind the founding of the nuns' order, Gotamī completed the task she initiated with the fruition of her spiritual practice. Her having become the first nun is linked to one of her innumerable past lives, and in the *Therī Apādāna*, Gotamī aspired for the position of the chief nun in one of her previous lives during the time of the Buddha Padumuttara many eons ago.<sup>105</sup> Seeing Buddha Padumuttara recognizing a nun for her long-standing spiritual experience, Gotamī wished for a similar position. Through this aspiration, she accumulated great merit by making offerings throughout her life, and was consequently reborn, experiencing many good lives, both human and godly, until her last birth as Gotamī, the nun known for her long-standing experience among the nuns of the present Buddha Gautama.

Moreover, according to *Therī Apādāna*, the leading of a great number of women for ordination was not the only time Gotamī acted as leader of a large group of women. A long time ago, she was born in Varanasi at a time when there was no Buddha present in the world, in the period between the previous Buddha Kaśyapa and the present Buddha Gautama. In this life, Gotamī was born among a large group of women servants in a merchant's house, and one day she met five hundred Pratyeka-buddhas, known as solitary realizers or as lone buddhas. This is a certain type of spiritual aspirant who embarks on a spiritual journey in a world with a teaching Buddha, but who has chosen to experience the fruition of their realization only at a time when there is no Buddha present in the world.

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<sup>105</sup> See, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 180-81.

This large group of Pratyekabuddha/Paccekabuddha Gotamī encountered was on its way to seek labor to help prepare their dwelling for the three-month rainy season retreat.

When Gotamī discovered her merchant lord had refused to help the mendicants build their dwelling, she asked if only wealthy people could help them, or whether servants could also offer to assist. When they replied that anyone could do so, Gotamī took charge of building hermits for them by employing the other servants' husbands. She and the five hundred women servants looked after the Pratyeka-buddhas throughout their rainy season retreat and their generous actions assured that all were rewarded with many good lives after that. According to the *Apādāna*, in another birth in a weaver's house Gotamī served and made offerings to Pratyeka-buddhas, as generous as in her previous lives and throughout her many lives among humans and gods.<sup>106</sup> In her last rebirth as Gotamī, she was born into the Koliyan clan of Devadaha as the sister of Maya, the Buddha's mother. The sisters Maya and Gotamī were both married to the Śākyan king Śuddhodana, but within days of the Buddha's birth, Maya passed away and Gotamī raised the Buddha while her own son Nanda's care was entrusted to one of her chief maids.

Gotamī's life took a radical turn when her foster son Siddhārtha, who later became the Buddha after his enlightenment, visited home for the first time since departing on a spiritual journey in search of truth. This visit of Siddhārtha

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

as the Buddha had a great impact on his parents, son, cousins and other fellow Śākyaans. His father Śuddhodana, despite having been unhappy when Siddhārtha left the palace, welcomed him wholeheartedly on his return. As the Buddha shared the knowledge he had gained and experienced through his spiritual practice, many of the fellow Śākyaans started to follow his teachings. Among them was his father, who being highly motivated by the teachings and diligent in practice, soon became a stream enterer (*rgyun zhugs, srotāpanna*), the first resultant stage of spiritual practice. Gotamī's son Nanda and the Buddha's own son Rāhula also went forth as ordained monks during this visit of the Buddha to Kapilavastu.<sup>107</sup>

The Buddha had come home after five years of his great enlightenment. As he had been sharing his knowledge with the people for some time, he already had ordained males among his followers and so Nanda and Rāhula also joined the order. However, when Gotamī desired to go forth as ordained, this was not as simple as had been the case for her son Nanda and grandson Rāhula. Although she was the queen of the Śākyaan clan and the foster mother of the Buddha, she could not go forth as an ordained nun as had Nanda and Rāhula. Gotamī had to take the initiative to obtain this opportunity for herself and other women who also wished to be ordained. As discussed in the previous chapter, according to the traditional accounts, initially the Buddha did not approve Gotamī's request that

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<sup>107</sup> Bode, "Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation (from Manorathapurani, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya)," 525. See also Pruitt's note. 1. of Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 182.

women be permitted to go forth as ordained, yet she persisted until eventually succeeding.<sup>108</sup>

Shortly after the Buddha left Kapilavastu for Vaiśālī, his father Śuddhodana passed away following his attainment of Arhathood.<sup>109</sup> Witnessing the triumphs of her husband, son and grandson, Gotamī did not want to simply rejoice in their achievements. She was strongly inspired to lead an ordained spiritual life herself and persisted to achieve it. Eschewing all comforts, she undertook a long journey barefoot, with a shaven head and rough robes, followed by five hundred female aspirants to Vaiśālī where the Buddha was residing. There despite initial reluctance, through the argument of women's equal capability to achieve all spiritual attainments, Gotamī's goal was finally accomplished. Soon after her ordination, with profound motivation towards her spiritual practice, she attained Arhathood and became the role model of a realized woman, a female Arhat, for those also aspiring to such an achievement. Gotamī clearly expresses the stages of her realization and attainment of fruition in saying:

Suffering is understood; the cause of suffering allayed.  
I've experienced cessation; I've cultivated the path.  
I have worshipped the teacher, and done what the Buddha taught;  
Laid down the heavy load, and loosed the ties to life.

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<sup>108</sup> *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka). Volume V, (Cullavagga): 352-55.*

<sup>109</sup> Bode, "Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation (from Manorathapurani, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya)," 525. Also, see Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 182.

The reason for which I went forth from home to homelessness is finally attained by me: destroying all the fetters.<sup>110</sup>

Gotamī proudly announced that she had finally reached a state thus far attained only by males and assumed to be outside the reach of women. Along with her initiative concerning the spiritual rights of women, she had demonstrated women's spiritual capability and triumphantly proclaimed:

I witnessed the joy of peace [attained] by the male Śākyan heroes.  
They were the men who formerly had been born as our husbands.<sup>111</sup>

Gotamī, remembering her responsibility and with great care for her fellow nuns, advised them that just as she had achieved her spiritual goal, Arhathood, they should do likewise:

The great Buddha made women nuns, only at my beseeching.  
So, if you love me, be like me, and follow after him.<sup>112</sup>

The fellow nuns were grateful to Gotamī and did not lack zeal in their spiritual practice, and soon after Gotamī's achievement, the five hundred women also declared their attainment of Arhathood. Addressing the Buddha as a hero, the women acknowledged that it was Gotamī the foremost of all, whom they are grateful to for their victorious achievement:

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<sup>110</sup> "Gotami's Story (Gotami Apadana)," in *Buddhism in Practice*, Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed. (1995), 120.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 121.

Hey, hero, it was Gotamī who pitied all of us. Perfumed by your good karma we slew the imperfections. Defilements gone, we have abolished existence and now we are like elephant cows who, breaking every single fetter, dwell without constraint.<sup>113</sup>

The then prevailing attitude to gender is apparent from one of Gotamī's verses where she seeks the Buddha's forgiveness for any wrongdoing. She addresses the Buddha as the chief of the worlds, saying "It is thought, chief of the world, that women are all flawed, if there should be some flaw in me, compassion-mine, forgive it."<sup>114</sup> Gotamī had finally proved that women were not all flawed and were also capable of attaining qualities so far thought to be within men's capability only.

#### *d) Grand Passing Away of Gotamī*

The occasion of Gotamī's death was yet another magnificent event highlighting female spiritual power. She did not face an untimely death or succumb to illness; rather, she chose the time of her death with full awareness. Living among her fellow nuns in the nuns' residence at Vaiśālī when the Buddha was also residing in the same town, a thought arose in her that it was time for her to pass away forever. Following this she reviewed her spiritual practice and its fruition, becoming confident of her realization and the exhaustion of all factors

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 123.

leading to rebirth. Gotamī thought it best not to prolong her life and witness the passing away of the Buddha.<sup>115</sup>

She considered this to be a perfect time to pass away, while the Buddha was still alive and the ordained communities were flourishing in harmony. Just as such thoughts arose, the earth shook and thunder roared with the wailing and weeping of goddesses dwelling in the vicinity, such as Pṛithvi (earth goddess), Lakṣmī (wealth goddess), and Yakṣīni (attendant of the wealth god) who were the supporters of spiritual practitioners in their mundane matters. Gotamī's resident five hundred fellow nuns also experienced a strange feeling and wondered what was happening. They went to see Gotamī to ask what had caused the shaking, roaring and wailing:

In solitude, sister, we were dampened with tears; the solid earth trembled, the gods' thunder roared. There, it is as though someone's crying is heard: What does this mean, Gotamī?<sup>116</sup>

When Gotamī shared her wish to pass away to her friends, they voiced the same wish. Together, they left the nuns' residence to see the Buddha and seek his permission to pass away. On the way, they met laywomen lamenting the passing of their leader and asked her not to leave them. Gotamī, ever confident, replied

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<sup>115</sup> "I cannot bear to look upon the Buddha's final passing" - *ibid.*, 118. Vinaya-kṣudraka-vastu // 'dul ba phran tshogs kyi gzhi// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 6) 'dul ba, tha 1b1-467a3, f. 171b - "*de'i phyir ji srid bcom ldan 'das bzugs shing dge slong gi dge 'dun mthun pa de'i tshe bdag yongs su mya ngan las 'da' bar bya'o/ \_*"

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

“Enough with all your crying, children: today’s a day to laugh!”<sup>117</sup> By this she meant it was a day to laugh because it was a day that vindicated her achievement of female spiritual power. In other words, she had achieved the goal of going forth as ordained, had destroyed all the fetters leading to the unending cycle of birth and death and had had the opportunity to celebrate her achievement with the Buddha, Ānanda, Nanda and Rāhula.

My wish I’ve had for very long today will be fulfilled.  
This is the time for drums of joy! Why are you crying, children?<sup>118</sup>

She advised them to be ‘strong and fervent’ if they loved her, to appreciate the Dharma’s great stability and to be like her.<sup>119</sup> Jonathan Walters, in *A voice from the Silence: The Buddha’s Mother’s Story* equates Gotamī to the Buddha, saying that “Gotamī is held up as the female counterpart to the Buddha.”<sup>120</sup>

However, since the Śrāvakayāna tradition does not believe in the possibility of multiple Buddhas at a time, a hierarchy exists between the Buddha and his male and female followers who have achieved Arhathood, as has he. While technically this is the same Arhathood, the Buddha is believed to have been a Bodhisattva for many eons before attaining enlightenment. A Bodhisattva is someone who wishes to become a Buddha for the sake of benefitting many

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Jonathan S. Walters, "A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha's Mother's Story," *History of Religions* 33, no. 4 (1994): 373.



sentient beings, thereby engages in countless benevolent activities over innumerable lifetimes.

By contrast, while the Arhats also wish to benefit others, they are less motivated than Bodhisattvas and are more individualistic. Moreover, there is a clear gender demarcation attached to becoming a Buddha in Śrāvakayāna Buddhism, while none exists for becoming an Arhat. The impossibility of female Buddhas in the Śrāvakayāna tradition will be critically analyzed in the second part of the next chapter: ‘Enlightened female Arhats versus the belief in ‘the impossibility of a female Buddha’ in Theravāda’.

Nevertheless, Gotamī was indeed a Buddha-like figure for her fellow women and the undoubted role model for female spiritual achievement. After she decided to pass away, Gotamī informed the Buddha: “I wish to go out totally, abandoning this body; grant me permission”,<sup>121</sup> conveying the same message to her son Nanda, grandson Rāhula and Ānanda. The Buddha, Nanda and Rāhula, having gone beyond the path of training and understanding the nature of impermanence, were not emotionally moved. However, Ānanda, still on the path and as such not yet spiritually matured, grieved and wept hearing that Gotamī would pass away. Gotamī, remembering Ānanda’s help with women’s

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<sup>121</sup> "Gotami's Story (Gotami Apadana)," 122. *Vinaya-kṣudraka-vastu* // 'dul ba phran tshogs kyi gzhi//Lhasa (lha sa): (H 6) 'dul ba, tha 1b1-467a3, f. 171b -172a - “bdag bsam bzhin du yongs su mya ngan las 'da' bar 'tshal lo/\_/\_de skad ces gsol ba dang/\_bcom ldan 'das cang mi gsung bar bzhugs nas skye rgu'i bdag mo chen mo go'u ta mis/\_bcom ldan 'das la lan gnyis lan gsum du 'di skad ces \_/\_gsol to/\_/btsun pa/\_bdag bsam bzhin du yongs su mya ngan las 'da' bar 'tshal lo/\_bcom ldan 'das lan gnyis lan gsum du cang mi \_gsung bar bzhugs nas skye rgu'i bdag mo chen mo go'u ta mis yang btsun pa bcom ldan 'das la 'di skad ces gsol to/\_/btsun pa/\_bdag bsam bzhin du yongs su mya ngan 'da' \_bar 'tshal lo/”

ordination, consoled him by saying: “You really shouldn’t mourn when the time to laugh has come! . . . your toil is bearing fruit.”<sup>122</sup>

There were likely many who continued to doubt the spiritual capability of women, regardless of the Buddha’s proclamation that women were as capable as men. When Gotamī informed him that she wished to pass away forever, the Buddha told her to perform miracles so that those he refers to as ‘fools’ who still doubted the spiritual capability of women may be proven wrong.

Yet still there are these fools [children] who doubt that women too can grasp the truth. Gotamī, show miracles, that they might give up their false views.<sup>123</sup>

While supernatural powers such as miracles are concomitant to spiritual achievements, the Buddha advised against demonstrating them for personal benefit. However, in Gotamī’s case, the Buddha tells her to show them so that those who believe that women are less capable spiritually may be proven wrong. Accordingly, paying homage to the Buddha, Gotamī leaped into the sky and appeared in many forms, appearing and disappearing she walked through the walls and the sky. She sank beneath the earth, walked on water as land and flew like a bird to Brahma’s abode. Making the earth a canopy with mount Meru its handle, she walked around the sky.

With these and many other miracles, Gotamī amazed everyone in the vicinity – humans, gods and goddesses. Her fellow nuns who wished to pass

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 126.

away with her also displayed some miracles. Paying homage to the Buddha, they rose up into the sky and gathered like stars, telling the Buddha that they had also perfected their spiritual practice and now wished to pass away with Gotamī.<sup>124</sup>

Gotamī walked back to her residence with her fellow nuns, followed by the Buddha, Nanda, Rāhula, Ānanda and others who were present. Having reached her hut, Gotamī sat cross-legged and entered into the deepest meditational equipoise, never to arise again. There was a shower of flowers from the sky, the earth and the mountains shook, and people and the gods wailed. The Buddha then announced to his monks that Gotamī had passed away into nirvana and they were to pay homage to her for the last time.<sup>125</sup> The Buddha, monks, gods, goddesses, snake gods, demons and Brahma honored her. Vinaya kṣudraka-vastu gives the account of Gotamī's cremation ceremony:

After the passing away of Gotamī along with her fellow five hundred nuns, Nanda, Anirudha, Ānanda, Rāhula carried Gotamī's palanquin. The Buddha also held the palanquin with his right hand. The rest of the monks carried the other nuns' [palanquin]. After great offerings were made to those deceased, they put down the palanquins in a solitary place. Then the king of Kośala Pasenadi along with his entourage of the queen, children, ministers and the villagers gathered heaps of various scented woods and cremated the bodies of Gotamī and her five hundred fellow nuns. Thereafter, everybody returned after the Buddha gave teachings on impermanence.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 131-32. *Vinaya-kṣudraka-vastu* // 'dul ba phran tshegs kyi gzhi// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 6) 'dul ba, tha 1b1-467a3, f. 172a – “dge slong ma lnga brgya po de dag gis kyang bcom ldan \_'das kyis zhabs gnyis la mgo bos phyag 'tshal nas 'di skad ces gsol te/\_btsun pa/\_bdag cag kyang bsam bzhin du yongs su mya ngan las 'da' bar 'tshal lo/\_”

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 137-38.

<sup>126</sup> *Vinaya-kṣudraka-vastu* // 'dul ba phran tshegs kyi gzhi// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 6) 'dul ba, tha 1b1-467a3 (vol. 10), f. 174b – 175a – “/de nas tshe dang ldan pa dga' bo dang/\_ma 'gag pa dang/\_kun dga' bo dang/\_sgra gcan zin gyis sbye rgu'i bdag mo chen mo go'u ta mi'i khyogs btegs go/\_bcom ldan 'das \_kyis kyang phyag g.yas pas bzung ngo/\_dge slong lhag ma rnam kyis

Gotamī's passing was so overwhelming that the Apādāna makes a striking comparison between her passing away and that of the Buddha's:

The final quenching of the Buddha was not the equal of the final quenching of Gotamī. Hers was a much more wonderful occasion.<sup>127</sup>

Indeed, Gotamī's passing away and funeral were significantly grander than those of the Buddha's, as well as those of her husband and the Buddha's father Śuddhodana. The Buddha recognized Gotamī as the 'most wise' and 'a master of great powers':

Know this, O monks, she was most wise, with wisdom vast and wide.  
She was a nun of great renown, a master of great powers.<sup>128</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

"The reason for which I went forth from home to homelessness is finally attained by me: destroying all the fetters."<sup>129</sup> Said before her passing away,

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*kyang dge slong ma lhag ma rnams kyi khyogs bteḡ go\_/\_de nas mchod pa chen po byas te khyer nas sa phyogs bar skabs \_dben sar khyogs rnams bzhaḡ go\_/\_de nas bcom ldan 'das kyis skye rgu'i bdag mo chen mo go'u ta mi dang/\_dge slong ma lnga brgya po dag gi lus las bla gos phud nas dge slong rnams \_/\_la bka' stsal pa/\_dge slong dag/\_skye rgu'i bdag mo chen mo go'u ta mi dang/\_dge slong ma lnga brgya po 'di dag lo brgya nyi shu lon yang lus la gnyer ma dang/\_skra \_dkar med cing bu mo lo bcu drug lon pa lta bu la ltos/\_de nas yul ko sa la'i rgyal po gsal rgyal btsun mo'i tshogs dang/\_gzhon nu dang/\_blon po dang/\_grong mi dang/\_yul mi \_dang bcas pas dri sna tshogs kyi shing gi phung po spungs nas skye rgu'i bdag mo chen mo go'u ta mi la sogs pa dge slong ma lnga brgya po'i sku gdung dag bsregs so/\_/bcom ldan 'das \_kyis kyang mi rtag pa dang ldan pa'i chos dag bshad nas gtsug lag khang du gshegs so"*

<sup>127</sup>Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 199.

<sup>128</sup> "Gotami's Story (Gotami Apadana)," 137.

clearly, for Gotamī it was not simply the status of being ordained that she aspired to when asking the Buddha to permit women go forth from the state of home to homelessness. Although being ordained and attaining Arhathood are not mutually exclusive, for many the former facilitates the latter.

Gotamī achieved the same bliss of Arhathood as her male counterparts: “I witnessed the joy of peace [attained] by the male Śākya heroes. They were the men who formerly had been born as our husbands.”<sup>130</sup> Hence, in addition to being a successful leader of the nuns’ order, Gotamī was even more successful as the leader of the female Arhats. Gotamī’s five hundred fellow nuns, having gone forth to be ordained with her, decided to leave the world with her, honored as the five hundred female Arhats. Thus, many women were not only great nuns but great Arhats.

Gotamī expressed joy over her own achievements as well as those of the nuns at the time of her death, in saying: “My wish I’ve had for very long today will be fulfilled. This is the time for drums of joy!”<sup>131</sup> Moreover, as a mother figure to the nuns, she made sure to remind them of their goal: “The great Buddha made women nuns, only at my beseeching. So, if you love me, be like me, and follow after him.”<sup>132</sup> Those were Gotamī’s final words to her fellow nuns; words of great love, care and leadership. Indeed, she was the most

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

extraordinary leader of the Buddhist nuns. Gotamī was the champion of women's spiritual rights and is indeed a legend in the world of Buddhist women.

## **Part II**

### **Female Buddha in Śrāvakayāna**

## Chapter Three

### Enlightened Female Arhats versus ‘The Impossibility of a Female Buddha’ in Theravāda

#### Introduction

Gotamī and her fellow five hundred Śākya nuns were not only the women who attained Arhathood, as many others from various socio-economic stratum had also done so. Along with Gotamī and her peers, certain women who joined the order under Gotamī’s leadership have spoken of their spiritual experiences. These recollections come in the form of a collection of verses known as *Therīgāthā*. *Therī* means elder nuns and *gāthā* means hymns or poems in Pali, the language in which the original text is written. These songs of realization by nuns are the testimony of early Buddhist women’s spiritual experiences and achievements. This is one of the many minor texts in *Khuddakanikāya*, one of the five parts (nikāyas) of the Sutta Piṭaka in the Pali canon of Buddhism, and probably the only text by female authors contained in the canonical texts.<sup>133</sup>

Under the leadership of Gotamī, Buddhist nuns and women stood parallel to the monks and other men in terms of their spiritual realization of Arhathood.

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<sup>133</sup> Kathryn R Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha : Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000). 1.



However, Arhathood is not the highest state of spiritual realization in Buddhism; the most supreme of all attainments being Buddhahood. Nevertheless, of the two major Buddhist traditions - Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna, according to Mahāyāna everybody should aim for Buddhahood. In contrast, according to Śrāvakayāna, Buddhahood is considered to be attainable only by a few and of those one at a time between many eons. Therefore, according to Śrāvakayāna, almost all spiritual aspirants aim to realize Arhathood. Regardless of its scarcity as per the Śrāvakayāna tradition, a gender demarcation exists in their canonical texts with reference to the very few who will achieve Buddhahood, which is said to be impossible for a woman but possible for a man.

Following from this, the chapter is divided into two sections: 1) enlightened women Arhats from the *Therīgāthā* and 2) a critical analysis of the concept ‘the impossibility of a female Buddha’ within Theravādin textual references. In light of over five hundred women Arhats’ spiritual achievements, I argue that historically, as early as from the time of the Buddha, Buddhist women strongly defied the view that a woman cannot attain Buddhahood.

## **1. Enlightened Women Arhats from the *Therīgāthā***

The *Therīgāthā* consists of five hundred and twenty-two verses grouped into sixteen sections by seventy-one female Arhats. It is also the main source for the study of women during the early period of Buddhism. Dhammapāla supplements this text with a commentary based on another canonical text named *Apādāna*, a collection of biographies. All seventy-one female Arhats whose

verses are collected in the *Therīgāthā* are ordained nuns. However, the verses they spoke include their spiritual experiences prior to their ordination as well, as some had achieved Arhathood even before ordination. The following brief stories of certain popular nuns come from Dhammapāla's commentary on the *Therīgāthā* with *Therī Apādāna*.<sup>134</sup>

### *Spiritually Realized Prior to their Ordination*

Nuns who had already attained Arhathood before ordination included Ubbiri, Sujātā, Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā and Sumānā. Ubbirī was from the family of a wealthy householder in Sāvatti.<sup>135</sup> When she saw the Buddha for the first time, she was struck with grief at the death of her daughter. The Buddha asked her for which of her eighty four thousand dead daughters she had been lamenting. This question suddenly made her realize the reality, and soon thereafter Ubbirī attained Arhathood. For Sujātā, amazingly it was her first encounter with the Buddha that led to her attainment of Arhathood. This nun Sujātā is not the laywoman Sujātā known for her offering of 'rice pudding' just before the Buddha's enlightenment in Bodhgaya.<sup>136</sup> Sujāta the nun was born into a wealthy merchant family of Sāketa and married into another wealthy merchant family. Once when

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<sup>134</sup>Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī* VI, 47.

<sup>135</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse 51-53, *ibid.*, 75.

<sup>136</sup> Sujātā, the laywoman first saw the Buddha prior to his enlightenment near Bodhgaya and is proclaimed by the Buddha later as one of his outstanding laywoman followers. See *The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikaya) Vol. I (Ones, twos, threes)*: 24-25. For her story, see Madhukar, *Great Buddhist Women*: 27-30.

she was returning from a festival at a royal garden, Sujātā saw the Buddha, and paying homage, sat down to listen to his teachings. With spiritual maturity derived from her past lives, at the conclusion of the Buddha's discourse, Sujātā attained Arhathood. Thereafter, she returned home and sought permission to go forth and be ordained.<sup>137</sup>

Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā was a Jain nun before becoming a Buddhist nun after hearing about the Buddha's teachings from Sariputta.<sup>138</sup> She too attained Arhathood after first hearing the Buddha's teachings and thereafter joined the nuns' order. Sumānā was the aunt of King Pasenadi of Kosala,<sup>139</sup> who had many virtuous lives during the time of former Buddhas. Although she heard the Buddha's teachings when young and had great faith in them, she did not go forth until later, as she wanted to take care of her grandmother. As she was already a non-returner, after her grandmother died she went to receive teachings from the Buddha and instantly attained Arhathood, joining the order immediately after.

Others also attained the stage of non-returns before becoming nuns, one of which was an unknown nun whose song of realization is the first song in the *Therīgāthā*.<sup>140</sup> From a wealthy family, she commenced as a lay practitioner and

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<sup>137</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse 145-150, Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 176.

<sup>138</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verses 107-111, *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>139</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse *ibid.*, 35.

<sup>140</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse 1, *ibid.*, 10.

had already reached the stage of non-returner before ordination. The other nun who was a non-returner at the time of her ordination was Anopama.<sup>141</sup>

Similarly, others like Puṇṇā,<sup>142</sup> Rohinī<sup>143</sup> and Subhā<sup>144</sup> had attained the first stage of stream entry at the time of their ordination. Puṇṇā was the daughter of one of Anāthapiṇḍika's servants. She attained the stage of stream enterer after hearing the teachings of the Buddha and later sought permission from her master to join the order. Rohinī was from a rich Brahmin family of Vesālī. Once when the Buddha was in Vesālī she went to see him and heard his teachings, attaining the stage of stream enterer after this initial teaching session. She later shared these with her parents and sought permission to join the order. Subhā was born as the daughter of a goldsmith in Rājagaha. As an adult, great faith arose in her towards the Buddha, and one day she went to see him when he was visiting Rājagaha. The Buddha gave her teachings on the four noble truths according to her disposition and she instantly attained the state of stream-entry, and finding she did not enjoy worldly life, joined the nuns' order.

### *Formerly Courtesan Arhats*

Not only were there women known as simply daughters, wives and mothers of such and such who became ordained, there were those known by their

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<sup>141</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse 151-156, *ibid.*, 178.

<sup>142</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verses 236-251, *ibid.*, 252.

<sup>143</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse 271-290, *ibid.*, 269.

<sup>144</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse 338-363, *ibid.*, 299.

profession as courtesans who also embraced an ordained life. Aḍḍakāsikā, Abhayamātā, Vimālā, and Ambapālī became highly realized nuns who were formerly courtesans and prostitutes. Aḍḍakāsikā,<sup>145</sup> despite being born in a rich family, became a prostitute later in life. As she says in her verse,<sup>146</sup> she was known as Aḍḍakāsikā because her wage as a prostitute was half the wage of the king of Kāsi. Disgusted with her life as a prostitute, she joined the nuns' order and soon attained Arhathood.

Abhayamātā<sup>147</sup> was formerly known as the town prostitute Padumavatī of Ujjenī before becoming a nun, later known as Abhayamātā after having a son named Abhaya from her courtship with king Bimbisāra. Her son Abhaya inspired her to join the nuns order and subsequently attain Arhathood. For Vimālā,<sup>148</sup> her profession lay behind her encounter with the teachings of the Buddha. Vimāla is said to have approached Moggallāna, one of the main monk disciples of the Buddha, intending to seduce him. On the contrary, she was seduced toward spirituality after the monk preached to her, leading her to become ordained and eventually realize Arhathood.

The best known figure among these former prostitute Arhats was Ambapālī.<sup>149</sup> The story of her origin is somewhat mythical, as she is believed to

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<sup>145</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse 25-26, *ibid.*, 44-48.

<sup>146</sup> “My wages of prostitution were as large as the revenue of the country of Kāsi. The townspeople fixed that price and me worth half the price.” - *ibid.*, 47.

<sup>147</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse 33-34, *ibid.*, 55-58.

<sup>148</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse 72-76, *ibid.*, 100-04.

<sup>149</sup> See commentary on Therīgāthā Verse 252-270, *ibid.*, 260-69.

have been born spontaneously from a mango tree in the royal garden of Vesālī and was thus named Ambapālī, guardian of the mango tree. One of the gardeners saw her and took her to the town. As she was exceptionally beautiful, many princes wanted to marry her and fought among each other. Seeing this, the towns people made her the prostitute of the town and said ‘let her belong to everyone’. Later she heard teachings from the Buddha and was so inspired that she made a monastery in her garden and offered it to the monks’ order, even inviting the Buddha and his disciples to lunch at her home. Her son Vimāla-Koṇḍañña who had become a monk inspired her after she heard his teachings, and she renounced her profession, joined the nuns’ order and soon attained Arahathood.

### *Arhats from Queen to Pauper*

Other women from various walks of life also joined the nuns’ order and equally enjoyed the realization of Arhathood, among them a formerly queen like Khemā and the impoverished Kisā-Gotamī. Khemā was the queen consort of Magadh’s king Bimbisāra, known for being exceptionally beautiful. In fact, initially she was so preoccupied by her beauty that she disliked listening to the Buddha’s teachings on detachment via the king, who as a follower of the Buddha, tried to convince her of the greatness of his teachings.

One day as she was walking around a garden she came across the Buddha. The Buddha knew she was obsessed with her beauty and alerted her to another young woman in the garden who was more beautiful than she.

Entrenched by the young woman's beauty, Khema continued watching her. However, after a time the woman's beauty faded away and she turned into an old woman wrinkled woman with a weak body. Shocked at this vision, Khema wondered if her beauty would meet the same end. The Buddha then gave her teachings on how everything is impermanent and people are under the illusion that they will not change.

According to *Dhammapda aṭṭakathā and Manorathāpūraṇī*, Khemā attained Arhathood just after hearing these teachings, which means she was already an Arhat before going forth.<sup>150</sup> However, according to Apadāna, she had only attained stream-entry following the teachings, attaining Arhathood later after going forth.<sup>151</sup> Khemā is one of the outstanding nuns proclaimed by the Buddha; the one with great wisdom among the nuns:

Monks, chief among my women disciples, who are nuns of long standing, is Great Pajapati the Gotamī, ... who are nuns of great wisdom, is Khema. ... of supernormal powers is Uppalavanna. ... proficient in the rules of discipline, is Patacara. ... among Dhamma-teachers, is Dhammadinnā. ... of meditative powers, is Nanda. ... who strive energetically, is Sona. ... who are clairvoyant, is Sakula.... Quick to win abnormal powers, is Bhaddā of the curly hair. ... able to remember past births, is Bhaddā of the Kapilas. ... of those who attained great supernormal powers, is Bhadda Kaccana. ... of the wearers of coarse robes, is Gotami the Lean. ... of those released by faith, is Sigala's mother.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup>See 2. Khema, Bode, "Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation (from Manorathapurani, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya)."

<sup>151</sup>Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 167.

<sup>152</sup> *The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikaya) Vol. I (Ones, twos, threes):* 22.

By contrast Kisāgotamī<sup>153</sup> was not only from a poor low caste family, she was also known for being unattractive, and was unable to find a husband until eventually somehow marrying a rich merchant. However, her in-laws despised her because of her unattractiveness and poor low caste family, only treating her well after she gave birth to a son. However, this happy period ended when her son died from a poisonous snakebite. Unable to bear the sorrow of losing her only son, she did not believe he was dead, asking around the town if anyone could cure her son, believing him to be merely unconscious. Rejected as insane, one kind man guided her toward the Buddha, saying that he was the greatest of all physicians and that if anyone could cure her boy, it was he.

Meeting with the Buddha, he knew she was not ready to accept that her son was dead, and said he would cure her son if she could bring some mustard seed from a family in which death had never occurred. Despite initial happiness, after asking from one door to the next she finally came to realize that death happens to all. With this realization, Kisāgotami attained the stage of stream-entry. Accepting her son to be dead, she took his body to the cemetery and returned to the Buddha to join the nuns' order.

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<sup>153</sup> See 12. Kisāgotamī, Bode, "Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation (from Manorathapurani, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya)."

Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 222-32.



### *Paṭācārā, the Inspiration for Grief Struck Mothers*

Another very well known nun whose renunciation of household life is deeply rooted in grief following a child's death is Paṭācārā, who later became a source of hope and sympathy for many women sharing the same fate. She is the nun with the largest female following who had experienced the same grief.

Paṭācārā's story is one that any mother would dread.<sup>154</sup> Despite being born into a wealthy family, she rejected her parents' plan to marry her to a man of equal social status eloping with a servant of the family.

For a while, Paṭācārā lived with her husband in a village. She wanted to come to her parents when she became pregnant and went alone after her husband refused to accompany her. Giving birth on the way, she was brought back to the village along with their newborn child by her husband. The same occurred during her second pregnancy; her husband again followed her to bring her back. It was a stormy night with heavy rain when Paṭācārā was about to deliver, and her husband went in search of shelter in the jungle, where he was bitten by a poisonous snake and died instantly. With no sign of her husband, Paṭācārā resumed her journey with her son and the newborn baby, assuming that her husband had left them. However, she was devastated to find him lying dead in the forest some time later.

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<sup>154</sup>See 4. Paṭācārā, Bode, "Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation (from Manorathapurani, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya)."

Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 143-54.

Reaching the flooded river, it was clear she could not cross it with both children. She left her elder son on the riverside and crossed the river with the newly born baby first, leaving the baby under a tree on the other side while she went back to fetch her elder son. As she reached the middle of the river, she saw that a vulture was about to take her baby and waved her hand to frighten it away. However, the elder boy thought his mother was signaling him to come to her. Entering the river, he was carried away while the vulture took newborn baby. Paṭācārā was devastated after losing both children just after finding her dead husband.

However, this was not the end of tragedy for Paṭācārā. While approaching her hometown she saw bodies being cremated and as her parents were among those who had died when houses collapsed in the storm. Unable to bear the sorrow of losing all her family members within a short time, Paṭācārā went insane, wailing and yelling in the town.

Fortunately, the Buddha was residing there at the time and she encountered him, whereby he gave her teachings on the impermanence of all things and how innumerable similar sorrows attending the loss of dear ones have occurred. Paṭācārā gradually regained her equilibrium and began to understand the reality of all things, thus becoming a stream-enterer. Thereafter, she entered the nuns' order and became highly influential, especially for those women who had also lost children. Over five hundred nuns who were mothers struck by grief after the death of a child mention Paṭācārā's teachings, in which they found solace and eventually attained Arhathood. An example of the regard in which she

was held occurs in Uttamā expression of gratitude to Paṭācārā in her song of realization:

I went up to a bhikkhunī who was fit to be trusted by me. She taught me the doctrine, the aggregates, the sense bases, and the elements. I heard the Doctrine from her as she instructed me. For seven days, I sat in one and the same cross-legged position, consigned to joy and happiness. On the eighth day I stretched forth my feet, having torn asunder the mass of darkness of ignorance.<sup>155</sup>

Paṭācārā was proclaimed by the Buddha to be the most outstanding nun in the proficiency of rules and disciplines, and thus is one of the thirteen outstanding nuns proclaimed in the Aṅguttara Nikāya.<sup>156</sup>

### *Outstanding Female Arhat Teachers*

As with Paṭācārā, one of the nuns who most inspired as a teacher was Dhammadinnā, proclaimed one of the outstanding thirteen nuns as a Dhamma teacher.<sup>157</sup> She was introduced to the teachings of the Buddha through her husband Viśākha who later joined the monks' order. At the time of his going forth, Viśākha told Dhammadinnā she could either stay in the house or take as much property as she wished and live with her father. However, Dhammadinnā

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<sup>155</sup>*The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 67.

<sup>156</sup> *The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikaya) Vol. I (Ones, twos, threes)*: 22.

<sup>157</sup> See 5. Dhammadinnā, Bode, "Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation (from Manorathapurani, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya)."

Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 25-31.

turned out to be more independent; as prepared as her husband to renounce household life, responding: “My dear husband, I will not swallow what you have spat out. Permit me to go forth.”<sup>158</sup>

Although Viśākha readily allowed Dhammadinnā to go forth to be ordained, when she had initially attained Arhathood he was not fully convinced of her realization. Since women were seen to be less spiritually, this is not unexpected, and Viśākha asked Dhammadinnā numerous questions to test her level of attainment. Able to answer all of these, one further step remained for Viśākha to accept her as passed, which was the Buddha’s approval. Viśākha thus travelled to where the Buddha was residing at that time and reported Dhammadinnā’s answers to him. The Buddha was pleased and praised her, saying that had he been asked the same questions, he would have answered likewise, and declared her as the foremost of nuns in giving discourses.<sup>159</sup>

Dhammadinnā later had many students, particularly women. An outstanding one was Sukkā who joined the nuns’ order under Dhammadinnā and soon attained Arahathood,<sup>160</sup> becoming a great teacher with an estimated entourage of five hundred nuns. An amazing incident related to her teaching prowess occurred when, while giving teachings in one of the nunneries, a spirit of a tree is said to have gone out into the town praising her:

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<sup>158</sup>*The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 26.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 77-83.

What has happened to these men in Rājagaha? They remain as though they have drunk wine. They do not attend upon Sukkā when she is preaching the Buddha's teachings. But the wise drink it, I think, which is not repellent, never causing surfeit, of sweet flavor, as travelers drink a rain cloud.<sup>161</sup>

These were among the great women Arhats during the time of the Buddha, inspirational figures for Buddhist women today drawn from the Therīgāthā that survived many generations of oral and written transmission. Many more women Arhats may have existed besides those documented in the Therīgāthā, whose names remain unknown but who can be imagined spiritually.

## **2. Critical Analysis of the Concept 'The Impossibility of a Female Buddha'**

### *a) Somā and Māra*

Somā is another legendary Buddhist nun known for her strong refutation of Māra's denigrating remarks regarding women's spiritual capability. According to *Apadāna* and *Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā*, Somā first saw the Buddha when he came to visit Rājagaha, and she was immediately drawn to his teachings and became a follower as a lay person.<sup>162</sup> Later she joined the nuns' order and soon attained Arhathood through diligence and hard work.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 88.

Somā was the nun who opposed Māra, the personified devil notorious for his obstructive nature, who asserted to Somā that women in general have only ‘two-fingered’ intelligence and are hence incapable of high spiritual realization. While women such as Somā were often targeted by Māra, he also harassed male spiritual aspirants, but only to tempt them towards sensual pleasures in order to distract them from their practice. By contrast, the female spiritual aspirants were not only tempted to sensual pleasures but often denigrated concerning their spiritual capability. To counter this, there were women such as Somā who opposed Māra by responding with rational argumentation.

The interaction between Somā and Māra is found in the *Therīgāthā*<sup>163</sup> and *Bhikkhunī-Samyutta*.<sup>164</sup> These two texts are located in the Pali Buddhist canonical literature and are a testament to women’s spiritual experience, both celebrating women’s achievements and expressing gender politics women faced at the time. The *Bhikkhunī Samyutta* is a collection of poems by certain female spiritual practitioners who experienced Māra’s confrontations. Among them, Māra’s conflict with Somā concerns gender and spiritual potential, which occurred when Somā was meditating in a secluded place. Māra confronted her intending to cause fear, as recounted in the *Bhikkhunī Samyutta*: “Then Māra, the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhunī Somā,

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<sup>163</sup> See Therīgāthā Verse 60-62, *The Elders' Verses 2 Therigatha*, trans. K. R. Norman (London: Pali Text Society, 1971). 9.

<sup>164</sup> See, 2. Soma in "Discourses of the Ancient Nuns: (Bhikkhuni-samyutta)", translated from the Pali by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Access to Insight, 5 June 2010, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bl143.html>

desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her . . .”<sup>165</sup> Then Māra said:

The place, hard to gain, which is to be attained by the seers,  
Cannot be attained by a woman with two-fingered intelligence.<sup>166</sup>

It is noteworthy that the adjective two-fingered is used by Māra to indicate the level of women’s intelligence. There are two explanations regarding the meaning of two-fingered intelligence; one is that in ancient India when women had to check whether the rice was cooked they took a grain of rice between two fingers and pressed.<sup>167</sup> The other explanation is that in India women traditionally spun wool to make thread, holding the thread in their fingers. Both imply that women are only fit for domestic labor, requiring no more than a rudimentary intellect.

Māra’s downplaying of Somā and other women’s spiritual capability could be regarded as the social and cultural outlook on women’s spiritual potential. In India during this period, few women attained high spiritual realizations and they were viewed as less capable spiritually. As discussed in chapter one, the founding of the nuns’ order was based on the women’s spiritual capability argument, where the Buddha’s proclamation that women were able to realize all four stages of spiritual fruition led to the order’s establishment. As a

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<sup>165</sup> Discourses of the Ancient Nuns: (Bhikkhuni-samyutta)", trans. from the Pali by Bhikkhu Bodhi. p. 4

<sup>166</sup> Verse 60, *The Elders' Verses 2 Therigatha*: 9. Verse 6. Bhikkhuni-samyutta, trans. Bodhi, p. 4

<sup>167</sup> Dhammapala, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs: Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*, 47: 89.

result, over five hundred women subsequently attained Arhathood as discussed previously.

According to Dhammapāla, Somā had already attained Arhathood when Māra confronted her:

Then, after attaining Arahathship, she lived in Sāvatti in the happiness of freedom. One day, after the meal, she entered the Andha Grove for her daytime rest and sat down at the foot of a certain tree. And Māra, invisible, went up to her [trying] to destroy her desire for seclusion, stood in the air and spoke this verse: The place, hard to gain, which is to be attained by the seers, cannot be attained by a woman with two-fingered intelligence [i.e., very little intelligence].<sup>168</sup>

Dhammapāla interprets what Māra meant by ‘the place, hard to gain’ as ‘Arahathship’ in his commentary: “that [place] which is named Arahathship”. However, referring to Māra’s next phrase, ‘which is to be attained by the seers’, Dhammapāla writes, “it is to be attained by those of great wisdom, Buddha, etc., by those who have received the name “seer”, in the sense of seeking for the division of virtuous conduct, etc.”

While Dhammapāla claims Māra meant Arhathood by the ‘place hard to gain’, the only example provided for the ‘seers’ is the Buddha, leaving the rest to ‘etc.’. Then he says, “But it is hard to gain (*durabhisambhavaṃ*), hard to accomplish (*dunnipphādanīyaṃ*) for others.” ‘Others’ here suggests other people in general and not necessarily hard to accomplish for women only. However, he then goes, “that [place] which is named Arahathship, the state of supreme

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 88.



confidence, cannot be obtained by a woman of two-finger intelligence (*dvaṅgula-paññāya*), of inferior wisdom (*nihāna-paññāya*).”<sup>169</sup>

I find Dhammapāla’s interpretation of the Māra’s verse inconsistent. First, implies that what Māra meant by the place hard to gain is Buddhahood because it is only attainable for those of great wisdom; Buddhas etc., and thus hard to gain for others. This is true; especially in the context of the Śrāvakayāna tradition, which believes, only the few exceptional can attain Buddhahood. Later, when interpreting the second half of the verse in the context of ‘cannot be attained by women’, he says, that place Arhathood cannot be attained by women who are of inferior wisdom.

In view of this conflicting commentary and because Somā had already attained Arhathood prior to Māra’s confrontation, I argue that Māra meant Buddhahood by ‘the place hard to gain’ and not Arhathood. Māra cannot mean Arhathood by the place hard to gain for women since whether women could attain Arhathood was already beyond question. This was settled upon founding the nuns’ order, when the Buddha proclaimed that women could achieve all spiritual results culminating in Arhathood.

As Somā was a nun when Māra confronted her and already an Arhat, this incident undoubtedly took place well after the establishment of the nuns’ order. Therefore, Māra could only mean Buddhahood by ‘the place hard to gain’ for women, as achieving Buddhahood in a woman’s body is deemed impossible in

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

the canonical texts of the Śrāvakayāna tradition. In order to understand the context of Māra's confrontation, it is necessary to examine the view of women and Buddhahood pertaining in this textual domain, later returning to Somā and Māra's debate.

Traditionally, as many as eighteen different schools are believed to exist within the Śrāvakayāna Buddhist tradition, Theravāda the only Śrāvakayāna school in practice today both philosophically and in terms of Vinaya lineage. While the Sarvāstivāda school's Vinaya lineage remains in practice, its philosophy is no longer practiced, although certain of their textual sources are to be found in Chinese and Tibetan translations. Few philosophical sources on the remaining Śrāvakayāna schools now exist, save for some sources on Vinaya lineage and a handful of philosophical sources only extant in Chinese translation. The role of gender in attaining Buddhahood according to Sarvāstivāda will be explored in the following chapter. In this section, the literary sources pertaining gender's significance in the realization of Buddhahood within Theravāda will be discussed.

### *b) The Impossibility of a Female Buddha in Theravāda*

Buddha is a Sanskrit/Pali word meaning to be 'awakened' or 'enlightened', thus Buddhahood is a state of being awakened and enlightened. Being awakened in Buddhism means to fully realize the real nature of all phenomena. According to the Theravāda interpretation, the Buddha and his disciples who became Arhats after following his teachings have all achieved

*nirvāṇa* and thus all are liberated beings known as Arhats.<sup>170</sup> However, the Buddha and his Arhat disciples differ in aspects such as the resolve to attain Bodhi for the benefit of others, and the amount of merit accumulated during the course of Bodhisatta practice after the resolution to achieve Bodhi, which only the Buddha possesses.

Of all Arhats, the Buddha was foremost in traversing the path and achieving the result; it was he who discovered the path and result, which he then taught to others. Therefore, while the Buddha is also an Arhat, he is a great Arhat with extraordinary skills and knowledge, fulfilling the role of teacher or master of all other Arhats. In this way, a distinction and hierarchy exists between an Arhat and the Buddha. Another important aspect is that only one ‘great Arhat’ known as the *samma sambuddha* (completely perfect Buddha) can exist at a time and can only be achieved by someone in a male form, whereas many Arhats of both genders are possible at the same time.

Consequently, this tradition has three hierarchical soteriological goals: Arhat, Pacceka-buddha and Buddha. An Arhat has eradicated all ten fetters as mentioned in chapter two, and has ceased the cycle of birth and death.<sup>171</sup> A

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<sup>170</sup> “At SN 22:58, the Buddha says that both the Tathāgata and the arahant disciple are alike in being liberated from the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. What is the difference between them? The answer the Buddha gives points to temporal priority as the distinction: the Tathāgata is the originator of the path, the producer of the path, the one who declares the path. He is the knower of the path, the discoverer of the path, the expounder of the path. His disciples dwell following the path and become possessed of it afterwards. But they both walk the same path and attain the same final goal.” – See, “Arahants, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhas”, by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Access to Insight*, 22 August 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/arahantsbodhisattvas.html>

<sup>171</sup> See ch. 2, p. 16, “In this community of monks there are monks who are arahants, whose mental effluents are ended, who have reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the

Pacceka-buddha's path closely resembles that of Arhat's with a different durations and manners of practice. Arhats realize their goal either within a lifetime or in subsequent lives by constantly listening to the Buddha's teachings until the result is achieved. By contrast, Pacceka-buddhas wish to achieve their result when there is no Buddha teaching in the world, and having received teachings from the Buddha once, do not engage in further instruction. Pacceka-buddhas practice on their own until the attainment of their result, hence known as Pacceka-buddha, which means lone or solitary buddhas.

While Arhat and Pacceka-buddha can be aspired to and achieved by anyone provided the practices and training requirements are fulfilled, Buddhahood is only aspired to and achieved in exceptional cases, requiring numerous lifetimes of practicing as a 'Bodhisattva', or someone who aspires to become a Buddha. In the course of attaining Buddhahood, Bodhisattvas must accumulate merit over many eons by engaging in benevolent actions through the lives of various species. This tradition considers that the majority of spiritual aspirants will not aspire to Buddhahood, since only one Buddha is possible at any time and place. Such a Buddha will always appear as a 'Teacher' figure, as with Gautama Buddha. Finally, the teachings of a specific Buddha of a particular age will last for a certain period as per that particular Buddha's aspiration and motivation.

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burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and who are released through right gnosis: such are the monks in this community of monks." – "Anapanasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing" (MN 118), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight*, 25 September 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.118.than.html>

Hence, Buddhahood is only sought by exceptional aspirants, and these must be male, as stated in the *Bahudhātukasutta*, *Discourse on the manifold Elements* in *Majjhima Nikāya*, *The Middle Length Sayings*:

It is impossible, it cannot come to pass that a woman who is a perfected one could be a Fully Self-Awakened One . . . but the situation occurs when a man who is a perfected one could be a Fully Self-Awakened One, this situation occurs. It is impossible, it cannot come to pass that a woman should be a wheel-turning king . . . but a man could be a wheel-turning king, this situation occurs. It is impossible, it cannot come to pass that a woman could be a Sakka . . . a Māra . . . a Brahmā, this situation occurs when a man might be a Sakka . . . a Māra . . . a Brahmā . . . this situation occurs.<sup>172</sup>

However, it is clear that not only will the Buddha never appear as a woman; four other figures cannot be female either. According to general Indian belief, a wheel-turning king (*cakravartin*) is a king with ruling power over the four continents; Sakka is the king of the celestial god realm, Māra is the personification of evil who obstructs all good and wholesome activities, and Brahma is the most powerful Brāhmaṇical god. These powerful figures in high positions derive from Indian religious cosmology and are always portrayed as males. It is interesting to see the inclusion of the Buddha in this group, although this demonstrates women were not only being denied spiritual attainment but any

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<sup>172</sup> *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings (Majjhimanikāya)*, 3: 109. Also, see another identical passage found in Anguttara Nikāya: “It is impossible, monks; it cannot come to pass, that a woman should be an Arahant who is a Fully Enlightened One. But, monks, it is quite possible for a man to be one. . . . So, likewise, with regard to a universal monarch. That a woman should become a Sakka, a Māra, a Brahmā, is a thing impossible. But a man may be.” *The Book of the Ones*, Chapter XV, 1-28 - *The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikaya) Vol. I (Ones, twos, threes)*: 26.

high position whatsoever. Given that the above figures are set in a patriarchal socio-cultural context, this is unsurprising.

While a woman can attain Arhathood, she cannot become a Buddha, given that although a Buddha is also an Arhat, in many respects he transcends what it is to be Arhat, as described in *Dīghanikāya*:

The Blessed one is an Arhat, a fully awakened one, endowed with knowledge and good conduct, happy, a knower of the world, unsurpassed, a leader able to control men, a teacher of men and gods, the awakened, the blessed. He knows thoroughly the worlds of gods, maras, recluses, brahmins and men, and having known them he makes his knowledge known to others. He preaches the dhamma (doctrines), which is excellent in the beginning, middle and end.<sup>173</sup>

Soteriologically, there is no difference between the Buddha and his disciple Arhats. However, the Buddha's status is higher since he is a 'leader able to lead men, a teacher of men and gods' and so on. I believe that is why it is said that a woman cannot become a Buddha, because to do so it is not sufficient to simply be fully awakened only. One also needs to meet the cultural requirements of a leader and a teacher. When the culture itself cannot imagine ancient godly figures such as Brahma and Sakka as women, that a Buddha who is their leader and

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<sup>173</sup> Dutt's translation from the Pali - Suttapiṭaka// Dīghanikāya// Sīlakkhandhavaggaṇṇāpāli// 3.Ambaṭṭhasuttaṃ// 255. Pokkharasātivatthu// "itipi so bhagavā araham sammāsambuddho vijjācaraṇasampanno sugato lokavidū anuttaro purisadammasārathi satthā devamanussānam buddho bhagavā" [bhagavāti (syā. kam.), upariṇādaṇḍasuttādīsupi buddhagūṇakathāyaṃ evameva dissati]. So imaṃ lokam sadevakam samārakam sabrahmakam sassamaṇabrāhmaṇiṃ pajam sadevamanussam sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedeti. So dhammam deseti ādikalyāṇam majjhakalyāṇam pariyoṇakalyāṇam, sāttham sabyañjanam, kevalaparipuṇṇam parisuddham brahmacariyam pakāseti. Sādhū kho pana tathārūpānam arahataṃ dassanam hoti'ti" - <http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/> See, Nalinaksha Dutt, "The Doctrine of Kaya in Hinayana and Mahayana," *The Indian Historical Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1929): 519.

teacher should be female is unthinkable. And while Māra may not be a god, he is notoriously influential owing to his powerful spells.

While these three figures are either celestial or mythical beings, the wheel-turning monarch and the Buddha are human beings. It is believed that as great beings (*mahāpuruṣa*), both the Buddha and the wheel-turning king have the thirty-two physical signs on their body listed in the *Mahapadana Sutta* of *Dīghanikāya*.<sup>174</sup> In this text, the thirty-two marks are listed in the context of a former Buddha named Vipassi, and it is believed that the bodies of all Buddhas will bear these marks.

The descriptions of the marks cover the physical body of a *mahāpuruṣa* from toes and fingers to the crown of the head. Obviously, since the former Buddha Vipassi was a male, one of his physical marks as a great person is related to his genitals. The tenth of thirty-two marks is: “His male organs are enclosed in a sheath.” With the concept of a Buddha’s body possessing those marks of a

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<sup>174</sup> I. He has feet with level tread II. On the soles of his feet are wheels with a thousand spokes III. He has projecting heels IV. He has long fingers and toes V. He has soft and tender hands and feet VI. His hands and feet are net-like (webbed?) VII. He has high-raised ankles VIII. His legs are like an antelopes IX. Standing and without bending, he can touch and rub his knees with either hand. X. His male organs are enclosed in a sheath. XI. His complexion is bright, the color of gold XII. His skin is delicate and so smooth that no dust adheres to it XIII. His body hairs are separate, one to each pore. XIV. They grow upwards, bluish-black like collyrium, growing in rings to the right. XV. His body is divinely straight XVI. He has the seven convex surfaces. XVII. The front part of his body is like a Lion’s. XVIII. There is no hollow between his shoulders. XIX. He is proportioned like a banyan-tree: his height is as the span of his arms. XX. His bust is evenly rounded. XXI. He has a perfect sense of taste. XXII. He has jaws like a lion’s XXIII. He has forty teeth. XXIV. His teeth are even. XXV. There are no spaces between his teeth. XXVI. His canine teeth are very bright. XXVII. His tongue is very long XXVIII. He has a Brahma-like voice, like that of the Karavika-bird. XXIX. His eyes are deep blue. XXX. He has eyelashes like a cow’s. XXXI. The hair between his eyebrows is white, and soft like cotton down. XXXII. His head is like a royal turban. [http://buddhasutra.com/files/mahapadana\\_sutta.htm](http://buddhasutra.com/files/mahapadana_sutta.htm)

Suttapiṭaka//Dīghanikāya//Mahāvaggapāli//1.Mahāpadānasuttam//Dvattiṃsamahāpurisal akkhaṇā <http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/>

great person in a male body, traditionally the possibility of Buddha appearing in a female form is inconceivable.

However, the idea of thirty-two physical marks of a ‘great person’ is not exclusively Buddhist. It is evident from the following narrative in *Majjhimanikāya* that the idea is derived from the Brāhmaṇical culture.<sup>175</sup> There was a Brāhmaṇ named Brāhmayu who had heard about the greatness of the Buddha. Brāhmayu is well versed in Vedas and Brāhmaṇic rites and rituals. Despite having heard much about the Buddha, he was unconvinced of his greatness. One day he sent one of his students to verify the Buddha was a great person and whether he bore all of the thirty-two marks of a great person. This student, Uttara, accordingly went to see the Buddha and followed him for seven months in order to thoroughly examine these physical signs of the Buddha. When convinced that the Buddha indeed possessed all the signs of a great person, he reported this to his master. Brāhmayu replied: “I worship that Blessed One perfect and rightfully enlightened. We will someday meet that good Gotama, and have a conversation with him.”<sup>176</sup>

However, the Buddha had said that importance should not be placed on his physical body but on his teachings/doctrines, known as the Dhamma. The above was said when the Buddha visited one of his ill disciples named Vakkali, who had asked to see him in person. The Buddha asked Vakkali why he wanted

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<sup>175</sup> Suttapiṭaka//Majjhimanikāya//Majjhimaṇṇāsapāli//5.Brāhmaṇavaggo//1.Brahmāyu suttaṃ <http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/>

<sup>176</sup> <http://www.vipassana.info/091-brahmayu-e1.htm>



to see him, stating that whoever sees the Dhamma sees him and whoever sees him sees the Dhamma.<sup>177</sup> According to the Buddha, to see the Dhamma is to realize the nature of interdependence: “whoever sees the nature of interdependent origination sees the Dhamma and whoever sees the Dhamma sees the nature of interdependent origination”.<sup>178</sup>

### c) *Buddhaghōṣa on a Female Bodhisatta in Theravāda*

Regardless of the Buddha’s emphasis on not placing importance on his physical body or appearance, the theory of the thirty-two marks of a ‘great person’ has gained much importance in the descriptions of a Buddha, to the extent that it became embedded into soteriological aspects of the path to Buddhahood. Buddhaghōṣa, commenting on the impossibility of women becoming a Buddha, says in his *Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakatha Pāpāncasudani*, commentary on *Majjhimanikāya*:<sup>179</sup>

Leave aside Buddhahood, which after the perfection of the qualities of omniscience is capable of saving the people, even the mere resolution (for

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<sup>177</sup> Suttapiṭaka//Saṃyuttanikāya//Khandhavaggaṇṇapāli//1. Khandhasaṃyuttaṃ//5. Vakkalisuttaṃ// “Alaṃ , vakkali, kiṃ te iminā pūtikāyena diṭṭhena? Yo kho, vakkali, dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati; yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati. Dhammañhi, vakkali, passanto maṃ passati; maṃ passanto dhammaṃ passati” <http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/>

<sup>178</sup> Suttapiṭaka//Majjhimanikāya//Mūlapaṇṇāsapāli//3. Opammavagga//8. Mahāhatthipadopamasuttaṃ// “yo paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati; yo dhammaṃ passati so paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passatīti” <http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/>

<sup>179</sup> Pāpāncasudani Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakatha// Buddhaghosacariya, 115, Bahudhatukasuttavannana, Buddhaghosacariya, *Pāpāncasudani Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakatha of Buddhaghosacariya*, vol. 4 (London: Pali Text Society, 1977). 122-23.

the attainment of the Buddhahood) cannot be accomplished by a woman.<sup>180</sup>

Buddhaghosa argues that the lack of female Bodhisattvas has precluded a female Buddha. He not only rules out female Buddhas, but also female Bodhisattvas, on the grounds that women cannot even accomplish the resolution to become a Buddha. Buddhaghosa's belief that a woman is incapable of even resolving to become a Buddha is based on his view that the female gender is an 'inferior' birth, as expressed in *Atthasalini*, his commentary on *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*:

Of the two, the masculine sex is superior, the feminine is inferior. Therefore, the former disappears through grossly immoral conduct; the latter may be brought about by weak morality. But in disappearing, the latter does so by weak immorality; the former may be brought about by strong morality. Thus, both disappear through immorality and may be brought about by morality.<sup>181</sup>

Buddhaghosa further argues that a woman cannot fulfill one of the eight conditions to become a Bodhisattva. These conditions are recorded in the *Niādana-kathā* of the *Jātakatthakathā* – Introduction to the Commentary on *Jātaka* (Birth Stories of the Buddha's previous lives). The author of the commentary is thought to be the 5<sup>th</sup> century scholar Buddhaghosa himself.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Arvind Sharma, "Can There Be a Female Buddha in Theravada Buddhism," *Bucknell Review: Women, Literature, Criticism* 24(1978): 76.

<sup>181</sup> Buddhaghosa, *The Expositor 'Atthasalini' Commentary on the Dhammasaṅgaṇī* trans. Pe Maung Tin (London: Pali Text Society, 1976). 421.

<sup>182</sup> See the preface of *The Story of Gotama Buddha, The Nidana-katha of the Jatakattakatha*, trans. N.A. Jayawickrama (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990).

The resolution, which consists of a combination of the eight conditions, birth as a human being, the advantage of sex, the good fortune, the meeting with a Teacher, ordination, endowment of latent capabilities to higher knowledge, the dedication of one's life and resolute will, reaches its fulfillment.<sup>183</sup>

The Jātaka commentary cites the above eight conditions in prose form and does not specify which sex for the second condition, only 'the advantage of sex' (*liṅgasampatti*) as translated by Jayawickrama. It is the commentator who interprets the 'the advantage of sex' as 'male sex':

The resolution of a person for Buddhahood made in a human existence is fulfilled. The resolution of a nāga, a supañña or a deity does not reach fulfillment. As a human being too, the resolution of a person in the male sex alone is fulfilled, but not of a woman, an eunuch or of an hermaphrodite. ...<sup>184</sup>

Based on this commentary to Jātaka, which is most probably in his own words, Buddhaghosa then says in his commentary to *Majjhimanikāya*: "These are the causes for the accomplishment of the resolution. Thus for a woman where could there be a Buddhahood when she is not even capable of making the resolution thereto."<sup>185</sup> This commentator's view is clearly based on androcentric beliefs.

Given the background of the commentator Buddhaghosa, said to be of a Brahmin

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183 Ibid., 18.; Aṭṭhakathā//Khuddakanikāya (aṭṭhakathā)// Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā-1//Ganthārambhakathā//Nidānakathā//1. Dūrenidānakathā//Sumedhakathā// "Yasmā pana buddhattaṃ patthentassa – "Manussattaṃ liṅgasampatti, hetu satthāradassanaṃ; Pabbajjā guṇasampatti, adhikāro ca chandatā; Aṭṭhadhammasamodhānā, abhinīhāro samijjhatī"ti."

<http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/>

184 Ibid.

185 Quoted from Buddhaghosacariya, *Pāpāncasudani Majjhimanikayatthakatha of Buddhaghosacariya*, 4: 122. in Sharma, "Can There Be a Female Buddha in Theravada Buddhism," 76.

family,<sup>186</sup> such a perspective is unsurprising. However, because he was one of the most popular commentators on Pali canonical works, his views may have influenced many other works of the Theravāda tradition.

The prose as well as the commentary on the eight conditions is provided in the context of one of Gotama Buddha's previous lives as an ascetic Sumedha. The first time Gotama Buddha resolved to attain Buddhahood was in his life as Sumedha, who became the first Bodhisattva in the series of Gotama Buddha's numerous past lives as Bodhisattas. Interestingly, according to Derris, the previous life of the ascetic Sumedha was as a princess, a female. She writes that although the story of the possibility of there being a female Bodhisattva is not included among the canonical birth stories of the Buddha Gotama, it exists in the apocryphal birth stories.<sup>187</sup> Sumedha as a princess will be discussed in the following chapter.

*d) Is the Passage on 'The Impossibility of a Female Buddha' Interpolation?*

Although the impossibility of a female Buddha is mentioned in a canonical text, modern scholars doubt it is a genuine view of the Buddha himself, despite being attributed to him. Such a perspective could be that of the people at the time of the Buddha or may have been added later. A comparative study has

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<sup>186</sup> See the section on 'Sexual equality' - Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues*: 370.

<sup>187</sup> Karen Derris, "When the Buddha Was a Woman: Reimagining Tradition in the Theravāda," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2 (2008).

recently been done on the different versions of the text in which the five impossibilities of a woman, including a female Buddha, are mentioned. Some discrepancies have been found regarding the text's impossibilities passage, casting doubt on its veracity. Anālayo compared five parallels to the passage on women's impossibility,<sup>188</sup> finding that the section found in the Chinese version of the same text does not mention women's impossibilities while some other parallels do, but with slight variations.<sup>189</sup>

According to Anālayo, the varying versions drawn from different sources reflect the possibility of gradual expansion, such as varying numbers of the main topics as well as the number of elements within the first topic, among many other minor variations.<sup>190</sup> In addition, significant variations in listing the impossibilities of women have also been discerned.<sup>191</sup> In addition, he has argued that the version lacking the section on women's impossibilities may not be due to loss or deletion, as other discourses in the same text do contain the impossibilities of women.<sup>192</sup> He concludes that

When considered against the background of the purpose of the whole discourse, the theme of what a woman cannot achieve appears to be quite

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<sup>188</sup> The five parallels are: a section with the same name in Madhyama-āgama (Chinese), a discourse translated individually into Chinese, a discourse in Tibetan translation, a full sūtra quotation in the Dharmaskandha of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma in Chinese and a full sūtra quotation in Śamathadeva's commentary on the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya in Tibetan. See, Bhikkhu Analayo, "The Bahudhātuka-sutta and its Parallels On Women's Inabilities," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 16(2009): 138.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 137-90.

<sup>190</sup> See note 44. Ibid., 178.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 161-62.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 164.

irrelevant. ... It would be difficult to conceive of any practical relevance that knowledge of gender restrictions for occupying these positions could have had for Ānanda [the discourse is in the form the Buddha speaking to Ānanda]. ...

The most straightforward conclusion would be that the theme of women's inability is a later addition to the exposition on impossibilities in the different versions of the 'Discourse on Many Elements'. Thus in this respect the Madhyama-āgama version quite probably testifies to an early stage, when the theme of what women cannot achieve had not yet become part of the discourse.<sup>193</sup>

Further, in one of his endnotes, Anālayo quotes Perez-Remon:

These impossibilities and their corresponding possibilities are introduced in between the other impossibilities and possibilities regarding moral matters, interrupting the enumeration of things possible or impossible, a fact that might indicate their later interpolation.<sup>194</sup>

Given these variations discerned in the textual comparative study, speculation that there may have been some interpolation in the text appears justified. While confirmation of this would be difficult, multiple voices regarding the impossibility of a female Buddha are present. However, irrespective of such observations, is still the traditional belief that there would never be a Buddha in a woman's form.

#### *e) Somā's Reply to Māra*

Within a context suggesting the impossibility of a female Buddha, Māra was indeed referring to Buddhahood by 'the place, hard to gain' and Buddha by

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>194</sup> See note 63, *ibid.*, 184.

‘seers’. Somā was neither fearful nor discouraged by Māra, confidently countering him through philosophical arguments:

What (harm) could the woman’s state do to us, when the mind is well concentrated, when knowledge exists for someone rightly having insight into the doctrine? Everywhere enjoyment of pleasure is defeated; the mass of darkness (of ignorance) is torn asunder; thus know, evil one, you are defeated, death.<sup>195</sup>

This was Somā’s powerful reply to Māra, who was voicing the people’s belief that a woman could not attain Buddhahood. As Somā had already attained Arhathood, she says her mind is ‘well concentrated’ and ‘the mass of darkness is torn’. There is no indication in her reply that ‘she has already attained’ what Māra thinks she cannot attain. Somā is asking what harm her being a woman could do when she is well concentrated, enlightened and has all the insight into the doctrine to attain Buddhahood, the ‘place hard to gain’? Indeed, what would gender matter in a spiritual practice?

## Concluding Remarks

Spiritual achievements of many female Arhats from the Therīgāthā demonstrate that women were no less spiritually capable than men. There were women from all walks of life who attained Arhathood, either before or after their ordination. Given that the Theravāda tradition considers Arhathood and Buddhahood to be essentially the same, Mara’s contention that a woman cannot

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<sup>195</sup> *The Elders’ Verses 2 Therīgatha*: 9.

attain the highest spiritual state of Buddhahood may simply reflect social prejudice. Such a view has gradually infused the discourses of the Buddha to the extent that they are virtually inseparable. Women's ability to attain Buddhahood was regarded as impossible, reinforced when a prominent Theravāda commentator ruled out the possibility of female Bodhisattas.

One of the main arguments for claiming the impossibility of a female Buddha concerns the adornment of the Buddha's physical body with thirty-two marks of a great being (*mahapuruṣa*). These were originally based on the male body of a wheel-turning king (*cakravartin*) derived from general Indian belief, which is evident from Brahmin Brahmayu's narrative. These physical marks express glorification of the Buddha as a great being, as the Teacher of all. However, to claim the impossibility of a female Buddha on the grounds that one of the thirty-two marks is lacking may not have been the original purpose of such glorification.



## Chapter Four

### Female Arhats and Bodhisattvas versus

### ‘The Impossibility of a Female Buddha’ in Sarvāstivāda

#### Introduction

Sarvāstivāda is one of the Śrāvakayāna schools with varying views in terms of women and Buddhahood. *Avadānaśataka* is a biographical text of Bodhisattvas, monks, nuns and various other personages from the time of the Gautama Buddha as well as some previous Buddhas. It belongs to the Sarvāstivāda tradition and is available in its Sanskrit original as well as translations in Chinese and Tibetan.<sup>196</sup> *Avadānaśataka* literally means one hundred *avadānas* or biographical narratives. From ten chapters of ten *avadānas* each, the eighth chapter is on the nuns from the Buddha’s time. All ten nuns in this chapter are enlightened Arhats like the nuns in the *Therīgāthā* and *Therī*

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<sup>196</sup> There are two editions of the Sanskrit manuscript: Parasurama Lakshmana Vaidya, *Avadana-Sataka* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1958).; Jacob Samuel Speyer, *Avadanashataka : a Century of Edifying Tales Belonging to the Hinayana* (Delhi: M. Banarsidass, 1992). For digital versions of both editions, go to, [http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1\\_sanskrit/4\\_rellit/buddh/avsata\\_u.htm](http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskrit/4_rellit/buddh/avsata_u.htm) and <http://www.dsbcproject.org/node/7296> The Tibetan translation I used is from the Lhasa edition of Tibetan canon; *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // *gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa* // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75) ff. 306a – 316a, Also, see Skilling, "Esa Agra; Images of Nuns in (Mūla-) Sarvāstivādin Literature," 139.

*Apadāna*. From the ten *avadānas* on nuns, the Somā *avadāna* has a significant element that does not appear in Somā's account in Pāli sources; Somā's *bhikṣuṇī prātimokṣa sūtra* transmission. In addition, Sarvāstivādin sources include narratives of women receiving predictions of their future Buddhahood, whereas this is not considered feasible in Theravādin narratives. However, the Sarvāstivāda, as one of the schools of the Śrāvakayāna tradition, also at times endorses the theory of 'the impossibility of a female Buddha' as the Theravādas did. Yet while one of the Theravādin commentators completely ruled out the possibility of a female Bodhisatta, a Sarvāstivāda commentator believes it would be possible until a certain stage.

Briefly introducing the Arhat nuns from *Avadānaśataka*, I will first discuss the significance of the Somā *avadāna*, in contrast to Māra's characterization of women as possessing only 'two-fingered' intelligence – or inferior intelligence as found in Pali. This will be followed by narratives of women receiving predictions of their future Buddhahood, in contrast to a narrative in Pali where a woman is not able to receive this. In light of this, I will analyze the Sarvāstivādin version of 'the impossibility of a female Buddha' passage and its commentarial position on a female Bodhisattva. I argue that irrespective of whether the narratives are historically accurate, they are significant in understanding the inconsistencies surrounding the theory 'the impossibility of a female Buddha'. While it is not possible to draw a definitive conclusion concerning the sequence in which the views appeared, I believe that

the differing views could in fact be a sign of fluctuations between the authentic doctrine of the Buddha and commentarial interpretations.

## 1. Arhat Nuns in Avadānaśataka

The nuns in the eighth chapter of *Avadānaśataka* are: 1) Suprabhā ('od bzang ma), 2) Supriyā (rab sdug ma), 3) Śuklā (dkar mo), 4) Somā (zla ba), 5) Kuvalayā (utpa la), 6) Sundarī (mdzes ldan ma), 7) Muktā (mu tig), 8) Kacaṅgalā (ka tsang ga la), 9) Kṣemā (bde byed ma) and 10) Virūpā (mi sdug).<sup>197</sup> Of these ten nuns, four are declared as the most outstanding nuns in terms of certain qualities: Supriyā (rab sdug ma) Somā (zla ba), Kacaṅgalā (ka tsang ga la) and Kṣemā (bde byed ma). I will first briefly present the other nuns followed by the four outstanding nuns, focusing in particular on Somā's outstanding quality.

Suprabhā was the daughter of a wealthy merchant in Śrāvastī. She attained stream entry after the very first time of her receiving teachings from the Buddha, sought permission from her parents, and was ordained under Gautamī, soon attaining Arhathood.<sup>198</sup> Śukla was from a wealthy Śākya family. When she was about to be married, she said she was not interested and sought her father's permission to go forth and be ordained. Soon thereafter, she attained

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<sup>197</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75), ff. 291b-292a - "'od bzang ma dang rab sdug ma/\_dkar mo zla ba ut+pa la/\_mdzes ldan ma dang mu tig dang/\_ka tsang ga la bde byed ma/\_mi sdug sde tshan bcad de bstan/\_"; Vaidya, *Avadana-Sataka*: 175. - "suprabhā supriyā caiva śuklā somā tathāparā |kuvalayā sundarī yaiva muktā caiva kacaṅgalā | kṣemā virūpā vargo bhavati samuddhitāḥ ||" [http://gretel.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretel/1\\_sanskrit/4\\_rellit/buddh/avsata\\_u.htm](http://gretel.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretel/1_sanskrit/4_rellit/buddh/avsata_u.htm)

<sup>198</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75), ff. 292a – 296b

Arhathood.<sup>199</sup> Kuvalayā was the daughter of a theatre master from southern India, who was very proud of her attractive appearance. After receiving teachings on the impermanent nature of her looks, she absorbed this fact, went forth to be ordained and soon attained Arhathood.<sup>200</sup>

Sundarī was the daughter of a king in Varanasi. She is also known as Kaśi Sundarī, Kaśi being the other name for Varanasi. As she came of age, although many princes wanted to marry her, she was not interested. She also sought her father's permission and went forth to be ordained, soon after attaining Arhathood.<sup>201</sup> Mukṭā was the daughter of a merchant in Śrāvastī. As with the other women, she was uninterested in marriage. However, when her father was asked by the rich householder Anathpiṇḍa to give his daughter to his son, Mukṭā agreed to a conditional marriage, whereby she and her husband would go forth to be ordained after a certain time. The groom's side agreed and both later became ordained and attained Arhathood.<sup>202</sup>

Virupā is said to be the daughter of Prasenajit, the king of Kosala. Because she was extremely unattractive, no one from the town wanted to marry her. Prasenajit somehow fooled a visiting captain from the south named Ganga and sent Virupā as his bride at night so that Ganga would not see her. Upon seeing Virupā the following day, he was shocked but unable to act owing to fear

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid ff. 301b – 306a

<sup>200</sup> Ibid ff. 310b - 316a

<sup>201</sup> Ibid ff. 316a -320a

<sup>202</sup> Ibid ff. 320 - 323b

of the king, and Ganga locked her up inside all the time. One day Ganga was invited to a party where everybody had to bring their wives or pay a fine for not doing so. To avoid taking Virupā he decided to pay the fine instead. Meanwhile, Virupā felt very dejected and decided to end her life by hanging. However, as the Buddha was in town, he suddenly appeared in front of her and saved her. She received teachings and instantly attained stream entry, offering him meals and robes. Virupā's ugliness subsequently disappeared and she became an extremely beautiful woman.

At the party, guests thought Ganga has chosen to pay a fine rather than bring his wife because she may be highly attractive, hence he did not want others to see her. Those who thought so made Ganga drink heavily, and when he was completely drunk they stole his house key and went to see his wife. As Virupā's ugliness had now disappeared, people were amazed at her beauty, commenting to Ganga that he was indeed lucky to have such a beautiful wife. Ganga thought they were mocking him, having paid the fine and yet still obliged to face the shame. However, when he returned home and saw Virupā indeed transformed, he too was amazed. Virupā explained everything to Ganga and then sought his permission to go forth, became ordained and soon attained Arhathood.<sup>203</sup>

*Avadānaśataka* embeds the biographical narratives of all the above nuns with fable-like beginnings and endings that I have not included here. Moreover, family associations of some of the nuns seem inconsistent historically. However,

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<sup>203</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // *gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa*// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75), ff. 332-337b

in spite of many elements in the narratives that cannot be taken literally, I believe that at base the narratives and the persons involved are historical, as well as their spiritual accomplishments. They are significant in revealing how these women defied the social and cultural expectations surrounding their gender. Such constraints dictated that as soon as they came of age, women were expected to marry and have a family. On the contrary, these women chose not to marry and to instead lead a spiritual life, which they did with a high degree of accomplishment. Many of them became acclaimed nuns with exceptional qualities and were declared the most outstanding of all nuns, as presented below.

## 2. Outstanding Arhat Nuns from Avadānaśataka

### *Supriyā, the most outstanding nun in merit accumulation*

Supriyā was the daughter of the wealthy householder, Anāthapiṇḍa of Śrāvastī, who went forth and was ordained at a young age. Once when the Buddha told her to serve the ordained community for three months, she ardently did so and attained Arhathood during that period. At the end of her service, Supriyā was proclaimed by the Buddha as the most outstanding of the nuns in merit accumulation.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75) f. 299b –“der bcom ldan 'das \_kyis dge slong rnams la bka' stsal pa/\_dge slong dag \_nga'i nyan kyi dge slong ma bsod nams byas pa rnams kyi mchog ni/\_'di lta ste/\_dge slong ma rab sdug ma 'di yin no”

### *Kacaṅgalā, the most outstanding nun in analyzing sūtra*

Kacaṅgalā's story differs significantly from others. She was an old woman named Kacaṅgalā from Kacaṅgalā, the town. Once when the Buddha and his entourage were passing by, Kacaṅgalā was on her way to fetch water and the Buddha told Ānanda to ask Kacaṅgalā for some water. As she offered water to the Buddha, she started calling him her son and hugged him. When the monks attempted to stop this, the Buddha said that Kacaṅgalā had been his mother in his five hundred previous lives. Thereafter, she received teachings, attained stream entry, was ordained and attained Arhathood. She was later declared the foremost of nuns in analyzing the sūtras.<sup>205</sup>

### *Kṣemā, the most outstanding nun in wisdom and eloquence*

Kṣemā is said to be the daughter of Prasenajit, king of Kosala. While her parents wanted her to marry, she was not interested and went to see the Buddha. After receiving the first teachings from the Buddha, she attained the state of non-returner, returning home to display miracles in front of her parents and the men who wanted to marry her. Astonished by this display, her parents and those who sought her for marriage apologized to her. Thereafter, she sought permission from her parents, went forth for ordination, and soon attained Arhathood. The

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid f. 325b- “de nas gang gi tshe bcom ldan 'das kyis dge \_slong ma rnams la mdor lung dpog pa mdzad nas/\_nang du yang dag 'jog las bzhengs pa de'i tshe/\_ka tsang ga las dge slong ma rnams la brda sprod par byed do/\_der bcom \_ldan 'das kyis dge slong rnams la bka' stsal pa/\_dge slong dag/\_nga'i nyan thos kyi dge slong ma mdo sde rnam par 'byed pa rnams kyi mchog ni/\_di lta ste/\_dge slong ma ka tsang \_ga la yin no/”

Buddha proclaimed her as the most outstanding nun in great wisdom and eloquence.<sup>206</sup>

*Somā, the most outstanding nun who has heard much and has the power to retain it*

According to *Avadānaśataka*, Somā was the daughter of a wealthy, learned Brāhmiṇ from Śrāvastī,<sup>207</sup> who was well-versed in Vedas and had many students under him. As Somā grew up, she too became highly educated and intelligent. By merely listening to her father teach his students, Somā could recall everything, and was later able to recite many texts from memory, causing amazement at her exceptional memory. Other Brāhmiṇ scholars would visit and debate with her daily. However, one day when she wondered why nobody showed up, she was told that someone known as the Buddha had come to the city and everybody had gone to see him. Despite having never heard of the Buddha, the first time Somā heard his name, she was overjoyed. She went to see the Buddha and immediately after listening to his teaching, she attained the stage of stream entry. She went forth and was ordained under Gautamī, and soon after her ordination, she attained Arhathood.

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<sup>206</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75) ff. 327a -332b, ff. 330b -331a “*der bcom ldan 'das kyis dge slong rnams la bka' stsal pa/\_dge slong /\_/dag nga'i nyan thos kyi dge slong ma shes rab che ba dang/\_sdobs pa che ba rnams kyi mchog ni/\_di lta ste/\_dge slong ma bde byed ma 'di yin no/'*”

<sup>207</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75) ff. 306a – 310b; Also, see Skilling, “Esa Agra; Images of Nuns in (Mūla-) Sarvāstivādin Literature,” 142-47.



Somā's biography in the *Therīgāthā* commentary differs from *Avadānaśataka*. According to *Therī Apadāna*, as related in the *Therīgāthā* commentary by Dhammapala, Somā was the daughter of a chief minister of king Bimbisara and no mention is made of her exceptional intelligence. Moreover, in both the *Therīgāthā* and *Bhikkhunī Samyutta*, Māra tells Somā that women are of only 'two-fingered' (inferior) intelligence, and therefore cannot attain high spiritual realizations. Somā strongly refutes Māra's denigration of women's intelligence by asking what harm could being a woman do when one's mind is calmed, focused and has an accurate understanding of the doctrine. According to the Pali sources, Somā's refutation of Māra's mocking of the level of women's intelligence ends with this argument.

While the *Avadānaśataka* does not contain Māra's vilification of women's intelligence in the Somā *avadāna*, its portrayal of Somā as of exceptional intellect is in itself a strong argument against that denigration. The level of Somā's intelligence is further demonstrated in the *Avadānaśataka* with a narrative related to the transmission of teachings. The Buddha once said that the monks would recite their *prātimokṣa sūtra* in their monastery and the nuns would do theirs in their nunnery. However, perhaps the nuns' order was in its formative stage, as Gautamī was at a loss when the Buddha said this, for not a single nun could recite the *prātimokṣa sūtra*. This is a text about the codes of monks and nuns and is recited fortnightly. At that time nuns invited a monk to the nunnery to recite this sūtra. When Gautamī requested the Buddha teach the nuns the *prātimokṣa sūtra*, he replied that if they were able to retain the entire sūtra after a

single recitation by him, he would teach it. Somā happened to be present when this interaction between the Buddha and Gautamī took place, and she placed her robe over one shoulder, raised her hands with palms pressed together and said:

I request the Blessed One to expound the *prātimokṣa sūtra*.  
I will remember it after a single recitation.<sup>208</sup>

The Buddha subsequently taught Somā the entire *Bhikṣuṇī prātimokṣa sūtra* in one recitation and thus she is renowned for her power of memory. The Buddha then proclaimed her to be foremost of nuns who have heard much and could retain whatever she heard.<sup>209</sup> This story of Somā's contribution to the nuns' order does not appear in her biography in the *Therīgāthā* or the *Therī Apadāna*.<sup>210</sup> Moreover, while Somā is proclaimed as one of the outstanding nuns in the *Avadānaśataka*, she is not among the thirteen outstanding nuns mentioned in Pali

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<sup>208</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75) ff. 308a- 308b - /de nas gang gi tshe bcom ldan 'das kyis dge slong rnams \_la/\_dge slong dag/\_khyed cag gis zla ba phyed phyed cing so sor thar ba'i mdo bshad pa gdon par gyis shig/\_ces bka' stsal pa dang/\_de'i tshe skye dgu'i bdag mo \_chen mos gsol pa/\_bcom ldan 'das kyis so sor thar pa'i mdo lung dbog tu gsol/\_bde bar gshegs pas so sor thar pa'i mdo lung dbog tu gsol/\_bcom \_ldan 'das kyis bka' stsal pa/\_de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas ni dge slong ma la tshig re re nas chos kyi lung dbog par mi \_mdzad de/\_gal te khyed las lan gcig smras pas 'dzin nus pa 'ga' zhig yod na ni/\_ngas lung dbog go/\_de nas de'i tshe dge slong ma zla ba 'khor de nyid kyi nang du 'dus par \_gyur te 'dug go/\_de nas dge slong ma zla ba stan las langs te/\_bcom ldan 'das ga la ba de logs su thal mo sbyar ba btud nas/\_bcom ldan 'das la 'di skad ces \_gsol to/\_lan gcig bka' stsal pas bdag gis bzung bar 'tshal na/\_bcom ldan 'das kyis so sor thar pa'i mdo lung dbog tu gsol/\_bde bar gshegs pas \_so sor thar ba'i mdo lung dbog tu gsol/

<sup>209</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75) ff. 308b -309a – “de nas bcom ldan 'das kyis rgyas par lung dbog par mdzad nas/\_lan gcig bka' stsal pas dge slong ma zla bas lobs \_so/\_der bcom ldan 'das kyis dge slong rnams la bka' stsal pa/\_nga'i nyan thos kyi dge slong ma mang du thos pa rnams dang/\_thos pa 'dzin pa rnams kyi mchog ni/\_'di lta \_ste/\_dge slong ma zla ba 'di yin no/\_”

<sup>210</sup> Skilling notes that he has not seen this narrative in any other Theravādin literature as well. See Skilling, "Esa Agra; Images of Nuns in (Mūla-) Sarvāstivādin Literature," 147.

sources. In fact, only Kṣema (Khemā there) as an outstanding nun appears in both sources.<sup>211</sup> Thus, Somā testified to the power of feminine intelligence in refutation of Māra's underestimation of the level of women's intelligence.

*Avadānaśataka*'s focus on women does not end with the narratives of the nuns' achievements, especially the intelligence aspect of the nuns. Remarkably, it also tells of a woman receiving the prediction of her future Buddhahood.

### 3. Women Receiving Buddhahood Prediction

#### *Yaśomatī receives her Buddhahood prediction*

Once, at a time when the Buddha was residing in Vaiśālī, one morning on his way to the alms round with his disciples, Simha Senāpati (*dmag spon senge*), an army officer in the town, invited them for lunch at his residence.<sup>212</sup> Yaśomatī, Simha Senāpati's daughter in-law watched the Buddha with great admiration and asked her father in-law if there was an opportunity for her to become like the Buddha. The father in-law thought this girl has great aspirations; if she comes across the causes and conditions for it to happen, she will aspire for Buddhahood. Then the father in-law told Yaśomatī that when she met the necessary causes for

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<sup>211</sup> For the outstanding nuns in Pali sources, see *The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikaya) Vol. I (Ones, twos, threes)*: 22.

<sup>212</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // *gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa* // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75) ff. 8a–12b; Vaidya, *Avadana-Sataka*: 5.

it to happen, she could also become someone like the Buddha, and gave her some gold, silver and precious jewels that she could use for offerings.

The following day, Yaśomatī invited the Buddha and his disciples to her house for lunch, when she made extensive offerings, received teachings from the Buddha and expressed her aspiration to become a Buddha like him for the benefit of all sentient beings.<sup>213</sup> The Buddha, upon hearing her aspiration, evaluated her deeds and accumulation of merit in her previous lives and then smiled at her.

Ānanda asked the Buddha what this smile meant and the Buddha replied:

Ānanda, Yaśomatī – by her root of good deed, aspiration and generosity - will accomplish Buddhahood after three uncountable eons; with great compassion, she will complete the six perfections. She will attain Buddhahood and come to the world as the Buddha Ratnamati with ten powers, four fearlessnesses, three extraordinary mindfulness and great compassion.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75) ff. 9b – “/de nas bu mo grags ldan mas lha \_dang/\_mi dad par byed pa'i cho 'phrul shin tu rmad du byung ba de mthong nas/\_sdong po rtsa ba nas bcad pa bzhin du lus thams cad kyis bcom ldan 'das kyi zhabs la phyag btsal nas \_smon lam btab pa/\_dge ba'i rtsa ba dang/\_sems bskyed pa dang/\_sbyin par bya ba'i chos yongs su gtong ba 'dis/\_bdag 'jig rten long ba 'dren pa med cing yongs su 'dren pa med \_par sems can ma brgal ba rnams sgrol ba dang/\_ma grol ba rnams 'grol ba dang/\_dbugs ma phyin pa rnams dbugs 'byin pa dang/\_yongs su mya ngan las ma 'das pa rnams \_yongs su mya ngan las zlo ba'i sangs rgyas su gyur cig ces byas so/\_”

<sup>214</sup> *Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka* // gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75) ff. 12a – “/\_bcom ldan 'das kyis bka' stsal pa/\_kun dga' bo/\_de ni de bzhin no/\_/de ni de bzhin te/\_kun dga' bo/\_de bzhin gshegs pa \_dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas rnams ni/\_rgyu med rkyen med par 'dzum pa mi mdzad do/\_kun dga' bo/\_bu mo grags ldan ma 'dis nga la 'di lta bu'i \_bkur sti byas pa mthong 'am\_btsun pa/\_mthong lags so/\_kun dga' bo/\_bu mo grags ldan ma 'di dge ba'i rtsa ba dang/\_sems bskyed pa dang/\_sbyin par bya ba'i chos \_yongs su gtong ba 'dis/\_skal ba grangs med pa gsum gyis yang dag par bsgrub par bya ba'i byang chub yang dag par bsgrubs te/\_snying rje chen pos yongs su bsgos pa'i \_pha rol tu phyin pa drug yongs su rdzogs par byas nas stobs bcu dang/\_mi 'jigs pa bzhi dang/\_ma 'dres pa'i dran pa nye bar gzhaq pa gsum dang/\_snying rje chen po dang \_ldan pa'i yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas rin chen ldan zhes bya bar 'gyur te/\_jig rten du 'byung bar 'gyur ro/\_/de'i sbyin par bya ba'i chos ni gang nga la sems \_mngon par dga' bar gyur pa 'di yin no/'”

This narrative is vital in two ways: first, it is a dialogue between a male and female member of a family about attaining Buddhahood in the future. Yaśomatī is not deterred from expressing her aspiration to attain Buddhahood by her father-in-law, and in fact this is not questioned at all. Clearly, it is not regarded as irrelevant or impossible for her as a woman by her father-in-law who in fact admires and encourages her great aspiration. In other words, there is no indication of such an aspiration by a woman being impossible in this interaction. Secondly, Yaśomatī is not only able to express her aspiration in front of the Buddha, but he predicts that she will achieve Buddhahood in the future as Buddha Ratnamati.

Hence, this narrative has a powerful message regarding the aspiration to achieve Buddhahood in the future, where gender is irrelevant to aspiring for Buddhahood. Moreover, it is in sharp contrast to the belief that one has to be male to receive the prediction of future Buddhahood as stated in Pali sources. In the Pali canon, the former birth stories of the present Buddha Gotama point to the beginning of his many Bodhisatta lives as a male ascetic named Sumedha. While the canonical narratives do not mention the previous birth of Sumedha, a narrative found elsewhere reveals that Sumedha was a princess in his previous life. However, despite her aspiration to attain Buddhahood, the princess was not able to receive her Buddhahood prediction because of her gender and thus did not fulfill one of the eight conditions.

*Gotama Buddha not able to receive his Buddhahood prediction as a woman according to a non-canonical Jātaka in Pali*

An essential step after one first resolves to attain Buddhahood is to receive the prophecy of one's future Buddhahood. According to the *Nidāna-kātha of the Jātaka aṭṭhakātha* in Pali, the first time Gotama Buddha resolved to attain Buddhahood was when he was a male ascetic named Sumedha.<sup>215</sup> However, according to Derris, in a non-canonical Jātaka referred by her as the Princess Jātaka found in Pali *sotaṭṭhakhī mahānidāna* compiled by Culabuddhaghosa, Sumedha was a princess in his previous life.<sup>216</sup> According to Princess Jātaka, Gotama as the princess aspired to attain Buddhahood for the first time. Despite her aspiration, the princess was not able to receive the prediction of her future Buddhahood because she was female. The following is the summarized narrative from Derris' article:<sup>217</sup>

During the time of a Buddha named (former) Dīpaṅkara, there was a princess who was his half sister. At the same time there was a monk who had great aspirations to become a Buddha in the future and was in need of oil to make lamp offerings to the then Buddha Dīpaṅkara. The princess offered the needed oil to the monk. With lamp offerings from the oil given by the princess, the monk expressed his aspiration to become Buddha in the future in front of the then

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<sup>215</sup> *The Story of Gotama Buddha, The Nidana-katha of the Jatakattakatha*: 17-21.

<sup>216</sup> Derris, "When the Buddha Was a Woman: Reimagining Tradition in the Theravāda."

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

Buddha. Dīpaṅkara Buddha predicted the monk would become a Buddha in the distant future with same name as his (thus the latter Dīpaṅkara Buddha).

After making his offering and expressing his aspirations, the monk conveyed a message sent from the princess to the Buddha when she offered him the oil:

O Sir, here is the oil, just as you wished. Let you make an offering to my brother. When you finish the offering, tell my brother my words: “O Sir! By this gift of shining white mustard oil, your sister wishes to become a Buddha in the future. She made the aspiration: ‘In the time of becoming a Buddha I am (will be) one [with] a name like the name of the oil shining white mustard [siri siddhatta].’”<sup>218</sup>

However, the former Buddha Dīpaṅkara’s response to his half sister’s aspiration to attain Buddhahood was that he could not predict her future Buddhahood because of her gender. He further said that there are eight conditions to be fulfilled before receiving a future Buddhahood prediction, one of which was to be a male while receiving the prediction.<sup>219</sup> The monk then asked the Buddha when the princess would be able to receive her prediction, if not now. The ‘prediction of a prediction’ followed, wherein the Buddha said she would receive her prediction of Buddhahood at a time when the monk himself had become the latter Buddha Dīpaṅkara and the princess was reborn as a male ascetic Sumedha.

While according to this Jātaka found in Pali, in which the princess was not able to receive the prediction of her future Buddhahood because she was

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid. Also, see *The Story of Gotama Buddha, The Nidana-katha of the Jatakattakatha*: 18.

female, the *Damāmuko sūtra*, which includes same the story of the princess among its many narratives, contains a completely different ending to the story. In the *Damāmuko sūtra* version, the princess is actually able to receive the prediction of her future Buddhahood.

*Gautama Buddha receives his Buddhahood prediction when he was a woman according to the Damāmuko sūtra*

The *Damāmuko sūtra* (*mdo mdzangs blun*) is a collection of fifty-one narratives related to the time of the Buddha Gautama and his former lives. The origin of this sutra is not known but was probably written in Sanskrit or Prakrit, as were most of the sūtras translated into Chinese and Tibetan. While the Tibetan translation of the sūtra is said to be translated from Chinese, the source of the language from which it was translated into Chinese is not known. It is believed that Chinese monks heard the narratives in Khotan.<sup>220</sup> The thirty-seventh narrative in the Tibetan version of the *Damāmuko sūtra*<sup>221</sup> is a narrative entitled ‘The Beggar Woman Named ‘Relying on Joy’’ (*dbul mo bsnyen dga’ mo*).<sup>222</sup> The Beggar woman narrative is not only a story of one woman but is layered upon

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<sup>220</sup> See the foreword of Stanley Frye, *The Sutra of the Wise and Foolish* (*mdo bdzangs blun*) or *the Ocean of Narratives* (*üliger-ün dalai*) (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 1981).

<sup>221</sup> *Damamūko-nāma-sūtra* // *mdzangs blun zhes bya ba'i mdo*// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 347) mdo sde, sa 207b4-476b2 (vol. 74) ff. 426a-430b

<sup>222</sup> I cannot think of a better translation of the title than the one from Frye’s English translation of the sūtra from Mongolian. In the Mongolian version, this narrative is the 38<sup>th</sup>.



two more narratives: one of the previous lives of the beggar woman and the Buddha as a princess.

### *A Beggar woman receives her Buddhahood prediction*

The narrative is from a time when the present Buddha Gautama was residing in Śrāvastī, where a beggar woman named Relying on Joy lived. Seeing the people of the town making extensive offerings to the Buddha, the beggar woman was distraught with her poverty-stricken state as she could not afford this. Lamenting her bad karma for being born poor, she went begging for an entire day but could only obtain one coin, with which she went to buy oil. The shopkeeper asked why she was buying so little oil, and she replied that she wished to offer a lamp to the Buddha but had only one coin. After the shopkeeper kindly gave her more oil than she could afford, she went to see the Buddha, offered lamps, and made the following aspiration:

Because I am poor at present, I am able to offer only this small lamp. However, through the merit of this offering, may I in the future be endowed with the lamp of wisdom and dispel the darkness of all sentient beings.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> *Damamūko-nāma-sūtra* // *mdzangs blun zhes bya ba'i mdo*// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 347) mdo sde, sa 207b4-476b2 (vol. 74) ff. 426a-430b, ff. 426b – 427a “/bsnyen dga' mos mar de thob nas rab tu dga' ste gtsug lag khang du song nas bcom ldan 'das la \_dbul lo/\_zhes sangs rgyas kyi spyen sngar mar me btsugs te smon lam 'di skad ces btab bo/\_bdag da ltar dbul phongs te mar me chung du 'dis sangs rgyas la mchod do/\_bsod nams 'dis ma 'ongs pa'i dus na bdag shes rab kyi mar me dang ldan te/\_sems can thams cad kyi mun pa'i dri ma bsal bar shog cig ces smon lam btab nas phyir \_/\_gnas su song ngo/”

That night, after all other lamps were exhausted, the beggar woman's remained lit, even the following morning. Mogalyāna, a monk disciple, saw the burning lamp and thinking it unnecessary in the daytime, he tried unsuccessfully to blow it out. The Buddha told the monk that no matter how hard he tried, the lamp could not be extinguished, as it had been offered with great aspirations for the benefit of all. When the beggar woman heard this, she came to him and prostrated. The Buddha then told her that after two incalculable eons, she would become a Buddha named 'Light of the Lamp' with ten powers.<sup>224</sup> Delighted to know that she would attain Buddhahood in the future, Relying on Joy went forth and was ordained.

### *The beggar woman in the past*

Hearing of the beggar woman's prediction of her future Buddhahood, Mogalyāna and Ānanda asked the Buddha why if she was so poor in that life, she was able to meet the Buddha and receive her Buddhahood prediction. These questions unfold in the second narrative within the story of the beggar woman. In reply to such questions, the Buddha states that many lifetimes before, the beggar woman was born as the wife of a wealthy householder at the time of the Buddha Kaśyapa. In this life, one day she invited the Buddha to her house for lunch.

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<sup>224</sup> *Damamūko-nāma-sūtra* // *mdzangs blun zhes bya ba'i mdo*// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 347) mdo sde, sa 207b4-476b2 (vol. 74) ff. 426a-430b, ff. 427a – 427b “|bcom ldan 'das kyis de skad ces gsungs nas bsnyen dga' mo yang bcom ldan 'das kyi spyen sngar 'ongs te zhabs la spyi bos phyag 'tshal ba dang/\_de'i tshe bcom \_ldan 'das kyis lung bstan te/\_khyod ma 'ongs pa'i dus na bskal pa grangs med pa gnyis 'das nas mngon par sangs rgyas te mtshan yang mar me 'od ces bya ste/\_dbang bcu dang \_ldan par 'gyur ro/”

However, prior to the wealthy wife's invitation, a beggar woman had also invited the Buddha to her home and thus he went. The householder's wife was upset, asking why the Buddha went to a poor beggar's house rather than coming to hers. However, the beggar woman was actually a highly realized person who had already attained the state of non-returner. Consequently, because the householder's wife criticized a highly realized being, she was reborn as a beggar woman for five hundred subsequent lives. Yet because she invited the Buddha to her house the following day and offered meals, she was able to meet him, make offerings and receive her Buddhahood prediction in that life.

### *When Gautama Buddha was a woman*

The last narrative that unfolds is the story that is parallel to that of the Princess Jātaka in Pali, mentioned by Derris. However, in this version the outcome of the Princess' offering contrasts sharply with that of the Pali version.

After hearing the story of the beggar woman Relying on Joy's previous lives and the prediction of her future Buddhahood, the entire town rejoiced in great admiration for her. The fact that a beggar woman with one lamp offering received her future Buddhahood prophecy prompted a range of townspeople to make great offerings of all kinds and lamp offerings for seven days; the town was brightly lit by the lamps for seven days. Seeing such a quantity of lamp offerings, Ānanda asked the Buddha why he had received so many. In response, the Buddha narrates a story of his past life, wherein a long time ago there was a king

named Kasiki who had a son born to one of his wives and who was later ordained and attained Buddhahood.

At one time the king invited the Buddha and his disciples and made extensive offerings for three months. Among the disciples was a monk named Ārya Bandhu who pledged to offer lamps for three months and went daily into the town to beg for oil. At the same time, the king had a daughter named Princess Muni, who noticed the monk begging every day and sent a messenger to ask why he was doing so. When the princess heard what the monk needed, she pledged to provide all the required oil. From that day on, the princess gave oil to the monk for the lamps he had pledged for three months. After three months of such offerings, the Buddha predicted that after many incalculable eons the monk would become a Buddha named Dipaṁkāra. The princess heard the monk had received his Buddhahood prediction, and having provided the oil for lamp offerings, she wondered about her own prediction. Consequently, she went to see the Buddha, at which time he predicted her future Buddhahood in the following words:

After ninety-one incalculable eons have passed, you the girl Muni will attain Buddhahood and become the Buddha named Śākyamuni.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> *Damamūko-nāma-sūtra* // *mdzangs blun zhes bya ba'i mdo*// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 347) mdo sde, sa 207b4-476b2 (vol. 74) ff. 426a-430b, ff. 429b – 430b “/rgyal po'i bu mo thub pas/\_dge slong 'phags pa'i gnyen lung bstan to/\_zhes \_/\_thos nas 'di snyam du bsams so/\_sang rgyas la phul ba'i mar me ni/\_bdag gis sbyar te/\_dge slong des bskul ma tsam byas kyang lung bstan \_na/\_bdag la ni lung ma bstan to snyam du bsams nas bcom ldan 'das gang na ba der song ste/\_de bzhin du drang por gsol nas bcom ldan 'das kyis lung bstan \_te/\_bu mo thub pa khyod ma 'ongs pa'i dus na bskal pa grangs med pa dgu bcu rtsa gcig 'das nas mngon par 'tshang rgya ste/\_mtshan yang shAkya thub pa zhes bya bar mtshan \_sum cu dang ldan par lung bstan to/\_de ltar rgyal po'i bu mos kyang sangs rgyas las lung bstan pa thob pas rab tu dga' ba skyes par gyur

After the prediction, the princess paid homage to the Buddha and went forth to be ordained, and the Buddha then said to Ānanda:

Ānanda, during that time, the monk Ārya Bandhu was the previous Buddha Dipaṁkara and I was Princess Muni. Because of my offering lamps in that life, I was constantly reborn with good lives as gods and humans. Even now, I have received these great offerings of lamps because of the one lamp offering I made as the Princess Muni in that life.<sup>226</sup>

The narratives of Yaśomatī, Princess Jātaka from Pali, the beggar woman and Princess Muni all involve women aspiring to Buddhahood and seeking a prediction of their attainment of Buddhahood in the future. In the Pali Princess Jātaka, on the basis of the requirement to fulfill eight conditions prior to receiving such a prediction, one of which is to be male, Gotama Buddha as a princess was not able to receive her prediction in that life. Although it was as the princess that he aspired for Buddhahood for the first time, it was only after the princess was reborn as male that he received his prediction of Buddhahood.

By contrast, according to the *Damāmuko sūtra*, Gautama Buddha as the princess received her future Buddhahood prediction in that very life. Moreover,

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*te sangs rgyas kyi zhabs \_la spyi bos phyag 'tshal nas rab tu 'byung bar gsol to/\_bcom ldan 'das kyis kyang rab tu 'byung bar gngang nas bar chad med par brtson 'grus rtsom mo/*"

<sup>226</sup> *Damamūko-nāma-sūtra* // mdzangs blun zhes bya ba'i mdo// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 347) mdo sde, sa 207b4-476b2 (vol. 74) ff. 426a-430b, ff. 430a – 430b “ \_/bcom \_ldan 'das kyis kun dga' bo la bka' stsal pa/\_de'i tshes de'i dus na dge slong 'phags pa'i gnyen ni/\_sngon 'das pa'i sangs rgyas mar me mdzad yin no/\_rgyal po'i bu mo thub pa ni/\_da \_ltar nga yin te/\_sngon mar me phul bar bskal pa grangs med pa'i bar du lha dang mi'i 'jig rten na bsod nams myong ste/\_gzugs kyang gzhan pas 'phags par bzang \_ste/\_da mngon par sangs rgyas nas kyang mar me mang po dang ldan par gyur to/\_ ”

even during the time of the present Buddha Gautama himself, the beggar woman is also predicted by the Buddha to attain Buddhahood in the future. Similarly, in the *Avadānaśataka* when the present Buddha Gautama was residing in Vaiśālī, Yaśomatī received her future Buddhahood prediction. Neither the *Damāmuko sūtra* nor *Avadānaśataka* mention a requirement to be male or any other conditions prior to receiving the Buddhahood prediction as required in Pali sources. These variations are indeed intriguing, with powerful messages concerning the belief that a woman can or cannot attain Buddhahood. However, while the narratives found in biographical texts such as the *Avadānaśataka* and *Damāmuko sūtra* of the Sarvastivādin origin do not specify gender in the attainment of Buddhahood, the theory of ‘the impossibility of a female Buddha’ that appears in Theravādin Pali canonical and commentarial texts is found in Sarvastivādin canonical and commentarial works as well.

#### 4. Women and Buddhahood in Sarvāstivādin Canonical Texts

The Sarvastivādin parallel of the Theravādin *Majjhima-nikāya Bahudhatukasutta*, which mentions the impossibility of a female Buddha along with four other impossibilities, is *Dhātubahuka-sūtra* (*khamṣ mang po pa'i mdo*).<sup>227</sup> Although its original Sanskrit or Prakrit is not extant, it appears in

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<sup>227</sup> *Dhātubahuka-sūtra* // *khamṣ mang po pa'i mdo*// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 300) mdo sde, ra 551b6-559a1 (vol. 71)

Tibetan translation and in other Sarvāstivādin texts on Abhidharma in both Chinese and Tibetan translations.<sup>228</sup> The passage on the impossibilities of women mentioned in this sūtra approximates the one in Pali discussed in the previous chapter. As Analayo has mentioned in his comparative study of the parallels of this discourse, this Sarvāstivādin discourse and other parallels include Pratyekabuddha as well as the impossibilities of women category.<sup>229</sup> The following is a translation of the passage on the impossibilities of women from the *Sarvāstivādin Dhatubahuka-sutra* in Tibetan:

There will never be a situation where two completely perfected Buddhas appear in the world at the same time but there will be a situation of one completely perfected Buddha appearing at a time. There will never be a situation where two wheel-turning kings appear in the world at the same time, but there will be a situation when one appears at a time. There will never be a situation where a woman is a wheel-turning king, Indra, Brahma, Māra, Pratyekabuddha and the unsurpassable completely perfected Buddha. But there will be a situation of attaining these positions for a man.<sup>230</sup>

In addition to including Pratyekabuddha among the impossibilities that the Pali version of the text does not, the sequence of what women cannot be differs from

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<sup>228</sup> For details on other parallels and variations, see Analayo, "The Bahudhātuka-sutta and its Parallels On Women's Inabilities."

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>230</sup> *Dhātubahuka-sūtra* // *khamṣ mang po pa'i mdo*// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 300) mdo sde, ra 551b6-559a1 (vol. 71), f. 557a – “/gnas ma yin zhing go skabs med pa ni/\_yang dag par \_rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas gnyis 'jig rten du gang snga phyi med par 'byung ba 'di ni/\_gnas ma yin te/\_gang gcig 'byung ba 'di ni/\_gnas yin no/\_gnas ma yin zhing go skabs med pa \_ni/\_khor los bsgyur ba gnyis 'jig rten du gang snga phyi med par 'byung ba 'di ni/\_gnas ma yin te/\_gang gcig 'byung ba 'di ni/\_gnas yin no/\_gnas ma yin zhing go skabs med pa ni/\_gang bud med 'khor los bsgyur ba'i rgyal srid dang/\_brgya byin nyid dang/\_tshangs pa nyid dang/\_bdud nyid byed bar 'gyur ba dang/\_rang byang chub mngon du byed par 'gyur ba dang/\_bla na med pa \_yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub mngon par rdzogs par 'tshang rgya bar 'gyur ba 'di ni/\_gnas ma yin no/\_di ni/\_gnas yin te/\_skyes pa gang yin pa'o/\_”

that in the Pali version. The Pali version first mentions the impossibility of a female Buddha followed by the other four. In the *Sarvāstivādin Dhatubhūka-sūtra* version, the others are listed first and the Buddha last. While this difference in sequence may be of little significance, it does make a difference to the tone. The sequence in Pali sounds as if women cannot become a Buddha, thus they cannot become one of the other four figures of power. The sequence in the above *Sarvāstivādin sūtra*'s language tone sounds like 'Just as women cannot be one of the four powerful figures, they cannot become a Pratyekabuddha and a completely perfected Buddha either'. The latter more clearly indicates that the impossibility of a female Buddha theory is based on attaining a position of power and leadership rather than owing to soteriological reasons.

Apart from canonical texts and Jātaka narratives on the theory of women and Buddhahood, commentarial works have always played a major role. Buddhaghosa, a 5<sup>th</sup> century Brahmin background commentator in the Theravāda tradition, held a strongly androcentric view regarding Buddhahood. His view of the impossibility of a female Bodhisattva is found not only in his commentaries but throughout Jātaka narratives. A parallel exists between Buddhaghosa of the Theravāda and Vasubandhu of the Sarvāstivāda tradition. Vasubandhu was also from a Brahmin background, also around the same time as Buddhaghosa – (C.E 5.AD). However, unlike Buddhaghosa, Vasubandhu was initially a Sarvastivādin but later a Mahāyānist. As a Sarvāstivādin commentator, he touches on the subject of a female Bodhisattva in his *Abhidharmakośa* and its auto- commentary *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*.



## 5. Vasubandhu on a Female Bodhisattva

*Abhidharmakośa* is the condensed form of a much larger text named *Vibhāsa*, which is currently extant in Chinese translation only. According to the *Abhidharmakośa*, Sarvāstivādins believed in three diverse spiritual goals: Arhathood, Pratyekabuddha and Buddhahood. Similarly, they also believed that Buddhahood is only achieved by a very few spiritual aspirants. The Buddha is seen as the great Teacher of both gods and men: his body adorned with the thirty-two marks of a great being (*mahāpuruṣa*). Consequently, a Buddha will appear as male only. However, while the Pali commentarial sources belonging to the Theravāda tradition state that a woman cannot even make an aspiration to attain Buddhahood, the Sarvāstivāda tradition suggests the possibility of a female Bodhisattva to a certain point.

In *Abhidharmakośa*, the course of a Bodhisattva path is implicitly divided into two phases: Bodhisattva and ‘Predestined’ (*nges par rtogs pa, niyatipatita*) Bodhisattva.<sup>231</sup> The following is said in terms of the ‘Predestined’ Bodhisattva:

From when is one a Bodhisattva? From the time of acquiring the noble marks of a Buddha, one will always be born in the higher realms, high castes, as *males*, possess intact faculties, and will recall all successive lifetimes.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> La Vallée Poussin Louis de Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, trans. Leo M Pruden, vol. 2 (Berkeley, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1988). 690,753.

<sup>232</sup> Vasubandhu // *Abhidharmakośakārikā* // *chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi tshig le'ur byas pa*// Derge (sde dge): (D 4089) mngon pa, ku 1b1-25a7, f. 15a – “/gang nas byang chub sems dpa' yin/\_/gang nas mtshan gyi las byed pa/\_/bde 'gro rigs mthor skye dbang tshang/\_/phor 'gyur tshe rabs dran mi ldog/”

While the passage states when is one a Bodhisattva without specifying of which phase, it becomes clear from its auto-commentary that this refers to a Bodhisattva who is predestined to attain Buddhahood; in other words from the time of acquiring the noble marks of the Buddha, in the course of one hundred supplementary eons:

In Jambudvīpa, being a male, in the presence of the Buddha, thinking of the Buddhas, having their origin in reflection, in the course of one hundred supplementary cosmic ages.<sup>233</sup>

One is a predestined Bodhisattva only when initially acquiring the noble marks of a Buddha. The conditions and the time of acquiring the marks are: the predestined Bodhisattva will perform the actions that culminate in the acquisition of the noble marks only in Jambudvīpa (this world of ours), and being a male in the presence of a Buddha over the course of one hundred eons, supplementary to the main three uncountable (*grangs med*, *asaṃkhyeya*) eons. Over the course of those three uncountable eons the Buddhahood aspirant is also a Bodhisattva but not a predestined one, since it is not yet fully determined whether she/he will be able to attain Buddhahood. Only when the Bodhisattva completes the three uncountable eons and reaches the beginning of the one hundred supplementary ones are they determined to attain Buddhahood. From then on, such a Bodhisattva is always born as a male and starts acquiring the thirty-two noble marks of a Buddha.<sup>234</sup> Although not a predestined Bodhisattva, one is still a

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<sup>233</sup> Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, 2: 691.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

Bodhisattva over the course of the uncountable eons, as evidenced by the following passage:

How many Buddhas did the Blessed One venerate when he was a *Bodhisattva*? In the course of first [uncountable] *asamkhyeya kalpa*, he venerated seventy-five Buddhas; seventy-six thousand in the course of the second; and seventy-seven thousand in the course of the third.<sup>235</sup>

Thus, according to the Sarvāstivādin view presented in the *Abhidharmakośa* and its auto-commentary, one can aspire for Buddhahood as a woman or man and be reborn as either a male or female Bodhisattva over the course of three uncountable eons. Only after the completion of this course will there be no more female Bodhisattvas. The reason for averting female birth here is because this is the point of acquiring the thirty-two marks of great beings of which one is to be a male. Moreover, according to Analayo's comparative study of the parallels of the Pali text in which the impossibility passage appears, the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel of the Pali *Bahudhātuka-sutta* found in Chinese translation in which the

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<sup>235</sup> Vasubandhu // *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* // *chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi bshad pa*// Derge (sde dge): (D 4090) mngon pa, ku 26a1-258a7; khu 1b1-95a7, ff. 220a – 220b “yang bcom ldan 'das byang chub sems dpar gyur pa na sangs rgyas ji snyed cig la bsnyen bkur byas she na/\_bskal pa grangs med pa dang po la ni sangs rgyas bdun khri lnga stong la bsnyen bkur byas so/\_gnyis pa la ni bdun khri drug stong la bsnyen bkur byas so/\_gsum pa la ni bdun khri bdun stong la bsnyen bkur byas so/\_bskal pa grangs \_med pa gang gi tha mar sangs rgyas gang zhig byung bar gyur zhe na/\_bzlog pa'i go rims kyis go rims bzhin du/\_rnam gzigs mar me rin chen gtsug/\_grangs med gsum gyi tha mar byung/\_yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas rin chen gtsug tor can gyi tshe ni bskal pa grangs med \_pa dang po rdzogs so/\_bcom ldan 'das mar me mdzad kyi tshe ni gnyis pa rdzogs so/\_de bzhin gshegs pa rnam par gzigs kyi tshe ni gsum pa rdzogs so/\_de dag thams cad kyi dang po shAkya thub pa yin/\_sngon shAkya thub pa zhes bya ba yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas gang la bcom \_ldan 'das byang chub sems dpar gyur pa'i tshe bdag kyang 'di 'dra ba'i rnam pa kho nar sangs rgyas par shog shig ces dang por smon lam btab pa byung ste/\_de yang 'di bzhin du rtsod pa'i dus kho na la byung la/\_de'i bstan pa yang la stong gi mtha'i bar du gnas par gyur to//”; *ibid.*, 692. Also, see note 483 on pp. 753-754

impossibility of women's passage does not appear is believed to be of the Sarvāstivāda tradition.<sup>236</sup>

## **Concluding Remarks**

Apparently, what emerges from these variations between the Theravādin and Sarvastivādin canonical texts is that the theory of the impossibility of a female Buddha has been a subject of different interpretations. For instance, while the Theravādin texts treated the subject consistently in demonstrating the impossibility of a female Buddha in their canonical, commentarial and Jātaka tales, the Sarvāstivādins did not strictly follow this. Although some of the Sarvāstivādin canonical and commentarial texts included the impossibility of a female Buddha concept, some did not. Moreover, Sarvāstivādin Jātaka narratives concerning female Buddhahood do not even hint at the relevance of gender in attaining Buddhahood.

In the end, the issue comes down to the status of a Buddha as a great being, for such a Buddha will appear as the Teacher of both gods and men. According to Indian cultural belief, the sign of a great being is to possess the thirty-two marks. I believe that in order to accommodate this cultural belief, the theory of the impossibility of a female Buddha evolved textually, orally and in the narratives. Since such a theory was not conceived on doctrinal and soteriological-based grounds, each tradition and their commentators interpreted it

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<sup>236</sup> Analayo, "The Bahudhātuka-sutta and its Parallels On Women's Inabilities," 138.

in their own ways, some being strictly androcentric, as were the Theravādins, while others such as the Sarvāstivādins were somewhat liberal.

## **PART III**

### **Female Buddha in Mahāyāna**

## Chapter Five

### Transcending Gender

#### Introduction

After covering Sarvāstivādin's mixed views regarding women and Buddhahood, I now approach the issue within the sphere of the other major Buddhist tradition known as Mahāyāna, a tradition comprised of Sūtrayāna and Tantrayāna.<sup>237</sup> Sūtrayāna is based on the teachings of the Buddha known as sūtras while Tantrayāna is based on Tantra teachings. While Sūtra teachings are non-esoteric, the Tantras are esoteric Buddhist teachings only recommended for advanced Buddhist practitioners. Sūtrayāna's focus is mainly on the causes of attaining Buddhahood by engaging in the Bodhisattva practice of the six perfections. By contrast, Tantrayāna emphasizes the resultant Buddhahood by mainly practicing generation of oneself in the form of a Buddha, among many other practices. While, the results of these two branches of Mahāyāna do not differ, it is the method of achieving Buddhahood that distinguishes them.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Vajrayāna is another term for Tantrayāna, for an explanation of different usages of terms with yāna suffixes, see D. Wangchuk, *The Resolve to Become a Buddha: a Study of the Bodhicitta Concept in IndoTibetan Buddhism* (International Institute for Buddhist Studies of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies, 2007). 109.

<sup>238</sup> Tripiṭakamāla // *Nayatrāyapradīpa* // *tshul gsum gyi sgron ma*// Derge (sde dge): (D 3707) rgyud, tsu 6b4-26b1, f. 16b2 – “gsang sngags kyi theg pa chen po ni bdag nyid che ba nyid de'i rigs can gyis blo phyin ci ma log pa'i sems dang ldan pa la, bcom ldan 'das kyis khyad

However, the Tantrayāna means of achieving Buddhahood, if followed correctly, is said to be quicker than the Sūtrayāna method.<sup>239</sup>

In terms of the attainment of Buddhahood within the domain of the Tantric Mahāyāna Buddhism, being more results oriented, the means for the realization of Buddhahood are not exclusively androcentric, and the aspirant's gender is irrelevant. However, in the traditional Buddhist communities, a general assumption pervades that the theory 'the impossibility of a female Buddha' found in Śrāvakayāna also applies to the Sūtrayāna Mahāyāna. This is based on the assumption that despite doctrinal variations, etymologically, both Sūtrayāna Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna fall under the Sūtrayāna (the spiritual vehicle following the sūtra teachings of the Buddha), in contrast to Tantrayāna.

Nevertheless, I argue that not all Sūtrayāna Mahāyāna commentators share this view. Just as they frequently differ on doctrinal aspects, the role of gender in the attainment of Buddhahood is also subject to debate. In this chapter and the next, the views surrounding the attainment of Buddhahood in a female body within the domain of the Sūtrayāna branch of Mahāyāna will be analyzed. Throughout this chapter, I use the term Mahāyāna with reference to the

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*par gyi rgyu nyid du ston par mdzad de, de yang pha rol tu phyin pa'i theg pa chen po dang don gcig pa las de'i khyad par gang dag yod pa de brjod par bya'o, , don gcig nyid na'ang ma rmongs dang, ,thabs mang dka' ba med phyir dang, ,dbang po rnon po'i dbang byas bas, ,sngags kyi bstan bcos khyad par 'phags, ,di ltar gnyis su med pa'i rnam pa thams cad mkhyen par bshad pa'i 'bras bu ni sngags dang pha rol tu phyin pa'i theg pa chen po gnyis la khyad par med pa yin mod kyi 'on kyang rab tu dbye ba rnam pa bzhi po de dag gis pha rol tu phyin pa'i theg pa chen po las sngags kyi theg pa chen po khyad par du 'phags pa nyid yin no"*

239 The most rapid being within one lifetime and in one body; for example, as with Milarepa and Indrabodhi.



Sūtrayāna branch of Mahāyāna and not with reference to both Sūtrayāna and Tantrayāna. I subsume the various views regarding the attainment of Buddhahood in a female body found in Sūtrayāna-Mahāyāna into two major views: 1) transcending gender, wherein the Mahāyāna hold gender to be irrelevant in any aspect of Buddhahood, and 2) limited transcendence of gender, for those Mahāyāna who assert the relevance of gender in one aspect of Buddhahood. While the former is based on Nāgārjuna's interpretation of a Buddha's body into two forms, the latter rests on Asaṅga's perception a Buddha's body as having three forms.

My argument to distinguish Mahāyāna's position on gender and Buddhahood into two different views is based on narratives found in Mahāyāna sūtras and also on their doctrinal differences. In this chapter, within the philosophical framework of the first view – Transcending Gender, I examine narratives centered on the possibility and impossibility of a female Buddha. I argue that these are strong counters to the Śrāvakayāna view of 'the impossibility of a female Buddha'. Transcendence of gender in the realization of Buddhahood demonstrated in the narratives will be extended to the context of doctrinal interpretations of the Bodhisattva stages and a Buddha's body.

## **1. Variegated Jewel, the Nāga Girl**

A Mahāyāna sūtra entitled the 'Questions of Sāgāra, the Nāga king' (*klu yi rgyal po rgya mtshos zhus pa, sāgaranāgarājaparipṛccha*) contains an

interactive narrative on gender and Buddhahood.<sup>240</sup> Nāga is an Indian word for semi-human, semi-serpent beings. The female protagonist in the following debate on gender relevance in terms of Buddhahood is Variegated Jewel (*rin chen sna tshogs can*, *viśva-ratna*), the daughter of the Nāga king Sāgāra, occurring in the lifetime of the Buddha.

One day Variegated Jewel along with thousands of other Nāga girls came to see the Buddha carrying pearl garlands, which, after circumambulating the Buddha and paying respects, they offered to him. Variegated Jewel then tells the Buddha that they all aspire to achieve the supreme enlightenment of Buddhahood in the future and to teach the Dharma to all sentient beings as does the Buddha.<sup>241</sup>

However, just after the Nāga girl's expression of her aspiration to attain Buddhahood, Mahākaśyapa, a senior monk disciple of the Buddha, interrupts her saying: "Buddhahood cannot be attained by a female body; it is very difficult to

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<sup>240</sup> *Ārya-sāgara-nāgarāja-paripṛcchā-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa klu'i rgyal po rgya mtshos zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Derge (sde dge): (D 153) mdo sde, pha 116a1-198a3 (vol. 58) (related part from f. 174b) For more discussions on this text, see Paul and Wilson, *Women in Buddhism : Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition*: 232-43.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid f. 174b – “*de nas klu'i rgyal po rgya mtsho'i bu mo lha ma yin gyi dbang pot hags zangs ris kyi tsha mo rin chen sna tshogs can zhes bya ba des, klu'i bu mo khri dang lhan cig tu lag pa gyas pas mu tig gi phreng ba blangs nas bcom ldan 'das la mig mi 'dzums par blta ste, phyag 'tshal zhing 'dug par gyur to, de nas bu mo rin chen sna tshogs can dang klu'i bu mo khri po de dag gis bcom ldan kyi sku la mu tig gi phreng ba de dag gsol nas tsig 'di skad ces gsol to, bcom ldan 'das bdag cag rnam lhan cig tu 'thun zhing yang dag par dga' bzhin du bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub tu sems bskyed do, bdag cag kyang ma 'ongs pa'i dus na de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas su gyur cig, da dar gyi de bzhin gshegs pa ji lta ba bzhin du 'di 'dra bar chos kyang ston par gyur cig dge 'dun yang srung bar gyur cig*”

be achieved.”<sup>242</sup> Variegated Jewel was not to be easily discouraged and she issues a long philosophic reply:

It may be that a female body cannot attain Buddhhood but for those with a pure and strong intention, it is not difficult. Attainment of Buddhahood depends on the aspiration to achieve it and when such a pure aspiration is generated, all the qualities of a Buddha are attained. The Buddhahood you said a female body cannot attain cannot be attained by a male body either. Because the Buddha has said that the eyes are neither male nor female, so is the same with ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, for they are empty and whatever is empty does not possess the signs of female or male. Realizing the emptiness of all phenomena is indeed the supreme enlightenment, and such a realization has the attributes neither of female nor of male. Therefore, Venerable Mahākaśyapa! Whatever is the nature of the supreme enlightenment that is my nature too.<sup>243</sup>

The Nāga girl and Mahākaśyapa subsequently had a long discussion in this manner on various ontological matters. Amazed by her intelligence,

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid f. 174b – “*de nas thse dang ldan pa ‘od srung chen pos klu’I bu mo la ‘di skad ces smras so, bu mo bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa’i byang chub ni bud med kyi lus kyis mngon par rdzogs par ‘tsang rgya bar mi nus te ‘grub par dk’a ‘o*”

<sup>243</sup> Ibid f. 174b – 175a – “*de nas bu mo rin chen sna tshogs can gyis tshe dang ldan pa ‘od srung chen po la ‘di skad ces smras so, btsun pa ‘od srung chen po bud med kyi lus kyis kyang bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa’i byang chub mngon par rdzogs par ‘tshang rgya bar mi ‘gyur la lhag pa’I bsam pa bsam pa la bzugs pa la yang, byang chub ‘grub dka’ ba ma mchis so, byang chub sems dpa’i byang chub ni sems bskyed pa la rags las te, byang chub sems bskyed ma thag tu sangs rgyas kyi chos thams cad bzung bar ‘gyur ro, btsun pas gang ‘di skad du bud med kyi lus kyis bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa’i byang chub mngon par rdzogs par ‘tshang rgya bar mi nus so, zhes gsungs pa de ni skyes pa’i lus kyis kyang mngon par rdzogs par ‘tshang rgya bar mi nus so, de ci’i slad du zhe na, de bzhin gshegs pas ‘di skad du mig ni skyes pa yang ma yin, bud med kyang ma yin no, de bzhin du rna ba dang, sna dang, lce dang, lus dang, yid ni bud med kyang ma yin, skyes pa yang ma yin no zhes gsungs pa’I phyir ro, btsun pa ‘od srung chen po de ci’I slad du zhe na, mig ni stong pa ste, stong pa gang lags pa de la ni bud med kyang ma mchis, skyes pa yang ma mchis pa’I slad du’o, btsun pa ‘od srung chen po de bzhin du rna ba dang, sna dang, lce dang, lus dang, yid ni stong pa ste stong pa gang lags pa de la ni bud med kyang ma mchis skyes pa yang ma mchis pa’I slad du’o, btsun pa de la mig khong du chud pa gang lags pa de ni byang chub lags so, rna ba dang, sna dang, lce dang, lus dang, yid khong du chud pa gang lags pa de ni byang chub lags so, byang chub gang lags pa de la ni bud med kyi chos rnams sam, skyes pa’i chos rnams ma mchis so, btsun pa ‘od srung chen po de lta bas nab yang chub kyi ngo bo nyid gang lags pa de ni bdag gi ngo bo nyid kyang de lags so”*

Mahākaśyapa eventually gave up challenging her and admitted: “if such was her understanding of the Buddha’s teachings, she will attain Buddhahood before not too long.”<sup>244</sup> All these discussions between the Nāga girl and Mahākaśyapa took place in front of the Buddha, who praised the Nāga girl’s great understanding: “well done, well done, whatever you said, you said it very well.”<sup>245</sup> Meanwhile, those present wondered when the Nāga girl would achieve Buddhahood, and knowing this, the Buddha told:

Oh monks! Variegated Jewel, the girl, will after three hundred uncountable eons, in an eon named ‘Fully Trained’ in a shining world, will become a Buddha named ‘Constantly All Seeing Buddha’.<sup>246</sup>

Historically, Mahākaśyapa is a well-known monk disciple of the Buddha only associated with the Śrāvakayāna tradition. Therefore, his position in this debate is that of the Śrāvakayāna view of the impossibility of a female Buddha. On the other side, the Nāga girl is representing the Mahāyāna view of the irrelevance of gender to the attainment of Buddhahood. This narrative is vital for the transcendence of gender argument, because Variegated Jewel was not only able to generate the aspiration to attain Buddhahood, the Buddha endorsed her

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid f. 177b – “*bu mo khyod kyi bstan pa ‘di ‘dra ba lags na, khyod ni ring po mi thogs par bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa’i byang chub mngon par rdzogs par ‘tshang rgya bar ‘gyur ro*”

<sup>245</sup> Ibid f. 178a – “*bu mo legs so legs so, khyod kyis chos bstan pa ‘di legs par smras so*”

<sup>246</sup> Ibid f. 178a – “*dge slong dag bud mo rin chen sna tshogs can ‘di ni bskal pa grangs med pa sum brgya na bskal pa rnam par sbyong ba zhes bya ba la, ‘jig rten gyi khams snang ba can du, de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa’i sangs rgyas kun tu rnam par gzigs zhes bya bar ‘gyur ro*”

position, and in her female body, she received the prediction of her Buddhahood.<sup>247</sup>

## 2. Vimaladatta's Power of Truth

There is yet another story central to the debate concerning the relevance of gender in the path to Buddhahood in the text *Questions of Vimaladatta (dri ma med kyis byin pas zhus pa, Vimaladattaparipṛcchā)*.<sup>248</sup> Vimaladatta was the daughter of Kosala's king Prasenjit, a contemporary of the historic Buddha. On the way to a bathing ceremony accompanied by hundreds of Brāhmiṇs on her twelfth birthday, Vimaladatta and her entourage met some Buddhist monks. After a long conversation with them, Vimaladatta went to see the Buddha and requested he teach her the various aspects of a Bodhisattva's way of life. Having received the teachings, Vimaladatta pledged to take up all the practices of a Bodhisattva. Seeing her pledging thus, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, another senior

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<sup>247</sup> An identical narrative is also found in another Mahāyāna text named *Lotus Sūtra (dam chos pad dkar, Sadharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtram)* in which the Nāga princess is understood to have symbolically transformed into a male Nāga. See, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra // dam pa'i chos pad ma dkar po zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo//* Lhasa (lha sa): (H 116) mdo sde, ja 1b1-285b2 (vol. 53) ff. 139a - 158b; For more discussion on this, see Nancy Schuster, "Changing the Female Body: Wise Women and the Bodhisattva Career in Some Mahāratnakūṭasūtras," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4, no. 1 (1981): 42-44.; Diana Y Paul, "Buddhist Attitudes Toward Women's Bodies," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 1(1981): 66-67.

<sup>248</sup> *Ārya-vimaladattā-paripṛcchā-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra // 'phags pa dri ma med kyis byin pas zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo//* Derge (sde dge): (D 77) dkon brtsegs, ca 241a1-261b6 (vol. 43); For further discussion on this, see Schuster, "Changing the Female Body: Wise Women and the Bodhisattva Career in Some Mahāratnakūṭasūtras," 31-35.

monk disciple, comments that: “It is amazing that you are pledging thus, are you not aware that the Bodhisattva practices are very difficult to accomplish?”<sup>249</sup>

In response to this question, Vimaladatta performed a ritual called ‘act of truth’. She said that by the power of truth, if she is to become a Buddha in the future like the present Buddha, may the earth quake without affecting anyone, may flowers rain down, may there be un-played music and may she herself be turned into a young boy of sixteen. Immediately afterwards, Vimaladatta indeed transformed into a boy of sixteen.<sup>250</sup>

All the monk disciples and Bodhisattvas present were amazed by the power of Vimaladatta’s truth, wondering how she could have such powers. The Buddha then told the gathering that Vimaladatta had since long ago resolved to achieve Buddhahood, and that she had been a Bodhisattva for a long time. The

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<sup>249</sup> In some Chinese translations, Mahāmaudgalyayana says she cannot pledge the Bodhisattva vows because she is a woman. See *ibid.* 35; *Ārya-vimaladattā-paripṛcchā-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // ‘phags pa dri ma med kyis byin pas zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po’i mdo// Derge (sde dge): (D 77) dkon brtsegs, ca 257b – “de nas tshe dang ldan pa mong gal gyi bu chen pos bu mo dri ma med kyis byin pa la ‘di skad ces smras so, bu mo khyod de skad smra ba ni ngo mtshar te, byang chub sems dpa’ rnams kyi byang chub sems dpa’i spyod pa bsgrub dka’ ba mi shes sam”

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 257b – 258a – “de nas bu mo dri ma med kyis gnas brtan mong gal gyi bu chen po la ‘di skad ces smras so, btsun pa mong gal gyi bu chen po bden pa dang bden pa’i tshig gang gis bdag ma ‘ongs pa’i dus na ji ltar da ltar de bzhin gshegs pa mngon sum du bzhugs pa bzhin du de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa’i sangs rgyas su ‘gur ba dang, ji ltar brtags pa’i chos ‘di dag kyang yang dag par blangs te gnas par ‘gyur zhe na, bden pa dang bden pa’i tshig des stong gsum gyi stong chen po’i ‘jig rten gyi khams ‘di rnam pa drug tu gyos par gyur cig, sems can gang la yang gnod pa med par gyur cig, bden pa dang bden pa’i tshig gang gis bcom ldan ‘das kyis ji ltar brtags pa’i chos ‘di dag yang dag par blangs te gnas par ‘gyur zhe na, bden pa dang bden pa’i tshig des lha’i me tog gi char mngon par ‘bab par gyur cig, ma dkrol bar sil snyan bye ba khrag khrig brgya stong sgra ‘byin par gyur cig, bdag kyang bud me kyi lus las gyur te skyes pa’i lus su red cing lo bcu drug lon pa ‘dra bar gyur cig, smon lam de skad btab cing bden pa’i byin gyi rlabs ‘di byas ma thag tu de nas de’i mod la stong gsum gyi stong chen po’i ‘jig rten gyi khams ‘di yang rnam pa drug tu gyos, ma dkrol bar sil snyan bye ba khrag khrig brgya stong gi sgra yang byung, lha’i me tog gi char yang mngon par bab bo, bu mo dri ma med kyis byin pa yang bud med kyi lus me snang bar gyur te skyes pa’i dbang po thob nas lo bcu drug lon pa tsam gyi gzhon nu ‘dra bar snang ngo”

text concludes with the Buddha's prophecy of her future Buddhahood. Unlike the Nāga girl who retained her female body throughout the debate, Vimaladatta transformed herself into a boy. However, the transformation she enacted was not in response to Mahāmaudgalyāyana's discouragement but the display of a miraculous power demonstrating the transcendent nature of gendered bodies. Vimaladatta demonstrated that such appearances are mere denominations and can be reversed instantly when one realizes the true nature of phenomena.

Hence, regardless of the fact of her turning into a boy, I believe this narrative is still vital in refuting the Śrāvakayāna view, particularly the Theravādin view of the impossibility of a female Bodhisattva. This is because the Buddha not only predicted her future Buddhahood, he proclaimed Vimaladatta to be a long standing Bodhisattva; an advanced female Bodhisattva until the moment of magical transformation. Indeed, this powerful demonstration of a miracle by Vimaladatta is in itself a great achievement. This will be followed by an even greater demonstration of miracles by another advanced female Bodhisattva appearing as a goddess amidst an assembly of monks and male Bodhisattvas.

### 3. The Non-Dual Argument from the Goddess

The extremely powerful role of a goddess appears in the unfolding of a famous Mahāyāna text *Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa Sūtra*,<sup>251</sup> a profound teaching on the notion of non-duality. In this epic text, the main protagonist Vimalakīrti is a Lichavī (clan) merchant during the time of the Buddha. From the Vaiśālī district of eastern India, he is regarded as a prominent lay Bodhisattva in the world of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The entire text focuses on the theme of non-duality, which is skillfully portrayed through the merchant's various methods.

Among the text's twelve chapters, there is one entitled 'the goddess chapter', whose dramatic event demonstrates the non-dual nature of a gendered disposition.<sup>252</sup> This chapter opens with an assembly of Bodhisattvas, monks and lay-people, as well as some invisible gods and goddesses gathered at Vimalakīrti's house. Among them was the prominent Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, sent by the Buddha to pay a courtesy visit to the merchant, who was unwell at the time. Vimalakīrti's illness in fact turns out to be his skillful means of creating a platform for discussing various topics among disciples of the Buddha holding diverse views. Within the congregation, a lengthy dialogue takes place

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251 *Ārya-vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa dri ma med par grags pas bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Derge (sde dge): (D 176) mdo sde, ma 175a1-239b7 (vol. 60); Lhasa (lha sa): (H 177) mdo sde, pha 270b1-376b3 (vol. 60)

252 For discussions on this subject, see Schuster, "Changing the Female Body: Wise Women and the Bodhisattva Career in Some Mahāratnakūṭasūtras," 41-42.; Diana Paul, "The Concept of Tathāgatarbha in the Śrīmālādevī Sūtra (Sheng-Man Ching)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1979): 221-32.



between Vimalakīrti and Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī on aspects of the conduct of a Bodhisattva.

Mañjuśrī: What is the root of good and evil?

Vimalakīrti: Materiality is the root of good and evil.

Mañjuśrī: What is the root of materiality?

Vimalakīrti: Desire is the root of materiality.

Mañjuśrī: What is the root of desire and attachment?

Vimalakīrti: Unreal construction is the root of desire.

Mañjuśrī: What is the root of unreal construction?

Vimalakīrti: The false concept is its root.

Mañjuśrī: What is the root of the false concept?

Vimalakīrti: Baselessness.

Mañjuśrī: What is the root of baselessness?

Vimalakīrti: Mañjuśrī, when something is baseless, how can it have any root? Therefore, all things stand on the root which is baseless.<sup>253</sup>

Just after Vimalakīrti replied to Mañjuśrī's question on the root of baselessness, a goddess suddenly appeared in front of those gathered. Delighted at the profound conversation between the two Bodhisattvas, as a gesture of appreciation the goddess showered the assembly with heavenly flowers.<sup>254</sup> It transpires that this

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<sup>253</sup> The English translation is from: Robert Thurman, *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture* (Varanasi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1991). 58.

*Ārya-vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa dri ma med par grags pas bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 177) mdo sde, pha 270b1-376b3 (vol. 60), ff. 327b – 328a – “smras pa, dge ba dang, mi dge ba'i rtza ba gang; smras pa, 'jig tshogs ni rtza ba'o, smras pa, 'jig tshogs kyi rtza ba gang, smras pa, 'jig tshogs kyi rtza ba ni 'dod pa dang, chags pa'o,, smras pa, 'dod pa dang, chags pa'i rtza ba gang, smras pa, 'dod pa dang, chags pa'i rtza ba ni yang dag pa ma yin pa kun rtog pa'o, ,smras pa, yang dag pa ma yin pa kun tu rtog pa'i rtza ba gang, smras pa, yang dag pa ma yin pa kun rtog pa'i rtza ba ni phyin ci log gi 'du shes so, ,smras pa, phyin ci log gi 'du shes kyi rtza ba gang, smras pa phyin ci log gi 'du shes kyi rtza ba ni rten med pa'o, ,smras pa, rten med pa'i rtza ba gang, smras pa, 'jam dpal, gang rten med pa de'i rtza bar 'gyur ba ci zhig yod do, de ltar chos thams cad ni rten med pa'i rtza ba la gnas pa'o”

<sup>254</sup> Ibid f. 328a – “de nas khyim de na gang gnas pa'i lha mo des byang chub sems dpa' sems dpa' chen po de dag gi chos bstan pa 'di thos nas dga' zhing mgu la yi rangs te bdag gi lus

act is an important tool in a discussion concerning gender that unfolds between the goddess and a senior monk disciple of the Buddha named Venerable Śāriputra, who was among the visitors. While the flowers that were showered on the Bodhisattvas fell off them naturally, those on the monks stuck to them, and nothing they did could rid them of these flowers.

Observing the monks' futile efforts, the goddess asked why they were so concerned about removing them. One of the Buddha's most senior disciples, Śāriputra, replied that flowers were not suitable for monks. The goddess began arguing that since flowers have no concept of being suitable for some and not others, it was Śāriputra himself who was conceiving of them as unsuitable. The goddess continued stating it was inappropriate for a monk who has gone forth in the teachings of the Vinaya to have conceptual thoughts.<sup>255</sup> She praised the Bodhisattvas who had abandoned all conceptual thoughts and hence the flowers fell off them naturally.<sup>256</sup> After exchanging arguments back and forth, Śāriputra

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*rags pa bstan nas lha'i me tog dag gis byang chub sems dpa' sems dpa' chen po de dag dang, nyan thos chen po de dag la mngon par gtor te,"*

<sup>255</sup> Ibid f. 327a – 328b - “*gtor ba dang byang chub sems dpa' rnam kyi lus la me tog gang dag bab pa de dag ni sa la lung ngo, nyan thos chen po rnam kyi lus la me tog gang dag bab pa de dag ni de nyid du chags nas sa la ma lung ngo, ,de nas nyan thos chen po de dag rdzu 'phrul gyi cho 'phrul gyis me tog de dag sprugs kyang ma lung ngo, ,de nas lha mo des tshe dang ldan pa sh'a ri'i bu la 'di skad ces smras so, ,btsun pa sh'a ri'i bu, me tog 'di dag sprugs te ci bya, smras pa, lha mo, me tog 'di dag ni rung ba ma yin pas na bdag me tog 'di dag 'dor ro, ,lha mos smras pa, btsun pa sh'a ri'i bu, de skad ma smra zhig ,de ci'i phyir zhe na, me tog 'di dag ni rung ba yin no, ,de ci'i phyir zhe na, 'di ltar me tog de dag ni mi rtog ,rnam par mi rtog pa ste, gnas bstan sh'a ri'i bu, nyid rtog cing rnam par rtog go ,btsun pa sh'a ri'i bu, gang dag legs par gsungs pa'i chos 'dul ba la rab tu byung nas rtog pa dang, rnam par rtog pa de dag ni rung ba ma yin pa'o,"*

<sup>256</sup> Ibid f. 328b – “*btsun pa sh'a ri'i bu, 'di ltar rtog pa dang, rnam par rtog pa spangs pa'i phyir byang chub sems dpa' sems dpa' chen po 'di dag gi lus la me tog mi chags pa la ltos,"*

raises the issue of her gender to the goddess, who responds with a counter argument that silences Śāriputra:

Śāriputra: Goddess, what prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?

Goddess: I have been looking for my 'female state' for these last twelve years; I have not yet found it. Reverend Śāriputra, if a magician were to incarnate a woman by magic, would you ask her, "What prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?"

Śāriputra: No, such a woman would not really exist, so what would there be to transform?

Goddess: Just so, Reverend Śāriputra, all things do not really exist. Now, would you think, "What prevents one whose nature is that of a magical incarnation from transforming herself out of her female state?"<sup>257</sup>

It is evident in the above dialogue that the goddess is attempting to bring Śāriputra to understand that he is caught up in the duality of gender. Śāntideva, in his *Bodhicaryavatāra*, eloquently expresses that 'male' 'female' duality is invalid:

Therefore who having analyzed it, would be attached to this dream-like form? And when in this way the body is not truly existent, how can the distinction be made into (truly existent) male and female bodies?<sup>258</sup>

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Also, see Madhyamikavatara 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter verse 9: "gang gis gang zhig gang la spong byed pa, gsum du dmigs pa yod na tshul khriṃs de, 'jig rten pa yi pha rol phyin ces bshad, gsum la chags pas stong de 'das,"

<sup>257</sup> Trans. Thurman, *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture*: 61.

*Ārya-vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa dri ma med par grags pas bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Lhasa mdo sde pha, f. 331b – "smras pa, lha mo, khyod bud med kyi dngos po las bsgyur na ci nyes, smras pa, bdag gi lo bcu gnyis kyi bar du bud med kyi dngos po btsal na'ang da dung ma rnyed do, btsun pa sh'a ri'i bu, sgyu ma mkhan gyis bud med sprul pa de la, 'di ltar, khyod, bud med kyi dngos po las bsgyur na ci nyes zhes byas na de ji skad zer bar 'gyur, smras pa, de la yang dag pa yongs su grub ba gang yang med do, smras pa, btsun pa sh'a ri'i bu, de bzhin du chos thams cad yongs su ma grub pa ste, sgyu mas sprul pa'i ngo bo nyid la bud med kyi dngos po las bsgyur na ci nyes zhes khyod de snyam du sems,"

<sup>258</sup> Śāntideva // *Bodhicaryāvatāra* // byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa// Derge (sde dge): (D 3871) dbu ma, la 1b1-40a7, f. 34a – "de ltar rmi lam lta bu yi, gzugs la dpyod ldan su zhig chags, gang tshe de ltar lus med pa, de tshe skyes gang bud med gang"; Śāntideva Ch. 9

Śāriputra apparently accepts that the question of male and female is not valid in terms of a magical creation, yet is not able to accept that in reality everything is akin to magical creations. Hence, in order to prove that a person's 'male' or 'female' nature is not as rigid as he thinks, the goddess shows her magical skills, turning Śāriputra into herself while she appears in his form:

Goddess: Reverend Śāriputra, what prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?

Śāriputra: I no longer appear in the form of a male! My body has changed into the body of a woman! I do not know what to transform.

Goddess: If the elder could again change out of the female state, then all women could also change out of their female states. All women appear in the form of women in just the same way as the elder appears in the form of a woman. While they are not women in reality, they appear in the form of women. With this in mind, the Buddha said, 'In all things, there is neither male nor female.'<sup>259</sup>

After the goddess makes Śāriputra admit that he does not know how to transform from the female body, she returns them both to their original forms and again asks Śāriputra:

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Verse 87: Trans. S. Batchelor, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life: Bodhisattvacharyavatara* (Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 1979). 150.

<sup>259</sup> Trans. Thurman, *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture*: 62.

*Ārya-vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa dri ma med par grags pas bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Lhasa mdo sde pha, f. 332a – “de nas lha mo sh'a ri'i bu'I gzugs su gyur pa des sh'a ri'i bu lha mo'i gzugs su gyur pa de la 'di ltar, btzun pa sh'a ri'i bu, bud med kyi dngos po las bsgyur na ci nyes zhes dris so, ,sh'a ri'I bu lha mo'i gzugs su gyur pas 'di skad ces smras so, ,kho bo skyes pa'i gzugs ni mi snang bar gyur te, kho bo bud med kyi lus su gyur nas gang bsgyur mi shes so, ,smras pa, gal te gnas brtan gyis bud med kyi gzugs las slar bsgyur nus na ni bud med thams cad kyis bud med kyi dngos po las 'gyur ro, ,ji ltar gnas brtan bud med du snang ba de bzhin du bud med thams cad kyang bud med kyi gzugs su snang ste, bud med ma yin pa las bud med kyi gzugs su snang ngo, ,de la dgongs te bcom ldan 'das kyis chos thams cad bud med kyang ma yin, skyes pa'ang ma yin”

Goddess: Reverend Śāriputra, what have you done with your female form?

Śāriputra: I neither made it nor did I change it.

Goddess: Just so, all things are neither made nor changed, and that they are not made and not changed, that is the teaching of the Buddha.<sup>260</sup>

Thus, the goddess skillfully brought Śāriputra to an understanding that there is no reason for her to change her female body. However, Śāriputra was not prepared to be silent in spite of the strong counter arguments, further challenging the goddess with questions eventually leading to the question of her achieving Buddhahood:

Śāriputra: Goddess, how soon will you attain the perfect enlightenment of Buddhahood?

Goddess: At such time as you, elder, become endowed once more with the qualities of an ordinary individual, then will I attain the perfect enlightenment of Buddhahood.

Śāriputra: Goddess, it is impossible that I should become endowed once more with the qualities of an ordinary individual.

Goddess: Just so, reverend Sariputra, it is impossible that I should attain the perfect enlightenment of Buddhahood! Why? Because perfect enlightenment stands upon the impossible. Because it is impossible, no one attains the perfect enlightenment of Buddhahood.

Śāriputra: But the Tathāgata has declared: "The Tathāgatas, who are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, have attained perfect Buddhahood, are attaining perfect Buddhahood, and will go on attaining perfect Buddhahood."

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<sup>260</sup> Trans. Ibid.

*Ārya-vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa dri ma med par grags pas bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Lhasa mdo sde pha, f. 331a -332b – "de nas lha mo des sh'a ri'i bu la 'di skad ces smras so, ,btsun pa sh'a ri'i bu, khyod kyis bud med kyi gzugs su byas pa de ga re, smras pa, bdag gis byas pa'ang med, bsgyur ba'ang med do, ,smras pa, de bzhin du chos thams cad kyang byas pa'ang med, bsgyur pa'ang med do, ,gang ma byas shing bsgyur ba med pa de ni sangs rgyas kyi bka'o,"

The same message is conveyed in Śāntideva // *Bodhicaryāvatāra* // byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa// Derge (sde dge): (D 3871) dbu ma, la 1b1-40a7, f. 36b. "de ltar 'gag a yod min zhing, dngos po'ng yod min de yi phyir, 'gro ba 'di dag thams cad ni, rtag tu ma skyes ma 'gag nyid"(9/150)

Goddess: Reverend Śāriputra, the expression, "the Buddhas of the past, present and future," is a conventional expression made up of a certain number of syllables. The Buddhas are neither past, nor present, nor future. Their enlightenment transcends the three times! But tell me, elder, have you attained sainthood?

Sariputra: It is attained, because there is no attainment.

Goddess: Just so, there is perfect enlightenment because there is no attainment of perfect enlightenment.<sup>261</sup>

While in the middle of the interaction the goddess says that Buddhahood is not achievable, but towards the end she clarifies that she does not mean Buddhahood is utterly unachievable, but unachievable only when one is caught in the dualism of achievable and non-achievable. She means that for one who has surpassed the realm of dualistic conceptions it is indeed achievable, but not for those with dualistic views.

This interaction between the goddess and Śāriputra is an important interplay on the issue of gender in the attainment of Buddhahood. While Śāriputra represents a conservative male point of view, the goddess represents a

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<sup>261</sup> Trans. Ibid., 62-63.

*Ārya-vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa dri ma med par grags pas bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Lhasa mdo sde pha, ff. 332b – 333a – “smras pa, lha mo khyod ji srid na byang chub mngon par rdzogs par 'tsang rgya bar 'gyur, smras pa, gang gi tshe gnas brtan khyod so so'i skye bo'i chos dang ldan par 'gyur ba de'i tshe bdag kyang byang chub mngon par rdzogs par 'tshang rgya'o, ,smras pa, lha mo, kho bo so so'i skye bo'i chos dang ldan par 'gyur ba de ni gnas ma yin no, ,smras pa, btsun pa sh'a ri'i bu de bzhin du bdag kyang byang chub mngon par rdzogs par 'tshang rgya ba de ni gnas ma yin no, ,de ci'i phyir zhe na, byang chub ni gnas ma yin pa la gnas pa'i phyir te, de lta bas na gnas ma yin pa la ni su'ang mngon par rdzogs par 'tsang rgya ba med do, ,gnas brtan sh'a ri'i bus smras pa, de bzhin gshegs pas gsungs pa ni gang-g'a'i klung gi bye ma snyed kyi de bzhin gshegs pa rnams mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas so, ,mngon par rdzogs par 'tsang rgya'o, ,mngon par rdzogs par 'tsang rgya bar 'gyur ro zhes gsungs so, ,lha mos smras pa, btzun pa sh'a ri'i bu, 'das pa dang, ma 'ongs pa dang, da ltar byung ba'i sangs rgyas rnams zhes bya ba de ni yi ge bgrang ba'i brda'i tsig bla dwags te, sangs rgyas rnams ni 'das pa'am, ma 'ongs pa'am, da ltar byung ba ma yin te, byang chub ni dus gsum las yang dag par 'das pa'o, ,gnas brtan gyis dgra bcom pa thob bam, smras pa, thob pa med pa'i rgyus thob bo, ,smras pa, de bzhin du mngon par rdzogs par byang chub ba med pa'i rgyus mngon par rdzogs par byang chub bo,”

more progressive view of a woman. In addition, these characters are strongly representing the views their respective traditions hold, demonstrating that the matter of a female Buddha was certainly a point of debate among the different traditions of Buddhism. Śāriputra, representing the Śrāvakayāna point of view, does not believe that one can attain Buddhahood in a female body and therefore poses the question of gender to the goddess. The goddess' sudden appearance seems to have been rightfully devised for this debate, to attempt to invalidate the Śrāvakayāna view on a female Buddha.

The flowers stuck on Śāriputra and futile efforts to remove them because he finds them unsuitable for monks indicate his, or rather Śrāvakayāna's rigid position. The natural falling off of the flowers from the Bodhisattvas depicts the Mahāyāna's point of view as balanced and flexible. When Śāriputra did not succeed in convincing the goddess to give up being female, he sarcastically asks her when she will attain Buddhahood. The goddess, understanding his satire, plays with words again and Śāriputra once again satirizes the Mahāyāna view of the possibility of innumerable Buddhas.

Indeed, from the Mahāyāna perspective there are as many Buddhas as there are sands, since a Buddha is not limited to the one who only rarely appears. Śāriputra's view expresses the sarcasm of Śrāvakayāna towards this, believing in only one form of a Buddha, the Teacher figure, who appears once in many eons. Eventually, the goddess intelligently claims that just as Śāriputra himself achieves Arhathood, she too will achieve Buddhahood without the need to give up her female body.

Finally, when the discussion between the goddess and Śāriputra ended, the host Vimalakīrti makes a comment to Śāriputra regarding the goddess:

Reverend Śāriputra, this goddess has already served ninety-two million billion Buddhas. She plays with the superknowledges. She has truly succeeded in all her vows. She has gained the tolerance of the birthlessness of things. She has actually attained irreversibility. She can live wherever she wishes on the strength of her vow to develop living beings.<sup>262</sup>

While praising the goddess for her many qualities, Vimalakīrti mentioned the important point that she had ‘attained irreversibility’. Irreversibility is a stage reached by a Bodhisattva associated with the eighth stage of ten Bodhisattva stages; such a Bodhisattva will never reverse from their Bodhisattva state.<sup>263</sup> In short, the attainment of Buddhahood depends on two key factors: the initial generation of aspiration to attain Buddhahood and perfecting the six perfections on ten Bodhisattva stages. Once the aspiration is generated and resolution to attain Buddhahood is made, one is known as a ‘Bodhisattva’. As discussed in the previous chapters, not only was a female Buddha considered impossible by the Śrāvakayānas, but female Bodhisattvas were also impossible according to

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<sup>262</sup> Trans. Ibid., 63.

*Ārya-vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa dri ma med par grags pas bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Lhasa mdo sde pha, f. 333a – “de nas li tsa ba'i dri ma med par grags pas tshe dang ldan pa gnas brtan sh'a ri'i bu la 'di skad ces smras so, ,btsun pa sh'a ri'i bu, lha mo 'di ni sangs rgyas bye ba khrag khrig phrag dgu bcu rtsa gnyis la bsnyen bkur byas te, mngon par shes pa'i ye shes la rnam par rtse ba, smon lam las yang dag par byung ba, bzod pa thob pa, phyir mi ldog pa la yang dag par zhugs pa ste, sems can yongs su smin par bya ba'i phyir smon lam gyi dbang gis ji ltar 'dod pa de bzhin du gnas so,”

<sup>263</sup> Irreversible Bodhisattva stage as the 8th stage Bodhisattva - See note 10 in Paul, "The Concept of Tathāgatagarbha in the Śrīmālādevī Sūtra (Sheng-Man Ching)," 242.



Theravāda, and only possible to a certain stage according to some Sarvastivādas. The Nāgārjuna-based Mahāyāna regards the Bodhisattva path as well as the body of the Buddha as not restricted by gender. The following is a brief presentation of their Bodhisattva stages and the body of a Buddha.

#### 4. Bodhisattva Stages

Bodhisattvas are those aspiring to Buddhahood for the benefit of not only oneself but for all sentient beings.<sup>264</sup> The generation of such an aspiration is defined by two phases: mere aspiration and practical engagement. The two are likened to the analogy of aspiring to go somewhere and the literal action of going there.<sup>265</sup> The Bodhisattva aspiration is also defined by three ways of aspiring in Tibetan Buddhism: 1) to attain Buddhahood first and then help others to attain it, known as the king-like-aspiration 2) to aspire for both self and others to attain it

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264 Maitreya // *Abhisamayālaṃkāra-nāma-prajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstrakārikā* // *shes rab phyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa*// Derge (sde dge): (D 3786) shes phyin, ka 1b1-13a7, f. 2b – “*sems bskyed pa ni gzhan don phyir, ,yang dag rdzogs pa'i byang chub 'dod,*”;

Śāntideva // *Bodhicaryāvatāra* // *byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*// Derge (sde dge): (D 3871) dbu ma, la 1b1-40a7, f. 40a – “*ji srid nam mkha' gnas pa dang, ,gro ba ji srid gnas gyur pa, ,de srid bdag ni gnas gyur nas, ,gro ba'i sdug bsngal sel bar shog ,gro ba'i sdug bsngal gang ci'ang rung, ,de kun bdag la smin gyur cig*” (10/55)

265 Śāntideva // *Bodhicaryāvatāra* // *byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*// Derge (sde dge): (D 3871) dbu ma, la 1b1-40a7, f. 2b – “*'gro bar 'dod dang 'gro ba yi, ,bye brag ji ltar shes pa ltar, ,de bzhin mkhas pas 'di gnyis kyi, ,bye brag rim bzhin shes par bya,*” (1/16)

simultaneously, known as a boatman-like-aspiration and 3) to aspire to help others attain it first, which is a herdsman-like-aspiration.<sup>266</sup>

The two methods of generating such aspirations are:<sup>267</sup> 1) through the practice of seeing both self and others as equally dear to oneself and then exchanging oneself with others (*bdag gzhan mnyam brje, parātma samatā*);<sup>268</sup> and 2) through the sevenfold-cause-and-effect steps (*rgyu 'bras man ngag bdun*), which starts from recognizing all sentient beings as having been one's mother at some point in people's innumerable past lives.<sup>269</sup> Following this recognition, a sense of gratitude towards all mother-like sentient beings is experienced, and this leads to a determination to repay their kindness by leading them to Buddhahood, embarking on the five paths and ten stages of Bodhisattva training. It is clear that

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<sup>266</sup> There are different views among Tibetan scholars whether the historical Buddha Śākyamuni's initial resolve was 'king-like' or 'herdsman-like'. See Wangchuk, *The Resolve to Become a Buddha: a Study of the Bodhicitta Concept in IndoTibetan Buddhism*: 99.

<sup>267</sup> The two methods are based on "the existence of two *bodhicittotpāda* traditions often associated with two distinct groups of textual authorities, such as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, and personal authorities, such as Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga." For this and more discussion on distinct views such as Madhyamaka proposing *bodhicittotpāda* possible in any form of sentient beings and on the other hand Cittamātra's view of *bodhicittotpāda* in human form only, see *ibid.*, 170-71.

<sup>268</sup> Śāntideva // *Bodhicaryāvatāra* // *byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*// Derge (sde dge): (D 3871) dbu ma, la 1b1-40a7, f.27a – 28a – "*bdag dang gzhan du mnyam pa ni, dang po nyid du 'bad de bsgom, bde dang sdug bsngal mnyam pas na, thams cad bdag bzhin bsrung bar bya . . . bdag dang gzhan du brje bya ba, gsang ba'i dam pa spyad par bya, bdag lus gang la chags pa yis, 'jigs gnas chung la 'jigs skye ba,*"

<sup>269</sup> Although this second method of *bodhicittotpāda* is commonly believed by the Tibetans scholars to be associated with Asaṅga's tradition, Gareth says it has not been possible to trace in any of Asaṅga's works. See Gareth Sparham, "Indian Altruism: A Study of the Terms bodhicitta and bodhicittotpāda," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15, no. 2 (1992): 233.

gender is irrelevant to the generation of an aspiration to attain Buddhahood, provided one is able to generate such aspirations.<sup>270</sup>

In the next step after the resolution to attain Buddhahood, Bodhisattvas embark on the practical application of their aspiration, accumulating vast amounts of merit and wisdom over many eons. These two accumulations are carried along ten stages through six perfections (*phar phyin drug, ṣaṭ pāramitā*). The following structure of the ten stages (*sa bcu, daśa-bhūmi*) of the Bodhisattva path to Buddhahood is from Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra-nāma*, which is based on *Daśabhūmi Sūtra* and Nāgārjuna's *Rājaparīkathā-Ratnamāla*.<sup>271</sup>

The first stage of a Bodhisattva requires eschewing three fetters of afflictive emotions (*kun sbyor gsum, tri-saṃyojan*): 1) believing in the real sense of 'I' (*'jig lta, sans. satkāya dṛṣṭi*) in the form of five aggregates (*phung po lnga, pañca skandha*), 2) viewing rules and austerity as the supreme method (*tshul khrims rtul bzhugs mchog 'dzin, śīlabratparāmarśa*) and 3) doubting the reality of all phenomena (*the tshom, vicikitsā*). Once having genuinely given up these fetters, such a Bodhisattva will then have joined the family of Buddhas, having achieved many spiritual qualities and excelling in the practice of perfection of

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<sup>270</sup> There is no gender relevance in the traditions even though they differ regarding the requirements for *bodhicittotpāda*. While it is not even necessary to be in a human form for *bodhicittotpāda* in Nāgārjuna's tradition, according to the latter tradition associated with Asaṅga, it is said that for the initial *bodhicittotpāda*, one is required to have received at least one form of a *prātimokṣa* vows. The difference is believed to be rooted in their doctrinal difference of one *gotra* and multiple *gotras*. See Wangchuk, *The Resolve to Become a Buddha: a Study of the Bodhicitta Concept in IndoTibetan Buddhism*: 185.

<sup>271</sup> Candrakīrti // *Madhyamakāvatāra-nāma* // *dbu ma la 'jug pa zhes bya ba*// Derge (sde dge): (D 3861) dbu ma, 'a 201b1-219a7

generosity (*sbyin pa'i phar phyin, dāna pāramitā*). This is the first stage known as the 'Very Joyous Stage' (*rab tu dga ba, pramuditā*).<sup>272</sup>

This will be followed by the stage where a Bodhisattva ceases all negative activities through the three doors of body, speech and mind as a stage of excellence in the practice of perfection of morality (*tshul khrims kyi phar phyin, śīla pāramitā*). Hence, this second stage is termed the 'Undeiled Stage' (*dri ma med pa, vimalā*).<sup>273</sup> Having the grounds adequately prepared, a Bodhisattva then devotes themselves fully to contemplation and meditation. As a result of pointed concentration, a Bodhisattva on the third stage termed the 'Radiant Stage' (*'od byed pa, prabhākarī*), will have gained immense mental powers such as clairvoyance.<sup>274</sup> A third stage Bodhisattva will also have eradicated all attachments, anger and hatred; thereby perfecting the practice of patience (*bzod pa'i phar phyin, kṣanti pāramitā*), constituting this stage's excellence.<sup>275</sup>

Following the perfection of the practice of patience, a Bodhisattva is now on the fourth stage termed 'Brilliant Stage' (*'od 'phro ba, arciṣmatī*), excelling in

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid f. 201b - “*di ni de bzhin gshegs pa rnams kyi rigs su'ang skyes pa ste, 'di ni kun tu sbyor ba gsum po thams cad spangs pa yin, 'byang chub sems dpa' de ni dga' ba mchog tu gyur 'chang zhing, 'jig rten khams brgya kun nas g-yo bar nus par gyur pa'ang yin, ,sa nas sar gnon byed cing gong mar rab tu 'gro bar 'gyur*” 1/5

<sup>273</sup> Ibid f. 202b – “*de tshul phun tsogs yon tan dag ldan phyir, ,rmi lam du yang 'chal khrims dri ma spangs, ,lus ngag yid kyi rgyu ba dag gyur pas, ,dam pa'i las lam bcu char sog par byed*” 2/1

<sup>274</sup> Ibid f. 203a – “*shes bya'i bud shing ma lus sreg pa'i me'i, , 'od 'byung phyir na sa ni gsum pa 'di, 'od byed pa ste bde gshegs sras po la, ,de tse nyi ltar zangs 'dra'i snang ba 'byung*” 3/1

<sup>275</sup> Ibid f. 203b “*sa der rgyal sras bsam gtan mngon shes dang, ,dod chags zhe sdang yongs su zad par 'gyur, ,des kyang rtag tu 'jig rten pa yi ni, ,dod pa'i 'dod chags 'joms par nus par 'gyur*” 3/11

the perfection of the practice of diligence (*brtson 'grus kyi phar pyin, virya pāramitā*). At this stage, a Bodhisattva genuinely gives up self-identity view as an independent and inherent existence of self.<sup>276</sup> On the fifth stage known as the 'Very Difficult to Train Stage' (*sbyang dka' ba, sudurjayā*), a Bodhisattva fully understands the subtle meanings of the four-noble-truths.<sup>277</sup> Once realizing the subtlest aspects of the four-noble-truths, a Bodhisattva passes to the sixth stage termed 'Manifesting Stage' (*mngon du phyogs pa, abhimukhi*) and is moving towards the qualities of Buddhas. Given all the qualifications of the preceding stages, a sixth-staged Bodhisattva will engage constantly in pure meditations, perfect the practice of concentration (*bsam gtan gyi phar phyin, dhyāna pāramitā*) and will have reached the stage of no suffering (*'gog pa, nirvāṇa*).<sup>278</sup> This will be followed by the seventh 'Gone Afar Stage' (*ring du song ba, dūramgama*) where a Bodhisattva perfects pure meditative equipoise with the flexibility of instant arising and abiding, and will excel in the perfection of skilful means.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid f. 203b - “*brtson 'grus gang du 'bar bar gyur pa yi, 'sa de bzhi pa 'od ni 'phro ba'o, 'der ni bder gshegs sras la rdzogs pa yi, 'byang chub phyogs lhag bsgoms pa las skyes pa'i, 'snang ba zangs kyi 'od pas lhag 'byung zhing, 'rang du lta ba dang 'brel yongs su zad*” 4/1-2

<sup>277</sup> Ibid f. 203b - “*bdag nyid che de bdud rnams kun gyis kyang, 'sbyang dka'i sa la pham par nus ma yin, 'bsam gtan lhag cing blo bzang bden rang bzhin, 'zhig mo rtogs la'ang shin tu mkhas pa 'thob*” 5/1

<sup>278</sup> Ibid ff. 203b – 204a – “*mngon du phyogs par mnyam bzhag sems, 'gnas te, 'rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas chos la mngon phyogs shing, 'jig rten 'byung ba'i de nyid mthong ba de, 'shes rab gnas pas 'gog pa thob par 'gyur*” 6/1

<sup>279</sup> Ibid f. 215a – “*ring du song 'dir 'di ni skad cig dang, 'skad cig la ni 'gog par 'jug 'byung zhing, 'thabs kyi pha rol phyin legs 'bar ba'ang 'thob*” 7/1

The final stages in the process are termed the three pure stages.

Unwavering at all times and with no trace of conceptual thoughts, on the eighth stage known as the ‘Unwavering Stage’ (*mi gyo ba, acalā*) a Bodhisattva possesses inconceivable efficiency and benevolence in all their activities of body, speech and mind.<sup>280</sup> Gaining proficiency in analytic knowledge and great intelligence are additional qualities obtained on the ninth stage termed ‘Good Intelligence Stage’ (*legs pa'i blo gros, sādhumatī*) where the Bodhisattva completes the perfection of wisdom (*shes rabs kyi phar phyin, prajñā pāramitā*).<sup>281</sup> The ‘Cloud of Dharma Stage’ (*chos kyi sprin, dharmameghā*) is the tenth and final stage of Bodhisattva practice and training, culminating in the attainment of Buddhahood, where a Bodhisattva showers the rain of Dharma teachings. Blessed by the radiance of all the Buddhas, the Bodhisattva has now become one of the many Buddhas.<sup>282</sup>

Having gone through the stages of a Bodhisattva aspiring to Buddhahood, it is clear that none require the identification or the appropriation of the aspirant’s gender. Another significant aspect of the description of Buddhahood is how the bodies of a Buddha are interpreted; one of the features of Buddhahood causing

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid f. 215a – “*yang yang sngar dge las lhag thob bya'i phyir, ,gang du phyir mi ldog pa nyid 'gyur ba, ,mi g-yo de la bdag nyid che de 'jug , 'di yi smon lam shin tu dag 'gyur zhing*” 8/1

<sup>281</sup> Ibid f. 215b “*dgu pa la ni de'i stobs lta zhig mtha' dag rdzogs par dag 'gyur zhing, ,de bzhin yang dag rig chos rang gi yon tan yongs su dag pa'ang 'thob*” 9/1

<sup>282</sup> Ibid f. 215b “*bcu pa'i sa la de yis kun nas sangs rgyas rnams las dbang bskur ba, ,dam pa 'thob cing ye shes lhag par mchog tu byung bar gyur pa'ang yin, ,char sprin rnams las chu char 'bab pa ji ltar de bzhin 'gro rnams kyi, ,dge ba'i lo tog ched du rgyal sras las kyang lhun grub chos char 'bab*” 10/1

differences regarding a female Buddha within Mahāyāna. What follows is the interpretation of a Buddha's bodies, wherein the Mahāyāna position of gender's irrelevance to the attainment of Buddhahood is argued.

## 5. Bodies of a Buddha

The following theory of a Buddha's body makes no mention of the relevance of gender in the attainment of Buddhahood. Mahāyānas - belonging to the interpretation of the Buddha's teachings by Nāgārjuna, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Indian master – regard the Buddhahood as a spiritual attainment and in whatever form one attains, and is not confined to one gender. This tradition of Nāgārjuna's understanding of the Buddha and the Buddha's body is primarily based on the Buddha's teachings known as the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*.<sup>283</sup> Among the many versions of *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is regarded the oldest, in which, *dharma-kāya* and *rūpa-kāya* are the only forms of the Buddha mentioned: “*Tathāgata* (Buddha) is not to be seen as *rūpa-kāya*, *Tathāgata* is to be seen as the *dharma-kāya*.”<sup>284</sup>

This Mahāyāna tradition mainly espouse the wisdom aspect of the Buddha, termed wisdom body (*chos sku*, *dharma-kāya*), and whatever physical aspect the Buddha appears in as its form body (*gzugs sku*, *rūpa-kāya*). *Dharma-*

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<sup>283</sup> The various forms of *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* are: *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Vajracchedikā*, *Pancvīmasatī*

<sup>284</sup> *Ārya-aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā* // 'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa brgyad stong pa// Derge (sde dge): (D 12) brgyad stong, ka 1b1-286a6, f. 277b – “*de bzhin gshegs pa ni gzugs kyi skur mi blta ste de bzhin gshegs pa ni chos kyi sku'o*”

*kāya* is defined as the ultimate wisdom body and *rūpa-kāya* as the Buddha's physical body. Similarly, in another *Prajñāpāramitā* text named *Vajracchedikā*, it is said, 'of the two bodies of the Buddha, *dharma-kāya* is the real form of the Buddha'.<sup>285</sup> Nāgārjuna clearly follows the two-body interpretation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and *Prajñāpāramitā* in his works too.<sup>286</sup> *Ratnāvali* is one of his major works, within which only two bodies are mentioned: the result of the accumulation of merit as the *rūpa-kāya* and the result of the accumulation of wisdom as the *dharma-kāya* of the Buddhas.<sup>287</sup> Similarly, in his *Yuktiṣaṣṭika* he

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285 *Ārya-vajracchedikā-nāma-prajñāpāramitā-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rdo rje gcod pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 18) sna tshogs, ka 215a4-235b7 (vol. 34) f. 230b -231a – “rab 'byor, 'di ji snyam du sems, gzugs kyi sku yongs su grub pas de bzhin gshegs, par blta'am, rab 'byor gyis gsol pa, bcom ldan 'das, de ni, ma lags te, gzugs kyi sku yongs su grub pas de bzhin gshegs par mi blta'o, ,de ci'i slad du zhe na, bcom ldan 'das, gzugs kyi sku yongs su grub pa, gzugs kyi sku yongs su rdzogs pa zhes bgyi ba ni, de yongs su grub pa ma mchis par de bzhin gshegs pas gsungs pa'i slad du ste, des na, gzugs kyi sku yongs su grub pa zhes bgyi'o, ,bcom ldan 'das kyi bka' stzal pa; rab 'byor, 'di ji snyam du sems, mtsan phun sum tsogs pas, de bzhin gshegs par blta'am, rab 'byor gyis gsol pa, bcom ldan 'das, de ni; ma lags te, mtsan phun sum tsogs pas de bzhin gshegs par mi blta'o, ,de ci'i slad du zhe na, de bzhin gshegs pas mtsan phun sum tsogs par gang gsungs pa de, mtsan phun sum tsogs pa ma mchis par de bzhin gshegs pas gsungs pa'i slad du ste, des na, mtsan phun sum tsogs pa zhes bgyi'o”

For more discussion on the evolution of terminologies, see Guang Xing, *The Concept of the Buddha: Its Evolution from Early Buddhism to the Trikāya Theory* (Routledge, 2005).; Dutt, "The Doctrine of Kaya in Hinayana and Mahayana."

286 Regarding Nāgārjuna's view on *kāya* as being of only two and not three, Dutt says, "Both Drs. Akanuma and Masuda could not trace the conception of Sambhogakaya in Nagarjuna's Mahaprajnaparamitasāstra. Dr. Akanuma also mentions his disinclination to accept the "Hymns of the Triple Body (Trikaaya)" ascribed by the Tibetans to Nagarjuna as a work of the famous Nagarjuna. (1) If the Karikas of Nagarjuna on the Tathagatakaya (2) be examined, it also becomes apparent that Nagarjuna was interested in giving an exposition of the real kaya (i.e. Dharmakaya or Svabhavakaya) only. To him the distinction between Sambhogakaya and Rupakaya was unimportant, as both were unreal. Thus, up to the time of Nagarjuna, the conception of Sambhogakaya was not distinguished from that of Rūpa-or Nirmanakaya." "The Doctrine of Kaya in Hinayana and Mahayana," 538-39.

287 Nāgārjuna // *Rājaparīkathāratnāvali* / *ratnāvali* // rgyal po la gtam bya ba rin po che'i phreng ba// Derge (sde dge): (D 4158) skyes rab / spring yig, ge 107a1-126a4, f. 115a "sangs rgyas rnams kyi gzugs sku ni, bsod nams tshogs las byung ba ste, chos kyi sku ni mdor bsdu na, rgyal o ye shes tshogs las 'khrung"



prays that by virtue of the wholesome deed of composing the text, ‘may all beings accumulate merit and wisdom, as a result of the accumulation, may they attain the two bodies of the Buddha that are born of merit and wisdom’.<sup>288</sup> Nāgārjuna mentions no restrictions in terms of the *rūpa-kāya* (form body) of the Buddha. In this way, the Buddha’s physical form is not regarded as the only criteria for Buddhahood, and is in fact secondary to the Buddha’s wisdom form.

## Concluding Remarks

The narratives of debate on a female Buddha symbolize two different views voiced through the characters involved. The central female figures represent the Mahāyāna philosophical view and are challenged by senior monk disciples of the Buddha, holding the Śrāvakayāna position. In all the above accounts, it is the senior monks Mahākaśyapa, Mahāmaudgalyāyana and Śāriputra who challenge the women. These are all highly-realized Arhats and honored by all Buddhist traditions, but they do not favor Mahāyāna ideals, and practices such as Bodhisattva and Buddhahood being open to all spiritual aspirants. Hence, while the Śrāvakayāna view represented by these senior monks claim a male body as the basis for attaining Buddhahood, the Mahāyāna view, and in particular that of early Mahāyāna philosophers such as Nāgārjuna, maintains gender is not relevant to attaining Buddhahood.

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<sup>288</sup> Nāgārjuna // *Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā-nāma* // *rigs pa drug cu pa'i tshig le'ur byas pa zhes bya ba*// Derge (sde dge): (D 3825) dbu ma, tsa 20b1-22b6, f. 22b “*dge ba 'di yis skye bo kun, ,bsod nams ye shes tsogs bsags te, ,bsod nams ye shes las byung ba'i, ,dam pa gnyis ni thob par shog*”

## Chapter Six

### Miraculous Transformations

#### Introduction

The goddess in the *Vimalkīrtinirdeśa sūtra* and Variegated Jewel, the Nāga girl from *Sāgaraparipṛccha*, refuted the Śrāvakayāna view that a male body is necessary for attaining Buddhahood. They did this following the Mahāyāna view as per Nāgārjuna's interpretation and retained their female bodies in spite of suggestions they transform into male bodies. Unlike the Nāga girl and the goddess, Vimaladatta transformed herself into a boy while demonstrating her power of truth that she would attain Buddhahood one day. There are more stories of Mahāyāna women such as Vimaladatta who transform from female to male.

A significant difference between the narratives of Vimaladatta and the ones I analyze in this chapter is the opponent or the challenger. In the previous chapter, the challengers were Śrāvakayāna personages such as Śāriputra, Mahākaśyapa and Mahāmaudgalyāyana. Ironically, there are instances where a male Mahāyāna Bodhisattva implies the impossibility of a female Buddha. A challenger representing the Śrāvakayāna view is reasonable, given their distinct view regarding women and Buddhahood. Hence, I argue that when a Mahāyāna

Bodhisattva advocates the relevance of gender in the realization of Buddhahood, it is a sign of conflicting views within the Mahāyāna itself.

Therefore, in this chapter I will be taking two narratives where Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas initiate the issue of gender in terms of attaining Buddhahood. Along with these narratives, I will attempt to establish the link between the other apparent Mahāyāna view with doctrinal and textual interpretations led by the Mahāyāna philosopher Asaṅga. His interpretation of a Buddha's body into three forms is one of his new interpretations that trigger the relevance of gender in Buddhahood. I will first analyze the narratives reflecting the Asaṅga's Mahāyāna view followed by the three-body theory of a Buddha to bring the messages of the narratives into context.

## **1. Sumati, the girl, versus Sumati, the monk**

The *Mahāratnakūta* (*dkon brtsegs*) is the second largest collection after Sūtra (*mdo sde*) in the Mahāyāna Buddhist canon preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations. It consists of forty-nine individual texts, one of such is *The Questions of Sumati* (*bu mo blo gros bzang mos zhus pa, sumatidārikā-paripṛcchā*).<sup>289</sup> Sumati was the eight-year-old daughter of a prominent personage in the Rajagṛha district of Bihar at the time of the historical Buddha Gautama. This text is of utmost significance, as it concerns a young girl's intellect and deep

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<sup>289</sup> *Ārya-sumatidārikā-paripṛcchā-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa bu mo blo gros bzang mos zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Derge (sde dge): (D 74) dkon brtsegs, ca 216a1-222a3 (vol. 43) ff. 216a – 222a

understanding of the Buddhist teachings. There have been previous studies on this narrative and its significance regarding gender, Bodhisattva practices and Buddhahood based on a Chinese translation.<sup>290</sup> My study here is based on a Tibetan translation of the text. The narrative starts with a description of the Buddha residing on Vulture Peak, Rajagṛha, with hundreds of monks and thousands of Bodhisattvas. At that time Sumati, the eight-year-old daughter of a householder named Ugra, comes to see the Buddha with her entourage. After prostrating and paying homage to the Buddha, Sumati expresses her wish to know about the Bodhisattva practices and the Buddha says she can ask whatever she wishes to know. Sumati starts asking various questions about Bodhisattvas and Buddhas and the Buddha gives her a detailed teaching based on these queries.

After receiving the teachings, Sumati pledged that she would follow entirely whatever the Buddha taught.<sup>291</sup> Just as Sumati pledged thus, Mahāmaudgalyāyana asks her, “As Bodhisattva practices are difficult to understand, when you pledge to follow them, is it because you have gained control of mind?”<sup>292</sup> Sumati replies by saying, “Through the power of truth and words of truth, if I will accomplish everything I pledged, may this world shake in

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<sup>290</sup> See Schuster, "Changing the Female Body: Wise Women and the Bodhisattva Career in Some Mahāratnakūṭasūtras," 29-31.; Paul and Wilson, *Women in Buddhism : Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition*: 199-211.

<sup>291</sup> *Ārya-sumatidārikā-pariprcchā-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa bu mo blo gros bzang mos zhush pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Derge (sde dge): (D 74) dkon brtsegs, ca 216a1-222a3 (vol. 43) ff. 216a – 218b

<sup>292</sup> Ibid f. 218b – “/bu mo/\_byang chub sems dpa' rnam kyis spyod pa ni nyams 'og tu chud par dka' na/\_khyod 'di lta bu \_yang dag par len par byed na/\_ci khyod kyis sems la dbang thob bam/”

six ways, may there be rains of heavenly flowers and un-played music.”<sup>293</sup> Just as she finished, the earth shook, heavenly flowers showered and un-played music was heard. Sumati added, “Through the power of truth and words of truth, if I will in the future become a Buddha like the present Buddha . . . may this assembly turn into golden color.”<sup>294</sup> The assembly turned into golden color just as Sumati wished. Mahāmaudgalyāyana was so amazed by Sumati’s power of truth and wisdom that he rose up from his seat, paid homage to the Buddha and said, “I prostrate to the Bodhisattvas who generated the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for the first time and to all the Bodhisattvas.”<sup>295</sup>

This brings to an end the interaction between Sumati and Mahāmaudgalyāyana, who was initially skeptical when Sumati pledged to adopt on all the Bodhisattva practices as taught by the Buddha. However, he is now convinced of Sumati’s high realization and does not challenge further. In fact, he acknowledges her as a Bodhisattva and prostrates before her. This is an enormous shift in a Śrāvakayāna personage’s outlook towards a female in

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid ff. 218b -219a – “|*btsun pa mo'u 'gal gyi bu/\_bden pa dang bden pa'i tshig des gang gis bdag gis chos thams cad yongs su rdzogs par byed par 'gyur ba'i bden pa dang/\_bden pa'i tshig des \_stong gsum gyi stong chen po'i 'jig rten gyi khams 'di rnam pa drug tu g.yos te/\_lha'i me tog gi char 'bab par gyur cig/\_ma dkrol bar yang sil snyan gyi sgra 'byung bar gyur cig ces byas \_so|*”

<sup>294</sup> Ibid f. 219a – “|*btsun pa mo'u 'gal gyi bu/\_bden pa dang bden pa'i tshig gang gis/\_da ltar gyi de \_bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas shakya thub pa ji lta ba de bzhin du/\_ma 'ongs pa'i dus na bdag de bzhin gshegs par 'gyur zhing/\_sangs rgyas kyi zhing der bdag la bdud kyang 'byung bar mi 'gyur ba dang/\_ngan song rnams kyi ming yang med pa dang/\_bud med kyi skyon rnams med par \_'gyur ba'i bden pa dang bden pa'i tshig des/\_'khor 'di gser gyi kha dog can du gyur cig*”

<sup>295</sup> Ibid f. 219a – “|*de nas tshe dang ldan pa mod gal gyi bu chen po stan las langs te chos gos phrag pa gcig tu bgos nas pus mo gyas pa'i lha nga sa la btsugs te, bcom ldan 'das ga la ba de logs su thal mo sbyar ba btud nas bcom ldan 'das la 'di skad ces gsol to, bcom ldan 'das bdag ni sems dang po bskyed pa nas bzung ste byang chub sems dpa' thams cad la phyag 'tshal lo*”

acknowledging her as a Bodhisattva. Sumati demonstrated that no matter how difficult the Bodhisattva practices were, she would follow them. Most importantly, the accomplishment of Sumati's realization of Buddhahood in the future is backed by the power of her prayers and truth.

However, it transpires that Mahāmaudgalyāyana was not the only one from this group of the Buddha's followers who challenged Sumati's level of intellect and aspiration. Mañjuśrī, a Bodhisattva, starts testing Sumati's understanding by asking her philosophical and ontological questions such as the definition of Bodhisattva, Buddhahood and so on. After Sumati answered all these to his satisfaction, Mañjuśrī said to the Buddha, "It is amazing that this girl Sumati has such profound understanding (*zab mo 'i bzod pa*)."<sup>296</sup> To which the Buddha said:

It is indeed, as you say. I generated my resolution to attain Buddhahood only after the girl Sumati had already been on the path of Buddhahood for thirty eons. Even you have been led to the stage of non-arising-of-phenomena (*mi skye ba 'i chos*) by this girl Sumati.<sup>297</sup>

After hearing from the Buddha that Sumati was his master previously, Mañjuśrī rose from his seat, prostrated to Sumati and said:

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid f. 220a – “*de nas bcom ldan 'das la 'jam dpal gzhon nur gyur pas 'di skad ces gsol to, bcom ldan 'das 'di ltar bu mo blo gros bzang mo 'di zab mo 'i bzod pa dang ldan pa ni ngo mtshar lags so*”

<sup>297</sup> Ibid f. 220a- “*bcom ldan 'das kyis bka' stsal pa, 'lam dpal de de bzhin no, ji skad smad pa de bzhin te, bu mo blo gros bzang mo yang dag par rdzogs pa 'i byang chub la yang dag par bzhugs nas bskal pa sum cu lon pa 'i 'og tu gdod ngas bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa 'i byang chub tu sems bskyed do, khyod kyang bu mo blo gros bzang mo 'di nyid kyis mi skye ba 'i chos la bzhugs par byas so*”

Mañjuśrī: I am seeing my master after a long time.

Sumati: Mañjuśrī! Do not conceptualize (*ma rtog shig*), because, to have reached patience/tolerance of non-arising-of-phenomena is to not conceptualize.

Mañjuśrī: Why has master still not changed from the female body?

Sumati: Mañjuśrī! To say, this is a woman and this is a man, is objectification (*dmigs pa*). Yet, I will clear your doubt. By the truth that I will in the future become a Buddha, may I become male.<sup>298</sup>

Instantly after her utterance, Sumati appeared in a male body clad in saffron robes. Now a male Bodhisattva, Sumati said that through the very truth of *him* becoming a Buddha in the future, may *he* now become ordained through the ordination method known as ‘come bhikṣu’ (*dge slong tshur shog, ehi bhikṣu*) and turn into a thirty-year-old highly realized monk. All happened as said, and Sumati is now addressed in the text as the Bodhisattva Sumati (*blo gros bzang po*) when the Buddha proclaims *his* future Buddhahood, “Mañjuśrī! This Bodhisattva Sumati. . . will in the future come to the world as the Buddha Śrīratnagūṇagarbha (*yon tan rin chen dpal gyi snying po*).”<sup>299</sup>

The gist of the story so far is that an eight-year-old girl named Sumati comes to see the Buddha, asks questions about Bodhisattva practices of the

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid f. 220a – “*bdag gis slob dpon yun ring mo zhig na mthong zhes kyan smras so, blo gros bzang mos smras pa, ‘jam dpal ma trog shig, de ci ‘i phyir zhe na, mi skye ba ‘i chos la bzod pa ni rnam par mi rtog pa ‘i phyir ro, ‘jam dpal gyis smras pa, ci ‘i phyir slop dpon gyis bud med kyi lus las da dung ma bsgyur, blo gros bzang mos smras pa, ‘jam dpal ‘di ni bud med do ‘di ni skyes pa ‘o zhes bya ba de ni dmigs pa ste, ‘on kyang khyod kyi the tshom med par bya ‘o, bden pa gang gis bdag ma ‘ongs pa ‘i dus na de bzin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa ‘i sangs rgyas su ‘gyur ba ‘I bden pa des bdag skyes par gyur cig*”

<sup>299</sup> Ibid f. 220b – 221a – “*/de nas bcom ldan ‘das kyis ‘jam dpal \_gzhon nur gyur pa la bka’ stsal pa/\_‘jam dpal/\_byang chub sems dpa’ blo gros bzang po ‘di ni de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa ‘i sangs rgyas/\_rig pa dang zhabs su ldan pa/\_bde bar gshegs pa/\_jig rten mkhyen pa/\_skyes bu ‘dul ba ‘i kha lo sgyur ba/\_bla na med pa/\_lha dang mi rnams kyi ston pa/\_sangs rgyas bcom \_ldan ‘das yon tan rin chen dpal gyi snying po zhes bya bar ‘jig rten du ‘byung bar ‘gyur ro/*”

Buddha, who then gives her teachings as per her request. After hearing his teachings, Sumati pledges to take on all the Bodhisattva practices he has outlined. Mahāmaudgalyāyana intervenes by cautioning her that Bodhisattva practices are very difficult to uphold. However, Sumati is not discouraged and proves her determination to follow such practices. She also demonstrated that she would become a Buddha in the future through the truth ritual.

Mahāmaudgalyāyana is convinced by Sumati's genuine aspiration and determination and acknowledges her as a Bodhisattva with a high level of understanding.

Next is another challenger who is himself a Bodhisattva. Mañjuśrī initially engages in an intellectual debate on philosophical and ontological issues with Sumati and is amazed by her high level of intelligence. He reports his amazement to the Buddha, who says that Sumati had been on the path to Buddhahood long before the Buddha himself first made his resolution to attain Buddhahood. Moreover, the Buddha also said that Mañjuśrī himself was previously led to the stage of realization called 'tolerance in non-arising of phenomena' (*mi skye ba'i chos la bzod pa*) by Sumati herself. Delighted to be reunited with his former master, Mañjuśrī paid homage to Sumati and expressed his reverence to her after a long time. What follows this is of utmost significance in the current narrative. After Sumati admonishes Mañjuśrī by saying 'do not conceptualize' – referring to his expression of being delighted to meet his former master, he asks Sumati why she still has not changed her female body. In response, Sumati transforms herself into a male body, even though she does it in



the form of establishing the volatility of male and female. There is yet another narrative of a similar nature in another Mahāyāna text.

## 2. Candrottārā, the girl, versus Candrottārā, the monk

*The Sūtra Predicting Candrottārā (bu mo zla mchog lung bstan pa, candrottārā-dārikā-vyākaraṇa*<sup>300</sup> is about a young girl and her intelligence and aspiration to attain Buddhahood. It starts with the Buddha residing in Vaiśālī with hundreds of Arhat monks and thousands of Bodhisattvas. Around that time, a daughter was born with exceptional signs and symbols to Vimalakīrti and his wife Vimalā who were residents of the town. The child was named Candrottārā, the Supreme Moon, by her parents because of a moon-like radiance over the house during her birth. It is said that Candrottārā instantly grew up as an eight-year-old girl with such unmatched beauty and grandeur that soon her parents were receiving marriage proposals for her from wealthy men in the town. Vimalakīrti not only received an enormous number of presents along with marriage proposals, he was under considerable pressure, subject to threats from some of the men seeking his daughter in the event he rejected their proposal.

Seeing her father caught in this situation because of her, Candrottārā offered him a solution. She would choose her groom herself after seven days of

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300 *Ārya-candrottārā-dārikā-vyākaraṇa-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa bu mo zla mchog lung bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Derge (sde dge): (D 191) mdo sde, tsa 224b5-243b5 (vol. 61); Lhasa (lha sa): (H 192) mdo sde, ba 356a7-386a5

For a previous study on this text based on a Chinese translation, see Paul and Wilson, *Women in Buddhism : Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition*: 190-99.

observing the eight precepts for laity.<sup>301</sup> Interestingly, on the sixth night of her observance of the precepts, from nowhere there appeared a lotus with a Buddha statue in Candrottārā's hand. When asked by Candrottārā, the statue told her that the Buddha had sent it to her. Thereafter, Candrottārā and the statue engaged in a long conversation about the various qualities and attributes of the Buddha. The following day, which was the seventh day of her observance, Candrottārā came out of her house holding the statue. Many people had gathered to see Candrottārā choose her groom, but when she saw the crowd, she rose into the air and began giving teachings to the crowd. The entire crowd was much impressed by her teachings and revered her as a teacher, sister and mother; those who had initially desired to marry her giving up such thoughts. Candrottārā then descended and along with hundreds of people, set off to see the Buddha in person. While Candrottārā and the people following her were on their way, Śāriputra was heading towards the town on alms round with over five hundred monks. Śāriputra and Candrottārā engaged in a lengthy dialogue on various philosophical concepts. Amazed by Candrottārā's high level of understanding, Mahākāśyapa, who was with Śāriputra, suggested that instead of going for alms, they should follow Candrottārā to the Buddha, since he thought that she would definitely request great teachings from the Buddha.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> The eight lay precepts are abstention from 1) taking life, 2) taking what is not given, 3) sexual misconduct, 4) false speaking, 5) drinking liquor, 6) big or high seat, 7) songs, dances and entertainments, 8) eating after noon. (*srog gcod dang, ma byin len, mi tsangs spyod, rdzun smra, chang 'thung, khri stan che mtho, glu gar dang dri rgyan, phyi dro'i kha zas*)

<sup>302</sup> *Ārya-candrottārā-dārikā-vyākaraṇa-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa bu mo zla mchog lung bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo// Lhasa mdo sde ba, f. 372b – “/de nas

Thereafter, Candrottāra and the people following her reached where the Buddha was residing, paid homage and offered flowers. Meanwhile, the Bodhisattvas who were present started testing her intelligence by asking questions one after the other. One of the Bodhisattvas named Amoghadarśana brings up the gender question and says to Candrottārā:

Amoghadarśana: Girl! Since Buddhahood cannot be realized with a female body, why you do not change yours?

Candrottārā: Noble son! All phenomena are in the nature of emptiness and emptiness can neither be reversed nor changed.<sup>303</sup>

Other Bodhisattvas and Śāriputra also asked Candrottārā many questions, but none related to her gender. Buddha, praising Candrottārā for the way she had answered all the questions, closed the discussion with: “Girl! Well done, well done, well done the way you spoke.”<sup>304</sup> After that, Candrottāra expressed her aspirations to take on Bodhisattva practices and eventually attain Buddhahood, to which the Buddha smiled. Ānanda, who was also there, rose and asked the Buddha what his smiling indicated, then the Buddha told all gathered about the

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*gnas brtan 'od srung chen pos gnas brtan shA radwa ti'i bu la 'di skad ces smras so/\_tshe dang ldan \_pa shA radwa ti'i bu/\_di lta bu'i spobs pa dang ldan pa'i bu mo 'di de bzhin gshegs pa'i spyen sngar 'gro bas na der ni chos bstan pa chen po'ang 'byung bar 'gyur bas bdag \_cag zan bcad de phyir log na ni 'o bu cag la legs kyi/\_bdag cag chos mnyan pa de lta bu las phyi rol tu gyur na ni ma yin no/\_de nas nyan thos chen po de dag phyir phyogs \_te de nyid nas phyir log par gyur to/\_*”

<sup>303</sup> Ibid f. 373b – “*/de nas byang chub sems dpa' mthong ba don yod kyis bu mo zla mchog la 'di skad ces smras \_so/\_bu mo/\_bud med kyi lus kyis ni byang chub mngon par rdzogs par 'tshang rgya bar mi nus na khyod ci'i phyir bud med kyi lus sgyur bar mi byed/\_bu mos smras pa/\_rigs \_kyi bu/\_chos thams cad ni stong pa nyid kyi mtshan nyid lags pas stong pa nyid la ni ldog pa dang/\_gyur ba ma mchis lags so/*”

<sup>304</sup> Ibid f. 377a – “*/de nas bcom ldan 'das kyis bu mo zla mchog la legs so zhes bya ba byin te/\_bu mo/\_legs so/\_legs so/\_bu mo/\_khyod de skad ston pa ni yang khyod legs so/*”

past lives of Candrottārā and her lives culminating in her attaining Buddhahood as the Buddha Candrottārā after many eons.<sup>305</sup>

Candrottārā remained in her female body throughout her interaction with the Bodhisattvas and Śāriputra. However, after hearing the Buddha's prediction of her future Buddhahood, she leapt joyfully to the height of seven tāla (palm) trees; Candrottārā was transformed into a boy while she was in the air.<sup>306</sup> With the new body of a boy, Candrottāra descended and paid homage to the Buddha. The boy then sought permission from the Buddha to go forth as an ordained monk. Candrottāra was no longer an adult and so the Buddha advised 'the boy' to get his parents' permission to go forth as an ordained. Amazed by the miraculous transformation, Candrottārā's parents happily let him go forth and Candrottāra then became Bodhisattva Candrottrā, the monk.

Like Sumati, Candrottārā, a young girl, is the sole focus of this text, which again focuses on her intelligence, compassion and miraculous power. Nevertheless, the result is that Candrottārā transforms into a male body and is eventually ordained as a monk just as Sumati was. The striking similarity is that both Sumati and Candrottāra not only transformed from female to male, they then became ordained monks. Another significant similarity in these two narratives is that the Śrāvakayāna personages Mahāmaudgalyāyana and Śāriputra

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid f. 383a – “/bskal pa bye ba stong \_phrag brgyad cu na/\_rgyal ba zla ba mchog ces bya bar 'gyur/”

<sup>306</sup> Ibid f. 383b – “/de nas bu mo zla mchog gis bcom ldan 'das kyi spyen sngar bdag nyid mngon \_sum du lung bstan pa thos nas dga' ba dang/\_mchog tu dga' ba de nyid kyis shing ta la bdun srid tsam du nam mkha' la mngon par 'phags so/\_mngon par 'phags ma thag \_tu bu mo de bud med kyi lus sgyur cing skyes pa'i lus mngon par grub par gyur pa dang/”

test the intelligence of the girls but do not explicitly raise the impossibility of a female Buddha notion. Rather, it is two Bodhisattvas who bring up the matter.

Despite these similarities, there are also differences between these two narratives. Sumati received her prediction of future Buddhahood after her transformation, while Candrottārā transformed after she received her prediction. While Sumati transforms herself into a male body as a result of Mañjuśrī's raising the issue of gender, Candrottārā was in fact able to pass that stage of Amoghadarśana's questioning of her gender. While Sumati initiated her transformation, Candrottārā does not initiate her own, which simply occurs as a result of her joy.

Similar questions regarding their gender were raised to the Nāga girl, Vimaladatta and the goddess, as discussed in the previous chapter. In these three narratives, it was one of the senior monk disciples who raised such questions. Senior monk disciples are well known for representing the Śrāvakayāna tradition, which differed from Mahāyāna regarding the Bodhisattva path and Buddhahood. Their view ranges from the utter impossibility of female Bodhisattvas to their possibility to a certain point. Consequently, their stance was that someone in a female body could never attain Buddhahood. On the other hand, as has been seen in the previous chapter, the Mahāyānas rejected such a view and regarded gender as irrelevant in the realization of Buddhahood. Therefore, when Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī and Bodhisattva Amoghadarśana raised the issue of gender to Sumati and Candrottārā, it is a different dimension within the Mahāyāna tradition itself.

### 3. Asaṅga and his Bodhisattvabhūmi: a New Dimension of the Mahāyāna Tradition

Although it is not explicit in the narratives, I argue that the two Bodhisattvas (Mañjuśrī and Amoghadarśana) are representing a view that differs from the Mahāyāna tradition based on Nāgārjuna's interpretation. In fact, they are representing a different Mahāyāna view, which, in spite of belonging to the Mahāyāna division, insists on the relevance of gender in terms of the attainment of Buddhahood just as the Śrāvakayāna did. I argue that this view is associated with the works of Asaṅga and is aligned with Śrāvakayāna's androcentric Buddhahood. Asaṅga as a Mahāyāna philosopher is the instigator of the other half of the Mahāyāna tradition variously known as Yogācāra (*rnal 'byor spyod pa*), Cittamātra (*sems tsam*) and the System of Vast Activity (*rgya cher spyod pa'i lugs*) which differs greatly from Nāgārjuna's tradition known as Madhyamaka (*dbu ma pa*) or the System of Profound View (*zab mo lta ba'i lugs*).

Both Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga equally uphold the Bodhisattva ideals, in view of the soteriological goal of omniscience/Buddhahood (*thar pa dang thams cad mkhyen pa*) in contrast with Śrāvakayāna's Arhat ideal of liberation/Arhathood (*thar pa tsam don gnyer*). Although they are recognized as the forefathers of Mahāyāna Buddhism, individually their views differ greatly regarding ontological, philosophical and hermeneutical matters. According to his work *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Asaṅga's view on Buddhahood is clearly androcentric:

. . . women cannot achieve the supreme full-enlightenment, because the Bodhisattva after crossing the first incalculable eon has given up womanhood and will never be reborn as a woman until the realization of the full-enlightenment...<sup>307</sup>

The Buddhahood described in this passage is not different from that described by Sarvāstivāda discussed in chapter four. According to Asaṅga, the path to such a Buddhahood takes three incalculable eons of Bodhisattva practice. Incalculable here not only means uncountable, it is also a name of a particular eon with the number followed by sixty zeros (*grangs med, asaṃkhyā*). According to Asaṅga's view presented in this text, during these three periods, after completing the first incalculable eon a Bodhisattva will never be reborn as a woman. This means that after the successful completion of their Bodhisattva practice in the latter two incalculable eons, a Bodhisattva who achieves Buddhahood will always be in a male body.

This statement not only strikingly echoes the Śrāvakayāna, particularly its view of the impossibility of a female Buddha, it strongly resonates with the demarcation of Bodhisattva stages found in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* discussed earlier in chapter four. There is a strong connection behind the similarity of these two views and the works in which they are found. Although *Abhidharmakośa* is a text belonging to the Śrāvakayāna tradition and

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<sup>307</sup> Asaṅga // *yogācārabhūmau-bodhisattvabhūmiḥ* // *rnal 'byor spyod pa'i sa las byang chub sems dpa'i sa*// Derge (sde dge): (D 4037) sems tsam, wi 1b1-213a7, f. 51a – “/bud med kyis kyang bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub mngon par rdzogs par 'tshang mi rgya ste/\_de ci'i phyir zhe na/\_di ltar byang chub sems dpa' ni bskal pa grangs med pa dang po 'das pa nyid nas bud med kyi dngos po spangs \_pas na/\_nam byang chub kyi snying po la gnas kyi bar du nams kyang bud med du mi 'gyur ba dang/”

*Bodhisattvabhūmi* is a Mahāyāna treatise, the commonality between these two works and the views expressed therein is because the two authors were brothers. It is well-documented that Vasubandhu was initially a Śrāvakayānist and only became a Mahāyānist later, and it is also believed that Vasubandhu's becoming a Mahāyānist is mainly due to his brother Asaṅga's influence. However, what is not widely known among the traditionalists is Asaṅga's earlier affiliation with a certain Śrāvakayāna sect before becoming a Mahāyānist. While according to Paramārtha both Asaṅga and Vasubandhu were initially Sarvāstivādins, Hsuan-tsang claims Asaṅga was previously from Mahīśāsaka – another Śrāvakayāna sub-school – before he became a Mahāyānist.<sup>308</sup>

*Bodhisattvabhūmi* is not an independent work but a part of Asaṅga's *Yogācarabhūmi* – encyclopedic in nature for it covers a vast array of subjects and is voluminous. Doctrinally, *Yogācarabhūmi* and thus *Bodhisattvabhūmi*'s position is also not entirely Mahāyāna as has been observed by Mullens - "The YBH's exposition clearly retains a close connection with non-Mahāyāna Buddhism, as has been noted above. It should, therefore, not be surprising that the BBH section

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<sup>308</sup> Alex Wayman, *Analysis of the Sravakabhumi Manuscript* (Los Angeles: Uni California Press, 1961). 25.;

See also J D Wills, *On Knowing Reality* (Varanasi Motilal Banarsidass, 2002). 3-66.; In a study based on Chinese translations of sources related to Mahīśāsaka and Sarvāstivādins, Cheng says that the former was against the idea of women attaining Buddhahood while the latter thinks it is possible through transformation from female to male. Mahāyānists (ca. 150) refute this latter view of Sarvāstivāda saying that in order to attain Buddhahood, a woman needs to transform into a man. However, some later Mahāyāna works adopt the Mahīśāsaka and Sarvāstivāda view on women and juxtapose them with Mahāyāna views. See, Cheng Mei Ku, "The Mahisasaka View of Women," in *Buddhist Thought and Ritual*, ed. David J Kalupahana (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 109, 15.



of the work shows this influence”.<sup>309</sup> Consequently, though Asaṅga was probably already a Mahāyānist when he wrote *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, I believe he was still influenced by the Śrāvākayāna doctrinal views owing to his prior affiliation before his entry into Mahāyāna. This is evidenced by his description of the supreme-full-enlightenment – Buddhahood - in the above passage, which is not different from the Sarvāstivāda’s definition of Buddhahood.

The only difference is that the Sarvāstivādins, as with all sub-schools of Śrāvākayāna, believed in only one form of a Buddha, which takes the form of the historical Buddha. On the other hand, while maintaining the form of Buddha as expressed above, Asaṅga proposes other forms as well. This is known from *Sūtralāṅkāra*, a work believed to be authored by him, in which Buddhahood is described as having three bodily forms – *tri-kāya*. Therefore, the androcentric Buddhahood that Asaṅga describes in the given passage refers to the ‘supreme emanation form’ of the ‘manifested body’ (*sprul sku’i ya gyal mchog gi sprul sku, uttam-nirmaṇa-kāya*) of a Buddha.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>309</sup>James Gerald Mullens, "Principles and Practices of Buddhist Education in Asaṅga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi*" (McMaster University, 1994), 42.

<sup>310</sup> See Sāgaramegha’s commentary to *Bodhisattvabhūmi*:  
Sāgaramegha//*Yogācārabhūmaubodhisattvabhūmivyākhyā*// *rnal 'byor spyod pa'i sa las byang chub sems dpa'i sa'i rnam par bshad pa*// Derge (sde dge): (D 4047) sems tsam, yi 1b1-338a7, 114b -116a

#### 4. The Three Body (*tri-kāya*) Theory

The three bodily forms of a Buddha is known as tri-kāya (*sku gsum*, *tri kāya*) which means ‘three – tri-bodies’. According to Khangkar, the first mention of *tri-kāya* theory appeared in *Sūtralāṅkāra*: as 1) truth body (*chos sku*, *dharma-kāya*), 2) complete enjoyment body (*longs sku*, *sambhoga-kāya*) and 3) manifested body (*sprul sku*, *nirmaṇa-kāya*).<sup>311</sup> The traditionalists believe that Aśaṅga brought *Sūtrālaṅkāra*, attributed to Maitrīya - a celestial Bodhisattva and the future Buddha, to the earth.<sup>312</sup> According to tri-kāya theory, while the fully awakened aspect of the Buddha’s mind is his truth body (*chos sku*, *dharma-kāya*), that in which he appears in the celestial Bodhisattva realm is known as the complete enjoyment body (*longs sku*, *sambhoga-kāya*). The physical body in which the historical Buddha appeared in this world is the body he manifested for earthly beings, this form is known as his manifested body (*sprul sku*, *nirmaṇa-kāya*).<sup>313</sup>

##### *Dharma-kāya*

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311 Khangkar Tsultrim Kalsang, *On the History of Buddhist Doctrine in India (The New Blue Annals) Part I*, Japanese and Tibetan Buddhist Cultural Series IX (Kathmandu: Tibetan Buddhist Cultural Association, 2007). 363-64.; Maitreya // *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkārikā* // *theḡ pa chen po mdo sde'i rgyan zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa*// Derge (sde dge): (D 4020) sems tsam, phi 1b1-39a4, f. 11b3 – “*sku gsum dag gis sangs rgyas kyi/\_sku bsdus par ni shes bya ste/\_sku gsum dag gis rang bzhin gyi/\_don 'di rten dang bcas par bstan/\_*”

312 However, there are modern scholars who think Maitrīya the author of *Sūtralāṅkāra* was a historical person and not the celestial Bodhisattva Maitrīya – the future Buddha. For detailed study regarding the authorship of works related to Maitrīya and Aśaṅga, see *A Synthetic Study of the Treatises of Maitreyanatha* (New Delhi: Western Tibetan Cultural Association, 1984).

313 In *Sandhinirmocanasutra*, the terms used for the two bodies are *dharma-kāya* and *nirmaṇa-kāya*, the latter being a new term for *rupa-kāya*. See *On the History of Buddhist Doctrine in India (The New Blue Annals) Part I*: 363.

The truth body (*chos sku, dharma kāya*) is the only real form of a Buddha that is the basis of the other two forms mentioned above: complete enjoyment body (*longs sku, sambhoga-kāya*) and manifested body (*sprul sku, nirmaṇa-kāya*).<sup>314</sup> Dharma-kāya is beyond the expression of language and symbols and is devoid of all physical signs and attributes. Nevertheless, this form is the culmination of all understanding, compassion and omniscience that one attains having achieved Buddhahood.<sup>315</sup> Dharma-kāya, in other words, is the Buddha-nature that pervades all sentient beings. However, simply being pervaded by the Dharma-kāya/Buddha-nature is insufficient; sentient beings are not able to realize it in the form of attaining Buddhahood so long as it is covered by ignorance and negative/afflictive emotions. Hence, the Bodhisattva path is the training to uncover this true nature and the potential of the mind by removing all negative emotions and ignorance.

The doctrine of Buddha-nature is itself another vast subject, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However, to better understand Asaṅga's view, it is useful to note the following distinction between he and Nāgārjuna. Based on the Buddha-nature doctrine, Mahāyānists such as Nāgārjuna argue that because Buddha-nature pervades all sentient beings, they are of one

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<sup>314</sup>There are also ways of interpreting the Buddha's body into four forms as in the *Abhisamayalāṅkarakarika*, by dividing the dharma-kāya into two: *ngo bo nyid sku, svabhavika-kāya* and *ye shes chos sku, jñāna-dharma-kāya*. See Haribhadra // *Abhisamayālaṅkāra-nāma-prajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstravṛtti*// *mngon rtogs rgyan gyi 'grel pa*// sde dge, shes phyin, ja 78b1-140a7

<sup>315</sup> Nāgārjuna// *Dharmadhātu-stotra*// *chos kyi dbyings su bstod pa*// Derge (sde dge): (D 1118) bstod tshogs, ka 63b5-67b3, f. 66b - “/ji ltar yar ngo'i bco lnga la/\_zla ba rdzogs par 'gyur ba ltar/\_de bzhin sa yi mthar thug na/\_chos kyi sku yang rdzogs shing gsal/”

spiritual disposition (*rigs gcig, eka-gotra*). Accordingly, there is ultimately only one soteriological vehicle (*mthar thug theg pa cig, eka-yāna*) which is the Bodhisattva vehicle (*byang sems theg pa, Bodhisattvayāna*) culminating in the realization of Buddhahood. Therefore, the spiritual aspirants aspiring for Arhathood and Pratyekabuddha are only provisional, as they are also eventually able to attain Buddhahood.

On the other hand, Asaṅga argues that although Buddha-nature pervades all sentient beings, the fact that sentient beings have hierarchical spiritual dispositions (*rigs sna tshogs, aneka gotra*), ultimately results in three soteriological vehicles (*mthar thug theg pa gsum, tri-yāna*). Therefore, only those sentient beings with their spiritual disposition inclined towards the Bodhisattva ideal (*byang sems rigs, bodhisattva gotra*) are able to achieve Buddhahood. Others with their spiritual dispositions inclined towards Śrāvakayāna's Arhathood (*nyan thos rigs, śrāvaka gotra*) and Pratyekabuddha (*rang rgyal rigs, pratyekabuddha gotra*) can only achieve their designated spiritual goals.<sup>316</sup> This is one of the fundamental differences between the two distinct Mahāyāna views, which results in Asaṅga's view of an androcentric Buddhahood aligned with the Śrāvakayāna view.

*Sambhoga-kāya*

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<sup>316</sup> For Asaṅga's view on spiritual dispositions (*rigs, gotra*), see Asaṅga// *yogācārabhūmau-bodhisattvabhūmiḥ*// *rnal 'byor spyod pa'i sa las byang chub sems dpa'i sa// sems tsam wi ff. 1a -7a*; Also, see Mullens, "Principles and Practices of Buddhist Education in Asaṅga's Bodhisattvabhūmi," 116.

Sambhoga-kāya is described as the form of the Buddha visible only to those Bodhisattvas in their final stage of the Bodhisattva path, at the brink of attaining Buddhahood. It is described as a highly subtle form of a body yet to be adorned with thirty-two major signs of a great being. As one of the thirty-two major signs is exclusively related to a male body, this form of the Buddha is also believed to be in a male bodily form only. This is the additional body of a Buddha the tri-kāya theorists developed, which is not found in the early *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures, but may be present in some later ones as observed by Dutt:

It is only in the recast version of the Pancaviṃsati that the expression Sambhoga-kāya was introduced by way of giving a gist of the topic. In it, the Sambhoga-kāya is described thus: Bodhisattvas, after attaining bodhi by means of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, take a body endowed with thirty-two major and eighty minor signs with a view to preach the doctrines of Mahāyāna to the bodhisattvas and at the same time to arouse in their minds joy, delight and love for the excellent dharma.<sup>317</sup>

This form of a Buddha's body becomes the basis of another form – the manifested bodies (*sprul sku, nirmāṇa-kāya*).

### *Nirmāṇa-kāya*

Nirmāṇa-kāya, the manifested body of a Buddha for earthly beings, is believed to appear in the world in three ways. These are 1) incarnated emanation (*skye ba sprul sku, jāt-nirmaṇa-kāya*) - emanating in whatever incarnated form is

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<sup>317</sup> Dutt says, "In the Abhisamayalankarakarika and the recast version of the Pancaviṃsati-sahasrika Prānaparamita, Sambhogakaya denotes the subtle body, which the Buddhas adopted for preaching their doctrines to Bodhisattvas, and Dharmakaya the body purified by the practice of the bodhipaksika and other dharma, which make a Buddha." - Dutt, "The Doctrine of Kaya in Hinayana and Mahayana," 518-19,38.

necessary – humans, animals, trees, bridges and so on,<sup>318</sup> 2) artistic emanation (*bzo bo sprul sku, śilp-nirmaṇa-kāya*) - emanating with various artistic and professional skills<sup>319</sup> and 3) the supreme emanation (*mchog gi sprul sku, uttam-nirmaṇa-kāya*) - which is to appear in a teacher figure by enacting twelve acts as did the historical Buddha.<sup>320</sup>

### *Supreme Emanation (mchog gi sprul sku, uttam-nirmaṇa-kāya)*

This third manifestation known as the supreme emanation appears in the world conforming to the notions of that particular world and people, and is thus most efficacious and beneficial to them in showing the path to Buddhahood. According to the *tri-kāya* theorists, the historical Buddha Śākyamuni assumed the manifested body (*sprul sku, nirmaṇa-kāya*).

As the Śrāvakayānas, the *tri-kāya* theorists also claim that this particular form always appears in male form. Not only was the present historical Buddha

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<sup>318</sup> sems can rnam 'dul ba'i ched du brgya byin dang/ ri dwags/ bse ru/ bya/ chu/ zam pa/ ljon shing sogs skye gnas sna tshogs su skye bar ston pa/

<sup>319</sup> sprul sku gsum gyi nang tshan zhig ste/ sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das kyis gdul bya 'dul ba'i ched du bzo bo rnam pa sna tshogs su sprul pa dper na dri za rab dga' 'dul ba'i phyir dri za'i pi wang gtong bar sprul pa lta bu'o/

<sup>320</sup> gdul bya thun mong ba'i snang ngor mdzad pa bcu gnyis kyi tshul bstan te 'gro ba 'dul ba'i sku'i rnam par sprul pa'o/

The twelve deeds of the Buddha (*mdzas pa bcu gnyis*): 1) Descending from Tushita Heaven, ('pho ba). 2) Entering the mother's womb, (lhum zhugs). 3) Taking birth, (bltams pa). 4) Becoming skilled in worldly arts and demonstrating physical prowess, (bzo dang). 5) Enjoying a retinue of queens, (rol rtse). 6) Renouncing the world, (nges 'byung). 7) Practicing austerities and renouncing them, (dka' spyad drug). 8) Going to the essence of awakening (Going towards the Bodhi Tree), (gshegs), 9) Defeating Mara, (bdud sde bcom). 10) Attaining total enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, (byang chub). 11) Turning the Wheel of the Dharma, (chos 'khor). 12) Departing for the ultimate peace of parinirvana, (myang 'das)

born as a male and a prince but all the future Buddhas manifesting in the form of supreme-emanation (*mchog gi sprul sku, uttam-nirmaṇa-kāya*) of a Buddha are always male and born into a high caste. It is a Buddha's deliberate appearance as a worldly person demonstrating his achievement of Buddhahood for the first time in that life, when he has already become enlightened in reality. This is believed to be a skilful means of setting an example for people aspiring to Buddhahood and the Buddha himself is quoted in *Sadharmapuṇḍarika* as saying:

Oh noble sons! Although I realized Buddhahood many incalculable eons ago, I sometimes enact these skilful methods to train sentient beings; therefore, it does not mean that I am lying.<sup>321</sup>

With the doctrinal context of Buddhahood in Asaṅga's Mahāyāna at the background, I will now attempt to interpret the gender challenges Sumati and Candrottārā faced and their eventual transformation into male bodies as monks. Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Amoghadarśana were likely referring to the supreme emanation form (of the manifested body of a Buddha) when they raised the question of their gender to the girls Sumati and Candrottārā. Sumati, being acclaimed as intellectually highly realized and someone long on the path to Buddhahood indicates that she is on the verge of crossing the first incalculable

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321 *Saddharmapuṇḍarika-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // *dam pa'i chos pad ma dkar po zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*// Derge (sde dge): (D 113) mdo sde, ja 1b1-180b7 (vol. 51), Lhasa (lha sa): (H 116) mdo sde, ja 1b1-285b2 (vol. 53), Lhasa f. 192a – “*rigs kyi bu dag \_de bzhin du nga'ang bskal pa bye ba khrag khrig brgya stong grangs med dpag tu med pa nas/\_bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i \_byang chub 'di mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas mod kyi/\_ngas skabs skabs su thabs mkhas pa 'di lta bu dag sems can rnams gdul ba'i phyir bstan te/\_gnas der \_nga la brdzun du smra bar 'gyur ba gang yang med do*”

For further discussion on Kāya theory, see Dutt, "The Doctrine of Kaya in Hinayana and Mahayana," 532.

eon on the path to Buddhahood. Her refuting the notion of intrinsic maleness and femaleness as such, eventually transforming herself into a male body could be a symbolic indication of the Bodhisattva giving up femalehood after crossing the first incalculable eon.

Similarly, Candrottārā's transformation taking place at the height of seven Tāla trees is most likely a metaphor implying that a female Bodhisattva is only able to cross the first incalculable eon. Her transformation into a young boy midair is a symbolic relinquishment of the female body prior to advancing towards the second incalculable eon. Hence, after both Sumati and Candrottārā transformed into males, they were symbolically Bodhisattvas in the second incalculable eon on their path to Buddhahood. The Buddhahood they were aspiring to is the supreme emanation (*mchog gi sprul sku, uttam-nirmaṇa-kāya*) in the *tri-kāya* theory. This is demonstrated by both Sumati and Candrottārā becoming monks, not simply lay-men, because one of the acts of that particular Buddhahood is to give up laity.<sup>322</sup>

The Buddha of the supreme emanation of *tri-kāya* theory and that of the Śrāvakayānas are identical in description. The sole difference is that while the Śrāvakyānas believe that the Bodhisattva attaining Buddhahood in that life is indeed attaining Buddhahood for the first time, the *tri-kāya* theorists of the Mahāyāna believe this to be simply an enactment of the manifested body of a Buddha who had long ago achieved Buddhahood.

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<sup>322</sup> See twelve deeds on p.



According to the Śrāvakayānas, by the force of accumulating merit and engaging in Bodhisattva practice, an aspiring Bodhisattva achieves Buddhahood in his last rebirth in the human world. He is then known as the Buddha - the Supreme Teacher. The model for such a Buddha for this epoch was Gautama Buddha, who appeared at a time and place where gender and caste were of utmost social importance. This specific model of a high caste male Buddha was gradually adopted as the standard norm or a requirement for any future Buddhas.

For the *tri-kāya* theorists in Mahāyāna, this model of a Buddha as Gautama Buddha appearing in a male body of royal caste was just one form of a manifested body (*sprul sku, nirmaṇa-kāya*), the supreme emanation (*mchog gi sprul sku, uttam-nirmaṇa-kāya*). There are two additional forms of a manifested body of a Buddha; the artisan and incarnated emanations.

### *Artisan Emanation (bzo bo sprul sku, śilpin-nirmāṇa-kāya)*

One example provided for the artistic emanation (*bzo bo sprul sku, śilpin-nirmāṇa-kāya*) is the Buddha's emanation as the king of artisans *viśva karma*, said to be the greatest of all artisans.<sup>323</sup> Another is the emanation of the Buddha as a lute player (*pi wang mkhan*) in order to tame the arrogance of Gandhara Raja

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Paramudita (*dri za'i rgyal po rab dga'*), who considered himself as the best lute player, hindering the progress of his spiritual practice through his arrogance.<sup>324</sup>

### *Incarnated Emanation (skye ba sprul sku, janma-nirmāṇa-kāya)*

The possibility of incarnated emanations is entirely pluralistic and inclusive, as it can be literally anything from humans to animals to inanimate objects such as bridges and trees, in order to lead sentient beings to Buddhahood.<sup>325</sup> Since this form of a Buddha does not appear in an explicit manner as a Teacher figure, it does not involve any social status. Consequently, it is not required to be adorned with the thirty-two signs of a great being exclusive to male bodies. Hence, there could be infinite Buddhas in this form in an infinite number of worlds, constantly engaged in their Buddha activities of benefitting sentient beings.

## **5. Tara, the Embodiment of Buddhahood**

Tārā is one possible specimen in the form of incarnated emanation of a Buddha; a popular female Buddha in the Tantric-Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition,<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> sprul sku gsum gyi nang tshan zhig ste/ sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das kyis gdul bya 'dul ba'i ched du bzo bo rnam pa sna tshogs su sprul pa dper na dri za rab dga' 'dul ba'i phyir dri za'i pi wang gtong bar sprul pa lta bu'o/ ... [OT]

<sup>325</sup> sems can rnam 'dul ba'i ched du brgya byin dang/ ri dwags/ bse ru/ bya/ chu/ zam pa/ ljon shing sogs skye gnas sna tshogs su skye bar ston pa/

<sup>326</sup> For an analysis of *Tārā-mūla-kalpa*, the source of Tārā as a Tantric female Buddha, see Susan S Landesman, "Goddess Tārā: Silence and Secrecy on the Path to Enlightenment," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 1 (2008).

the embodiment of Buddha activities who is variously portrayed as a Buddha, Bodhisattva and goddess.<sup>327</sup> Although her existence as a Buddha is not found in non-Tantric canonical texts, Tārā is a fully enlightened female Buddha in non-Tantric Mahāyāna Buddhism as well. This is deduced for the following reasons: 1) Unlike other Tantric deities, Tārā's origin is embedded in both mythological and historical narratives, 2) Tārā is identified in multiple forms: a female Buddha, Bodhisattva and goddess, 3) particularly, Tārā in her initial entrance to the Bodhisattva path was advised by monks to forego her female body in a similar manner to the other non-Tantric female figures such as Sumati, Candrotarā and others.

The above facts are not normally associated with Tantric figures, as 1) the origin of Tantric deities is not usually historical, 2) they are not identified in multiple ways, and 3) other Tantric female Buddhas do not have a history of facing challenges for being a female on their entry to the Bodhisattva path. In fact, the Bodhisattva path is not the primary means of realizing Buddhahood in Tantric Buddhism. Hence, I would argue that Tārā could in fact be accepted as a fully enlightened female Buddha across Mahāyāna Buddhism in general, not specifically limited to Tantric Buddhism. I will start with Tara as a female Buddha followed by Tārā as a Bodhisattva and a goddess.

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<sup>327</sup> Tārā as the embodiment of all three bodies – tri-kāya is found in the following canonical texts:

Akṣobhaya Vajra // *Āryatārāstotra* // 'phags ma sgrol ma la bstod pa // Narthang (snar thang): (N 3664) rgyud 'grel, zu 184b5-185b6; Kaśmiri Sūryagupta// *Āryatārābhaṭṭārikā-nāma-dvātriṃśatkastotra sarvārthasādhakarānālaṃkārasaṃnibha-nāma*// rje btsun ma 'phags ma sgrol ma la mtshan sum cu rtsa gnyis kyi bstod pa don thams cad grub pa zhes bya ba // Narthang (snar thang): (N 3668) rgyud 'grel, zu 191a7-192b2

## *Tārā, a Female Buddha*

Tārā's origin is both mythical and historical. According to the text *The Praise in Twenty-one Homages*, Tārā is said to have been born from the tears of Avalokiteśvara.<sup>328</sup> While Avalokiteśvara is depicted as a male Bodhisattva in Indian and Tibetan sources, interestingly, in the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist traditions the same Bodhisattva is female, known as Kwan-Yin.<sup>329</sup> Nevertheless, the origin of Tārā in this story is Avalokiteśvara, a Bodhisattva constantly helping to liberate sentient beings from saṃsāra – the world of suffering. According to the legend, one day when Avalokiteśvara surveyed the world, he saw just as many beings suffering as before. It seemed that no matter how much effort he put into liberating them, the number of sentient beings suffering had in no way diminished. Seeing this, Avalokiteśvara was overwhelmed by helplessness and wept, his tears forming a pool with a blooming lotus from which emerged the glorious Tārā in the form of a sixteen-year-old girl. Born of the tears of compassion, Tara herself was the personification of compassion,

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<sup>328</sup> *Namastāre-ekaviṃśati-stotra-guṇa-hitasahita* // *sgrol ma la phyag 'tshal nyi shu rtsa gcig gis bstod pa phan yon dang bcas pa*// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 412) rgyud, nga 299b5-301a6 (vol. 82) f. 299b - “/jig rten gsum mgon chu skyes zhal gyi/ /ge sar bye ba las ni byung ma/”

See also, *Sarvatathāgata-mātanītāra-viśvakarmabhava-tantra-nāma* // *de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi yum sgrol ma las sna tshogs 'byung ba zhes bya ba'i rgyud*, Lhasa (lha sa): (H 676) rgyud, pha 51a6-75b6 (vol. 92), f. 55a – where the praise is in dharani form – Tibetanized Sanskrit.

For the English translation of this and many other canonical texts related to Tārā, see Martin Willson, *In Praise of Tara: Songs to the Saviouress* (Boston: Wisdom, 1986).

<sup>329</sup> Laurence Austine Waddell, "The Indian Buddhist Cult of Avalokita and His Consort Tārā The Saviouress, Illustrated from the Remains in Magadha," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1894): 64.

assuring Avalokiteśvara that she would work tirelessly, ferrying beings across the world of suffering.<sup>330</sup>

Tārā is also characterized as being born through prayers by Buddha Amitabha<sup>331</sup> or from a blue ray from Buddha Amitabha's eye.<sup>332</sup> Amitabha is a Sambhoga-kāya Buddha in a pure land called the 'western pure land'. It is said that Tārā originated from a blue ray from his left side while Avalokiteśvara emerged out of a ray from his right side. Both Tārā and Avalokiteśvara, according to this depiction, could be interpreted as the incarnated emanations (*skye ba sprul sku, janma-nirmāṇa-kāya*) of Buddha Amitabha in order to facilitate his efforts to help sentient beings cross the ocean of suffering to the blissful western pure land.

### *Tārā, a Female Bodhisattva*

Tara's historical origin is found in the *Tārā Tantra* compiled by Tāranātha, an Indo-Tibetan historian.<sup>333</sup> In this account, Tara's origin resides in

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<sup>330</sup> Miranda Eberle Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006). 307. cites Gyalwa Gendun Drub, *Six Texts Related to the Tara Tantra*, trans. with Doboomb Tulku and Chomdze Tashi Wangyal Glen H. Mullin (New Delhi: Tibet House, 1980).

<sup>331</sup> *Ārya-tārābhaṭṭārikā-nāma-aṣṭaśataka // rje btsun ma 'phags ma sgrol ma'i mtshan brgya rtsa brgyad pa zhes bya ba*, Lhasa (lha sa): (H 677) rgyud, pha 75b6-79a5 (vol. 92) f. 76b – “*skyob pa 'od dpag med pa yi/ /smon lam stobs kyis byung ba ste*”

<sup>332</sup> Dharamachari Purna, "Tara: Her Origins and Development," *Western Buddhist Review: Journal of the Western Buddhist Order* 2(2001): 3-4.; Purna cites Alice Getty, *The Gods of Northern Buddhism: Their History and Iconography* (Courier Dover Publications, 1928). 120.; Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*: 307. Shaw cites Pierre Arènes, *Deese Sgrol Ma (Tara) Recherches Sur La, La*, vol. 74 (Peeters Leuven, 1996).

<sup>333</sup> Tāranātha // *sgrol ma'i rgyud kyī byung khungs gsal bar byed pa'i lo rgyus gser gyi phreng ba // gsung 'bum/* ('dzam thang par ma/) Volume 12, na, ff. 1-25, For the English

the distant past in the world of a Buddha named Amoghasiddhi. At that time, Tara was born as princess Jñānacandra (Moon of Wisdom), and was then a devout follower of the Buddha. After having made the grandest of offerings to the Buddha and his disciples, Princess Jñānacandra aspired to Buddhahood for the first time. At that time, the monk disciples of the Buddha told her that since she had accumulated great merit, if she prayed, she would be transformed into a male in that very life, and hence would be of greater benefit. In this case, the monks not only said this was feasible, they advised her to do so.<sup>334</sup>

However, Jñānacandra was not persuaded by their argument and had a long debate with the monks, after which she uttered the following, vowing to remain in female form:

Here there is neither male nor female,  
 There is no self, no person, and no consciousness.  
 Hence, designating as a male and female is meaningless.  
 It is simply the delusion of the fools of this world.<sup>335</sup>  
 There are many who aspire to attain Buddhahood in a male form but there are not any who wish to work for the benefit of sentient beings in a female form. Hence, I vow to work for the benefit of sentient beings in a female form until the cyclic existence (*'khor ba, saṃsāra*) ends.<sup>336</sup>

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translation of this text, see D. Templeman, *The origin of the Tārā tantra* (Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 1981).

<sup>334</sup> Tārānātha // *sgrol ma'i rgyud kyi byung khungs gsal bar byed pa'i lo rgyus gser gyi phreng ba // gsung 'bum/* ('dzam thang par ma/) Volume 12, na, f. 2 – “*de'i mthar byang chub tu sems bskyed de sems dang po bskyed pa yin no, de'i tshe dge slong rnams kyis khyed dge ba'i rtsa ba 'di nyid kyis lus 'di nyid la skyes par gyur te bstan pa la bya ba byed par smon lam btab na de bzin du 'gyur ba'i phyir de ltar rigs so zhes bskul pa las dri lan mang du yod skad pa la*”

<sup>335</sup> Ibid “*mthar rgyal ba'i bu mos smras pa, 'di na skyes pa med cing bud med med, bdag med gang zag med cing rnams rig med, pho mor btags pa 'di ni ya ma brla, 'jig rten blo ngan rnams par 'khrul bar gyur, ces bya ba la sogs pa brjod de*”

<sup>336</sup> Ibid “*skyes pa'i rten la byang chub 'dod pa ni mang gi, bud med kyi lus kyi 'gro ba'i don spyod pa ni 'ga' yang med do, de bas na 'khor ba ma stong gi bar du bud med kyis gzugs kyis 'gro ba'i don bya'o zhes dam bcas so*”

Following this, she continued making offerings and practicing meditation for millions of years until reaching the first stage of Bodhisattva. Jñānacandra meditated on a special meditation called ‘liberating all beings’ and having accomplishment this meditation, she was daily able to liberate a great number of beings from suffering. Seeing her work, Amoghasiddhi, the current Buddha, gave her the name ‘Tārā’ meaning liberator or savior in Sanskrit, stating that she would henceforth be known by this name until achieving Buddhahood. From then onwards Tārā constantly appeared in many other worlds of the other Buddhas and continued working for the benefit of sentient beings in various forms.

### *Tārā, a Goddess*

Historically, Tārā was also seen as a goddess in ancient India. Modern scholars believe there may be some correlation between the Brāhmaṇical goddess Durga and the Buddhist goddess Tārā.<sup>337</sup> This is mainly owing to similarities observed in their images and the etymology of their names: Durga also means the one who saves from going downwards – meaning into hell or into the world of suffering. The earliest Durga-like image of Tara found in India dates from around

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<sup>337</sup> Waddell, "The Indian Buddhist Cult of Avalokita and His Consort Tārā" The Saviouress, Illustrated from the Remains in Magadha," 63.; Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*: 313.; Purna, "Tara: Her Origins and Development."

6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. While the early Durga was depicted as calm, that found in modern Hinduism appears wrathful and bloodthirsty.

Waddell considers the origin of Tārā from the lotus may be related to Lakṣmī, the Brāhmaṇical goddess of wealth, who also originated from a lotus in the ocean.<sup>338</sup> This association is not only related to their origins, but the fact that the lotus is a characteristic feature of both goddesses. In her standing images, Tārā is seen bearing a lotus in her hand while in seated images, she is situated on a lotus pedestal, her right foot placed on a petal and Lakṣmī is represented in a similar manner. Lakṣmī as the goddess of abundance helps beings flourish materially while Tārā helps them flourish intellectually towards Buddhahood indicating similarity between the two roles.

Tārā as a goddess appears in many forms and colours, the most popular being the green Tārā and white Tārā. As green Tārā, she is sometimes referred to as the goddess of nature or Mother Nature. She is also popularly known as the goddess who protects from the eight great fears: lions, elephants, fire, snakes, rivers, chains, thieves and evil spirits; thus is also referred to as Astamahābhaya Tārā meaning the 'liberator from the eight great fears'.<sup>339</sup> Images of Tārā in this form date back to 7th century Indian art forms found in the Ellora caves, Maharashtra, western India and the Ratnagiri caves in Orrisa, India. Although the

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<sup>338</sup> Waddell, "The Indian Buddhist Cult of Avalokita and His Consort Tārā" *The Saviouress*, Illustrated from the Remains in Magadha," 64-65.

<sup>339</sup> For stories of how Tāra protects from eight and sixteen fears, see - *Tārānātha// sgrol ma'i rgyud kyi byung khungs gsal bar byed pa'i lo rgyus gser gyi phreng ba gsung 'bum/* ('dzam thang par ma/) Volume 12, na, ff. 1-25;

Willson, *In Praise of Tara: Songs to the Saviouress*: 179-86.



male Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara is also known as the one who protects from these eight great fears, Tara is far more renowned in this role. As the liberator from the eight great fears, this gives rise to eight different forms of her appearance.

Tara in her white form or ‘white Tārā’ is known as the goddess of longevity or Mrtyuvancana Tārā – Tārā who Cheats Death. While white Tārā in her role of healing and prolonging life is relatively well-known, it is less popular than her green counterpart. Images of white Tārā found in Indian sources show her seated on a white lotus with her right hand in a boon-granting gesture. A feature in white Tārā that is only seen in Nepalese and Tibetan arts is her seven eyes, wherein along with a third eye of wisdom on her forehead are four more of these on the soles of her feet and palms of her hands; thus white Tārā is also known as the seven-eyed Tārā.<sup>340</sup>

Since Tārā’s origin as princess Jñānacandra when she aspired to attain Buddhahood for the first time, she is believed to have either remained as a Bodhisattva or have attained Buddhahood in her female form, as she had vowed. However, the various forms of Tārā in different roles of liberating beings are seen as not merely the activities of a goddess or a Bodhisattva, but as those of Buddhas: Tārā as the embodiment of the activities of all Buddhas and the mother of them.<sup>341</sup> Another goddess referred to as the mother of all Buddhas is

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<sup>340</sup> For Tārā’s role in Newar Buddhism of Nepal, see Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*: 350.

<sup>341</sup> Mātṛceṭa // Āryatārādevīstotrasarvārthasādhana-nāma-stotrarāja // ‘phags ma lha mo sgrol ma’i bstod pa don thams cad grub pa zhes bya ba bstod pa’i rgyal po // Derge (sde dge):

Prajñāpāramitā, perfection of wisdom, but this is more a personified aspect of the transcendent wisdom. Prajñāpāramitā is the mother of all Buddhas because from the perfection of wisdom arises the fully enlightened Buddhas, while Tārā is the mother of all Buddhas based on her role as the embodiment of the energy or activities of all Buddhas. Tārā in this role not only protects the sentient beings from mundane fears and perils, she is the source of enlightened energy that ferries sentient beings across the ocean of birth, old-age, illness and death to Buddhahood.<sup>342</sup>

Tārā is not only seen as the mother of all Buddhas, she is also viewed as an earthly mother, called upon as ‘mātā’ meaning ‘mother’ in prayers found in Sanskrit and later translated into Tibetan. Such prayers hail her as a mother using different adjectives: loving mother, supreme mother, only mother, mother of the world, and universal mother. With her wisdom, motherly love and bountiful compassion, Tārā nurtures the sentient beings and protects them from natural perils and her enlightened wisdom leads them to the path of enlightenment.

Thus, Tārā is indeed a Buddha manifesting in different forms. Arising from the rays emanating from the right eye of the Buddha Amitabha, she appears in the incarnated form (*skye ba sprul sku, janmanirmāṇa-kāya*) of a Buddha to help Buddha Amitabha carry out his Buddha activity. Likewise, emerging from

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(D 1703) rgyud, sha 58a7-60b5 – f. 59b - “*dus gsum sangs rgyas kun gyi bskyed mdzad ma, sangs rgyas sras bcas ma lus khyod kyi sku*”

<sup>342</sup> Mātṛceta // Āryatārāstotra // ‘*phags ma sgrol ma la bstod pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 3693) rgyud, mu 327a4-327b4 – “*/skye rgas na 'chi'i chu bo bzhi po las/\_sgrol ba'i gnyen po mkhas pa khyod lags \_te/\_byams pa'i gru 'dzin snying rje'i skya ba can/\_rje btsun sgrol ma khyod la phyag 'tshal lo/*”

the tears of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, Tara appeared once again in the incarnated form of a Buddha to help Avalokiteśvara in his Bodhisattva activity. Tārā as a Buddha is omnipresent in her various forms, appearing in whatever form she is needed or called upon to be; not only by humans but also by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Historically, Tārā was invoked by Indian Buddhist masters such as Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Candragomin and Atiśa in India and by the Dalai Lamas in Tibet.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This new dimension of Mahāyāna is aligned towards the Śrāvakayāna interpretation in terms of its soteriological goal – Buddhahood. The source of this new trend of Mahāyāna seems to be Asaṅga's work *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and Asaṅga's prior affiliation with Śrāvakayāna sub schools Sarvāstivāda and Mahīśāsaka before his entry into Mahāyāna. However, since Asaṅga was for the most part a Mahāyānist, a new interpretation of the Buddha's bodies was formulated that would differentiate his view on Buddhahood from Śrāvakayāna's. This is the three body (*sku gsum, tri-kāya*) theory, of which the truth body (*chos sku, dharma kāya*) is non-gendered as is the awakened spiritual aspect of Buddhahood. Complete-enjoyment body (*longs sku, sambhoga-kāya*) is a subtle non-physical body of a Buddha visible only to the celestial Bodhisattvas as their mentor, yet it is said to be in male form since it is adorned with the 'thirty-two signs' of a great being (*skyes bu chen po, mahāpuruṣa*).

Similarly, one of the manifested bodies (*sprul sku, nirmāṇa kāya*) of a Buddha is known as the supreme emanation (*mchog gi sprul sku, uttam nirmāṇa kāya*). This particular Buddha form appears on earth as a teacher figure to the earthly beings, and is therefore believed to always appear in a male body since it too is adorned with the thirty-two signs of a great being (*skyes bu chen po, mahāpuruṣa*). The other two forms of the manifested body (*sprul sku, nirmaṇa kāya*), the artistic emanation (*bzo bo sprul sku, śilpin-nirmāṇa-kāya*) and incarnated emanation (*skye ba sprul sku, janma-nirmāṇa-kāya*) are not restricted to males, presumably because their roles are not directly concerned with leadership status.

Given this context, Sumati and Candrottārā's eventual transformations into male bodies substantiate the tri-kāya theory. Their transformations into not only male bodies but into monks demonstrate that their aspiration to appear in the supreme emanation (*mchog gi sprul sku, uttam nirmāṇa kāya*) of a Buddha. Tārā's refusal to transform into a male body could be understood as her choice not to appear in the supreme emanation form of a Buddha. Her vow to remain as a woman throughout her Bodhisattva career as well as her Buddha activities show that supreme emanation is not the only form of a Buddha, and that other forms of Buddhahood are attainable by female bodies.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the forms of a Buddha - *sambhoga kāya* as a teacher of bodhisattvas and *uttam-nirmāṇa-kāya* as the teacher of earthly beings - described in a mentor/teacher/founder/leader figure - is not open to female bodies. This is because a female body cannot be adorned

with thirty-two signs of a great being (*mahāpuruṣa*). However, these signs are neither exclusive to Buddhist soteriology nor Buddhism in general. It is thus clearly an attribution rooted in Indian socio-cultural beliefs as discussed earlier, and it can be concluded that these androcentric forms of Buddhahood are not the result of the genuine soteriological incapability of a female body, but of prejudice related to social status.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Hermeneutics of a Female Buddha**

#### **Introduction**

So far, we have seen diverse views regarding the possibility and impossibility of attaining Buddhahood in a female body. It is deemed utterly impossible according to Śrāvakayānist canonical literature. Moreover, Buddhaghosa, a prominent commentator in Theravāda, considers even a female Bodhisattva to be impossible. Sarvāstivāda, another Śrāvakayānist, while still maintaining the impossibility of a female Buddha, indicates a female Bodhisattva may be feasible to a certain extent. In terms of Mahāyāna, while the early Mahāyānists such as Nāgārjuna do not mention the relevance of gender in terms of Buddhahood and strongly endorse the possibility of a female Buddha, later Mahāyānists such as Asaṅga seem to revert somehow to the Śrāvakayāna view of the impossibility of a female Buddha.

These different views are fascinating; in fact, it is intriguing that the issue of gender in the attainment of Buddhahood was a point of debate among the ancient Indian Buddhist philosophers. For those who follow Śrāvakayāna Buddhist traditions, leaving aside their view, all other views are not considered authentic teachings of the Buddha but works of later Indian Mahāyāna

philosophers. Most of the fundamental Mahāyāna doctrines including Buddha Nature, emptiness, viewing the Buddha as having different bodies and Buddhahood as the ultimate goal for all spiritual aspirants are rejected by Śrāvakayānists. For the Mahāyānists, these are in fact the ultimate teachings of the Buddha.<sup>343</sup> While Śrāvakayānists refuse to accept the teachings found in Mahāyāna literature, the Mahāyānas do not claim that the teachings found in their corpuses are the only teachings of the Buddha. Mahāyānas argue that the Śrāvakayāna teachings are also as much the Buddha's teachings as the Mahāyāna's are, as the Buddha's teachings fall into the categories of provisional and definitive meanings.

My argument in this chapter is that the theory of 'the impossibility of a female Buddha' is deeply ingrained in the hermeneutic of androcentric Buddhahood, which aligns the Buddha with imaginary figures of great importance to ancient Indian culture. I will argue that this theory contradicts the fundamental Buddhist belief that Buddhahood is a universal spiritual realization since all sentient beings are naturally and primordially endowed with Buddha nature, or the potential to realize Buddhahood. From this contention, I will first argue that not all the canonical literature can be interpreted literally, as

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343 Maitreya // *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* // *theg pa chen po mdo sde'i rgyan zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4020) sems tsam, phi 1b1-39a4, f. 2a -3a - "*theg chen sgrub pa'i skabs kyi leu*" For English translation of this text along with Vasubandhu's commentary on it, see Robert Thurman, *Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature (Mahayanasutralamkara)* (American Institute of Buddhist Studies, Columbia University, 2004). 7-14.; See also, Bhāvaviveka // *Madhyamakahrdayakārikā* // *dbu ma'i snying po'i tshig le'ur byas pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 3855) dbu ma, dza 1b1-40b7, f. 18b - "*theg chen sangs rgyas gsung yin te/\_bdag med la sogs ston pa dang/\_dkon mchog gsum gyi bdag nyid che/\_ston phyir slob ma'i theg pa bzhin/*"

consideration is required of many aspects of a discourse of the Buddha to determine whether it bears provisional or definitive meaning. These concerns a hermeneutic of two meanings, which are further, rooted in the hermeneutic of spiritual dispositions and vehicles (multiple spiritual dispositions and vehicles and one spiritual disposition and vehicle). Finally, I argue that the ultimate and the most definitive of all Buddhist doctrines is the *Tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, the Buddha nature, and that Śrīmālādevī the queen of Ayodhya, was one of the greatest ever teachers of this doctrine after the Buddha.

## 1. Hermeneutic of Two Meanings: Provisional and Definitive

According to the Mahāyānas, there are two ways of understanding why different views are ascribed to one Master. Firstly, even though the Buddha spoke one teaching, individuals [people with their individual capacity] heard it differently.<sup>344</sup> This is illustrated with an analogy stating that there may be the same amount of rain at a certain time and place where there are many different plants, yet according to an individual plant's different capacity in absorbing the

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344 *Buddha-avataṃsaka-nāma-mahāvaipūlyā-sūtra* // *sangs rgyas phal po che zhes bya ba shin tu rgyas pa chen po'i mdo* // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 94) phal chen, ga 1b1-386a3, ff. 13b – 14a – “*dus thams cad du sems can gyi dbang po dang/\_mos pa ji lta ba bzhin du go bar byed pa/\_sems can gyi mthu ji bzhin du sangs rgyas kyi gsung gi dbyangs kyis rnam par rig par byed pa/\_sangs rgyas kyi gsung gcig gis brjod du med pa'i 'khor gyi dkyil 'khor gyi sems can 'byams klas pa rnam pa tha dad pa mngon \_par dga' bar byed pa'*”



rainwater, some will absorb more or less than others.<sup>345</sup> Secondly, it is for pedagogical and therapeutic reasons that the Buddha spoke differently to different people at different times because of his skillful methods of application.<sup>346</sup>

### *Skilful Means (thabs mkhas, upāyakaśalya)*

The reason for teaching differently to different audiences resides in the goal of the Buddha's teachings, which is to help the receiver eventually come to the realization of Buddhahood. Achieving this meant that all his actions and speech are utilized so as to be most beneficial and helpful to the receiver. Therefore, sometimes the Buddha may make a statement which sounds definitive (*nges don, nitārtha*) although it could be interpretive (*drang don, neyārtha*). Different teachings are required due to the varying levels of individual dispositions, inclinations and circumstances. Hence, the Buddha is said to have given various teachings and uttered many kinds of statements; on the surface, some may even seem to contradict what he said at other times and places. However, seemingly contradictory teachings and statements may seem apt and

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<sup>345</sup> Wangchuk Dorjee Negi, *Vajrayana Darsana Evam Sadhana: Theory and Practice of Buddhist Tantra* (Sarnath: Central University of Tibetan Studies, 1998). 1.

<sup>346</sup> *Ārya-lankāvatāra-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa lang kar gshegs pa'i theg pa chen po'i mdo // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 110) mdo sde, ca 87b7-307a4 (vol. 51), f. 116a – “/gzhan la gang zhig bstan pa de/\_gzhan la bshad par mi rung ste/\_ji ltar nad pa so so \_la/\_sman pa sman rnams gtong ba ltar/\_sangs rgyas de bzhin sems can la/\_sems tsam du'ang rab tu gsung/\_mgon po rnams ni gang gsung ba'i/\_so so rang rig spyod \_yul ni/\_rtog pa can gyi yul ma yin/\_nyan thos rnams kyi'ang de bzhin min/”

acceptable to others in different times and contexts. This method of the Buddha's teaching is known as skillful-means (*thabs mkhas, upāya-kauśalya*).<sup>347</sup>

Since the Buddha is regarded as omniscient, when aware his audience is either not ready for his teachings or it would be more beneficial if he conveyed these indirectly, he employs an indirect manner with an underlying intention not explicit in his discourse. Such teachings are discerned as definitive (*nges don, nitārtha*) or interpretable (*drang don, neyārtha*) by analyzing whether they are bound by a certain implicit intention (*dgongs pa can, abhiprāyika*) or not (*dgongs pa can ma yin pa, ābhiprāyika*). Four objects are given in *Mahāyānasūtralaṅkāra* in view of to whom or what the Buddha may have uttered in a non-literal teaching.<sup>348</sup>

There are four types of ulterior implications: introductory implications concerned with the disciples; natural implications concerning the three realities; therapeutic implications for the control of faults; and transformational implications concerning the profundity of expressions.<sup>349</sup>

Firstly, introductory implications concerned with the disciples (*gzhug pa ldem por dgongs pa, avatāraṇasam̐dhi*) means the Buddha gives an indirect teaching

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<sup>347</sup> See Robert Thurman, "Buddhist Hermeneutics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 1 (1978).

<sup>348</sup> Maitreya // *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* // *theg pa chen po mdo sde'i rgyan zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4020) sems tsam, phi 1b1-39a4; For a study on the word 'abhiprāya', see Michael M Broido, "Abhiprāya and Implication in Tibetan Linguistics," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (1984).

<sup>349</sup> Ibid f. 17a - "gzhug pa ldem por dgongs pa dang/\_/mtshan \_nyid ldem por dgongs pa dang/\_/gnyen po ldem por dgongs pa dang/\_/bsgyur ba ldem por dgongs pa ste/\_/nyan thos dang ni ngo bo nyid/\_/de bzhi nyes pa 'dul ba dang/\_/brjod pa zab pa nyid la ni/\_/ldem por dgongs pa 'di rnam bzhi/'", The English translation is from Thurman, *Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature (Mahayanasutralamkara)*: 160.

in view of the disciples' (*nyan thos, śrāvakas*) inclinations and dispositions. This teaching method is called introductory implication, as it indirectly introduces the disciples to the Buddhist doctrine. For instance, in order not to frighten them, the Buddha says that forms and so on do exist.<sup>350</sup> Secondly, natural implications concerning the realities (*mtshan nyid ldem por dgongs pa, lakṣaṇābhisaṃdhi*) are teachings in view of the three realities (*mtshan nyid gsum, tri-lakṣaṇa*), by saying all phenomena are devoid of reality and unborn and so on.<sup>351</sup> Thirdly, therapeutic implications for the control of faults (*gnyen po ldem por dgongs pa, pratipakṣābhisaṃdhi*) are teachings aimed at eliminating faults through supplementary sayings.<sup>352</sup> Fourth, transformational implications concerning the profundity of expressions (*bsgyur ba ldem por dgongs pa, pariṇāmanābhisaṃdhi*) are teachings given in view of profound teachings by transforming the words.<sup>353</sup>

There are also four aspects of implications: “The intentional hint should be understood as fourfold: intending equality, another meaning, another time, and

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<sup>350</sup> Vasubandhu // *Sūtrālaṃkārabhāṣya* // *mdo sde'i rgyan gyi bshad pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4026) sems tsam, phi 129b1-260a7, f. 184b – “/de la gzhus pa la ldem por dgongs pa ni nyan thos rnam la blta bar bya ste/\_bstan pa la 'jug par bya ba'i don du mi skrag par bya ba'i phyir gzugs la sogs pa yod pa nyid du bstan pa'i phyir ro/”

<sup>351</sup> Ibid “/mtshan nyid la ldem por dgongs pa \_ni kun brtags pa la sogs pa'i ngo bo nyid gsum la blta bar bya ste/\_chos thams cad ngo bo nyid med pa dang/\_ma skyes pa la sogs par bstan pa'i phyir ro/”

<sup>352</sup> Ibid ff. 184b – 185a – “/gnyen po la ldem por dgongs pa ni nyes pa rnam gdul bar bya ba la blta bar bya ste/\_ji skad /du \_sgrib pa brgyad kyi gnyen por theg pa mchog phan yon dang bcas pa bshad pa'i zhar la tshigs su bcad pa gnyis 'chad par 'gyur ba lta bu'o/”

<sup>353</sup> Ibid f. 185a – “/bsgyur ba la ldem por dgongs pa ni brjod pa zab mo la blta bar bya ste/\_ji skad du/\_snying po med la snying por shes/\_phyin ci log la legs par gnas/\_nyon mongs pas ni rab nyon mongs/\_byang chub dam pa 'thob par 'gyur/\_zhes gsungs pa lta bu'o/”

personal disposition.”<sup>354</sup> Implication in view of intending equality (*mnyam pa nyid la dgongs pa, satamatābhiprāya*) is such as when the Buddha said – ‘I was myself Buddha Vipāśyi at such time and such place’ implying equality of the undifferentiated wisdom/truth body (*chos sku, dharma-kāya*).<sup>355</sup> Second, intending another meaning (*don gzhan la dgongs pa, arthāntarābhiprāya*) is saying ‘all phenomena are devoid of reality and unborn and so on.’ but not meaning as literally spoken.<sup>356</sup>

Third, intending another time (*dus gzhan la dgongs pa, kālantarābhiprāya*) is saying ‘those who pray to be born in the pure-land will be born there’, which means at another time and not now, though not explicitly indicated.<sup>357</sup> Fourth, intending personal disposition (*gang zag gi bsam pa la dgongs pa, pudgalāśayābhiprāya*) is like the Buddha praising some people for a certain degree of wholesome deed while not others for the same degree of wholesome deeds.<sup>358</sup> Thus, the teachings that have any of the above implications

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<sup>354</sup> Maitreya // *Mahāyānasūtrālamkārikā* // *theg pa chen po mdo sde'i rgyan zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4020) sems tsam, phi 1b1-39a4, f. 17a - “/mnyam pa nyid \_dang don gzhan dang/\_de bzhin du ni dus gzhan dang/\_gang zag gi ni bsam pa la/\_dgongs pa rnam pa bzhir shes bya/\_”; Thurman, *Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature (Mahayanasutralamkara)*: 161.

<sup>355</sup> Vasubandhu // *Sūtrālamkārabhāṣya* // *mdo sde'i rgyan gyi bshad pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4026) sems tsam, phi 129b1-260a7, f. 185a – “/dgongs pa rnam pa bzhin la mnyam \_pa nyid la dgongs pa ni/\_di ltar nga nyid de'i tshe yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas rnam par gzigs su gyur to zhes gsungs pa lta bu ste/\_chos kyi sku la khyad par med pa'i phyir ro/”

<sup>356</sup> Ibid “don gzhan la dgongs pa ni \_di ltar chos thams cad ni ngo bo nyid \_med pa ma skyes pa'o zhes bya ba la sogs pa gsungs pa lta bu ste/\_don la sgra ji bzhin ma yin pa'i phyir ro/”

<sup>357</sup> Ibid ff. 185a – 185b – “dus gzhan la dgongs pa ni/\_di ltar gang dag bde ba can du smon lam 'debs pa de dag der skye bar 'gyur ro zhes gsungs pa lta bu ste/\_dus \_gzhan na snyam du dgongs pa yin no/”

<sup>358</sup> Ibid f. 185b – “/gang zag gi bsam pa la dgongs pa ni/\_di ltar dge ba'i rtsa ba de nyid kha cig la ni bsngags la chung dus chog shes pa kha cig la ni smad pa lta bu'o/”

are not definitive, and therefore need to be interpreted. Such teachings are also known as non-literal (*sgra ji bzhin ma yin pa, nayathāruta*) while the definitive teachings are not bound by underlying implications and can be accepted as literal (*sgra ji bzhin pa, yathāruta*).<sup>359</sup>

Given such varied teaching methods, it is clearly not viable to take canonical attributions indicating gender relevance in the attainment of Buddhahood literally. Moreover, there are studies suggesting the notion of gender relevance in realizing Buddhahood could have been added later and not said by the Buddha.<sup>360</sup> In Yuichi's study covering both Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna sources, she concludes that the idea 'women cannot attain Buddhahood' may have appeared at around the first century B.C., three hundred years after the Buddha had passed away.<sup>361</sup> Moreover, the Buddha himself strongly encouraged people to examine his teachings before accepting them, and a widely quoted passage from the Buddha uses an analogy: "Monks and scholars should examine my teachings carefully in the manner gold is examined by burning, cutting and rubbing. Only after such examination should my teachings be accepted and not out of respect for me."<sup>362</sup> Moreover, another hermeneutical

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<sup>359</sup> These hermeneutical concepts are called six boundaries (*mtha' drug, ṣaṭkoṭi*). For their usage in both Tantric and Sūtra teachings, see David Seyfort Ruegg, "Purport, Implicature and Presupposition: Sanskrit abhiprāya and Tibetan dgongs pa/dgons gzhi as Hermeneutical Concepts," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 13, no. 4 (1985): 310.

<sup>360</sup> Kajiyama Yuichi, "Women in Buddhism," *Eastern (The) Buddhist Kyoto* 15, no. 2 (1982).

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>362</sup> Kamalaśīla // *Tattvasaṃgrahapañjikā* // *de kho na nyid bsdus pa'i dka' 'grel* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4267) tshad ma, ze 133b1-363a7, f. 143b – "'di ni bcom ldan 'das kyang bzhed pa yin te/\_ji skad du/\_dge slong dgag gam mkhas rnam kyis/\_bsreg bcad brdar bas gser bzhin

exposition exclusively employed in the Mahāyāna literature broadly categorizes the Buddha's teachings in terms of three phases known as the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma (*chos 'khor rim pa gsum*).

### *Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma*

According to *Ārya-saṃdhinirmocana-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra*, the entire teachings of the Buddha are broadly divided into three turnings of the wheel of Dharma.<sup>363</sup> Subsequently, the teachings given over these turnings are categorized as interpretable and definitive:

Then the Bodhisattva Paramārthasamudgata said to the Bhagavan: Initially, in the Vārāṇasī area, in the Deer Park called Sages' Teaching, the Bhagavan taught the aspects of the four truths of the Āryas for those who were genuinely engaged in the [Śrāvaka] vehicle. The wheel of doctrine you turned at first is wondrous. Similar doctrines had not been promulgated before in the world by gods or humans. However, this wheel of doctrine that the Bhagavan turned is surpassable, provides an opportunity [for refutation], is of interpretable meaning, and serves as a basis for dispute.<sup>364</sup>

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*du/\_yongs su brtags na nga yi bka'/\_blang bar bya yi gus phyir \_min/\_zhes gsungs pa bzhin no!*"

<sup>363</sup> *Ārya-saṃdhinirmocana-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa dgongs pa nges par 'grel pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 109) mdo sde, ca 1b1-87b7 (vol. 51); For English translation of this text, see *Wisdom of Buddha. The Samdhinirmocana Mahāyāna Sūtra*, trans. John Powers (Dharma Publishing Berkeley, 1995).

<sup>364</sup> Ibid f. 38a -39b – “/de nas bcom ldan 'das la byang chub sems dpa' don dam yang dag 'phags kyis yang 'di skad ces gsol to/\_bcom ldan \_'das kyis dang por yul wA ra NA si drang srong smra ba ri dwags kyi nags su theg pa la yang dag par zhugs pa rnams la 'phags pa'i bden pa bzhi'i rnam par bstan pas chos kyi \_'khor lo ngo mtshar rmad du byung ba/\_sngon lhar gyur ba'am/\_mir gyur pa sus kyang chos dang mthun par 'jig rten du ma bskor ba gcig tu rab tu bskor te/\_bcom ldan 'das kyi chos \_kyi 'khor lo bskor ba de'ang bla na mchis pa/\_skabs mchis pa/\_drang ba'i don/\_rtsod pa'i gzhi'i gnas su gyur pa lags la/"; ibid., 139.

This first turning of the wheel of Dharma was mainly based on the doctrine of ‘four-noble-truths’, and are the Buddhist teachings belonging philosophically-speaking to the Śrāvakayāna schools. The notion of the impossibility of women to achieve Buddhahood and other high positions such as Brahma, Indra, Universal monarch and Mara are found in the scriptural texts that come under this turning. This is the turning and phase of the Buddha’s teachings where he is often said to have taught in accordance with conventional social practice, and many of the teachings within this turning affirm conventional realities. For instance, the Buddha said there is suffering, there is a path, and there are different levels of spiritual dispositions as well as physical relevance in terms of spiritual realization.

However, since the Śrāvakayānas do not conform to this hermeneutical approach, whatever the Buddha taught in the first turning is his ultimate view and there are no other turnings of the wheel of the Dharma. On the other hand, the Mahāyānists believe that the Buddha taught more than the first turning, believing that along with the first, the second turning of the Dharma, which is fundamentally significant to the doctrine of emptiness that is central to the Mahāyānas, is also interpretable and not definitive according to *Samdhinirmocana sūtra*.

Then the Bhagavan turned a second wheel of doctrine which is more wondrous still for those who are genuinely engaged in the Great Vehicle, because of the aspect of teaching emptiness, beginning with the lack of own-being of phenomena, and beginning with their absence of production, absence of cessation, quiescence from the start, and being naturally in a state of nirvana. However, this wheel of doctrine that the

Bhagavan turned is surpassable, provides an opportunity [for refutation], is of interpretable meaning, and serves as a basis for dispute.<sup>365</sup>

The second turning of the wheel of the Dharma contains the teachings from when the Buddha taught that all phenomena are empty of real existence, no suffering, no path, and no realization. This is in sharp contrast to the first turning, which, while conventionally true, by contrast the second is incompatible to any conventional notions. The *Prajñāpāramitā Mahāyāna sūtras* are the core doctrine of this turning, though not exclusively, as it is also expounded in the third turning. The notion such as ‘Buddhahood is neither attainable nor unattainable’ and ‘Buddhahood abides in the non-abiding state’ echoed by the goddess in the Vimalakīṭinirdeśa and the Nāgā girl are based on the teachings of the second turning. The teachings under this turning transcend the duality of possibility and impossibility of women achieving Buddhahood.

It is the third turning of the wheel of the Dharma in which the Buddha made a clear distinction as to what are his ultimate definitive teachings. This turning is known as the ‘perfectly distinguished wheel of Dharma’ (*legs par rnam par phye ba’i chos ‘khor*).

Then the Bhagavan turned a third wheel of doctrine, possessing good differentiations, and exceedingly wondrous, for those genuinely engaged

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid f. 38b –“*bcom ldan 'das kyis chos rnams kyi ngo bo nyid ma \_mchis pa nyid las brtsams/\_skye ba ma mchis pa dang/\_'gag pa ma mchis pa dang/\_gzod ma nas zhi ba dang/\_rang bzhin gyis yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa nyid las brtsams \_nas theg pa chen po la yang dag par zhugs pa rnams la stong pa nyid smos pa'i rnam pas ches ngo mtshar rmad du byung ba'i chos kyi 'khor lo gnyis pa bskor te/\_bcom ldan 'das \_kyi chos kyi 'khor lo bskor ba de'ang bla na mchis pa/\_skabs mchis pa/\_drang ba'i don/\_rtsod pa'i gzhi'i gnas su gyur pa lags la*”

Ibid., 139-41.



in all vehicles, beginning with the lack of own-being of phenomena, and beginning with their absence of production, absence of cessation, quiescence from the start, and being naturally in a state of Nirvāṇa. Moreover, that wheel of doctrine turned by the Bhagavan is unsurpassable, does not provide an opportunity [for refutation], is of definitive meaning, and does not serve as a basis for dispute.<sup>366</sup>

Teachings under this turning are thus regarded as perfect, complete and definitive.<sup>367</sup> In this turning, the Buddha clearly stated what he meant by affirming the conventions, what he meant by absolutely negating all phenomena and what is reality, by neither following conventions nor rendering extreme annihilation. It is under this phase of teachings the Buddha taught the true nature of all phenomena, the true nature of all sentient beings, and the true nature of all spiritual realizations. These teachings neither conform to any social conventions nor completely negate them. The three different turnings are also interpreted through a verse from one of the oldest Mahāyāna sūtras, the *Ārya-aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*: “Mind, that mind is not mind, the nature of mind is luminosity.”<sup>368</sup> The first word ‘mind’ is interpreted as indicating the affirmation

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid f. 38b – 39a - “*bcom ldan 'das kyis chos rnams kyi ngo bo \_nyid ma mchis pa nyid las brtsams/\_skye ba ma mchis pa dang/\_'gag pa ma mchis pa dang/\_gzod ma nas zhi ba dang\*/\_rang bzhin gyis yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa nyid las \_brtsams nas/\_theg pa thams cad la yang dag par zhugs pa rnams la legs par rnam par phye ba dang ldan pa/\_shin tu ngo mtshar rmad du byung ba'i chos kyi 'khor lo gsum \_/\_pa bskor te/\_bcom ldan 'das kyi chos kyi 'khor lo bskor ba 'di ni bla na ma mchis pa/\_skabs ma mchis pa/\_nges pa'i don lags te/\_rtsod pa'i gzhi'i \_gnas su gyur pa ma lags so/*”

Ibid., 141.

<sup>367</sup> There are slight variances among the Tibetan scholars in terms of classification of the second and third turnings with regards to which is entirely interpretable and which is definitive, and what the core texts of each turning are. See Kennard Lipman, “Nītārtha, Neyārtha, and Tathāgatagarbha in Tibet,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (1980).

<sup>368</sup> *Ārya-aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā* // *'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa brgyad stong pa* // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 11) brgyad stong, ka 1b1-450a4 / (ornamental ed.) 1b1-

of all phenomena and hence symbolizing the first turning; the second statement “mind is not mind” as indicating the non-existence of all phenomena and hence symbolizing the second turning, while the third statement “the nature of mind is luminosity” indicates the true nature of mind and hence symbolizes the third turning.<sup>369</sup>

The primary doctrine under this turning is the doctrine of Tathāgatagarbha – Buddha Nature; the belief that all sentient beings are innately pervaded by nature to be fully enlightened. However, the endowment of the Buddha Nature does not mean that one will become a Buddha at any time without any effort, and has to be developed from its dormant state through spiritual practice. Although everyone has the same potential from within, their present diverse circumstances mean they have diverse spiritual dispositions. Therefore, no one single method of teaching will be suitable for all, and thus the Buddha skillfully taught different teachings to different audiences with different spiritual dispositions (*rigs, gotra*).

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523b2 [523b3-578a3] (vol. 29), f. 4b – “*di ltar sems de ni/\_sems ma mchis pa ste/\_sems kyi rang bzhin ni/\_’od gsal ba lags so/*”

<sup>369</sup> There are slight variances between the Tibetan scholars on how the mind is luminous, in terms of whether it is luminous being empty of self (*rang stong, swaśūnyatā*) or empty of others (*gzhan stong, paraśūnyatā*) which stems primarily from the following: Maitreya // *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra-ratnagotra-vibhāga* // *theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma’i bstan bcos* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4024) sems tsam, phi 54b1-73a7, f. 61b – “*/rnam dbye bcas pa’i mtshan nyid can/\_glo bur dag gis kham stong gi/\_rnam dbye med pa’i mtshan nyid can/\_bla med chos kyi stong ma yin/*”

## 2. Hermeneutic of Spiritual Dispositions (*rigs, gotra*)

The basis for requiring both provisional and definitive teachings is fundamentally rooted in the view that people have different levels of understanding and capabilities in terms of spiritual realization. These levels depend on the kind of spiritual goal one is inclined towards, which in turn depends on one's spiritual disposition (*rigs, gotra*). The Sanskrit word 'gotra' is also found in Brāhmanical works such as the Vedas and Upanishads. In these works, gotra refers to one's family clan such as Brahmin, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra as a means of identifying the person's specific vocation. However, the Buddha was opposed to categorizing humanity into different castes, since he believed that at base, human beings were inherently the same.

Hence, in Buddhism the definition of 'gotra' differs from the above. The Buddha stated that 'gotra' defined as one's family clan or caste is not important, whereas one's motivation and actions were. Consequently, he defined 'gotra' as the quality and potential of one's mind in terms of spiritual realization.<sup>370</sup> Found in much Buddhist literature with slightly varying explanations, 'gotra' is explained in the Vinaya Piṭaka (The Book of Disciplines) as "Being contented with just the bare necessities of robes, alms and a dwelling place is the 'gotra' of a noble being. Being joyous of relinquishing and meditating is the 'gotra' of a

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<sup>370</sup> 'Gotra' is translated into Tibetan as 'rigs' which means 'a kind or a type' and the English translations given to it so far are 'lineage', 'spiritual-gene' and 'spiritual disposition'. See, D Seyfort Rugg, "The Meanings of the Term" Gotra" and the Textual History of the "Ratnagotravibhāga", " *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 39, no. 2 (1976).

noble being.”<sup>371</sup> Similarly, in the *Abhidharmakośa* by Vasubandhu, “non-attachment is the ‘Gotra’ of noble beings”.<sup>372</sup> In this way, the term ‘gotra’ is identified with qualities of the mind such as contentment and non-attachment in such literature, demonstrating that the criterion for becoming an Ārya or a noble being is the development of such qualities of the mind and not of attributes such as caste, race or gender.<sup>373</sup>

### *Three Spiritual Dispositions and Vehicles (tri-yāna) as Definitive*

In the Śrāvakayāna tradition, the three spiritual dispositions have three corresponding spiritual vehicles, and it is believed that spiritual aspirants are inherently divided into three types of spiritual inclinations. They are known as those spiritually inclined towards the attainment of Arhathood (*nyan thos rigs*, *śrāvaka-gotra*), Pratyeka-buddha (*rang sang rgyas rigs*, *pratyekabuddha-gotra*)

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<sup>371</sup> Qtd in Kalsang, *On the History of Buddhist Doctrine in India (The New Blue Annals) Part II*: 239.

<sup>372</sup> Vasubandhu // *Abhidharmakośakārikā* // *chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi tshig le'ur byas pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4089) mngon pa, ku 1b1-25a7, f. 19a – “*ma chags 'phags rigs*”, Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, 2. (6/7 )

<sup>373</sup> The four Indian Buddhist philosophical schools have varying definitions of gotra as a term as follows: Vaibhaśika School defines ‘gotra’ as “a mental factor (*sems byung*, *caitta*) of contentment and non-attachment to the world and worldly properties which is the nature of the noble beings. Sautrantika School identifies ‘gotra’ as the seed (*sa bon*, *bīja*) of the mind and says that it is “a potentiality to bring forth undefiled wisdom which is the seed of mind”. Yogacarya School’s definition does not vary greatly from the above as “an attainment (*thob pa*, *prapti*) of reality (*chos nyid*, *dharmata*) that is potential to bring about undefiled phenomena abiding in the mind-stream from the beginningless time” Thus, the three schools define (*rigs*, *gotra*) to a conditioned phenomenon (‘*dus byas kyi chos*, *saṃskṛtadharma*) In the Madhyamaka School, ‘gotra’ is defined in the name of Tathāgatagarbha; “The undefiled innate nature of all existence is the ‘gotra’ and the mind that abides unchangingly in the nature of primordially pure, empty, luminous, unobstructed and all pervasive is the Tathāgatagarbha.” See, Dharma Śrī // *sdom gsum rnam nges kyi 'grel pa dpag bsam snye ma* // rdza rong phu dgon gyi dpar khang // f. 7b -8a

and Buddhahood (*byang sems rigs, bodhisattva-gotra*). Accordingly, an individual motivated by one of the three spiritual dispositions is capable of realizing that particular spiritual goal only.

One is motivated by whichever spiritual disposition is definitive and not progressive, according to the Śrāvakayānas. Hence, three different levels of spiritual capabilities mean three different results and consequently three spiritual vehicles: hearer vehicle (*nyan thos theg pa, śrāvaka-yāna*), solitary-buddha vehicle (*rang rgyal theg pa, pratyekabuddha-yāna*) and Bodhisattva vehicle (*byang sems theg pa, bodhisattva-yāna*). While the first two results of Arhathood and Pratyekabuddha are not restricted to one gender of the humanity, Buddhahood, the third result, is restricted to the male gender for the Śrāvakayānas, as discussed in chapters three and four.

From the Mahāyāna tradition, Asaṅga conceives of the three spiritual dispositions are inherently diverse and not progressive. In his *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Asaṅga defines the three spiritual dispositions hierarchically in terms of their mental faculties, solely attaining their respective spiritual goals.

Bodhisattvas are naturally of sharp faculty, Pratyekabuddhas of middling faculty, and Śrāvakas of weaker faculty. . . Śrāvakas attain the result of the enlightenment of Śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas attain the result of the enlightenment of Pratyekabuddhas. Bodhisattvas attain the result of the unsurpassable full-enlightenment.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Asaṅga // *yogācārabhūmau-bodhisattvabhūmiḥ* // *rnal 'byor spyod pa'i sa las byang chub sems dpa'i sa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4037) sems tsam, wi 1b1-213a7, f. 3a –“ *byang chub sems dpa' ni rang bzhin gyis dbang po rno ba yin la/\_rang sangs rgyas ni dbang po 'bring yin/\_nyan thos ni dbang po rtul ba yin no'*” . . . “*nyan thos ni nyan thos kyi byang chub kyi 'bras bu thob par byed do/\_rang sangs rgyas ni \_rang byang chub kyi 'bras bu thob par byed*

Asaṅga thus not only believes in the hierarchical and inherent diversity of the spiritual dispositions, he also mentions a category lacking spiritual dispositions (*rigs med pa, agotra*) in his *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, wherein those devoid of any spiritual disposition will not be able to attain Buddhahood.<sup>375</sup>

### *One Spiritual Disposition and Vehicle (eka-yāna) as Definitive*

Mahāyānists such as Nāgārjuna and his lineage maintain there is ultimately only one spiritual vehicle (*'thar thug theg pa gcig, eka-yāna*) and do not believe that diverse spiritual dispositions are inherently diverse.<sup>376</sup> For them, at its root the 'gotra' is not hierarchical but one and the same within all sentient beings as stated by the Buddha.

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*do/\_byang chub sems dpa' ni bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub kyi 'bras bu thob par byed do/*"

375 Ibid f. 2a -2b - *"/gang zag rigs la gnas pa ma yin pa rigs med pa ni sems kyang skyed cing 'bad pa la yang dag par gnas pa yod du zin kyang\*/\_bla na med \_pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub yongs su rdzogs par 'gyur ba'i skal ba med do/\_de lta bas na rnam grangs 'dis ni byang chub sems dpa' byang chub kyi sems kyang ma bskyed la/\_byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la sbyor ba ma byas kyang\*/\_rigs ni gzhi yin par rig par bya'o/\_gal te rigs la gnas kyang sems skyed par mi byed la/\_byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa dag la yang sbyor bar mi byed na ni skal ba yod kyang byang chub myur du 'grub par mi 'gyur ro/\_de las bzlog pa ni myur du 'grub par rig par bya'o/*" f. 7a – *"/rigs med na ni thams cad kyi thams cad rnam pa thams cad du byang \_chub thob par mi 'gyur ba kho nar rig par bya'o/*"

376 *Ārya-saṃdhinirmocana-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // *'phags pa dgongs pa nges par 'grel pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo* // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 109) mdo sde, ca 1b1-87b7 (vol. 51), f. 30a *"/don dam yang dag 'phags/\_de la sems can nyan thos kyi theg pa'i rigs can rnam kyis kyang lam 'di nyid dang/\_sgrub pa 'di nyid kyis grub pa dang bde ba bla na med pa'i mya ngan las 'das pa 'thob \_par 'gyur la/\_sems can rang sangs rgyas kyi theg pa'i rigs can rnam dang/\_de bzhin gshegs pa'i rigs can rnam kyis kyang lam 'di nyid dang/\_sgrub pa 'di nyid \_kyis grub pa dang bde ba bla na med pa'i mya ngan las 'das pa thob par 'gyur bas 'di ni/\_nyan thos dang/\_rang sangs rgyas dang/\_byang chub sems dpa' rnam kyi rnam par dag pa'i \_lam gcig pa yin la/\_rnam par dag pa gcig ste/\_gnyis pa gang yang med pas ngas de las dgongs nas theg pa gcig bu bstan te/*"

The spiritual disposition (*rigs, gotra*) cannot be defined as inferior, mediocre or excellent as it is akin to space and equal for all. There is no difference since all phenomena are fundamentally of one taste.<sup>377</sup>

Moreover, diverse spiritual aspirants are only circumstantial and eventually progress towards the attainment of Buddhahood, as there is ultimately only one spiritual vehicle (*mthar thug theg pa gcig, eka-yāna*) just as there is only one reality (*chos dbyings, dharmadhatu*) to realize. However, just as objects appear to be diverse on the surface, spiritual dispositions also appear diverse.

Since there is no difference in reality (*chos dbyings, dharmadhatu*), the spiritual dispositions (*rigs, gotra*) cannot be differentiated. Their differences are stated because of mere appearance of diverse phenomena.<sup>378</sup>

Here the spiritual disposition is in parallel to the reality of all phenomena; the former subjective and the latter objective. While the true nature of all phenomena is one and same, objects do appear and function differently in convention. Similarly, although all sentient beings are of one spiritual disposition, they appear to possess diverse spiritual dispositions temporarily, as though all things are of one and the same true nature but appear and function differently.

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<sup>377</sup> *Ārya-kāśyapa-parivarta-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa 'od srung gi le'u zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 87) dkon brtsegs, cha 211a6-260b5 (vol. 40), f. 242b -243a “rigs de la tha ma dang/\_'bring dang/\_mchog tu rnam par bzhag pa yang med do/\_de ci'i phyir zhe na/\_rigs de ni nam mkha' dang mtshungs pa'i phyir mnyam pa'o/\_rigs de ni chos thams \_/\_cad ro gcig pa'i phyir khyad par med pa'o/”

<sup>378</sup> Maitreya // *Abhisamayālaṅkāra-nāma-prajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstrakārikā* // shes rab phyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa // Derge (sde dge): (D 3786) shes phyin, ka 1b1-13a7, f. 3b “chos kyi dbyings la dbyer med phyir/\_rigs ni tha dad rung ma yin/\_rten pa'i chos kyi bye brag gis/\_de yi dbye ba yongs su brjod/”

Therefore, the other two spiritual vehicles of hearer vehicle (*nyan thos theg pa*, *śrāvaka-yāna*) and solitary-buddha vehicle (*rang rgyal theg pa*, *pratyeka-buddha-yāna*) are only provisional. Consequently, teachings the Buddha delivered gave to audiences belonging to these two vehicles are assumed as not yet spiritually mature for Buddhahood. Their attainment as Arhat or Pratyeka-buddha is not final, and will attain Buddhahood eventually, as only one universal spiritual goal of Buddhahood exists, since Tathāgatagarbha, the Buddha embryo, pervades all sentient beings.<sup>379</sup>

### **3. Tathāgatagarbha, the Buddha Embryo as the Ultimate Doctrine**

Tathāgatagarbha is a Sanskrit word consisting of two words; Tathāgata and garbha. ‘Tathāgata’ is basically an epithet of a Buddha; literally ‘thus-gone’, in the sense of having gone thus as have all the past Buddhas, or having gone as it is to be. Garbha’s many meanings all refer to ‘something within or interior’, usually it is translated as an essence or embryo/womb.<sup>380</sup> The literal meaning of the two combined words is ‘the essence or embryo of the Tathāgatas or Buddhas’, for simplicity generally translated into English as Buddha-Nature. According to the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, the embryo of Buddha is present

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<sup>379</sup> For a critical study on one of the earliest sources on Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, see Michael Zimmermann, *A Buddha within: the Tathagatagarbhasutra: the Earliest Exposition of the Buddha-Nature Teaching in India* (The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2002).

<sup>380</sup> For different meanings of the term ‘garbha’, see *ibid.*, 41-46.



within all sentient beings, not only humans.<sup>381</sup> It is the potential to transform from an ordinary human being's mind into a Buddha's mind, with the quality of being inherently and primordially luminous, free from the darkness of unknowing and endowed with cognitive ability.

Both Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna agree that the nature of mind is luminosity, it is non-gendered and has the potential to develop qualities such as enlightenment and to abandon temporal defilement. However, the mind and its potential to attain Buddhahood are referred to as the Tathāgatagarbha in the Mahāyāna teachings only. The Theravāda literature extant in Pali does not mention the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, nevertheless defining the mind as luminous just as described in the Tathāgatagarbha teachings: "Luminous, O monks, is the mind, and it is defiled by temporary defilements. Luminous, O monks, is the mind when it is free from temporary defilements."<sup>382</sup>

In the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, the Tathāgatagarbha in the form of a luminous mind is also temporarily obscured by defilements. Therefore, being endowed with this is not sufficient; it has to be divested of concealment to attain

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<sup>381</sup> The Tathāgatagarbha concept as Buddhist doctrine is not free from debate for its way of defining the potential to realize Buddhahood. See, Nalinaksha Dutt, "Tathāgatagarbha," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 33(1957). Richard King, "Is" Buddha-Nature" Buddhist? Doctrinal Tensions in the Śrīmālā Sūtra: An Early Tathāgatagarbha Text," *Numen* (1995). Sallis B King, "The Doctrine of Buddha-Nature is Impeccably Buddhist," *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: the Storm over Critical Buddhism*, Jamie Hubbard & Paul Swanson, eds. (1997). Similarly, it is also acclaimed for its inclusiveness and positivity, see Anton Luis Sevilla, "Founding Human Rights within Buddhism: Exploring Buddha-Nature as an Ethical Foundation," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 17(2010).

<sup>382</sup> Aṅguttaranikāya // Ekakanipātapāli // 5. Paṇihitaacchavaggo // "49. Pabhassaramidaṃ, bhikkhave, cittaṃ. Tañca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭha"nti. Navamaṃ. 50. "Pabhassaramidaṃ, bhikkhave, cittaṃ. Tañca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vippamutta"nti. Dasamaṃ." Accessed from <http://tipitaka.org/romn/>

Buddhahood. The Tathāgatagarbha is in the dormant stage while sentient beings are wandering in Samsāra, the mundane world. Gradually, through the realization of such a potential within oneself, one engages in the Bodhisattva practice of removing defilements through training in morality, meditation and wisdom.

Upon the correct and successful completion of these practices, one is able to fully develop the Buddha essence and attain Buddhahood as stated in the

*Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra:*

The Buddha sees that all kinds of beings universally possess the Tathāgatagarbha. It is covered by countless kleśas, just like a tangle of smelly, wilted petals. So I, on behalf of all beings, everywhere expound the Saddharma, in order to help them remove their kleśas and quickly reach the Buddha way. I see with my Buddha cakṣur that in the bodies of all beings there lies concealed the buddha-garbha, so I expound the Dharma in order to reveal it. Just as I have a Tathagatadhatu, so do all beings. When they develop it and purify it, they quickly attain the unexcelled path.<sup>383</sup>

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383 *Ārya-tathāgatagarbha-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 260) mdo sde, zha 1b1-24a2 (vol. 67), f. 7a – 7b “de bzhin gshegs pas kyang sangs rgyas kyi mig gis sems can thams cad de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying por mthong nas sems can de dag gi 'dod \_chags dang/\_zhe sdang dang/\_gti mug dang/\_srid pa dang/\_ma rig pa'i nyon mongs pa'i sbubs dbye ba'i phyir chos ston te/\_de sgrub pa'i de bzhin gshegs pa rnams ni/\_yang \_dag pa nyid du gnas so/\_rigs kyi bu dag/\_di ni/\_chos rnams kyi chos nyid de/\_de bzhin gshegs pa rnams byung yang rung/\_ma byung yang rung/\_sems can 'di \_dag ni/\_rtag tu de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po can yin na/\_rigs kyi bu dag/\_smad par 'os pa'i nyon mongs pa'i sbubs rnams kyis g.yogs pas/\_de dag gi nyon \_mongs pa'i sbubs gzhi pa dang/\_de bzhin gshegs pa'i ye shes kyang yongs su sbyang ba'i phyir de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs \_rgyas byang chub sems dpa' rnams la chos ston te/\_bya ba 'di la'ang mos par byed do/\_de la byang chub sems dpa' sems dpa' chen po chos de dag la mngon par brtson \_par gnas pa de dag gang gi tshe nyon mongs pa dang/\_nye ba'i nyon mongs pa thams cad las yongs su grol bar gyur pa de'i tshe de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang \_dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas zhes bya ba'i grangs su 'gro ste/\_de bzhin gshegs pa'i bya ba thams cad kyang byed do/”

The English translation is from, William H Grosnick, "The Tathagatagarbha Sutra," *Buddhism in Practice*, Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed. (1995): 92-106.

#### 4. Śrīmālādevī, the Great Female Teacher of the Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine

One of the prominent figures related to the earliest sources of Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, the *Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālādevī (lha mo dpal phreng gi seng ge'i sgra, śrīmālādevī-siṃhanāda)*, is a woman named Śrīmālādevī.<sup>384</sup> According to this text, Śrīmālādevī was the daughter of king Prasenajit of Kosala, a contemporary of the historic Buddha. Studies exist regarding Śrīmālādevī as a historical or symbolic figure because of her association with Prasenajit, whose daughter's name appears differently in other literary sources. While some studies indicate that Śrīmālādevī may be Prasenajit's wife rather than daughter, others claim she may be a different historical figure originating from the Andhra region of India around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.<sup>385</sup>

Irrespective of the historical aspect, my focus is primarily on the imagery of Śrīmālādevī as a powerful female teacher of the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine. Śrīmālādevī had an important text named after her, which has become one of the

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<sup>384</sup> *Ārya-śrīmālādevī-siṃhanāda-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa lha mo dpal phreng gi seng ge'i sgra zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 92) dkon brtsegs, cha 418a6-454a4 (vol. 40)

For English translation of this text from Chinese, see Diana Y Paul and John R McRae, *The Sutra of Queen Śrīmālā of the Lion's Roar: The Vimalakīrti Sutra* (Numata Center for Buddhist, 2004). Also, see Paul, "The Concept of Tathāgatagarbha in the Śrīmālādevī Sūtra (Sheng-Man Ching)."

<sup>385</sup> For an analysis of Śrīmālādevī's historical background, see the Introduction of Alex Wayman and Hideko Wayman, *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā: a Buddhist Scripture on the Tathāgatagarbha Theory*, vol. 10 (Varanasi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990). See the historical overview in Diana Y Paul, "A Prolegomena to the Srimaladevi sutra and the Tathagatagarbha Theory: the Role of Women in Buddhism," (1974).

earliest sources on the Tathāgathagarbha doctrine.<sup>386</sup> In this text Śrīmālādevī is introduced by her mother Mallika as wise, learned and intelligent, adding that if Śrīmālādevī could see the Buddha and hear his teachings, she would have no difficulty understanding them.<sup>387</sup> It is interesting to note that it was the mother rather than the father praising her daughter's intelligence and ability to understand the Buddha's teachings. Mallika's description of Śrīmālādevī is particularly significant given that throughout the text the teachings on the Tathāgathagarbha are known as 'what is difficult to understand'. As the text progresses, Śrīmālādevī shows she is not only able to understand the teachings, but she becomes the one who teaches the doctrine and guides others to the path of Buddhahood. Her teaching is symbolically known as 'Śrīmālādevī's lion-like roar', said to be of definitive meaning that teaches of one spiritual vehicle ultimately for all.<sup>388</sup>

Śrīmālādevī was a princess as well as the queen of Ayodhya. Surrounded by her retinue, one day she received a letter from her parents about the Buddha and his teachings. Immensely excited to read about him and his teachings, she

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<sup>386</sup> The commentaries on the *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra* extant only in Chinese have variously interpreted Śrīmālādevī as an eighth stage male Bodhisattva who is appearing as a woman, a tenth stage Bodhisattva and an emanation of a Buddha. See "A Prolegomena to the Srimaladevi sutra and the Tathagatagarbha Theory: the Role of Women in Buddhism," 30-32.

<sup>387</sup> *Ārya-śrīmālādevī-siṃhanāda-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* // 'phags pa lha mo dpal phreng gi seng ge'i sgra zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 92) dkon brtsegs, cha 418a6-454a4 (vol. 40), f. 418b – "rgyal po chen po/\_kye ma khyed kyi sras mo lha mo dpal phreng ni mdzangs \_shing gsal la zab cing mkhas te/\_gal te ngas bcom ldan 'das mthong ba lta na tshogs chung ngus chos rtogs la/\_bcom ldan 'das kyis chos bstan pa la yang the tshom ma mchis \_par 'gyur ro"

<sup>388</sup> Ibid f. 439a - "bcom ldan 'das/\_de lta lags pas de bzhin gshegs pa rnams kyi seng ge'i sgra 'di ni nges pa'i don lags te/\_don 'di ni mgo gcig tu lung bstan par bgyi ba yang lags \_so"

immediately prayed for the Buddha's appearance, whereupon he appeared in front of her. Śrīmālādevī paid homage to the Buddha and asked his blessing to soon attain Buddhahood. She also wished that whatever merit she had accumulated in any of her past lives would allow her to always see the Buddha guiding her. In front of her entire retinue, the Buddha predicted that she would attain Buddhahood and be known as the Tathāgata Arhat Samyaksambuddha Samantaprabha in the future:

Queen, by reason of your virtuous root formed of the merits accumulated by praising the genuine qualities of the Tathāgata, you, for incalculable eons, will experience perfect sovereignty among gods and men. In all your lives you will not fail to see me. Just as you now praise me face to face, so you will continue praising. And you will also make offerings to innumerable Buddha Lords. After 20,000 eons you will become the Tathāgata-Arhat-Samyaksambuddha Samantaprabha.<sup>389</sup>

As Śrīmālādevī received her predictions, many gods and men prayed to be born in her Buddhaland, where the Buddha stated would have no lower realms: no hell, hungry ghost or animal realms. Śrīmālādevī, after receiving the prediction of her future Buddhahood, pledged to uphold ten vows until her attainment of

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid f. 419b -420a – “/de nas bcom ldan 'das kyis 'khor 'dus pa'i nang du lha mo dpal \_/\_phreng bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub tu lung bstan te/\_lha mo khyod kyis de bzhin gshegs pa la yang dag pa'i yon tan dag gis mngon par bstod \_pa'i bsod nams bsags pa gang yin pa'i dge ba'i rtsa ba 'dis/\_lha mo khyod bskal pa tshad med grangs med par lha dang mi'i rgyal srid phun tshogs pa myong bar 'gyur te/\_tshe rabs \_thams cad du yang nga mthong ba dang 'bral bar mi 'gyur zhing/\_nga la mngon sum du 'di lta bu'i bstod pa bsngags pas bsngags par 'gyur ro/\_sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das dpag \_tu med grangs med pa rnams la yang mchod pa byed par 'gyur ro/\_da phyin chad bskal pa brgya stong grangs med pa nyi shu na/\_khyod de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par \_rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas kun tu bzang po zhes bya bar 'gyur te/\_de'i tshe yang lha mo khyod kyi sangs rgyas kyi zhing der ngan song dag 'byung bar mi 'gyur ro/”

Trans. Wayman and Wayman, *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā: a Buddhist Scripture on the Tathāgatarbha Theory*, 10: 62.

Buddhahood. She vowed not to permit any thoughts of the violation of morality, disrespect towards teachers, anger or ill-will towards sentient beings, jealousy towards the glory and perfections of others, covetousness and so on. After thus pledging, she said to the Buddha:

Lord, I take those ten great vows in the presence of the Lord. For that, may the Master of Dharma himself now be my witness! Although they may be taken face to face with you the Teacher, some sentient beings with meager roots of virtue might think, 'Oh, those ten great vows are difficult to uphold,' and would have doubt or hesitation toward me. Lord, by so thinking they would incur for a long time much harm, suffering, and disaster. Lord, for the sake of helping precisely such persons, I wish to perform in the presence of the Lord this 'Blessing of Truth'.<sup>390</sup>

Śrīmālādevī knew that it was not sufficient to simply take these vows; she felt the need to perform an act of truth to demonstrate to the people that she was indeed capable of upholding such vows. She performed the act of truth by saying the following:

Lord, just as surely as I have taken exactly these ten great vows, and if they are just as stated by me, then, Lord by dint of this, my word of truth, may a shower of heavenly flowers descend upon the group and may divine sounds be heard sounded!<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid f. 422b – 423a – “/bcom ldan 'das/\_bdag gi yid dam chen po bcu po 'di dag ni/\_bcom ldan 'das kyi spyang sngar blangs pa lags te/\_di la chos kyi rje nyid bdag gi dpang du \_/\_gyur pa lags so/\_bcom ldan 'das/\_ston pa mngon sum du gyur tu lags kyang sems can dge ba'i rtsa ba chung ngu la la dag/\_kye ma yid dam chen po bcu po 'di dag ni/\_lcogs par dka'o snyam du bdag la the tshom za'am/\_yid gnyis 'tshal ba de dag ni/\_bcom ldan 'das de nyid kyi yun ring por gnod pa dang/\_sdug bsngal ba dang/\_phung \_bar 'gyur te/\_bcom ldan 'das/\_de dag nyid la phan gdags pa'i slad du/\_bcom ldan 'das kyi spyang sngar bden pa'i byin gyi rlabs 'di bgyi bar 'tshal te”; Trans. Ibid., 66.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid f. 423a – “/\_bcom ldan 'das/\_bdag gi yid dam chen po bcu po gang dag blangs pa'i yid dam chen po bcu po 'di dag la/\_bcom ldan 'das/\_gal te bdag ji skad smras pa de bzhin du bgyid par 'gyur ba lta na/\_bcom ldan 'das/\_bdag gi bden pa'i tshig 'dis 'khor gyi dkyil 'khor 'dir lha'i me tog gi char 'bab par gyur cig/\_lha'i sgra grag par gyur cig/\_des kyang bdag gi bden \_pa'i byin gyi rlabs 'di len par gyur cig/\_”; Trans. Ibid., 66-67.

As she uttered those words, heavenly flowers were showered and heavenly sounds heard. Śrīmālādevī proved the power of her truth in front of the Buddha and the entire assembly. Witnessing her supernatural powers, the gathering ceased to doubt her capability, praying that they would be with her constantly until their attainment of Buddhahood. Having proven her capability, Śrīmālādevī begins delivering profound teachings on themes ranging from the six perfections, four noble truths, twelve interdependent originations and Mahāyāna the great vehicle as the one and ultimate spiritual vehicle for all spiritual aspirants. She said:

Because the vehicles of the Disciples and the Self-Enlightened ones are included in the Great Vehicle, Lord, 'Great Vehicle' is an expression for Buddha Vehicle. In that way, the three vehicles are counted as one vehicle (ekayana). By realizing the 'one vehicle' one attains the incomparable rightly completed enlightenment.<sup>392</sup>

The core of her teachings concerned Tathāgathagarbha, the pure and luminous mind which she sums up at the end:

Lord, this Tathagatagarbha is the embryo of the Illustrious Dharmadhatu, the embryo of the Dharmakaya, the embryo of supramundane dharma, the embryo of the intrinsically pure dharma. Lord, this intrinsic purity of the Tathagatagarbha stained by adventitious secondary defilements is the domain of the Tathagata, who is the inconceivable master. Why so? The

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid f. 440a - “*bcom ldan 'das/\_nyan thos dang/\_rang sangs rgyas kyi theg pa rnam ni theg pa chen po la yang dag par 'du ba'i slad du ste/\_bcom ldan 'das/\_theg pa \_chen po zhes bgyi ba de ni sangs rgyas kyi theg pa'i tshig bla dwags so/\_bcom ldan 'das/\_de ltar na theg pa gsum po 'di dag ni theg pa gcig kho na'i grangs su mchi'o/\_bcom ldan \_'das/\_theg pa gcig rtogs pas bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub rtogs par 'gyur ro*”; Trans. Ibid., 92.

virtuous consciousness, being momentary, is not defiled by defilements;  
and also the  
unvirtuous consciousness, being momentary, is not defiled by  
defilements.<sup>393</sup>

The Buddha and the entire assembly were amazed by Śrīmālādevī's great  
confidence and understanding of the profound doctrine, and the Buddha praised  
her intelligence and endorsed her teaching:

Queen, exactly so! It is difficult to understand the meaning of the  
intrinsically pure consciousness in a condition of defilement. Queen,  
these two Doctrines are difficult to understand: the consciousness  
intrinsically pure is difficult to understand; and the defilement of  
consciousness is difficult to understand. Queen, you as well as the  
Bodhisattvas possessed of the great Doctrine are able to hear these two  
Doctrines. Queen, the rest, the Disciples, accept the two Doctrines only  
through faith in the Tathāgata.<sup>394</sup>

Śrīmālādevī thus demonstrated that she was able to understand 'what is difficult  
to understand' and became a great teacher with hundreds of followers.

Regardless of the historical authenticity of Śrīmālādevī as a person, the text and  
the message it conveys is profound. From the text's outset, Śrīmālādevī is

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid f. 449b – “*bcom ldan 'das/\_de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po 'di ni dam pa'i chos  
kyi dbyings kyi snying po lags so/\_chos kyi sku'i snying po lags so/\_jig rten las 'das pa'i chos  
kyi snying po \_lags so/\_rang bzhin gyis yongs su dag pa'i chos kyi snying po lags so/\_bcom ldan  
'das/\_de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po rang bzhin gyis yongs su dag pa glo bur gyi nye ba'i \_nyon  
mongs pas nye bar nyon mongs pa 'di ni de bzhin gshegs pa'i yul te/\_bsam gyis mi khyab bo  
snyam bdag bgyid do/\_de ci'i slad du zhe na/\_bcom ldan 'das/\_dge ba'i \_sems ni skad cig pa  
ste/\_nyon mongs pa rnams kyis kun nas nyon mongs pa ma lags/\_bcom ldan 'das/\_mi dge pa'i  
sems kyang skad cig pa ste/\_sems de yang nyon mongs \_pa rnams kyis kun nas nyon mongs pa  
ma lags pa'i slad du'o'*”; Trans. Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid f. 450a – “*/de nas bcom ldan 'das kyis lha mo dpal phreng gis rtogs par dka' ba'i  
don \_bshad pa gsan nas rjes su yi rang bar mdzad de/\_lha mo/\_de de bzhin no/\_lha mo/\_de de  
bzhin te/\_sems rang bzhin gyis yongs su dag pa rtogs par dka' ba dang/\_sems \_de'i nye bar nyon  
mongs pa rtogs par dka' ba'o/\_lha mo/\_chos 'di gnyis nyan nus pa ni khyod dam/\_byang chub  
sems dpa'i chos chen po dang ldan pa gzhan dag yin no/\_lha \_mo/\_nyan thos rnams ni chos 'di  
gnyis la de bzhin gshegs pa la dad pas 'gro bar zad de'*”; Trans. Ibid., 106-17.



introduced as a wise and intelligent woman, not as a young girl as were the other female figures such as Sumati and Candrottāra, but as a mature woman with the status of a queen. There is no question from those present that being a woman is problematic while she expresses her aspiration to attain Buddhahood, and she receives the prediction of her attainment of Buddhahood in the future with no conditions.

However, Śrīmālādevī does assume that people may doubt her ability to uphold the Bodhisattva vows, though she does not mention this could be owing to her gender. She dispenses with possible doubt regarding her resolve to uphold the vows by the ‘act of truth’ that she displays, with the Buddha as her witness. Throughout the text, she confidently delivers profound teachings and eventually achieves the Buddha’s acclamation that she is a great teacher with hundreds of followers.

## **Concluding Remarks**

From the above discussions, there are clearly many hermeneutical aspects that need consideration when opting for a particular view. Certainly, philosophically, soteriologically and ontologically, gender plays no role in the path to Buddhahood. However, certain interpretations of the Buddha’s teachings and doctrines can create gender-biased views derived from social and cultural factors. However, since Buddhism is not a monotonous doctrine, it is rich with vast and profound hermeneutical methods and traditions. A strong tradition within Buddhism requires analyzing everything the Buddha taught through

analysis, and many teachings are only provisional and therefore interpretable, rather than definitive and literal.

Śrāvakayāna traditions, which do not differentiate the teachings into provisional and definitive teachings, believe there are three inherently diverse spiritual dispositions, resulting in three diverse spiritual vehicles (*theḡ pa, yānas*). In spite of gender playing no role in defining these diverse spiritual dispositions, they believe anyone in a woman's form cannot attain the highest spiritual realization known as Buddhahood. Similarly, Asaṅga, while being a Mahāyāna personage, also believes in three inherently diverse spiritual dispositions and accordingly three diverse spiritual vehicles. He also held a biased of gender while defining the manifested aspect of Buddhhood – that the supreme emanation form of the manifested body of a Buddha would never be female.

Remarkably, these two views were not the only ones representing Buddhism as a whole. When Mahāyānas of one spiritual vehicle theorists (*eka-yānists*) such as Nāgārjuna and others, interpret Buddhist soteriology, they see no place for gender, interpreting the Buddhist doctrine in a plurastic and inclusive manner. Furthermore, the eka-yanists argue that since all sentient beings are endowed with the Tathāgatagarbha or the embryo of Buddhas, thus all spiritual aspirants will attain Buddhahood. In this sense only one spiritual disposition exists, to be eventually inclined toward the attainment of Buddhahood. Consequently, there is only one spiritual vehicle of the Bodhisattva to reach Buddhahood. This view is enhanced by the renowned female teacher

Śrīmālādevī, who confidently delivers profound teachings and emerges as a very strong character in the *Śrīmālādevī Simhanada Sūtra*.

## **Conclusion**

The lineage of the nuns' ordination was historically formed as a result of women's own initiatives at the time of the Gautama Buddha. Over time, it went through many changes since its inception and, unfortunately, it did not survive in its place of origin. However, luckily before its disappearance from India, it was transmitted to some women in Sri Lanka from where it later went to China. Sri Lanka, China and Tibet were the three main countries where Buddhism took root after its disappearance from India. Yet the nuns' full ordination lineage was never formally introduced in Tibet.

The original single ordination lineage beginning from the Buddha branched off into multiple lineages after the demise of the Buddha. At present, there are mainly three ordination lineages: Theravāda in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand; Dharmagupta in China and Taiwan; and Mūla-Sarvāstivāda in Tibetan Buddhism. Among these three traditions, only the Dharmagupta as found in Chinese Buddhist tradition maintained the nuns' ordination lineage without disruption.

However, since the late 1980s through the 90s there has been strong lobbying for reinstating full ordination for nuns. It was started by the nuns in the Theravāda as well as the Mahāyāna's Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Consequently, a group of Theravada nuns from Sri Lanka was granted full ordination in a dual

ordination ceremony presided over by a group of fully ordained nuns from Taiwan and monks from Sri Lanka in 1998. Since then, there have been several occasions of nuns from both the Theravāda and the Tibetan tradition receiving full ordination from the Dharmagupta nuns. However, the official stand on the nuns' full ordination is still in limbo in both the traditions. In the case of the Tibetan tradition, lobbying for reinstating the full ordination for nuns is still going on for institutional reinstatement.

Nevertheless, today there are many Buddhist women all over the world following the footsteps of Prajapati, Soma and others. There are also many women who are not leading a monastic life but are inspired by the courageous female Bodhisattvas like the Naga girl, Candrottāra, Tara and others in their spiritual practice.

A careful textual analysis of the relevant sections from the corpus of classical Buddhist literature clearly shows that the idea of the impossibility of a female Buddha by no means has a soteriological basis. This androcentric notion of a Buddha is a result of glorifying the Buddha as the leader and teacher of both gods and men. Consequently, the Buddha's physical appearance is of importance only because of the ancient Indian cultural belief that a great being's physical body is adorned with thirty-two marks, one of which is to be male. Hence, because the idea of the impossibility of a female Buddha was not soteriological and doctrinal but was instead socio-cultural, it was strongly debated across the non-Tantric Buddhist traditions.

Within the Śrāvakayāna tradition, Theravādins consistently maintained the notion that both a female Buddha and a female Bodhisatta are impossible. On the other hand, the Sarvāstivādin's position on a female Buddha is mixed. While in some of their literature they explicitly stated the possibility, others stated the impossibility. However, unlike the Theravādins, the Sarvāstivādins definitively believed in the possibility of female Bodhisattvas. Similarly, within the Sūtra-Mahāyāna, there are two different views. While Nāgārjuna-led Mahāyāna completely rejected the impossibility of a female Buddha notion and believed in the possibility, Asaṅga-led Mahāyāna believed in the partial impossibility of a female Buddha. These diverse Mahāyāna views seem to be rooted in their doctrinal differences in terms of Kāya and Yāna theories.

Thus, the impossibility of a female Buddha is not a unanimous view across non-Tantric Buddhism. The possibility of a female Buddha is as much the view of non-Tantric Buddhism as the impossibility. Moreover, amidst these diverse views among different traditions, Tathāgatagarbha, the doctrine of Buddha Nature, is the most profound and unsurpassed doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The universality of this doctrine not only overcomes discrimination within humanity but across the entire realm of sentient beings.

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Kaśmiri Sūryagupta // *Āryatārābhataṭṭārikā-nāma-dvātriṃśatkastotra*

*sarvārthasādhakaratnāṃkārasaṃnibha-nāma* // rje btsun ma 'phags ma  
*sgrol ma la mtshan sum cu rtsa gnyis kyi bstod pa don thams cad grub pa*  
*zhes bya ba* // Narthang (snar thang): (N 3668) rgyud 'grel, zu 191a7-  
192b2

Kamalaśīla // *Tattvasaṃgrahapañjikā* // *de kho na nyid bsdus pa'i dka' 'grel* //

Derge (sde dge): (D 4267) tshad ma, ze 133b1-363a7

Maitreya // *Abhisamayāṃkāra-nāma-prajñāpāramitopadeśasāstrakārikā* //

*shes rab phyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par*  
*rtogs pa'i rgyan zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D  
3786) shes phyin, ka 1b1-13a7

Maitreya // *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra-ratnagotra-vibhāga* // *theg pa chen po*

*rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4024) sems tsam, phi  
54b1-73a7

Maitreya // *Mahāyānasūtrāṃkārakārikā* // *theg pa chen po mdo sde'i rgyan*

*zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa* // Derge (sde dge): (D 4020) sems tsam,  
phi 1b1-39a4

Mātṛceṭa // *Āryatārādevīstotrasarvārthasādhana-nāma-stotrarāja* // 'phags ma

*lha mo sgrol ma'i bstod pa don thams cad grub pa zhes bya ba bstod pa'i*  
*rgyal po* // Derge (sde dge): (D 1703) rgyud, sha 58a7-60b5

Mātṛceṭa // *Āryatārāstotra* // 'phags ma *sgrol ma la bstod pa* // Derge (sde dge):

(D 3693) rgyud, mu 327a4-327b4

Nāgārjuna // *Rājaparīkathāratnāvalī* / *ratnāvalī* // *rgyal po la gdam bya ba rin po*

*che'i phreng ba*// Derge (sde dge): (D 4158) skyes rab / spring yig, ge  
107a1-126a4

*Nāgārjuna // Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā-nāma // rigs pa drug cu pa'i tshig le'ur byas pa  
zhes bya ba*// Derge (sde dge): (D 3825) dbu ma, tsa 20b1-22b6

*Nāgārjuna // Dharmadhātu-stotra// chos kyi dbyings su bstod pa*// Derge (sde  
dge): (D 1118) bstod tshogs, ka 63b5-67b3

*Namastāre-ekaviṃśati-stotra-guṇa-hitasahita // sgrol ma la phyag 'tshal nyi shu  
rtsa gcig gis bstod pa phan yon dang bcas pa*// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 412)  
rgyud, nga 299b5-301a6 (vol. 82)

*Pūrṇa-pramukha-avadāna-śataka // gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya  
pa* // Lhasa (lha sa): (H 351) mdo sde, ha 1b1-446a1 (vol. 75)

*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra // dam pa'i chos pad ma dkar po  
zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*// Lhasa (lha sa): (H 116) mdo sde, ja  
1b1-285b2 (vol. 53)

*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra // dam pa'i chos pad ma dkar po  
zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*// Derge (sde dge): (D 113) mdo sde, ja  
1b1-180b7 (vol. 51)

*Sāgaramegha // Yogācārabhūmaubodhisattvabhūmivyākhyā // rnal 'byor spyod  
pa'i sa las byang chub sems dpa'i sa'i rnam par bshad pa* // Derge (sde  
dge): (D 4047) sems tsam, yi 1b1-338a7

*Śāntideva // Bodhicaryāvatāra // byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*//  
Derge (sde dge): (D 3871) dbu ma, la 1b1-40a7

*Sarvatathāgata-mātanītāra-viśvakarmabhava-tantra-nāma // de bzhin gshegs pa*

*thams cad kyi yum sgrol ma las sna tshogs 'byung ba zhes bya ba'i rgyud,*

Lhasa (lha sa): (H 676) rgyud, pha 51a6-75b6 (vol. 92)

*Tārānātha // sgrol ma'i rgyud kyi byung khungs gsal bar byed pa'i lo rgyus gser*

*gyi phreng ba // gsung 'bum/ ('dzam thang par ma) Volume 12, na, ff.*

1-25

*Tripiṭakamāla // Nayatrāyapradīpa // tshul gsum gyi sgron ma//* Derge (sde dge):

(D 3707) rgyud, tsu 6b4-26b1

*Vasubandhu // Abhidharmakośakārikā // chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi tshig le'ur*

*byas pa//* Derge (sde dge): (D 4089) mngon pa, ku 1b1-25a7

*Vasubandhu // Abhidharmakośabhāṣya // chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi bshad pa //*

Derge (sde dge): (D 4090) mngon pa, khu 1b1-95a7

*Vasubandhu // Sūtrālamkārabhāṣya // mdo sde'i rgyan gyi bshad pa //* Derge (sde

dge): (D 4026) sems tsam, phi 129b1-260a7

*Vinaya-kṣudraka-vastu // 'dul ba phran tshegs kyi gzhi//* Lhasa (lha sa): (H 6) 'dul

ba, tha 1b1-467a3 (vol. 10)

*Vinaya-kṣudraka-vastu // 'dul ba phran tshegs kyi gzhi //* Lhasa (lha sa): (H 6)

'dul ba, da 1b1-509a7 (vol.11)

*Viśākhadeva // Vinayakārikā // 'dul ba tshig le'ur byas pa //* Derge (sde dge): (D

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