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THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

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9

THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

Women in Buddhism: Āmrapālī, Paṭācārā, Ṛṣidāsī, Śīrīmā

1. WHY THE SEXES?

Why are there women and men in the world? In the **Aggañña Sutta** (the Discourse on the Knowledge of Beginnings, D 27),¹ the Buddha gives an interesting explanation for it. The discourse is actually a satire on the socioeconomic origins of the caste system and the social contract of kingship in ancient India, but the Buddha in his characteristic humorous manner of teaching, starts at the very beginning of things, the origin of the universe itself.

There comes a time, Vāseṭṭha, when sooner or later after a long period of time, this world contracts². At the time of contraction, beings are mostly born in the Ābhassara (Skt. Ābhasvara) Brahmā world. And there they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through space, glorious—and they stay like that for a very long time.

But sooner or later, after a very long period, this world begins to expand³ again. At the time of expansion, the beings from the Ābhassara Brahmā world, having passed away from there, are mostly reborn in this world. Here they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through space, glorious—and they stay like that for a very long time.

(D 1:17 = 3:86)

The description here is common to **the Brahma-jāla Sutta** (D 1) and the Aggañña Sutta. It continues, in the latter case, as follows:

At that time, Vāseṭṭha, there was just one mass of water, and all was darkness, blinding darkness. Neither moon nor sun appeared, no constellations or stars appeared, night and day were not distinct, nor months or fortnights, no years or seasons, and **no male or female**----beings were reckoned only as beings.

And sooner or later, after a very long period of time, **savoury earth** (P. *rasa, paṭhavī*) spread itself over the waters where those beings were. It looks just like the skin that forms itself over hot milk as it cools. It was endowed with colour, smell and taste. It was the colour of fine ghee or butter, and it was very sweet, like pure wild honey.

(D 3:86 f.)

Then a curious radiant being tasted the savoury earth. Finding it very tasty, craving arose in the being. Other radiant beings also tasted the savoury earth and were captivated by its taste and craving arose in them. So, they consumed more and bigger chunks of the tasty earth, and as a result began to progressively lose their radiance. At that time, too, the moon and sun, night and day, and the seasons appeared.

Feeding on the tasty earth over a long period of time, the bodies of these beings became coarser and began to lose their ethereal qualities. Some were good-looking, some ugly, and the better looking became conceited with their looks, while the ugly scorned the tasty earth, which by then had disappeared. In its

¹ For scholarly analyses of this sutta, see, for example: R.F. Gombrich, “The Buddha’s Book of Genesis?” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 35 1992a:179-191; Steven Collins, “The Discourse on What is Primary.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 21 1993:301-393; Rupert Gerthin, “Cosmology and Meditation: From the Aggañña-Sutta to the Mahāyāna”. *History of Religions* 36,3 1997:183-217.

² *saṃvartate/saṃvaṭṭati*, lit. “rolls in”, devolves.

³ *vivartate/vivaṭṭati*, lit. “rolls out”, evolves.

place, there grew **mushroom-like fungus** (P. *bhūmi,pappaṭaka*), of good colour, smell and taste. The beings now fed on this fungus and their metamorphosis continued. When the fungus disappeared, bamboo-like creepers, just as sweet, took their place.

When the creepers disappeared, **a kind of rice**, “free from powder and from husks, fragrant and clean-grained”, grew in the open spaces. By this time, their bodies had become coarse and physical enough so that “the females developed female sex-organs, and the males developed male sex-organs”. (The Commentary explains that those who were women in their previous lives, became women; those who were men before, became men.)

And the women became excessively preoccupied with men, and the men with women. Owing to this excessive preoccupation with each other, passion was aroused, and their bodies burned with lust. And later, because of this burning, they indulged in sexual activity.

(D 3:86-88; abridged & paraphrased)

The sutra then goes on to explain how they began to build homes and villages, to work and share labour, and how those who worked in the fields (*kṣetra/khetta*) came to be called **kṣatriya** (*khattiya*), among whom were those who gladdened (*rañjati*) the people with what is good (*dharma/dhamma*), that is, the **rāja**. Those who drew others away (*bāhenti*) away from evil were called **brāhmaṇa**. Those who lived by various (*viśva/vissa*) trades were called **vaiśya** (*vessa*), and those who lived by hunting (*raudra/ludda*) were called **sūdra** (*sudda*). This was how society first functioned: through **circles (maṇḍala) of work**.

2. BUDDHIST CONCEPTION OF OEDIPUS COMPLEX

The Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta (M 38, “Discourse on the Destruction of Craving”) contains the only canonical description we have of the physical conditions for rebirth, that is, through the conjunction of three things: the sexual union of the parents, the mother’s fertile period and the being-to-be-born (*gandharva/gandhabba*) (M 1:265 f.). However, the Theravadins are at pains to stress that the *gandhabba* here refers to **the rebirth consciousness** (P. *paṭisandhi,citta*), not an “intermediate being” (Skt. *antarā,-bhava*) as claimed by the Mahayana. In fact, the Theravadins say that the Majjhima text is actually “a concrete application of dependent origination—so far expressed only as a doctrinal formula—to the course of individual existence” (M:Ñ 1232:410n).

Perhaps the oldest statement on the psychology of sex in terms of what later is called **the Oedipus complex** by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the German founder of psychoanalysis, is found in the most important work of the Sarvāstivāda, that is, Vasubandhu’s **Abhidharma,kośa** (4th-5th century). There, Vasubandhu attempts to describe how rebirth (Skt. *pratisaṃdhi*) takes place. His description is clearly an elaboration based on the description of conception given in the Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta (M 1:265 f.). Driven by karma, the being-to-be-born or “intermediate being” (*antarā,bhava*, to use Vasubandhu’s term) goes through a birth experience:

Even though distant, he sees the place of his rebirth. There he sees his father and mother united. His mind is troubled by the effects of sex and hostility. When the intermediate being is male, it is gripped by a male desire with regard to the mother, when it is female, it is gripped by the female desire with regard to the father; and inversely, it hates either the father, or the mother, whom it regards as either a male or female rival. As it is said in the *Prajñāpti*, “Then either a mind of lust or a mind of hatred is reproduced in the Gandharva.”

When the mind is thus troubled by the two erroneous thoughts, it attaches itself through the desire for sex to the place where the organs are joined together, imagining that it is he with whom they unite. Then, the impurities of semen and blood is [*sic*] found in the womb; the intermediate being, enjoying its pleasures, installs itself there. Then the *skandhas* harden; the intermediate being perishes; and birth arises that is called “rebirth” (*pratisaṃdhi*)...

(Abhks 3,15; based on Pruden’s tr.)

3. EARLY INDIAN CONCEPTION OF WOMEN

During **the Vedic period** (1500-1200 BCE), women were greatly honoured as mothers, and were generally permitted freedom of movement by their menfolk, but as a rule, they played little significant role in religious life and rituals. With the rise of **the Brāhmaṇas** (900-700 BCE), the prose commentaries on the Vedas, complex rituals were seen as being able to influence or control the cosmos. A class of priestly specialists arose who performed these rituals and taught them in their own dwellings. Only the sons of the brahmins were allowed such training since they have to live outside their own homes for the training. (Jhingran 1989:90 ff.)

Moreover, **a son** had to perform the funeral and memorial rites for the benefit of the father and male ancestors in the afterlife. There were rituals to prevent the birth of a girl, since they were regarded as a burden freed only by marriage. A wife was largely regarded as a child-bearer and as subservient to the husband and his parents. Even in the time of **the Upaniṣāds** (1000-600 BCE), i.e. including the Buddha's time, religion, especially asceticism, was seen as a male reserve, and ascetics generally regarded women as temptresses.

Although according to **Jainism** a woman can be reborn as a man, unlike Buddhism, it does not concede the possibility of ultimate spiritual liberation for women. Such ideas crystallized after the 5th century and the best example of this attitude is found in such works as the brahminical Dharma,śāstras, of which the best known text is **the Manu,smṛti** or "Laws of Manu" (which in its present form dates from 1st century BCE). The Manusmṛti describes women as follows:

By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged woman, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons. A woman must never be independent.

(Manu,smṛti v,147 f.) [Cf. 7c]

The Manusmṛti also forbids women from performing religious rites and from having any knowledge of the Vedas (Manu,smṛti ix,18). A woman's religious duties were simply to server her husband and looking after the domestic affairs (ii,67). A man could divorce his wife, but a woman had not right to divorce her husband (ix,81). Generally, women were seen as highly sexed and ever ready to seduce men (ix,13-18). (Jhingran 1989:96).

Buddhist Views of Women

4. SEXUAL EQUALITY

(a) Changing attitudes

The **early Buddhist** view of women is liberal and egalitarian. However, during **the Commentarial period** (beginning about 500 years after the Buddha), the monastic view of women were generally less flattering as the Order became more male-centred and described by terms such as "institutional androcentrism" and "ascetic misogyny" (Sponberg 1992). **The Jātaka stories**, for example, contain some of the most blatantly misogynous texts. We shall first look at the early Buddhist attitude to women and then at the later change of heart, and the reasons behind them.

The Buddha lived and taught in a society where women were generally regarded as socially and spiritually subservient to men. In keeping with the social conventions of his days, the Buddha first approached only male ascetics and male householders, that is, until **the 5th year** of his Ministry, when the Order of

Nuns was formed [6:6]. The Buddha, however, introduced radical measures that allow women to realize their full spiritual potential.

On a social level, the Buddha's teaching on individual karma plays down the need for a person to depend on the memorial rites of his son for postmortem spiritual benefits. A person's destiny, both male and female, according to the Buddha, largely lies in one's own hands:

Just as you have sown the seed,
So shall you reap its fruit.
One who does good reaps good,
And the evil doer reaps evil.
When you have sown the seeds,
You shall taste the fruit.

(S 1:227)⁴

(b) Spiritual equality

Never before has the position of women come to be so equal that of men as in the Buddha's Order and Buddhist community. In her classic work, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, **I.B. Horner** comes to the conclusion that

...the position of women in Buddhist India was more enviable and more honourable than it had been in pre-Buddhist days. Daughters and widows were no longer regarded with such undisguised despair and contumely. On the contrary, both they and wives commanded more respect and ranked as individuals. They enjoyed more independence, and a wider liberty to guide and follow their own lives. (Horner 1930:82).

The Buddha's teachings as we have them in **the four Nikāyas** [6:27b] and even in the Khuddaka Nikāya, are generally quite clear about the spiritual equality of women and men. The main points of this sexual equality in spiritual terms cover not only ordained members (monks and nuns) but also lay followers (male and female). I have here expanded and updated **I.B. Horner's main points** relating to sexual equality as evident in the early texts (Horner, 1930:287 f.):

- (1) The Buddha wins enlightenment for monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, and teaches the Dharma equally to all of them (M 1:490 f.). The Milinda,pañha gives the simile of "the tree [that] makes no distinction in giving shade" (Miln 409 f.), that well illustrates the Buddha's compassion:

To the murderer Devadatta, to the robber Aṅgulimāla,
To Dhanapāla [Nālāgiri], and to Rāhula, too—the Sage was the same to all.
(DhA 1:146; cf. MA 2:387; Ap 145)

- (2) The conduct of the members of the fourfold company have an analogous effect on the persistence or disappearance of the Dharma (A 5.201 = 3:247), the progress or decline of the Sangha (A 4.7 = 2:8), and the same virtues or vices will take the woman or the man to happy states or suffering states (A 5:283-287).
- (3) Women and men may have the same spiritual limitation or powers (Vajīrī, S 1:86; Somā Therī, S 1:129; Udena, S 4:110 f.; Mātugāma Saṃyutta, S 26; Kāḷigodhā, S 5:396 f.); sometimes, women may be wiser than men (e.g. Bhaddā Kuṇḍala,kesī, DhA 2:222; Mallkā, S 3.8 [8:16a]).
- (4) Nuns may develop to the same extent as monks. (Ānanda's lion-roar, D 2:141; M 1:466 f.) [6:6]

⁴ For details, see e.g. Cūḷa,kamma,vibhaṅga Sutta, M 135.

- (5) The Buddha has declared that he would not enter Nirvana until the fourfold company, comprising wise monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, has been established for the progress of the Teaching. (D 2:104, 113)
- (6) The Buddha's teachings apply equally to both sexes (Dh 168 f.). The Buddha himself shows an egalitarian attitude towards his devotees. In the **Desanā Sutta**, for example, the Buddha declares, "...just like the excellent field are **my ordained disciples, both men and women**...just like the moderate field are **my lay disciples, both men and women**, I teach them Dharma that is good in its beginning, good in its middle and good in its ending, both in spirit and in letter. I make known to them the Holy Life, that is wholly perfect and pure." (S 4:315 f.)

Futhermore, it is recorded in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta, that after accepting a meal offering from a courtesan, Āmrāpālī (Ambapālī) [14; 10:66], he honours it by turning down another invitation from a group of young Licchavī kshatriyas of Vaiśālī (V 1:231-233; D 2:95-98). Āmrāpālī later joins the Order and becomes an Arhant (ThiA 206 f.).

- (7) The Dharma protects all Dharmafarers, male and female, equally, who practise it. (Tha 303)

5. THE ORDER OF NUNS

(a) The Jains

The position of women in Buddhism is closely associated with **Ānanda** [6:6] since he is instrumental in moving the Buddha to establish the Order of Nuns (*bhikkhūṇī, saṅgha/bhikkhūṇī, saṅgha*) in the fifth year of the Ministry (V 2:253-283; A 4:274-280). After Śuddhōdana's death, **Mahā Prajāpatī Gautamī** (at the head of 500 companions whose husbands have renounced following their listening to the Kalaha-vivāda Sutta, Sn 862-877) approaches the Buddha and thrice requests ordination, but he turns her down, replying: "Be careful, Gotamī, of the going-forth of women from home into homelessness."⁵

Even before the Buddhist Order of Nuns is formed, **the Jains** have their own Order of Nuns, as evident from the Therīgāthā (Thī 107-111) of Bhadrā Kuṇḍala, keśā (Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesī, the Curly-haired), a former Jain nun.⁶ The Jain Order, however, is more solitary and less organized than the Buddhist one, and they actually deny that women are capable of liberation (Harvey, 2000:383 f.; Jaini, 1991). There are also other non-Buddhist women religious wanderers and debaters in the Buddha's time.

(b) Cūḷa Dhamma, samādāna Sutta

In the **Cūḷa Dhamma, samādāna Sutta** (M 1:305) the Buddha speaks of "four ways of undertaking" the religious life: that is,

that which is pleasant now but painful later;
that which is both painful now and later;
that which is painful now but pleasant later; and
that which is both pleasant now and later.

⁵ **The Dakkhiṇā, vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 142) relates how Gautamī, when still a lay-woman (M 3:253), makes an offering of "a new pair of cloths" that she had herself spun to the Buddha, but he proposes that she instead offer them to the Saṅgha, that is, so that the merit is greater. In the list of **seven kinds of offerings**, the sutta also mentions the "twofold Saṅgha" (P. *ubhato, saṅgha*), that is, including the Order of Nuns (M 3:255). If Gautamī were a laywoman when the Order of Nuns was already formed, then the account about her being the first nun (V 2:254 ff.) must be false [5]. However, it is possible that the sutta consisted of two originally separate passages being conflated into one text (Harvey 2000:386). In other words, it is likely that at least the section on the seven kinds of offerings was interpolated later. [17]

⁶ A 1:25; AA 1:367 ff.; Ap 2:560 ff.; ThiA 101 f.; DhA 2:217 ff.

In the first case, a religious person claims that “there is no harm in sensual pleasures” and indulges in them, and so suffering painful karmic effects in due course. The second case is illustrated by one who practices self-mortification, suffering pain now and later. In the third case, there is the case of a person with strong greed, hate and delusion, but he perseveres in the holy life, in due course enjoying the fruits of the holy life. And in the last case, a person without strong greed, hatred or delusion meditates and gains the Absorptions, and is reborn in the happy realms.

In the first case, that of one whose religious undertaking is pleasant now but painful later, the Buddha gives the example of a religious who “gulps down sensual pleasure...with women wanderers who wear their hair in a topknot” saying, “Pleasant is the touch of this woman wanderer’s tender soft downy arm!” (M 1:305). The Buddha’s caution over ordaining women is clearly motivated by **the danger of sexual relations** between monks and nuns, if they were to be in close association. The second reason is that the Buddha does not see any advantage in going against social conventions of the day (as long as they do not go against his Teachings) (see Harvey 2000:387 f.).

(c) Women’s spirituality

When Ānanda comes to know of the plight of Gautamī and her companions, he intercedes on their behalf and approaches the Buddha with the famous remark confirming women’s spirituality:

Now, Lord, are women, after having gone forth from home into homelessness in the Doctrine and Discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, able to realize the fruit of Stream-winning or the fruit of Once-return, or the fruit of Non-return, or spiritual perfection?

(V 2:254)

The Buddha’s hesitation to ordain women is similar in spirit as when he hesitates to teach the Dharma immediately after his enlightenment (M 1:168 f.) [4:1].

In both cases, he only agrees once good reasons are cited: some “have little dust in their eyes” and will understand; women can attain advanced states of insight. While the ordination of women was not a complete innovation at the time, I.B. Horner comments that it was unusual at the time, and was made in the face of the “dead weight” of public opinion (1930:110), so that “What Gotama did for women shines as a bright light in the history of freedom” (p. 113).

(Harvey 2000:384)

(d) The Buddha’s hesitation to ordain women

Mohan Wijayaratna, in his book, *Buddhist Monastic Life* (tr. Grangier & Collin, 1990:158-163), gives some important insight into the reasons for the Buddha’s hesitation to ordain women. The Buddha might have thought that it is not the proper time to establish the Order of Nuns. The first hypothesis offered by Wijayaratna is that all the women who first came to him for ordination are his relatives from the Śākya clan. If the Buddha had acceded to their request at once, some of his opponents might have thought it scandalous. However, after it was formed, many brahmin women join the Order.

The Buddha probably also anticipated some serious problems that might arise in the daily lives of the nuns. The Order of Nuns might become vulnerable and need the protection of future generations. Indeed some unfortunate incidents did occur even in his own lifetime. For example, Utpalavarṇā was raped in Andhavana, after which nuns are forbidden to travel or dwell in forests (the Dark Wood) (V 3:35; DhA 2:49 f.) [9:11b]. On another occasion, while the nuns were away, their huts were burned down (V 4:303). Once a group of travelling nuns were looking for a place to lodge for the night. The brahmin’s wife told them to wait until the head of the house returned. But when he arrived in the night and saw the nuns, he immediately threw them out with the words, “Out with these shaven-headed whores!” (V 4:273-275).

(e) The eight strict rules

The most important reason for the Buddha's hesitation is that having women in the Order might be a serious threat to the celibacy and discipline of the monks. As such, it is not so much as that women are vulnerable, as that the men who are morally weak might easily fall into sexual temptations. There is also the tendency of women to mother men with whom they are familiar or favour. Above all, in any social or physical relationship between the sexes, it is usually the women who bear the brunt of the blame, like ending up being pregnant [9b].

As such, the Buddha introduced **the Eight Strict Rules** (*guru,dharma/garudhamma*) to be “observed, respected, honoured and revered by a nun, and never transgressed for as long as she lives”, that is to say:

- (1) A nun, even if ordained for a hundred years, must greet a monk with deference, even if he has been ordained that very day. She must rise up from her seat, salute him with joined palms, and show him proper respect.
- (2) A nun is forbidden to spend the Rains Retreat in a place where there is no monk.
- (3) Every fortnight, a nun is to ask two things of the monks: the date of the Upoṣadha ceremony (for the recitation of the Prātimokṣa) and to teach them Dharma.
- (4) At the end of the Rains Retreat, a nun must address the triple “invitation” (*pravāraṇā/pavāraṇā*) to both the Orders (of the monks and of the nuns): she must ask if anyone has “seen, heard or suspected” anything against her (for which she has to make amends).
- (5) A nun who has committed a serious offence must undergo probation (*mānatva/mānatta*) before both Orders.
- (6) Ordination as a nun must be sought from both Orders only after a postulant (*śikṣamānā/sikkhamānā*) has kept to the Six Precepts [i.e. the 5 Precepts and the rule regarding not eating during wrong hours] for two years.
- (7) A nun should on no account revile or abuse a monk.
- (8) A monk can admonish and advise a nun, but a nun cannot admonish or advise a monk.

(V 2:255, 4:52; A 4:276 f.)

These heavy rules are interesting because, traditionally, the Buddha would only make a rule or amend one after the fact, that is, only after a problem incident or an infringement of a rule has occurred. In the case of the ordination of women, he has introduced **preventive measures**, rather than corrective and restorative procedures (which were introduced later for the nuns by way of the Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya). Despite the Buddha's careful precautions, however, many untoward incidents later occur involving the nuns. There are cases where indisciplined nuns like Sthulā Nandā (S 2:219) [6:18] and Sthulā Tiṣyā (S 16.10) [6:17] who rudely abused Mahā Kāśyapa.

6. ASCETIC MISOGYNY?

There are in the early Canon, especially **the Aṅguttara Nikāya**, what appears as negative references to women. It is useful here to remember that the teachings of the Aṅguttara are generally meant for **the laity**, and originally compiled with the Indian social background. Women are likened to black snakes, treated as evil smelling and adulterous, and accused of ensnaring men (A 2:498). They are regarded as secretive and not open (A 1:263). They are thought of as being full of passion, easily angered, envious, and “weak in wisdom”, and have no place in public assemblies or business. They are incapable of earning a living by any profession because they are uncontrolled, envious, greedy and stupid (A 2:87). A woman's existence is described as centring around men, adornment, her son, and being without a rival (A 2:76). Women are expected to be like slaves and be obedient to their husbands (A 3:224, 361-367).

Taken out of context, such statements may sound like expressions of classic male chauvinism or more technically, “ascetic misogyny” (Sponberg 1992:18-24). Let us examine this problem from historical, social and spiritual angles. **Historically**, early Buddhism inherited a society whose attitude towards

women have been moulded by the androcentric priestly texts (especially the *Manu.smr̥ti*) of the brahminical system [3]. The apparently anti-feminist statements reflect the early Buddhist *inheritance*, not its legacy.

Socially, we see Buddhist women in Buddhist communities in south-east Asia, especially modern Singapore and Malaysia, for example, as antitheses of the “misogynist” statements quoted here. According to the 1980 Singapore Census, about 35% of Singapore men are Buddhist, and a slightly higher percentage of women are Buddhist. In Malaysia, too, Buddhist social and welfare activities are generally dominated by women. This might be regarded as a modern development, but in the history of a Buddhist country like Siam, for example, there are women warriors like Suriyothai and women (more than men) engaged in business often line the streets of the towns. All this despite the fact that the post-canonical texts tend to show a misogynist bias.

Despite the presence of the “misogynist” texts in the early Canon, it is very difficult to find men in our Buddhist community (or Buddhist communities anywhere in the world) who actually have a low opinion of women, unless perhaps if they have serious marriage problems or are male homosexuals. In other words, those remarks quoted from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* are culturally limited to ancient Indian society of the Buddha’s time.

On the **spiritual** level, practising Buddhists generally try to develop a balanced approach to gender issues. I have used the term “balance” in two senses: as counter-weight and as harmony. Among the Confucian-dominated patriarchal Chinese society, for example, its male-centredness is **counter-weighted** by a motherly Guanyin, the female form of Avalokiteśvara, said to be the object of faith of “half of Asia”. In the Tibetan pantheon, however, Avalokiteśvara is represented as an **androgynous** hypostasis of compassion balanced by wisdom (the eye in each of “his” thousand palms).

The concept of **balance as harmony** plays a vital role in Buddhist practice. The teaching of the Five Spiritual Powers (*bala*) or Faculties (*indriya*), is one of balance: faith should be balanced by wisdom, effort by concentration, and harmonizing the four is mindfulness (D 3:239; A 3:10; Vbh 342). The four Divine Abodes (*brahma, vihāra*), too, is only effected by a balanced practice of lovingkindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity (D 2:196, 3:220; Dhs 262; Vism 320). At the heart of Buddhism, we have the statement that “there is no concentration (*dhyaṇa/jhāna*) without wisdom; nor is there wisdom for him who lacks concentration” (Dh 372), both should work together like the wings of a bird.

If Buddhism is founded on the misogynist notion that women are in various ways inferior to men, it is hard to explain the general openness we see today among modern practising Buddhists with regards to gender issues. Buddhist men are just as willing to perform domestic functions (like “mothering” a child) just as much as Buddhist women would excel in business, and in academic and professional fields. Even if the modern philosophy of gender is dictated by socioeconomic circumstances, Buddhists easily accept the notion of harmony between the male and female. [9a]

7. MALE MONASTIC VIEW OF WOMEN

(a) *Mātā,putta Sutta*

By its very definition, **monasticism** (a term derived from the Greek *monazein*, “to live alone”) entails celibacy. Under such circumstances, it is less surprising if monastic teachings are coated in what appears to be “misogynist” language. After all, one of the greatest threat to the celibate life of the monastic would be the opposite sex, which would lead to sexual involvements, caring for a family and distraction to the spiritual life. Hence, the Buddha’s warning to the monks in **the *Mātā,putta Sutta*** (A v,55) relates a case where a mother and son were nun and monk spending the rains retreat together in Śrāvastī committed **incest**:

Monks, I see no other form...sound...smell...taste...or touch, so enticing, so desirable, so intoxicating, so binding, so distracting, such a hindrance to winning the unsurpassed release from the yoke as a woman's form...sound...smell...taste...or touch.

Monks, a woman, even when walking, will stop to ensnare a man's heart. Whether standing, sitting or lying down, laughing, talking or singing, weeping, stricken or dying, a woman will stop to ensnare a man's heart.

Indeed, monks, one may in truth speak of womanhood as being totally a snare of Māra.

Speak to a man who has a sword in hand, or a goblin,
Or even sit close to a venomous snake, by whose bite one lives not—
But never speak with a woman alone!

(A 3:68)

One should consider the context of this teaching. The fact that this sutra is preserved in the *Anguttara*—a collection meant for the initial and basic reading of newly ordained monks and serious lay practitioners—shows that it serves to remind them of **the minimum personal conduct** so that the precept of celibacy is not threatened or broken. Far from degrading women, we can easily sense here the Buddha's wry humour in wisely appreciating the beauty of women. And if we understand the real nature of Māra (as our own state of mind), then the problem lies more with the men's weaknesses than with the women's powers.

(b) The Uppatho Sutta

There is no notion of ritual pollution here, as in the case of the brahminical system [3]. It is simply a case of separating an inflammable fuel from the fire that needs to be extinguished. **The purpose of monasticism** is to create the best conditions for spiritual development of its candidates, which as such entails the removal of all distractions. The danger to personal development is **lust**, that is, the drive to fill a perceived emptiness in oneself by things and experiences of others. In this context, the reference from the *Devatā Saṃyutta* is enlightening:

- 197 What is called the deviant path?
 What undergoes destruction night and day?
 What is the stain of the holy life?
 What is the bath without water?
- 198 Lust is declared the deviant path.
 Life undergoes destruction night and day.
 Women are the stain of the holy life—
 Here men are trapped.
 Austerity and the holy life—
 This is bath without water.

(S 1:38; cf 1:43)

It is important to note here that “women are the stain of the holy life” insofar as holy men (who have chosen celibacy) are concerned. This statement is applied to a conventional situation; it is not a universal statement of ultimate truth. “The bath without water” is the Buddha's humorous repartee to the brahminical practice of washing away their impurities (sustained by external impure situations and persons).

(c) The Bhāradvāja Sutta

The Bhāradvāja Sutta gives a good idea of how monks and nuns train themselves in relation to the problem of sexual lust. Once when the venerable **Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja** (the foremost amongst monks who are lion-roarers, A 1:23; S 5:224 f.; V 2:111 f.) is dwelling in Ghosita's Park at Kauśambī, king Udayana

(Udena) of Vatsā (Vamsā) approaches him and asks **how the young monks maintain their celibacy and spiritual practice:**

Master Bhāradvāja, what is the cause or reason why these young monks, youths with black hair, endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, who have not dallied with sensual pleasures, lead the complete and pure holy life all their lives and maintain it continuously?

Maharajah, this is spoken by the Blessed One: “Come, monks, towards women who are old enough, bear them in mind as your own mother; towards those old enough to be your sisters, bear them in mind as your sisters; towards those young enough to be your daughters, bear them in mind as your daughters.” This is the reason, Maharajah...

The mind is wanton, master Bhāradvāja. Sometimes lust arises towards women who are old enough to be one’s mother...towards women who are old enough to be one’s sisters...towards women who are young enough to be one’s daughters. Is there any other reason that these young monks...lead the complete and pure holy life all their lives and maintain it continuously?

Maharajah, this is spoken by the Blessed One: “Come monks, review this body upwards from the soles of the feet, downwards from the tips of the hair, enclosed in skin, as full of many kinds of impurities: head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, midriff, spleen, lungs, intestines, small intestines, chyme, excrement, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine” (asubha,saññā or kāya,gatā,sati.)
(D 4:293 f.; M 3:90; A 5:109; Vism 239-266)⁷

That is easy, Master Bhāradvāja, for those monks who are developed in body, in moral conduct, in mind, in wisdom but, it is difficult for those who are undeveloped... Sometimes, though one thinks: “I will regard the body as foul,” one beholds it as beautiful...

Maharajah, this is said by the Blessed One: “Come, monks, dwell guarding the sense-doors, Having seen a form with the eye, do not grasp its signs and features. Since you leave the sense-door unguarded, evil, unwholesome states of covetousness (abhiijhā) and displeasure (domanassa) might invade you...Having heard a sound with the ear....Having smelt an odour with the nose...Having felt a touch with the body...Having cognized a mental state with the mind, do not grasp the signs and features...cultivate the restraint of the senses.”

It is wonderful, Master Bhāradvāja! It is amazing, Master Bhāradvāja! You have made the Dharma clear in many ways.... Master Bhāradvāja, I go for refuge to the Blessed One, and to the Dharma, and to the Order of Monks. From this day let Master Bhāradvāja remember me as a lay follower who has gone forth for refuge for life.

(S 35.127 = 4:110-113; abridged)

8. POWERS OF THE SEXES

(a) Powers of a woman

The androcentric society of the Buddha’s time had certain expectations of a woman, that is, there were certain qualities that men saw as desirable in a woman. Most of these expectations were understandably from a male bias. However, there is a universal quality that is expected not only of women, but also of men, that of virtue. The **Visāraḍa Sutta** gives us a good idea of these ancient expectations:

Monks, there are **five powers of a woman**. What are the five?

⁷ *kāya,gatā,sati*. To these 31 parts of the body, the Commentaries add “brain” as the 32nd, Vism 241.

The power of beauty, the power of wealth, the power of relatives, the power of sons, the power of virtue. These are the five powers of a woman. When a woman possesses these five powers, she dwells confident at home...she abides at home having won over her husband...she abides with her husband under her control.

(S 4:246)

However, the Buddha observes that in ancient India, if a woman has only **the power of virtue**, even to the exclusion of the other qualities, the virtuous would “accommodate her in the family; they do not expel her” (S 4:248)

(b) The best of goods

The Saṃyutta Nikāya contains a riddle: **What is the best goods (*bhaṇḍana*)?** Answer: “A woman ranks as the best of goods.” (S 1:43). At a cursory glance, this sounds like regarding woman as a “commodity”, which might well be true in androcentric India (and materialistic modern society). This riddle is actually the second question is a quatrain of riddles:

- 239 What is sovereignty in the world?
 What ranks as the best of goods?
 What in the world is a rusty sword?
 What in the world is considered a plague?
- 240 Power (*vaśa/vasa*) is sovereignty in the world.
 A woman ranks as the best of goods.
 In the world anger is a rusty sword.
 Thieves are considered a plague in the world.

(S 1:43)

Like many of the verses (*gāthā*) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, especially the Sa,gāthā Vagga (the first chapter), this riddle is in the ballad (*ākhyāna*) form and belongs to free floating ancient **gnomic poetry** of India which the Buddhists preserved (Winternitz 1933 2:57 f.). “Too many cooks spoil the broth” is an English gnome. (The Āḷavaka Sutta, for example, centres around riddles given by the yaksha Āḷavaka to the Buddha who answers them, Sn 181-192.)

As such, the statement that “**A woman is the best of commodities**” is a gnome or ancient Indian saying preserved in the Canon. The Saṃyutta Commentary, however, gives an interesting explanation to this non-Buddhist statement. A woman is called *the* best of goods because a woman is an article that should not be given away; or else she is so called because all Bodhisattvas and Universal Monarchs are conceived in a mother’s womb. (SA 1:100)

(c) Common qualities

The importance of woman in Buddhism is attested by the fact that a whole section, **the Mātugāma Saṃyutta** of the Saṃyutta Nikāya is dedicated to women. This *saṃyutta* or “connected discourses” on women significantly open with two discourses of the title, **the Manāpa Amanāpa Sutta**. The two discourses are identical except for the subject: in the first is about women; the second is about men.

What five qualities that **a woman** possesses that makes her extremely disagreeable to a man? *She is not good-looking; not wealthy; not virtuous; lethargic; and infertile.* (S 37.1)

What five qualities that **a man** possesses that makes him extremely disagreeable to a woman? *He is not good-looking; not wealthy; not virtuous; lethargic; and infertile.* (S 37.2)

Again, here we see only the social aspects of gender relationship; as such, this is a conventional truth that can be overcome through spiritual practice. With some understanding of the Dharma, one can look beyond the external standards into the true nature of others and inspire them to show their natural goodness. In short, one attempts to see a person as he or she really *is*, and respecting that being. In this way, one will discover the other person's hidden goodness and one's own self-knowledge.

9. EQUALITY OR HARMONY?

(a) Gender harmony

As a rule, stereotypes are inaccurate: that women are feminine, and men should be masculine. **Femininity** is on one extreme of the gender spectrum, and **masculinity** is on the other end. The feminist movement that has arisen in western societies is a reaction against a male-dominated western society under the shadow of patriarchal Christian values. Indeed, feminism exists because there is masculinism; but both, seen as polarized externalities, are incomplete in themselves.

According to Buddhism, in terms of emotional health, social harmony and spiritual development, mental or psychological aspects of gender matter more than its physical manifestations. Modern psychology, such as the work of Carl Gustav Jung, the German psychologist, has shown that we all have aspects or degrees of femininity and masculinity in ourselves. **There is a masculine side (anima) in every woman, and a feminine side (animus) in every man.** Both aspects must be harmonized internally for one to become a healthy individual. [5:4c]

“Equality” of gender is not necessarily a good thing for anyone, since equality suggests a more physical situation than a mental or emotional one. We can share things equally but we can only harmonize an imbalance, which really is the crux of the gender problem in a patriarchal (or matriarchal) society. **The harmonization of gender** gives a truer picture of the problem and its solution. It is in this light that we should view the various “negative” statements made, especially in the *Aṅguttara*, regarding women [6].

(b) Qualities peculiar to women

Social “equality” is **not a just measure** for women as against men but the two genders each have their peculiar qualities. In **the Āveṇika Sutta** (S 37.3), the Buddha lists five characteristics peculiar to women, “the five kinds of sufferings peculiar to women, that women experience but not men”:

- (1) Even when young, when a woman marries (goes to live with her husband's family), she is separated from her relatives.
- (2) A woman is subject to menstruation.
- (3) A woman becomes pregnant.
- (4) A woman gives birth.
- (5) A woman is made to serve a man.

(S 4:239)

Kṛṣṇa Gautamī (Kīsā Gotamī) makes this “indirect” statement of conventional truth regarding women, recorded in her *Therīgāthā*:

Painful is the state of a woman, says the Trainer of those persons worthy of training.
Being a co-wife, too, is painful—some having given birth once,
Even cut their throats; the gentler ones take poison.
When a difficult birth occurs, both mother and unborn child die.

(Tha 216 f.)

(c) Contextualization

It is important here to “**contextualize**”, that is, read these texts in their context, first by analyzing whether each statement is a “hidden” (Skt. *saṃvṛti*, lit. “covered”) or “conventional” (P. *sammutti*) teaching, or a statement of ultimate (*paramârtha/param’attha*) truth [1:1b]. The statements made in the Āveṇika Sutta: (1) about married women living with the in-laws, and (5) about women being subservient to men, for example, are **conventional truths** relating only to societies like those of ancient India of the Buddha’s time.

The other three statements of the Āveṇika sutta—that (2) a woman is subject to menstruation; that (3) a woman becomes pregnant; and that (4) a woman gives birth—are also conventional truths but they are also universal truths of a **worldly (*laukika/lokiya*) level**, i.e. not of the level of spirituality or Dharma. In other words, these last three statements are not true in the ultimate sense because they are not hindrances to spiritual development and enlightenment. In terms of the **not-self doctrine** (*anatman/anattā*), there is no persisting personality, male or female, but only a single karmic stream interconnected with other karmic streams in a boundless net of interbeing. This is what Sponberg calls “soteriological inclusiveness” (1985:8-13).

Buddhist Women Saints

10. BUDDHIST VIEW OF GENDER

(a) Solutions to gender problem

The gender issue, that is the problem of sexual justice and harmony, arises from two causes: social oppression and emotional oppression. The first, **social oppression**, as we have seen is often rooted in ancient culture and religion. The second cause, **emotional oppression**, arises from personal interaction between individuals of different sexes into professional or intimate relationships (especially in marriage, family life and as occupational hazard). In both cases, the best way of the oppressed gender (whether male or female) is to be spiritually strong.

There are two basic ways to solve the gender problem if one is entangled in it. First, form a circle of positive like-minded **spiritual friends** to define, discuss, deliberate, solve and prevent the problems, especially through mutual emotional support and engaged action (such as learning from other action groups dealing with similar problems. In short, form or join a network of engaged Buddhists to deal with the problem.

The second solution to the gender problem is to **revise and harmonize your mental approach** to the whole problem. One of the most difficult aspects of the gender issue to deal with is the perception of one’s being a “victim”, which is clearly defined in the Dhammapada:

He abused me; he beat me; he defeated me—
In those who harbour such thoughts, hatred (*vera*) is never appeased.

He abused me; he beat me; he defeated me—
In those who do not harbour such thoughts, hatred (*vera*) is appeased.

(Dh 3-4)

The point of these statements is that one has the choice of not *thinking* about it, since this does not solve the problem, but only worsen it. Being a victim remains a negative mental attitude after the wounds, bruises and hurt have healed.

(b) Kṛṣṇā Gautamī

The healing has to start and continue with a positive mental attitude of lovingkindness to oneself and to the oppressor. It is important to try to understand the oppressor: why he or she is oppressive and perhaps do something positive about it.⁸ When **Kṛṣṇā Gautamī** loses only child after a long-awaited pregnancy, she falls into the rut of denial, insanely wandering about in search of a cure for her dead infant. She meets the Buddha who tells her to find a handful of mustard seeds from a house that has known no death. As she goes from house to house throughout the city, the message of impermanence and death is echoed and re-echoed into her being. She returns a sane person to the Buddha and is ordained into the Order. (DhA 2:270-275; cf. Thī 213-223)

One day, while Gautamī is meditating in the Andhavana (Blind Men's Grove) in Śrāvastī after her noonday meal, Māra appears to her in an attempt to terrify and distract her from concentration. Māra addresses Gautamī in verse:

525 Why now, when your son is dead,
Do you sit here alone with tearful face?
Having entered the woods all alone,
Are you on the lookout for a man?

Then, upon investigating, it occurs to the nun Gautamī that it must be Māra: “This is Māra the Evil One.” Then she replies him in verse:

526 I have gotten past the death of sons;
With this, the search for men has ended.
I do not sorrow, I do not weep,
Nor do I fear you, friend.

(S 1:130; cf. Thī 213-223)

Here, Gautamī puns on the expression “gotten past the death of sons”. First, she has accepted her child's death and her mourning is over. Having understood the Dharma, she does not need a son any more; as such, there is no more fear of losing one. So she lives fearless of Māra.

(c) Somā Therī

One of the most famous stories regarding the gender issue is that of **the nun Somā**, the daughter of king Bimbisāra's chaplain. She became a nun on meeting the Buddha during his first visit to Rājagṛha [4:20]. Once in Śrāvastī, after her noon-day meal, she enters the Andhavana. Then, Mara the Evil One, desiring to frighten and distract her from her concentration, approaches her and addresses her in verse:

522 That state so hard to achieve,
Which is to be attained by the seers,
Cannot be attained by a woman
With her two-finger wisdom.⁹

Then, upon investigating, it occurs to the nun Somā that it must be Māra: “This is Māra the Evil One.” Then she replies him in verse:

⁸ See for example Thich Nhat Hanh's poem “Please Call Me By My True Names” (in *Peace is Every Step*, London, 1991: 123 f.)

⁹ Two-finger wisdom. The Commentary explains that when a woman wants to check if the boiling rice is cooked or not, she would squeeze a bit of it between her two fingers.

- 523 What does womanhood matter at all
 When the mind is well-concentrated,
 When knowledge flows on steadily
 As one sees rightly into the Dharma.
- 524 One to whom it might occur,
 “I’m a woman” or “I am a man”
 Or “I’m anything at all”—
 Is fit for Māra for to address.

(S 1:128 f.)

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing that the nun Somā knows him, sad and disappointed, disappears right there.

(d) Craving, conceit, wrong view

The notion that “I am a woman” or “I am a man” or “I am this or that” is rooted in craving, conceit and wrong views. Other than simply accepting one’s gender, to dwell on the thought that one is “male” or “female” is rooted in **craving** (as allegorized in the origin story of the universe in the Aggañña Sutta) [1]. When this craving reaches a neurotic level, one begins to crave for what one “thinks” (subconsciously) that one needs, that is, what one perceives as sexually desirable in another.

Often a man or a woman, because of her sex and sexuality, thinks of herself as “equal, superior or inferior” to another (S 1:12, 3:48 f., 5:56, 5:98). A man might perceive himself as being better or stronger than a woman, or that being a male is superior to being a female. This wrong perception based on **discrimination** (*vidhā*) or **conceit** (*māna*) plays a key role when one tries to solve interpersonal problems. In other words, one has to outgrow cultural conditioning regarding gender stereotypes and treat everyone as a person.

The most difficult level of overcoming the gender problem is that of **wrong view** because despite our “understanding” of the not-self doctrine (what more if we do not even know about it), we often find it difficult to relate to the opposite sex or have a healthy view of sexuality. Through lack of understanding how one’s mind works, one thinks one has needs that could be satisfied outside of oneself or by someone else, when the answer actually lies with understanding one’s own mind.

11. WOMEN WHO HAVE OVERCOME TEMPTATION

The Saṃyutta has a whole section called the **Bhikkhuṇī Saṃyutta**, the 5th book of the Sa,gāthā Vagga. The story of Somā Therī comes from this *saṃyutta*. We have two more interesting stories of intrepid nuns who defeat Māra through their self-knowledge: the stories of the nuns Vijayā and Utpala, varṇā.

(a) Vijayā Sutta

The nun Vijayā is a friend of Kṣemā [8:3], from whom she hears the Dharma and then joins the Order under her (Thī 169-174; ThīA 159 f.). Once in Śrāvastī, after her noon-day meal, she enters the Blind Men’s Grove (Andhavana). Then, Mara the Evil One, desiring to frighten and distract her from her concentration, approaches her and addresses her in verse:

528 You are so young and beautiful
And I too am a youth in my prime.
Come, noble lady, let us rejoice
With the music of the fivefold ensemble.¹⁰

Then, upon investigating, it occurs to the nun Vijayā that it must be Māra: “This is Māra the Evil One.” Then she replies him in verse:

529 Forms, sounds, tastes, odours,
And delightful experiences of touch—
I offer them right back to you.
For I, Māra, do not need them.

530 I am repelled and humiliated
By this foul, putrid body,
Subject to break-up, fragile:
I’ve uprooted sensual craving.

(S 1:131)

Then, Māra the Evil One, realizing that the nun Vijayā knows him, sad and disappointed, disappears right there.

(b) Uppala,vaṇṇā Sutta

The nun Utpala,vaṇṇā (Uppala,vaṇṇā) is the foremost of the nuns who have psychic powers and she is the left-hand chief nun of the Buddha (Kṣemā is the right-hand chief nun) (Thī 224-235). She is the daughter of a Śrāvastī banker and is so called because her complexion is of the colour of the heart of the blue lotus. When she came of age, kings and commoners all over ancient India came to ask for her hand in marriage. Not to offend any party, her father decides that she should renounce the world. Because of her spiritual readiness (*upaniśraya/upanissaya*), she willingly agrees.

One day while she is sweeping the consecrated convocation hall (*upoṣadh’āgāra/uposath’āgāra*), she takes the flame of the lamp she has lit as her **fire-object** (*tejas kṛtsnā/tejo kaṣiṇā*). On attaining mental absorption, she becomes an Arhant with the four analytical skills (*pratisaṃvid/pañisaṃbhidā*).¹¹

Once in Śrāvastī, after her noon-day meal, she enters Blind Men’s Grove. Then, Mara the Evil One, desiring to frighten and distract her from her concentration, approaches her and addresses her in verse:

532 Having gone to a sal tree with flowering top,
You stand at its foot all alone, O nun.
There is none whose beauty rivals yours:
Foolish girl, are you not afraid of rogues?

Then, upon investigating, it occurs to the nun Utpalavaṇṇā that it must be Māra: “This is Māra the Evil One.” Then she replies him in verse:

¹⁰ The fivefold ensemble. Comy lists them as *ātata*, *vitata*, *ātata*, *vitata*, *susira*, *ghana*. The Porāṇa Ṭikā explains that *ātata* is an instrument with one surface covered by skin, such as a kettle drum (*kumbha*); *vitata*, an instrument with two surfaces covered with skin, such as the *bheri* and *mudiṅga* drums; *ātata*, *vitata*, an instrument with a head covered with skin and bound with strings, such as a lute (*vīṇā*); *susira*, wind instruments, include flutes, conches and horns; and *ghana* is a class of percussion instruments (excluding drums), such as cymbals, tambourine and gongs.

¹¹ The 4 analytical skills: (1) analytical skill in meanings or consequences (*artha*, *pratisaṃvid/attha*, *pañisaṃbhidā*); (2) analytical skill regarding ideas or causes (*dharma*, *pratisaṃvid/dhamma*, *pañisaṃbhidā*); (3) analytical skill of language (*nirukti*, *pratisaṃvid/nirutti*, *pañisaṃbhidā*); (4) analytical skill in ready wit or creative insight (*pratibhāna*, *pratisaṃvid/* *pañibhāna*, *pañisaṃbhidā*). (A 2:160; Pm 1:119; Vbh 294)

- 533 Though a hundred thousand rogues
 Just like you might come here,
 I stir not a hair, I feel no terror;
 Even alone, Māra, I do not fear you.
- 534 I can make myself disappear
 Or I can enter your belly.
 I can stand between your eyebrows
 Yet you will not catch a glimpse of me.
- 535 I am the master of my mind,
 The bases of power are all well developed;
 I am freed from all bondage:
 Therefore I do not fear you, friend!

Then, Māra the Evil One, realizing that the nun Utpalavarṇā knows him, sad and disappointed, disappears right there.

It is said that once when she was in Blind Men's Grove, her cousin, the youth Ānanda, madly in love with her, hid in her hut and upon her returning, rapes her. After that, nuns are forbidden to stay in the Grove. (DhA 2:49 f.; V 3:35)

12. PAṬĀCĀRĀ¹²

(a) Secret affair

Paṭācārā (we do not know her real name) was the foremost amongst the nuns who are well-versed in the Vinaya (A 1:25). However, her story is a very sad one: she suffered the tragic loss of all her loved ones all within a few days, a tragedy that drove her to madness, that is, until she met the Buddha (DA 3:746; MA 1:232; UA 127). She was the beautiful daughter of a Śrāvastī banker. When she came of age (between 14-16), her parents confined her to the seventh floor of their mansion, where she secretly became intimate with her servant boy.

One day, when her parents decided that she should marry a rich young man of her station, she decided to elope with her secret lover, the servant-boy. Disguised in servant's clothes, she met the boy at the city gate, and together they ran off to another village, where they lived together by growing their own food. She herself prepared food for both of them.

In due course, they began to have a child. Thinking that they needed their parents' help now and that as parents they would surely love grandchildren, she decided that they should return to Śrāvastī. Her husband, fearing that he might be beaten up upon his return, refused to go. By then, her birth pangs came and she delivered a son in great pains.

When the second child came, she again thought of visiting her parents' house. Again, her husband refused. When her husband was away working, she took the first son with her and left for Śrāvastī. On finding out that she had left, her husband immediately trailed her into the middle of the forest. When she found her, however, she refused to turn back.

¹² ThīA 108 ff.; AA 1:356 ff.; DhA 2:260 ff., 3:434 f.; J 6:481.

(b) Loss of all her loved ones

Then a thunderstorm arose and at the same time she suffered her birth pangs. Her husband quickly went about with an axe seeking materials for making a shelter. He tried to get some brushwood while standing on top of an anthill. A fierce serpent that inhabited the anthill emerged and stung him to death.

Meantime, Paṭācārā was giving birth to her second child by herself unsheltered from the storm with first son wailing away. Both her sons now cried loudly for fear of the cold and rain. She spent the night, weak and alone in the forest. When morning came, she found her dead husband. “Because of me, my husband has to die in such a lonely place,” she lamented. Then she struggled to continue her journey with her two babies.

They soon reached a stream that had flooded because of the storm during the night. She could not ford the stream with both her children because of the swift currents and deep waters. So, she carried the new-born infant in her arms, and left the first son behind on the bank.

Having reached the other bank, she left the new-born son there. But when she was midstream, a hawk saw the new-born son. Because of his reddish flesh, the hawk mistook it for a piece of meat and so swooped down on it. The terrified mother hysterically screamed, “Shoo! Shoo!” Hearing her shouting, the first son thought that she was calling for him. He stepped into the river and drowned in the swift currents. The hawk had taken away her second son. She cried out in great grief.

Then she met a man from Śrāvastī and when she asked him about her family, the man replied that their house had collapsed in the terrible storm in the night. Both her parents and her brother, too, were killed and their bodies were being cremated right at that moment, pointing to the wisps of smoke rising in the sky over the trees.

At that very moment, Paṭācārā could not bear it any longer and went mad. Her clothes fell from her body, but she did not know it. As she went about lamenting her losses, some scolded her, some threw rubbish at her, some threw dust on her head, some pelted her with clods of earth.

(c) Paṭācārā healed

Now at that time, the Buddha was teaching in the Jetavana. When he saw her, he knew that she had done good deeds in the past which were just then ready to ripen. The Buddha simply pronounced: “Sister, regain your mindfulness!” Instantly, through the supernatural power of the Buddha, she was healed. Then someone threw her his cloak and she put it on.

She then told her tragic story and the Buddha listened patiently. When her grief had subsided, the Buddha said:

The four oceans contain but little water
Compared to all the tears that we have shed,
Smitten by sorrow, bewildered by pain.
Why, O woman, are you still heedless?

(DhA 2:268; cf. Assu Sutta, S 2:180)

The Buddha then gave her this instruction as recorded in the Dhammapada:

288. There are no sons for one’s protection,
 Nor father nor relatives, too.
 For one who is overcome by death,
 No protection is to be found amongst relatives.

289. Realizing this reality,
Let the wise and the virtuous
Swiftly clear the way
That leads to Nirvana.

(Dh 288 f.)

At the end of the teaching, Paṭācārā became a Stream-winner and requested to be admitted into the Order. After her ordination, by reason of her happy mind (P. *paṭit'ācār'attā*), she was called Paṭācārā. (DhA 2:269)

(d) Paṭācārā's enlightenment

One day, while she was washing her feet, she noticed how the water she had spilled on the ground ran a little way and disappeared into the ground. The second time it went a little farther, and a third time farther still. Taking this as her subject of meditation, she reflected:

Even as the water I spilled the first time ran a little way and disappeared, so also living beings in the world are dying in youth. Even as I spilled the water the second time ran a little way farther, so also living beings in the world are dying in the prime of life. Even as the water I spilled the third time ran a little farther yet, so also living beings here in the world are dying of old age.

(DhA 2:269)

In her Therīgāthā, there is a verse which describes another intense spiritual experience of hers. She describes how, before turning in, when extinguishing her lamp, she realizes that the point of the light going out is like the moment of enlightenment:

Having taken a lamp, I entered my cell.
I checked the bed and sat down on the couch.
Then, taking a needle,
I pulled down the wick.
The liberation of the mind
Is like the quenching of the lamp.

(Thī 112-116)

The Buddha who was seated in his Fragrant Chamber, sent forth a hologram of himself, and standing before Paṭācārā said: “Paṭācārā, it's better to live but a single day, indeed, a single moment, and see the rise and fall of the Five Aggregates, than to live a hundred years and not see.” And, connecting his teachings together, the Buddha pronounced this stanza:

113. One may live for a hundred years,
Not seeing the rise and fall of things.
Better, indeed, is one day's life
Of one who sees this rise and fall.

(Dh 113)

At the conclusion of this teaching, Paṭācārā became an Arhant together with the four analytical skills (*pratisaṃvid/paṭisambhidā*). [11b n8]

Paṭācārā later became a great teacher, and many women, stricken with grief, sought her guidance and her consolation (ThīA 47, 177, 122). The Buddha declared her as the foremost amongst the nuns who are Vinaya-experts (A 1:25). From being a frivolous young girl who lost everything she had loved, Paṭācārā became an Arhant and the expert in the Discipline amongst the nuns.

Famous Courtesans Who Converted

13. COURTESANS

In a man-dominated society, as India was during the Buddha's time, women were regarded as valuable commodity (S 1:43) [8b]. To the worldly ancient Indians, women had only three functions: doing domestic chores, entertaining the men, and bearing children. Social controls, like those advocated by the Maṇu,smṛti, as we have seen [3], kept the women uneducated and dislocated from religious wisdom. On the other hand, if a woman had some wisdom she was more likely to be liberated.

The most potent combination for an Indian woman then would be **beauty and wisdom**. Such a woman would likely be a special class of women in the Buddha's time: **the courtesan or geisha** (*gaṇikā* or *gaṇakī*, lit. "one who belongs to the crowd"). Such women are highly respected and admired by the ancient Indian men. They are not like the prostitutes or social escorts of modern times but perhaps more like the ancient Greek heterae or the Japanese geishas. They are well-versed in the culture and literature of their society, and as such provided much more than just physical pleasures to the clients, and they charged very high fees for their services.

In spite of the adverse opinions of the priests and more traditional people, courtesans flourished in the Buddha's days. Some, like **Vimalā** (Thi 39) and **Śīrimā** (SnA 1:144), appear to have been courtesans because their mothers were. Birth-rate amongst the Indian courtesans was low simply because, as Sālavatī puts it: "Men do not like a pregnant woman." (V 1:267 f.). There are no records of infanticide but the murder of illegitimate children are recorded in the Ṛgveda (Macdonell & Keith 1912 1:395). **Sālavatī** of Rājagṛha (V 1:269) and a courtesan of Kauśambī (DhA 1:174) put their sons in an old winnowing basket and abandoned them on a dust-heap. Sālavatī's son was saved by the prince, Abhaya, and lived to become the famous physician, Jīvaka.

Āmrāpālī (Ambapālī) of Vaiśālī had a son, Vimala Kauṇḍinya (ThīA 206 f.) and **Abhaya,mātā Padmavatī** (Padumavatī) of Ujjayinī had Abhaya Rāja,kumāra (ThīA 31 f.), both of whom became monks. Four courtesans, namely:

Vimalā of Vaiśālī (Thī 72-76; Tha 1150-1157; ThaA 2:178; ThīA 76 f.),
Abhaya,mātā Padmavatī (Thī 33 f.; Thī 33 f.; ThīA 31 f.),
Ardhakāśī (Aḍḍhakāśī) (V 2:277; VA 1:242; Thī 25 f.; ThīA 30 ff.; Ap 2:610 f.), and
Āmrāpālī (Thī 252-270; ThīA 206 f.)

converted to Buddhism, joined the Order and became Arhants. Little is known of **Vimalā** of Vaiśālī, except that she tried to seduce Maudgalyāyana (ThīA 76 f.) and was rebuked for it (Tha 1150-1157). Almost nothing is known of **Abhaya,mātā** of Ujjayinī except that she entertained king Bimbisāra and bore him a son, Abhaya Rāja,kumāra (ThīA 31 f.).

Ardha,kāśī of Kāśī is an important nun whose ordination has no precedent: she was ordained by a messenger (V 2:276 f.). When unscrupulous men heard that she plans to renounce the world, they keep a watch over the road she will be taking to go to Śrāvastī. For her safety, the Buddha allows her ordination through a messenger, a learned and competent nun.

14. ĀMRAPĀLĪ

The beautiful **Āmrāpālī** (Ambapālī) began her lay life as a loyal and generous supporter of the Order, but later renounced the world and became an Arhant. She was said to have been spontaneously born in the king's garden at Vaiśālī. It is more likely that she was an abandoned child that the gardener found at the foot of a mango tree, hence her name. She grew up to be an extremely beautiful girl and numerous young

Licchavī princes vied each other for her hand. Not to offend any of the suitors, she was made a courtesan of the city.¹³

Āmrapālī's fame spread and reached **king Bimbisāra** of Magadha who decided to meet her and was overcome by her beauty. She bore him a son, Vimala Kauṇḍinya, who later became a monk.¹⁴

In the course of his final journey, the Buddha stopped at Vaiśālī and stayed in Āmrapālī's **Mango Grove**. Inspired by a long Dharma discourse from the Buddha, she invited the Order for the next day's meal. As she hurried home to make preparations, a troop of Licchavī princes met her. On learning that she would be hosting the offering the next day, they made an offer of 100,000 pieces of money for the transfer of the honour to them. However, Āmrapālī replied that she would not turn over the honour even if she were offered the whole of Vaiśālī and its revenues! On the following day, at end of the meal-offering, she donated her Mango Grove to the Order, where the Buddha had earlier on delivered many discourses. (D 2:101 f.) [10:4c2]

Vimala Kauṇḍinya, her son by Bimbisāra, had become a monk and an Arhant. One day, while listening to him preaching, Āmrapālī decided to join the Order as a nun (ThīA 207). She took her own body as her meditation object, and reflecting on its impermanence and imperfections attained Arhantship.

- 252 My hair was black, the colour of bees, each ending in a curl.
Now on account of old age, it has become like hemp fibres:
Not otherwise is the word of the Speaker of Truth.
- 253 Covered with flowers my head was fragrant like a casket of delicate perfume .
Now on account of old age, it smells like dog's fur.
Not otherwise is the word of the Speaker of Truth.
- 256 Formerly my eyebrows were beautiful like crescents well-painted by an artist .
Now on account of old age, they droop down with wrinkles.
Not otherwise is the word of the Speaker of Truth.
- 257 Brilliant and beautiful like jewels, my eyes were dark blue and long in shape.
Now overwhelmed with age, their beauty has utterly vanished.
Not otherwise is the word of the Speaker of Truth.
- 260 Formerly my teeth looked beautiful, like the colour of plantain buds.
Now on account of old age, they are broken and yellow.
Not otherwise is the word of the Speaker of Truth.
- 265 Formerly both my breasts were lovely, full, round, firm and high.
Now they just hang down and sag like a pair of empty water bags.
Not otherwise is the word of the Speaker of Truth.
- 266 Formerly my body was beautiful like a well-polished sheet of gold.
Now it is all covered with fine wrinkles.
Not otherwise is the word of the Speaker of Truth.
- 267 Formerly both my thighs looked beautiful like an elephant's trunk.
Through old age, they are now like bamboo poles.
Not otherwise is the word of the Speaker of Truth.

¹³ Cf. case of Utpalavarṇā. [11b].

¹⁴ Bimbisāra, however, installed Sālavatī as the courtesan of his capital, Rājagṛha.

- 270 Such is the body: now decrepit, the abode of many pains.
It is nothing but an aged house with its plaster fallen off.
Not otherwise is the word of the Speaker of Truth.

(Thī 252-270; selections)

Āmrapālī's gaining enlightenment by reflecting on the impermanence of her own body shows that Buddhist spiritual practice or meditation, far from being something mystical and difficult, is an awareness and acceptance of the natural processes that our lives go through. If we constantly apply this **perception of impermanence** (*anitya, saṃjñā/anicca, saññā*) every waking moment of our lives—whether standing, walking, sitting, or lying down—we would surely move faster on the path to enlightenment.

15. ṚṢI, DĀSĪ

(a) Failed marriages

Ṛṣi, dāsī (Isi, dāsī) was the beautiful daughter of a good and wealthy merchant of Ujjayinī (Ujjenī), the capital of Avantī (modern-day Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh). She was given in marriage to the son of a merchant of Sāketa in Kośala (modern-day Sujankot on the Sail river, Unao district, Uttar Pradesh). For a month, she served him lovingly and conscientiously .

412. By myself I cooked the rice,
By myself I washed the dishes.
As a mother looks after her only son,
So did I serve my husband.
413. I showed him devotion unsurpassed,
I served him with a humble mind,
I rose early, diligent, virtuous was I—
And yet my husband hated me.

(Thī 412 f.)

When Ṛṣidāsī related her predicament to her parents-in-law, they praised her virtues and asked their bewildered son what was wrong. He could not give a good answer and replied that he simply could not stand the sight of her, even though she was an ideal wife, having done nothing wrong.

418. I have done nothing wrong,
I have done him no harm,
I have not spoken rudely to him.
What have I done that my husband hates me?

(Thī 418)

He simply tired of her for no apparent reason at all. In the end when her husband could not be brought to love her, they had no choice but to send Ṛṣidāsī back to her parents' house. Returning to her house as a rejected wife, everyone (except the husband) was devastated:

419. Rejected, overcome by suffering,
They led me back to my father's house.
“While appeasing our son,” they exclaimed,
“We have lost the beautiful goddess of fortune!”

(Thī 419)

She was back in her father's protection, and he looked for a new husband for her, this time even asking for only half the usual dowry. When she finally found a new husband, again she served him with love and diligence but the same pattern repeated itself. Now both she and her father were totally at a loss.

Shortly thereafter, **an ascetic** visited them in quest of alms. It occurred to Ṛṣidāsī's father to offer her to this ascetic. When the ascetic was offered the hand of the beautiful Ṛṣidāsī and the comfort of her mansion, he readily accepted. But after only two weeks, he begged the father to return his robe and bowl. The ascetic would rather starve as the poorest of beggars than spend one more day in Ṛṣidāsī's company. Despite the pleas and offers from the family, the ascetic said that he simply could not live in the same house as Ṛṣidāsī, and with those words he left. (Thī 422-425)

(b) Recalling her past lives

Ṛṣidāsī was now miserable and on the verge of suicide rather than continue to bear such suffering. Now on that same day, the nun **Jina,dattā** came to her house for alms. Seeing the nun's peaceful countenance, Ṛṣidāsī decided that she should be a nun herself. At first, her father refused to release her, but relented in the end after considering her pleas, exhorting her to gain enlightenment (Thī 432).

After seven days of spiritual striving, she gained the Three Knowledges (of the recollection of her past lives, of the other's karma, and of the destruction of defilements). Looking into her past, she realized that eight lives ago, when **she was a man**: a handsome and rich goldsmith, who intoxicated with his youth, seduced the wives of others, treating them as objects to be won, used and discarded.

For his evil deeds, the goldsmith was reborn in **a hell** where he was cut on all sides by razor-sharp blades as she ran towards the form of a beautiful woman before him. After that, he was reborn as **a monkey**. When he was only seven days old, the troop leader castrated him. After dying, he was reborn as **a sheep**, the offspring of a one-eyed ewe, and was made a gelding, unable to satisfy his sexual urges. His third animal birth was as **an ox**, castrated and forced to pull the plough and cart with hardly any rest (Thī 440 f.), which was especially painful for him because he had always avoided hard work when he was a goldsmith. In fact, as an ox, he had to work so hard that he lost his eyesight.

After three births as animals, he was reborn as a human being, as **a hermaphrodite**, with the sex organs of both male and female, since he was obsessed with them! After 30 unhappy years he died and was reborn as the object of his desire: **a woman**. This is how **desire turns man into the object of his desire** (Nyanaponika & Hecker 1997:315). The newborn girl was born into the lowest caste, the daughter of a very poor carter who failed in everything he did and ended up owing money to a lot of people.

In order to discharge his debt, he had no choice but to give his sixteen-year-old daughter away as a slave to his creditor, a wealthy merchant. In due course, the merchant's son, **Giridāsa**, fell in love with her and took her as a minor wife. The first wife suffered as a result of this new intrusion. The slave girl secured her newly won position by sowing discord between Giridāsa and his first wife so that they broke up in the end. (Thī 443-446)

After her death this time, she was reborn as **Ṛṣidāsī**, whom, despite her love and industry, three successive husbands could not love. Since she did not react with anger or aggression, but endeavoured at all times to be a model wife, she cultivated a store of merit for herself. Finally, Ṛṣidāsī cleared the mystery of her strange fate, and was finally free.

447. This was the fruit of that past deed,
That although I served them like a slave,
They rejected me and went their way:
Of that, too, I had made an end.

(Thī 447)

(c) Evaluation

Mrs. C.A.F. Rhys Davids is of the opinion that **the Isidāsī Therīgāthā** (the above story) has a late style and suggests late literary creation. The scene is Pāṭalīputra, and not any of the usual towns mentioned in the Canon. According to her, the name of Ṛṣidāsī's sponsoring nun—Jinadattā—suggests traces of Jain influence here. (Thī:R xxii f.)

The Ṛṣidāsī story could easily be misread to affirm that it is one's bad karma to be born as a woman or a hermaphrodite. The story however does confirm that one's habitual thought and actions will follow one in one form or another. As one thinks and acts, so would one reap the fruits. The point is clear: one should take care what one desires after because ultimately **one becomes what one desires**.

16. ŚIRIMĀ

(a) Uttarā

Śirimā was a courtesan of Rājagṛha, daughter of Śālavatī and younger sister to Jīvaka the doctor. Her story is closely intertwined with that of **Uttarā Nanda, mātā**, the foremost of lay-women disciples who waited on the Buddha (B 36.20). Uttarā was married into a non-Buddhist family so that her husband, Sumana, forbade her from observing the fast (*upoṣadha/uposatha*).

Knowing her husband well enough, Uttarā then came up with an idea. She hired the services of the courtesan Śirimā at the cost of 15,000 pieces of money (*kārṣāpaṇa/kahāpaṇa*)¹⁵ to look after her husband for a fortnight. When her husband saw the beauty of Śirimā, he immediately agreed to the arrangement.

On the last day of the fast, Uttarā was busy preparing alms for the Buddha. Her husband, who was walking nearby with Śirimā, saw Uttarā hard at work, smiled thinking what a fool she was not to enjoy her wealth. Uttarā smiled in return, thinking how foolish he was for not making proper use of his wealth. Śirimā, thinking that both husband and wife were smiling at each other to slight her, flew into a fury.

Seizing a pot of boiling oil, Śirimā threw it at Uttarā's head. Uttarā, at that moment, was full of lovingkindness for Śirimā. The oil, therefore, did not hurt her at all. Śirimā, realizing her grievous error, begged for forgiveness from Uttarā. Uttarā then said:

“My father is still living. If he forgives you, so will I.”

“I shall go to your father, the rich guildmaster, and ask him for forgiveness.”

“Puṇṇa is the father who brought me into the round of suffering. If the father bringing me out of the round forgives you, then so will I.”

“But who is this father who is bringing you out of the round of suffering?”

“The Buddha, the Perfect Self-enlightened One.”

“But I don't know him. What shall I do?”

“The Teacher will be coming here tomorrow, together with his monks. Come yourself, bringing whatever offering you can, and ask his forgiveness.”

The following day, after the meal-offering was over, Śirimā went up to the Buddha and begged for forgiveness. “What for?” asked the Buddha. Śirimā then related the whole story. The Buddha then asked Uttarā to confirm the story. Uttarā said:

“I suffused her with lovingkindness, and thought to myself: My friend Śirimā has done me a great service...”

“Excellent, Uttarā, excellent!” said the Buddha, “That is the right way to overcome anger.” And he added this verse:

¹⁵ On the *kārṣāpaṇa*, see section 8:2a.

223. Overcome anger with non-anger,
Conquer evil with goodness,
Conquer the miserly with generosity,
And the liar with truth.

(Dh 223)

Then the Buddha delivered a discourse, at the end of which Uttarā won the fruit of Non-return. Her erstwhile unbelieving husband and parents-in-law all became Stream-winners, as did Śīrimā.

(b) Śīrimā's body

Ever since the Eye of Truth arose in her, Śīrimā gave up her life as a courtesan and devoted herself to looking after the Order. Through meal-tickets, she invited the Order to send eight monks daily to her house for a meal-offering. One day, one of the eight monks returned to his monastery and when asked about the meal, he replied that the food was indescribably good, but Śīrimā's looks was even better.

As the monk described Śīrimā's beauty, another monk who was listening simply fell in love with her without even having seen her. It so happened that on the following day, Śīrimā fell sick and could not serve the monks, including the lovesick monk. So, her servant served the monks. At the end of the meal, Śīrimā made an effort to get out to pay her respects to the monks. Even without her adornments and simply dressed, the lovesick monk thought that Śīrimā looked extremely beautiful. "Imagine how beautiful she would look when she is well and wears her jewelry!" he thought.

That same evening, Śīrimā died. King Bimbisāra relayed the news to the Buddha, who then instructed that the body should not be cremated but left in the charnel ground and guarded against carrion crows and other animals. After three days, Śīrimā's corpse was swollen and festering with worms, so that it looked like a pot of rice over a hot fire, bubbling over on the surface.

Bimbisāra then decreed, under pain of a fine of eight gold coins, that all adult residents of Rājagṛha were to file past the body, to see Śīrimā in her present condition. As for the lovesick monk who had not eaten for four days, the food in his bowl, too, was by then crawling with worms. His friends then told him that the Buddha was going to see Śīrimā. At the word "Śīrimā", the monk was galvanized. He emptied his bowl and rinsed it, and then joined the others to see Śīrimā.

When the crowd had gathered, the Buddha instructed king Bimbisāra, "Let it be proclaimed with the beating of drums what whoever pays the sum of 1000 coins may have Śīrimā." But no man wanted her now, so the price was lowered; but no man wanted her even for free. Then the Buddha spoke to the monks:

Here, monks, you see a woman who was loved by the world. In this same city, in the past, men would gladly pay a thousand gold coins to enjoy her for just one night. Now, however, no one will have her, even for nothing. This is what the body comes to, perishable and fragile, made attractive only through ornaments, a heap of wounds with nine openings, held together with three hundred bones, a continuing burden. Only fools attach fancies and illusion to such an impermanent thing.

147. See this painted puppet,
A mass of wounds,
Diseased: an object of desires,
It has nothing stable or lasting.

(Dh 147)

After the Buddha's discourse, the lovesick monk was cured and became a Stream-winner (DhA 3:104 f; VvA 74 ff.). After the contemplation of the body, he developed insight and became an Arhant.

As for Śīrimā, she had been reborn in the heavens. Seeing the Buddha, the monks and the crowd around her corpse, she descended to earth in a glorious blaze accompanied by 500 celestial maidens in 500 chariots. Then she dismounted and saluted the Buddha. The venerable Vaṅṅīsa, the foremost poet in the Order, asked from where she had come and what meritorious deeds she had done to obtain such glory, and Śīrimā told her story (Vv no. 16 = 137-149).

(c) The Vijaya Sutta

On this special occasion, the Buddha delivered the Vijaya Sutta, also known as **the Kāya, vicchan-**
danika Sutta (The Discourse for Disillusionment Regarding the Body, Sn no. 11):

- 193 If walking or standing still,
 Sitting or lying down,
 One bends, one stretches—
 This is the movement of the body.
- 194 Joined together with bones and sinews,
 Laid over with skin and flesh,
 Covered by the outer skin—
 One does not see it as it really is.
- 195 Full of gut, filled with the belly,
 The lobe of the liver, the bladder,
 The heart, the lungs,
 The kidneys and the spleen.
- 196 Nasal mucus, saliva,
 Sweat and lymph,
 Blood, fluid of the joints.
 Bile and fat.
- 197 And from the nine openings,
 Impurities ever flow:
 Eye secretion from the eye;
 Wax from the ear,
- 198 And mucus from the nose;
 Through the mouth, it pukes
 Now bile, now phlegm;
 From the body, sweat and dirt;
- 199 And the hollow of its head
 Is filled with the brain.
 “It’s beautiful!” so thinks
 The fool led by ignorance.
- 200 But when it lies dead,
 Bloated and blue-black,
 Cast away in the cemetery,
 Relatives care not for it.

- 201 Dogs devour it, and
Jackals, wolves and worms,
Crows and vultures, too, devour it,
And what other living beings there be.
- 202 Having heard the Buddha Word,
The monk has insight here—
Indeed, he thoroughly knows it.
For he sees (the body) as it really is.
- 203 “As this [body] is, so was that;
As that [body] is, so will this be.”
(Knowing this,) let one discard desire for the body,
Both within and without.
- 204 Having discarded desire and passion,
The monk who has insight here
Reaches the Deathless, the Peace,
The eternal state of Nirvana.
- 205 This two-legged (body) is impure,
Foul-smelling, that we attend to:
Full of various dead things,
Trickling from here and there.
- 206 Whoever, such a body
Would think to exalt
Or should despise another—
What else is this but lack of insight.

(Sn 193-206)

At the end of the discourse, the nun Janapada, kalyāṇī Nandā became an Arhant, and Śīrimā a Non-returner. (SnA 1:244 f., 253 f.)

17. GOTAMĪ THERĪ APADĀNA

The first Buddhist nun is Mahā Prajāpatī Gautamī (Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī), the Buddha’s foster mother.¹⁶ One of the most beautiful examples of spiritual poetry is found in **the Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī Therī Apadāna**. It is also a good example of the usage of the dichotomy of “worldly language” and “Dharma language” [1:1b]. Above all, this selection of verses (esp. verse 31) reflect the harmonization of femininity and masculinity in an individual:

27. What I’ve long wished for, | today is fulfilled.
‘Tis time to beat the drum of joy. | What are your tears for, daughters?
28. If there is love for me; | if there is gratitude,
Let all work with firm effort | so that the True Teaching may stand.
29. When asked by me, | the Self-enlightened One gave women the going-forth.
Therefore, just as I rejoice, | so should you do the same.

¹⁶ See section 5 nError! Bookmark not defined. above.

30. Having thus admonished those women, | preceded by the nuns,
She approached and worshipped the Buddha, | and these words spoke:
31. **O Well-gone One, I am your mother; | and you, O Wise Hero, are my father:**
O giver of happiness of the True Teaching, | O refuge, I was given birth by you, O Gotama!
32. O Well-gone One, your physical body was nurtured by me;
My Dharma body, flawless, | was nurtured by you.
33. To satisfy a moment's craving, | you had milk suckled by me.
But I, drinking the milk of Dharma from you, | Had peace without end.
34. For my raising you, | you owe me no debt, Great Sage!
For women desiring children, | may they have a child like you.¹⁷
35. Mothers of kings like Mandhātā | drown in this sea of becoming,
But you, O Son! brought me | Across the ocean of becoming.
36. Queen mother, royal consort: | these names are easy for women to gain,
But "the mother of the Buddha", this name | is the most difficult to obtain.
- (Ap 531)

18. CAN A WOMAN BE A BUDDHA?

Both the Pali Canon and the Commentaries say that "it cannot happen that a woman might become an a Worthy, Perfect Self-enlightened Buddha" (M 3:65; A 1:28; BA 91). The reasons, as we have seen are more biological and historical, not spiritual. The position of a Perfect Self-enlightened Buddha is that of someone who has not only discovered the highest liberating truth of reality but who proclaims it to a world that is rooted in the twin evils of like and dislike, a male-dominated world.

As we have also seen, in the ultimate sense, sex is a world-bound notion. On the spiritual level, one has to transcend sexuality, and are as such equal---or more accurately, on the highest spiritual level, all biases of superiority, inferiority and equality are transcended, since the notion of ego and self are destroyed.

Can a woman become a Buddha? It is interesting to note that in the distant past, Gautama Buddha was a born as a woman. According to the **Jina, kāla, māli** (written by Ratana, paññā, a 16th century monk in Siam), the Bodhisattva, in the distant past before the Buddha Dīpaṅkara, is the **step-sister** of a Buddha named **Purāṇa Dīpaṅkara** ("Earlier Dīpaṅkara"). It is said that she makes a gift of mustard oil to a renowned elder monk named **Pacchima Dīpaṅkara** ("Later Dīpaṅkara").

With the offering, she makes an aspiration to attain Buddhahood, and predicted by the Buddha Purāṇa Dīpaṅkara that in the distant future the elder monk would become **the Buddha Dīpaṅkara** and that the young woman would be reborn as the male ascetic named **Sumedha** (Jink:J 1978:3). It is also interesting to note here that, according to Theravāda tradition, once a vow for Buddhahood is made, the aspirant would always be born as a woman thereafter until the final attainment of Buddhahood. (Reynolds, 1997:29 f.)



¹⁷ Alt. Tr. "To get a son like you | sates all desire for sons." (Walters, 1995:120).

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