

Some notes on the role of women in Early Buddhism

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Abstract

This note analyses, with selected examples, the role of women in ancient Buddhist literature and epigraphy, with a brief focus on the comparison of their role in two macro-regions of the ancient Buddhist ecumene: Gandhāra and Central India. Furthermore, the note briefly discusses the link between desire and gender, finally considering the emphasis on gender as an obstacle towards enlightenment rather than a help.

Keywords: Early Buddhism, *saṃgha*, *bhikkhunī*, laywomen, Gandhāra

1. Introduction

The role of women in the History of Buddhism could be described as ambiguous. On one hand they enjoy certain freedoms, such as the choice for laywomen to remain maidens, freeing them of their often-imposed role of wives and mothers, as dictated by most traditional societies and religions. On the other hand, the establishment of the *bhikkhunī* order itself was accepted with reluctance by the Buddha and the nuns' ability of reaching enlightenment has long been questioned, their potential of becoming *bodhisattva* or *arhat* being object of discussion.

In this paper, I wish to analyse the issue of women and their ability – or lack thereof – of reaching enlightenment through the analysis of a few selected examples of female characters who appear in Buddhist literature and in Buddhist epigraphy¹. Furthermore, I aim to consider the gender binary not as a determining factor towards enlightenment, but, on the contrary, as an irrelevant distraction from it and, in the end, as an obstacle that should be overcome.

2. Examples of women in Buddhist literature

2.1 Women in the Buddhacarita

The *Buddhacarita* (Acts of the Buddha) is a Sanskrit epic poem written by Aśvaghōṣa in the 2nd century CE. The views expressed in this work can be considered representative of the traditionalism of Buddhism in Northwest India,

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particularly in the Gandhāra region. It should be remembered, incidentally, that in the Buddhist visual art of Gandhāra, so rich in iconographic themes and subjects, depictions of nuns are very rare, with the exception of specific events in the Buddha's life (Utpalavarṇā and the descent from the paradise of the Thirty-three Gods for example). After all, donatory inscriptions in the name or work of nuns are completely absent in Gandhāra, while donations by laywomen belonging to the ruling elites (e.g. the princesses and queens of the Avaca and Oḍi dynasties recur).

Being one of the central texts of pre-Mahāyāna Gandhāran Buddhism, its representation of women is explicitly based on a somewhat male-centered vision. Two main categories of women can be found inside this text: the first one is formed by supporting characters whose only role is to uphold the protagonist's tale, their only distinctive features are stereotypically derogatory feminine behaviors such as crying, wailing, motherly concern and inaction in front of unforeseen circumstances. The second category is formed by evil characters who actively try to mislead the male protagonist.

The following examples belong to the first category: queen Mahāmāyā, biological mother of the Buddha, her sister Mahāprajāpatī, aunt and adoptive mother of the Buddha, and Yaśodharā, the Buddha's wife. Queen Mahāmāyā, the first female character to appear in the text, is represented while giving birth to Siddhārtha; her role is minor and entirely subordinated to the prince, so much that she is never mentioned again outside of *Canto I: The Birth of the Holy One*². Mahāprajāpatī is represented as broken-hearted and powerless towards her son's departure, she throws herself on the ground, weak and resigned³. Yaśodharā reacts by cursing the prince and his companions, who let him abandon the palace⁴. Not only she suffers a loss, but she also feels betrayed by her husband who chose to ascend by himself; couple ascension was in fact allowed at the time, given that husband and wife lived in chastity. Yaśodharā is then left wondering why her husband decided to follow that path without her, she even surrenders to jealousy for one brief moment, thinking that he left her for one of the *Apsaras*. During her monologue, she mentions the word *Sahadarmacāriṇī* which can be translated as 'lawful wife' but also as 'coadjutant in the fulfillment of *dharma*' (Passi 1979: 205). The second translation encompasses a certain degree of complementarity of husband and wife in the path to enlightenment. This concept of complementarity can be found in a much more ancient Vedic text: the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (Brāhmaṇa of one hundred paths). In this Sanskrit text, written around 300 BCE as a commentary to Vedic rituals we have several examples of ascetic couples. I quote here just one of these examples of couple asceticism. During a *Śrauta*, a public ritual, husband and wife ascend together,

²*Buddhacarita*, I, 2 (Johnston 1936).

³*Buddhacarita*, VIII, 24 (Johnston 1936).

⁴*Buddhacarita*, VIII, 61 (Johnston 1936).

becoming “Prajāpati’s children”⁵, Prajāpati being the creator deity of Hinduism⁶, reaching *moksa*, a form of liberation from suffering and from the cycle of rebirth, similar to Buddhist *nirvana* in some respects. The importance of the woman’s role in the ritual is highlighted right before its performance: “she, the wife, in sooth is one half of his own self; hence, as long as he does not obtain her, so long he is not regenerated, for so long he is incomplete”⁷. At first glance, this statement may be perceived as if the woman was described as the man’s subordinate, but it actually shows the complementarity of the spouses: the wife needs her husband just as much the husband needs his wife, without one there cannot be the other, both of them are necessary for procreation, for the performance of the sacrifice and thus for their own ascension. The exclusion of a woman from a *Śrauta* ritual is a lack of respect, just like Siddhārtha’s choice of practicing ascension by himself is an insult towards Yaśodharā, whose reaction is predominated by rage and despair.

Compared to the women’s, the king’s reaction to Siddhārtha’s escape is very different: “Thus the king grieved over the separation from his son and lost his steadfastness, though it was innate like the solidity of the earth”⁸ and after having commanded his subordinates to start the search for his son, “... considering the matter to have been disposed of, performed the remaining rites in company with his wives and daughters-in-law”⁹. The king, although affected by a brief moment of confusion, quickly regains control and returns to his daily life, taking immediate action. On the contrary, the aforementioned women assume behaviors which show their weakness and their inability to promptly confront adversities.

The second category of women can be found in *Canto IV: The Women Rejected*. A group of courtesans with the order of entertaining the prince tries to corrupt him by offering him sensual pleasures in a futile effort to mislead him from his path. In this passage their bodies are the object of desire and a direct cause of suffering; even though they are young and beautiful, they are in truth subjected to old age, illness and death; they are therefore impure and a source of impermanence and illusion¹⁰. In the *Buddhacarita* women do not occupy a central role, they are background elements with the purpose of enhancing the men’s virtuous behaviors by contrast, with a focus on the Buddha’s glorious deeds. Portrayed as either weak and suffering or impure and corrupt, there are no examples of great women in this text.

⁵ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 5:2:1:11 [Eggeling 1894].

⁶ “Prajapati.”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

⁷ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 5:2:1:10 [Eggeling 1894].

⁸ *Buddhacarita*, VIII, 81 (Johnston 1936).

⁹ *Buddhacarita*, VIII, 87 (Johnston 1936).

¹⁰ *Buddhacarita*, IV, 88 (Johnston 1936).

2.2 Women in the Vinaya-Pitaka

The *Vinaya-Pitaka* is one of the three baskets of the Pāli Canon, the foundational text of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia and Ceylon. The canon, already introduced in Sri Lanka in the III century BCE, was recorded in written form only in the I century BCE during a council of monks. A subsection of the *Vinaya-Pitaka*, the *Cullavagga*, tells the story of the institution of the monastic order of nuns, in-existent prior to that time. This canonical account narrates that Mahāpajāpatī for three times asked the Buddha to allow women to practice Buddhism and that for three times he refused her. Only with Ānanda's assistance, his favorite disciple, the monastic order of *bhikkhuni* became reality, but not without any conditions: nuns were forced to follow eighty four more rules compared to monks and, moreover, their admission in the *saṅgha* was bound to cause a shortening in the duration of the Buddhist Law, which was not going to last forever anymore, but it was instead going to last only five hundred years. Following, the dialogue during which Ānanda convinces the Buddha of the legitimation of the female monastic order:

‘Are women, Lord, capable— when they have gone forth from the household life and entered the homeless state, under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Blessed One — are they capable of realising the fruit of conversion, or of the second Path, or of the third Path, or of Arahatsip?’

‘They are capable, Ānanda.’¹¹

From this conversation it is understood that the possession of female genitalia does not encompass any obstacle towards the path to enlightenment. The only substantial difference between monks and nuns is the number of rules to follow, but from a theoretical standpoint, men and women are equally able to ascend. Unlike the *Buddhacarita*, in this text Mahāpajāpatī is a pivotal character who, although with Ānanda's help, makes real something that appeared impossible up until then: the institution of a female monastic order of *bhikkhunīs*, proof that women can in fact attain enlightenment.

Mahāprajāpatī's role as first nun and founder of the female monastic order was doubted on the basis of the account given in the *Dakkhiṇāvibhaṅga-sutta*, where she is portrayed as offering a robe to the Buddha while only observing five precepts, instead of the ten precepts members of the *saṅgha* must adhere to, thus presuming she must have been a laywoman at the time (Anālayo 2014a: 108). Not only would this claim conflict with the canonical accounts which indicate Mahāprajāpatī as the first nun and founder of the *bhikkhunīs* order, but also with the listing of eminent disciples in the *Ekottarika-āgama* and in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. These texts respectively describe her as being “the foremost of those *bhikkhunīs* who have gone forth to train for a

¹¹ *Cullavagga, Khandaka 10, Chapter 1* [Rhys Davids 1881].

long time” (Anālayo 2014a: 99) and “foremost for being long-standing” implying her role in the foundation of the order of *bhikkhunīs* (Anālayo 2014a: 101), which only the nun of longer standing, and therefore the first ordained nun, could have achieved. Therefore, I believe that Bhikkhu Anālayo’s explanation of this anachronism with a merger of two originally different texts (Anālayo 2014a: 110) is the most accurate one, and that there were actually no nuns before Mahāprajāpatī.

2.3 Women in the Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra

Pure Land Buddhism is a branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism popular in Eastern Asia, featuring the devotion to Amithaba Buddha, reason why this current is also known as Amidism. The core concept of this doctrine is the ascension to the *Sukhāvātī* (Land of Bliss), of which an extensive description is found in the *Long Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra*. Access to this Land of Bliss is only granted to ‘great men’, which would apparently make it inaccessible to women. It is important to understand that the meaning of a ‘great man’ is not a 君子 (*jūnzǐ*) in the Confucian sense of a ‘gentleman’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2020), but it is a being able to transcend desire and, therefore, able to transcend its own gender identity. The bodies of the men and women who want to access the Land of Bliss must undergo a transformation in order to become ‘great men’ in the sense that they must be liberated by the structure of desire (Lu, 2022: 12). Once their genitalia have no impact on their desire, that means they are truly liberated. A person who describes oneself as a man or a woman or anything at all is not liberated and is therefore not ready to enter the Land of Bliss (Lu, 2022: 11) because as long as one perceives oneself as a man or a woman, one will be subjected to desire towards one of the two genders, just like one will be somebody else’s object of desire. Like Jiefeng Lu explains in his paper, the inhabitants of the Land of Bliss are neither men nor women, they are ‘great men’, ‘perfect beings’ who have liberated themselves from desire. The apparent paradox of women not being able to access the Land of Bliss is thus solved, allowing them to reach enlightenment.

3. Examples of women in Buddhist epigraphy

3.1 Records of women in the Edicts of Aśoka

The *Edicts of Aśoka* is a list of edicts carved in stone, famous for being the most ancient Indian corpus of decipherable written documents (Milligan 2016: 44), as well as being the first tangible proof of the expansion of Buddhism. This corpus indistinctly mentions monks and nuns, evidence of the presence of an already well-established monastic community during King Aśoka’s empire which lasted from around 257 BCE, presumably the year of his Buddhist conversion, and 223

BCE, presumed year of his death (Cunningham 1969: vii). The Minor Rock Edict of Bairat, for example, recites the following:

... I desire, Sirs, that many groups of monks and (many) nuns may repeatedly listen to these expositions of the *Dharma*, and may reflect (on them). In the same way both laymen and laywomen (should act).
(Hultsch 1925: 160 – 161)

It is clear that the king is indiscriminately referring to both men and women, he mentions monks and nuns as well as laymen and laywomen, indicating the existence of a monastic order. The Edict on the schism of Sanchi is another confirmation of this claim:

The *Saṅgha* both of monks and of nuns is made united as long as (my) sons and great-grandsons (shall reign, and) as long as the moon and the sun (shall shine). The monk or nun who shall break up the *Saṅgha* must be caused to put on white robes and to reside in a non-residence.
(Hultsch 1925: 174)

There can be no discussion over the fact that a monastic order composed by both monks and nuns existed at this time. However, it is difficult to determine whether this community was extant prior to Aśoka's empire due to the lack of epigraphic records.

3.2 Records of women in the donative inscriptions of Sanchi

The site of Sanchi, situated in central India, is a source of many kinds of inscriptions. Not only the Edict on the schism was found there, but also a different category of epigraphy: donative inscriptions. These inscriptions record donations made to the Buddhist community at Sanchi, meaning the funds which made the construction of the great Sanchi *stūpa* possible. Most of these inscriptions are short and concise, usually including the name and sometimes the profession and place of origin of the donor. To give a concrete example, I will report Matthew D. Milligan's translations of two inscriptions:

“A gift of Dhamarakhitā, [a woman] from Madhuvana.” (Milligan 2016: 130)
“A gift of the nun [Aca]lā [or Isilā].” (Milligan 2016: 142)

Milligan's research has brought up an unexpected conclusion: most of the donations were gifted by women, a big percentage of them being non-local women who resided outside of Sanchi and went on a pilgrimage there (Milligan 2019: 71). The amount of donative inscriptions is so generous that the Sanchi *stūpa* as it appears today probably would not have existed without their patronage. As Milligan himself writes: “Simply put, at the heart of early South Asian Buddhist material culture is the pocketbook of the early South Asian Buddhist woman, who may have been a nun, a mother, daughter, wife or all the above.” (Milligan 2019: 74). It is then apparent that women had a certain degree

of freedom and economic power; they could become nuns, go on a pilgrimage and donate funds by themselves.

4. A comparison of trends in two macro-regions

While analyzing the sources presented until now, two different trends emerged: a tendency to marginalize women in the Northern-Western Indian and Gandhāran tradition, unlike the one in Central-Southern India and Southeast Asia, which seems to allow women more freedom. One of the causes of this could be the presence of the *Sarvāstivāda* and its subsect *Mūlasarvāstivāda* in the Northern-Western regions of the Indian subcontinent, specifically: Kashmir, Mathurā and Gandhāra¹². As already mentioned, Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* is an example of Gandhāran Buddhism, the author belonged to the brahman caste, proved by his partial knowledge of *Veda* rituals, and he was considered a patriarch by the *Sarvāstivādins* (Passi 1979: 223-224), followers of the homonymous conservative predominantly misogynist pre-Mahāyānic school. The *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, canonical text of the aforementioned school, refers to women in terms of the man they are closest to, e.g. the merchant's wife, the brahman's daughter (Finnegan 2009: 145), it describes female bodies as a temptation for monks (Finnegan 2009: 240) and, moreover, compares women to venomous snakes (Finnegan 2009: 302). The representation of female figures in the text is less than flattering. The Story of Sudinna, which led to the promulgation of the rule of celibacy for Buddhist monks (Martini 2012: 439), depicts Sudinna's mother as the one who conceives a plan to make him stray from his ascetic life so to make him return home. Sudinna is then tricked by his own mother to lay with the woman who used to be his wife before he ordained as a monk. His mind and his body "scorched by desire" he "took off his monastic robes, and two times, three times, they joined together in sexual union, the impure act" (Martini 2012: 449 – 450). These few examples from the text give an immediate impression of how women were perceived at the time.

It is also known that in the Sanskrit society of the I century CE, the most common form of marriage (although not the only one) was patrilocal marriage in which young maidens were 'gifted' to their grooms (Finnegan 2009: 145); it is in fact certain that Gandhāran aristocrats used to take a wife in India and Southeast Asia, which indeed indicates a patrilocal society, but once they became part of the family, the wives were allowed to act as laywomen and become active donors (Olivieri 2019: 254). An important archaeological piece of evidence of this, all the more important because it is rare (in a context where inhumation is scarcely practiced), comes from the multiple burial monument of Butkara IV (Swat, Gandhāra: c. 200 BCE-100 CE). Here lies the collective burial of an extended

¹² "Sarvastivada and Mulasarvastivada", *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*.

stem family, presumably an aristocratic family, where exogamy was practiced (Olivieri 2019: 247). Two individuals sharing a son-mother relatedness were discovered in this site, mother and son having no direct relationship with the female from the other chambers (Olivieri 2019: 243). As explained by Luca M. Olivieri:

The failure to detect genetic relatedness between the 3-family group of the chamber [51] and the other two individuals (female), may reflect an agnatic lineage and society (a possibility that might also be reinforced by the available sex ratio in the burial). It is therefore possible to propose also at Butkara IV, as in the SPG sites, a male-biased ancestry pattern. (Olivieri 2019: 252)

The individuals buried at Butkara IV manifested the South Asian component in their ancestry, a component which was transmitted by maternal side and that is most likely proof of “a gradual and slow process of ‘Indianization’ that proceeded side by side with the diffusion of Buddhism.” (Olivieri 2019: 252). Central India and Southeast Asian women seemed to be able to be less subordinate to men; the donative inscriptions at Sanchi demonstrate that a number of nuns had the financial means to afford a pilgrimage and to donate, stepping out of the role of being somebody’s wife, unlike Gandhāran families, where women are recorder to be only active as lay members. It is possible that this is Aśoka’s legacy; the remains of a king who used to preach tolerance and respect among his citizens, as opposed to a conservative school of thought such as the Gandhāran patrilocal society.

5. The gender binary as an obstacle towards enlightenment

I selected two tales which I will shortly illustrate to exemplify the link that I believe exists between desire and gender. The first one is a parable from the second volume of the 舊雜譬喻經 (*Jiù zá pìyù jīng*). This parable tells the story of a young man who upon seeing Aniruddha, a handsome *arhat*, mistakes him for a woman and, desiring her, tries to seduce her. When he realizes that Aniruddha is actually a male, the young man is transformed into a woman. The tale evidently compares a woman’s body to the object of desire, its role subordinated to the man who desires it (Lu 2022: 6). In this text, it is clear that desire is the direct cause of gender: women make themselves the object of desire to men, therefore they identify as women, so when the young man desires another man, he is transformed into a woman. Since desire causes gender, and there cannot be any desire in the Land of Bliss, one must free oneself of desire to ascend, spontaneously freeing oneself of gender as well. A parallel can be drawn between the story from the 舊雜譬喻經 (*Jiù zá pìyù jīng*) and a tale from the *Dhammapada* commentary, which narrates of the protagonist Soreyya who, seeing the beautiful skin colour of the bhikkhu Mahākaccāyana, desires to have

him as his wife and this thought causes him to transform into a woman (Anālayo 2014b: 111). The story develops in the same way, involving a man transforming into a woman as a consequence of desiring another man. The commentary identifies this change of sex, from man to woman, as a result of bad karma, however it is important to notice that no such claim is made in any of the canonical texts (Anālayo 2014b: 113). I wish to focus instead on the fact that the cause of this aforementioned transformation is, once again, desire. Soreyya becomes a slave to his own desire which causes him to transform into a different gender. Once again, desire causes gender, not vice versa.

As written by Jiefeng Lu: "... gender is just a consequence of being produced, and the further question is how we identify ourselves with others we encounter." (Lu 2022: 5) I wish to corroborate this claim. Gender emerges when we start relating ourselves to others; were a person to grow up in total solitude, there would not be any need to define gender, for it would not make any sense to the person themselves. We can therefore talk about *social* gender, necessary to define interpersonal relations inside our society. Gender answers the question: 'How do I identify myself (in relation to others)?' and 'How do others perceive me?'. Being a 'man' or a 'woman' emerges from the perception of a difference compared to the people who surround the individual. A 3-year-old girl may not have a clear perception of her own gender until she realizes she is expected to wear a two piece swimsuit at the beach or to wear a dress instead of trousers at a birthday party. When one of these occurrences happen, she will most likely notice a separation, an 'us' versus 'them': the ones in a dress and the ones who are not. This is certainly an oversimplification of the matter, but it implies that gender is a learned behavior, not a natural one. There are undeniable biological differences, such as genitalia and secondary sex characteristics, but these have nothing to do with the way we are taught to behave, with our social gender. Regarding the two tales mentioned earlier from the 舊雜譬喻經 (*Jiù zá pìyù jīng*) and the *Dhammapada* commentary featuring a change of sex, it could be possible that the protagonists do not *physically transform* into women, but they are immediately *perceived* as women by the people surrounding them once they experience desire towards a man, as a manifestation of their social gender. Regardless, it would make no substantial difference in the retelling of their stories since it did not matter how the protagonists perceived themselves – certainly they thought themselves to be men – but how the people surrounding them perceived them to be, and they considered them as women, riddled with desire. In the Buddhist Pure Land the gender binary is irrelevant, because the people who have ascended there are neither men nor women, but 'perfect beings' who have defeated desire; neither their biological sex nor their social gender are relevant. Therefore, one needs to transcend gender, which is caused by desire, and turn into a 'perfect being' in order to reach enlightenment, which makes gender itself an obstacle towards enlightenment. The emphasis should not be on

the person's gender, but on the person's self-cultivation; first and foremost they should have gotten rid of desire.

6. A few conclusive notes

A great deal of evidence has been analysed to prove the existence of a female monastic order, as well as the ability of women to reach enlightenment. The *Edicts of Aśoka* and the donative inscriptions at Sanchi are both proof of the presence of women in the *saṃgha*. Even the *Buddhacarita*, although being a conservative text, mentions the possibility of couple ascension for husband and wife, and the *Vinaya-Pitaka* makes it clear that nuns can effectively ascend. Pure Land Buddhism, which might appear contrary to women's enlightenment, allows women to ascend once they transform their bodies into the ones of 'great men' or 'perfect beings'. It is evident at this point that monks and nuns were equally able to ascend, but I believe that the emphasis on the gender binary is in itself the first obstacle towards enlightenment, not an aid. Gender is caused by desire; not vice versa, therefore its transcendence is necessary in order to reach liberation, since one must rid themselves of desire in order to reach enlightenment.

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