# AN IMAGE OF WOMAN IN OLD BUDDHIST LITERATURE:

## THE DAUGHTERS OF MĀRA

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"How are we to conduct ourselves, lord, with regard to woman kind?"
"As not seeing them, Ānanda."
"But if we should see them, what are we to do?"
"No talking, Ānanda."
"But if they should speak to us, lord, what are we to do?"
"Keep wide awake, Ānanda." (1)

Considerable evidence shows that women maintained a remarkably free and open existence during the earliest years of Buddhism. They commanded a great deal of respect and authority in the home, were allowed to manage property, to give it away, and quite probably also to inherit it; they could come and go in the community with a great deal of freedom--for example, to hear the words of the Master. They were not forced into marriage--certainly never into child-marriage as was later the case in Hindu practice. Nor were they required to become recluses at the time of widowhood. Most important, they were able to leave the world, study the sacred teachings of Buddhism, become preachers and teachers in their own right, and even reach the highest stage of attainment, or arhatship. (2)

Furthermore, it appears that the early Buddhists held a reasonably positive view of woman's capacities and achievements. This is reflected in the high praises heaped upon certain women in Buddhist memories of the formative days: Mahāpajapati, who founded the order of nuns, Patācārā and Sukkhā, two great preachers, the extraordinarily generous donors Visakhā, Mallika the queen, Ambapalī the courtesan, and many others. It even appears, albeit rarely, in the utterances ascribed to the Buddha when his wife bore a daughter, that a girl "may prove even a better offspring than a boy." (3)

It is generally agreed, however, that the Buddhist assessment of woman dropped sharply in the years shortly before and following the appearance of written Buddhist literature. A denigrating stereotype gradually emerged and became dominant; it in turn seems to have worked to limit the opportunities and activities of women in later years. The stereotype appears even in fairly early texts. The Pāli Vinaya, a legendary history of the monastic rule, tells of women who seduce and rape unsuspecting

monks--even while the latter are asleep or too ill to resist. (4) The Buddhist sutta literature frequently pronounces on the weaknesses of woman and the dangers posed by the female sex:

> "Monks, a woman even when going along, will stop to ensnare the heart of a man; whether standing, sitting, or lying down, laughing, talking, or singing, weeping, stricken or dying, a woman will stop to ensnare the heart of a man." (5)

> "Womenfolk are uncontrolled, Ānanda. Womenfolk are envious, Ānanda. Womenfolk are greedy, Ānanda. Womenfolk are weak in wisdom, Ānanda." (6)

The somewhat later Jātaka collections, stories of the former lives of the Buddha, pour forth such a mass of invective that one author has commented: "The stories of the Jātakas seem to have been framed to bring to light the evil influence of women." (7) Among their many edifying accounts, an ancient and blind hag, flattered by a young student, tries to kill the son who has tended her faithfully in order to make off with her new "lover." A woman rescued from a flood by an ascetic seduces her rescuer and becomes his wife, but later deserts him for a robber chief and tries to murder him. A girl raised in total isolation from men and carefully guarded by her husband nonetheless manages to acquire a lover. (8) And numberous women betray fathers and husbands for even blind, lame, hunchbacked and balding paramours. Often such stories are accompanied by little ditties that point out their morals:

> 'Tis nature's law that rivers wind;
> Trees grow of wood by law of kind;
> And, given opportunity,
> All women work iniquity. (9)

The community of nuns likewise felt the impact of the declining image. In time, the worthiness of the whole order of nuns came to be severely questioned by some segments of the Buddhist community. Hence it is said in all stories of its founding that the Buddha was extremely unwilling to let the community come into being. When Mahāpajapati, the aunt who had raised him from birth, asked if she might establish it, he first said no. It was only at the intervention of his beloved disciple Ānanda that he agreed to the women's request. Certain later accounts add an even more damning postscript:

> If, Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, the Brahma-faring, Ānanda, would have lasted long, true dhamma would have endured for a thousand years. But since, Ānanda, women have gone forth...

> in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, now Ānanda, the Brahma-faring will not last long, true dhamma will endure only for five hundred years. (10)

Furthermore, it was expected that nuns would be behind their brothers in accomplishment. Hence a nun had to spend two more years in the novitiate than a monk. (11) In time the equality of women in attaining to the supreme achievement came to be questioned. For, although a woman might still become arhat, a new level of achievement was not recognized--that of Buddhahood itself, or "supreme and perfect enlightenment." This was strictly closed to women, as were the attainments of four lesser classes of beings: a cakravartin (universal emperor), a Māra (lord of desire and death), a Sakka or a Brahmā (two kings of the gods) (12) Correspondingly, of course, the Buddha never bore the stigma of female birth in his own career as bodhisattva. Furthermore there were only 13 classes of attainment in which women could reach the highest excellence, as contrasted to 47 men. (13) A woman who had accomplished some extraordinary feat might, however, gain the privilege of rebirth as a man. Hence the Buddha's mother, who died seven days after his birth, is said to have been reborn as a male god in Indra's paradise. (14) A young woman who "cultivated the thoughts of a man" and honored the three jewels is likewise said to have been reborn as a son of the gods in the same heaven--in a position superior to three monks of lesser worthiness. (15)

It is not surprising to find that the new feminine image is paralleled in increasing limitations on feminine freedom. Thus one finds in the same sutta collection that warns about woman's greediness and stupidity prescriptions for young married women which advise the latters' total submission to their husbands. A good wife must get up before her husband in the morning, go to bed after him at night, speak to him sweetly at all times, honor all those whom he honors, and comply with his wishes in all things. (16) Nuns similarly found their independence limited. Monks were to have strict rights of seniority over nuns; they were also to serve as the women's chief source of information about the dharma and were to set all dates for the women's religious observances. Nuns could not complete their ordination without being questioned by the monastic community; but nuns had no authority over the ordination of monks. Nuns might not remain alone in a monastery during the rainy season without the presence of a supervisory monk. Nuns could not rebuke monks. (17)

The stereotype and its impact are easily documented. The problem of accounting for the declining image is far more compl To a certain extent, of course, the image is pan-Indian. The feeling that women were weak and could not be left to fend for themselves is reflected as well in contemporary Hindu prescriptions for their behavior. There, too, women were subordinated t

men throughout their lives and were told that their sole place in society was in their homes. And non-Buddhist Indians also told stories about the foolishness and wickedness of women; in fact we may expect that it told some of the same stories as those found in the Buddhist literature. But blaming the situation on the general cultural context in this case simply evades the issue. For research into various aspects of the Hindu literary tradition has shown that a parallel decline in the feminine image was occuring there at the same time, and that many of the restrictions on the Hindu woman which are so familiar to us also date from that decline. (18) Furthermore, commentators on that phenomenon have a frequent tendency to attribute that decline to the powerful influence of Buddhism. (19)

More specifically, the finger is pointed at the Buddhist ascetic tradition. This seems a fruitful line of inquiry. The denigrating literature was produced by Buddhist monks. Such monks were expected to practice strict celibacy. Yet many were former householders who had known the pleasures of sexual intimacy. Some found that its loss was far harder to bear than expected. Some wives, too, intentionally lured the husbands who had deserted them, in hopes of persuading these to return to home and children. Many of the most lurid portrayals of feminine wickedness were presented as a corrective to such immediate and practical situations. Thus, for example, the Jātaka stories cited above about murderous wives and mothers were told, according to the commentary, to monks who were "passion-tost," while the vast majority of tales about unfaithful wives were told to backsliding husbands who were tempted to return to the householder's life.

Nor can we overlook the possibilities of Freudian interpretation. Monks were expected not only to control their actions but also to "weed out" the very thought of wrongdoing. Freud has taught us much about the relationship between such radically repressed thoughts and excessive anxiety about their objects.

But I think that there was still another factor at work in the rise of the Buddhist deprecation of woman--a source that is based on the human symbol-making process. I suspect that the new Buddhist attitude was derived at least in part from a traditional way of perceiving the fundamental nature of feminity. According to this traditional mode of perception, a woman is a kind of cipher for fecundity, or the process of becoming. The historic roots of this symbolic reduction are pan-Indian, and to a certain extent also cross-cultural. I believe that the Buddhist stereotype arose as this basic perception encountered the ideals and goals of the Buddhist path.

In ancient India, a woman's primary and most valuable characteristic was her fecundity. The point is emphasized in the institution of marriage where she was always expected to be fruitful and was subject to replacement if she failed to bear children. It is clear in the veneration of the mother which, as I. B. Horner

has pointed out, amounted almost to a cult. It emerges perhaps most sharply in Indian art, whose consistent emphasis on bulging breasts and massive hips is frequently pointed out.

Furthermore, woman's inherent generative capacity placed her, as it has in many other regions of the world, in strong association with other aspects of the natural realm of increase. The association was powerful enough that certain potent divine powers of this natural realm came to be represented in female form. The earth, for example, was a female power; it was addressed as such as early as the Atharvaveda:

> "Upon the firm, broad earth, the all-begetting mother of the plants,...upon her, propitious and kind, may we ever pass our lives!" (20)

Other powers connected especially to the fecundity of the earth and vegetative realm were often also female; thus, for example, a familiar being in ancient India was the female devatā, or tree spirit. Also familiar is the mysterious yakshī, a type of goddess whose many spheres of power seem to have included the wild and prolific spaces of wilderness regions, the life-giving waters, and the fertility of human women.

The association was close enough also that human women were readily confused with such natural powers. We know, for example, that it is difficult to separate human from divine women in Hindu sculpture. Often human women, such as dancers, were portrayed in positions identical to those of the divine types cited above. (21) The most famous example of a human woman whose portrayal mimicked the divine was Mahāmāyā, the Buddha's mother, who gives birth to the Buddha in a position identical with that commonly given to hakshīs and devatās. But Indian literature may also reflect such a confusion--for example, in a passage from the Mahābhārata where the beautiful Damayantī, wandering in the forest, is asked: "Are you a goddess of this wood, or this mountain, or of the heavenly regions? Are you a yakshī, or a rakshasī, or an apsaras?" (22) Alternatively, a woman might function as a power with the capacity to grant fecundity in the natural realm; thus, for example, the frequently cited belief that an asoka tree must be kicked by a young woman before it could flower.

The pattern continues in Buddhism, where one finds the same basic reduction of feminity and the same tendency to identify women with the larger realm of increase. There are two things, it said, of which women never tire--intercourse and child-bearing (23) Further, woman's tendency to seek sexual connection and increase no matter what the cost is only a reflection of her "inborn nature"; hence the bodhisattva says in a Jātaka that she is not to be held responsible for any evil consequences of such overwhelming drives. (24) Buddhism knows and recognizes the "fertility goddesses"; as we have already seen in the case of

Mahāmāyā, its art is as free as parallel Hindu productions to present various women as duplicates of such divinities.

It was this close association between woman and the whole realm of natural generative productivity which, I believe, was also responsible for Buddhism's developing aversion towards women. For Buddhism--at least the monastically oriented, more conservative Buddhism which produced the majority of the texts we have used--was opposed to and even afraid of this realm of productivity. Conservative Buddhism drew a sharp line between two states of "existence" nirvāna, or liberation (literally "blowing out"), and samsāra, or becoming (literally "wandering through" or transmigration). Samsāra was the enemy--a realm of ceaseless generation and destruction that inevitably bred suffering. It had to be broken--overcome--for the desired liberation to occur. Yet, as we have seen, a woman was a veritable image of becoming and of all the forces of blind growth and productivity which Buddhism knew as samsāra. As such she too was the enemy--not only on a personal level, as an individual source of temptation, but also on a cosmic level, as representation and summation of the processes binding all men. And she especially had to be overcome, if liberation was to remain a possibility.

The symbolism never became as explicit in Buddhism as it later did in the Hindu tradition; there "samsāra" became "māyā" or "prakriti", both feminine concepts represented iconographically and sometimes even ritually in female form. Rather, the growing influence of the Mahāyāna form of Buddhism sent both the modes of portraying women and the relationship between aspirant and samsāra developing in another direction. (25) But there is one place in the Buddhist literature where women do come to symbolize the ultimate bonds of samsāra. When the Buddha-to-be is about to begin the night's effort that will culminate in his enlightenment, he is challenged by the god Māra, lord of desire and death--in other words, of samsāra. Māra knows that the Buddha's enlightenment will mean the end of his own supremacy over the world; hence he is desperate to prevent the accomplishment. First he assembles all his demonic armies and attacks the bodhisattva outright. The attack fails and the army flees in disarray. Then Māra regroups and decides to throw his ultimate weapon at the Buddha-to-be. This consists of his three lovely and voluptuous daughters. The three smile, sigh, invite, and utilize all thirty-three devices of feminine seduction. With the daughters' failure, the Master's enlightenment becomes a certainty; for Māra's realm--the realm of becoming--the realm of feminity, has no more hold on him. (26)

## NOTES

1. Dīghanikāya 16. 5. 9; trans. T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, Dialogues of the Buddha, Vol. II (Mahāparinibbānasutta) (5th ed.; London: Luzac and Company, 1966,) 154.
2. For a description of the status and accomplishments of early Buddhist women, see I. B. Horner, Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1930); see also Bimala Churn Law, Women in Buddhist Literature (Ceylon: W. E. Bastian and Co., 1927).
3. Samyuttanikāya 3. 2. 6; cited Horner, p. 20.
4. See, for example, Suttavibhanga 1. 10. 11-12, 17-20, 23-24.
5. Anguttaranikāya 5. 6. 55; trans. E. M. Hare, The Book of the Gradual Sayings 5 vols.; London: Luzac and Company, 1955-65), III, 56.
6. Anguttaranikāya 4. 8. 80; trans. Hare, II, 93.
7. Shakuntala Rao Shastri, Women in the Sacred Laws (Madras: Bharatiya Vidya Bhayan, 1953), p. 92.
8. See Asātamantajātaka, Takkajātaka, Andabhūtajātaka.
9. From Andabhūtajātaka, trans. Robert Chalmers, The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births ed. E. B. Cowell, Vol. I (London: Luzac and Company, 1969), 47.
10. Cullavagga 10. 1. 6; trans. I. B. Horner, The Book of the Discipline, Vol. V (London: Luzac and Company, Ltd., 1963), 356; for a version of the complete story, see Cullavagga 10. 1. 1-6.
11. Bhikkunivibhanga 74. 1. 1.
12. See, for example, Anguttaranikāya 1. 15. 12-13.
13. I. B. Horner makes this revealing comparison in the introduction to her translation of the Cullavagga, op. cit. p. xiv.
14. See Albert Foucher, The Life of the Buddha According to the Ancient Texts and Monuments of India, trans. Simone Brangier Boas (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), p. 206.
15. Dīghanikāya 21. 11; trans. Rhys Davids, op. cit. p. 306.
16. Anguttaranikāya 5. 4. 34.
17. Cullavagga 10. 1. 4.
18. See, for example, Shakambari Jayal, The Status of Women in the Epics (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass), Shastri, op. cit., Ratnamayidevi Dikshit, Women in Sanskrit Dramas (Delhi: Mehar Chand Lachhman Das, 1964).
19. See, for example, Jayal, Shastri, op. cit.
20. Atharvaveda 12. 1. 17; trans. Louis Renou, Hinduism (Wash-

ington Square Press, 1963), p. 58.

See Heinz Mode, The Woman in Indian Art (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), pp. 13-14.

Mahābhārata 3. 61. 114-115.

Anguttaranikāya 2. 6. 10.

Bandhanakokkhajātaka.

This problem has been discussed by Kathryn A. Cissell in a still unpublished paper, "How should one regard women?: The contemplation of dharmas, marks and non-duality"; I am extremely grateful to her for allowing me to read her manuscript.

For a retelling of the story, see Foucher, op. cit., pp. 113-114.

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