Buddhist Feminism

Buddhism, as a way of living with compassion and insight, is radically liberating for women. Yet Buddhism as an historical institution reflects both 2500 years of men's power over women, "patriarchy", and women's struggle for empowerment. One can find within the Buddhist tradition women who prefigure modern feminism by two and a half millennia, and yet writings which equal the worst anti-woman polemics of any religion.

The liberative project of dharma-practice, as opposed to historical Buddhist culture, is intrinsically opposed to patriarchy. Patriarchy, as the limiting of human potential, is rejected by those who cut through habitual, socialized thoughts and behaviours. Patriarchy, as the institutionalization of violence against women is rejected by those who practice peace. Patriarchy, as the proprietary relationship of the sexes in the patriarchal family, where men own women's sexuality, their labour-power, and children, their product, is rejected by those who eschew the illusion of self in property. Throughout history spiritual radicals have been driven from everyday patriarchal society, "the householder life", into radical sexual alternatives such as celibacy.

Early Buddhism's influence on the position of women was historically progressive. The Buddhists and their contemporaries, the Jainas, were the first Indian mendicant orders to admit women, and thus greatly expanded women's social options. Women in 500 B.C. India had no property rights, no control over their household affairs or choice of husband, and from 500 A.D. until the 1900's widows were sacrificed on their husband's funeral pyres. The brahminal caste-system was strongly patriarchal, as summed up in this phrase from the laws of Manu:

Their fathers protect them in childhood,
their husbands protect them in marriage,
their sons protect them in age;
a woman is never fit for independence.

(quoted by Khantipalo)

The system was especially constraining for upper-caste women, from whose ranks many of the early Buddhist Sisters came. Many of the early Sisters were also from the aristocratic republics, such as the warrior clan of the Shakyan from which Shakyamuni Buddha came. As these republics were slowly absorbed by the expanding imperialist monarchies, as were the Shakyanas during the Buddha's lifetime, the democratic rights of noble women were further constrained. [As Goonatilake (1932) points out, during the pre-brahmin Vedic period women were more equal with men, in marriage, education, and access to the practice of religion.]

At this time of great social changes, some strong independent women did renounce society and become wanderers, such as the Buddha's ex-wife Yasodhara, who decided to follow the example of her ex-husband; after he left, she shaved her head, donned patchwork robes, and ate one meal a day from a bowl. (Later, she became a nun and attained enlightenment.) But these women mendicants were not widely accepted. By providing a culturally approved alternative to marriage, the Sisterhood made freedom from the patriarchal family widely available. Young women were given leverage over their fathers' choice of husband; choose well or I'll become a nun!

The Buddhist Sisterhood was India's first "women's space", a life separate from, if somewhat subordinate to, monks; wandering, studying, and meditating in the company of other women, free from restrictions of children and family. The Sisterhood was an option for those strong, intelligent women for whom the patriarchal family would have been stifling, or "women-identified women" who today might become lesbians, or women with strong introspective personalities, or
simply women whose situation in lay life would be otherwise bleak, such as widows, spinsters, or abandoned wives.

Though the Buddha had admitted several of these wandering women ascetics to his Order before he created the Sisterhood (Nayes), he formally created the new Order only after being approached by a delegation of women from his warrior-caste Sakyan clan, headed by his aunt and step-mother Mahapajapati Gotami. These privileged women had cut their hair, donned robes, and walked 200 to 300 miles to ask admission to the Order. They arrived crying, covered with dust and with swollen feet. The Buddha refused three times. Then the Buddha's closest disciple, Ananda, taking pity on the women, interceded and asked directly if women could attain enlightenment. The Buddha acknowledged that they could and subsequently created the Sisterhood.

Women are capable, after going forth from the home unto the homeless life under the Dharma set forth by the Tathagata (the Buddha), of realizing the Fruits of Stream-winner, Once-returning, Never-returning and Arhatship (the four stages of Enlightenment).

Yet he predicted that the dharma and the Sangha would decline twice as fast in 500 years rather than 1000, and he laid down eight rules to stem the tide of degeneration.

1. All nuns, no matter how senior, must bow to all monks, no matter how junior.
2. Sisters shall not spend the rains-retreat in a district where there are no brothers.
3. The bi-weekly meeting for the reciting of the code of conduct shall be set by a brother, and a sermon preached at these meetings by a brother.
4. Sisters must invite criticism at the end of the rains-retreat from both the Brotherhood and Sisterhood.
5. Sisters guilty of wrong-doing shall do penance to both Orders.
6. A Sister may take final ordination after observing the major vows for two seasons.
7. Sisters may not speak among brothers, though brothers may speak among Sisters.

These rules have strongly suggested an anti-woman streak in the Buddha, especially in light of the more misogynist writings in later Buddhist scriptures. But the revolutionary nature of this innovation, in its context, suggests quite the opposite. At the mundane level, Buddha was taking the risk that all celibate orders of both sexes run, of being slandered as “free-lovers”, and indeed the Buddhist scriptures recount that the nuns were slandered in this way. On a larger scale, the Buddha’s prediction that the dharma and Sangha would eventually decline can be seen as a recognition that the integration of enlightenment into worldly life, that the interdependence of Sangha and laity represented, would eventually end in a new status-quo. The more revolutionary the institution, the more hostility from the “powers that be”, and the sooner racist, casteist, patriarchal society would storm the “dhamma-dhatu” (“dharma fortress”). In a sense, the eventual elimination of the Sisterhood in most Buddhist countries represents a diminution of true
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dharma, patriarchy's cooptation of the revolution, and these rules are an avoidance of the "infantile disorder of ultra-leftism", radical extremism.

It doesn't really make any difference if this was the intent of the Buddha or not. Scriptures are a deadly trap if we are attached to them, rather than holding on to our own analytical, experiential understanding, as Buddha warns in the Kāma Sutta. A feminist perspective can be derived from analysis of one's experience, the most basic "principle" in Buddhism. A Buddhist does not have to find feminism in the scriptures any more than she has to deny modern astronomy and search for the mythical Mount Meru at the center of the world.

On the other hand, if we have faith that there was a radical experience of insight passed down from the Buddha, it is important to examine the scriptures for the influence it had on Indian women before setting the scriptures aside. Indeed, an examination of the early Buddhist scriptures provides much evidence of the ways women's power and a feminist analysis were articulated in early Buddhism.

For instance, several nuns and lay women were among the Buddha's ablest and wisest disciples. Theri (Sister) Kénná, a former slave, was worshipped by King Pasenadi after she had taught him about the concept of non-existence after death. The unshrinking Puññika Theri, another former slave who had been freed by her master so she could become a nun, once lectured to a brahmin:

- O ignorant of the ignorant— who has said that one is freed from evil karma by water baptism? If this is so, all the turtles, frogs, serpents and crocodiles will go to heaven!

Two serious offences in the monastic code require lay women to act as judges of a monk's guilt if he is seen in suspicious encounters with other women. The Buddha enjoined that young boys need both parents' permission in order to ordain, which contravened the supremacy of the father. Buddhism does not stigmatize widows, and allowed them to remarried.

One of the few scriptures given specifically for lay-people is the Siggalovada Sutta, an excellent example how the Buddha reinterpreted traditional Hindu-brahminical ideas. In it he advises a boy not to make sacrifices to the gods of the 6 directions but rather to regard 6 social relationships (between parents and children, teachers and students, husbands and wives, friends, employers and employees, and laity and renunciates) as the 6 directions, worthy of the worship of fulfilled responsibility. It was a rather new idea at the time that a husband had as many responsibilities to his wife as she to him; 1, to show her respect, 2, to show her compliance, 3, not to commit adultery, 4, to leave her in charge of her sphere, 5, to supply her with finery. By elaborating these sets of interdependent relations the Buddha pointed away from authoritarian, proprietor relations, where superiors had no responsibility to inferiors, towards a more paternalistic society.

While the Buddha subordinated the Sisters to the monks in matters such as paying of respects, speaking in public, and the necessity to stay near and be taught by monks, he guarded their equality and independence in other areas. Then six monks had some of the Sisters' wash, dye and comb sheep's wool for them, causing the Sisters to neglect their meditation. Buddha made a rule that monks must not have Sisters do such work for them. (Might a modern application be that men...
should help with child care at meditation retreats? After some monks had come in a group to visit the nuns, the Buddha made a rule that only one senior monk, chosen by the other monks, was to visit the nuns every two weeks for their lecture, and then he was to leave before nightfall. A monk once coerced a nun into giving him her robe, accusing her of selfishness when she protested that the nuns were poorer than the monks. The other nuns were enraged, causing the Buddha to forbid exchange of robes between the Orders except through a formal procedure.

Unlike other religious traditions, the segregation of nuns had nothing to do with their impurity; for instance, Buddhism does not stigmatize menstruation. Rather their separateness was to protect both Orders from falling back into the habitual, patriarchal behavior patterns of lay-life, drawn by the powerful magnet of sexual attraction. There is the story of the monk and nun, formerly man and wife, who were frequently meeting alone. Once they were inspired to expose themselves to each other and the monk ejaculated on his robe. Then the nun, his former wife, washed his robe for him. The upcar Caesar caused the Buddha to forbid nuns from washing monks' robes.

By far the most interesting indication of "feminism" in the Buddhist canon is the volume of Buddhist nun's enlightenment stories, the Therigatha, a companion piece to the parallel collection of monks' enlightenment stories. The author of the Therigatha, Soma Theri, is challenged in another scripture by the personification of illusion, Mara, that women have no capacity for wisdom. She replied:

What should a woman's nature signify when consciousness is strong and firmly set, when knowledge rolls ever on, when she by insight righteously comprehends the Dharma? Am I a woman (in these matters) or am I a man, or what am I then? Is one who talks like this fit to talk to Mara?

Though the Therigatha has many verses which emphasize the pessimistic and anti-sexual side of early Buddhism, many also express an awareness of the unique sufferings of women and the value of the freedom of monastic life. For instance, Kisa-Gotami Theri's verse sings of the pain in women's lives, bearing children, having them die, losing one's husband:

Lowly and destitute by birth
reborn a thousand times
she (woman) suffered untold sorrow.
The tears her eyes shed were as boundless as the sea...
Born to a lot so humble,
a target for scorn, by the light of truth she won release.

Cutting through the conditions which bind women's potential, the path of liberation removes those hindrances which are women's lot. These were not just narrowly interpreted as desires, but also external conditions and exploitation of women's labor, as in Sumangala and Sumangalamata Theris' (here merged) songs:

Free! Free! I am from all defilements
from shameless spouse, from pestle and mortar
I'm free, from weaving harsh rushes which
bruise the fingers, from reeking smells of
stale cooking pot. Free! Free!
Am I so wonderfully free!

From ploughshare, sickle and mammettee
from those three crippling things am I free,
so well am I freed, so free.

Split, split, as the rushes did break
I have so well destroyed lust and hate.
In reverence I sit by root of tree;
I say "Oh this indeed is peace" as in
quietness I meditate.

Oh happiness! Now here I'll stay, just here.
No drudgery of toil for me, no drudgery ever!
Sumangala, now meditate! Sumangala, now meditate!
Sumangala, delay not; now live!

The Importance of the Sisterhood as an alternative to arranged marriage is
portrayed in the story of Isidasi Theri, which begins with two nuns of royal birth
sitting by a river after finishing their almsfood.

Of the two, more beautiful was Isidasi,
the other, the pious Theri Bodhi,
both learned, skilled in meditation,
from every fetter free.

Theri Bodhi enquired what had made Isidasi...

Turn away from home and hearth?
Seated solitary in the shade,
Isidasi, who could with skill preach the Truth

explained that she had been given by her beloved father to a wealthy suitor,
and had lived as his obedient wife. Though she had served him and his relatives
attentively and humbly...

with harsh and angry words
my husband would always address me.

Her husband finally left her. When her husband’s parents asked him what
she had done, he said she was not at fault and that he simply did not love her.
Thereafter, her parents gave her to a second nobleman.

For a month I lived as a slave in his house
attending on him devotedly. Yet he too drove
me away.

After that, her father enticed an ascetic monk to marry her, but he only
stayed two weeks before taking again to his robes and begging bowl. Understand-
ably depressed, Isidasi felt her only options were suicide or the Sisterhood.

Then one day, on her way for alms,
the noble Jina Adatta stepped into my home.
A nun so pious, so full of poise,
who observes so well the vows,
who is wise.
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Isidasi offered her aims and then respectfully requested admission to the nun's order. When her father protested, pleading with her to stay and suggesting that she offer aims to the monks and nuns instead, Isidasi proclaimed her independence.

I alone will bear myself the consequences of my deeds.

With her parents' blessing, then she ordained, and achieved deep knowledge and calm in 7 days.

To modern feminists who have grown up in an era of relative sexual freedom it is difficult to understand that till the present virtually the only way a woman could be free of being a sex object for males was to renounce sexuality altogether. As this song from the Therigatha illustrates, the Buddhist teachings helped empower women to cut through the tangle of humiliating sexuality.

Mara (Illusion):

You who are so young, so lovely
Seated beneath sal tree with blossoms crowned
So aware of your loneliness.
Do you not tremble when seducers come along?

Nun:

Though men like you, seducers,
A hundred thousand should approach,
No single hair of mine will turn
Nor will I quake with fear.
And so, tempter, coming all alone,
of what effect are you?

I who possess super-normal powers
Can make my form disappear.
Between your eyebrows or your belly,
I could lodge and stay.
Now then, Mara, could you see me...
Know tempter, I have triumphed over you.

The Sisterhood was, in fact, a direct affront to male control and appropriation of women's sexuality. A nun was a woman who had resigned from the sex-trade, and nuns were consequently the focus of even more unpleasant sexual attention than lay women. After the rape of the highly respected and eventually enlightened nun, Uppalavanna, the Buddha forbid nuns to live alone in the forest, and the rules of the Sisterhood enforced an even more corporate life than that among the monks. A nun had always to have a nun companion, which was often a younger sister of another nun. Though the nuns and monks' communities were separate, nuns were to spend their 3-month rains retreat near a monks' community, partly for protection against molestation.

*Could Helen Reddy's popular song "I Am Woman" be perhaps a modern liturgy for Buddhist nuns:

Yes, I am wise, but its wisdom born of pain
Yes, I've paid the price, but look how much I've gained
If I had to, I can do anything
I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman!
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The frustration some men felt when confronted by nuns' disinterest in the patriarchal sex-game is clear in the story of Subhi Thai, who was waylaid by a "seducer" while walking through the forest. He spoke love verses attempting to convince her of the folly of renunciation for one so young and beautiful, but she remained strong in determination and counseled him to lay aside his lust. Reminding him that her body was made of elements, doomed to decay and death, transient, intangible, an illusion, she inquired what was so attractive to him. After he had praised her eyes she plucked them out and gave them to him, frightening him away. While this may give a whole new meaning to Christ's injunction "If thine eye offend thee pluck it out", some may feel that rather than suggesting self-mutilation as the correct response to sexual harassment, that Sister Subhi should have threatened to pluck out his eyes instead. The Zen approach certainly seems to be different as in this story of 1331 A.D. Japan:

...when Kita Yoshimada was fighting against Hojo Sodatoki, the chief retainer of the Hojo family, named Sakuna Sadakuni, was slain. His wife, Sawa, wished to pray for the dead man; she cut off her hair and entered Tokeiji (monastery) as the nun Shotoku. For many years she devoted herself to Zen under the 17th teacher at Enkakuji, and in the end she became the third teacher at Tokeiji. In the Rohatsu (meditation intensive) training week of December 1339, she was returning from her evening interview with the teacher at Enkakuji, when on the way a man armed with a sword saw her and came to rape her. The nun took out a piece of paper and rolled it up, then thrust it like a sword at the man's eyes. He became unable to strike and was completely overawed by her spiritual strength. He turned to run and the nun gave a Katru shout, hitting him with the paper sword. He fell and then fled.

Zen student's Test: Show the paper sword which is the heart sword and prove its actual effect now.

(Ling, 1976)

Three hundred years after the Buddha, the Indian Buddhist monarch, Asoka, had sent his son, the monk Mahinda Thera, to mission to the Lankans. Seeing that the sister-in-law of King Devanampliya Tissa was practicing with a number of other Sri Lankan women as ten-vow novices, and in need of full ordination, Mahinda sent for his sister, the nun Sanghamitta. Comforting her father, Asoka, on his loss of son and daughter, Sanghamitta said:

There are holy women impatient for my coming, waiting to receive the ordination, so I must hearken to the call, and we are both sufficiently brave to bear the parting, my father, when it is my duty that commands me.

Embarking with a sapling of the Buddha's original Bo tree, the descendent of which still grows today in Anuradhapura tended by 10-vow nuns, Sanghamitta imparted the higher ordination in Lanka. The Lankan Sisterhood was said, probably exaggerated, to have reached ninety thousand nuns not many years later. This fully-ordained line died out eventually in all Theravada countries (that is Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Cambodia) though the line was passed to China when a delegation of Lankan nuns learned Chinese and went to instruct Chinese nuns in orthodoxy. Though this order of fully-ordained nuns still exists today in Taiwan and Hong Kong, these nuns are Mahayanaists and thus not accepted as legitimate by the Theravada. Secondly, they no longer practice the double.
ordination into both the Brotherhood and Sisterhood, rather than being newly ordained each generation by monks without having an independent lineage. Though more than 100,000 "nuns" exist today in Buddhist countries, the vast majority of them are technically only 10-vow novices with very little prestige.

It is interesting that "nuns" and lay-women's energies in Theravāda countries are usually focused on devotional rituals and shrines, such as the Bo-tree at Anuradhapura. Conversely, in the Mahāyana tradition where the devotional aspect has been integrated with the core doctrine, rather than being a secondary, inferior pursuit, the nuns' order has been comparatively more successful. Monks frequently attribute the decline of the Sisterhood to women's weakness for devotionality and emotionalism, and men's alleged preference for meditation and discipline, though we should remember mystic Simone Weil's words when we are taught history by Buddhist monks:

"History therefore is nothing but a compilation of the depositions made by assassins with respect to their victims and themselves."

(Weil, p. 225)

Alongside the generally liberative strain, there developed in Buddhism a patriarchal strain which reflected the pattern of the outside world. This included the appearance of the notion that women cannot attain enlightenment, but must die and be reborn as men; a doctrine flatly contradicted by the Buddha and the early enlightenment stories, though there is a sutra which suggests that women cannot become Buddhas (Anguttara, i, p.26,9-19). The negative strain in Buddhism emphasizes that women cannot attain enlightenment since they are by nature lustful, clinging, deviant, weak-minded and feeble, born to this miserable condition because of their wicked past karmas. In the later literature on the Buddha's past lives, the Jātaka Tales, women are usually portrayed in an unflattering way, many responsible for holding back or seducing away the enlightenment-seeking male. Buddha is never portrayed as having taken a woman's form.

The scriptures hold up the man who abandons his wife and family in his monastic search for personal fulfillment as faultless; in fact the Buddha abandoned his wife shortly after she gave birth to their first son, whom he named "Mahāla" meaning "bond". Some of the early nuns were the ex-wives of men who had left to become monks, sometimes after violent arguments. In a previous life the Buddha had given away his wife and children to a wicked brahmin as an act of renunciation. Much of the negative tradition emphasizing women's seductress natures can be attributed to monks not being very well grounded in self-understanding and blaming external forms for the desires that arise within them. (I couldn't help raping that woman, your honor, when she wore such sexy clothes...) If women were more manipulative it is understandable since interpersonal power was the only avenue open to them.

A slightly less oppressive notion was that women could attain enlightenment, but only after changing into a man according to the formula "their female organs disappear and male organs appear" (see Paul, 1979). In a sense, the nun's disciplining was less a means to get back to the androgynous void beyond sex differences, than it was a way to become more like men and overcome their female karmas.

Obviously women do have different karmas than men; karmas here understood as those limiting conditions which obscure our inner wisdom, which tend to manifest as habitual tendencies of thought, speech and behavior, or as external circum-
stances, and which we are partly responsible for because of our past actions. The
question is, what precisely is the nature of "woman's karma"? and how is she re-
sponsible for it. If one says that the karma consists of women's weaker bodies,
and minds or lack of spiritual capacity one falls into the misogynist trap. Cer-
tainly Buddhists should acknowledge that women have a more difficult life, with
family burdens and disempowering socialization. But the Buddhist path does not
tell the oppressed that there is nothing they can do about their situation since
it is the result of their past actions. Rather, that our unwillingness or lack
of determination to liberate ourselves in the past has contributed to the oppre-
sion we face now and its about time we seized the moment and took responsibility
for our lives. The handicap is not knowing how to deal correctly with our karma,
not the karma itself.

For instance, Buddhism displays a certain ambivalence about the Mother: on
the one hand mothers are said to have strong karma holding them back from enli-
ghtenment because of their attachment to their children. Yet Buddhist scriptu-
res recommend that one meditate on compassion by reflecting that in some previ-
ous birth each of us has been the mother of every other one of us, and that we
must have the same love towards all beings that the mother has for her child,
whom she would sacrifice her own life for.

(This issue is parallel to the discussion in the women's movement about
whether there are any intrinsic qualities of "womanhood" beyond all the defor-
med patriarchal programming, or whether humans are basically androgynous, and
that this should be our goal.)

Even when the scriptures do not give a negative or inferior cast to feminin-
ity, and are moderately progressive for their time, they still show a certain
contentment with the status-quo position of women, as in the wife's obligations
to her husband (Sīhalavatī and Uppahe Suttas): a wife should rise early and go
to bed late, doing all things willingly and with a sweet voice; honor all that
her husband honors; be skillful in home crafts; oversee the servants and slaves
in the household; not commit adultery and protect the household monies. Though
Buddha says a daughter may turn out to be better than a son (in the Sānyutta
Nikāya), another sutra points out that wise parents desire sons to keep up the
traditions and possess the heritage (Anguttara, III, 36).

Unfortunately the Buddhist scriptures were not written down until several
hundred years after the Buddha died, having been passed down as an oral tradition,
and thus we don't know how much was added on by later monks. But only the most
ardent apologist will blithely dismiss what she disagrees with as commentary and
accept the rest as the Buddha's own words. Really, it is more correct to look
on even the earliest Buddhist scriptures as reflections of the total social,
intellectual, psychological and politico-historical phenomenon of early Buddhism,
and thus only an indirect reflection of the Buddha himself. In this way we may
honestly hold the perfect wisdom that the Buddha represents aloft from the com-
plex and contradictory body of scripture, and its occasional misogyny.

If the slow death of the Sisterhood and the rise of misogyny in Buddhism
were indicators of a decline in pure dharma; and if one is superstitious enough
to believe that the dharma would die after 500 years, then the rise of the Māha-
yana tradition roughly 500 years after the Buddha can be seen as a fresh awaken-
ing of radical insight which again had consequences for women. The Māhāyanaists
placed much more emphasis on the potential wisdom of women and laity, and their
creation of a semi-divine pantheon of enlightened beings ("bodhisattvas"), many of whom were female, liberated women in the Buddha-realms if not on earth. The famous Chinese/Japanese bodhisattva Kuan Yin is depicted sometimes as a male, sometimes as female and sometimes as androgynous. The chief female bodhisattva of Tibet, Tara, has some forms which carry weapons and which minister to such specific needs as removing the fear of tyrannical governments.

The Vimalakirti Sutta, a late Mahayana scripture, provides the most delightful example of the effect of the Mahayana emphasis on Sunyata or "Voidness," and its relationship to sexuality. It is also an important Sutta because the protagonist is a layman whose wisdom and supernatural powers are equal to the Buddha's and superior to all the Buddha's monks. The following section is an encounter in the sutta between the monk Sariputra (well-respected in the Pali scriptures, but a favorite target for the Mahayanists) encountering a highly enlightened goddess.

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

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

Sariputra: Not such a woman would not really exist, so what would there be to transform?

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

Thereupon, the Goddess employed her magical power to cause the elder Sariputra to appear in her form and to cause herself to appear in his form. Then the Goddess, transformed into Sariputra, said to Sariputra transformed into the Goddess, "Reverend Sariputra, what prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?"

And Sariputra, transformed into the Goddess, replied "I no longer appear in the form of a male! My body has been changed into the body of a woman! I do not know what to transform!"

The Goddess continued, "If the elder could again change out of the female state, then all women could also change out of their female states. All women appear in the form of women in just the same way as the elder appears in the form of a woman. While they are not women in reality, they appear in the form of women. With this in mind, the Buddha said, "In all things, there is neither male nor female." (Thurman, p.61)
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When the Hindu Tantric tradition began to seep into Buddhism, with its complicated sexual yogas and meditation, it had a radical effect on certain Buddhists' attitude to women. The earthiness and sensuality attributed to women, which the sexist side of Buddhism saw as their spiritual weakness, became a spiritual power in Tantric Buddhism. The female yogi, "yogini", who channels her sexual energy into meditation in the midst of the sex act was seen as one of the most important teachers a Tantric monk could have (an idea reflected in Herman Hesse's novel SIDDHARTHA). For instance, the Tantric master Naropa, and his wife, shared a "long and highly fruitful relationship" with the consort-scribes Pa-me-mo, and the Tantrist Savari was taught by two sisters, Logi and Guni, who, as Tantric consorts, helped him to important breakthroughs on his path.

In Tantric symbolism, female energy represents perfect wisdom, related to voidness and the womb, while male energy is linked to compassionate action. Implements such as the bell (female) and the lightning bolt (male) were held in stylized forms during Tantric rituals, symbolizing these energies, and during the sexual ritual, the yoni and yoga will meditate on their union as the union of these two principles.

The PrajnaParamita (Perfect Wisdom) must be adored everywhere
by those who strive for liberation.
Pure she stays in the realm
beyond this empirical world;
In this empirical world
she has assumed the form of a woman.
In the guise of a woman
she is present everywhere...
Woman in all social positions
must never be despised.
A woman is Divine Inspiration.
Only in this world
she has assumed bodily form.

(Gesinther, p.83, 1952)

Some Tantric yoginis were royal or upper-caste, but many were also low-caste, while many monks in this period appear to have been upper-caste. Thus, monks involved in affairs with Tantric consort-gurus were not only offensive to Buddhist discipline but also to caste-sensitivities. The King Dombhips was driven from his throne when his twelve-year Tantric relationship with a low-caste woman was discovered. After retiring to the forest to continue their practices, they were finally put to death. When the Indian monk Tilopa, the founder of a great lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, was just a student monk he was visited by an ugly, old woman who asked if he understood the Dharma. Frustrated, he answered "no", which caused her to dance with glee. Embarrassed, he answered "yes", with which she began to weep. She revealed herself as one of a number of demonesses who had been entrusted by the Buddha to guard special teachings until wise enough people arose to understand them. Throwing respectability to the wind, Tilopa embarked on a journey to the demonesses' realm, engaging all the demonesses and their queen in sexual yoga in order to win their teachings. After this he became a social outcast, and took a low-caste woman, a sesame-seed-oil ("til") maker, who taught him her trade, and from whom he got his name.
The Tantric Siddha Vajraghanta had a woman liquor-merchant as his consort, with whom he travelled and taught. When the Tantric master Saraha had a block in his practice he met a woman Tantric who was working as an arrow-smith (Profession men such as the making and selling of weapons or alcohol are not considered proper for a Buddhist and are usually pursued by other religious groups or low-caste people in Buddhist societies; yet, the Tantrics took up these professions as spiritual disciplines.) Saraha lived with her as his consort-guru making arrows, and had many breakthroughs. When the king came with a crowd to criticize Saraha's low-caste liaison, he replied:

I am indeed a Brahmin, and I live with the daughter of an arrow-smith, caste or no caste: there I do not see any distinction. I have taken the sworn vows of a bhikkhu (monk) and I wander about with a wife; there I do not see any distinction. Some may doubt and say "Here lies an impurity!" but they do not know.

(Ray in Gross, 1980)

Even the relationship of husband and wife becomes a Tantric practice situation, as in the story of Saraha asking his wife for a radish curry. Before she had returned he had gone into a trance which lasted 12 years. After he came up from his meditation, he again asked for the radish curry. Informed that radishes were not out of season he determined to go to the mountains to meditate. Upon hearing this his wife answered that just removing his body from the world was not renunciation, and his trances had not helped much if, after 12 years, he had not given up his desire for radish curry. Chastened, he achieved a profound enlightenment.

After Tantric Buddhism became institutionalized in Tibet, sexual yogis became rare and celibate monks again became the norm. But the tolerant attitude towards sexuality remained. As in Freud's notion of infants' "polymorphous perversity", where sexual pleasure has not yet been localized in the genitals but is experienced equally by the whole body, Zen and Tantric disciplines teach one to experience one's senses (including consciousness) fully, without neurotic blocks and limitations. For celibate monks and nuns in these traditions, sexual energy could still be worked with through visualization meditation and yogic exercises, perhaps more powerfully because of their celibacy; by forgiving the sexualized obsession with genital sexuality, they more easily opened themselves to a richer moment-to-moment experience of life.

There are probably numerous stories waiting to be re-discovered, or that have been irretrievably repressed, of strange, uppity nuns, with offensive practices and doctrines; in Theravada countries, a weakness for heresies such as Mahayanism, or semi-exotic devotionalism; while in Mahayanaist countries, we might find cults centered around women claiming power as incarnations of female bodhisattvas, or bisexual yoginis dedicated to spiritual androgyny. (Sister Kenna points to divisions between orthodox and liberal nuns during the Anuradhapura period, during which Tantric ideas were known and had some following in Sri Lanka. It was nuns from the Tantra-sympathetic Abhayagiri Vihara who went to China to Ordain nuns there.)

In Tantra, the highest states of enlightenment are represented by the sexual union of two deities, both of which the meditator identifies with; reminiscent of Jung's male and female archetypes present in every psyche. Homosexuality in
the male Sangha has been known since the earliest days, and there are disciplinary rules against the intentional emission of semen (as in masturbation) and in penetration of the penis into any animal or human orifice "the depth of a sesame seed". Though lesbianism is not (to my knowledge) explicitly discussed in Buddhist scriptures, there were undoubtedly numerous cases dealt with in the history of the Sisterhood. (We might reflect that today, especially in the West where homosexuality is rapidly becoming a legitimate lifestyle, there are fewer reasons for a rigid segregation of the sexes in celibate communities.)

An example of a wildly unconventional, and very earthy, celibate is the revered Tibetan saint Milarepa, a hermit who preached in spontaneous verse. Though he usually preached to women by attempting to convince them of the pettiness of their vanity, grossness of their personalities, or the shortness of their lives, his "Song with Nine Meanings" indicates a clear understanding of women's special burdens:

In the morning you get up from bed
in the evening you go to sleep
in between, you do endless housework;
you are engrossed in these three things.
Grandmother, you are an unpaid maid...

The head of the family
is the most important one;
income and earnings are the next most longed for things.
Then sons and nephews are wanted most.
By these three are you-bound.
Grandmother, you yourself have no share.

Question your own thoughts and your mind examine.
You should practice the Buddha's teaching;
You need a qualified and dependable guru.
And then things may be different for you.

Agenda for a Buddhist Feminism

A thread of radical insight can be traced down through Buddhist history, liberating the men and women exposed to it from patriarchal culture. Yet Buddhism never developed a clear analysis of the patriarchal aspects of ego, of male-privileged access to dharma-practice, or of the disempowering socialization and position of women. Consequently, after the first burst of dharma in a society, patriarchal culture, allied with the rising class of male religious professionals (monks), reassert the status-quo.

Fortunately, changes in the contemporary world, especially in the West, seem to be encouraging Buddhism toward a revival, a turning-point where the old forms passed down from the sexist counter-revolutions must be dropped. Dharma-practice is quickly evolving from its agricultural adaptation, where meditation and study were possible only for an aristocratic and monastic elite, to a post-industrial adaptation in Asian cities and the West, where earlier hierarchies are being transcended.

The development of a feminist dharma, a "stree-yana" or "women's vehicle", only seems possible today, as a synthetic praxis develops out of the dialectical dialogue of "Buddhism-mets-feminism", integrating the theory-and-practice of
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both. Feminism is one of the many results of the European Enlightenment, and it is only in this generation that Westerners and radicalized Asians, socialized in the assumptions of liberal democracy, are beginning to fashion a Buddhist culture appropriate to those assumptions.

Near the top of the Asian Buddhist-feminist agenda will be the revival of the order of Sisters and its democratization vis-a-vis the male Sangha. Nuns have very little prestige in Buddhist countries today. In Thailand, nuns cook for themselves and for the monks, as well as performing other labor which would be forbidden if they were fully ordained. They frequently have merely replaced motherly responsibilities with those of celibate housewives, though with even more exaggerated subservience than laywomen. Nuns, poor and humble, live lives much closer to the spirit of renunciation than the privileged monks; if their obvious piety and perseverance could be recognized, and given equal prestige with monks, it would have a revolutionary effect on Asian Buddhism.

Re-establishing the full-ordination, however does not seem to be the path to such equality. Theravadin nuns have tried, and are still trying, to have Theravada accept the legitimacy of the Chinese nuns' ordination lineage, though with little success. Also, inequality is built into the rule of full-ordination itself; of what value would it be to have a legitimate ordination lineage if one simply ignores the highly repressive rules that are the basis of that lineage? Even for rural Asian women, the opportunities for spiritual growth are greater in lay-life than they would be in an orthodox Sisterhood; such a Sisterhood is not progressive today. Finally, even if full-ordination was reestablished, and its legitimacy accepted without the extra-rules, nuns still would not have the same prestige as monks; the root of the problem lies in the whole attitudinal and social structure of patriarchy, not in the presence or absence of a certificate of equality.

The institutionalized male monopoly on spirituality can be seen in the typical temple sermon; a monk addressing 100 women and children and five old men. In Sri Lanka, monks are already beginning to resent the enthusiastic attention some lay women give to the needs of the rapidly growing body of 10-vow nuns. Nuns, poor and living in shacks or spartan convents, are completely dependent on their lay women supporters. They could potentially be Gramscian "organic intellectuals" for lay Buddhist women, synthesizing and articulating women's interests in a religious form. The denial of monastic educational opportunities to nuns today can be seen as a structural constraint of patriarchy placed on the ability of nuns to develop independent discourses. While the earliest nuns in Lanka had access to education and taught lay women (Gonnetilake, 1982), many of them having come from the advantaged classes, the typical nun today is a poorly educated, lower class spinster or widow, who is preoccupied with tending shrines and performing ceremonies. Nuns could be powerful social workers, as the nuns in the Catholic Church are, combining their spiritual discipline with compassionate social service. In fact, as the result of lay women's and nuns' agitation, nuns are now being organized and trained in Sri Lanka and Thailand, in meditation, Pall, Buddhist philosophy, and social service work. The Sri Lankan government only began to register its upwards of 2000 nuns in 1984, and has just established a fund for their support. Khantipalo gives an estimate of 70,000 nuns in Thailand, with more than 5000 organized in the Foundation of Thai Nuns, and involved in social work.*

*Sri Lanka also now has an "All Ceylon Buddhist Nuns Association" near Colombo.
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Though other religious groups (such as fundamentalist Muslims and Hindus) are certainly more repressive towards women than Buddhists, the position of women in Buddhist countries, and among Buddhist ethnic minorities, has much room for improvement. Yet apologists in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma blithely assure us that since Buddhism provides freedom to women, that hysterical "women's lib" is an unwanted Western import. For instance, this editorial appeared in the Chinese/Sinhalese publication Young Buddhist, based in Singapore, in 1983:

Buddha did not forget women either. He defined the role of women in His time. The dual function of women in society—namely, as mother and wife, a husband's best friend—was clearly defined by the Buddha...

Is there, in the first place, any inequality of the sexes? Is it not a figment of imagination of women? Why can women not remain women? Why must they feel their security threatened unless they also move into the domain of the male? If women were intended to perform the functions which men perform, then they would have been born men and not women!

If it is for economic reason that a wife has to work to help the husband support the house, then there is justification. But if a woman becomes so highly educated and then remains a spinster, then it is a totally different thing. For then she has not fulfilled the role which nature had intended her to play...

In short, why can't women just remain women and do what women ought to do and not be a "woe to men"?

One of ten women in Bangkok is a prostitute, sold to businessmen on sex-tours from Buddhist Japan, with the tacit approval of the Thai Buddhist-military government. The policies of Asian countries rarely pay serious attention to encouraging the independence of women in development projects, such as through income-generating skills. Rather, young women's labor is generally exploited in Buddhist countries the same way it is in others (with the possible exception of the post-Buddhist societies of Mongolia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, North Korea, China and Tibet, though we unfortunately have very little information about the condition of women or Buddhism in these countries.) Sadly, there is little available in English about the phenomenon of Untouchable Buddhists in India, who began to convert to escape their caste status in the 1950's under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, much less about their women, who were doubly oppressed, as women and Untouchables, by the caste system and its impurity concepts.

Buddhist-feminist, male and female, must seriously examine the patriarchal aspects of ego, the patriarchal thought, speech and behavior which inhibits wisdom and compassion. Monks should not be allowed to shift blame for their lack of mindfulness by accusing women of seductiveness. The territorial possessiveness of men, obvious in their hysterical reactions to "hysterical" women's libbers and the rising power and assertiveness of women, must be pointed out. When women object to the inferior status of even the original enlightened nuns, and call for equality, Asian monks point out that women are merely reacting from wounded pride or ego. Bowing to men is merely a discipline to help nuns train humility. Yet, it seems most women precisely don't have a problem with pride or "ego", while most monks apparently do. Wouldn't the skillful discipline today
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be to have every monk bow to every nun, no matter how long she has been in the
robes? (I laugh at how inconceivable this is!) Better yet, let us simply put
away humiliation of either sex in favor of the more rigorous discipline of honest
equality.

Fundamentally, a Buddhist approach points to the processes by which we make
others into objects, and then commodities for use. We make others into sex-objec-
tes, labor-commodities, casualty statistics; we separate ourselves from "the Third
World", "non-Buddhists", Nature. As socialists-feminists point out, this process
of alienation of women is not just a phenomenon of consciousness ("male chauvini-
sm"); but also is dependent on the way women work in society, the way families
are run, the form of education given. In order for us to relate to one another
in the light of compassionate wisdom, rather than through the alienating tangles
of thought, we must change society from top to bottom, from the psyche to the
street plan, transforming every social structure that reinforces and manifests
the oppression of one person by another.

Western Buddhists, taking Asian Buddhism and attempting to shape a modern
Buddhism from it, have different challenges and opportunities. For instance, for
better or worse, we do not have strong norms to guide the relations of the sexes
as in Buddhist countries. Sadly, we must even beware of the sexual abuse of po-
wer by Buddhist teachers.

This is not a new problem; one of the most serious offenses described in the
monastic code is to "praise sexual intercourse (with a monk) as the highest means
of making merit". But in the nonviolent West, it is a more serious problem, as
illustrated by the events at the San Francisco Zen Center in 1983. Students of
the (married) Zen Roshi, Richard Baker, discovered that he had been sleeping
with some of his meditation students and asked him to resign. Subsequently, an
editor of the women-in-Zen journal Kahawai, based in Hawaii, revealed that she
had evidence of 10 Buddhist teachers in the West who had caused psychological
harm to students whom they had had secret sexual affairs with. (Interestingly,
she comments that the Tantric Buddhist groups, who have made a doctrine of the
notion that "sexual intercourse with a guru is the highest means to the achieving
of enlightenment", are the least damaging, since teacher-student sex is openly
acknowledged; see Coevolution Quarterly Winter, '83, and Spring '84. Also, it is
important to point out that lay affairs with the clergy are a run-of-the-mill
scandal in Asian Buddhism, and in all other religions for that matter, while fit-
ing your Zen master is quite uncommon; SFBG is to be commended on their maturity
in holding to the Dharma as their sole refuge.)

More subtly, Buddhists must examine the whole way in which Buddhism is tau-
ght, for the male bias that has crept in after 2500 years. When dharma is taught
in the West, egollessness, humility and renunciation are frequently emphasized,
ignoring the dynamic side of the path. It is quite appropriate to address the
problems of careerist, ego-centered, goal-oriented males by emphasizing "go with
the flow", but women have already been programed into humble, nurturing, passive
roles. Teaching women what is ordinarily understood as "egolessness" is redun-
dant. Rather dharma-teaching to women must emphasize wariorship, the dynamic
empowerment that comes when we let go of hesitation, doubt, and fear, the neuro-
tic-self.
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(At Enkakuji in 1304, when the Master gave his approval to the nun Shido, the head monk challenged her understanding.) She faced him and drew out a ten-inch knife (carried by all samurai women) and held it up: "Certainly a teacher of the line of the patriarch should go up on the high seat and speak on the book. But I am a woman of the warrior line and I should declare our teaching when face-to-face with a drawn sword. What book should I read?"

(Ling, 1976)

In the Sigalovada Sutta, society was seen as a set of dyadic hierarchical role-relationships, each with a responsibility to the other. Though this liberal paternalism was historically progressive for women (and workers) in 500 B.C., it is rather outdated today. In the 21st century we can foresee a society of individuals free of the restrictions taken for granted before, with responsibilities to themselves, their community and all living beings, but not to superiors or inferiors. We must do to the structure of social hierarchy what the "perfect wisdom" schools did to the orthodox dualism of samsara and nirvana, purify, see their deep interpenetration and equality and build our practice on that basis. For instance, if Western Buddhists preserve the institution of marriage it will be quite different from before.

In an interview before John Lennon was assassinated he discussed the years he had sacrificed his career to stay at home raising his son. He commented that being a mother was so limiting; so demanding a discipline that it was "like living in a Zen monastery"; he only found it possible because of his deep commitment to feminism (via Yoko Ono). Like this we can suggest that motherhood can be an excellent path for the practice of self-sacrifice, patience, and attentive love when embarked on by choice, with enough resources and some free time. In fact, it is a good discipline that mothers and fathers should share it equally.

Beyond simply democratizing family responsibilities, Buddhists today may find alternatives to celibacy and marriage, the two "appropriate" lifestyles of previous Buddhism. Marriage in Buddhism, after all, is not a sacrament, nor can monks (or nuns) act as match-makers for courting couples, or participate in marriage ceremonies. While previous societies tended toward the celibate-householder dualism as the most stable arrangement, birth control, industrialization, education and other changes in the means of reproduction have opened up the possibilities for spiritual paths. Today fully sexual people can approximate the monastic's independence from children and family, and even from commitment. Western Buddhist communities are experimenting with many sexual lifestyles and living arrangements; in some, women are freed for meditation and study by cooperatively shared cooking, house-keeping, child-care and income-generation.

The possibilities of appropriate lifestyle on a woman's path today in the West are only limited by her personality, karma or stage of life. For some women mothering may be right, for others monastic celibacy, for others single-sexuality, and yet others lesbian women-centered lives.

What is it to be a woman, and yet not be determined by gender? What does it mean for women to be liberated? Even if we completely eradicate the cultural construct of "womanhood" and create a society where men and women share everything equally, what of all the other oppressions and limiting conditions?
Buddhism and feminism in the West both arose as responses to the politics of the 1960's that didn't go far enough in effecting our moment-to-moment experience, in creating a "personal politics". The new social movements destroyed the sterile dogma of the primacy of the class contradiction, yet a new model has not yet arisen to integrate the increasingly diverse liberation movements. I suspect that Buddhism can contribute to unlocking an integrative "politics of consciousness" based on the interdependence of spiritual and social liberation. Any one movement does not necessarily encompass another (women won't necessarily be liberated by a workers' state, nor whales by gay rights), and thus they must remain autonomous. Yet they must also be linked into a stronger synergetic network based on the new emerging paradigm. Suffusing the diverse social movements with this new integrated paradigm, while yet respecting their autonomy seems the ideal task for the detached and open-systemed Buddhist: the Zen of Coalition-Building.

As in every movement against oppression, there is a danger of encouraging greed for the oppressor's possessions or qualities, and objectifying the hated enemy. Perhaps the major contribution that Buddhism can make to feminism is a practice for working with "the rage stage", the period of radical and painful awakening to how thoroughly warped the accepted status quo is. Rather than indulging in anger, living in a claustrophobic fantasy-world of upright Sisters and civil men, dharma-practice can help radical women develop a detached-yet-thorough clarity, an assumed equality that allows a great spaciousness and skillfulness in dealing with patriarchy.

Sitting meditation could be powerfully used by feminists not only to let go of anger and other emotional tangles, but to tap into that fundamental experience of enlightened mind which is the only thing beyond socialized experience. Both Buddhism and feminism begin with experience beyond preconception, name and form, searching for the unconditioned "true self" through personal examination in a supportive pattern group. By looking very closely at our minds we see through the habitual patterns that make up the unsatisfying fiction we call "I".

In this sense, Buddhism is more developed than feminism. Yet within the feminist communities there are parallels to monastic awareness disciplines. In the States, being "PC" or "politically correct" involves a whole code of behavior for body, speech and mind. Rather than robes, various uniforms are worn which create a more simple, less time-consuming "masculine" appearance. Rather than a shaved head, short hair (with or without makeup). Like the strictly moral, the feminist is strict and mindful in her sexual relationships, with men or women, but guarding against sex-stereotyped behavior rather than carnality. Lesbians, as women who have made a radical break with the whole game of Mara/Patriarchy, are given the special status and mystic aura that surrounds renunciates, celibates and androgynies in every culture, and some lesbians also share the puritanical moroseness and misogyny that plagues renunciates.

Rather than a code of pleasant speech, the feminist's spiritual development can be seen in whether she automatically uses neutral pronouns, and says "chair-person" instead of "chairman". (Small behaviors can indicate important things to the trained eye; just as the Zen Master can size a student up without speaking a word, a sensitized feminist can usually tell another from speech and behavior.) Instead of a clear awareness of the suffering of impermanence, the feminist's first noble truth is an inescapable awareness of pervasive pain and patriarchy. Her compassion meditation begins with a reflection on her natural woman's nurture, spreading out to all her suffering sisters in the world, and (among the
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most advanced) to men also, for weren't they all the sons of mothers, and isn’t the goal an equal and united humanity.

Even more marked parallels to Buddhism can be found in the writings of feminist theologians, such as Mary Daly. Feminist discussions of the entrapping influence of linear rational thought could have come from the lineage of the Zen patriarchs, though this trait is attributed to "sado-masculinity" rather than simply the conceptualizing mind. (Raising another Buddhist-feminist question: do women have less linear conceptualizing minds, and if so, how should their meditations and spiritual practices be different from men?)

The feminist theologians' advocacy of spiritual death to the old, deluded self, and re-birth into a new, wise empowered self can be found in all spiritual traditions.

Some feminists are interested in reviving the feminine images in the traditional religions, feminizing or androgynizing God and rediscovering female role-models. Others dismiss all traditional religions as patriarchal, and are turning to witchcraft and Mother Goddess worship for a feminist spirituality. As shown above, Buddhism has a buried tradition of enlightened women role-models, and a rich pantheon of androgynous and feminine enlightened beings ("goddesses"). Especially in the Tibetan tradition, sophisticated visualization meditations involving these female images are used to awaken different latent aspects of our personality, working with powerful emotions to create enlightened states of mind. Feminist witchcraft and Buddhism both approach mythology and deity symbolism in a psychological and creative way, but in Buddhism (and originally in Hinduism) all the diverse deity images are not only manifestations of the primal male and female principles present in each of us, but beyond that, are manifestations of the Void, enlightened mind. All the qualities typified by the great Bodhisattvas are inherent in humans and are not separated from the One Mind. (Zen Patriarch Huayn Po)

The practice of a feminist Buddhism, perceiving the androgynous Void beyond sexual identity, can lead ultimately to the full, honest expression of the whatever men's and women's true natures finally turn out to be. It seems clear that the full integration of these two traditions, having arisen in different contexts and focusing on different parts of human experience, would not only contribute to women's practice of Buddhism, but to the fuller liberation of humanity.

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