

What Did the Buddha Think of Women?

Bhikkhu Cintita, 2012

Buddhism is widely known throughout the world as a religion of peace and kindness. It is less known as a religion of gender-equality. And, in fact, many Buddhists throughout the world are taught that women, because of their characteristic karmic dispositions, are incapable of awakening or of becoming a buddha, at least without first being reborn as men. Furthermore, relatively few women



have gone down in Asian history as teachers, yogis and thinkers; the great Indian scholar-monks were all exactly that, monks, and the ordination and transmission lineages tracked in East Asia list one man after another. The Theravada tradition managed completely to have misplaced its order of fully ordained nuns, and the Tibetan never had one, leaving a decidedly lopsided Sangha throughout much of Asia, and very limited opportunities for women to receive the support and respect that nourishes the highest aspirations of the Buddhist Sangha.

Moreover the Buddha himself has been commonly implicated in this bias. For instance, although he created a twofold Sangha of monks and nuns, he is said to have done so reluctantly, and he seems to have created a degree of dependency of the latter order on the former. He is also reported to have said,

... in whatever religion women are ordained, that religion will not last long. As families that have more women than men are easily destroyed by robbers, as a plentiful rice-field once infested by rice worms will not long remain, as a sugarcane field invaded by red rust will not long remain, even so the True Dharma will not last long.

Nonetheless, that the Buddha would harbor the slightest bit of ill-will toward women, flies in the face of the complete awakening of the Buddha, which entails that he was utterly pure of thought, kind and well disposed to a fault, completely without defilement or bias of any sort, toward any living being. It is true that the authenticity of many of the passages that have been attributed in this regard to the Buddha in the early scriptures, has in fact been questioned in modern scholarship. Nonetheless, even if we accept these scholarly arguments we can indulge no more than a provisional sigh of relief, for we must then attribute these passages instead to very early and very influential disciples of the Buddha, to monks with the respect and authority needed to shape the already widely disseminated early scriptures, probably to arahants. What gives?

Gender Equality in Early Buddhism

An image that shines through in the discourses repeatedly is, in fact, that of a Buddha who had nothing but the deepest kindness and respect for women, in stark contrast to the standards of the society in which he lived. I think the evidence here overwhelms any allegations of unkindness toward women on the part of the Buddha. Let's consider the evidence:

Buddha's Kindness. The Buddha would have been totally incapable of misogyny. Misogyny is a form of ill-will and to harbor ill-will would belie his awakening and everything he taught about the three fires of greed, hatred and delusion and the training in kindness (metta) and compassion. No species is exempt as an object of kindness, as non-harming to all sentient beings is advocated. Consistently the Buddha's message and training are of boundless kindness and compassion toward all beings, even those who have done great harm, such as King Ajatasattu, who had killed his own father to seize his throne, yet was taken on by the Buddha as a disciple. Given his boundless kindness toward *all* beings, certainly he had boundless kindness toward women.

But how does this kindness with regard to women manifest in practice? Do we find the Buddha actively engaged in improving the social status of, and creating opportunities for, women in the early scriptures? Fortunately, we find in the case of the Buddha a detailed view, almost unique among historical figures, of social engagement. Although the Buddha was not a rabble-rouser in the way Jesus seems to have been, that is, he was not actively engaged in upturning Indian society, the Buddha was the engineer of the monastic Sangha, in which he created forms and norms afresh, to fashion what, for him, would have been the ideal society. For instance, in the Sangha he eliminated the caste system altogether and established a consensus democracy with little hierarchy and no centralized authority (outside of himself in the beginning). It is within the monastic Sangha that we indeed discover his active promotion of the interests of women and the leveling of the disadvantages women would

otherwise expect in ancient Indian society, as we will soon see.

Women outside the Sangha. The Buddha in many places offered advice to householders about the roles and status of the two genders which must have stood out in his culture for the reciprocity and mutual respect he recommended. For instance, he described the respective duties of husbands and wives as follows:

In five ways should a wife as Western quarter, be ministered to by her husband: by respect, by courtesy, by faithfulness, by handing over authority to her, by providing her with ornaments. In these five ways does the wife minister to by her husband as the Western quarter, love him: her duties are well-performed by hospitality to kin of both, by faithfulness, by watching over the goods he brings and by skill and industry in discharging all business. – DN 31

The Buddha, on learning of King Pasenadi of Kosala was displeased that his queen had just given birth to a daughter rather than the desired son, reassured the king as follows:

A woman, O lord of the people, may turn out better than a man. She may be wise and virtuous, a devoted wife, revering her mother-in-law. – SN 3.16

Reliability of women. The Buddha addressed what was apparently a widespread distrust of women in his day. The monks' monastic code makes explicit the Buddha's trust of women to offer testimony as witnesses to possible sexual transgressions by monks. Accordingly we find the two *indefinite (aniyata) rules*, in the Monks' *Patimokkha* (the master list of rules that monks follow) that explicitly *require* consideration by any *sangha* of the testimony of trusted women. For modern culture it is a bit of a shock that such rules would be necessary, but their inclusion is itself evidence that they must have contradicted the norms the prevailing folk culture, which would be to dismiss the testimony of women.

Women's potential for awakening. Getting to the core issue of Buddhist practice the Buddha stated unequivocally that women have the same potential for awakening that men have.

Women, Ananda, having gone forth are able to realize the fruit of stream-attainment or the fruit of once-returning or the fruit of non-returning or arahantship.

In an early text we have an even clearer statement of the complete irrelevance of gender to attainment. This tells of the nun Sona's encounter with Mara, who characteristically tries to dissuade her from the path, in this case claiming a woman cannot attain awakening. Sona, knowing better, replies,

What does womanhood matter at all, when the mind is concentrated well, when knowledge flows on steadily as one sees correctly into

Dhamma. One to whom it might occur, 'I am a woman' or 'I am a man' or 'I'm anything at all' is fit for Mara to address. – SN 5.2

The Buddha elsewhere attests to the great number of awakened women disciples.

Inclusion of women into the monastic Sangha. The Buddha created a parallel nuns' order about five years after the start of the monks' order. Although there was a rare precedent in some of the Jain schools, the founding of the far more deliberately constituted Buddhist nuns' order must have represented a radical breakthrough in opportunities for women's religious practice. And there is a clear statement in his (albeit mythical) encounter with Mara at the end of his life that the founding of the nuns' order was his intention from the time of his awakening.

Not only did nuns' ordination in Buddhism give women the opportunity to opt out of an often oppressive patriarchal system, but to partake in almost equal partnership with their monk brothers in the Third Gem, which, in the time of the Buddha, must have been an enormous honor. It meant that the Sangha in which all Buddhists, both men and women, take refuge would now consist of both monks and nuns. This must have also been a courageous decision given the standards of Indian society and the practical concerns it brought for the protection of the nuns in a difficult and hazardous way of life.

Protecting the safety of the nuns. The Buddha took care, like a wise parent, to protect nuns from the dangers of the itinerant ascetic lifestyle. Physical dangers came from highway men and cads. More gentle dangers to the nun's practice came from the poor fellow who would see some lovely creature, modest of attire, bald of head and dignified of deportment, enter the village day after day for alms, fall in love and then, through slather of charm and sumptuous gift of meal, undertake to overcome a few of her more irksome vows. The Buddha thereby built protective measures into the monastic rules, the *Patimokkha*, in order to secure for the nuns, in spite of their vulnerability, the same opportunities on the path of practice enjoyed by the monks.

Examples of protective rules are:

Should any bhikkhunī [i.e., nun] go among villages alone or go to the other shore of a river alone or stay away for a night alone or fall behind her companion(s) alone, ... it entails initial and subsequent meetings of the Community.

Should any bhikkhunī stand or converse with a man, one on one, in the darkness of the night without a light, it is to be confessed.

Should any bhikkhunī, lusting, having received staple or non-staple food from the hand of a lusting man, consume or chew it, ... it entails initial and subsequent meetings of the Community.

Likewise special rules for the monks, who, though limited by vow, are

themselves often subject to the same flames of lust, regulate their interactions with nuns. For instance,

Should any bhikkhu sit in private, alone with a bhikkhuni, it is to be confessed.

Should any bhikkhu, by arrangement, get in the same boat with a bhikkhuni going upstream or downstream — except to cross over to the other bank — it is to be confessed.

Protecting nuns from conventional gender roles. The Buddha also took care to protect the nuns and monks from falling into accustomed roles to the disadvantage of the nuns. We find rules in both *Patimokkas* to inhibit this. The Nuns' *Patimokkha*, as one instance, contains the rule:

Should any bhikkhuni, when a bhikkhu is eating, attend on him with water or a fan, it is to be confessed.

Most often it is the monk who is expected to enforce the rule, for instance:

Should any bhikkhu have a used robe washed, dyed, or beaten by a bhikkhuni unrelated to him, it is to be forfeited and confessed.

Should any bhikkhu chew or consume staple or non-staple food, having received it with his own hand from the hand of an unrelated bhikkhuni in an inhabited area, he is to acknowledge it: "Friends, I have committed a blameworthy, unsuitable act that ought to be acknowledged. I acknowledge it."

It is instructive to observe however that nuns in modern Theravada countries, who are not fully ordained as "bhikkhunis," and therefore fall outside of these original rules, quite commonly fall precisely into the willing role of serving monks, exactly as the Buddha clearly feared.

Accomplishments of women. In the Suttas the Buddha explicitly extolled the accomplishments of the bhikkunis. At least one nun, Dhammadinna, is found in the Suttas teaching in the Buddha's stead, to which the Buddha comments that he would have explained the topic at hand in exactly the same way she did. The Therigati, a section of the Khuddaka Nikaya in the Suttas, is a collection of poems composed by early awakened nuns, said to be the only canonical text in all the world's religions dealing first-hand with women's spiritual experiences.

In fact the Buddha's and his early disciples' promotion of women's practice seems to have been wildly successful in early Buddhism. The record of King Ashoka, the 3rd Century BCE emperor of much of India and great exponent and supporter of Buddhism, gives us a unique snapshot of the state of Buddhism in India two centuries after the Buddha, through his edicts issued as stone inscriptions. In these earliest written texts related to Buddhism, many contemporary monks and nuns are named for their accomplishments as teachers, scholars and workers of good, including Ashoka's own daughter, Ven.

Sanghamitta, who founded the Nuns' Sangha in Sri Lanka. What is striking is how prominent the nuns are in these inscriptions, apparently appearing almost as often as monks. This is evidence for King Ashoka's high regard for the Nuns' Sangha, for the achievements of the early nuns, and for the Buddha's compassionate and wise cultivation of the conditions conducive to the nuns' practice, in an otherwise generally unsupportive cultural environment.

Shining Forth. The Buddha that shines forth from the Suttas is one of complete purity of purpose, always looking for the benefit of all — really all — and incapable of even the slightest hint of bias or unkind thought. This is a Buddha that must make the most feminist among us smile.

I should note that I use the phrase “shines through” is a special sense. The ancient Suttas and the *Vinaya* are not entirely reliable texts, having passed through both oral and orthographic transmissions and suffering from faults of memory, embellishments, insertions, deletions and other edits along the way. Modern techniques of textual analysis are useful in sorting the authentic from the inauthentic but no particular passage can ever be proven to be original. In fact, the inconsistencies in the early scriptures are so great that by cherry picking relevant passages one could attribute almost any position to the Buddha one wants. I have even read arguments that his teachings are indistinguishable from those of the Veda-toting Brahmins. This is where “shining through” is important.

The adept reader of the early scriptures will with time recognize an overriding and repeated consistency behind the passages. It is as if he is piecing together a jigsaw puzzle in which some pieces are missing and in which other pieces have been mixed in from other jigsaw puzzles, but at some point clearly recognizes, “Oh, I get it: This is the Golden Gate Bridge!” This is what it means for a particular interpretation to shine forth. Although it cannot be proven decisively, and still admits of debate, the convergence of evidence from many sources becomes so overwhelming to those who see what shines through that doubt disappears. The accomplished Buddhist practitioner is even more ready to witness this shining through than the scholar because his own experience might provide decisively confirming evidence from direct experience. He is like the jigsaw enthusiast who has actually been on the Golden Gate Bridge, who is already familiar with its features and the contours of the land- and sea-scape around it. Once the Golden Gate Bridge has shined through it becomes the basis of interpreting the remaining unplaced pieces, but also rejecting some altogether as intruders from other people's jigsaw puzzles.

I submit that the Buddha that shines through the early scriptures is clearly one with complete kindness and compassion toward women, one who was very actively engaged with providing for women equal opportunities for practice and who established a nuns order for that purpose, one who took great pains to care for the security and well-being of the members of that order and to protect their practice from the incursion of conventional social roles. No other interpretation makes sense.

But how about the pieces that do not yet fit?

Is there Evidence of Gender Inequality in Early Buddhism?

The commonly cited and worrying instances of gender inequality in Buddhist scriptures include isolated passages that openly disparage women, special rules allegedly imposed by the Buddha that entail an unequal relationship between the nuns' and monks' orders, the alleged reluctance of the Buddha to create a Nuns' Sangha, the greater number of rules nuns must follow in contrast to monks, and the poor historical track record of almost every sect of Buddhism with regard to gender equality. As we consider these remaining pieces the ocean fog might seem to roll in to obscure the Golden Gate Bridge seemed a moment ago to shine through clearly. Let's look at these points one by one.

Isolated statements attributed to the Buddha in the discourses that seem to disparage women. Here is an example from the early discourses:

“Venerable sir, what is the reason that women neither come to the limelight, nor doing an industry see its benefits?”

“Ananda, women are hateful, jealous, miserly and lack wisdom, as a result they neither come to the limelight, nor do an industry and see its benefits.” – AN 4.80

Whoa! Where did that come from? Does that sound at all like the kind nurturing Buddha we met above, for whom women clearly *do* come to the limelight?

In fact this exchange is tacked awkwardly onto the very end of a sutta which begins with the theme of *“non-sensual thoughts, non-hateful thoughts, non-hurting thoughts and right view”* and furthermore seems to bear, suspiciously, no relationship whatever to anything else in the sutta. Yet there it is. As mentioned, the ancient Suttas have a complex history with much editing and insertion often by lesser minds long forgotten. There can be little doubt that this is a piece that belongs to someone else's grim jigsaw puzzle. The Suttas must always be read for the system that shines forth, the consistent message. We have to conclude that such remarks, not common in the Suttas, was a later insertion by a benighted monk, perhaps some once jilted lover, and not the words of the Buddha.

Although the origin of this kind of discrepancy often seems clear, I should caution against dismissing too readily any statement in the scriptures that seems initially inconsistent to the reader. For instance, many passages, discourage monks from contact with women, for instance, not to look at them, not to talk with them, not to touch them, not to enter into a secluded space with them. For those unfamiliar with the nature or functions of Buddhist monastic

practice, this sometimes initially suggests misogyny clear and simple. But in fact ascetic traditions such as Jainism and monastic Buddhism give careful attention to controlling the passions, in particular sexual passion (see my “Sex, Sin and Buddhism” on why this is part of Buddhist practice). This has nothing to do with gender bias at all; the *woman* renunciate is equally expected to avoid contact with *men* in exactly equivalent ways. One should always be willing to look a little deeper.

Another example where the Buddha might seem to disparage women, is the Buddha’s often referenced statement in MN115 that a woman cannot become a buddha. On the surface this seems to place a limit on a woman’s spiritual attainment, but the context reveals that this does not contradict womens’ equal potential for awakening at all. In Early Buddhism a buddha is not only an awakened one, but also someone who has the particular and very rare historical role of restoring Buddhism in the world, so that others can achieve awakening. That is,

Buddha = Awakened One + Original Teacher.
Arahant = Awakened One.

Only once in many eons, a buddha arises in the world, discovers the truth that no one can teach him, and then propagates that truth so that others can share that buddha’s awakening, thereby getting the ball rolling again. There is no question in the early scriptures that women can be arahants, that is, can share the Buddha’s awakening. The claim must therefore be that only a man can be an Original Teacher. The context provided in the relevant passage confirms this, in which parallel statements are made about universal monarchs, and dieties who bear influence in the world.

*It is impossible that a woman should be the Perfectly Awakened One.
It is possible that a man should be the perfect rightfully Enlightened One. It is impossible that a woman should be the Universal Monarch ... the King of Gods ... Mara ... Brahma ...*

Now, being an Original Teacher requires a number of personal qualities beyond arahantship, including charisma, physical stature, skill in exposition, a nurturing attitude, aptitude for strategic planning, a low, booming and articulate voice, etc. Which qualities are relevant is largely determined by society in which he lives, so that a patriarchal society, for instance, one with little regard for feminine qualities, would not produce feminine original teachers, universal monarchs or maras, any more than a society which values thick heads of hair will produce bald televangelists. In short, the Buddha’s statement, I submit, is more about the society in which the Buddha lived, than of women.

The *Garudhammas* (Heavy Rules). The most cited evidence of gender bias in the early texts where reportedly imposed by the Buddha as he established the Nuns’ Sangha. They are recorded in the Vinaya as follows:

1. A nun who has been ordained even for a hundred years must greet

respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but that day.

2. A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there are no monks
3. Every half month a nun should desire two things from the Order of Monks: the asking as to the date of the uposatha day, and the coming for the exhortation.
4. After the rains a nun must 'invite' before both Orders in respect of three matters, namely what was seen, what was heard, what was suspected.
5. A nun, offending against an important rule, must undergo manatta discipline for half a month before both Orders.
6. When, as a probationer, she has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek higher ordination from both Orders.
7. A Monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun.
8. From today, admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden, admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden. – I.B. Horner, Book of the Discipline, V.354-55

Let me provide some brief explanations that will dispel some, but indeed not all, of the shock the Westerner generally experiences on first encountering these rules. They actually have less bite than bark, which, as we will see, is probably their primary purpose.

First, putting aside gender roles, although the form of respectful greeting (rule #1) is quite foreign to Western culture it would have been familiar in the Buddha's world, and still in most of Asia today it is a part of common etiquette, found for instance in the way children greet parents, students greet teachers, junior monks greet senior monks and lay men and women greet both monks and nuns. Yet the specific rule cited here clearly imposes a gender-based distinction within the Sangha, even while there are, for instance, no similar caste-based distinctions at all.

Second, there is little here in the way of a power structure. While the nuns may ordain other nuns, a group of monks must concur (rule #6). And should a nun be sanctioned for a serious disciplinary infraction a group of monks must agree with the terms of the sanctions (rule #5), which are largely specified in the Vinaya in any case. That's it, and for most nuns this is a rare or even once-in-a-lifetime matter. Otherwise monks have no authority at all to tell nuns what to do. Should a nuns' community find the local community of monks uncooperative or obstructive in some way, they are free to align themselves with a more agreeable community of monks. To the extent the *Garudhamma* are present in the Nuns' *Patimokkha*, their violation is atoned by simple acknowledgement. Although the power allocated to the monks is of very limited scope, the rules again clearly do express a gender bias, for monks do not seek approval from nuns for their ordinations, nor for the terms of sanctions against their misbehavior.

Third, these rules set up a partial dependency of the nuns' community on the monks' community with regard to teaching and training, particularly during the time of the three-month yearly Rains Retreat (rule #2 and rule #3). Whereas this can be viewed primarily as an obligation of the monks to the nuns, and any potential for abuse of this relationship is carefully circumscribed in the ways already described, there is nonetheless an asymmetrical relationship that attributes greater competence in practice and understanding to the monks.

Fourth, critical feedback flows in only one direction, from monks to nuns. The "invitation" is an occasion at the end of the Rains Retreat in which each monk or nun invites the others to provide constructive criticism of one's actions. Criticism of monks by nuns is excluded on this occasion (rule #4) and on any other occasion (rule #8). The puzzling inclusion of rule #7 is not as gender-biased as it seems, since monks are already prohibited from abusing or reviling *anybody* in any way.

As in the case of isolated statements, there is strong evidence that these rules, or at least some of them, are not the words of the Buddha. Not the least of this evidence is that the origin story makes little chronological sense given other events reported in the Suttas. Ananda's intervention on behalf of the would-be nuns, for instance, seems to have happened when he would have still been a young boy. Nonetheless if the *Garudhammas* did not originate with the Buddha they must have originated with very influential early disciples of the Buddha, since they have a prominent place in every known version of the *Vinaya*. I think we do well to uncover the foggy motivation behind the *Garudhammas* before we attribute a discrepant understanding to these otherwise worthy disciples.

The Buddha's resistance to establishing the order of nuns. The *Vinaya* also tells us that Buddha at first resisted his aunt Mahapajapati's lobbying effort to form a Nuns' Sangha, until Ananda interceded on her behalf and elicited the famous statement from the Buddha that women's capabilities for attainment and awakening were equivalent to men's. It should be noted that the Buddha never refused to found a Nuns' Sangha, he simply puts Mahapajapati off with the words, "*Don't ask that.*" But after he agrees to begin ordaining nuns, and imposes the *Garudhammas*, he expresses some concern about his decision.

If, Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, the Dhamma would have lasted long. The true Dhamma would have endured for a thousand years. But because women have gone forth . . . in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, now the Dhamma will not last long. The true Dhamma will endure only for five hundred years. Even, Ānanda, as those households which have many women and few men easily fall prey to robbers, to pot-thieves . . . in whatever dhamma and discipline women obtain the going forth . . . that dhamma will not last long. Even as

when the disease known as white bones (mildew) attacks a whole field of rice, that field of rice does not last long, even so, in whatever dhamma and discipline women obtain the going forth . . . that dhamma will not last long.

Even as when the disease known as red rust attacks a whole field of sugar-cane, that field of sugar-cane will not last long, even so, in whatever dhamma and discipline women obtain the going forth . . . that dhamma will not last long. Even as a man, looking forward, may build a dyke to a great reservoir so that the water may not over-flow, even so, were the Eight Garudhammas for the nuns laid down by me, looking forward, not to be transgressed during their lives.”

Again, some scholarship has questioned the authenticity of this statement along with the entire origin story of the *Garudhammas*, but also again it came from somewhere, so let us consider what the concern is, that is expressed here. This envisions the slow deterioration of the Buddhist movement. Although the condition for this deterioration is identified as allowing women to ordain into the Sangha, how or why the deterioration proceeds is left obscure. This is what we should take pains to discover. It is also unclear to me whether or not the last line says that through the *Garudhammas* the problem has been fixed, that is, that the envisioned early demise of the Buddhist movement will thereby be averted.

Although the similes here make use of some strong negative imagery for the deterioration of the Buddhist movement, I think it is very rash indeed to see blatant misogyny in this, as if it were saying that *women* are like white bones or red rust. These are similes about the deterioration of the Buddhist movement, not directly about women. If I were to say, “women are a counterweight in American elections to the conservatism of men,” this would not be taken to mean that women are like counterweights, presumably stupid and bottom-heavy. In fact elsewhere the Buddha makes metaphoric use of negative imagery for things he actually holds in very high regard, for instance, comparing mindfulness to a piece of wet, sappy wood (that does not allow Mara to kindle a fire), or comparing the effort of a monk in removing fetters to the effect of heat, wind and moisture in causing the stays of a ship to rot when left ashore during the winter. In the *Dhammapada* Nirvana becomes a flattened metal pot. Additionally, the parallel remaining simile, that of the household with many women and few men, suggest that the “rot” comes not from within but from without; the presence of women represents a secondary condition of vulnerability rather than the most direct cause of the problem.

In short, what this passage clearly does say is that, all things considered, expanding the Sangha to include women has the potential to set off a gradual deterioration of the Dharma. Given that great cost, it is no wonder that the Buddha (or at least his early disciples) would be hesitant to take the risk to include women in the Sangha. His boldness in allowing the value he place in women’s practice to override this grave concern is to be commended. What is

still obscure is the basis of this concern, how and why the inclusion of women, in spite of the Buddha's best intentions, might initiate this process of deterioration, and how the *Garudhamma* might help to avert this. I will take up this can of worms momentarily.

The greater number of monastic rules imposed on nuns. The Theravada *Patimokkha*, the master list of rules, enumerates 227 rules for monks and 311 for nuns, and other *Vinaya* traditions reveal similar proportions. This is often cited as evidence for gender bias, but, in fact, the reasons for the extra rules are complex and diverse and do not admit to such a simple conclusion.

The primary reason for the rule count differential seems to be that the Nuns' *Patimokkha* was compiled at a later date than the Monks' *Patimokkha*. Each represents a kind of snapshot of a moving target, one earlier than the other. In fact, the body of rules prescribed by the Buddha seems to have grown over a long period of time, some of these rules specific to monks and some to nuns, but the bulk of them the same or equivalent. Each *Patimokkha*, because it is a kind of master list serving for memorization and group recitation, seems to have been closed to further additions at a certain time even as the rules imposed by the Buddha continued to grow, first the Monks' *Patimokkha* was closed then the newer nuns'. This gave us two snapshots, the second showing a bigger set than the first, so that, in fact, many rules prescribed by the Buddha for *both* monks and nuns elsewhere in the *Vinaya* are listed in the Nuns' *Patimokkha* but missing in the monks'.

The Nuns' *Patimokkha* additionally includes most of the *Garudhamma* rules and the Monks' *Patimokkha* does not. As noted in the section on Gender Equality, differing but complementary rules also protect the nuns from potential gender-associated vulnerabilities in their interactions with monks and laity. Also the origin stories of the rules reveal that a number of rules that apply only to nuns arose from complaints lodged by nuns against the misbehavior of other nuns.

Finally the nuns also have more rules specifically regulating sexual conduct. A body of rules for each order not only enforces celibacy but also helps the monastic to avoid compromising situations and to maintain propriety in this critical aspect of monastic practice. However, the nuns' circumstances are stricter in this regard probably because the nuns are easily subject to male aggression and are able to become pregnant. Consider how well-intentioned modern parents generally subject their teenage daughters to more oversight than they do their sons. The Buddha seems to have shared this attitude.

Gender bias in later Buddhism. Virtually every sect of Buddhism seems to have developed a degree of gender bias beyond the best intentions of the Buddha, for instance the loss of the nuns' Sangha in many traditions. Since my concern here is the role of women in early Buddhism I do not need to say much about this. Presumably this has arisen largely through the attitudes and

continual pressure of the embedding patriarchal cultures found throughout much of Asia, as undoubtedly other institutions — businesses, government, military and so on — have. The Buddha described his teaching as “against the stream,” which means that there is a constant tension between the *Dharma-Vinaya* on the one hand and popular opinion and habit on the other. When the latter overwhelms the former the Sangha has failed to preserve the purity of the teachings. How could this happen?

Woefully, it seems that as the early context in which the scriptures arose began to recede into ancient history, particularly quickly in lands outside of India itself, many passages were reinterpreted to endorse various forms of gender discrimination. We have seen, for instance, that the statement that a woman cannot become a buddha was probably rather benign in its original context, carrying no substantial relevance for the spiritual expectations of women practitioners. However the meaning of “buddha” shifted in the later Mahayana tradition to become, rather than a rare historical role, an attainment higher than arhantship to which all Buddhists were encouraged to aspire. When the word “buddha” was reinterpreted in this way then the statement that a woman cannot become a buddha indeed limited a woman’s spiritual expectations. This may be a basis of the common Mahayana view that women have an unequal capacity for progress on the path, or that, in order to attain awakening, they must first be reborn as men. Likewise the *Garudhamma* rules, whose motivation in Buddha’s India we have yet to fully examine, could then easily be read as confirmation of women’s inferior capacities, once these motivations are obscured, particularly because they are formulated in such symbolic (bark) rather than practical (bite) terms.

The fog clears. In summary the fog that threatened to obscure the image of the Buddha and early Buddhism, the image that had clearly shined through by the end of the section on Gender Equality, has almost lifted. Taken on a case-by-case basis each piece that seemed to challenge our puzzlers’ skill has snapped into place or been attributed as an intrusion from someone else’s puzzle ... except around two remaining issues: the purpose of the *Garudhamma* rules and the Buddha’s reported hesitation in establishing the Nuns’ Sangha. These require closer examination.

Fitting the Most Challenging Pieces into the Puzzle

What does a jigsaw practitioner do with incongruous pieces? The Golden Gate Bridge clearly shines through, but remaining pieces might depict a lion and a skateboard! It is important not to give up. In the end it might be discovered that the photographer has chosen an angle in which a boy appears in the foreground, wearing baseball cap and printed t-shirt sailing through a parking lot on his skateboard as the Golden Gate Bridge looms in the background.

Recall that the *Garudhammas* are the eight rules that symbolically put the nuns under the thumb of the monks, and that they were intended to remedy a threat

to the lifespan of the Dharma which arose in the establishing the nuns' Sangha. I will argue here that the threat is that the nuns' sangha would have fit poorly into the social norms of patriarchal India, that it would have been difficult for the nuns to receive the lay support already enjoyed by the monks and that the reputation of the Sangha as a whole would have declined. The remedy was to present the *appearance* of conformity to social norms. The real intention was to promote, not denigrate, the interests of women, all the while preserving the Dharma.

The challenge of establishing a Nuns' Sangha. To understand the argument it is necessary to understand the status of women in Buddha's India. India seems have been on a long trajectory of increasing patriarchy before and after the time of the Buddha. In early Vedic India women apparently enjoyed a status considered much more equal to men, and the egregiously patriarchal practice of sati, the self-immolation of widows on their deceased husbands' funeral pyres, would still not be known in India until several hundred years after the Buddha. By the Buddha's time India had become a highly stratified society, in which each person is born into a social caste with no prospect of upward mobility. Spiritual practice and education were widely considered masculine pursuits. Furthermore women were generally subject in all stages of life to masculine authority. The last point is described, for instance, in the following ancient passage,

By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. – Laws of Manu, V, 147-8.

Women who were nonetheless independent of masculine authority, by choice or happenstance, were commonly regarded as “loose women,” or as prostitutes. But apparently even prostitutes could regain much of their reputation and security by becoming official wards of the male-administered villages where they offered their services.

Now the monastic Sangha stands in most ways apart from the broader community, engineered as a kind of ideal society and built on values and practices that will often seem obscure to the general society. At the same time it is imperative that the Sangha live in harmony with the general society, for it is fragilely dependent on lay donors for all of its material needs and is intent on exerting a civilizing influence on that society. The Buddha was much engaged in maintaining that harmony alongside the integrity of his teachings. In fact, the origin stories of the monastic rules reveal that most originated in feedback from the lay community about what they regarded an inappropriate behaviors of monks and nuns. For instance, the three-month Rains Retreat (vassa) of the Buddhist monastic was initially instituted in response to lay pressure, not in response to monastic needs (yet came to serve monastic practice). As long as they did not violate essential principles, the Buddha was willing to conform to

the “Design-a-Monk[®]” expectations of the general society, to clothe the Sangha in respectability.

The establishment of a sustainable *Monks*’ Sangha presented no great challenges. Wandering mendicants were already very common in India in masculine form, and their aspirations were respected in the general society, at least enough for people to offer alms to help sustain them. The establishment of the Nuns’ Sangha would prove far more challenging. There was apparently little in the way of a tradition of women among the ranks of wandering mendicants, except for recently the Jain experiment with nuns’ ordination, which seemed not to be working out so well due to a “decay of morals” (as Dhammavihari puts it) stemming from mingling monks and nuns to an extent that they were often finding each other far more interesting than sitting under a tree following the breath.

The main concern for the Buddha would have been that a public that was already quite supportive of monks would be less supportive, or even hostile, with regard to nuns, and would consequently make it more difficult for the nuns to receive adequate alms to support their practice, for the nuns would be widely regarded as incapable of spiritual progress, or worse, be denigrated as ... “loose women,” and thereby worthy of support only for the wrong reasons, and at the cost of their safety. Unlike the uniform absorption of all castes into the Sangha, which no doubt must have also occasionally raised lay eyebrows, the presence of two genders in the Sangha could not be hidden from daily awareness under uniform attire and bald heads.

Initially the nuns would also need a lot of coaching; relatively few would have previous experience in the intense spiritual practice of the mendicant or yogi. Also the nuns would generally be at a disadvantage in general education, education having been largely neglected for women of all social classes. Although the monks’ order itself was but a few years old, many of its members would have had decades of ascetic practice behind them before joining the order, and many also apparently came from the educated upper ranks of society and have had, therefore, a leg up in absorbing the Buddha’s teaching.

The resolution. Wanting to offer to women the greatest gift he could give, the opportunity to learn, practice and live the Dharma as members of the monastic Sangha, it is nonetheless no wonder under the circumstances that the Buddha would have hesitated if pressured prematurely to establish a nuns’ order, nor that he might have feared dire consequences for the longevity of the Buddhist movement. To resolve the issue he would have to:

1. Provide for the nuns’ education and training to bring them up to the level of the monks as well as provide for their safety, yet
2. Keep the two orders physically independent to discourage romantic interludes and flirtatious behaviors, and, to the extent that was not possible, discourage both genders from falling into well-worn domestic roles,

3. Avoid the public impression that nuns were “loose women” by publicly putting them under masculine authority, yet
4. Not create still another patriarchal power structure that would one day be abused by wayward monks.

The *Garudhammas* support #1 and #3. They establish a requisite structure of authority, but more importantly serve a public relations function in a rather clever and effective way. They consolidate the relevant points in a single dramatic passage, unmistakably intended for public, not monastic, consumption. They have far more bark than bite. In fact, additional rules dispersed throughout the *Vinaya* and presented in the typical dry language of that text, that only monastics would know of, mitigate the impact of the *Garudhammas* and sustain points #2 and #4.

We have already seen the kindness of the Buddha and the early monks’ Sangha in ensuring the safety of the nuns and to keep the monks and nuns from falling into traditional gender roles. It was likewise important that the structures of authority set up in the *Garudhammas* carry little real power and in particular not become abusive. The primary relationship between the Sanghas in this regard was the periodic “admonishment,” basically a pep or Dharma talk. Accordingly, hidden in the *Vinaya* is the careful regulation of this relationship. For instance, an admonishing monk cannot show up among the nuns in the late hours, and must have certain qualifications, described as follows:

A monk who is entrusted to preside over their welfare should conform to perfect standards of moral virtue. He should also possess a thorough knowledge of the teaching of the Master and know well the complete code of the Patimokkha covering both the Bhikkhus and the Bhikkhunis. He should be of pleasant disposition, mature in years and acceptable to the Bhikkhunis, and above all, should in no way have been involved in a serious offense with a Bhikkhuni. – Vin.IV.51

Not just any monk could show up to hold forth in front of the nuns.

Also hidden in the *Vinaya* is the mildness of the consequences to a nun should she fail to observe a *Garudhamma*: She need only acknowledge her offense to another nun. That’s it. Although one can imagine means by which an ill disposed monks’ Sangha might still use the *Garudhammas* to oppress a nuns’ sangha, most of which probably have been tried, in practical terms the system that was set up is primarily one of service of the monks to the nuns, in providing protection and training.

It should be pointed out also that the application of *Garudhamma* #1, whereby nuns must show respect to monks, was adjusted in the *Vinaya* after an incident involving some flirtatious monks who where neither behaving like monks nor respecting these nuns as nuns. After these nuns refused to show respect to the monks, and the matter was taken up by the Buddha, the Buddha took the nuns’ side.

This strategy of conforming symbolically and publicly to certain norms in order to appease the general society was probably repeated in China centuries later but in a different context. Chinese society placed enormous value in family and this is enforced in the Confucian code. The monastic habit of leaving family behind for the contemplative life was at odds with this value and might well have threatened the existence of the Sangha. It has been suggested that this is the origin of the great emphasis in Chinese Buddhists place on lineage, that is, the ancestry and transmission based on successive generations of preceptors and ordainees, teachers and students, within the Sangha. In this scheme, to enter the Sangha one leaves one family, but only to enter another, or so it would appear. It was all symbolic (bark) but served served a more amiable public perception of the Sangha.

Whose resolution was this? As mentioned various inconsistencies call into question the account in which the Buddha proclaimed the *Garudhammas*. The account of their function offered here concerning the well-intentioned purpose of the *Garudhammas* provides some possible insight into the story of their development.

It seems to me that the bark of the *Garudhammas* may not have been necessary while the Buddha was still alive. The glow of his own towering personal stature would have extended to the whole Sangha and the nuns would have been publicly regarded as daughters of the Buddha, and therefore under masculine authority already, just as the monks would have been regarded as sons of the Buddha. Still, certain of these rules might have been introduced piecemeal by the Buddha as useful. Certainly he would have set up some kinds of arrangements for the very early nuns to receive instruction from the more experienced and educated monks and for nuns initially to receive ordination directly from monks. Possibly the *Garudadhamma* #1, requiring nuns to bow to monks, was introduced early on, since this rule was apparently directly borrowed from the Jains, has a story of subsequent modification (see above) and it is justified in the scriptures separately from the origin story of the *Garudhamma*, as necessary because other sects follow this rule (already indicative of the social pressure at work here).

However at the Buddha's death his personal authority would have disappeared and at that point all the *Garudhammas*, but more importantly a dramatic proclamation of their contents for popular consumption, would have become necessary. I suggest that the origin story we have for the *Garudhammas* and the establishment of the Nuns' Sangha was composed only after the Buddha's death, attributed back to the Buddha to put the "garu- "(weight) into "Garudhamma," and badly bungled. It all fits.

Conclusions in a Modern World

The Buddha clothed the Sangha in respectability according to the standards of the society in which he lived. This strategy gained room for the Sangha to

become the ideal society within, with minimal interference from the faulty society without. In the ideal society the same opportunity for practice was secured for women as for men. In that cultural context that was a great accomplishment. Unfortunately in a modern society these clothes have a poor fit and they sometimes offend.

The monastic rules have historically always bent to changing climate, geography, technology and society. The Sangha would not have survived if this were not the case. At this point in history it is imperative that any semblance of gender inequality, symbolic or otherwise, be *removed* in a Buddhism that thrives in a modern culture. I have said nothing about the politics of how to get there from here, about untangling the force of ancient traditions, of maintaining harmony and respect among conservative and liberal elements in these traditions with regard to women's equality, about how to introduce or reintroduce full ordination for women in those traditions that lack it. It may take patience but the necessary adaptation will certainly happen.

I hope that I have shown for now that, whatever clothes we wear, the project of realizing full equality for women within Buddhism is totally in accord with the Buddha's original pure intentions, intentions which must make the most feminist among us smile.