

The female body in early Buddhist literature

In the following I intend to present Theravāda Buddhist perceptions of the female body and their impact on sexuality, gender equality and salvation. In doing so I am drawing on a selection of texts from the Buddhist canonical literature, which are relevant to the Theravāda tradition. Buddhist scriptures were first canonized in the first century CE, that is, more than 300 years after the appearance of the historical Buddha. Without doubt the scriptures thus contain mixed materials that have been influenced by a variety of opinions over time and not solely the original utterances of the Buddha himself. Consequently, the canonical literature shows inconsistencies regarding several issues, one of which is the status of women and the feminine (Sponberg 1992: 3, 7–8). Considering the distinction between codified norms as given in the normative texts and actual practice, these accounts only provide us with stereotypical attitudes. Furthermore, it is important to point out the androcentric bias of these scriptures: they have been written by senior monks for other monks, hence we do not find distinctly female opinions on the subject. The only exception is the *Therīgāthā*, which supposedly encompasses songs and poems written by nuns. Consequences will be explained below. First I will highlight some of the major Buddhist tenets and principles, of which there needs to be a prior understanding in order to guarantee a realistic appraisal of the perception of the woman and the female body.

The Buddhist concept of the self and the body

According to the Buddha, everything in life is pervaded by suffering (Pāli *dukkha*). In his Four Noble Truths he teaches about (1) the nature of this suffering, stating that birth, ageing, and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, association with the unbeloved, as well as separation from the loved, and not getting what is wanted is suffering. He further (2) identifies the origin of suffering in the three poisons, or defilements (Pāli *kilesa*), which are: ignorance, craving, and clinging and (3) declares enlightenment, or Nirvana, as the end of suffering, which follows the relinquishment of and freedom

from the three *kilesas*. Eventually, (4) he provides a way, leading to the end of suffering, in the Noble Eightfold Path. (Schumann 1974: 37–41.)

In a way, the three poisons are the fuel that keeps the Wheel of Life turning. Unless they are abandoned, a human being will remain caught up in the cycle of rebirth (*Samsāra*) and thus suffering will never stop (Herrmann-Pfandt 1998: 123).

The given context suggests focusing on the human defilement of craving (*taṇhā*) or greed, meaning the craving for sensual pleasures, existence and extermination. Within the Buddhist concept of *Samsāra* it has a significant impact, causing human beings to constantly crave for this or that, thereby clinging to the world and failing to break the cycle of suffering and attaining Nirvana (Gómez 2004: 213–14).

Associated with craving are the illusions about the nature of the self and the substance of the material world. What human beings mistake as a unique and constant 'self' is actually not existent—it is what Buddhists call not-self, or selflessness (Pāli *anattā*). What makes us believe in a constant self is the sum of experiences obtained by the interaction of the five clinging-aggregates, the *khandhas* (Pāli) that form the human being. These are; (1) form or matter (Pāli *rūpa*), externally identified as the physical world. Internally *rūpa* includes the material body and the physical sense organs; (2) sensation, or feeling (Pāli *vedanā*) meaning the ability to sense an object as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral; (3) perception (Pāli *saññā*) including conception, cognition, and discrimination and so on, which registers whether an object is recognized or not (e.g. sounds, shapes, smells); (4) mental formations (Pāli *sankhāra*) comprising all types of mental habits—thoughts, ideas, opinions, prejudices, compulsions, and decisions, triggered by an object, and (5) consciousness (Pāli *viññāṇa*), which is formed by the other four *skandhas*. There is a certain reciprocity, as *viññāṇa* is the aggregate or function that (mis)interprets the other *khandhas* as constant and thus forming a self, but they are in reality ever-changing. (Schumann 1974: 42–50.)

Apart from the interaction between all the *khandhas* persists a significant dualism between the body (*rūpa*) and the consciousness (*viññāṇa*), as the former provides the basis for all the other aggregates, which again generate consciousness. Without a physical body there is no sensation, without sensation there is no perception, and so on. At the same time the body becomes manifested by consciousness. In death the body ceases to exist, it decays and dissolves at the same time as the consciousness splits into the clinging-aggregates that will reassemble in a new constellation in a subsequent rebirth, or dissolve in Nirvana. (Collins 1997: 188.)

Summing up, the soteriological aim of Buddhism, the end of all suffering, can only be reached by overcoming the illusion of the self and the illusion of the material world. Within this framework, the attitude towards the human body is ambivalent. As an integral part of the aspects combining to form the misleading consciousness, it is considered a hindrance that binds us to the world and to suffering. Thus it is depicted as a 'bag of dung' that should be avoided like excrement; its urges and drives have to be controlled:

You little hut made of a chain of bones, sewn together with flesh and sinew. Fie upon the evil-smelling body. You cherish those who have another's limbs.

You bag of dung, tied up with skin, you demoness with lumps on your breast. There are nine streams in your body which flow all the time.

Your body with its nine streams makes an evil smell and is obstructed by dung. A *bhikkhu* desiring purity avoids it as one avoids excrement.

If any person knew you as I know you, he would avoid you, keeping far away, as one avoids a cess-pit in the rainy season. (*Theragāthā* 1146–1208, in Norman 1969: 106–10.)

This resentment towards the body is also related to the cosmogonic myths that were inherited from the older Indian culture. The *Agañña-Sutta*¹ depicts the divine realm, where the formerly incorporeal and self-luminous beings fed only on joy, until they began to dissolve. Then the Earth formed some sort of sludge or scum on the surface of the waters that was eaten by the beings, who then acquired corporeal bodies and lost their luminosity. Soon sexual differences appeared on their bodies and they developed lust for one another and sexual intercourse. The overall aim is to regain the incorporeal, luminous status. (Lang 1982: 96.)

These perceptions imply that only ascetic practice and especially the abstention from sexual pleasures will weaken the ties to the lower material world (Lang 1982: 97). If cultivated in the right way, the body thus becomes a vehicle on the path to salvation: in the end the body is the basis for all ascetic practices and meditation.

1 *Dīgha-Nikāya* III.80–98, in Rhys Davids & Rhys Davids 1977, III: 77–94.

Tied to the world: the female body

The aforementioned principle of *anattā* and the illusory nature of the material world are basic Buddhist tenets; thus one might conclude that the body and sexuality, or sex and gender, respectively, do not really matter as they are illusory themselves. This argument is often quoted to emphasize the equality of women and men in and the general tolerance of Buddhism.

In fact, early Buddhist literature provides us with some accounts that represent this attitude. For example, a nun called Somā ponders the claim that women would not be fit to attain enlightenment, concluding, that there is no hindrance if one—male or female—has come to insight in the doctrine:

That place, hard to gain, which is to be attained by the seers, cannot be attained by a woman with two-finger-intelligence (i.e. very little intelligence).

What (harm) could the woman's state do to us, when the mind is well concentrated, when knowledge exists for someone rightly having insight into the doctrine?

Everywhere enjoyment of pleasure is defeated; the mass of darkness (of ignorance) is torn asunder; thus know, evil one, you are defeated, death. (*Therīgāthā* 60–2, in Norman 1971: 9.)

The same attitude is reflected by the tale of Sumedhā (*Therīgāthā* 448–522, in Norman 1971: 45–51), who strongly objects to marriage and wants to go forth instead, given the vanity and defilement of the world. There does not seem to be any doubt in these women, that they are able to follow the spiritual path. Furthermore, we find statements ascribed to the Buddha himself confirming the equal ability of men and women, despite their gender differences, to attain the status of an *arahant* and even enlightenment. Notwithstanding their androcentric bias, the canonical sources introduce us to several female followers of the Buddha who gained respect within the early community as donors, practitioners and teachers of the *Dhamma*. (Sponberg 1992: 5–7.)

Alan Sponberg argues that this soteriological inclusiveness, granting women the same possibilities on the spiritual path as men, can be considered 'the most basic and also the most distinctively Buddhist attitude regarding the status of women in the vast literature of the 2500-year-old tradition' (Sponberg 1992: 8).

Nevertheless, examining the quotes on women in the scriptures, especially when focusing on the female body, one finds a majority of statements that are

clearly misogynistic, revealing that it does make a meaningful difference, if you are (re)born within a female or a male body. Inconsistencies like these derive from the aforementioned mix of opinions and attitudes that emerged in the early centuries of the history of Buddhism. The early community has to be seen as being under the considerable influence of its historical, social and cultural surroundings in Northern India. The pervasive ideology of Brahmanism strongly restricted women and linked womanhood to suffering in the world. The woman was depicted as vile, false and sexually insatiable; specific characteristics that prevented her from attaining spiritual fulfillment (Skr. *mokṣa*). Gautama Buddha grew up in these strongly patriarchal surroundings, where the woman was understood to be a menace to society and therefore had to be controlled by her male kin: her father and brother, her husband, her son. Opposing the image of a 'good' woman, who was a devoted mother and an obedient wife, was that of a 'bad' or 'dangerous' woman, sexually insatiable and so on, as explained above. (Kawanami 2001: 138–9; My Hanh 1995: 99–100.)

The Buddha was mainly interested in promoting a way of life leading to the liberation from suffering—his focus lay on soteriological issues and not on a new social order. He spread the idea of equal abilities in attaining liberation, no matter what social background (caste) or sex one came from, but he did not question the social reality of the dualism of sex and gender (My Hanh 1995: 12). He was not a social reformer; born as the Prince Siddharta, he had actually made a point of turning away from politics. In fact he promoted a way of life for those who strive for spiritual fulfillment that entailed an abandonment of worldly issues such as social status, family ties and all forms of relationships. Thus, it is not surprising that in early Buddhist literature, attitudes emerged that resemble an image of womanhood similar to the traditional Indian perception. In the following I will illustrate this in a selection of text passages and give explanations regarding their relation to Buddhist doctrine.

Consistent with the traditional Indian image, a fair amount of passages in the canonical literature of early Buddhism portray the woman as vile, deprived and vicious. She is much more strongly subject to drives, urges, and emotions than a man and therefore has to be controlled by men. Female sexuality renders her weak-minded and keeps her from spiritual growth. The female body is imperfect and impure, especially because of the biological processes of menstruation, pregnancy and birth. (Kawanami 2001: 138–41; My Hanh 1995: 126.)

The legitimation of this attitude towards the female is rooted in the Buddhist understanding of the composition of the world and human life as illustrated above.

The main source of suffering is the formation of a new constitution of the five *khandhas*, which translates to the physical conception and birth. Birth gets the whole chain of existences going and the association of birth with the female body has severe consequences for Buddhist women. Buddhism is basically an ascetic religion—sexuality and sexual craving, or lust (Pāli *taṇhā*, *rāga*), in general are considered a hindrance on the path to enlightenment—the woman as both the object of the male's lust and as an allegedly cunning temptress personifies the aspects of life and the world that the ascetic has to renounce. She is rendered responsible for the forbidden, for human sexuality and all illicit behaviour. (Hermann-Pfandt 1998: 123; Lang 1982: 99.) This also relates to the aforementioned cosmological myths. As Karen C. Lang points out, the word *pathavī*, used to denote the earth, is feminine in gender. The fertility of the earth and women, respectively, are associated with each other: tasting the feminine leads to the downfall of humanity. (Lang 1982: 96.)

In the *Bhavacakra* a pregnant woman thus symbolizes the 'becoming', which is worldly existence and being trapped in the cycle of life. Buddhist literature, on the other hand, portrays the womb as a hell of torment and ordeal, or as a place of impurity (Lang 1982: 95; My Hanh 1995: 124). Buddhist monks focus mainly on liberation from the bondage of desire; in their written work they often use the woman's body as a metaphor for the worldly objects of desire and sensual pleasure. Misogynist statements are prior warnings to the seekers after enlightenment to refrain from fleshly desire, not to be corrupted by the pleasures of the senses, but to concentrate on spiritual growth. Sexual contact with a woman's body defiles a man and sexual intercourse can result in the birth of a child, further strengthening one's ties to the world. Sexuality and birth are impediments for both men and women, but women are more strongly affected by it. (Lang 1982: 99.) Thus in the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* the female body is depicted as the snare of Māra, the demonic Lord of Death and manifestation of evil:

Monks, a woman, even when going along will stop to ensnare the heart of a man; whether standing, sitting or lying down, laughing, talking or singing, weeping, stricken or dying, a woman will stop to ensnare the heart of a man. Monks, if ever one would rightly say: It is wholly a snare of

Māra,—verily, speaking rightly, one may say of womanhood: It is wholly a snare of Māra. (*Aṅguttara-Nikāya* V.55, in Hare 1973: 56.)

A dancing girl is described in similar words by a monk in the *Theragāthā*, when he compares her to a ‘snare of death spread out’ (*Theragāthā* 267–70, in Norman 1967: 32); the same comparison is applied by another monk to his wife and child when he is approached by them (*Theragāthā* 299–302, in Norman 1969: 34) and by yet another who encounters a courtesan (*Theragāthā* 459–46, in Norman 1969: 48). Characteristic also is the account of Raṭṭhapāla, who metaphorically refers to the possibility of escaping this snare by the knowledge of the teaching (the fodder):

See the painted puppet, a heap of sores, a compounded body, diseased,
with many (bad) intentions, for which there is no permanent stability.

See the painted form, with jewels and earrings; covered with skin and
bones, it is resplendent with clothes.

The feet are reddened with lac, the face is smeared with powder,
enough to delude a fool, but not for one who seeks the far shore.

Hair braided eight-fold, eyes smeared with collyrium, enough to de-
lude a fool, but not for one who seeks the far shore.

The hunter laid his net; the deer did not come near the snare; having
eaten the fodder, let us go while the deer-trapper laments.

The hunter’s net is broken; the deer did not come near the snare; hav-
ing eaten the fodder, let us go while the deer-trapper grieves. (*Theragāthā*
769–93, in Norman 1969: 74–6.)

This attitude is not confined to monks; in the *Therīgāthā* the nun Vimalā who formerly has been a courtesan describes her doings with the same resentment and reluctance:

Intoxicated by my (good) complexion, my figure, my beauty, my fame,
haughty because of my youth, I despised other women. Having decorated
this body, very variegated, deceiving fools, I stood at the brothel door, like
a hunter having spread out a snare, showing my ornamentation. Many a
secret (place) was revealed. I did various sorts of conjuring, laughing
(= mocking?) of people. (*Therīgāthā* 72–4, in Norman 1971: 11.)

Also various *Jātakas* illustrate the depravity of the female sex that leads man into torment and suffering. They are portrayed as manipulative, vicious and seductive.

A sex composed of wickedness and guile,
Unknowable, uncertain as the path
Of fishes in the water,—womankind
Hold truth for falsehood, falsehood for the truth!
As greedily as cows seek pastures new,
Women, unsated, yearn for mate on mate.
As sand unstable, cruel as the snake,
Women know all things; naught from them is hid!²

Wrathful are women, slanderers, ingrates
The sowers of dissension and fell strife!
Then, Brother, tread the path of holiness,
And bliss therein thou shalt not fail to find.³

Though soft of speech, like rivers hard to fill,
Insatiate, nought can satisfy their will:
Down, down they sink: a man should flee afar
From women, when he knows what kind they are.
Whomso they serve for gold or for desire,
They burn him up like fuel in the fire.⁴

Even if the aim of a *Jātaka* is not an admonition directed towards men to be careful when dealing with women, female characters often take the role of ignorant or murderous villains, or symbolize the profane in general. In the rare case that a woman is presented in a positive way, this alludes to the loyal wife

2 Andabhūta-Jātaka 62 (Cowell 1973, I: 151–5), cf. Durājāna-Jātaka 64 (ibid. 158–60), Rādha-Jātaka 145 (ibid. 309–10), Culla-Paduma-Jātaka 193 (Cowell 1973, II: 81–5), Gahapati-Jātaka 199 (ibid. 94–5), Culladhanuggaha-Jātaka 374 (Cowell 1973, III: 144–8), Samugga-Jātaka 436 (Cowell 1973, III: 313–16).

3 Takka-Jātaka 63 (Cowell 1973, I: 155–8), cf. Culla-Paduma-Jātaka 193 (Cowell 1973, II: 81–5), Kukkuta-Jātaka 383 (Cowell 1973, III: 168–9).

4 Mudu-Pāni-Jātaka 262 (Cowell 1973, II: 224–6), cf. Sattubhastha-Jātaka 402 (Cowell 1973, III: 210–15).

and devoted mother, who is humble and giving, or even sacrifices herself for the well being of her loved ones.⁵

This conforms to a common ambiguity in the perception of woman: one part is demonized and debased, the other part transcended, or even deified. Especially in relation to her body, in her ability to give birth, the woman is split: as a mother of sons and important male characters she is praised and honoured, but her female genitals, her bodily functions, are considered to be filthy and vicious. The original creative power of the female body and sexuality is either directly linked to suffering, or fully negated, as is the case with Māyā, the Buddha's mother. (My Hanh 1995: 53; Herrmann-Pfandt 1998: 123.)

In the legend of the Buddha's mother, his conception and birth, an extensive negation of the female body is expressed: Māyā is pictured as a very chaste and pure woman, a virgin and an ascetic. She conceived the Buddha-to-be in a dream, by means of a white elephant entering her side. After ten months she gave birth to Siddhartha from her right side, while standing in the garden of Lumbini. Thus she actually gave birth without any genitals or sexual action being involved and is depicted as an ideal woman. It is needless to say that this supports a very distanced relationship to the female body and sexuality. Furthermore, in the legend, Māyā had to die seven days after giving birth, in order to guarantee that she would not become polluted and lose her sacred status. In the end her image is ambivalent—on the one hand she symbolizes the patriarchal ideal of womanhood, on the other hand she is associated with allurements and ignorance. In contrast to the old Brahmanic perception of the status of a mother as the highest ideal for a woman, in Buddhism motherhood has a bitter taste. It is of secular character, strengthening the ties to the world. (Kawanami 2001: 140; My Hanh 1995: 52, 131.)

Altogether the woman's physical, biological and mental features are a major hindrance on the path to Nirvana—not only to herself, but also to men. Due to her tempting qualities and her natural ability to give birth she is, in a way, responsible for all suffering. Consequently, in Theravada Buddhism, women are not granted Nirvana. In fact, only a pious monk is capable of attaining enlightenment. Nuns and lay people, whether they are women or men, are excluded. It is noteworthy, however, that lay men can decide to become monks and hence have a chance of Nirvana; women, even nuns, on the

5 Cf. Sambula-Jātaka 519 (Cowell 1973, V: 48–53), Succaja-Jātaka 320 (Cowell 1973, III: 44–7), Godha-Jātaka 333 (ibid. 71–2), Culladhammapāla-Jātaka 358 (ibid. 117–20), Māti-Posaka-Jātaka 455 (Cowell 1973, IV: 58–61).

contrary, have to be reborn into a male body first. What is granted to pious nuns is the possibility of acquiring the status of an *arahant*, but a Buddha is never a woman. The female is considered imperfect and impure and thus incapable of the proper conduct leading to enlightenment. Nirvana as the highest perfection can only be gained in a male form; also only the man possesses the mental stability required. (My Hanh 1995: 123–6.)

The fate of being a woman is understood as a karmic consequence. Therefore the suffering of women, for example, the physical suffering in labour, but also the subordination to the man, is not related to a socio-historical structure, or to socialization, but it is an unchangeable fate the woman has brought upon herself by sinful deeds in her previous life (My Hanh 1995: 23). Being born into a female body is a comeuppance. The Buddhist teachings of *karma* and *Samsāra* thus give way to the subjection of women in society. By practising the *Dhamma*—especially in financially ‘supporting the *Sangha*’—and leading a pious life, women can improve their *karma* in the hope of a rebirth in a male body. Practising the *Dhamma* for women actually means subordination and obedience—for lay women, as well as for the nuns.

The female body and the *Sangha*

However disadvantaged women are because of their bodies, the Buddha did establish a female *Sangha*, implying the overall possibility for women to follow the spiritual path to the liberation of suffering. As the story about the invention of a nun’s order in early Buddhism demonstrates, the Buddha himself at first had no intention of including women in his *Sangha*. He did so very reluctantly and not without accentuating that the endurance of his teachings in the world would thereby be impaired from 1000 to 500 years. (My Hanh 1995: 124.) As Alan Sponberg (1992: 13–18) points out, this story has to be understood rather metaphorically, as an account not of the negotiation between Mahāprajāpatī, Ānanda, and the Buddha, but between groups in society with different interests. Thus it is a document exposing the social dynamics of that time.

Following the account in the *Bhiksunikarmavacana*⁶ (Paul 1985: 82–94) Buddha’s aunt, Mahāprajāpatī makes a request to the Buddha that women should be allowed into the order. He declines her request, thereupon his fa-

6 This fragment of the Sanskrit Vināya gives a concise account of the story, the Pāli version is much more extensive, cf. Cullavagga X, in Horner 1975: 352–92.

vourite disciple Ānanda speaks in her favour and is told by the Buddha why he actually does not want to allow women into the order:

To go forth from home under the rule of the Dharma as announced by me is not suitable for women. There should be no ordination or nunhood. And why? If women go forth from the household life, then the rule of the Dharma will not be maintained over a long period. It is just as if, O Ānanda, there were a family with many women and few men. It is subject to easy attack and spoliation. It is subject to easy attack specifically of thieves and bands of robbers. Just thus, O Ānanda, if women go forth under the rule of the Dharma, this rule of the Dharma will not be long enduring. It is as if, O Ānanda, in a big field belonging to a householder, a quantity of thunderbolts with great flashes of lightning fell, to the extent that the field was destroyed, ruined, and brought to nought. Just thus, O Ānanda, the rule of the Dharma—if women go forth from a home life—will not continue for long. Suppose, Ānanda, there was a sugar cane field belonging to a householder. Upon it fell a blight by the name of Crimson disease until the sugar cane was destroyed, ruined, and brought to nought. Just in this way, when women go forth, the rule of the Dharma is not long maintained. (Paul 1985: 84.)

While his first objection refers to the threat of an easy attack and spoliation of a female *Sangha*—which yet could be interpreted as a justified fear for the lives of the women—he then emphasizes that the real hazard to the *Dhamma* are women themselves, comparing them to a quantity of thunderbolts with great flashes of lightning and a blight by the name of Crimson disease that destroys, ruins and eventually erases everything.

Eventually he gives in and allows women to form a nun's order, 'but only within a carefully regulated institutional structure that preserves and reinforces the conventionally accepted standards of male authority and female subordination' (Sponberg 1992: 13).

This was reduced to a praxis by providing them with eight important rules that clearly establish the monks' control over the female *Sangha*:

1. In the presence of monks, O Ānanda, women are expected to request ordination to go forth as nuns. I announce this as the first important rule for women to overcome the obstructions so that instruction can be maintained throughout life.

2. In the presence of monks, O Ānanda, a nun must seek the teachings and instructions every half month. I announce this as the second important rule for women. . .
3. No nun may spend a rainy season, O Ānanda, in a place where no monks are resident. This, O Ānanda, is the third important rule for women. . .
4. After the rainy season a nun must have both orders [monks and nuns] perform the 'end of the rainy season' ceremony for her with reference to the seeing, hearing, or suspicion [of faults committed by her]. This is the fourth important rule for women. . .
5. It is forbidden, that a nun, Ānanda, accuse or warn a monk about transgression in morality, heretical views, conduct or livelihood. This is the fifth important rule I announce for women. . .
6. A nun, Ānanda, should not scold or be angry with or admonish a monk. I announce this as the sixth important rule for women. . .
7. When a nun violates important rules, O Ānanda, penance must be performed every half month. This I declare as the seventh important rule for women. . .
8. A nun of one hundred years of age shall perform the correct duties to a monk. She shall, with her hands folded in prayerful attitude, rise to greet him and then bow down to him. This will be done with appropriate words of salutation. I declare this as the eighth important rule. . . (Paul 1985: 85–6.)

Preceding the entering of the order a nun has to agree to these eight rules. As already noted above, Buddhism originated in a patriarchal society. By subordinating the nuns to the monks, the Buddha probably intended to protect the spiritual and social welfare he saw endangered by making too many concessions to women (My Hanh 1995: 108; Sponberg 1992: 17–18).

Living within the monastery, the nuns have to follow a code of conduct (*Bhikkhuni-Vibhanga*, 311 rules) quite similar to, but much more comprehensive than the monks' code (*Sutta-Vibhanga*, 227 rules). The nuns have to observe 84 additional rules; given a closer look, however, a lot of them

are actually established to protect them from harm and there is no apparent stronger condemnation of the nun's sexuality. But it is very important to bear in mind that this is not an acknowledgement of female sexuality as such. As sexuality in general is understood to be a major hindrance on the spiritual path, it is strongly prohibited by the first rule of the code for male and female members of the *Sangha*. Entering the order ideally means giving up one's sexuality, which is associated with the female. In fact all 'female thought processes' have to be eliminated in order to gain the required mental stability attributive to the male. The nun actually has to overcome her femininity, and transform into a man, because the woman's ties to the world, her urges and aforementioned physical and mental handicaps deprive her of spiritual growth. (Kawanami 2001: 137; Lang 1982: 99–101.)

This is illustrated by the example of Gopikā in the *Sakka-Pañha Suttanta*:

She, having abandoned a woman's thoughts and cultivated the thoughts of a man, was, at the dissolution of the body after her death, reborn to a pleasant life, into the communion of the Thirty-and-Three gods, into sonship with us (*Dīgha-Nikāya* II.271, in Rhys Davids & Rhys Davids 1977, II: 306).

Karen C. Lang (1982: 100) argues that this figurative transformation from preoccupation with sexuality to concern with spirituality seems to be rooted in the fear and disgust of women's bodily functions. Ascetic practices, such as fasting, will prevent menstrual flow and sexual abstinence will prevent her from bearing children. Furthermore, 'shaving off the woman's hair and enjoining her to wear shapeless garments, identical to those worn by monks, also contribute to the impression that women were expected to transform their female nature, physically as well as mentally' (Lang 1982: 101).

Given these facts, strictly speaking, there is no female *Sangha*. Femininity is not fit for spiritual growth and has to be dropped.

Conclusion

Early Buddhist literature reflects an understanding of the female body as being more closely connected to the material world and the cycle of reincarnation, due to its biological qualities. This has a severe impact on the woman's status and her chances of attaining enlightenment. Considering the early teaching of individuals possessing equal capacities to attain liberation, no

matter what sex or social background, Buddhism as it developed over time failed to translate the equality of the sexes into a social reality. In fact, the perception of a distinct female ‘nature’ which was deemed a hindrance could not easily be erased from the collective consciousness. (Sponberg 1992: 11–12.) It is, however, important to note that Buddhist countries are subject to diverse influences that affect attitudes towards the female body, sexuality and the status of women—thus one has to be very careful with generalizations regarding norms and practices. Over time the negative attitudes and restrictions have been questioned; social changes have given way to new interpretations and perspectives. Pondering religious and cultural implications of the Buddhist attitude towards the body and its sex while also considering, for example, modern Mahayana Buddhist interpretations—especially by Western Buddhists and Buddhist Feminists—can lead to an acknowledgement of its potential of interpreting *anattā*, selflessness and an equality of capacity to practice *Dhamma* in favour of a general sex and gender equality.

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