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Attitudes toward Women and the  
Feminine in Early Buddhism

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Observers of Buddhism, both sympathetic and critical, often are struck by the apparent ambivalence toward women and the feminine that one finds in Buddhist literature. Various antifeminine attitudes certainly are evident in many early Buddhist texts, a characteristic Buddhism shares with probably all institutionalized religious traditions. The voice one hears in reading these Buddhist texts, however, is neither consistent nor univocal. Many scholars have noted an underlying tension within the Buddhist literature, a tension between certain attitudes that seem unusually positive in their assessment of women and the feminine, on the one hand, and attitudes that are much more blatantly negative, on the other. Occasionally this tension turns up even within a single text, as in the well-known Pali account of the founding of the order of nuns, a story in which we find Gautama, the Buddha, conceding that women indeed are quite capable of attaining the highest Buddhist goal of liberation, but going on to add that the creation of an order of nuns will dramatically hasten the decline of his teachings in the world.

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Unless otherwise noted I have used the translations of the Pali Text Society (PTS), with occasional emendations for the sake of clarity and terminological consistency; references for those passages are to the PTS editions, which will allow easy access to both the original text and the translations, which are cross referenced.

We shall look more closely at this oft-cited story later; for now it is important to note that just this juxtaposition of apparently divergent and contradictory views has led many writers to characterize the early Buddhist attitude toward women as profoundly ambivalent.<sup>1</sup> But, is this really the most helpful way of understanding the disparity of views expressed in such texts? Although not inaccurate, strictly speaking, the characterization of ambivalence is misleading at the least, often carrying a connotation of uncertainty, or even confusion. The view I wish to explore here is that what we find in the early Buddhist texts is not a single, uncertain voice, but rather a multiplicity of voices, each [4] expressing a different set of concerns current among the members of the early community. What we have, I would submit, is a rich multivocality—not a simple inconsistent ambivalence. In itself, the observation may seem rather obvious, yet what it means is that rather than seeking a doctrinal reconciliation or justification for this inconsistency of views in the literature, instead we must seek to understand the social and intellectual dynamics of the early community of Buddhists that led to such a discordant juxtaposition of views.

An important step in such an understanding is to distinguish more carefully the different attitudes we find represented within this multivocality: we must separate the voices, and we also need to recognize the specific institutional or intellectual context out of which each voice arose. My goal in this study, then, is to provide a survey of the various attitudes present in early Buddhist literature, one that should help us become more sensitive to the internal tensions and disputes within the early Buddhist community reflected in this diversity of views. Given the dearth of sources for early Buddhist social history, such an analysis of the scriptural texts remains the

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<sup>1</sup> Ambivalence is a recurrent theme in modern scholarship on this issue, see for example Cornelia Dimmitt Church's "Temptress, Housewife, Nun: Women's Role in Early Buddhism," in *Anima* no. 2 (1975): 53-58, esp. p. 54a; and Nancy Auer Falk's "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980), pp. 207-224.

most accessible window to the development of this influential religious tradition. It can tell us something about the world-view of the early Buddhists and, even more interestingly, it can tell us also about their efforts to reconcile the tension that arose when those Buddhists sought to accommodate the radically critical social doctrines of the Buddha with the more mundane demands of conventional social values.

Before looking at the various attitudes toward women one finds expressed in Buddhist literary sources, we should briefly consider the social context within which Buddhism arose and developed. Contemporary sources for this period of Indian history are limited, yet we know enough to see that, like other important aspects of the tradition, Buddhist attitudes toward women were shaped, in part at least, in response to the social circumstances of the day. Especially relevant to our concern are two key developments, the relatively rapid urbanization of the eastern Gangetic valley and the emergence of a new sense of self-consciousness or individuality, especially among those who were on the margins, socially or spiritually, of the prevailing Brahmanic culture. Interrelated at several levels, both these social developments were in large part responses to the technological innovations inaugurated at the beginning of the Iron Age in Northern India. By the eighth century BCE, the old agrarian social order was undergoing a dramatic transformation. The new technology of iron smeltery provided more efficient tools for both agriculture and [5] organized warfare, and both innovations fostered the growth of a new urban culture based in a dozen or so city-states not unlike those of classical Greece.

The effect of such social transformation was at once both traumatizing and liberating. The old social and religious order with its ideological foundation in Brahmanic ritualism had never been firmly established on the eastern edges of Vedic culture, and the new social structures of urbanization further exacerbated this ideological vacuum, giving rise to a whole new range of religious and philosophical speculation. What was the place of the individual in this new, rapidly changing world of intercity trade, specialization of labor, and organized military expansionism? It was a time

that demanded not just new answers, but a new ethos. Later known as the Age of the Wanderers, this time saw the emergence of a class of professional seekers or strivers who sought to formulate the structures of that new ethos, exploring a new set of questions as well as answers.

What role did women play in these new social and religious movements? Certainly they played a much greater and more significant role than allowed by the strictures of the Brahmanic social order. Urbanization along the eastern Ganges during the Age of the Wanderers fostered the creation of new mercantile and artisan classes, undermining the traditional social order prescribed by the *varṇa* system of four classes dominated by the Brahmanic ritual technocrats. There is evidence, moreover, to suggest that this same social transformation opened new roles for women, creating, for a brief period at least, opportunities unprecedented in the early or subsequent history of South Asia. Seen in that light, the prominence of women among Gautama's early followers is less surprising, though no less revolutionary. The newly emerging social order had much less invested in defending prevailing social values, and in such a climate both women and those of lower social standing generally were freer to explore and express their religious vocations. According to historical accounts recorded in the later canon, women were quick to take advantage of the opportunity, encouraged more by Gautama, it appears, than by any of the other mendicant teachers of the day, except perhaps Mahāvīra, leader of the Jains. Canonical sources, even with their androcentric bias, note that some of Gautama's most prominent patrons were women, indicating both that there were a significant number of women of independent means during this period and that their support was instrumental in fostering the early community.

Among the women followers of the Buddha, moreover, we know that some remained lay followers and others gave up worldly pursuits [6] to become full-time followers. Women "wanderers" were not unknown in this period, yet only among the Jains and the Buddhists do we find record of a sizable, organized group of mendicant female seekers of liberation. But were these women deemed truly capable of spiritual pursuits? Clearly not,

according to traditional Brahmanism; and even the Jains soon divided into two antagonistic groups split over the question of whether Jain nuns could become liberated directly or only after rebirth as monks. This same issue was to be debated later by the Buddhists though less schismatically, in part no doubt because there clearly were women among Gautama's followers who were accepted as fully and equally enlightened. This is the most significant point regarding the place of women in early Buddhism: traditional sources agree that women could and did become arhats, fully liberated individuals living free from the psychophysiological suffering that characterizes human existence according to the Buddha's teaching.

Sources within the canon cite numerous instances of arhats among the women who had renounced worldly life and even a few cases of women like Khemā, who, as chief consort to the king of Magadha, became fully enlightened even before leaving lay life (and well before Bimbisāra the king, who became only a "stream-winner" in spite of his ardent support of Gautama). These prominent women followers seem to have held positions of great respect: many, like Pātācārā and Soṇā, were known for their ability to teach the Dharma; others like Khemā were specifically praised by the Buddha for the depth of their understanding.<sup>2</sup> Some of these women teachers apparently had their own followings, moreover, and were capable not just of introducing the Dharma, but of bringing new aspirants to full liberation without the intercession of the Buddha or some other senior male teacher. In the canonical sources, women most often are presented as teachers to other women, yet even the conservative editors of those texts preserved a few stories of women like Dhammadinnā, who had occasion, after becoming a nun, to instruct her former husband, Visākha. In the *Cūlavēdallasutta*, Dhammadinnā answers a long series of questions regarding aspects of the doctrine and practice put to her by Visākha, a prominent merchant and lay

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<sup>2</sup> Biographical details of the members of the early Buddhist community mentioned here and later are scattered throughout the canon and its commentaries; for a summary account see the appropriate entries in the Pali Text's Society's *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, ed. B. P. Malalasekera (London: Luzac & Co., Ltd., 1960).

Buddhist teacher who, the commentaries say, had a substantial following of his own. Visākha later reports her answers to the Buddha, who is greatly pleased, proclaiming that he would have answered in precisely the same way.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, we lack sufficient contemporary records to assess fully the role of women among Gautama's followers. Nonetheless, even the brief survey I have provided here of the surviving accounts is enough to suggest that women not only were conspicuously present [7] in the earliest community, but also seem to have held prominent and honored places both as practitioners and teachers. The later history of women in Buddhism is much more mixed. Whereas women patrons and donors remain quite visible, the order of nuns does not appear to have enjoyed the prestige or creativity one might have expected of the successors to Khemā, Dhammadinnā, and the early arhat nuns. Even their historical continuity as an order becomes obscure within a few hundred years and dies out entirely in South and Southeast Asia. To put these surprising developments into perspective we must now examine the variety of attitudes toward women and the feminine that emerged in Buddhist literature as the tradition became established as one of the major religions of early India.

### *Four Distinct Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine*

Much more could be said about the social and religious climate in which Gautama, the Buddha, lived, but my concern here is more with what later

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<sup>3</sup> *MN*, vol. 1, pp. 298-305; this *sutta* is also noteworthy because Dhammadinnā discusses the nature of feelings, telling Visākha that the problem with the three kinds of feeling—pleasant, painful, or neutral—is that they carry a tendency toward attachment, repugnance, and ignorance, respectively. These negative tendencies are not inherently latent in all instances of feeling, however, so the point, she goes on to indicate, is not to eliminate the feelings, but to get rid of the disruptive tendency that normally accompanies the feelings.

Buddhists made of his teachings—with how they reconciled the religious guidance he had given them with the social contingencies within which the Buddhist community subsequently grew. The focus of this study thus is on attitudes toward women expressed within the early community. With a concern to identify those themes that were formative for the subsequent historical phases of the tradition, I shall focus here on Buddhism in India, primarily the early period up to the beginning of the Common Era, but with some reference to later Indo-Tibetan developments.<sup>4</sup>

The attitudes I wish to examine and distinguish are those current among members of the early Buddhist community during the period that saw the rise of Buddhist monasticism, or rather we should say that they are a selection of those views, because our primary source is the textual canon redacted by one group within the tradition, the senior monks. Gautama's personal views on these issues no doubt played a decisive role, yet we are rather limited with regard to what we can ascribe with certainty to him, especially as he appears to have eschewed discussion of many topics he considered nonconducive to the soteriological task immediately at hand, namely liberation from suffering.<sup>5</sup> Although the earliest canonical literature certainly reflects something of Gautama's view's on the place of women, we must remind ourselves that those texts also inevitably contain much later material as well, material in which one may discern not only doctrinal and

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the roles women actually played, see I. B. Horner's *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1930); Falk, "Vanishing Nuns"; and Janice D. Willis, "Nuns and Benefactresses: The Role of Women in the Development of Buddhism," in *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), pp. 59-85. For developments in East Asian Buddhism, see Nancy Schuster's excellent survey, "Striking a Balance: Women and Images of Women in Early Chinese Buddhism" also in *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, pp. 87-111.

<sup>5</sup> Along with other historians of religion I use the term *soteriology* here to refer to the attempt to provide a systematic account of liberation in any sense, whether through the agency of a salvific figure or not. I also use the form *soteric* in reference to anything that has to do with the goal of liberation itself rather than the system that explains it.

institutional development and change, but also inconsistencies that [8] reflect the varied concerns of different subgroups within the broader community. When the later tradition turned to the canon for guidance on issues regarding the place of women, it found a diversity of views, not just those of the historical founder. Among those various voices recorded in the literature, we can differentiate at least four distinct attitudes, three occurring in the early canon and a fourth representing, in part, a later attempt to resolve the inconsistency and tension among the first three. The first three I refer to as *soteriological inclusiveness*, *institutional androcentrism*, and *ascetic misogyny*, and the fourth I call *soteriological androgyny*, to emphasize both its innovative quality and its historical relationship to the first attitude of inclusivity.

### *Soteriological Inclusiveness*

Buddhism, in its origins, above all else was a pragmatic soteriology, a theory of liberation that sought to free humanity from suffering, first by thoroughly analyzing the fundamental human predicament and then by offering a practical method or path for eliminating the afflictions, cognitive and dispositional, that are perpetuated as greed, hatred, and delusion. In his reflections on human suffering and liberation, the Buddha was frequently critical of conventional views, including those carrying the authority of the Brahmanic tradition. In marked contrast to the sacerdotal ritualism of the Brahmins, he offered a path that was open to all. The first canonical attitude I wish to consider, soteriological inclusiveness, thus arguably is the most basic and also the most distinctively Buddhist attitude regarding the status of women that one can find in the vast literature of the 2500-year-old tradition. The earliest Buddhists clearly held that one's sex, like one's caste or class (*varṇa*), presents no barrier to attaining the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering. Women can, we are told by the tradition, pursue the path. Moreover, they can (and did) become arhats, Buddhist saints who had broken completely the suffering of the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsāra*).

A revolutionary soteriological assertion in its day, this view is found directly expressed at a number of points in the early literature. Consider, for example, the occasion when the harem of King Udena was devastated by a fire that killed some 500 of the king's consorts, including Sāmāvātī and other committed followers of the Buddha. Asked to comment on this tragedy, the Buddha replied: "Monks, among these [victims], some women disciples are stream-winners, some once-returners, some nonreturners. Not fruitless, monks, are all [9] these women disciples who have met their end" (*Udāna*; VII.x<sup>6</sup>). This passage clearly implies that there were serious women practitioners (and not just patrons) among the Buddha's early followers and, moreover, that women were deemed quite capable of achieving the standard stages of the path to liberation by which one becomes an arhat. The same sentiment is reiterated in more categorical terms and taken a step further in another passage, where we find the Buddha using the parts of a chariot to illustrate the components of the Buddhist path.

'Straight' is the name that Road is called, and 'Free  
From Fear' the Quarter whither thou art bound.  
Thy Chariot is the 'Silent Runner' named,  
With Wheels of Righteous Effort fitted well.  
Conscience the Leaning-board; the Drapery  
Is Heedfulness; the Driver is the Dharma,  
I say, and Right Views, they that run before.  
And be it woman, or be it man for whom

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<sup>6</sup> The *anāgāmin* or "nonreturner" is one who will reach arhatship in the current lifetime, which raises an interesting ambiguity in this text. Is the Buddha saying here that there were nonreturners among these victims of the fire (and that their religious careers were cut short—or were brought to a sudden conclusion—by an untimely death)? Or is he speaking of the future, saying that some of them will become nonreturners in their next lives, which might be either as women or as men. The latter interpretation might help to explain the use of the neuter plural to refer to the women in this one passage, a grammatical peculiarity noted but not explained by the PTS translator, F. L. Woodward. In either case, the significant point for our purposes is that the path was open to women, even to lay practitioners like these royal courtesans.

Such chariot doth wait, by that same car  
Into Nirvāṇa's presence shall they come. (*Samyutta Nikāya*; I.5.6)

Not only is the path open to women, in other words, it indeed is the same path for both women and men. We must not overlook the fact that the crucial point in such passages is not that sex and gender differences do not exist, but rather that they are soteriologically insignificant, that they constitute at most a distraction from the true goal of liberation. Consider the story of Somā, the daughter of the chaplain of King Bimbisāra who became a follower of the Buddha and eventually one of the most famous women arhats. One day Māra, the Buddhist personification of doubt and temptation, appeared to her as she was resting under a tree, taunting her with the conventional belief of women's limited intelligence and spiritual capacity.

Māra the evil one, desirous of arousing fear, wavering, and dread in her, desirous of making her desist from concentrated thought, went up to her and addressed her in verse:

That vantage point the sages may attain  
Is hard to win. With her two-finger wit,<sup>7</sup>  
That may no woman ever hope to achieve.

Recognizing the trap, Somā banishes Māra with a confident affirmation of the strength of her meditative concentration and wisdom:

What should the woman's nature signify  
When consciousness is taut and firmly set, [10]

When knowledge rolleth ever on, when she  
By insight rightly comprehends the Dharma?

To one for whom the question doth arise:  
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<sup>7</sup> One commentary explains that “women, when boiling rice, cannot tell if it is cooked without testing it between two fingers”, cf. *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, p. 1310.

Am I a woman, or  
Am I a man, or what not am I then?  
To such a one is Māra fit to talk.<sup>8</sup>

Taken together these passages indicate that whatever limitations women might conventionally be held to have had, they were not to be excluded from any of the forms of Buddhist practice nor from the ultimate goal of those practices, liberation from all the forms of human suffering. Radical as this position was socially, it was quite consistent with the basic philosophical principles of the Buddha's teaching, indeed one can understand it as a corollary of the doctrine of "no-self" (*anātman*), understood to mean that the individual has no ultimately fixed or determinant nature—a theme we shall see developed more explicitly in later Buddhist thought. But how consistently was this implication of *anātman* recognized among the early Buddhists? The passages we shall consider in the following sections suggest that many early Buddhists found reason to limit women's access to Buddhist practice. Indeed Somā herself still speaks in the preceding passages of a "women's nature" even while asserting that its limitations are irrelevant.

To understand better the complexity of this inclusive spirit with regard to women in early Buddhism, we should consider further its relation to the Buddha's rejection of caste or class distinctions. Both of these social views are derived from the same philosophical principles. Just as the Buddhist goal was not limited to those born in a certain social group, so it was not limited to those born as males. Both positions were unusual for the time, indeed both were perceived as radical and dangerous by more orthodox critics of the Buddha's Dharma. Both assertions reflect an attempt to locate virtue and

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<sup>8</sup> The story of Somā's encounter with Māra, along with those of other female disciples, is found in the "Suttas of the Sisters" chapter of the *Samyutta Nikāya* (*SN*, vol. 1, pp. 128-135), where the charge of spiritual incompetence is but one of the tribulations faced and overcome by the female practitioners. The *Psalms of the Sisters* (*Therīgāthā*, XXXVI) offers a slightly modified and less interesting version of Somā's story, one that appears to incorporate a stock passage from the accounts of Gautama's encounter with Māra instead of the key concluding verse found here.

spiritual potential beyond conventional social and gender distinctions. Both can be seen as evidence of a newly emerging sense of individuality that began to take precedence over narrower biological and social constraints during the Age of the Wanderers. There is a difference, however.

Although unquestionably related, the distinctive Buddhist positions on caste and the spiritual capacity of women do differ significantly. The question of caste arises far more frequently in canonical literature, and the argument usually centers on the idea that the virtues (or vices) attributed to a particular caste are a matter of individual cultivation or lack thereof, not a matter of innate qualities [II] acquired by birth in a particular social class. At least one early *sutta*, the *Kūṭadanta* (*DN*, 5) theorizes quite explicitly on the socioeconomic origins of caste distinctions.<sup>9</sup> Much harder to find, however, is any clear distinction between socially conditioned gender roles as opposed to biologically innate sexual differences.<sup>10</sup> Although parallel to

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that early Buddhist cosmogonic myths place more emphasis on explaining the socioeconomic origins of the caste system and the social contract origins of kingship than on attributing the decline from a Golden Age to sexuality in general or to femininity specifically. Whereas there are some intriguing parallels to Western Gnosticism, as we shall see later, the contrast to Judeo-Christian cosmogonies in this important regard is sharper than Diana Paul, for example, suggests in her analysis of the *Aggañña-suttanta*, *Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), pp. xxvi-xxviii. Frank Reynolds provides a more balanced discussion of the *Aggañña-*<sup>o</sup> and the *Pāṭika-sutta* as examples of early Buddhist cosmogonic myths in “Multiple Cosmogonies and Ethics: The Case of Theravāda Buddhism” in *Cosmogony and Ethical Order*, ed. Robin W. Lovin and Frank E. Reynolds (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985). Richard Gombrich argues, quite convincingly, that these stories are best understood as satirical spoofs of conventional Brahmanical views of society and kingship, though the later Buddhist tradition of course has taken them at face value; see his comments regarding “The Buddha on Kings and Politics” in *Theravāda Buddhism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), pp. 81-86.

<sup>10</sup> For a useful survey of current theoretical positions on this distinction and other issues in feminist studies, see Caroline Walker Bynum’s introduction to *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), which she coedited with Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman.

the position on caste, the willingness to include women appears to have remained embedded in a set of cultural assumptions about gender, assumptions that were never completely rejected. Though they adamantly repudiated the prevailing view that caste was genetic, the early Buddhists nonetheless felt that sexuality did entail a set of biologically given characteristics that shaped one's abilities and capacities, even if it did not inexorably determine them. They could see quite clearly that sex is biologically differentiated in a way that caste was not; what they were prone to overlook, however, was that sexual identity is as much socially constructed as it is biologically given. The lack of a clear conceptual distinction between biological sex and social gender may indeed have been one factor that allowed the discrepancy between the doctrine of soteriological inclusiveness and the attitudes of androcentrism and misogyny I shall take up later.

It is hardly surprising that the early Buddhists, including the women themselves, would have seen the woman's lot as a difficult one, that they would have considered it an unfortunate birth and certainly one to be avoided if possible. By any objective standard it was a more restrictive life, compared to the social freedom allowed men. And it almost certainly became more so as the new urban culture developed its own more rigid structure in the centuries following the Buddha's death. The constraints of childbearing are very real in any traditional culture, and certainly those constraints do arise from biological differentiation, though this need not imply that women are burdened by an irrevocably fixed nature. The inconsistency that subsequently emerged, in some Buddhist circles at least, then lay not in recognizing the realities of sexual differentiation, but rather in the additional assumption that this differentiation relegated women to a lower capacity for pursuing the spiritual path. In more contemporary terms, it arose from the failure to distinguish the limitations of social gender roles from the assumption of inherent sexual limitations with regard to the pursuit of liberation.

In the sections of this chapter that follow, we shall see that among some factions of the Buddhist community were powerful social concerns that reinforced this lack of consistency, and we also shall see that other factions struggled to realize both the soteriological and even the social promise of the early teaching. For now, however, we must [12] be careful not to read an overt assertion of sexual egalitarianism or even equivalence into this early attitude of soteriological inclusiveness, while at the same time we must be careful not to underestimate the revolutionary breakthrough that even this more limited notion of inclusiveness represented at the time. There is no question that women are explicitly included in the Buddhist quest for liberation, yet it is also important to note that the question of equality, and especially of social equality, for some time at least remained a moot point.

The notion that early Buddhism was doctrinally egalitarian is potentially quite misleading, however popular it has come to be.<sup>11</sup> It is possible, though historically unverifiable, that the Buddha's personal view was more sexually (if not spiritually) egalitarian, but the doctrinal pronouncements that survive in the edited canon present a more restricted position, one that appears intentionally limited to an assessment of women's ability to achieve liberation; nothing is asserted about their social rights within society at large.<sup>12</sup> Kari Børreson provides a useful conceptual distinction that helps the issues here. With regard to early Christianity, she prefers to speak of an attitude of equivalence rather than equality, because equality implies a sense of sameness, whereas equivalence allows for physiological and

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<sup>11</sup> See Nancy Schuster Barnes, "Buddhism," in *Women in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), p. 106, for example.

<sup>12</sup> There is one text sometimes adduced as evidence for a more explicitly egalitarian attitude. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (I, 82-83, *Kindr. Say.*, pp. 110-111) reports that when Pasenadi, the King of Kosala, was unhappy on hearing that his queen had given birth to a daughter rather than a son, the Buddha pointed out to him that a daughter may prove to be an even better offspring than a son. This is so, he argues, because she may grow up to be wise and virtuous and also because she may bear a son who will perform great deeds and rule great realms.

psychological differences without implying any hierarchy of difference.<sup>13</sup> The early Buddhist texts, however, are less than explicit regarding the question of hierarchical differentiation. Hence I feel that we should distinguish further, in the case of early Buddhism at least, between an attitude of equivalence and one of inclusiveness. Inclusiveness asserts neither sameness nor a lack of hierarchical differentiation. The ambiguity latent in this attitude of inclusiveness becomes quite apparent if we consider how it is interpreted by most contemporary Asian Buddhists, who feel that women have equal access to the Dharma, but insist nonetheless that sexual differences are real and that the male sex is by nature superior to the female sex, both socially and spiritually. There is little in the early canonical literature to conclusively refute that interpretation of inclusiveness, and indeed much to reinforce it, as we shall soon see.

To avoid this ambiguity by asserting more explicitly a direct parallel between caste differences and sexual (or rather gender) differences would have been logically possible and would have been quite consistent with the sentiments of the broader teachings of Gautama. In the early Buddhist canon as it has come down to us, however, such an explicitly drawn conclusion is conspicuously absent. Whereas women were initially granted a religious role that remained virtually without parallel in the Indian tradition for some time, the door was [13] still left open to speculation about the limitations of the “female nature,” a theme prominent in the androcentric and misogynist views that were to become increasingly characteristic of the tradition as the monastic order became more institutionalized and male dominated in the first several centuries following Śākyamuni’s death.

### *Institutional Androcentrism*

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<sup>13</sup> This is a central theme throughout her *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Women in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981; org. published in French, 1968).

The second attitude we must consider appears to have developed somewhat later, though it finds expression especially in the Vinaya, texts concerned with regulation of the monastic order and containing some of the oldest material in the Buddhist canon. Here we find a new theme, one emerging from a different set of concerns than the philosophical reflection and empirical observation that led to the view of soteriological inclusiveness. Although this attitude does appear early in the literature, it represents, in my opinion, a concern that could have become important only once the early community had become established within the broader social milieu.

Having once noted that women were quite capable of pursuing the religious life, the early Buddhist community had to determine what to do with the interest that view generated. Initially this was probably not a problem because the charisma of a venerated and widely respected teacher was sufficient to forestall most worries about internal authority and external social acceptability. After Gautama's death, however, the community continued to grow and its organization shifted more toward a pattern of established cenobitic monastic residence. With this shift we find increasing evidence of an attitude I shall call *institutional androcentrism*: the view that women indeed may pursue a full-time religious career, but only within a carefully regulated institutional structure that preserves and reinforces the conventionally accepted social standards of male authority and female subordination.

This attitude is reflected in a number of texts, but I shall focus most of my discussion in this section on one extended passage, the oft-cited story of the ordination of Mahāpajāpatī, the woman who was both the Buddha's aunt and his foster mother. Though frequently mentioned in discussions of the place of women in Buddhism, this passage warrants more careful and critical consideration than it customarily has received. Too often glossed over, for example, are the multitude of problems with the historicity of the story; and also some significant differences between the Pali and the Sanskrit versions

have been entirely overlooked or disregarded in the recent literature.<sup>14</sup> I shall [I4] argue that what we have here is not a literal historical account of the founding of the order, but rather a more complex document, one that reports symbolically or mythically the process of mediation that finally resolved—only centuries after Śākyamuni’s death—the problem posed by the existence of an order of nuns.<sup>15</sup> Although this lack of historicity might make our text

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<sup>14</sup> The tradition accepts the story as factual, of course, in spite of inconsistencies with other texts that suggest that the Buddha’s wife may have been the first nun. Chronologically Pajāpatī is not the most likely candidate, as it is said that she became a nun only after the death of her husband, King Suddhodana, by which time the Buddha already is supposed to have had many women followers. Pajāpatī would, however, be the obvious choice for a mythologized version of the event, however, both because of her prestige as the Buddha’s foster mother and because a similar story is told of Mahāvīra, the founder of the Jains, and his aunt (or cousin). The first modern scholar to reject entirely the historicity of the story was Maria E. Lulius van Goor, in her critical study of the early order of nuns, *De Buddhistische Non: Geschetst naar Gegevens der Pāli-Literatuur* (Leiden: Brill, 1915), which was subsequently followed by E. J. Thomas and other historians of early Buddhism. I. B. Horner was more reluctant to reject the story entirely, although she notes the problems, adding apologetically that the prophecy of the decline of the Dharma after 500 years may have been an addition by the monks who “would naturally try to minimise the importance which he gave to women” (*Women under Primitive Buddhism*, p. 105).

<sup>15</sup> Based on recent research on the early development of theories regarding the “decline of the Dharma” (Jpn: *mappō*), I feel that this Pali redaction of the story was formulated after the split between the Sarvāstivādins and the Vibhajyavādins, but probably before the Mahīśāsakas subsequently split off from the main Sthavira line; in other words, most likely between 237 and 200 BCE. An even later date has been suggested by Kajiyama Yuichi, who argues that this version of the story is an ex post facto “prophecy,” composed 500 years after the Buddha’s death to explain a decline that already had occurred. He thus dates this version of the story from roughly the beginning of the Common Era (*Shinran*, pp. 321-322), a date very late for a work included in the Pali canon. In her recent Ph.D. thesis, “The *Candragarbha-sūtra* in Central and East Asia: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline” (Harvard University, 1988), Jan Nattier argues for an earlier date, pointing out the significant fact that this story seems to be found only in the literature of schools affiliated with the Sthaviras and not with the Mahāsāṅghikas (pp. 3-8). She feels that this redaction of the story thus must date no ear-

initially seem less interesting, the mythic account it offers in fact is all the more intriguing and useful because of what it suggests about tensions within the early community and what it tells us about how those tensions eventually were reconciled.

The story of Mahāpajāpatī's ordination as the first nun survives in several different versions, which relate the same basic story except for a few significant details. The most developed version appears to be that found in the *Cullavagga* (Chapter X), second of the two *Khandhakas* of the Theravāda Vinaya.<sup>16</sup> I shall summarize the story from that Pali text, noting

lier than the Council of Pāṭaliputra (ca. 340 BCE), which marked that first schism, and no later than the division between the Sthaviras (Vibhajyavādins) and the Sarvāstivādins, which most likely occurred before the end of Aśoka's reign, probably in 237 BCE according to P.H. L. Eggermont (*The Chronology of the Reign of Asoka Moriya* [Leiden: Brill, 1956]). Following Nattier's sound lead, I would place the origin of the Pali version recorded in the *Cullavagga* somewhat later still, in light of the differences I shall note later between the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivādin versions of the story (see especially notes 17-21). These differences are sufficient, I feel, to argue for at least two different Sthavira traditions, the less elaborated version preserved in the Vinaya of the later Mūlasarvāstivādins and the Pali version of the Theravadins. This would suggest the more elaborate Pali version developed some time after 237 BCE, when the Vibhajyavādins split off from the Sarvāstivādins, but before the Mahīśāsaka split, around 200 BCE. The Pali version appears to show significant development over the Sarvāstivādin Sanskrit version, but even allowing some time for that development to occur, the Pali redaction still seems to have been completed at least 200 years before the end of the Dharma predicted in the text. This date seems more plausible than the much later date suggested by Kajiyama, moreover, as it seems more likely that the anonymous editors would have reason to predict an imminent end (that is, one they expected within 100-200 years) rather than feeling the need to explain an end that had in their opinion already occurred.

<sup>16</sup> The same Pali version is also found in a slightly truncated form in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (IV; VIII.VI.51-52). The only other version surviving in an Indic language is a somewhat different Sanskrit version from the Sarvāstivādin Vinaya. This Sanskrit text was edited by C. M. Ridding and Louis de La Vallée Poussin, ("A Fragment of the Sanskrit Vinaya: Bhikṣuṇīkarmavācanā," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 1, no. 3 [1919]: 123-143), who point out that this Sanskrit version agrees closely with the Tibetan *Bhikṣuṇīvibhaṅga* (India Office, Stein Tib. MSS., No. 30), except for the section

differences in the Sanskrit version where necessary. Temporally the Pali text divides into six well-delineated episodes, each marked with a shift of scene and characters.<sup>17</sup>

*Scene 1. Mahāpajāpatī Beseeches Śākyamuni.* While staying among his kinsmen, the Sakyans in Kapilavatthu, the Buddha is approached by his aunt Pajāpatī, who raised him as a child after his mother's death. She suggests that it would be good if women were allowed to become nuns, taking up the homeless life as full-time disciples rather than lay followers. The Buddha tells her to be wary of this idea, without specifying precisely what danger he has in mind.<sup>18</sup> Pajāpatī repeats her request three times, without avail, and then retires unhappy and distraught.

*Scene 2. Mahāpajāpatī Meets with Ānanda in Vesālī.* Having shaved their heads and put on monastic robes, Pajāpatī and a large group of Sakyan women follow the Buddha to Vesālī, where Pajāpatī waits outside the Buddha's door with "her feet swollen...sobbing and in tears."<sup>19</sup> Disturbed at their appearance, the Buddha's personal attendant Ānanda inquires about her distress and offers to take up their cause.

*Scene 3. Ānanda Intercedes on Mahāpajāpatī's Behalf.* Telling Pajāpatī to wait outside, Ānanda leaves to seek out the Buddha. Making the same request,

on the Patanīyas (folios 23b-29b). Their edition of the Sanskrit text recently has been translated by Frances Wilson in Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism*, pp. 77-94.

<sup>17</sup> The Sanskrit version is much simpler in structure: the events all take place on the same day at the same location and are narrated in the first person by the Buddha, in contrast to the more detailed third-person historical account we find here. The inclusion of more elaborate details and the more complex and symmetrical narrative structure in the Pali version suggests that it represents a more developed redaction of the story, one tailored to serve specific needs.

<sup>18</sup> In the Sanskrit version the Buddha says that the monastic life with shaved head and the robes of a mendicant would be suitable for Pajāpatī alone. He does not respond directly to her entreaty on behalf of the other women, and he does not say anything about being wary.

<sup>19</sup> This detail, with its suggestion of defiance or of a fait accompli also significantly is absent in the Sanskrit account.

he gets the same answer. But then Ānanda tries a different approach, asking, “Lord, are women, having gone forth from home into homelessness in the Dharma and Discipline proclaimed by the Truthfinder, able to realize the fruit of stream winning, the fruit of once returning, the fruit of nonreturning, or perfection (that is, arhatship)?” The Buddha replies that indeed they are. Thereupon Ānanda points out that the women should then be allowed to become [15] nuns, both because the Buddha acknowledges that they are capable of arhatship and because he owes a great debt to Pajāpatī, “foster-mother, nurse, giver of milk, who suckled him as a child.”<sup>20</sup>

*Scene 4. The Buddha Assents, Conditionally.* Conceding Ānanda’s point, the Buddha agrees to Pajāpatī’s ordination if she will accept eight rules (in addition to the normal monastic rules): (1) Nuns, no matter how senior, must always defer to monks, no matter how junior. (2) Nuns must not spend the rainy season retreat in a residence where there is no monk. (3) Nuns must observe the fortnightly monastic observances under the direction of monks. (4) After the rainy season retreat nuns must formally report to a convocation of monks as well as to the other nuns. (5) A nun who has broken a monastic rule must be disciplined by both the order of monks and by that of the nuns. (6) Both monks and nuns are necessary for the ordination of new nuns. (7) Monks must never be abused or reviled in any way by a nun. (8) Nuns may be formally admonished by monks, but not monks by nuns.

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<sup>20</sup> Here we find perhaps the most significant differences in the Sanskrit version of the story. First of all, there is nothing of Ānanda’s switch of tactics, no direct challenge regarding the principle of soteriological inclusiveness. In the Sanskrit version, Ānanda simply repeats Prajāpatī’s original request, whereupon the Buddha responds that going forth from home under the rule of the Dharma is not suitable for women. If it is undertaken, the Dharma will not be long enduring, he adds, citing analogies similar to those that follow later in the Pali version. But then he goes on to say that he will expound eight rules that will overcome the obstructions that prevent women from maintaining the threefold instruction throughout life as nuns, adding finally the analogy of prophylaxis. The prophecy of decline thus is more vague and seemingly more avoidable in the Sanskrit version: it lacks the specific reference to a decline after 500 rather than 1000 years and it also reverses the logical order of the prophecy and the prophylactic measures, suggesting that the decline can be prevented.

*Scene 5. Ānanda Communicates the Decision.* Ānanda then returns to Pajāpatī and reports the Buddha’s decision. Honored, Pajāpatī accepts the eight conditions as readily “as a youth fond of ornaments would accept a garland of lotus or jasmine flowers,” vowing she will never transgress them.

*Scene 6. Ānanda Communicates Pajāpatī’s Acceptance.* On hearing Pajāpatī’s reply, the Buddha then declares the prophecy that this compromise will result in the Dharma enduring for only 500 years rather than 1000, adding several somewhat obscure analogies of robbers attacking households, mildew attacking rice, and rust attacking sugar cane. Finally he says that establishing the eight rules is like prophylactically building a dam so that water will not overflow a reservoir.<sup>21</sup>

The spiritual capacity of women is acknowledged here, yet the prevailing tone of the text reflects a concern for regularizing the order even at the expense of the women practitioners. Why this apparent shift in attitude? Why this new concern for androcentric control? The two attitudes are not completely incompatible, it is true; indeed both are presented side by side, at least in the Pali version of the story, yet one is struck by the incongruity of their juxtaposition. The first point to note is that the two do arise out of very different sets of concerns, and that the latter attitude of androcentrism represents a response to a problem that became increasingly more an issue after the community had reached a certain degree of success in establishing a place for itself within the broader society. In contrast to the attitude of inclusiveness, which focused on the capability of women to pursue the path, the focus [16] here is not on women themselves, but rather on a perceived threat to the integrity of the monastic institution as it existed within the broader social community.

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<sup>21</sup> As indicated in the previous note, the details narrated in the Pali version as separate events (Scenes 3-6) are collapsed in the Sanskrit version into a single exchange between the Buddha and Ānanda, without any further communication or mediation involving Prajāpatī. The rules in that version are the same, though in a different order, culminating rather than beginning with the rule about seniority; see Wilson’s analysis in Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, p. 103, n. 8.

This is why I prefer to read this story as a document of reconciliation, as a symbolic, mythologized expression of a compromise negotiated between several factions of the order, including the nuns and their male supporters. The issue was resolved only over a period of time, I suspect, and the document we have here is probably a still later attempt to rationalize and legitimize post facto what had already become the status quo. Beyond simple rationalization, however, I also see a theme of reconciliation and compromise, one that seeks to recognize and to validate each of the different positions represented.

In the story, each of the contending factions or interest groups is given a traditionally respected voice, with Śākyamuni expressing both the concern of the conservative and socially sensitive majority and also the spirit of wary (even reluctant) compromise and reconciliation that eventually emerged. The traditional figures chosen to voice the other positions suggest that it was necessary to take the contending factions quite seriously. As I have already noted, Pajāpatī commanded great respect as the woman to whom the Buddha owed the greatest debt. Ānanda is a more complex character: on the one hand, he was considered spiritually slow, being the last of the traditional 500 senior disciples to achieve arhatship; but on the other hand, tradition also holds that it was he who was asked to recite the Buddha's teachings at the first council, being seen as the most reliable source, because of his long association with the Buddha as his personal attendant and the reliability of his memory. In contrast to some of the other arhat-disciples, Ānanda is frequently depicted in very human terms and also as the male disciple most respected by the women followers. Even the shifts in scene, all of Ānanda's coming and going, may be narrative elements added to the more developed Pali version of the story to represent the complex process of mediation that had go on between the various factions.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Several other narrative details occurring in the Pali version help support such a reading. Rather than as an unlikely act of defiant disobedience, the peculiar assertion that Pajāpatī and her followers donned yellow robes after the Buddha's initial rebuff might be read as a tacit acknowledgment that an order of nuns did in fact exist for some time before the community had to confront the social problems that it involved in a more for-

To understand better the social dynamics reflected in this document of reconciliation, we must recognize more clearly the concerns it addresses. One aspect of the problem becomes more evident later in the same text when reasons are given for further special rules regarding the nuns.

Now at [one] time the entire Order of nuns went [to the monks] for [the Vinaya rite of] exhortation. People looked down upon, criticized, spread it about, saying: “These are their wives, these are [17] their mistresses, now they will take their pleasure together.” They told this matter to the Lord. He said: “Monks, the entire Order of nuns should not go for exhortation [at the same time]. If they should go thus, there is an offense of wrong-doing. I allow, monks, four or five nuns to go for exhortation.”<sup>23</sup>

Although one might question whether this solution would in fact resolve the alleged problem, it is clear that the focus of the concern for the monks is public opinion. The issue is not soteriological theory as much as preserving the social acceptability necessary to financial support. The problem faced by the community at this stage of development in fact was a true dilemma, one born of the shift toward cenobitic monasticism, an institutional structure that had no precedent in the history of Indian religions. On the one hand, the two subcommunities of monks and nuns had to maintain sufficient distance from each other to avoid the question of impropriety, and on the other hand, they had to deal with the social unacceptability (indeed unimaginability) of an

mal manner. And the similarly incongruous detail about Pajāpatī’s second thoughts regarding the seniority issue (see note 24) is probably best understood as an attempt to have one single figure in the narrative voice a divergence of opinion among the nuns. Or perhaps the latter view is the position initially taken by most of the nuns, whereas the compliant acceptance reflects part of the official compromise.

<sup>23</sup> *Cullavagga* X; 263-264. Exhortation (*ovāda*) was the special ceremony in which a duly deputed senior monk formally questioned the nuns regarding their observance of the eight special rules for nuns (*garudhammā*) mentioned earlier. Subsequently the number of nuns who could go for exhortation at the same time was further reduced from four or five to two or three. For similar reasons, a rule was also added that monks should not go to the residence of nuns to perform the exhortation.

autonomous group of women not under the direct regulation and control of some male authority.

The latter half of the dilemma is seen more distinctly in one of the analogies ascribed to Śākyamuni above in Scene 6. To allow women to become nuns would create a situation, we are told, similar to a household that had many women but few men, one that easily falls prey to robbers and thieves. In other words, women must be protected by some androcentric social structure like the family. But the order of monks is ill-suited to that task because monks, by definition, have given up just such social responsibilities. For women to regulate and protect themselves, even if consistent with the notion of soteriological inclusiveness, was nonetheless socially unthinkable.<sup>24</sup> The irony is that some more or less formally organized order of nuns certainly existed by the time this dilemma became a social issue. The nuns, no doubt, had regulated themselves quite successfully for some time and probably continued to do so after the resolution, albeit now officially under the control (and protection) of the monks.

It was an uneasy compromise, most likely, but one that got the monks off the hook, while also legitimizing as much as possible the existence of the anomalous group of quasi-autonomous women. Whether the nuns of that

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<sup>24</sup> The importance placed on the need to conform to social expectations is underscored further by an intriguing coda appended to the Pali version of our story. Though initially she had accepted all eight of the special rules as readily “as a youth fond of ornaments would accept a garland,” Mahāpajāpatī apparently had second thoughts. Later, we are told (*Cullavagga* X; 257), she asked Ānanda to go back to the Buddha to see if he would relent on the first rule regarding seniority, a concession that would have allowed nuns far greater status and prerogatives within the monastic community and one that would thus no doubt have significantly altered the subsequent history of the order of nuns. The reply was negative, not surprisingly, justified on the grounds that such a sexually egalitarian application of seniority was totally unprecedented. If it was not allowed among the other groups of religious wanderers, as lacking in care as they unquestionably were, how could it be allowed by the Buddha, Ānanda is told. The allusion is no doubt to the Jains, who had split into two irreconcilable factions over the question of whether women could become liberated as women rather than first being reborn as male monks.

time assented to the compromise as readily as Pajāpatī does in the story of course is impossible to determine historically. By accepting the authority of the monks, at least nominally, the nuns did gain a more acceptable place in the eyes of the broader society, even though in the long run that was to prove to be a heavy [18] price to pay, for the order of nuns was subsequently relegated to a second-class status, a constraint that was certain to be reflected in diminished prestige, educational opportunity, and financial support. Historically it is clear that the order of nuns went into a steady decline in spite of having secured some degree of acceptability. Given the earlier precedent of accomplished women practitioners among the Buddhists and also the better documented enthusiasm demonstrated by the parallel order of Jain nuns, one might reasonably expect that Buddhist nuns would have maintained a creative religious life in the convents in spite of increasing androcentric restriction. Although that may have been, for some centuries at least, once the androcentric structure was established, life in the convents became gradually more marginalized and eventually ceased to play any role in the official accounts of the tradition. As Nancy Falk points out, by the third century CE, the order of nuns in India had already virtually disappeared from the official record.<sup>25</sup> We know, from the report of Chinese pilgrims in India for example, that convents continued to exist well into seventh century CE and beyond, yet there is no record of what these women achieved in their practice or what they contributed to the broader Buddhist community.

Could it have been any different? Probably not under those social conditions, certainly not without more overt support from the order of monks, who had much to lose and little to gain from asserting a place of

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<sup>25</sup> “Vanishing Nuns,” pp. 208-210. A prominent exception to this observation can be seen, however, in the story of the courtesan who becomes a nun reported in the famous sixth-century Tamil epic, the *Maṇimēkalai*. In her excellent study of this tale, Paula Richman argues that it was skillfully composed to present the idea of female renunciation in favorable terms to a Tamil audience having little precedent for or familiarity with this then novel northern Indian religious ideal. Richman’s dissertation research on this topic is summarized in “The Portrayal of a Female Renouncer in a Tamil Buddhist Text” in *Gender and Religion*.

equivalence for the nuns. For all its commitment to inclusiveness at the doctrinal level, institutional Buddhism was not able to (or saw no reason to) challenge prevailing attitudes about gender roles in society. The greatest surprise is that the order of nuns managed to survive for as long as it did, however marginally.

### *Ascetic Misogyny*

Alongside the institutional androcentrism we have just considered, we must recognize another, even more negative attitude toward women and the feminine in Buddhist literature, an attitude that often was much more aggressively hostile in its expression. In some cases what we find what appears to be simply a Buddhist appropriation of prevailing social views regarding gender, as in the passage from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, where Ānanda asks the Buddha, “Pray, lord, what is the reason, what is the cause why womenfolk neither sit in a court [of justice], nor embark on business, nor reach the essence of [any] deed?” To which, we are told, Gautama replies: “Womenfolk are uncontrolled, Ānanda. [19] Womenfolk are envious, Ānanda. Womenfolk are greedy, Ānanda. Womenfolk are weak in wisdom, Ānanda. That is the reason, that is the cause why womenfolk do not sit in a court of justice, do not embark on business, do not reach the essence of the deed” (*AN*, II.82-83). The distinction between androcentric and misogynist texts is not always clear-cut, and passages like this one were undoubtedly employed in support of the institutional concerns we saw in the previous section. Even so, I think we are dealing with a different attitude here, one that has its own historical development in the literature and one that voices its own distinctive set of concerns. Part of the difference already can be seen in the fact that this passage more clearly precludes (or at least contradicts) a position of soteriological inclusiveness in its suggestion that women could never accomplish a deed as demanding as liberation. Other passages go much further, moreover, portraying women not just passively as

weaker human beings, but seeing them rather as active agents of distraction and ruin. The *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna* tells us that: “Women are ever the root of ruin, and of loss of substance; when men are to be controlled by women how can they gain happiness?... A woman is the destruction of destructions in this world and the next; hence one must ever avoid women if he desires happiness for himself.”<sup>26</sup>

Such aggressively misogynist sentiments go well beyond the attitude of institutional androcentrism: they are more defensively hostile in tone, and they arose in response to a different set of problems. To understand the place of these antifeminine depictions in the Buddhist tradition we must first look to the cosmogonic myths that the early Buddhists inherited from the older Indian culture. Details vary somewhat, but early Buddhists, along with most of their non-Buddhist contemporaries, felt that this world had evolved (or devolved, rather) from a pure realm of formless, asexual beings. Embodiment and sexual differentiation were seen as the manifestation of a lower state of existence, one bound by attachment to the earth and brought on by eating and sexual activity.<sup>27</sup> There are striking parallels between this world-view and that of the slightly later Gnostic traditions in the West, an observation explored by Karen Lang, who points out:

Both the Buddhist and Gnostic accounts of the fall have in common the following sequence of events: a deliberate act of eating brings about the transformation of originally luminous, incorporeal, and asexual nature into one that is now dark, material, and sexual. This transformation, in turn, brings about an awakening of sexual desire and the subsequent satisfaction of this desire through sexual intercourse. These scriptures imply that, since sexuality was involved [20] in the fall, abstention from sexual pleasures will weaken the

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, trans. Cecil Bendall and W. H. D. Rouse (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> There is some evidence that this account may have been a relatively later addition to the canon, a possibility that would support my view that ascetic misogyny developed later in Buddhism than the attitudes of soteriological inclusiveness and institutional androcentricity.

ties that bind humanity to the lower material world and thus enable seekers after enlightenment to ascend to the luminous state of perfection forfeited by their ancestors.<sup>28</sup>

Given that world-view, it is not surprising that both Gnostics and Buddhists would come to associate impurity with the natural realm and female fecundity, while seeing transcendent purity to be expressed in masculine celibacy. But are misogynist views in the Buddhist literature the result of such myths? Is it not more likely that the myths simply provide a socially acceptable rationalization for an attitude that arises from some more specific practical problems? In the Buddhist literature such sentiments most often are expressed in discussions of male religious practice, and especially in texts that present the spiritual ideal primarily in terms of ascetic purity. This suggests that the psychological demands of ascetic celibacy are more central to understanding this attitude than the legacy of cosmogonic assumptions. Consider the shift in perspective reflected in the following two paragraphs:

Monks, I see no other single form so enticing, so desirable, so intoxicating, so binding, so distracting, such a hindrance to winning the unsurpassed peace from effort.. .as a woman's form. Monks, whosoever clings to a woman's form—infatuated, greedy, fettered, enslaved, enthralled—for many a long day shall grieve, snared by the charms of a woman's form....

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

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<sup>28</sup> Karen Lang, "Images of Women in Early Buddhism and Christian Gnosticism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 2 (1982): 97. The attempt to establish some direct link between Mahāyāna Buddhism and Gnosticism has been a perennial theme in comparative studies of the history of religion, from the publication of Isaac Jacob Schmidt's pamphlet "Über die Verwandtschaft der gnostisch-theosophischen Lehren mit den Religions-systemen des Orients, vorzüglich dem Buddhismus (sic)" in 1828 up to the more recent efforts of Eliade, Tucci, and Conze; for a useful survey of the as yet inconclusive fruit of these endeavors, see Edward Conze's "Buddhism and Gnosis" in *Further Buddhist Studies*, (Oxford: Cassirer, 1975), pp. 15-32.

man....Verily, one may say of womanhood: it is wholly a snare of [the Tempter,] Māra. (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* III; 67-68)

Here the concern is not directly institutional, it is much more personal and individual. Where the androcentric attitude is more sociological in its intention, what we find here is more psychological, a fear of the feminine, and a fear specifically of its power to undermine male celibacy. What is being censured here? The first paragraph focuses on the male tendency to be misled by craving and clinging to a feminine form. Standing alone it might be read as an astute psychological assessment of the problems of celibacy; that is, the male problem of pursuing an ascetically celibate path. The second paragraph seems however to move from psychological astuteness to psychopathological misogyny. Here we find the feminine and women categorically condemned as a threat to male celibacy. The problem lies no longer [21] within the male ascetic, now it is effectively projected onto the external object of craving and desire, in this case womankind as a whole. In fact, the juxtaposition of perspective in this same text suggests the possibility that the second paragraph is a later interpolation, one that drew on long-standing and socially accepted gender biases to shift the burden of responsibility off of the male ascetic and onto the female object of desire. As such, the emergence of conventional misogyny into Buddhist literature would represent a shift in perspective away from the psychological soteriology of the earliest tradition back toward the purification soteriology of the ascetics who had been criticized for their excesses by Śākyamuni.

Whereas such virulent passages in fact are relatively infrequent, they seem to turn up even more often in certain genres of the later Mahāyāna literature than in the earlier *suttas* of the Pali Canon.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this is one

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<sup>29</sup> The most blatantly misogynous texts of the Pali literature are found in the *jātaka* stories, an (originally) noncanonical Buddhist appropriation of popular animal tales and hero legends. This relative (even if not exclusive) contrast between views in the *sutta* literature versus those in the more popular genres further supports my thesis that misogyny initially was resisted by the early tradition, but eventually found more of a home among those later factions of the community who defined their soteriological goals more in terms

reason why I feel it is necessary to distinguish this attitude from the institutional androcentrism considered earlier. Although the early Mahāyāna reaffirmed the basic principle of soteriological inclusiveness with its universalization of the bodhisattva path, a religious ideal it held open to all—men and women, monastic and lay—this rejection of institutional androcentrism did not entail a corresponding rejection of ascetic misogyny. Consider these excerpts from the “Tale of King Udayana of Vatsa,” a *sūtra* from the important Mahāyāna collection, the Mahāratnakūṭa

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All desires are suffering, the vilest of evils,  
The impurity of pus, extremely despicable....

Like the overflow from a toilet or the corpse of a dog or a fox,  
In the Śitavana cemetery pollution flows everywhere.  
The evils of desire are contemptible like these.

Fools lust for women, like dogs in heat.  
They do not know abstinence.

They are also like flies who see vomited food.  
Like a herd of hogs, they greedily seek manure.

Women can ruin the precepts of purity.  
They can also ignore honor and virtue....

As the filth and decay of a dead dog or dead snake are burned away,  
So all men should burn filth and detest evil.

The dead snake and dog are detestable,  
But women are even more detestable than they are....

Women are like fishermen; their flattery is a net.  
Men are like fish caught by the net. [22]

of ascetic purification than in terms of psychological enlightenment.

The sharp knife of the killer is to be feared.  
The woman's knife is to be feared even more so....

Confused by women one is burnt by passion.  
Because of them one falls into evil ways. There is no refuge....

Relationships with women are extremely base.  
Evil among evil—What satisfaction is there in lust?...<sup>30</sup>

The clear association here of misogyny with concerns for pollution and purification suggests further that this attitude evolved quite independent of the concerns that gave rise to institutional androcentrism. The prominence of the purification theme suggests, moreover, that what we find here is related to a pan-Indian tradition of asceticism, one that also may have had at least an indirect influence on Gnosticism and early Christian monasticism as well. Although the earliest Buddhists were critical of the extreme manifestations of this older tradition of śramaṇic asceticism, both on practical and philosophical grounds, outbursts like these in even the later Mahāyāna literature indicate the presence of a strong and persistent ascetic wing within the *saṃgha*. Even so, we must be careful to note the relative weight given such sentiments within the tradition. Both Schuster and Kajiyama have correctly criticized the tendency to overestimate the frequency and the centrality of this misogynist theme.<sup>31</sup> Even in this same *sūtra* we find mitigating statements; for example, King Udayana addresses the Buddha:

“Lord, because of woman's deception, I am perplexed and ignorant. For this reason I have intense hate. Lord, because you bring peace and benefits to living beings, I want you to explain, out of compassion, the flattery and deceit of women....”

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<sup>30</sup> *T* 310, XI.543-547; trans, in Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, pp. 27-50.

<sup>31</sup> See Kajiyama Yuichi, “Women in Buddhism,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 15, no. 2 (Autumn 1982): 53-70; and Barnes, “Buddhism,” pp. 105-133. In both cases, the criticism is directed in particular toward the depiction of the tradition presented in Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism*.

[The Buddha] answered: “Put aside these actions. Why don’t you ask about what is important and not about extraneous matters?... Your majesty should first know a man’s faults. Then he’ll have insight into those of a woman....Because all men engage in four kinds of wrong and excessive actions, they are perplexed by women...”<sup>32</sup>

Although the insidiously pernicious effect of misogyny must not be minimized, it must also be evaluated in the broader context of the underlying principle of inclusiveness. Similarly we must not minimize the inconsistency within the tradition here: misogyny is even more basically in conflict with the spirit of soteriological inclusiveness than is institutional androcentrism. The point is not to play down either the presence or the incongruity of misogynist sentiment in Buddhist [23] literature; rather we should see the expression of this discordant attitude as an indication of conflicting interests within the early community, just as we did with expressions of institutional androcentrism.

Whereas the attitude of ascetic misogyny led to some of the most vituperative attacks on women and the feminine in Buddhist literature, we must also note that it was more effectively challenged and counterbalanced within the tradition than the attitude of institutional androcentrism. Perhaps this was because misogyny is more obviously deleterious to both its perpetrator and its object, especially in terms of Buddhist psychology. Some Buddhists, even if not all, were quick to recognize that fear of the feminine, and misogyny, generally, is itself a form of clinging and bondage. Candrakīrti and other Mādhyamikas were fond of citing a passage from the *Dṛdhādhyāśayaparipṛccha Sūtra* that illustrates this response quite well:

“Suppose a certain man goes to a magic show. The magician creates a magical woman, and, seeing her, desire arises in the man. Due to the mind of desire he becomes anxious and fretful, and, rising from his seat, he leaves. He leaves and contemplates the impurity of that woman.... Now what do you think, O Son of Good Family, has that man done the right thing, or has he done the wrong thing?”

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<sup>32</sup> T 310, XI.543; trans, in Paul, *ibid.*, p. 29.

“Lord, anyone who contemplates the impurity of a nonexistent woman..  
.has done the wrong thing.”

The Lord spoke, “O Son of Good Family, in this [same way] whatever monk or nun, or layman or lay woman contemplates the impurity of an entity that has never arisen and never existed... has made a similar [mistake]. I would not say that such a foolish person is practicing the path.”<sup>33</sup>

All Buddhist soteriologists agreed that craving for an object of sexual gratification was a serious obstacle to liberation. In contrast to the more extreme ascetic traditions, most Buddhists went a step further to recognize that the problem lay not in the external object of desire itself, but rather in the subjective craving, which lay within oneself. The misogynist wing of the Buddhist community appears to have overlooked this distinction, however, and the Mahāyāna doctrine of nondualism can be seen, in part at least, as a response to just this type of confusion. The text just cited indicates the dispute that turned on this point, while also offering a powerful philosophical antidote. Neither “men” nor “women” in fact exist, at least not as intrinsically existing entities, nor consequently as objects of sexual clinging. If we nonetheless persist in our craving, then clearly the problem lies in the clinging, not in the nonsubstantial object onto which we project that [24] clinging. And to cling, moreover, to one’s *aversion* to such an object actually is just as deleterious as clinging to one’s *craving* for it. Here we can see the spirit of the earlier principle of soteriological inclusiveness reemerging, though expressed now with a greater degree of philosophical and psychological insight and sophistication.

The three attitudes that I have discussed so far developed side by side for much of the first several centuries after the Buddha’s death, and they are found in the *Nikāyas* and *Āgamas* as well as in the later Mahāyāna literature. Theoretically and chronologically, soteriological inclusiveness was the most basic of the three, though institutional androcentrism emerged fairly early, as

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<sup>33</sup> Trans. José I. Cabezón in “Women and Illusion: Toward an Aesthetics in Buddhism,” a paper presented at the 1987 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Boston, p. 10.

social acceptability became an increasingly important issue for the order of monks. The roots of ascetic misogyny were pre-Buddhist, but it may have been the last of the three to have emerged in the literature, at least in its extreme, vituperative form. If true, that would suggest that the psychological problems it reflects were perhaps less severe when the monastic order was still more closely integrated into lay society in the early days. As monasteries became more autonomous and the monastic life more sheltered from contact with the outside world, however, the problems of psychological adjustment to celibacy may have become more central than the social problems that arose when mendicancy and social interaction were still part of the ideal.

In any case, the tension among these three attitudes is a recurrent theme in the social history of the early community, reaching its culmination in a controversy that became quite heated by the first century CE. The dispute concerned the question of whether a woman could become a buddha. Under the influence of androcentric and misogynist views many Buddhists—from both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna schools of thought—rejected this possibility even if they were willing to allow for the existence of woman arhats. The question was never conclusively resolved, but in their attempt to reaffirm the early principle of soteriological inclusiveness some factions of the Mahāyāna were inspired to develop that original principle toward a much more actively egalitarian view, an affirmation of nondualistic androgyny, which had strong roots in the newly emerging Mahāyāna philosophy of emptiness.

### *Soteriological Androgyny*

Finally then we come to the fourth attitude we must consider, one that formulated the goal of Buddhist practice psychologically as a dynamic [25] state of nondualistic androgynous integration. As this fourth voice did not become fully articulated, in the written literature at least, until sometime after the sixth or seventh century CE, it is a development significantly postdating the period we have discussed so far (fifth century BCE-fourth

century CE). The texts and practice traditions in which it does find expression, moreover, are not part of the core tradition shared by all forms of Buddhism. Strictly speaking, this development thus falls outside of my intention to focus on attitudes toward women in early Buddhism. Even so, it warrants our attention here, both because of the crucial shift in perspective it presents, but also because it has significant roots in those earlier Buddhist attitudes and doctrines we have been considering, a point that is too easily overlooked.

The innovative aspect of this fourth attitude lies in its dramatic revalorization of the feminine—its reassessment of the soteriological relevance not just of the feminine, in fact, but of socially defined gender characterizations in general, a reevaluation of all those qualities and expectations culturally ascribed to male and female. We must be careful not to overlook the relationship between this view and the position of soteriological inclusiveness considered earlier, but we must also note the significant evolution presented in this new stance. Rather than simply seeing sexual and gender differences as irrelevant and ultimately insignificant, this fourth attitude takes a more actively positive stance. The differentiation so characteristic of ordinary relative existence is seen not merely as something to be left behind in pursuit of the ultimate. Instead, differences are acknowledged as provisional, as not ultimately real, and they are further affirmed as potentially powerful means of soteric transformation.

The underlying assumption expressed in this view is that all beings, to differing degrees, consciously or unconsciously, manifest the full range of characteristics conventionally identified as gender specific. Certain psychological characteristics are conventionally distinguished as feminine or masculine, but the emphasis is on the soteriological potential of those differences rather than on the social limitations they often reflect. Femininity and masculinity are seen as dialectically interactive modes of all human existence—mutually complementary and equally essential to the ideal state, a state of androgynous integration. The soteric task is first to recognize those psychological traits or energies that dominate one's current state and then to

use the power of that energy to bring the repressed and undeveloped aspects into full expression. Like Jung's archetypes, these psychological traits can take either positive or demonic expression, and those most [26] likely to be destructive unless positively transformed are the ones conventionally associated with the opposite sex.

This new ideal of a dialectical androgyny finds its fullest expression after the sixth century CE in the Vajrayāna literature of later Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, although its origins can be discerned already in the Perfection of Wisdom literature of the early Mahāyāna movement, which probably dates from around the beginning of the Common Era. Much of the symbolism and imagery associated with this development came into Buddhism from the subcurrent of tantrism that eventually worked its way into the mainstream of both Buddhism and the various Hindu traditions. Even though some might wish to argue that the origins of this attitude thus are non-Buddhist, we must not overlook the distinctively Buddhist interpretation and transformation of these tantric themes and motifs. The new mythopoetic soteriology of Vajrayāna Buddhism clearly owes as much to older Buddhist philosophical principles as it does to the "new" tantric symbolism that we find emerging in Buddhist literature only later.

We see the beginnings of this new attitude already in the explicit feminization of liberating wisdom as *Prajñāpāramitā* in the Perfection of Wisdom Literature. Wisdom always had been a prime Buddhist virtue, to be sure, and it has been primarily expressed with a grammatically feminine noun (*prajña/pañña*). In the early Mahāyāna literature, however, that grammatical gender begins to take on more explicitly psychological overtones when we find the ultimate virtue of wisdom, *prajñāpāramitā*, presented as "the mother of all Buddhas."

The Buddhas in the world-systems in the ten directions  
Bring to mind this perfection of wisdom as their mother.

The Saviours of the world who were in the past, and also those that are [just  
now] in the ten directions,

Have issued from her, and so will the future ones be.

She is the one who shows this world [for what it is], she is the genetrix, the mother of the Jinās [= Buddhas]...<sup>34</sup>

The femininity of this key virtue is no longer coincidental, and not surprisingly it is readily personified in the form of the goddess Prajñāpāramitā and later Tārā. But we should be careful not to assume that we are dealing with an exclusive or dualistic sexual dichotomy in this affirmation of the feminine aspect of liberating wisdom. In a provocative study of this theme in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, Joanna Macy astutely observes that the specific qualities associated there with feminine wisdom are not those typically ascribed to the feminine in more rigidly static and dualistic conceptions of sexual [27] differentiation.<sup>35</sup> Wisdom is a teacher of the Buddhas, the genetrix and nurse of six perfections. Macy points out that her “evident compassion is not seen as a cradling, cuddling, or clasping to the bosom”; it is a function rather of her ability to see with clarity. Similarly there is little talk of sheltering, housing, or enclosing, because the point of this wisdom is to attain a way of being in the world unbound by any position or fixed attachment.<sup>36</sup> What makes this affirmation of the feminine distinctly Buddhist, then, is the rejection of an exclusive bipolarity or dichotomy between the traits identified as feminine and masculine.

The interactive or dialectical aspect of gender imagery we find in these early Mahāyāna texts is reflected further in a significant shift in terminology that gradually took place within that branch of the tradition. Wisdom and compassion had always been linked in Buddhist thought, and one of the central themes of the Mahāyāna as a revitalization movement within

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<sup>34</sup> *Prajñāpāramitā-Ratnaguṇasamṃcayagāthā* XII, 1-2; trans. Edward Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary* (Bollingen, Calif.: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> Joanna Macy, “Perfection of Wisdom: Mother of all Buddhas,” *Anima* 3, no. 1 (1977): 75-80; reprinted in *Beyond Androcentrism*, ed. Rita Gross (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77a.

Buddhism was the assertion that there could be no truly liberating wisdom that was not inherently compassionate. In Sanskrit both of these terms, *prajñā* and *karuṇā*, are feminine in gender. As nondualistic androgyny began to emerge as the new ideal, that older pair of terms was supplemented, indeed virtually superseded by an equivalent pair: wisdom (*prajñā*) and skillful means (*upāya*), the latter understood as compassion in action and rendered, not coincidentally, with a word masculine in gender.

If the origins of the soteriological androgyny can be seen in early Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras*, we must turn to the tantric literature of Vajrayāna Buddhism to find the mature expression of this attitude. The psychosexual imagery assimilated into Buddhism with the development of Vajrayāna provides a rich elaboration of the nondualistic bipolarity incipient in the Prajñāpāramitā. Basic psychological states of mind, especially those conducive to or disruptive of liberation, were symbolized as both masculine and feminine deities, each with its own consort of the opposite sex; and enlightenment, the optimum mode of existence, was depicted in terms of a sexual union representing the androgynous ideal. The Vajrayāna masters recognized that the power of underdeveloped and unintegrated psychic energy could be both destructive and transformative, and they devised an intricate psychotherapeutic practice of visualization exercises that enabled properly initiated practitioners to manifest and then positively integrate even the most demonic aspects of their psyche. The liberating potential of those chthonic forces was typically represented by the female *ḍākiṇī*, the elusive “sky dancer” encountered sometimes as a demoness or hag and sometimes as a tantalizingly bewitching beauty.<sup>37</sup> [28]

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<sup>37</sup> A useful and very accessible introduction to the theme of spiritual androgyny especially as it occurs in the stories of female masters in Vajrayāna may be found in Reginald Ray’s chapter on “Accomplished Women in Tantric Buddhism of Medieval India and Tibet” in *Unspoken Worlds*, ed. Falk and Gross. Ray’s primary source, the traditional hagiographic songs and histories of the eighty-four siddhas or masters has been now been translated by Keith Dowman in *Masters of the Mahamudra* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), and in *Sky Dancer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) the same translator provides the hagiography of Ye shes ’tsho rgyal, Tibet’s most famous *ḍākiṇī* and female

Among the various voices we have encountered in this survey of Buddhist attitudes toward women and the feminine, certainly this last one has spoken most alluringly to the concerns of modern feminism. Not surprisingly this attitude in Buddhism has attracted much attention from those who are currently seeking an alternative to the sexual dualism underlying many other religious traditions, all the more so because the view repudiates the institutional androcentrism and ascetic misogyny that prevailed throughout much of the history of Buddhism. Still, we should be careful not to overidealize what we find here. The potential for a truly androgynous soteriology based on an attitude of equivalence undoubtedly is great in light of this development; but we should ask how much of that potential in fact has been realized in practice. Who, we might well wonder, has really benefited the most from this revolution in Buddhist soteriology? In theory the shift to an androgynous ideal should have undermined the repression of female spiritual practice sanctioned by the androcentrism and misogyny of the monastic establishment; and indeed one does find in the later tradition, especially in Tibet, many more instances in the literature of women practitioners and masters. Still we must also recognize a persistent androcentric focus even in the elaboration of this feminine ideal. If the goal is androgynous integration, any valorization of the feminine is primarily of benefit to the male practitioner—even though it also may alter his behavior toward women as well. The feminine sky-dancers or *dākiṇīs* are a powerful representation of the repressed feminine aspects of the male psyche, to be sure. But are the corresponding needs of the female practitioner addressed so thoroughly and so richly? It is precisely the *dākiṇīs* that come to play a

Buddha. This latter figure is also the subject of an excellent essay by Anne C. Klein “Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen” (*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 1: 73-98), a study of the philosophic tradition underlying the dynamic, nondualistic masculine-feminine imagery exemplified in the visualization practices of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Further stories of female masters in Tibet are collected in Tsultrim Allione’s *Women of Wisdom* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), along with the author’s reflections on her own experiential encounter with this tradition as a Western woman practitioner.

prominent role in this new view after all, not their masculine counterparts, the *dāka*.<sup>38</sup> But then perhaps that is a side of the tradition yet to emerge.

We have examined four different views of women and the feminine, each well represented in the literature of the tradition. At the very least this demonstrates the inadequacy of any attempt to speak of the Buddhist attitude toward women. That may seem regrettable, even if unavoidable, but I would submit that there is also a significant gain in acknowledging the multivocality demonstrated by the attitudes surveyed here. Doing so enables us to see the tradition more accurately for what it is: one stream of many interacting currents in the cumulative history of human religious experience, one that, like all other human institutions, encompasses both noble aspirations and all too human failings. To note only the variety of attitudes, however, would run the risk of seeing the tradition as fundamentally confused. As I indicated [29] in the introduction to this chapter, the picture I wish to paint is not one of confusion or ambivalence, but rather one of contending interests and concerns variously expressed by different factions within the early community, each vying to assert its specific concerns. This is not to demean the Buddhist ideal clearly expressed in the principle of soteriological inclusiveness and androgynous integration. It is, however, an attempt to view that ideal in the context of actual human affairs, the only realm in which ideals become meaningful.

Critics of Buddhism will rightly find much to censure in what I have surveyed here. Buddhist women have unquestionably suffered abuses of androcentrism and misogyny, abuses quite comparable to those recently documented in the other major institutionalized religions. For advocates of the Buddhist tradition to deny those parallels would be naive. When these all too familiar expressions of human failing are viewed in the broader perspective of Buddhist thought, however, a positive note also must be

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<sup>38</sup> This important notion that religious symbols are polysemic with regard to the gender of the user or perceiver is the central theme of the cross-cultural studies collected in *Gender and Religion*.

heard. And it can only be heard if we acknowledge the multivocality I have sought to underscore in this study. Recognizing the institutional and psychological pressures that militated against the basic principle of inclusiveness asserted by Śākyamuni, one can only be struck at the persistence with which that ideal nonetheless was sustained, to be reexpressed in ever more comprehensive terms. Although the ideal expressed in that principle only rarely has been actualized within the tradition, it consistently has remained the guiding ideal. For non-Buddhists much can be learned from this tradition's experience in attempting to sustain that ideal. For Buddhists themselves, the ideal offers much that is yet to be realized.