
Dharma, Interpretation and Buddhist Feminism

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Abstract

This article aims to critically examine and re-evaluate androcentric Buddhist text from a feminist perspective, and to consider the relationship between interpretation and dharma in theory about women with the hermeneutic approach. Through the building process of bhikṣuṇī saṅgha the cognized dharma(Truth) and its interpretation(the world) are contradictory to each other. In early Buddhist texts, the ambiguous attitude towards both equality and discrimination of women is the product of male-centered interpretation being asserted as Truth. Therefore, the realm of truth and women are limited. As the interpretation of emptiness in the Mahāyāna Buddhism strengthened, 'the theory of woman's 5 hindrances' has been criticized, and the concept of 'sexual transformation into male' for attainment of Buddhahood has been transcended. Hence, the creative interpretation by women appears in the śrīmālā sūtra. This research shows the possibility for further projects in Buddhist feminism.

I . Introduction

Buddhism is a religion of liberation. Women could participate in the path of liberation, since the Buddha admitted women as members of *saṅgha*. Early Buddhism pursued equality, and built *saṅgha* beyond the caste system. However, women were limited in the principle of equality. As the Buddhist Scholar Gross, Rita M. notes, Buddhism does have an androcentric and patriarchal record (Gross, 1993: 4). For example, when a woman became a monk for the first time, the Buddha set 'the Eight rules of honor', which

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emphasized the absolute respect to males. Further there are other sexist records existent in Buddhism : such as the theory stating that the Buddhist dharma continuance would be reduced by formation of the community of Buddhist nuns, the doctrine that women have no attainability of buddhahood because of their 5 hindrances, and the mythic stories which show female-to-male sexual transformation to become a Buddha. These were ideological obstacles to keep women away from endeavoring towards enlightenment.

The androcentric and patriarchal record of Buddhism reveals that, even under the pretense of egalitarian philosophies, women's contingent personal qualities and sex-specific characteristics have been forcibly subordinated under the assumed essence 'woman'(Tomm, 1995: 240). Many Buddhist women ask, "Does [Buddhist] religion enforce and perpetuate sex-role stereotypes and the power of men over women?" (Christ and Plaskow eds., 1979: 3). Some feminist theologians opt for an assimilationist/reformist approach which relies on the notion that the tradition is not 'irreformably sexist', and other feminist theologians opt for a total revolution entailing the rejection and abandonment of such traditional symbols, structures, and language.(*Ibid.*: 9-11) However, many Buddhist feminist scholars try to reilluminate the history of Buddhism focusing more on the 'feminist revalorization of Buddhism'² than ultraism that is abandonment of tradition. This article goes along with this argument, and attempts to reinterpret Buddhist texts including sūtra.

The written history of Buddhism cannot be considered as unbiased because it has been created and transmitted with the male-dominant perspective.³ Buddhist women's concerns are marginalized from the mainstream of Buddhist discourse, and efforts are required to overcome the long-lasting androcentrism⁴ in Buddhist history. Recent Buddhist studies

² Gross notes that revalorization contains an implicit judgment, and to revalorize is to have determined that, however sexist a religious tradition may be, it is not irreparably so. (Gross, 1993: 3)

³ "The quest for an accurate history stems from the conviction that androcentric history, by definition, cannot be accurate." (Gross, 1993: 19-20).

⁴ As Gross notes, there is "quadruple androcentrism" in Buddhism. On the first level, it must be recognized that the preservation of certain Buddhist documents operated within an androcentric context. On the second level, the records by or about women that were preserved tended to be overshadowed or ignored in favor of male-centered stories by later Buddhist traditions. On the third level, much of Western scholarship on Buddhism has reinforced this androcentrism by virtually ignoring those texts about or by women. On the fourth level, contemporary Buddhism in both

that have focused on the re-evaluation and restoration of the roles, images, and literature of women have been written predominantly by women. Many of these scholars are approaching the study of women, sex, and gender in Buddhism from a feminist perspective. For example, see Rita M. Gross, 1993; Diana Y. Paul, 1985; and Anne Carolyn Klein, 1995. (Owen, 1997: 46)

This study pursues re-evaluation and reconstruction of Buddhist texts in feminist perspective, rather than the historical research on the texts. Therefore it might be different from the description of historical research on the building process of *sūtras*. The purpose of this article is to find out the relationship between interpretation of Buddhist *dharma* and the changing awareness towards women. First of all, it explores the Buddha's enlightenment and admission of *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*. The contradicting attitude towards women in early Buddhist literature will be criticized in terms of the limited interpretation of *dharma*. Secondly, it is examined how this ambivalence is overcome in *Mahāyāna* Buddhist *sūtras*, and how interpretation of emptiness has transformed the view toward the equal status of women and men. Through this study, the meaning of Buddhist woman's history will be reevaluated with the interpretation of *dharma*. This study is expected to make a contribution to Buddhist feminism, and to provide some hints on the relationship between Buddhist feminism and Buddhist hermeneutics.

II. Women's Capabilities and Discrimination: Limited Interpretation of Dharma

1. Establishment of *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha* and Rules of Honor to *bhikṣu*

According to early Buddhist texts, the Buddha kept silence after achieving enlightenment. He thought that it was impossible to teach *dharma* to people because *dharma* can not be defined by words. With the *God Brahmā's* earnest request, the Buddha changed his mind and decided to turn

the West and Asia has been, according to Rita Gross, "unrelenting in its ongoing androcentrism" (Gross,1993: 18). Although Gross's third level reflects the situation of Western Buddhism, it is similar to the early modern Korean Buddhist studies of androcentrism.

the wheel of the *dharma* in the world. Since then, Buddhism has led people into the path of liberation. The second time when the Buddha changed his mind was when he agreed to the building the *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*. The Buddha kept rejecting women's desire to become monks, and then *Ānanda* asked the Buddha, "Can women attain arhatship?" *Ānanda's* intention with this question was to inquire into the Buddha's contradictory attitude on equality of *dharma*, as the Buddha teaches social equality and practices it through building *saṅgha*, thus overcoming the caste system. The Buddha replied that women can be *arhat*, the highest state of liberation(*The Vinayapiṭaka, bhikṣuṇī kkaṇḍhaka* 254), and allowed the community of Buddhist nuns. The Buddha's enlightenment should be interpreted regarding to worldly affairs, and the birth of women's *saṅgha* is based on such interpretation of enlightenment.

Conversely, the Buddha set the 'Eight rules of honor' to the *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*, which dictate the behavioral norms to becoming a monk. These rules especially emphasize the strict respect to *bhikṣu*⁵, and provoke women's opposition. *Mahāprajāpatī*, the Buddha's aunt and stepmother, accepted these 'Eight rules of honor' and became the first *bhikṣuṇī*, but later she requested the elimination of the first article for elder *bhikṣuṇī* to pay respect to younger *bhikṣus*. However, the Buddha rejected her appeal by the reason that there was no prevailing custom in society at the time.(*The Bhikṣuṇī saṅgha* 257-258) In addition, after *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha* was formed, the Buddha revealed his thought to *Ānanda* as follows.

If women did not intend to enter the *saṅgha* where they keep this doctrine and rules, the state of continence lives for over a thousand years. However, this state is going to remain only for five hundred years. Women's entrance to the *sramanā* life can be a reason of diminishing life of the state of continence. Making an analogy, it is like a house that be easily stolen due to the lack of men and the abundance of women, or like an infective disease

⁵ The contents of 'Eight rules of honor' are as followings. (*Bhikṣuṇā kkaṇḍhaka* T22: 923) ① Even though the *bhikṣuṇī* of one hundred years old, she must respect the new *bhikṣu*. ② *Bhikṣuṇī* should not blame or scold *bhikṣu*. ③ *Bhikṣuṇī* should not reveal *bhikṣuṇī's* sin, and should not make him remember or admit it. ④ *sikṣamāṇā* need the order of monk from *bhikṣuṇī* when she masters regulations. ⑤ *Bhikṣuṇī* commits *sanghāvāseṣa*, she should be confined in both *saṅghas* for fifteen days. ⑥ *Bhikṣuṇī* should ask *bhikṣuṇī* to teach orders for fifteen days. ⑦ *Bhikṣuṇī* cannot do *vārṣika* (growing in the rainy season) unless there is a *bhikṣuṇī*. ⑧ When *bhikṣuṇī* finishes *vārṣika*, she has to ask for three works from *bhikṣu saṅgha*.

ruining healthy grains. (*Ibid.*,:256)

Furthermore, the Buddha said that the 'Eight rules of honor' was to prevent the degradation of 'the state of continence'. (*Ibid.*,: 256 ; *the Aṅguttaranikāyā* 272-277) As we accept these texts as they describe, the Buddha allowed the *bhikṣunī saṅgha*, set conditions of the 'Eight rules of honor', denied to revise, and predicted the decrease of Right *dharma*'s continuance. How should this Buddha's attitude be understood and interpreted? One argument is some *bhikṣu* inserted the 'Eight rules of honor' regardless of Buddha's intention when they were singing together (*saṅgīti*) of *the Vinaya-piṭaka*⁶. Another argument is that the possibility of later insertion is unlikely and the rules must have existed in the initial period⁷. If the Buddha actually set the 'Eight rules of honor', the words on continuance of *dharma* reduced to the Buddha's regret about the permission of *bhikṣunī saṅgha*. When we consider the Buddhist doctrines, regret of the Buddha is an impossibility. Such states of emotion as regret of the past and anticipation of the future do not occur to the Buddha. (Wijayaratna, 1998 : 37)

The problematic nature of 'Eight rules of honor' is mentioned in many scholarly works. The major points being ; ① Different from other rules related to committed crimes, the Eight rules of honor is suggested exceptionally as a condition of the Buddha's prophecy. (Paek, *Ibid.*,: 112) ② The items in the Eight rules are too specific, such as 'both of *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣunī saṅgha*', '*sikṣamānā*', 'six *dharma*s', and so on, even though the community of Buddhist nuns had not been established. (Lee, 1985: 72) ③ Although the 'Eight rules of honor' replaced the 'order of monk', only the honor to *bhikṣu* became a condition without requiring 'adoration for Buddha, *dharma*, and *saṅgha*'. (Jeon, 1986: 327) ④ When the 'Eight rules of honor' is included to 'the order of monk for *bhikṣunī saṅgha*' later, this corresponds to the light sin, *pāyattika*. This is contradictory. (*Ibid.*, : 328)

⁶ Ven. Hae-ju, Jeon said, "After 500years since the Buddha passed away, the responsibility for the confusion in the *Abhidharma* schools is set on the formation of *bhikṣunī saṅgha*." (Jeon, 1986: 336)

⁷ This argument is based of the fact that the topic was mentioned in both of the Chinese *Āgama* and the Pali text *Nikāya* and that there were already more than one request of revision at the time. It is also mentioned that establishing 'The eight rules of honor' was socially and practically inevitable considering the gender inequality as the norm in that time period. (Paek, 2001: 112-113) Nevertheless, this argument is problematic. It assumes that this doctrine was accepted without any resistance at that time, although it is questionable in current society. This assumption ignores the existence of women's objections, and weakens the persuasiveness of this argument.

Further investigation is required to find out whether the Buddha established the 'Eight rules of honor' by himself. Apart from the search of historical fact, the problems of the 'Eight rules of honor' would be pointed out in terms of interpretation of *dharma*. First of all, the Buddha's principle of equality is interpreted in a more passive and limited manner on the issues of sex than of class. The Buddha might have to reflect contemporary Indian social customs and institutions to operate as a religious group. However, Buddhism broke these institutions, built the non-class system of *saṅgha*, and presented the equal *dharma* through these historical facts. Therefore, keeping a worldly discriminative custom only on issues of women is an obvious contradiction. Secondly, while women's being monks is permitted by the interpretation of equality, discriminative rules are applied in the problem of respectful treatment. In other words, the spirit of permission and the condition of rules as entering reveals double standard of equality and discrimination.

In Early Buddhism, the community of Buddhist nuns was established along with the predicament of the 'Eight rules of honor' and blame of degradation of Right *dharma*. In spite of these difficulties, women had strong desire for liberation. There were many liberated women who attained *dharma* according to the Buddha's teaching, and some texts, such as *Therīgāthā* recorded many case of women's enlightenment.⁸ These women left their painful worldly life, worshipped the Buddhist *dharma*, and were reborn as new beings. This is valuable history showing women's possibility to achieve enlightenment among social discrimination and prejudice.

2. Intensification of Androcentric Doctrine

After the Buddha's *nirvāṇa*, Buddhist society was dominated by conservative *bhikṣus*, including *Mahākāśyapa*, who were willing to intensify androcentric doctrines. Some of the Buddha's disciples criticized *Ānanda*'s request for building *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*, and asked him to repent his fault. (The *Vinayapiṭakā* 289) These *bhikṣus* reinforced the theory of the reduction of Buddhist *dharma* continuance by women's *saṅgha*, and justified the establishment of Eight rules of honor. In addition, they set the doctrine that women cannot attain Buddhahood due to their five hindrances. The doctrine of women's five hindrances manifests the reason why women's attaining

⁸ In *Therīgāthā*, there are songs of ninety-two liberated women, and rich description on their internal experience and life.

Buddhahood is more difficult than the case of men. Five hindrances are ; women cannot be reborn as *the God Śakra, the God Brahmā, the king māra, a Cakravartin king, and a Buddha*. This theory appears in *the Gautamī sūtra, the Gautamī Prophecy sūtra, the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya*, etc. Through these conservative reforms, the prejudice and ignorance against women worsened. Intensification of andocentric doctrine can be traced through different historical texts, because description in each text shows subtle differences in connection with theories related to women. According to the tradition of the past Buddha, terms like '*bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*' and '*a head bhikṣuṇī of saṅgha*' exist, but the theory of the Right *dharma*'s declination is not related.(Paek, *Ibid.*: 112) Then, *the Vinayaṭīkā* shows that the '*appearance of bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*' is connected to the Right *dharma*'s declination. Meanwhile, the theory of declination is intensified through various texts. *The Vinayaṭīkā* notes that because of appearance of *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*, the Buddhist *dharma* is not going to persist long and that if appearance of *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha* does not exist, the Buddhist *dharma* would remain for more than five hundred years longer. In *the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya*, the criticism is strengthened by saying, the Buddhist *dharma* would strongly exist for a thousand years, but the time is decreased to five hundred years due to the appearance of *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*.⁹

In *the Gautamī sūtra* and *the Gautamī Prophecy sūtra*, '*the appearance of bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*' is not related to the theory of the Right *dharma*'s declination. Instead, only the theory of women's five hindrances' is included.(*the Gautamī sūtra* T1, 606a-607b; *the Gautamī Prophecy sūtra* T1, 857c-858a) *The Mahīśāsaka Vinaya* reveals the most systematic connection with the '*appearance of bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*', the theory of the Right *dharma*'s declination, and theory of women's five hindrances, (*the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya* T22, .186a) which proves that it is the latest text on this issue.

The development of these theories can be explained and classified according to several steps. In the first step, the '*appearance of bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*' is not relevant to the theory of the Right *dharma*'s declination. The second step is characterized with the two relations of '*appearance of bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*' either to the theory of declination, or to the theory of five hindrances. The third step is the completion of an androcentric system by connecting the theory of declination, theory of five hindrances and the '*appearance of bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*'.

⁹ According to Jeon, the appearance of '*the theory of 500 years reduction of the Right dharma*' in texts is constructed in the present form after five hundred years of Buddha's death. (Jeon 1986: 335)

Furthermore, the theory that women cannot be a Buddha because of five hindrances is further asserted by an additional reason that women are missing retractable horse-penis marks among 'thirty two heroic marks of a Buddha.'¹⁰ Through this solidification of theory on women, it became a generalized notion that women cannot be a *tathāgata*¹¹, the purpose of Buddhist practice. Furthermore, women's *saṅgha* is the obstacle in Buddhism which will decrease the continuance of the Right *dharma*.

What was the process of intensification of androcentrism in the formal aspects? In the development of *saṅgīti* of *sūtra* and *vinaya*, only andocentric contents could be selected, and the selection and distortion was increased after the process of each *Abhidharma* school's transmission. As we can easily find the phrases referring to 'at five hundred years after the Buddha passed away' in many texts, the contemporary ideas could be intercepted into the Buddha's text when they were written around the transition of B.C. and A.D. Consequently, the discriminative doctrines against women could have been added in the texts at this time. This tells us that the motive of intensification of sexual discrimination is parallel to Buddhist hermeneutic occasions, because the time of creating, transmitting, and transcribing of text are all important hermeneutical occasions of Buddhism. Theories on women are directly related to interpretation. The discriminative nature of Buddhist doctrine is a product of andocentric interpretation without reflection on alienation of *dharma* from reality.

¹⁰ In the 2nd period of bodhisattva's practise in Buddha's former life, Śakya bodhisattva is born into a man as a result of his practice, and gets thirty-two kinds of special marks. These marks is not seen on a normal human body. Among them. the 10th mark, retractable horse-penis mark means that *tathāgata*'s penis is hidden as a horse. According to this idea, since women do not have penis, thirty-two marks cannot be formed, and therefore women cannot be a Buddha. An advanced interpretation is required regarding to the attainment of buddhahood, sex and women's limitation.

¹¹ The notion of the attainment of Buddhahood started in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Previously, the attainment of arhatship is the final goal. Therefore, the impossibility for women to become a Buddha in the doctrine of women's five hinderance cannot appear in *Abhidharma* Buddhism, and be considered to an addition after arising of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. More research on the influence of *Mahāyāna* doctrine to *Abhidharma* school is needed. The theory of five hindrances is accepted in the early *Mahāyāna sūtras*, and criticized and conquered in the later *Mahāyāna* texts.

III. Women's Conquest and Creation: The Magnified Interpretation of Mahāyāna Thoughts

1. Overcoming the Theory of Women's Five Hindrances

The status of women in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism is enlarged, compared to previous Buddhist thought. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism was a Buddhist movement initiated to recover from the problematic doctrines of *Abhidharma* Buddhism. It presented the thought of emptiness as a result of critique and reinterpretation of contemporary Buddhism. The enhanced status of women can be traced in early *Mahāyāna* texts, including laywomen's active participation in transmitting *Mahāyāna* thought.¹² According to Nancy Schuster Barnes, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism arose during a period when the implications of the Buddha's teaching came under heavy scrutiny. In particular, a "doctrinal crisis erupted wherein the spiritual capacities of women were challenged and a real effort was made to prove theologically that women are inferior to men." (Barnes, 1987: 114). Therefore, for the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist to overcome the theory of women's five hindrances was a primary subject. The process of overcoming the theory through the illustration of a few texts will be investigated.

The first case can be found in the *Nāgadattā sūtra*. When a woman named *Nāgadattā* vowed to attain Buddhahood, a *māra* disguised himself as her father and said, "A woman can not be reborn as a *Cakravartin* king. Nevertheless, how can you expect to be reborn as a Buddha?" *Nāgadattā* replied, "I have also heard that a woman cannot be reborn as a sage king, the God *Śakra*, the God *Brahmā*, and a Buddha. So, I shall transform my body into a man's and practice the bodhisattva path to become a Buddha." And then, she transformed her body into man's and received a Prediction of her enlightenment by the Buddha. (T14, p.909a) This text shows that a woman overcomes a *māra*'s discouragement to achieve Buddhahood and receives a Prophecy of attainment of enlightenment. But she doesn't criticize the theory

¹² *The Mahāprajñāpāramitā sūtra* (T8, p.544b) says, "If laymen and laywomen carry and read the *Prajñāpāramitā*, hundreds and thousands of heaven people come down to listen to *dharma* and vitalize them. When the *dharma* teachers preach *Prajñāpāramitā* in the four groups of *saṅgha*, they are not afraid of audience's question and blame." Through this text, we can see that laywomen have preached *Prajñāpāramitā* to monks, and it is likely that this is a fact, for this *sūtra* describes the psychological difficulties of laywomen minutely.

of woman's five hindrances and accepts it as true here.

The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra tries to overcome the theory of hindrances and to show directly a scene of women's attainment of Buddhahood.

Śāriputra said to the daughter of the sea dragon king *Sāgara*, "How could you attain perfect enlightenment? --- A woman's body has five hindrances.--- How can the body of a woman speedily achieve Buddhahood?" Just then, in the space of an instant, the assembled multitude all saw the sea dragon's daughter turn into a man, perfect the conduct of a bodhisattva,---and achieve perfect enlightenment with thirty two heroic marks and eighty beautiful features.(T9, p35; Jeon 1999, 124-125)

As the quote above shows, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra* has a daring design that the sea dragon's daughter conquers spiritual barrier and reveals herself achieving enlightenment instantly. But there is not a criticism of the problematic theory in this text. In addition, she became a Buddha with thirty-two marks after transformation into a man's body.

In the *Suryajihmīdaraṇaprabhā sūtra*, a monk called *Uttaragata* explains to a woman named *Prajñādattā* the reasons for limitation of being a woman.¹³ She objects to his view and argues that discrimination with regard to sex is unfounded because it is constructed by many causes and conditions. The Buddha praises *Prajñādattā*. She transforms her female body into a male's, and then, receives a prediction of attainment of Buddhahood.(T15: 542a) This text shows men's more strengthened theory of hindrances, and women's more aggressive attitude of criticism. *Prajñādattā* conquers the theory of hindrances by interpreting emptiness, as it were, 'absence of substance'. However, the stereotype of sexual transformation persists.

There are a few different views of Buddhist scholars about meaning of the sexual transformation. According to Barnes, by breaking the habitual tendency to cling to one's sexual identity as foundational, the transformation of sex becomes the theatrical presentation of the meaning of sunyata.(Barnes, 1987: 120-121) As Jeon notes, "the idea of sexual transformation for

¹³ ① Women cannot be reborn as the God *Śakra*, because of their impure and evil nature. ② Women cannot be reborn as the God *Brahmā*, because of their unbridled indulgence in lust. ③ Women cannot be reborn as the king *Māra*, because of their arrogance regarding the true *dharma*. ④ Women cannot be reborn as a universal sage king, because of being endowed with eight-four latent bad qualities. ⑤ Women cannot be reborn as a buddha, because of their hatred, ignorance, attachment to the mundane world, and *karma* accumulated through actions of body, speech, and mind. (T15: 541b ; Jeon, 19 99: 129)

enlightenment appears to be a strategy that eventually led to a theory of enlightenment in a female body.”(Jeon, 1999: 138) Furthermore, Diana Y. Paul argues that sexual transformation represents “a transition from the imperfection and immorality of human beings (the female body) to the mental perfection of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas (the male body).”(Paul, 1985: 175), and she said, “We have the dichotomy of femaleness as an image for the degraded mind and maleness as an image for the perfected mind.”(*Ibid.*: 176)

Although the inference that women cannot attain Buddhahood has been destroyed, the idea of sexual transformation remains as another issue to overcome. The concept of sexual transformation into man’s body seems to be a result of limited interpretation of emptiness in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, which still persists in realms of sexual dichotomy

2. Conquest of Sexual Transformation to Attain Enlightenment

It is considered that women’s sexual transformation to prove their enlightenment is *Mahāyāna* Buddhism’s limit to conquer men’s authority. Although this branch demonstrated women’s capability of awaking, overcoming male authority is a difficult task. It can be shown by the fact that many texts include sexual transformation motifs. In *the Candrottarādārikā-vyākaraṇa sūtra*, *the Vimaladattā sūtra* and *the Mahāratnakūta sūtra*¹⁴, the male elder is often astounded by women’s wisdom and spiritual advancement and contradicts or challenges her. Often, this challenge is manifested in his request that she prove her level of spiritual attainment by changing her sex. (Gross, 1993: 67) The heroines of these texts preach the emptiness of sex and the absence of sexual substance to the male disciples of the Buddha, responding to the request for change of sex. Nevertheless, these female figures still manifest contradictory behavior in using sexual transformation to prove the validity of their argument.

A case of women’s enlightenment without sex-change is found in the *sūtra* of *Sāgaranāgarāja. Ratnadatta*, a daughter of the dragon king who challenges the conservative disciple of the Buddha, *Mahākāśyapa*. She said, “You have said, ‘One cannot attain Buddhahood within a woman’s body.’ Then, one cannot attain it within a man’s body either. What is the reason? Because ultimately mind is neither male nor female.”(T15: 149c) After

¹⁴ *The Candrottarādārikā-vyākaraṇa sūtra* (T14: 620b) ; *the Vimaladattā sūtra* (T12: 106b) ; *the Mahāratnakūta sūtra* (T11: 554c-555b)

declaring this, *Ratnadatta* receives a prophecy of Buddhahood attainment from the Buddha without sex change. In this *sūtra*, a woman defeats a sense of man's authority with a broader interpretation of emptiness, and is given the prediction on her own body without any transformation.

In the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtra*, a more advanced case of overcoming andocentric sexual transformation appears. A goddess engages Śāriputra, the eminent monk of wisdom, in a battle of wits. She changes the monk into her likeness, and shows him clearly that sexual transformation can be applied to a man's body. This episode confirms that the interpretation of emptiness should be applied in the matter of sexuality. Mutual transformation between male and female bodies is a proof of theory on emptiness that everything has no fixed characteristics.

Śāriputrā : "Why don't you change your female sex?" Goddess : "I have been here twelve years and have looked for the innate characteristics of the female sex and haven't been able to find them. How can I change them? Just as a magician creates an illusion of a woman, if someone asks why don't you change your female sex, what is he asking?" Śāriputrā : "But an illusion is without any determinate innate characteristics so how could it be changed?" Goddess : "All things are also without any determinate innate characteristics, so how can you ask, 'why don't you change your female sex?' " Then the goddess, by supernatural power, changed Śāriputrā into a likeness of herself and changed herself into a likeness of Śāriputrā and asked : "Why don't you change your female sex?" Śāriputrā, in the form of a goddess, answered : "I do not know how I changed nor how I changed into a female form." Goddess : "Śāriputrā, if you can change into a female form, then all women [in mental state] can also change. Just as you are not really a woman but appear to be female in form, all women, also only appear to be female in form but are not really women. Therefore, the Buddha said all are not really men or women." (T14: 548b-c)

The goddess transforms Śāriputrā into the body of herself, and makes him think from a woman's standpoint about the meaning of the request, "Why don't you change your female sex?" By changing freely back and forth from female to male, the goddess proves that maleness and femaleness are not ultimately real but empty, like a show of magic. (Schuster, 1985: 90) According to Rita Gross, "By retaining her female form, the goddess demonstrates the total relativity and insignificance of sexual differentiation." (Gross, 1991: 108).

As above, the later *Mahāyāna sūtras* such as *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* interpret positively the concept of sex as a tentative and relative one and the possibility of mutual conversion, and non-necessity of change to male for

certification. Therefore, in addition to being capable of enlightenment, women gain victory over a custom of sexual transformation. This is a triumph over the limitation of the dualistic notion that separates woman as a symbol of human's imperfection and immorality, from man as a symbol of Bodhisattva's mental perfection.

3. Conquest of Another Dualism and Women's Creative Interpretation

According to *Mahāyāna* Buddhist doctrine, especially with regard to the Bodhisattva's vow, there are two kinds of female image existent. One is a woman who is required to escape from being a woman, and the other is a woman who chooses being a woman spontaneously for others. With the expansion of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, many texts included the Bodhisattva's vow which states intention to use self-enlightenment to save all suffering beings. Meanwhile, women's wish to be reborn as men appears also in some vows, because it is considered that a woman's life is full of suffering. In the *Strīvivarta-vyākaraṇa sūtra*, the Buddha preaches on women's suffering as follows:

“Women's bodies are not free, because they are bidden by others. They have uncountable difficult labor of pestling pill and rice, grinding pea, small beans, or barley, spinning yarn out of cotton, and spinning the wheel, etc. So, women have to be anxious about their bodies. To be free from this suffering forever, women have to think like this : I will throw a woman's body away and be reborn as a man fast. Then, I will become a Buddhist monk and practice the bodhisattva path. I will never covet after clothes, dishes, ornaments.”--- And the Buddha said, “A woman *Vimalarami*, who has already achieved supreme perfect irretrograde enlightenment, was reborn as a woman to help all living beings achieve enlightenment.”(T14: 919b-921a)

Women's bodies represent the suffering of living beings in this context. All living beings desire to be liberated from suffering. However, because women are bound by labors and duties, they are required to be reborn as men ahead of liberation. On the other hand, the female bodhisattvas who have achieved perfect enlightenment are considered to be in women's bodies to serve and teach living beings. This is compatible with the general concept of bodhisattva which holds that even if bodhisattvas leave the suffering world, they will come back to this painful world to save others.

For example, in the *Sumatidarika-parīpṛccha sūtra*, *Sumati* is critical of the transformation issue and vows for other women. She replies against *Mañjuśūri's* advice that she transform her female body, “The woman's

nature cannot be obtained. Why does it need for me to transform it into a man's?" However, *Sumati* proves the truth of her utterance by means of transforming into a man's body. Then, she declares vows like this : I will attain Buddhahood like the *tathāgatha* of the *Śākyas* in the future. There are not evil doing, evil intention, and features of women in my land.(T12: 78a) Another example is in the *Mahāsaṅgīpāta sūtra*. This text explains in the following about the significance of serving and teaching living beings in a woman's body.

The purpose for the goddess serving, and teaching living beings in a woman's likeness is to make living beings change their female bodies. She does this in a woman's body by reason that the transformation of a man's body into a woman's is easy, but the opposite is difficult.(T13 : 149b)

These texts connect the concept of a woman as the symbol of living beings' suffering with the concept of a woman as a bodhisattva of skillful means. The female bodhisattva's action in saving women is expressed by helping to escape from being a woman. The idea that an enlightened woman's vow to help suffering women in this world is an admirable virtue of the bodhisattva. However, this bodhisattva's vow includes dualistic limitations that divide the meaning of being a woman into two categories, that of a confident woman (bodhisattva), and that of an abhorrent woman (living beings). Therefore, a woman is able to achieve Buddhahood in her body, but at the same time needs to be reborn as a man to acquire liberation. This is contradictory and disturbs women's sense of sexual identity.

Such dualistic and contradictory view of woman is overcome in the *Śrīmālā sūtra*. According to the *Śrīmālā sūtra*, the Buddha gives a prophecy of attainment of Buddhahood to a lady named *Śrīmālā* who has praised the virtue of a Buddha.(T12: 217b) *Śrīmālā* makes the vow to ten items, the vow to three items, and one Great vow that she will accept the Right teaching.(*Ibid.*: 217b-218a) Then, she proves her vows to be true by the appearance of a rain of flowers and a mystic sound from the heaven.(*Ibid.*: 217c) *Śrīmālā* preaches the *dharma* with the power borrowed from the Buddha's authority. After she returned to her palaces, she relates the nobility of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism to her husband, the king. She also serves and teaches all women who are seven years or older in the palaces. The king teaches all men. Thus, all of the nation turns towards the *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.(*Ibid.*: 223a)

In this *Śrīmālā sūtra*, we do not find reference to sexual transformation

into a man's body in the process of receiving a prediction, or to the vow to help women be reborn as men. In addition, for the method to prove the sincerity of her vow, *Śrīmālā* does not use sexual transformation but rather natural events. Moreover, *Śrīmālā* preaches the *dharma* with 'a voice like a roaring lion' which previously has been used to represent only the Buddha's character. This suggests that *Śrīmālā*, a woman, is respected as a Buddha. Thus, *Śrīmālā sūtra* has already overcome sexism, consciousness of man's authority, and the desire to escape from being a woman.

Śrīmālā, who destroyed the spiritual barrier that oppressed women, shows new interpretations of the Buddhist doctrines. She says that men and women, who have accepted the Right teachings, can comfort and be compassionate toward all living beings and eventually become 'the Mother of *dharma*' in the world. (*Ibid.*,: 218b) Furthermore, the meaning of *Tathāgatagarbha*, the central concept in this text, is the 'womb of *Tathāgata*'. *Tathāgatagarbha*, as it were, the *dharma-kāya* in affliction, is compared to the womb of the pregnant woman. The *Śrīmālā sūtra* expresses the core of *Mahāyāna* thought as female images such as this. Besides, in the last scene *Śrīmālā* has all the nation turn towards *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, together with her husband, and gives many hints concerning the direction for Buddhist feminism.

IV. Conclusion : Further Projects of Buddhist Feminism

The history of women in Buddhism has been a process in overcoming limitation and prejudice about woman. This article intended to investigate the process of intensification of androcentrism and the process of overcoming it through the Buddhist texts from the viewpoint of feminism. According to Gross, "the attempt to limit and classify people on the basis of sex... is to make absolute determinations and discriminations on the basis of a relative, empty trait... such judgments and limitations absolutize the relative" (Gross, 1993: 177). Therefore, the doctrines of Buddhism have had to be reinterpreted to correct the error of absolutization, and overcome the limitation for woman. Generally, for feminists, the full realization of one's potential entails eradication of conventional notions of femininity and masculinity, and female and male sex roles, as well as the appropriation of all human possibilities, institutions, and pursuits as women's (and men's) birthright (*Ibid.*,: 1986: 44). Thus, Buddhist women, too have argued not only are they equal with men in the achievement of Buddhahood, but also have

made an effort to destroy the customary notion of sexism.

Women have overcome a lot of obstacles resulting in a steady re-interpretation of the Buddha's teaching, the spirit of critique about androcentrism, women's passionate desire for enlightenment, and the female bodhisattva's practice of saving living beings. We can find here the possibility and direction for Buddhist feminism. The spirit of women has been raised up by passing through the history of conquest. The *Śrīmālā sūtra* shows a newly interpreted and more developed Buddhist thought held by women, which overcomes the limit of androcentrism. As Minamoto notes, "I maintain that because the concept of equality between man and woman can be found in Buddhism... Buddhism has the potential to develop a new form of feminism" (Minamoto, 1991: 170). Buddhist feminism, which is the meeting of Buddhism and feminism, has the basis of a fundamental equality in Buddhism. Especially, *Mahāyāna* view enriches the significance of the meeting with feminism. For example, the intersection of sunyata and sex gender is particularly revealing in light of recent feminist discourse asserting that biological sex, as well as gender, is constructed (Butler, 1993).

Buddhism is not useful for considering the problems of women in general without critical re-interpretation. Thus, the further investigation of Buddhist feminism includes criticizing and interpreting Buddhist doctrines from a feminist perspective. According to Rita Gross, by reinterpreting these stories within a feminist framework, they are brought to their fullest potential and emerge as "much more into line with [their] own fundamental values and vision than [they were] in patriarchal form" (Gross, 1993: 3) In addition to reinterpreting critically, it is necessary to exhume and absorb the 'usable past' (*Ibid.*: 19) for women illustrated in the *Śrīmālā sūtra*. Buddhist feminism is expected to be a helpful theoretical quest towards saving and liberating all living beings, especially when it is accompanied by a sincere attitude to interpretation of Buddhist doctrine and self-reflection on separation and discrimination of female from male, on one's own self from others, and on reality from truth.

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