

# ‘Gender Trouble’ in Early Buddhism

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*This paper aims to investigate the historical origins of entrenched forms of sexism still evident within the Buddhist Sangha. By drawing links between the works of other scholars in an attempt to understand how the past informs the present, the author hopes that it may be a tool for others to help fashion a more enlightened future.*

Key words: Buddhism, Sangha, Sexism, Gender, History.

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My interest in Buddhism began in 2003, when I studied it in grade 12 as part of a World Religions course. I was struck by its comprehensive, ‘down to earth,’ rational view of the world, and I eventually identified as a Buddhist. Yet when I compare the smallness of my knowledge of my ‘faith’ to the great learning of others, my identification as a Buddhist is rendered a tenuous one. This paper has its origins in two separate revelations of my

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The title is an unoriginal pun based on the ‘Queer theorist’ Judith Butler’s influential book ‘Gender Trouble.’

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ignorance. One occurred when a Sri Lankan-born acquaintance acknowledged the wisdom of Buddhism and acted at times in 'a Buddhist manner,' yet declined to identify as a Buddhist; he wanted to avoid the potential for hypocrisy which he saw his parents demonstrate at times: he claimed that despite identifying as Buddhist, his Sri Lankan parents were not immune to being homophobic or sexist. A second event which prevented me from developing mistaken Shangri-La like perceptions of Buddhist countries was reading the biography of Tenzin Palmo; borne Dianne Perry in England, Palmo is famous for having championed the rights of women to practice Buddhism to their full extent, and once reduced His Holiness the Dalai Lama to tears at a council, when she passionately outlined the difficulties nun's face because of sexism in Buddhist cultures like Tibet.<sup>1</sup>

Tibet's Vajrayana Buddhism is perhaps the most familiar form of Buddhism to westerners, having been one of the later historical formations of the Buddhist schools. Palmo's contemporary battles are evidence of a long-standing tradition of entrenched sexism evident within Buddhism of all kinds, which stretches back almost 2500 years to the time the living Buddha created the Sangha, or community of ordained Buddhists.

By most accounts, Buddhism is Australia's fastest growing religion, and the 2001 census reported that it had the biggest following of any non-Christian faith; broken down, however, this means that Buddhists make up only 2% of Australia's population (Mann 2007: 2). Preliminary research for this paper revealed that many scholars had been involved with studying issues of gender in Buddhism—this possibly stems from the fact that Buddhism comprised a facet of the New Age movement of the 1960's and '70's, which was concurrent with the Women's Liberation movement; some academics with a predisposition to spirituality and a concern with feminist issues found their interests intersecting, it seems. Whilst there is no doubt much fascinating literature out there in the world of academia about gender in Buddhism, very little of it was accessible to me—an interesting essay could therefore, perhaps be written about occidental bias within Christian dominated regional

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1 (Mackenzie 1998). See in particular Chapter 13, 'The Vision.'

universities.

What was available to me was a miscellany of journal articles, small chapters, or smaller single-line references about a disparate range of issues on such a significant topic. From this poor array, I've endeavoured to investigate some of the gender troubles arising from the power relations within the historical context of early Buddhism. Two articles have proved invaluable to this paper: Mizu Nagata's *Transitions in Attitudes to Women in the Buddhist Canon: The Three Obligations, the Five Obstructions, and the Eight Rules of Reverence* (Nagata 2002: 279-295); and Jonathan Walters' *A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha's Mother's Story* (Walters 1994: 358-379).

This paper shall begin at the beginning, with the founding of the community of ordained Buddhists, the Sangha, and the controversy surrounding the ordination of women; the influence of Hindu culture shall be addressed in explicating the origins of this controversy and Nagata Mizu's paper is crucial to this task. As attention turns to the actual role of women in early Buddhism, Walters' paper has proven important, not only evidentially, but also in investigating the role of historians in further compounding Buddhist gender troubles.

Differing stories have created a mist of Buddhist mythology, from which the 'ordination controversy' emerges as a chance for historians to unravel the complicated historicity of Buddhism. This controversy is centred upon Gotami, who became Siddhartha's surrogate mother upon the death of his birth mother, Maya, shortly after his delivery. When Siddhartha became the Buddha, Gotami wanted to be ordained into the Sangha, and was the first woman to be permitted by Buddha to leave her home and undergo training. Nagata provides a good academic overview of the event:

There are approximately ten texts that record the circumstances of Gotami's entrance into the clergy. None of them agree on all counts. [...] The following points are those that all texts share in common:

1. When Sakyamuni [Siddhartha] was in retreat in his homeland,

Gotami asked for permission to enter the clergy and was immediately refused.

2. Gotami, in the guise of one who had already entered the clergy (i.e. wearing robes, with her hair cut and her feet bare) pursued Sakyamuni to his next resting place.

3. Through the mediation of Ananda [Buddha's most faithful disciple], her entrance to the clergy was admitted. At that time, Ananda spoke of the debt Sakyamuni owed her for having raised him. However, the reason why Sakyamuni felt compelled to grant permission was his own recognition that "women, too, can attain enlightenment if they enter the clergy and practice."

4. As a condition for permission to enter the clergy, Gotami accepted eight conditions, the eight rules of reverence, which Sakyamuni had laid down (Nagata 2002: 283).

The eight rules of reverence, in essence, circumscribed the participation of the nuns in the Sangha and required their obedience to the monks (see appendix). Nagata observes that whilst most texts report that Gotami joyfully accepted the eight rules and promised to revere them, two or three, however, record a different scenario. The *Vinaya* of the Mahasanghika School is one of these. It recounts how when Gotami heard Buddha declare that eight additional rules had been created just for the nuns, she questioned him, particularly on the first rule: "*A nun, even if a hundred years have passed since she received the precepts, shall greet a monk that very day with deference, rise up from her seat, salute him with joined hands, and show him respect.*" Gotami's ironic response to this rule was, "*When my years in the community reach one hundred, then I will bow in respect to a newly ordained monk*" (Nagata 2002: 284). One might expect that eight additional rules would not sit easily with Gotami and her fellow females, as some of the sources indeed testify—Gotami's response in the last story could be more bluntly rearticulated as, "Over my dead body!"

Nagata claims that in most sources, after the eight rules of reverence have been stated, Buddha expresses the view that the community will suffer harm as a result of including women. Buddha stated that because he let women into the Sangha, the predicted 1000 year reign of Dharma would be reduced by half:

“If I had not permitted women to enter the clergy the period of the true dharma of the Buddha would have lasted a thousand years; but because I have now permitted women to enter the clergy the period of the true dharma has been reduced to 500 years. It is like a house in which there are many women and few men: it rapidly declines” (Nagata 2002: 285).

The Buddhist community is also likened in many accounts to a good crop blighted by disease: “women will affect it like ‘mould’ in rice, wheat or sugarcane fields” (Nagata 2002: 283).

The shared elements amongst the various accounts testify to the patriarchal *mise en scene* in which women struggled for ordination. Hinduism bears a degree of infamy not only for the religiously institutionalised oppression of its caste system, but also its treatment of women. Gunapala Dharmasiri describes the Hindu culture at the time of the Buddha as one “where the woman was by definition inferior to man and where woman was strictly stated to be the obedient servant and devotee of the husband, to the extent that she should be willing to sacrifice her life at the funeral pyre of her husband” (Dharmasiri 1997: 138-172, 150). Hinduism categorically stated that woman’s lives should be ones of subordination. The Brahmins, the dominant highest ranking caste in society, articulated women’s life-long secondary status through what Nagata refer to as the ‘three obligations doctrine,’ recounted in their key legal text, *The Laws of Manu*:

A woman in childhood should be subordinate to her father, in youth to her husband, and after her husband’s death, to her children. A woman must not be allowed to be independent.

A woman should not seek to be separated from her father, husband or son, for by doing so she brings disgrace both on her own and her husband’s family (Nagata 2002: 280).

When the secondary status of women in most social circles would naturally be a source of suffering, what accounts for Buddha’s seemingly hypocritical perpetuation of it within the Sangha, the one place equality might

be expected to reign? Various historians have tried to extrapolate from his actions what Buddha's motivations were.

Dharmasiri is keen to stress that the assertion by Buddha of the equality of men and women, at least as regards their potential to reach enlightenment, was truly revolutionary when one considers the "patriarchally entrenched Hindu culture." In some not insignificant ways, little has changed between the Buddha's days and ours—women are still subject to harassment, and nuns in 6th century India were not exempt from this. For example, the nun Subha once found her path in the forest blocked by a man who claimed he was infatuated by the beauty of her eyes—her answer was to pluck them out and present them to him (Dharmasiri 1997: 155; Trainor 1993: 57-79). "So," Dharmasiri writes,

in such circumstances, an enlightened Buddha should have definitely shown some reluctance as a sensitive human being about starting the order of nuns. On the other hand, reluctance may have been a skilful means to elicit the full responsibility from women for starting the order, being aware of the possible dangerous side effects (Dharmasiri 1997: 155).

Revealing her faith in Buddhahood, Dharmasiri contends that, "[if] the Buddha were really enlightened, he should have been aware of the social issues involved," and that whatever decisions Gotama may have made in regards to the nuns, "[he] must have done it for the safety of the nuns themselves"; Buddha's specification through the 'eight rules of reverence' for nuns to be subordinated to the guidance of the monks was a product of necessity in the face of the circumstances of the patriarchal social situation,' thereby giving the rules a validity and legitimacy according to the embedded social structure.' Dharmasiri disputes the actual centrality of the Buddhist Sangha to Buddhist practice, claiming that compared to Judaism with its synagogues, and Christianity with its churches, "Buddhism has no doctrinal indispensability of social 'institutions' for attaining liberation [or, salvation]." Dharmasiri contends that viewed in this light, women's ordinations were a political and cultural issue rather than a doctrinal one (Dharmasiri 1997: 154).

Nagata argues that an aspect of this political situation was an awareness on Buddhism's behalf of its radical status amidst Hindu Indic culture, and its desire to ensure its survival by not 'rocking the boat' of the cultural scene too much. Nagata argues that this reluctance is evident in one of the myths about Buddha, when, upon his enlightenment, it took the persuasion of Brahma himself to convince Buddha to expound the Dharma, and to set in motion the First Turning of the Dharma Wheel (Nagata 2002: 281).

Buddha had much to be reluctant about: "against the traditional faith in God, soul and active indulgence in worldly life, he preached the philosophy of atheism, *anatta* (soullessness), and world renunciation" (Upadhyaya 1968: 163-173). Yet it seems that because Buddhism did not explicitly set itself up in opposition to Hinduism (like Jesus did to the religious leaders of his day, for example), Buddhism was allowed to exist as an alternative, relatively unmolested. There was a two-way traffic of influence between Hinduism and Buddhism. Upadhyaya argues that the Dharma, championed by such a charismatic personality as Buddha, "posed such a serious challenge to traditional Indian thought that the need was felt at once to put its house in order," leading to a revision of Brahman thought (Upadhyaya 1968: 164ff; Horner 1982: 5ff). Hinduism, on the other hand, exercised its own influence upon Buddhism, as we shall see.

In the *Vinaya in Five Parts* of the Mahisasaka school, one of those texts where Gotami questions the Rules of Reverence, Buddha explains his reasons to Ananda for the First Rule of Reverence: "That I established this rule for nuns is because it accords with reason. And why is that? Women have five obstructions: they cannot become an Indra, Mara, Brahma, Cakravartin King, or Dharma king of the three realms [i.e., a Buddha]" (Nagata 2002: 284-285). The five figures referred to in Buddha's comment are five types of superior being from Hindu cosmology. Brahma is the creator god and the deified form of Brahman, the principle of reality underlying all things; he was adopted and worshipped during Buddha's lifetime as a protector deity of Dharma, as was Indra, the most powerful of the Vedic god's, and the ruler of the Trayastrimsa heaven. Mara is the controller of the world of desire that

both gods and humans dwell in, the realm of *samsara*, and in Buddhist scriptures is always portrayed as impeding the spread of Dharma: “Mara resented the Buddha’s enlightenment [and tried to prevent it] because it meant that the Buddha would not be reborn in the world of desire. The spread of Buddhism meant the diminishment of the world Mara controlled” (Nagata 2002: 281). In Indian mythology, a Cakravartin king is an ideal world-ruling sovereign, who rules by righteousness (*dharma*), rather than might. Nagata describes a Buddha as “one who has transcended the world of human beings and gods and is the highest guide of the spiritual realm. In contrast, a Cakravartin king is merely the ruler of the secular aspect of the human world” (Nagata 2002).

In sum, Buddhism transformed the beneficent gods of India into protector deities and made Mara an object of dread. Sakyamuni was given higher rank than the ideal ruler of the secular world, and as the highest being within the world of humans and gods transcended historical existence (Nagata 2002).

Buddha was cleverly remodelled as *the* Supreme Being, thereby stressing the pre-eminence of his Dharma. Nagata argues that this manipulation of Hindu mythology also served the purpose of propitiating the threatened culture:

The fundamental teachings [of Buddhism] ran counter to traditional Indian thought. These philosophical reasons were the reason why Sakyamuni hesitated before beginning to teach others after achieving enlightenment. Buddhism was made more palatable to Indian society by transforming the already existing and widely known gods into protectors of the Buddhist religion (Nagata 2002: 293).

Original versions of this story were written in the native language of the culture whose mythology they appropriated, with the Sanskrit term *sutana*, literally meaning ‘rank’ or ‘position,’ being used in relation to the five beings. Yet when this story was translated into Chinese, as in the Mahisasaka version above, ‘rank’ or ‘position’ was usually translated into ‘obstruction’ or ‘obstacle.’<sup>2</sup> Within China, there was a well established native version of the



three obligations doctrine found within Hindu culture, expressed for instance in the Confucian classic *The Book of Rights*:

For woman, there is the teaching of the three obligations. They have no special way of their own. Therefore, while they are unmarried, they are subordinate to their fathers; while they are married, they are subordinate to their husbands, and when their husbands die, they are subordinate to their children (Nagata 2002: 280).

Nagata describes the doctrine of the five obstructions as, “an abstract expression of discrimination against women”; when coupled with the doctrine of the three obligations, it formed “a set phrase expressing the inferiority of women,” not only within Chinese schools of Buddhism, but in Japanese schools, and also back in India, where the three obligations doctrine persisted with Hindu culture. Whilst the five obstructions doctrine developed within Buddhism itself, “[like] the doctrine of the three obligations, however, it was linked to Hindu culture, although the circumstances of its formulation were very different” (Nagata 2002: 293). Hinduism thus had a significant effect upon Buddhism, not necessarily in a very positive or productive manner.

We can safely conclude, Nagata argues, that the subordinating doctrines of the three obligations and the five obstructions were not the direct teachings of Buddha; The seemingly sexist ordination stories, and the instigation of the eight rules of reverence which they imply, have been revealed by historians to be monkish concoctions’, posthumously written and functioning to justify the sexism that developed within the Sangha following the Buddha’s death.<sup>3</sup> The mist that surrounds the origins of the ordination controversy, caused by conflicting stories, is merely representative of a larger fog when it comes to

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2 There is a Pali version of a ‘five obstructions story’ extant in the Chinese *Bahudhatuka Sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikaya*: “One of the qualities of a wise person is that he knows that a female cannot become ruler of the world of humans and gods ... He knows that it is not reasonable for a woman to become an arhat or truly enlightened one. He knows that it is reasonable for a man to become an arhat of truly enlightened one. He knows that it is not reasonable for a woman to become a Cakravartin king, Indra, Mara or a Brahma” (Nagata 2002: 282).

3 (Dharmasiri 1997: 153-4), citing Alan Sponberg; see also (Walters 1994: 363), citing Nancy Auer Falk, Renate Pitzer-Reyl and Rita M. Gross.

the position of women within Buddhism.

In the course of elucidating the part played by women in early Buddhism, eight rules of reverence or no, Jonathan Walters provides an invaluable analysis of the obfuscations historians themselves have contributed to this area. Walters focuses upon a set of woman's voices grouped around a body of Therivada hagiographical texts, the *Therigatha* ('*Psalms of the sisters*') , a famous body of verses spoken by nuns who became enlightened during the lifetime of the Buddha. These texts are paralleled by a longer and similar set of texts about monks, called the *Theragatha*, or '*Psalms of the Bretheren*.' The entire collection dates from no later than the third century BCE, about 200 years after the period they discuss (Walters 1994: 364).

In the late 19th century, the pioneering Buddhologist Caroline Foley found ample evidence within the *Theragatha* of women playing a decisive role in early Buddhism, a religion which to her eyes held an unprecedented degree of egalitarianism. She contended that women spearheaded a number of reforms, most significant of which was, "an enhanced appreciation and cultivation of female spirituality and the concomitant creation of less oppressive social roles for religious women" (Walters 1994: 359-360). Foley's findings confirmed the dominant scholarly attitude of the time that Buddhism represented a 'Reformation' of Brahmanical Indian society, thus erecting a Brahmanical-Buddhist continuum when it came to the issue of women's religious progress in 6th century India (Walters 1994: 359-361).

This rosy and simplistic view of both Brahmanism and Buddhism was significantly disrupted in the 1980's by Diana Paul, whose *Women in Buddhism* "represented a new stage in the historical study of Buddhist women."<sup>4</sup> In the texts she studied, Paul found a traditional context that constrained rather than produced religious images of the feminine, and traced the cultivation by women in response to this restriction of an androgynous Buddhist mythology within the Mahayana school.<sup>5</sup>

Paul displaced the Brahmanical-Buddhist continuum with a

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4 (Walters 1994: 361), citing (Paul 1985).

5 See also (Paul 1981: 63-71).

Theravada-Mahayana continuum. Walters admits that such an analysis is useful in the attention it draws to the very real efforts of Mahayanist women in combating the misogyny of early Buddhism, but in championing Mahayana Buddhism simply for not being Theravada, any positive characterisation of women in the earlier school is lost (Walters 1949: 362).

Karen Lang continued with the important work Paul led in correcting the romantic scholarship on the women in the Theravada tradition, revealing androcentrism to be more widespread among the early Sangha than previously thought. Lang painted a picture that, while still promising in regards to religious women, was much bleaker than Foley's vision:

Despite [a] lack of support, even from their own community, Buddhist women were active participants in early Buddhist history. Their verse reflect a concern and compassion for others that lie at the root of Buddhist practice. But because the gradual patriarchalisation of early Buddhism tended to obscure their achievements, we need to reclaim these long dead women as part of our own human history (Walters 1949: 362).

Yet Walters claims that the voices that Lang chose to give mouth to articulated nothing but tales of oppression, and thereby served as a 'counter-voice,' defeating the purpose of the exercise: "*Theravada women speaking through Lang embody misogynist attitudes, reproducing them in the process of making them eloquently testify to their own remarkable achievements*" (Walters 1949: 362). Therevada is again characterised as something to be moved beyond. Walters counts as achievements the rectifications of erroneous views about early Buddhism in the face of canonical evidence of misogyny, and concurs on the importance of female Mahayanist's advances on this sexism. His paper, however, is an important attempt to show that Theravadin women, like their Mahayanist counterparts, were vocal and active in constructing their own worlds.

Walters proves that misunderstandings or misreadings of Buddhist texts account for misconceptions about the role or status of women in early Buddhism. As with any investigation of a system of thought, the

historiography of Buddhism has been conducted primarily through an analysis of the written (and spoken) word. Walters examines the “amplifications and silencings of women’s voices that characterise both the ancient and medieval Buddhist tradition in which this hagiographical literature was produced and transmitted, and the modern Western academic tradition in which it has been studied and interpreted” (Walters 1949: 358).

Walter’s thus reveals the difference in opinion between Foley and Lang regarding early Theravadan women not to be a problem of contradiction, but rather of historical conflation. Both parties were reading from different renditions of the one text: Lang, in the 1980’s, worked from an original version of the *Therigatha*, whilst Foley, in the 1890’s, worked from a commentary by Dhamapala written almost 900 years after the *Therigatha* stories were conceived. As Lang revealed, the original *Therigatha* made the true extent of the androcentrism in the Sangha much more evident than it was to Foley; Dhamapala did indeed observe a degree of sexism within the *Therigatha*, and it was his description of women’s fight against this which enabled Foley to draw her somewhat ironic conclusion about nun’s position of strength within Buddhism (Walters 1949: 362-363).

The missing link which rectifies this historical conflation is the Apadana collections of the 1st century B.C.E. This groups of stories expands upon both the *Theri*-and the *Theragatha*, by fleshing out the bibliographical stories of the monks and nuns with accounts of their many past lives, and what they did in these to help them reach enlightenment at the time of the Buddha. The *Theri-Apadana*, the stories about the nun’s past lives, is important in its discussion of the gendered problematical situations which nuns encountered, and moreover articulates a very vocal response on their part to these problems: “[t]hey certainly address some sort of androcentrism, for they lash out at a male dominated context” (Walters 1949: 370). For example, Yasodhara claims credit for herself for the deeds she did in past lives as the Buddha’s wife, such as making countless offerings to previous Buddha’s and Bodhisattvas on his behalf, which led to his this-life enlightenment. Similarly, Bhadda-Kapilani, the wife of a famous monk, claimed one of his past-life

deeds to be her own: when he was angrily reluctant to give an offering of alms to a Buddha, she intervened and did so, saving him from damnation. Another nun was even able in these stories to glorify herself for killing a scoundrel husband (Walters 1949: 370).

Whilst Dhamapala may have based his commentary of the *Therigatha* upon an original version of the text, the *Theri-Apadana* inspired him to make a paltry translation of its bibliographical stories into prose. In so doing, he lost a great deal of the interpretive and ideological dimensions of his source texts, reducing the force of the women's voice by removing their ideological stance, thereby leaving an account for later Buddhologists like Foley which misrepresented the social reality of the Sangha (Walters 1949: 365).

Whilst the *Therigatha* does reveal the position of women to be powerful enough to actually begin combating sexism, leading to later freedoms within the Mahayana tradition, as Diana Paul observes, Walters wants to move beyond this Theravada-Mahayana continuum. He protests the disservice of dumbing-down and silencing within commentarial writing, and strives to show that within the 100-200 year period between the *Therigatha* and the *Apadana*, women had made some significant lea-way both within and outside the sangha:

I want to suggest that the texts of the *Theri-Apadana* [...] both produced and were produced by a period of strength for Buddhist women, which lasted until the eclipse of that power in Theravadan societies and the silencing of these texts within Theravadin commentarial thought some 1,500 years later (Walters 1949: 359).

Walters cites clear epigraphic evidence that Buddhist nuns actually participated in imperial building projects, and claims that in this era some nuns must have enjoyed significant power, including economically, and

were among the key players in the most important politics of their day. [...] Although a comprehensive history of Theravada nuns remains unwritten, there is good evidence to suggest that nun's continued to play important religious, political and economic roles in

Theravada Buddhist history right up to their medieval “disappearance” (Walters 1949: 368).

Walters argues that the *Apadana* stories were probably composed to be performed in empire-wide state festivals sponsored by the Sunga and Satavhana emperors in the second and first centuries BCE. These would have made sophisticated dramas, performed by both men and women, with nuns stories being performed alongside monks. The stories functioned as imperial ‘charters’ for the empire: “the literary unity of all Indians (as characters in some Buddhist cosmology) constituted an actual association of people from all geographical locations and walks of life as a single imperial unit. This pan-Indian association, the empire, was enacted and affirmed during the imperial festivals” (Walters 1949: 368). The expansion of the empire which occurred at this time meant a parallel expansion of the context for Buddhism, by now a strong bulwark of India’s religious culture. Stories about renunciant monks were only relevant to other renunciant monks, so the *Apadana* were provided as examples for the (ever increasing) majority of potential lay people, who were at the beginning of the path to enlightenment, not the end, of what they could do to aid their progression along it.

The world of *Apadana* was characterised by strict separation of the sexes when it came to reincarnation—monks were always men in their past lives, nuns were always female. This created the problem of the relevance of men’s stories to women: “Given the universalising context to which these texts belong, the absence of nun’s tales would have represented a glaring defect: one half of human society would have been excluded from salvation (as well as political participation).” In this context, the *Theri-apadana* “addressed a special, gender-related soteriological problem” (Walters 1949: 369). Its stories extended Buddhism to women at large as the monks tales did to men. The *Gotami-apadana* gave examples of Gotami performing meritorious acts in a past lives as a slave woman, a rich man’s daughter, and a powerful goddess, all of which led to her eventual enlightenment; additional tales further outlined a huge range of salvific acts for women to perform to help them towards liberation, and also detailed the range of women who have the

potential for arhantship—all of them, as it happens, reminding us of Buddha's acknowledgment that potential for enlightenment was sexless.

Whilst a woman could become enlightened, could she actually become a Buddha, one who could show the way to liberation for others? “[A] serious soteriological problem for women remained: nuns in previous lives could serve as paradigmatic counterparts to monks in previous lives, but who could stand in apposition to the Buddha himself?” (Walters 1949: 372). If Buddha was the supreme role model for men, did this leave women floundering in an enlightened *samsara*, able to achieve nirvana but unable to achieve *parinirvana*, “that supreme ‘going out’ that, attained by few, points the goal out for many?” (Walters 1949: 372) Walters claims that the *Apadana*'s gave a resounding “yes,” in the *Gotami-apadana*, where Gotami is portrayed as “a supreme paradigm for religious women” (Walters 1949: 373).

The action of this *Apadana* takes place on the final day of Gotami's life, aged 120, and recounts in flashback her past lives, before describing her entry into *parinirvana*. This description parallels, almost step by step, that of the famous older *Mahaparinibbanasutta*, which recounts the death and *parinirvana* of Buddha. As with Buddha, Gotami's decision to undergo what will be her final death is attended by miraculous earthquake and thunder; like Buddha's, she is confronted by her followers and asked for an explanation of the phenomenon, and tells them it means she has decided to enter *parinirvana*. The text diverts from the *Mahaparinibbanasutta* (almost heretically, Walters observes), to say that having occurred before the death of the Buddha, it was not the earthquake produced by Buddha's decision to enter *parinirvana*, but that of Gotami's decision to and the one following her death that informed Buddha's chief disciple Ananda of his lord's imminent departure from the world. Also, Gotami's nuns decide to reach nirvana with her, unlike Buddha's monk. Like Buddha, Gotami consoles her followers (and Ananda) about her final departure, and also performs a number of miracles. Gotami's exit from this life through various levels of consciousness is traversed in exactly the same order as Buddha's, and attended by the same recitations on the part of the chief monks and gods. Beings from all the levels of existence are likewise

portrayed as lamenting her death; Gotami's funeral is even explicitly portrayed as being more sumptuous than the Buddha's (Walters 1949: 373-375).

Through this laborious portrayal of Gotami as the Buddha's female counterpart, "the *Gotami-apadana* was able to solve a serious soteriological problem raised by gender specific characterisation of the Path" (Walters 1949: 375). As the founder of the bhikkuni-sangha, the order of female nuns, and having completed her spiritual path by demonstrating the attainability of paranirvana, Gotami was the vindication of Buddhist practice for females. The *Gotami-apadana* articulates a voice far removed from any of the counter-voices that Lang may give breath to.

In the course of importantly correcting Foley's misconceptions about the early sangha, scholars like Lang and Paul unfortunately conflated early Buddhism with all Theravada thought, and silenced the strong female voices that Foley and her colleagues called to our attention over a century ago, such as Gotami's. Walters argues that it is important these Theravadan voices be heard along with the Mahayanist voices Paul has recovered, as they demonstrate the power of women to have "successfully launched a powerful challenge to early Buddhist androcentrism" (Walters 1949: 377).

In conclusion, I wish to return to one of my starting points, the inspirational Tenzin Palmo: the contemporary battles of Palmo and other courageous women (and men) against the sexism which undermines their practice is revealed by the ordination controversy to be part of a nearly 2500-year-long continuum of sexism. In "*Reflections on Buddhist-Christian Dialogue and the Liberation of Women*," Paul Ingram writes that "[a]t their core, neither Buddhist nor Christian teachings are patriarchal, but both have been shaped by institutions that are patriarchal" (Ingram 1997: 49-60). Some aspects of this patriarchalism have been revealed in the historiographical unravelling of the issues surrounding the ordination of women into the sangha. As Walters shows, some historiography has (probably unintentionally) proved itself the agent of patriarchy, by denying the voice of women's successful



contention against androcentrism.

I believe that it is because the core components of Buddhist philosophy are firmly rooted in the *self-evident facts of our existence* [my supervisor here commented that “this big claim will require some explanation] that Buddhism has endured as one of the world’s oldest organised ‘religions,’ finding endless cultural manifestations as it strives to provide an answer to the universal issues of life. Australia is just one of these places where it is being recognised for its increasing applicability. Unfortunately, however, cultural sexism has made its incursion into a doctrine where it should ultimately have no place, and has even encouraged the interior genesis of sexism. Ingram writes that “[t]he liberation of women engenders other forms of liberation—for both women and men” (Ingram 1997: 49). It is important that the stories of the early nuns are given voice, as they broaden the horizons of what ever-adaptable women are capable of achieving in the face of adversity, and might suggest new or overlooked tactics in tackling the incursion of sexism into a doctrine, the Dharma, which when truthfully and selflessly followed, may lead to the liberation of all sentient beings from suffering.

## Appendix

The order and context of the eight rules of reverence varies a bit from text to text, but Nagata provides this example from the *Pali Vinayas*:

1. *A nun, even if a hundred years have passed since she received the precepts, shall greet a monk that very day with deference, rise up from her seat, salute him with joined hands, and show him respect.*

2. *A nun may not spend the rainy season retreat in a district where there are no monks.*

3. *A nun should ask two things of the monks every fortnight: when the Uposatha, or the bi-monthly confession, will be held, and when the nuns should call upon the monks for instruction in the eight rules of reverence.*

4. *A nun should make the triple invitation before two groups within the Sangha, the male and female, after the rainy season retreat; she must ask if anyone has seen, heard, or suspected anything against her.*

5. *A nun who has committed a serious offence shall undergo the manatta discipline before both groups.*

6. *A nun can receive the complete precepts before both groups only when the sikkhana, or 'postulant,' has followed the six precepts for two years.*

7. *a nun may on no account revile or abuse a monk.*

8. *A nun may not admonish a monk from this day forwards [the day of the founding of the nuns' order], but a monk may admonish a nun.*

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