

Women in Buddhism

KAJIYAMA YUICHI

In 1930 I. B. Horner published *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London), a celebrated work in which she discussed in detail the status of women, lay as well as mendicant, during the period of Early Buddhism. The book, based on abundant materials which this excellent Pali scholar collected out of the Vinaya and Nikāya texts, threw much light not only on the societal and spiritual state of women under Early Buddhism, but also on the history in general of ancient India. Recently, Diana Mary Paul, a gifted scholar of Indian and Chinese Buddhism and the author of *The Buddhist Feminine Ideal—Queen Śrīmālā and the Tathāgatagarbha* (American Academy of Religion Dissertation Series No. 30, Scholars Press, Missoula 1980), has written a book entitled *Women in Buddhism* (Lancaster-Miller Publishers, Berkeley 1980). She deals with the status of women as found reflected in Mahāyāna sūtras such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, *Saddharmapundarika*, *Sukhāvativyūha*, and *Śrīmālādeviśiṃhanāda*. Clearly in this work she picks up the threads of history where Horner left off and continues the study of women in the periods subsequent to those discussed by Horner. In fact, Horner wrote the preface to Paul's book.

Both authors, being women themselves, are naturally concerned with the discrimination which almswomen and laywomen suffered in the Buddhist communities in ancient India. I appreciate the interpretations they offer of discrimination against females in Buddhist society. My intention here is to add some comments which will help to show how the problems of women in general were closely related to the changes of Buddhist ideas of deliverance and enlightenment in the times to which they refer. Briefly stated, both men and women equally attained arhatship in the days of Gautama the Buddha and his direct disciples. However, during the following period in which the Buddhist order underwent

division into about twenty schools—the period of Hinayāna Buddhism, as it is called—the belief arose that a woman is unable to become a Buddha, making Buddhahood a possibility open only to men. After Mahāyāna Buddhism appeared in history around the beginning of the Christian Era, it tried to emancipate women through the philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) promulgated by the *Prajñāpāramitā* and related sūtras, which declared the equality of both sexes on the grounds that men and women alike are empty of essential natures; and through a movement which encouraged faith in Buddha Amitābha who sympathized with the physical and social plight of women, and who propagated the doctrine that all women who devote themselves to Buddha Amitābha would be born in his paradise—actually, in the sense that people are all subject to the truth of suffering, it may be said that we are all invested with feminine natures. The philosophy of emptiness and the grace of Buddha Amitābha became the two wheels which carried the vehicle of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In trying to revive the real spirit of Buddha Gautama, Mahāyānists developed new ideas and theories which led to the emancipation of both women and Buddhism itself. The following is not a review of Paul's book *per se*. It is meant to serve as another interpretation of the materials with which she dealt.

I

The *Saddharmapundarikasūtra*, popularly called the *Lotus Sūtra*, tells a famous story of the daughter of Sāgara, the Serpent King, who transforms her female body into a male body just before she becomes a Buddha.¹ Before she demonstrates this transformation and realization of Buddhahood, Śāriputra, who is a renowned disciple of Gautama the Buddha, and who, however, usually plays the role of a comic character in Mahāyāna sūtras, addresses the daughter, saying that a woman cannot realize five kinds of status, namely, those of Brahmā, Indra, the Four Guardian Gods, the Universal Monarch (*cakravartin*), and the irreversible Bodhisattva.² Irreversibility is one of the last stages of Bodhisattvahood.

¹ *Saddharmapundarikasūtra*, ed. H. Kern and B. Nanjio (Bibliotheca Buddhica X), pp. 263–265; D. Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, pp. 187–190.

² For the third status, the Skt. text has *mahārāja* (Great King), Kumārajīva's Chinese tr. *Māra*, and Tib. text "Four Guardian Gods"; for the fifth, Kumārajīva's tr. has "Buddha."

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

Without going through it a Bodhisattva cannot attain the stage of Buddhahood. That a woman is incapable of becoming an irreversible Bodhisattva, therefore, is tantamount to saying that she can never attain Buddhahood. In spite of this declaration by Śāriputra, she realizes Buddhahood by first changing herself into a man.

This story shows two facts: 1) At the time of the compilation of the *Lotus Sūtra*—during the second and third centuries—the dictum that a woman is unable to become a Buddha had been well established. 2) The *Lotus Sūtra* was meant to eliminate such discrimination and to demonstrate the Mahāyāna idea that even a woman is capable of becoming a Buddha. The *Lotus Sūtra*, however, had to make a compromise, changing the daughter into a man before she became a Buddha, because of the discriminatory belief that prevailed in contemporary Indian society.

We come across the same discrimination and the same idea of sexual transformation even in the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines (Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra)*, the oldest of Mahāyāna sūtras, which came into existence around the beginning of the Christian Era. In this sūtra there is a story of Gaṅgadevī, the Goddess of the Ganges, in which Gautama the Buddha gives a prediction that the Goddess will become a Buddha, Suvarṇapuṣpa (Golden Flower) by name, after going through numerous rebirths.³ But the Goddess, after her death, has to change her sex from female to male before being born in the Land of Buddha Akṣobhya. Thus, we know that the theory of a woman being incapable of becoming a Buddha as well as the idea of sexual transformation as a solution existed at the very beginning of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

II

In Japan as well as China the Buddhist axiom that a woman has “five kinds of incapacibilities and three kinds of subordination” (五障三従) was widely accepted up to the nineteenth century. The five kinds of incapacibilities of a woman are the same as those which Śāriputra mentions in the *Lotus Sūtra*, although the third (the Guardian Gods) and the fifth (the irreversible Bodhisattva) are here replaced by King Māra, the

³ *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, ed. P. L. Vaidya (Buddhist Skt. Texts, No. 4), p. 181; Paul, pp. 182-184.

Evil One, and Buddhahood, respectively, according to the enumeration generally found in many sūtras. The three kinds of subordination mean that a woman must be deferential to her parents when she is young, to her husband when she is married, and to her eldest son when she is old. It is interesting to note that we find the theory of the three kinds of subordination in both the Chinese classics, such as the *Li-chi* 禮記 and *Kun-tzu chia-yu* 孔子家語, and Indian classics, such as the *Law Book of Manu* (*Mānavadharmasāstra*).⁴ Chinese and Japanese Buddhists inherited the theory, not from the Chinese classics, but from Indian Buddhist sūtras, such as the *Fu-shuo Yü-yeh-nü-ching* 仏説玉耶女經,⁵ an early Buddhist sūtra corresponding in content to the story of Sujātā in the Pali Canon,⁶ and the *Hua-yen-ching*, a celebrated Mahāyāna sūtra.⁷

Setting aside the three kinds of subordination, let us examine the dictum that a woman is incapable of becoming a Brahmā, Indra, Māra, Universal Monarch, or Buddha. Besides the many Mahāyāna sūtras and treatises, which are later compositions, the dictum is found in three groups of early sūtras and vinayas: 1) Sūtras and vinayas describing the foundation of the Buddhist Order of almswomen by Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, the aunt and foster mother of Gautama the Buddha, viz., *Mahīśāsaka's Book of Discipline* (五分律, Taisho XXII, 186a); *Madhyamāgama* (*Gautami-sūtra*, Taisho I, 607b); *Ch'ü-t'an-mi-chi-kuo-ching* 瞿曇彌記果經 (Taisho I, 858a). 2) *Ekottarāgama* Vol. 38 (43.2), containing the story of Princess Munī (Taisho II, 757c). 3) *Bahudhātukasutta* (MN III, 65–66); *Ssu-p'in-fa-mên-ching* 四品法門經 (Taisho XVII, 712b).

The three texts in the first group all tell the historic event of the foundation of the almswomen's Order by Gautamī; and at the very end of the story, the dictum of the five kinds of incapacities of women is mentioned, suggesting that it may be a later interpolation. In fact, the same event of the foundation of the almswomen's Order is described in the same manner in *Aṅguttara-nikāya* VIII. 51, *Cullavagga* X. 1, and *Dharmaguptaka's Book of Discipline* III. 14 (四分律, Taisho XXII, 992a ff.), but these three texts make no reference whatsoever to the five incapacities of women. In *Dharmaguptaka's Book of Discipline*, the Buddha, after permitting the establishment of the almswomen's Order, laments that if women had

⁴ *Mochizuki Bukkyō Daijiten*, 1543a; *Mānavadharmasāstra*, V. 148.

⁵ Taisho II, 864a.

⁶ AN VII. 59.

⁷ Taisho X, 790b.

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

not been allowed to be ordained in the Buddhist Order, the Law would have remained in this world for 500 years, whereas in all the other texts the Buddha says: "Now that women have been ordained, the Law, which otherwise would have remained for 1,000 years, will continue only for 500 years." This fact may indicate that *Dharmaguptaka's Book of Discipline* is older than the other texts. In any case it is certain that the foundation of the almswomen's Order mentioned in all the texts is a historical fact, while the dictum of a woman's incapability has been added later to some of them. We gather from the Buddha's lamentation concerning the length of the preservation of the Law that the extant forms of these texts were finalized about 500 years after the demise of the Buddha. It was around this time that successive foreign invasions deeply distressed India and the rise of the Mahāyāna threatened traditional Buddhism.

The story of Princess Munī told in the Chinese *Ekottarāgama* 43.2 contains the dictum of a woman's incapability. The same story appears in the *Sūtra of the Wise and Foolish*, No. 20 (賢愚經, Taisho IV, 371b-c) without any reference to the dictum. The Pali counterpart of *Ekottarāgama* 43.2 is the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* VIII. 47 (Samkhitte Uposatho), but it does not include the story of Munī itself. Thus, in the second group, the dictum is inferred to be a later accretion.

In Pali Literature, however, the same dictum is found in the *Bahudhātukasutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* (No. 115). This sutta enumerates various kinds of possibilities and impossibilities. For example, it is impossible for a man of discretion to commit the five great crimes, but it is possible for an indiscreet man to do so; it is impossible that there are two Buddhas in one and the same world, but it is possible that there is a single Buddha in one world. Among a lengthy list of such kinds of possibilities and impossibilities, we read that it is impossible for a woman to become a Buddha, Universal Monarch, Māra, Indra, or Brahmā, but it is possible for a man to become any one of these five. This kind of sutta easily allows later accretions to creep in. The Chinese counterpart of the *Bahudhātukasutta* is found in *Madhyamāgama*, No. 115 (Taisho I, 723a) and the *Ssu-p'in-fa-mên-ching* (Taisho No. 776). The dictum of the five incapacities of women is mentioned in the latter, though not in the former. The *Ssu-p'in-fa-mên-ching*, however, was translated into Chinese by Fahsien as late as A.D. 1000 or thereabout, so we can disregard it for now.

Another Pali source of the dictum is the *Aṭṭhānavagga* of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (AN I. 15). The sutta says, in sections 12-16, that it is impossible

for a woman to become a Samyak-sambuddha, Cakravartin, Śakra (i.e., Indra), Māra, or Brahmā, although it is possible for a man to attain any of these five, in a manner similar to that of the *Bahudhātukasutta*. There is, however, no Chinese counterpart for this sutta.

Thus, the doctrine that a woman cannot reach any of these five pinnacles is mentioned sporadically in separate Pali and Chinese texts; but this position is not corroborated by the appearance of this dictum in both a Pali sutta and its Chinese counterpart. This fact diminishes the authenticity of the doctrine. It is most likely that the dictum did not exist when the Buddhist Order maintained one and the same tradition, but that it was created after the Order was divided into many schools and was inserted into sūtras of various schools.

The Indian Buddhist Order was first divided into the Sthaviravāda and the Mahāsāṃghika schools just after the time of Emperor Aśoka (268–232 B.C.); and many subschools then branched out from the two in the following centuries. Each of these schools edited its own sūtras and established separate disciplines. During the reign of Aśoka, a little before the first schism, Mahinda, a son of Aśoka, carried the Buddhist tradition to Sri Lanka, where it became established as Theravāda (Skt. Sthaviravāda) Buddhism. The tradition that remained in India spread to northwestern India and then, by way of Central Asia, reached China in the first century A.D. The tradition in Sri Lanka has been upheld to this day in Pali Literature, forming the so-called Southern Tradition. The tradition that reached China has been preserved in the form of Chinese Āgamas, the so-called Northern Tradition. If one and the same sūtra or the description of an event is available both in the Chinese translation of the Āgamas and in the Pali Canon, we can ascertain that the sūtra or event had existed before the first schism of the Buddhist Order or the bifurcation of the Buddhist tradition. On the contrary, if a passage existing in the Chinese Āgamas is not found in the Pali Canon or vice versa, we have but to conclude at present that the passage had not existed before the first schism, but had been interpolated later, i.e., after the late third century B.C. This is simply a general criterion which is observed by Buddhist scholars when they consider the date of a certain sūtra or an event; there are exceptional cases in which parallel passages were later incorporated both into the Northern and Southern texts. As for the dictum that a woman cannot become a Buddha or the other four pinnacles, I place, for the time being, its appearance in history between the late third century and the first century B.C.

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

III

We do know for sure that the dictum of the five kinds of incapacibilities of women cannot be dated back to an earlier time, because there are many facts and passages which show, on the contrary, the existence of equality of power among men and women before the time of the first schism of the Buddhist Order. To cite a few examples, in the *Samyutta*-(I. 5.6) as well as the *Majjhima-nikāya* (I. 169), there is a verse which reads:

And be it woman, be it man for whom
Such chariot doth wait, by that same car
Into Nirvāṇa's presence shall they come.⁸

In the *Therīgāthā*, a collection of 73 verses or psalms composed by distinguished almswomen under Gautama the Buddha, there are many poignant and serene poems which doubtlessly show women's attainment of arhatship, the highest religious state in Original Buddhism.⁹ Not only many almswomen but also even laywomen, such as Sujātā and Khemā, were said, according to their commentators, to have reached arhatship,¹⁰ although both became almswomen soon after they had attained the highest state. Gautama had many epithets, such as Buddha, Tathāgata, Bhagavat, Sugata, and Sammāsambuddha. Another of these epithets was arhat, meaning 'one who deserves worship'. There were many hundreds of monks and nuns who were enlightened to arhatship through the teaching of Gautama. These disciples, monks and nuns alike, were equal to Gautama insofar as they were emancipated from the bonds of defilements, although they must have been inferior to Gautama in knowledge and charisma. There was no distinction in enlightenment between Gautama and his disciples, nor between monks and nuns. Monks and nuns who attained arhatship, however, did not claim that they had attained Buddhahood, out of reverence for their noble leader, the Buddha Gautama. During this period not even men, let alone women, dared to call themselves Buddhas, hence no distinction existed between men and women in Buddhism in its earliest stage.

The following is the story in brief of how Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī formed the Buddhist Order of almswomen. Five years after Gautama

⁸ Cited from I. B. Horner, p. 104.

⁹ Cf. Horner, Part II, 3 (pp. 162-210).

¹⁰ Cf. Horner, p. 167.

attained enlightenment, a large company of women led by Mahāprajāpatī arrived at the Nigrodha Park in Kapilavastu, where Gautama the Buddha stayed. All of them were dressed in yellow robes, travel-stained, their feet swollen. They wished to leave their worldly ways for one reason or another and came to plead for the Buddha's permission to join the religious order. Three times they asked him for admission into the Order, and always he met them with the same reply, "Enough O Gautamī, let it not please thee that women should be allowed to do so." The Buddha then went on to Vaiśālī. Mahāprajāpatī and her followers, saddened by the refusal of the Buddha, but undaunted, followed him. On the way they were met by Ānanda, who, shocked to see them in this doleful plight, but deeply impressed by their zeal and determination, undertook to speak to the Buddha on their behalf for admission into the Order. Ānanda asked the Buddha three times, saying, "It would be well, Lord, if women were to have permission granted them to do as they desire." But it was of no avail and the Buddha remained adamant. Goaded by his silence, Ānanda lit upon a fresh argument, appealing to the Buddha's sense of justice and truth, saying: "Are women not capable of leading a contemplative life and of treading the paths of arhatship?" The Buddha replied: "They are capable [of gaining arhatship]." Having been persuaded by Ānanda, the Buddha decided to allow women to form the nuns' Order, imposing on them eight special conditions (*garudhammā*, or chief rules) by which almswomen had to abide.

This event described in the Pali Canon as well as Chinese Āgamas reveals that Gautama hesitated to permit admission of women in the Order, not because women could not attain enlightenment, but because he had to deliberate on problems which might arise between the Order of monks and that of nuns, and between the Buddhist Order and the lay society. Gautama was as great an administrator as he was a religious sage. The hesitation or deliberation was quite natural on his part as the leader of a great number of disciples. We should not interpret this event as showing discrimination against women by Gautama because he never even as much hinted that a woman had not the same chance as a man to become an arhat, or that she was in any way unfit by her nature to attain nirvāṇa.

The eight chief rules prescribed for almswomen by Gautama do certainly enforce discrimination against almswomen because they include such precepts as, "An almswoman, even if of a hundred years' standing,

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

shall make salutation to . . . and perform all proper duties towards an almsman, if only just initiated"; and, "From henceforth official admonition by almswomen of almsmen is forbidden, whereas the official admonition of almswomen by almsmen is not forbidden."¹¹ As I. B. Horner says, however, "The rule is the outcome of an age-old and widespread tradition rather than a prudent provision to keep women in their places."¹² Gautama asserted equality in religious ability of men and women in the face of the existing convention of societal discrimination against women.

IV

The *Fu-shuo Yü-yeh-nü-ching*, mentioned in Section II, belongs to a group of sūtras preserved in Pali and Chinese which represent the Early Buddhist view of women, especially that of wives in lay society. Professor Y. Iwamoto gives an excellent summary of the contents of this set of sūtras in his book *Bukkyō to Josei (Buddhism and Women)*, Regulus Library No. 123, 1980), pp. 24–37. Rather than go fully into what he has written, I will introduce only the gist of the material to clarify its significance in relation to the problem being discussed in this paper. The sūtras are:

1. *Aṅguttara-nikāya* VII. 59, *Sattabhariyā* (Seven Kinds of Wives)
2. Chinese *Ekottarāgama* VI. 9 (Taisho II, 820c–821a)
3. *A-sou-ta-ching* 阿遼達經 (Taisho II, 863, a-c)
4. *Fu-shuo Yü-yeh-nü-ching* (Taisho II, 863c–864c)
5. *Yü-yeh-nü-ching* (Taisho II, 864c–865c)
6. *Yü-yeh-ching* (Taisho II, 865c–867a)

Sūtra 1 enumerates seven kinds of wives with brief comments admonishing Sujātā, the wife of Anāthapiṇḍika's son. The types are: 1) murderous, 2) thievish, 3) masterly, 4) motherly, 5) sisterly, 6) friendly, and 7) subservient. The first three types of wives are bad and doomed to go to hell, while the rest are good and assured to attain bliss. The seventh, a slave-type wife, seems to be the best, because Sujātā, on being admonished by the Buddha, is recorded to have said that she wished to belong to this category. Sūtra 2 lists only four kinds of wives: 1) motherly, 2) parental, 3) rebellious, and 4) slavish. Sūtra 3 enumerates three evil and four good

¹¹ Cf. Horner, Part II, 2. The Eight Chief Rules for Almswomen (pp. 118–161).

¹² I. B. Horner, p. 121.

wives, almost parallel to the lists in Sūtras 1 and 2.

Sūtra 4 classifies wives into five kinds: a mother-type—loving her husband like a child; subject-type—serving him like a lord; sister-type—serving him like an elder brother; slave-type—serving him as a slave; and wife-type—loving him with the same mind as his, though her body is separate. Sūtras 5 and 6 give a classification into seven kinds parallel to those of Sūtras 1 and 3; the fourth of the former, however, is a wife-type which is similar to the fifth of Sūtra 4.

Sūtras 4, 5, and 6 list the ten miseries of a woman, though the ten items vary from one sūtra to another. I will cite the ten miseries from Sūtra 4: 1) Parents are not pleased when a woman is born; 2) It is useless to bring her up; 3) Parents are anxious about her marriage; 4) She is afraid of her husband wherever she goes; 5) She has to part with her parents; 6) She has to depend on another family; 7) Pregnancy is a difficulty; 8) Delivery is a suffering; 9) She is constantly fearful of her husband; and 10) She is never free. The three sūtras then enumerate five moral and three immoral behaviours of a wife, the details of which are not pertinent here. Among the six sūtras only Sūtra 4 has the theory of three kinds of subordinations, as mentioned earlier.

Iwamoto, after giving his summary of the sūtras, makes note of the fact that the good types and good moral behaviour of wives are also counted in the sūtras, in addition to bad types and immoral behaviour traditionally perceived in Hindu society. I view this as showing good faith on the part of Buddhists in favor of women.

I also wish to draw attention to the following: None of the sūtras in this group refers to the dictum of the five kinds of incapacities even though Sūtra 4 contains the axiom of the three kinds of subordination of a woman. This may suggest that the dictum of the five kinds of incapacities, which is probably a later belief than the axiom of the three kinds of subordination, was created not much earlier than many of the Mahāyāna sūtras containing the dictum. This is one of the reasons why I am hesitant to place the appearance of the dictum at a date earlier in history than the first century B.C. One may contend that these sūtras, being admonitions directed to a lay wife, do not necessarily refer to the dictum of the five kinds of incapacities which excludes a woman from becoming a Buddha. However, the stories of Sujātā, Khemā, the daughter of Sāgara, the Serpent King, the Goddess of River Ganges, and Muni—all of whom were laywomen when they received teachings from the Buddha—refute such a contention.

As for the dictum that a woman cannot become a Buddha or the other four pinnacles, we can only tentatively place its appearance in the first century B.C. The grounds are as follows:

1. The dictum seems not to have been prevalent at the time of the first schism of the Buddhist Order, because it is not found both in a Pali sutta and its Chinese counterpart, although it is recorded here and there in various sūtras in Chinese and Pali; hence at the earliest it must have arisen between the late third century B.C. (after 232 B.C. when Aśoka's reign came to an end) and the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism (around the beginning of the Christian Era). Taking into account that the six sūtras explained in Section IV do not refer to the dictum, it seems to have appeared only in the latter half of the period mentioned above.

2. The Buddha's words that the True Law would continue to exist for 500 years after the ordination of Gautamī may mean that the sūtras describing Gautamī's foundation of the Order of almswomen were compiled around 500 years after the time of the foundation of the almswomen's Order, which took place five years after Gautama's enlightenment in 428 B.C.¹³

3. Adding 500 years to 423 B.C. (the year in which Gautamī founded the Order of almswomen), we get A.D. 77, when the above said sūtras presumably took their final forms. This date probably coincides with the time when traditional Buddhism was being threatened by the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

4. However, considering that in the days of the compilation of early Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* and the *Lotus Sūtra*, the dictum was already long established, we have to push back its date of appearance by at least 100 years—the time of the appearance in history of the dictum must be earlier than the time of its record in sūtras. We may thus determine the first century B.C. as the probable date when the dictum first arose.¹⁴

¹³ Cf. Nakamura's chronological table in his *Indo Kodaishi* (Ancient History of India), Vol. II, pp. 434–435.

¹⁴ Shizutani places the original Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the *Great Amitābha Sūtra* and *Akṣobhya-tathāgata-vyūha*, in the first century A.D. and early Mahāyāna sūtras such as the original form of the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* in the second century A.D. His dates are the latest among those by Buddhist scholars. I place the compilation of the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* and other early Mahāyāna sūtras around the beginning of the Christian Era in accordance with the more generally held view.

We have confirmed that there was no religious discrimination between men and women in Primitive Buddhism, i.e., during the period of Gautama and his direct disciples. Why and how, then, did the idea that woman cannot become a Buddha whereas man can, occur to Indian Buddhists a few centuries after the demise of Gautama? There are various reasons, a few of which I will briefly mention.

1. Gautama the Buddha is reputed to have said that he did not open up a path to enlightenment by himself, but just followed the paths of other ancient sages. Out of these words a Buddhist belief arose that there were seven Buddhas in the past, of which Gautama was the last. Another belief was also created that in the future Maitreya will be a Buddha and appear as successor to Gautama. Thus, the lineage of Buddhas came to be fixed so that no others could aspire to become a Buddha.

2. The Sarvāstivāda, one of the most powerful conservative schools, allowed the existence of only one Buddha at any one time in all the world systems. According to them, the path to Buddhahood is totally different from the path to arhatship. The former is trodden only by a Bodhisattva who practises austerities, sacrificing his life for other sentient beings during innumerable lifetimes, and who undergoes special training in order to acquire the 32 physical marks of a Buddha, which are not common to human beings. The path to arhatship is open to ordinary men who, hearing the Buddha's Law for the first time in the present life, begin to study Buddhism. Therefore, śrāvakas or ordinary disciples can, in this life, only wish to attain arhatship, which is now regarded as a stage far lower than Buddhahood. This belief of the Sarvāstivāda was shared by most of the conservative schools, although the Mahāsāṃghika and its subschools, as well as Mahāyāna Buddhists, had different opinions. During the period of Hīnayāna Buddhism, i.e., the late third century B.C. to the beginning of the Christian Era, no one, neither man nor woman, aspired to Buddhahood. The dictum that a woman cannot become a Buddha thus did not have a target to which it could have been directed.

3. Since the inception of the Order of almswomen there had been a struggle for power between the Order of almsmen and that of almswomen. Although almswomen succeeded in acquiring rights in some matters, usually through the mediation of Gautama, their status seems to have declined after his death. The ancient Indian idea that an unmarried woman

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

is to be despised diminished under Gautama's Buddhism, but, as I. B. Horner suggests, by the time the *Milindapañha* (*Questions of King Milinda*) was put in writing during the second century B.C., women had relapsed into further degradation, and the greater differences between women and men had darkened the horizon once again.¹⁵ Buddhist sūtras and books of discipline were edited and codified by the hands of monks, not by nuns, several centuries after the death of Gautama. Thus it is natural that those texts which have survived to the present contain many passages discriminating against women.

4. Among the many causes of the origination of the idea that a woman cannot become a Buddha, the most important and concrete one arose from an event, accidental or intentional, which took place on the occasion of the deification of Gautama the Buddha. Gautama was a human being, although he had extraordinary insight and charisma. Once the disciples who actually had observed Gautama's physical appearance were no longer living, he began to be deified by people, who attributed him with the same 32 physical marks which ancient Indians believed were possessed by a Cakravartin. The Cakravartin was a mythic universal monarch, who they said would appear in India to unite the subcontinent, conquering all rival warlords and bringing peace to the world.¹⁶ The 32 physical marks of the universal monarch included his head having an excrescence, his hands reaching his knees, his fingers having webs, his tongue able to cover all his face. Gautama, being a universal monarch of the spiritual world, was likened to a Cakravartin, a universal monarch of the material world, and was imagined to have the same 32 marks, in addition to supernatural spiritual characteristics. We are now mainly concerned with the tenth of the 32 marks, *kośopagatavastiguhyā*, the concealment of the lower organs in a sheath. The Chinese translation *yin-ma-tsan-hsian* 陰馬藏相 means that the Buddha's private parts are hidden like those of a horse. Professor E. Ōchō, one of the greatest scholars of Chinese Buddhism, infers that the idea of a woman's incapability to become a Buddha must have been derived from this tenth mark possessed by a Buddha,¹⁷ because even if the genitals are concealed, this mark necessitates that a Buddha must be a man. Indian

¹⁵ Cf. Horner, p. 26.

¹⁶ Many scholars think that the idea of a Cakravartin was created after the model of Emperor Aśoka, hence after the late third century B.C., though there has been no evidence to prove it.

¹⁷ E. Ōchō, ed. *Hokke Shisō* (Thoughts of the Lotus Sūtra), p. 98.

Buddhists of the first century B.C. may have overlooked the point that furnishing a Buddha with the 32 marks of a universal monarch would lead to the serious consequence of excluding women from becoming Buddhas. As for the pinnacles of the other four realms, Brahmā, Indra, Māra, and Universal Monarch, we should take into account the facts: a) that in the world of Brahmā there are no women, b) that Indra and a Universal Monarch, both being valiant and gigantic warriors, are usually imagined as men rather than women, and c) that Māra the Evil One, surrounded by female attendants at his beck and call, is more likely to be a man.

VII

In the beginning of this paper I referred to the stories of the daughter of Sāgara, the Serpent King, and the Goddess of River Ganges, found in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*, respectively, as examples of women's sexual transformation prior to becoming Buddhas. Also I mentioned that this kind of sexual transformation was a compromising device on the part of Mahāyāna Buddhists, who, though wishing to eliminate the discriminatory idea that a woman could not become a Buddha, could not entirely disregard a prejudice which was so widely prevalent in Indian society as a whole. However, Mahāyānists were not the first to devise this sexual transformation to serve such a purpose. We find its precedent in the Chinese *Ekottarāgama*, which is the latest compilation of all Hīnayānic sūtras extant in Chinese translation. It betrays even Mahāyānic influence in many places. Nevertheless, as a whole it is older than most of the Mahāyāna sūtras. In the 38th chapter of this Chinese *Ekottarāgama* there is a story of a former life of Gautama the Buddha, which I referred to earlier as the story of Munī.

In one of his former incarnations, Gautama the Buddha was a princess known as Munī. At that time there was an old monk who, being sick and weak, could not collect lamp-oil and other things necessary to worship the Buddha Ratnākara. The princess took care of him and supplied him with lamp-oil. The monk lit lamps and worshipped Buddha Ratnākara, who gave him a prediction that he would become a Buddha named Dīpaṃkara, or Light-maker, after millions of years. Hearing this the princess also went to Buddha Ratnākara to plead with him for a prediction that she would also be a Buddha in the future. Buddha Ratnākara told her he could not so predict, because a woman was said to be incapable of attaining

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

Buddhahood and the other four states, and that she should ask Buddha Light-maker when he appeared in this world in the future. After millions of years the former old monk became Buddha Light-maker, at which time the princess was born as a Brahmin. In the form of a man she once again approached the Buddha and was given a prediction that he (i.e., the former princess) would become a Buddha, Śākyamuni by name.

This is a kind of Jātaka story. And Gautama the Buddha, after telling this story, declares that the former princess Muni is none other than he himself. This Jātaka story is unique insofar as it combines the prediction by Dīpaṅkara with a former incarnation of Gautama as a female. Just two weeks prior to writing this work in Berkeley, during a chat with Professor P. Jaini, I happened to mention this story. Much to my surprise and his, Jaini told me that he was editing a newly discovered Pali manuscript in which the same story appears. The following week he showed me his edition of the manuscript and comparing it with the Chinese text, we confirmed that the two versions must have been based on one and the same story.

VIII

During the period of transition from Hīnayāna to Mahāyāna Buddhism, however, Buddhist concern with women was not always directed to the problem of whether a woman is able to be perfectly enlightened. Buddhists in that period were also concerned with the miseries, natural as well as societal, from which women in ancient times had to suffer. The problem of sexual transformation of a woman should be investigated from such a viewpoint, too. The ten kinds of miseries, which were referred to in Section IV as enumerated in the *Fu-shuo Yū-yeh-nü-ching*, include, besides lower social status, troubles and pains from which women suffer in event of pregnancy and childbirth.¹⁸ We can easily imagine how much pain, sacrifice and patience were demanded of women during such periods and also during the years of rearing children.

I select here yet another example. The so-called *Pure Land Sūtra* (*Sukhāvativyūha*, Taisho No. 360) describes, as the 35th of the 48 vows made by Buddha Amitābha when he was still a Bodhisattva, how women who are born in his paradise will be changed into men. The vow says:

¹⁸ Cf. Taisho II, 864a; Y. Iwamoto, *Bukkyō to Josei*, p. 34.

O Lord, if, after I have obtained enlightenment, women in immeasurable, innumerable, inconceivable, incomparable, immense Buddha countries on all sides, after having heard my name, should allow carelessness to arise, should not turn their thoughts toward enlightenment, should, when they are free from birth, not despise their female nature; and if they, being born again should assume a second female nature, then may I not obtain the highest perfect knowledge.¹⁹

In brief, Buddha Amitābha, when he was a Bodhisattva, made a vow that all women who desired to be reborn in his paradise, and had the aspiration to attain full enlightenment, would become men. In this vow we clearly see that a woman is to be changed into a man if she has the resolution to become a Buddha.

We have five Chinese translations of one and the same *Pure Land Sūtra*. The oldest of them, the so-called *Great Amitābha Sūtra* (Taisho No. 362), translated by Chi-ch'en, is regarded by such scholars as the late Professors C. Akanuma and M. Shizutani, as well as Prof. A. Hirakawa, to have been compiled earlier than the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*, the oldest Mahāyāna Sūtra. The *Great Amitābha Sūtra* has only twenty-four vows in distinction to the 48 of the above-said *Pure Land Sūtra* (Taisho No. 360); it does not claim itself to be a Mahāyāna sūtra, and has many other archaic characteristics. We may date this sūtra as of the first century B.C. The second of the 24 vows in this sūtra refers to women, but simply says: "When I become a Buddha, there will be no women in my country; all women who wish to be reborn in my country will become men."²⁰ The sūtra says that women are to become men, but it does not relate this sexual transformation to the resolution to become a Buddha.

Professor Akanuma, discussing the antiquity of the *Akṣobhyatathāgata-vyūha* (阿閼仏国經, Taisho No. 313), which is generally recognized to be as old as the *Great Amitābha Sūtra*, argued as follows: In the land of Buddha Akṣobhya there are women, but they undergo no sufferings from pregnancies, deliveries, and so forth. The idea of the existence of women without suffering is older than the idea of the sexual transformation in the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* and the non-existence of women in Amitābha's paradise, as described in the *Pure Land Sūtra*.²¹

¹⁹ Max Müller's translation as cited in Paul, pp. 167-170.

²⁰ Cf. Taisho XII, 301a.

²¹ Cf. Akanuma, *Bukkyō Kyōten Shiron* (Historical Investigations of Buddhist Sūtras), p. 230.

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

I think two temporal stages can be discerned in the sexual transformation. In the case of the *Pure Land Sūtra*, a woman who has the resolution to become enlightened is born in the paradise of Amitābha assuming a male figure, whereas in the *Great Amitābha Sūtra* the non-existence of a woman in paradise has nothing to do with the resolution to become a Buddha. Thus an interpretation is possible in the case of the *Great Amitābha Sūtra* that Buddha Amitābha wishes a woman's transformation just because of the greater troubles and pains, physical as well as social, she suffers.

Such evidence leads us to think that in the pre-Mahāyāna period progressive Buddhists such as Mahāsāṃghikas and other precursors of Mahāyāna desired the transformation of women into men upon their rebirth in Amitābha's paradise, not because of the belief that women are incapable of being fully enlightened, but rather from the notion that women should be emancipated from bodily and social sufferings.

IX

The philosophical liberation of women culminated in the second and third centuries, during which sūtras such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanāda* were written. Here I do not intend to explain in detail the ideas of emptiness and *tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha nature existing in every and all sentient beings); they are dealt with by Diana Paul in her book. Suffice it to say that when all dharmas, sentient beings as well as material things, are empty of their essential natures, there cannot be any distinction between men and women, for both are the same in their emptiness. Thus, in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*, a goddess ridicules Śāriputra, transforms him into a woman, and declares that although she has sought womanhood in herself for a long time, she has not been able to find it. Being a philosophy of non-distinctionism, the philosophy of emptiness absolutely negates discrimination between men and women. As for *tathāgatagarbha*, I would mention that the word *garbha* has two main meanings, one being 'womb' and the other 'embryo'. *Tathāgatagarbha* thus means either 'the womb containing a Buddha' or 'the embryo or essence of a Buddha contained in a womb'. In either case we should note that the word *garbha* is unmistakably connected with

womanhood. This means that any aspirant to be a Buddha must be essentially female.

X

In conclusion I wish to distinguish five historical stages regarding the Buddhist attitude towards the problem of women and enlightenment:

1. Primitive Buddhism under Gautama and his direct disciples made no distinction between men and women with regard to capability of emancipation, despite the prevalence of societal discrimination against women in ancient India.

2. The dictum that a woman is incapable of becoming a Buddha arose probably in the first century B.C.

3. Just before the beginning of the Christian Era a new movement developed: Present Buddhas, especially Akṣobhya and Amitābha, sympathizing with the physical ills and social predicament of women, vowed to save them—Akṣobhya removing all difficulties of women in his Buddha Land, and Amitābha transforming women into men on their birth in his paradise.

4. Early Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the *Pure Land Sūtra*, developed the idea that a woman can be enlightened by transforming herself into a male.

5. The mature philosophy of emptiness and Buddha nature in all sentient beings, represented in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, *Śrīmālādevī*, and other sūtras, declares that a woman can be enlightened remaining just as she is—a woman.