

Women's Soteriological Agency, Text Transmission & Buddhist Institutions

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e-learning course Asian Buddhist Women

July 14, 2016

Buddhist women
soteriological agency
text transmission
male-monastic transmitters
Buddhist institutions

- philosophical perspective => theoretical, psychological, and moral aspects of agency

applied with a view on gender => tries to determine if representations of intention and will differ in the case of male vs. female agents

- textual perspective => contextual representation of women's agency as this is articulated in textual descriptions, in its mental, verbal, and physical dimensions

applied to study of representation of women's agency in Buddhist texts => how women's capacity as individuals engaging with the soteriological and ideological structures is represented by the **third-person perspective** of the traditional male monastic narrators and transmitters

[ideological] agency
(Skt. *karṭṛ-tā*)

Buddhist “narrative scholasticism” & “ideological agency”

doctrinal prescriptive level is articulated by descriptive
“authentic” narratives

but normative “authentic” narratives & their at times
literalist readings reframe doctrinal prescriptive level by
sanctioning it with “factual sacred history”

case study (1).
the Parinirvāṇa of
Gautamī & her 500
nun followers

the story of the
parinirvāṇa of Mahā-
prajāpatī Gautamī
and her five hundred
nun companions was
popular, widely
transmitted, and
existed in multiple
versions



case study (1). the Parinirvāṇa of Gautamī & her 500 nun followers

- focus on Tibetan and Chinese Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya versions
- hagiographic account
- textually developed, embellished, replete with supernormal feats
- redactionally belonging to the Middle Period of Indian Buddhism
- soteriological paradigm is the early Buddhist path to liberation
- women protagonists are arhatīs
- no question of gender-based soteriological restrictions
- parinirvāṇa informs value system & women's soteriological agency

Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī reflected: "The Blessed One praises a harmonious monastic community. I should enter parinirvāṇa while the Blessed One is still living and the community of monks is [still] harmonious." With such a thought in mind, she rose from her seat and approached the Blessed One. With folded hands raised in respectful salutation, she said to the Blessed One:

"Venerable sir, my intention is to enter parinirvāṇa." She spoke like that and the Blessed One remained completely silent. For a second and a third time Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī said to the Blessed One: "Venerable sir, my intention is to enter parinirvāṇa." When for a second and a third time the Blessed One remained completely silent, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī said again to the Blessed One: "Venerable sir, my intention is to enter parinirvāṇa."

[When] she had spoken like that, the Blessed One replied to Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī in this way: "Gautamī, do you say this intending to enter nirvāṇa?"

[She said]: "I am intending to enter nirvāṇa, Blessed One."

"Gautamī, do you say this intending to enter nirvāṇa?"

"I am intending to enter nirvāṇa, Well-Gone One."

"Gautamī, now, you are saying this intending to enter nirvāṇa. All compounded things have just such a nature [i.e., the nature of being bound for cessation], Gautamī – what more can I say?"

The five hundred nuns also paid homage with their heads at the feet of the Blessed One and said: "Venerable sir, our intention, too, is to enter parinirvāṇa." The Blessed One replied: "Gautamīs, do you say this intending to enter nirvāṇa?"

[They said:] "We are intending to enter nirvāṇa, Blessed One." "Gautamīs, do you say this intending to enter nirvāṇa?" "We are intending to enter nirvāṇa, Well-Gone One." "Gautamīs, now, you are saying this intending to enter nirvāṇa. All compounded things have just such a nature [i.e., the nature of being bound for cessation], Gautamīs – what more can I say?"

[Gautamī and the five hundred nuns] approached the venerable Nanda, Aniruddha, Rāhula, and the venerable Ānanda. Having arrived, they paid homage at the feet of the venerable Ānanda, and said to the venerable Ānanda: "Venerable sir, our intention is to enter parinirvāṇa."

[The venerable Ānanda replied:] "Gautamīs, do you say this intending to enter nirvāṇa?" ...

Then Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her retinue of five hundred nuns paid homage with their heads at the feet of the most senior monks and went back to their residence. ...

soteriological agency | motivations for Parinirvāṇa

varied motivations for wishing to enter *parinirvāṇa* in the parallel versions:

- in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī hears the monks saying the Buddha will soon attain final extinction
- in one of the two discourse versions independently translated into Chinese, she cannot bear to see the Buddha, Śāriputra and Mahāmaudgalyāyana pass away
- in the other discourse, she finds out about the imminent parinirvāṇa of the Buddha, Ānanda, Śāriputra and Mahāmaudgalyāyana by psychic means, while she is in meditative concentration
- in the *Therīgathā* commentary and the Pali *Apadāna*, Gotamī emerges from her path fruition attainment and, upon gladly recognising that her life faculty is coming to exhaustion, she considers approaching the Buddha and the elders to communicate her wish
- In the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* agrees she desires to enter *parinirvāṇa* before the Buddha and his direct disciples do so themselves
- in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, the passing away is not explicitly related to the Buddha's own imminent parinirvāṇa but the Buddha's impending death is clearly in the air. Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī reflection is that with the Teacher still living and the saṅgha abiding in harmony, it is appropriate for her to leave the world

soteriological agency | motivations for Parinirvāṇa | hierarchies of values

- full ideological, experiential and practical acceptance of the notion of full liberation from the cycle of birth and death through the full realisation of awakening
- a value system which may at first jar with modern exegesis forms the background to the nuns' 'intentional death', that is, the depiction of the nuns' final entrance into the 'deathless'.
- Gautamī's decision appears to be motivated most of all by the superiority of nirvāṇa (and parinirvāṇa) over any other existential value and personal relationship

soteriological agency | motivations for Parinirvāṇa | hierarchies of values

- the way she approaches the Buddha (and, secondarily, the saṅgha elders) shows respect for and devotion to the Buddha's authority while basing one's decision on the highest refuge that is nirvāṇa, final nirvāṇa
- when the Buddha as the one who has disclosed the path is still alive, there remains a sense of duty towards him. His presence ensures the continuous harmony of the saṅgha
- now that he is about to pass away, and soon enough the harmony of the saṅgha will also start to increasingly deteriorate, to opt for the supreme harmony and peace which is final nirvāṇa comes as a natural consequence
- fully within the parameters of the early Buddhist notion of liberation

hierarchies of values | spiritual/existential & institutional

- to approach the Buddha indicating one's wish to pass away is also found elsewhere in the early Buddhist discourses
- a polite statement of intention that entails also an aspect of asking for permission or approval (ex. Subhadra in the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra and Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya; Dravya Mallaputra in the Saṃyukta-āgama)
- parinirvāṇa of Gautamī and the nuns seems to have a textual model in the episode of Subhadra's passing away at the Buddha's own death bed (Anālayo 2012)
- the antecedent of Subhadra covers only the declaration of intention made to the Buddha as the Teacher
- the same wish that Gautamī and the nuns express to the monk elders is an instance of expansion due to group narrative dynamics & overall text growth and increased dramatic pathos
- perhaps close personal and spiritual ties among the early generation of disciples of the Buddha explain the nuns' multiple farewells
- Subhadra had just been converted and ordained, did not have a relationship to anyone apart from the Buddha himself

hierarchies of values | spiritual/existential & institutional

- extended round of leave-taking conforms to etiquette of monastic hierarchy, whereby nuns as individuals or as a group are legally and socially subordinate to monks
- institutional rather than spiritual dimension of hierarchy
- the specific weight and gravity of the deeper spiritual hierarchies at stake – being an (arhatī) śrāvaka, the Buddha's presence, nirvāṇa – and the ancient Indian protocols of communication offer an interpretive key of the nuns leave-taking which may bring us a little closer to the world view that informs the narrative
- need to read Gautamī's act of speech from the viewpoint of its pragmatics, the ways in which context contributes to language meaning.
- soteriological & conventional coexist in one and the same passage

case study (2).
the funeral of Gautamī & her 500 nun followers
1/2

When they saw that Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her retinue of five hundred had attained parinirvāṇa, they [i.e., the monks] thought: "When the Buddha's aunt has attained parinirvāṇa, an effort should be made in the duties of homage to her body. We must go!" They went to Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's residence carrying finely fragrant wood. The Blessed One too, accompanied by his great disciples, including Ājñātakauṇḍinya, Mahākāśyapa, Vāṣpa, Mahānāma, Aniruddha, Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana and others, as well as another large group of bhikṣus, together went to Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's residence.

*In the same way the King of Kośala, Prasenajit, attended by his retinue of queens, princes, ministers, citizens and people of the countryside, the householder Anāthapiṇḍada surrounded by his own following, Mṛgāra's mother *Sagā, chamberlains *Rṣidatta and Pūraṇa, and, in addition to them, crowds of people who had gathered from various places, went to Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's residence. Then King Prasenajit offered five hundred biers decorated with variegated gems and garments, perfumes, incense, flowers, garlands, parasols, banners, and ensigns, and all kinds of musical performances [were executed].*

Then the venerable ones Nanda, Aniruddha, Ānanda and Rāhula lifted up Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's bier. The Blessed One, too, grasped it with his right hand. The rest of the monks lifted up the biers of the remaining nuns. Then they carried them very reverentially and placed the biers in a secluded open area.

Then the Blessed One removed the upper robes from the corpses of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and the five hundred nuns and addressed the monks thus: "Behold, O monks! Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and these five hundred nuns, even though they are one hundred and twenty years old, have no wrinkles on their bodies, and no grey hair, just as if they were sixteen-year-old virgins!"

Then the King of Kośala, Prasenajit, his retinue of queens, princes, ministers, citizens and people of the countryside, made piles of different varieties of fragrant woods and cremated Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and the five hundred nuns.

agency | context | transmission

two questions:

1. what is the function of the role played by the Buddha and his monks in the funeral proceedings?
2. what is the function of the display of the youthful bodies?

these two questions can best be tackled by situating all these events at the **interface** between **ancient Indian social conventions and funerary practices** on the one side and **the early Buddhist value system** on the other side

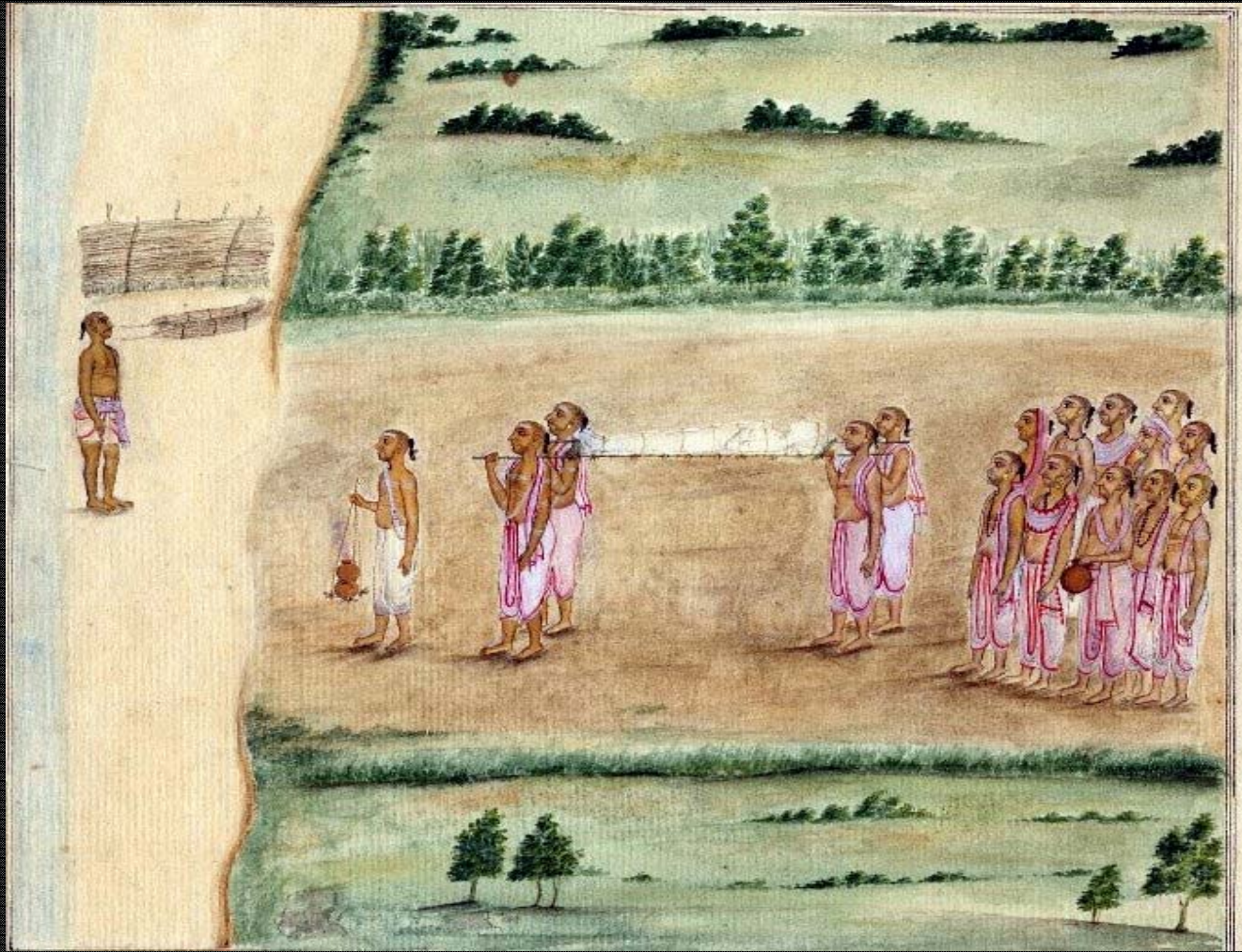
Q 1. the Buddha & the monks' role in the funeral proceedings | Buddhist culture

- in terms of Buddhist monastic etiquette or spiritual values, **that the Buddha and the monks honour the dead bodies of the nuns does not seem to present any real problem to the monastic transmitters of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya**
- the **carrying of the biers in a reverential manner cannot be compared to the normal monastic paying homage or worship**, at least not in the sense of bowing, or of performing the *añjali* gesture to a spiritually or socially superior person.
- the ceremony described in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya entails **the monk's management of a customary ritual (*pūjā*)** and is best considered as an expression of respect rather than ceremonial paying homage or worship (*vandanā*)
- the performance of a *pūjā* as a ritual or ceremonial act before the cremation is **different from performing *vandanā*** or reverentially saluting a living person or the body of a departed person
- the Buddha is on record in other discourses for requesting the monks to **take care reverentially of the bodily remains of monks who have passed away as arhats**

Q 1. the Buddha & the monks' role in the funeral proceedings | Buddhist culture

**Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa:*

"... It is like the nun Mahāprajāpatī with the five hundred arhatī nuns who attained parinirvāna on one day, at one time. On that occasion, **laymen** who had attained the three paths **held up the five hundred biers** [with the bodies of the nuns] and **the Four Great Kings held up the bier of the Buddha's foster mother Mahāprajāpatī**. The Buddha, at the front [of the funeral procession], himself expressed respect **by burning incense, holding an incense burner**. The Buddha told the monks: 'You should help me. I am expressing respect to the body of [my] foster mother.' Then the arhat monks went up to the top of the Malaya Mountain by supernormal power. Each took **red sandal incense firewood** [back with them] and **assisted the Buddha making a pile [of wood for the cremation]**. This is a low [form of] paying respect."









Q 1. the Buddha & the monks' role in the funeral proceedings | Indian (Buddhist) culture

the Buddha, the 'son' of his foster mother Mahāprajāpatī, carries an incense burner at the front of the funeral procession. This appears to mirror the Brahmanical funerary ritual of the eldest son holding an earthen pot with the sacred domestic fire (with which he will light the pyre) in front of the funerary procession of the parent

the eldest son is the one who opens the funeral procession and is appointed to celebrate all the rites once the officiating Brahmin has completed the preliminaries within his purview

in the excerpt translated above, apparently the monks kept to the side, since only upon the Buddha's request did the arhat monks help him to build the cremation pyre for his foster mother, which again seems to mirror the Brahmanical ritual, wherein the eldest son lights the pyre.

Q 1. the Buddha & the monks' role in the funeral proceedings | Indian (Buddhist) culture

- the description of the funerary homage paid to the nuns follows a **standard pattern of similar rituals in India**
- it might be no coincidence that in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* the relatives of the Buddha and Mahāprajāpatī carry and hold the bier of Mahāprajāpatī – the Buddha's cousins and Mahāprajāpatī's nephews Aniruddha and Ānanda and Nanda, the latter the son of Mahāprajāpatī, and the Buddha's son Rāhula and Mahāprajāpatī's 'grandson'
- **just as in Brahminical funerals, the men who carry the corpse of Gautamī are her close relatives**

Q 2. the function of the display of the nuns' youthful bodies

Finnegan (2009: 235):

“[t]he final curious gesture of revealing Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's naked upper body to the monks foreshadows Ānanda's removing Buddha's robes after his passing so that a group of *bhikṣuṇīs* could see the one feature among the 32 that mark a great person that women had not been able to view—an act for which Ānanda will be harshly criticized later by Mahākāśyapa. Since it is Buddha who uncovers the nuns publicly, there is no question that it be seen as inappropriate, but it bears asking just how we are to take this post-mortem display of the women's bodies.”

Q 2. the function of the display of the nuns' youthful bodies | the 5 robes of a Buddhist nun

- taking **the rules on nuns' robes** and the ancient Indian context into account may give us some useful clues on how we are to take these seemingly peculiar events
- that the Buddha would be “revealing Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's naked upper body to the monks”, may not be what is actually meant
- nuns are supposed **to wear a vest to cover their upper bodies** (2 out of the 5 pieces of robe in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, a *saṃkakṣikā* and a *kusūlaka*)
- the **naked upper bodies of the nuns would not have been exposed** if only their upper robes (uttarāsaṅga) had been taken off

Q 2. the function of the display of the nuns' youthful bodies | the 5 robes of a Buddhist nun

Conceivably the upper robes that the Buddha removed were covering the nuns' bodies from top to toe, similar to the way a funerary cloth is used to cover the corpses in traditional Indian Brahminical funerals to this day. The description might also assume that the outer monastic robe (*saṅghāṭī*) was used as a further layer to cover the nuns' corpses, which may have been fully clothed with all of the five robes of a *bhikṣuṇī*. Thus the Buddha would have just exposed the nuns' faces and arms



Q 2. the function of the display of the nuns' youthful bodies | Indian (Buddhist) culture

- in Brahminical funerals, normally the eldest son, with his head ritually shaven and clad in white, is also responsible for cutting the shroud of the deceased open before igniting the pyre from the home fire
- this suggests a connection between the Buddha taking off the upper robe of Gautamī and the eldest son cutting open the shroud in the funerary performance

case study (2). the funeral of Gautamī & her 500 nun followers | soteriology & reframing of ritual

Filippi (2010: 131–132)

“[t]he corpse is laid on a straw mat on top of a stretcher in the form of steps, made of udumbara wood. This mat substitutes the black antelope skin or perhaps the skin of the sacrificial anustaraṇī cow, which represented the placenta in which the being was enfolded while awaiting a new birth, during ancient times. The dead man is invited to take off his old clothes and wear new and purer robes. ... Then his big toes and also his thumbs are tied together, his arms are tied tightly along his sides, and his legs in their winding sheet are tied together. The shroud must be of unused new silk, and the body is tied to form a bundle resembling an Egyptian mummy. ... The silk chosen for men is white, sometimes yellow, while it is always red for women, symbolizing the whiteness of semen and the redness of blood, in view of a new conception.”

the funeral of Gautamī & her 500 nun followers | soteriology & reframing of ritual

- Vedic and Brahminical home fire carried in order to ignite the funerary pyre is out of the question, the sacrificial fire was renounced by the Buddha and after him by all Buddhist monastics (the **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* replaces this with an incense burner carried by the Buddha)
- also obviously missing in Gautamī's funeral is the presence of an officiating Brahmin priest
- not a rite de passage involving accompaniment into the after-life & continued fertility through saṃsāric existence

Q 2. the function of the display of the nuns' youthful bodies | avadāna didactics

after the funeral the Buddha relates an avadāna, the story of a past life of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her followers at the time of the Buddha Kāśyapa. She was the chief queen of King Kṛkī and the five hundred nuns were his royal concubines. Neglected by the king when they became old, they wished they could have, life after life, youthful bodies until the end of their lives. Through the power of a meritorious action the women performed together, their wish came true in every birth up to the last.

case study (2).
institution | transmission | soteriology |
positive attitude of transmitters

in sum:

- the funerary proceedings are presented as the monks saṅgha's respectful tribute to Gautamī and the nuns, formally carried out in accordance with the conventions of the time
- the record memorialises the founder of the bhikṣuṇī-saṅgha and her arhatī nun followers
- the core value is parinirvāṇa

case study (3).
Gautamī's funeral beyond
early Buddhism & the Middle Period

Daoshi's summary of the 'Sūtra of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Buddha's Mother' (in T 2122 and T 2123) (Heirman 2015):

after the funerary homage and cremation, Mahāprajāpatī's relics are brought to the Buddha

the Buddha declares that his mother and her followers have been freed from their dirty (female) bodies full of negative emotions and are now able to act as men, which will lead them to arhatship

the Buddha then orders a temple to be built

=>implies a further rebirth for arhatī Mahāprajāpatī

=> by inference, she would not have attained full emancipation from existence in spite of her present passing into parinirvāṇa

soteriological inconsistency |
negative attitude of transmitters
in *Vinaya* commentary

- females must be born as males to attain the highest goal, here worded in terms of arhatship as a proposition extraneous to arhatship soteriology and ideology
- necessity of sex change to attain bodhisattva investiture and Buddhahood
- proposition at home in fully-fledged Mahāyāna soteriological model prevalent at Daoshi's time in seventh-century China
- Daoshi projects Mahāyāna 'gendered soteriology' on the *parinirvāṇa* of a female arhatī
- negative attitude yet "objective" factual record of memorialisation (temple building)
- overall ideology of masculinisation in Chinese monasticism

case study (4).
story of woman who cooks for the
Buddha in the Sarvāstivāda and
Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinayas*

- a unique story in the Sarvāstivāda and Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya versions of the Vairambhyā (or Vairañjā, Pali Verañjā) narrative of a woman who cooks horse-fodder barley for the Buddha
- inspirational didactics of the Buddha's and the elders bad karma & questionable pasts
- unique connection between the woman's act of service and a form of spiritual aspiration
- episode incidental to the main narrative & thus informative

Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya:

The Blessed One said this to the venerable Ānanda: "Why, Ānanda, did you not provide a description of the Buddha's qualities to that girl?"

[Ānanda said:] "Venerable sir, this occurred to me: 'The characteristics of a Buddha are profound and it could have been the case that that girl would not have grasped them. [Therefore] I provided a description of a wheel-turning king's qualities for her.'"

[The Buddha said:] "You are at fault, Ānanda! Had you provided a description of the Buddha's qualities for her, it could be the case that she would have generated an irreversible intention towards unsurpassed full awakening. Nevertheless, Ānanda, that girl will become the woman-treasure of a wheel-turning king."

soteriologies | textual development | positive attitude of *Vinaya* transmitters

- *kṣūṇas tvam, Ānanda, "You are at fault, Ānanda"*
 - *kun dga' bo, khyod kyis ma legs pa zhig byas te, "Ānanda, it is not well done by you!"*
 - 阿難陀！汝為過失, "Ānanda, you made a mistake!"
-
- reason for the second woman's failing to conceive an aspiration to Buddhahood is that her inner potential has not been duly awakened and nurtured
 - Ānanda is admonished by the Buddha for having failed to function as a channel of inspiration for the woman.
 - When Ānanda reports to the Buddha, the Buddha praises the woman's merit and affirms that she would have been able to formulate the aspiration to full awakening, not subject to retrogression, had she been duly directed.
 - the failure and the admonition highlight, by contrast, the woman's potential.

failure, fault, success, virtue | text transmission

Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* presents a missed opportunity to aspire to the bodhisattva path: had Ānanda been capable of fully assisting the spiritual flourishing of the woman-cook, she would have presumably generated a resolve towards Buddhahood

=> the transmitters of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* were at ease with the idea that a woman is capable of conceiving an aspiration to Buddhahood

failure, fault, success, virtue | text transmission

a *Vinaya* canonical text transmitted within an inherently androcentric institution such as the Buddhist *saṅgha* had no objection to the idea that a woman can aspire to Buddhahood. The Buddha himself is shown to make such an affirmative statement. It is only an incident (Ānanda's short-sightedness) that inhibits the arising of the aspiration

in view of the negative effects of gender bias in the actual agency of Buddhist women in history, the Buddha's admonition to Ānanda sounds quite poignant, that it is a failure and a fault not to be able to serve a woman's best interest on her spiritual journey by not taking the right initiative in the circumstances

Sarvāstivāda Vinaya:

Ānanda took a portion of the [horse] fodder for the Buddha and a portion for him-self. He entered the village, approached a woman, and praised the Buddha's qualities before her: "The Buddha has such [qualities], namely mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, knowledge and vision of liberation, great benevolence (mahāamaitrī), great compassion (mahākaruṇā). He is endowed with omniscience, with the thirty-two marks, with the eighty attributes, his body complexion is golden, a halo sur-rounds his head, he has a voice [like] Brahmā; one never tires of looking at him. ...

Those who have not yet crossed over, he [makes] them cross over, those who have not yet understood, he [makes] them understand, those who have not yet [attained] cessation, he [makes] them [attain] cessation, those who have not yet gone beyond birth, aging, illness, death, grief and despair, distress, duḥkha and sadness, he [makes] them go beyond these. Because of certain circumstances, [the Buddha] is staying here for the rainy season. I request you to take this fodder and cook it for the Buddha."

The woman promptly answered: "I have too many chores at home, I cannot do that."

[another] woman had heard the qualities of the Buddha, and immediately confidence arose in her mind that a person like this is rare in the world. She told Ānanda: "I will cook it and also prepare your portion. Moreover, for good and virtuous monks who follow the training rules, if I have enough strength, I will also prepare it for them." (...)

When the Buddha had finished his meal, Ānanda (...) said to the Buddha: "World Honoured One, today I asked a woman to cook but she refused, and next to her there was another woman who volunteered to cook without being asked."

The Buddha told Ānanda: "The one who did not cook, will not be able to get what she could have obtained. Had she been the one who cooked, she would have become the chief consort of a wheel-turning king. The one who cooked out of her own initiative [gained] such immeasurable merit. Suppose she does not make any additional merit, such virtue is [so] vast that it would [alone lead her] as far as liberation."

textual difficulties with the sentence

“such virtue is [so] vast that it would [alone lead her] as far as liberation”

(此德廣大乃至解脫)

difficulty no. 1:

a variant reading with omission of the string “as far as liberation” (乃至解脫)

=> the sentence ends by just stating that the virtue in question is vast

=> if variant is original rather than result of omission:

- Buddha’s statement would be only about the greatness of the virtue, a virtue so vast in and of itself that any auxiliary merit becomes unnecessary
- how such a vast merit acquired by the second woman is going to ripen would not be spelled out

text transmission | variant readings | sample of philological approach

difficulty no. 2:

two possible interpretations of “up to” (乃至) in the string 此德廣大乃至
解脫:

a) 乃至 used as an abbreviation, corresponding to Sanskrit *yāvat* “up to”
“such virtue is [so] vast *up to* (乃至) liberation”

- various lower benefits to be supplemented before “liberation”
- the second woman gains a range of benefits (encapsulated by the abbreviation) up to, and including, liberation

b) 乃至 not used as an abbreviation:

“such virtue is [so] vast [to lead] up to (乃至) liberation”

- no range of intermediate benefits covered by the abbreviation
- her merit is so vast that it leads all the way to liberation (temporal & consecutive sense)

text transmission | variant readings | sample of philological approach

difficulty no. 3:

possible semantic ambivalence of the word “liberation” (解脱)

- the term 解脱 lit. “liberation” (*vimukti*, Pali *vimutti*), regularly stands for arhatship
- a search for comparable contexts in the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* does not yield any similar declaration of assurance or similar context featuring 解脱
- the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* storyline is roughly aligned with other tales of success of arhats-to-be and arhatīs-to-be that are also found elsewhere in Sarvāstivāda/Mūlasarvāstivāda Middle-Period narrative materials
- a plain reading in terms of arhatship would be neither unusual nor unexpected

soteriological development |
positive attitude of *Vinaya* commentators

Commentary (*vibhāṣā*) on the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* only
extant in Chinese translation (T 1440):

Had she cooked the grains, she would have become the woman-treasure of a wheel-turning king at the time of the Buddha Maitreya. The one who personally cooked the grains [gained] immeasurable merit, so that, with that as a condition, she will surely reach unsurpassed full awakening (anuttarā saṃyaksambodhi).

soteriological development | text transmission

Funayama 2006: 44f:

[f]rom ... Chinese elements incorporated in the body of the text, it is possible to conclude that *Sarvāstivāda-vinaya-vibhāṣā* is a mixture of a translation of an Indic text, which constitutes the greater part, and a certain amount of exegetical elements that were interpolated perhaps in the process of transcribing the translation

- the commentarial gloss proposing to read Buddhahood into 解脫 could be a Chinese reading of the passage rather than a reflection of the understanding of the Indian Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* masters
- the gloss assumes the story to be based on the fully developed bodhisattva ideal
- yet, the basic story could have arisen before this ideal came into prominence. In view of the prevalence of Mahāyāna ideology in China, a reading of Buddhahood into a passage like the one in the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* would be natural

Q. can the interpretation according to which “liberation” denotes Buddhahood (along the commentarial lines) can find any support in the presentation of the text itself?

- the story may have originally been about merit-making, possibly (depending on variant reading) culminating in liberation as a disciple rather than a Buddha, as in stories of arhats and arhatīs told in commentarial and avadāna literature
- idea that by merit-making arhatship can be reached is unsupported by the early discourses
- subsequently, with the popularity of the bodhisattva path & “literatures of merit”, the story would have been read in line with this development

women's soteriological agency | canonical text transmitters

in sum:

- pending the existence of textual uncertainties in the canonical text, the monastic commentators who produced the *vibhāṣā* on the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* clearly read the story along the lines of Buddhahood
- noteworthy in view of the effect of tendencies to soteriological exclusion that were to affect the fully-formed formulation of the bodhisattva path in Indian Buddhism
- the monks who transmitted these canonical texts are not only willing to acknowledge a woman's spiritual standing in terms of her great merit that will eventually ripen in liberation (Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*)
- but they even go as far as to perceive a woman's aspiration to Buddhahood as an acceptable proposition (Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*)

soteriologies | textual development |
positive attitude of *Vinaya* transmitters

the textual developments in both versions of the story of the woman who cooks & its gloss in the Chinese commentary testify to positive attitudes on the part of their male monastic transmitters:

“[w]e hear different voices [within one and the same text or literary corpus], and **this multivocality . . . is but the normal state of affairs.**” (Dimitrov 2004: 17)

“multi-” & Buddhist institutions

Gautamī's upasampadā as foundation history | gurudharmas

- Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī's upasampadā took place by her agreement to lifelong observance of the eight gurudharmas
- foundation narrative as legal & ideological aetiology for the establishment of the female monastic order
- most gurudharmas regulate the legal & institutional relationship of Buddhist nuns as individuals and as a celibate community with Buddhist monks
- hierarchical subordination, the monks in turn responsible to provide exhortation and protection
- *Vinaya* hierarchical subordination essentially gender-based, comes combined with the anteriority and thereby seniority of the monks' community as a whole
- seniority of ordination does not override the gender divide wherein nuns who are either junior or senior to a monk are expected to pay homage to the monk.

Buddhist institutions | gurudharmas as *Vinaya*

- legally fit to stand & not fit to stand types of ordination
- transition from early to later forms of nun ordination
- upasampadā by gurudharmas no longer applicable
- yet, gurudharmas continue to furnish essential legal & ideological frame for the order of nuns
- most of the 8 gurudharmas are included in the nuns' *Vibhaṅgas* / *Prātimokṣas* of the canonical *Vinayas*, with details varying across different *Vinayas*
- critical significance of this narrative & its structural placement in the *Vinaya* corpora

Buddhist institutions: scholasticism | liberal discourse

- philological studies and text-historical method have made their impact outside academia (like this course!)
- more or less correct dissemination of academic findings on alleged non-historicity of the *gurudharmas* as a basis for a progressive rejection of the validity of the *gurudharmas* and their legally binding nature
- this has often taken place on the basis of a discourse alien to the legal and intellectual history of the Buddhist tradition and its scholasticism
- liberal approach to the *letter* of the *Vinaya* as against its *spirit* used to suggest the removal or non-application/applicability of the *gurudharmas* on the grounds of their conflict with the mainstream notion of gender equality as a universal human right

Buddhist institutions: scholasticism | liberal discourse

- *however*, structural subordination of the nuns to monks in the *Vinaya* as the basic chart for community life (starting from the impossibility in any of the three living monastic traditions to carry out a nun ordination without the involvement of monks) is a legal & objective state of affairs that needs to be recognised as such
- *even though* in their present formulation the *gurudharmas* presumably stand at the end of a process of redactional development that reflects the male monastic community's increasing fear and control of the female community (Anālayo 2016)
- ... institutional androcentrism (and yet inclusive of women) remains a constitutional component of the Buddhist monastic society (monks and nuns) as encoded, or enshrined, in the *Vinaya* as a whole

fault & virtue (!) | the reestablishment of bhikkhunī/bhikṣuṇī ordination

- the legal implications of one of the principles of ‘subordination’ of nuns to monks has afforded a legitimate base for the contemporary revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the Theravāda tradition, reopening the doors to “lawful” female renunciation in the Theravāda *saṅgha*
- this has allowed the reestablishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* to stand on firm legal grounds that can be deemed acceptable by Theravāda legal traditionalists
- the irony of this “re-foundation history” is that, quite apart from gender discourse and campaigning, it has been made possible by exploiting one of the chief culprits of gender-based inequality This is *garudhamma 6 in the Theravāda Vinaya*, which allows *bhikkhus* to ordain *bhikkhunīs* when a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is not yet (or no longer) in existence (Bodhgaya – Dambulla; cf. Anālayo 2013).
- This has a parallel in the case of the Tibetan and Himalayan tradition, which is the only surviving heir to this day of the ancient Indian Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* lineage. Recent academic findings indicate that the legal implications of one of the *gurudharmas* might be able to provide a lawful key to the controversy over the introduction of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition (Tsedroen & Anālayo 2013)

conclusion | the paradox of subjectivation

Kawanami's (2013) field-work with nuns in Burma/Myanmar:

these nuns are not members of the *saṅgha* since they are not legally ordained and occupy a liminal space at the edges of both (patriarchal) society and (male) *saṅgha*



Kawanami 2013: 92f:

“[a] senior nun in her late forties said **it was not until she became a nun that she started to notice actual disadvantages of being a woman**. She can now see a laywoman’s life beyond the social confines and norms, and has come to question many things: why could she not walk abreast with men or sit level with them or eat before men; why could she not go anywhere without being chaperoned by a male kin; why was she expected to do the cooking and not allowed to study like her brothers? She could not understand previously why she was reprimanded if she did not care for her appearance. **The endless list of restrictions placed on her had made her exasperated and she was even convinced that being a woman was the result of her bad karma. The experience of becoming a nun had positive effects on her as it gave her a chance to look at her previous “self” in an objective light and she seems to appreciate her spiritual journey in that way.**

Another nun said that as a schoolgirl she disliked kneeling and prostrating herself in front of monks, but never questioned why she had to act in such a deferential manner. As a nun, she can now understand why she has to pay respect to the *sangha* and even appreciates doing the prostration on her own accord.

As a nun, she can now understand why she has to pay respect to the sangha and even appreciates doing the prostration on her own accord.

Here it may be useful to refer to the notion of the “paradox of subjectivation” of Butler (1993), originally stated by Foucault (1982: 15), which locates agency as a “reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.”

That is, the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination can also be the very means through which she becomes a self-conscious “agent.” The agency or self-determination of a nun in this context is formed as she becomes imbued with the communal ethos and strict discipline, and undergoes new situations of “subordination” in the monastic life. And, in the process of *subjectivation*, a nun starts to understand the “self,” which was previously not possible in her lay life, and becomes not only aware of what she is, but also starts to assume authority in her monastic vocation.”

agency | text transmission | institution the paradox of subjectivation

- “rearticulatory” process of subjectivation methodologically relevant when approaching women’s stories in narrative and *Vinaya* texts & real life of nuns
- “subjectivation” helps balance historical understanding of how social subordination affects the representation of female agency in the texts with appreciation of positive role models and their beneficial contribution to the **subjective articulation of agency**
- **the very paradox of subjectivation allows the traditional women and audiences to flourish all the way to liberation or to get started on threading the bodhisattva path up to the threshold of Buddhahood, all limitations notwithstanding**
- **a fully-fledged and yet at the same time restricted women’s apperception of their agency in the texts and their audiences**
- understanding these dynamics may also help address “**our own**” **possible cognitive dissonances** due to being conditioned by our own cultural past and ideologies.

- ❖ a philological approach to intellectual & institutional history
- ❖ text-historical and religio-historical method
- ❖ study of textual developments and ideological constructs
- ❖ view on the osmosis between the normative, the historical process, the particulars, the religion in practice, the many stories that are told
- ❖ the 'conditional' or 'dependently arisen'
- ❖ detailed case-studies point to the existence of a multiplicity of voices and layers in *Vinaya* literature with regard to gender perceptions and propositions
- ❖ collective and communal redactional history of the *Vinayas*
- ❖ texts as a reflection of the composite social and ideological constitution on the ground in ancient and medieval Buddhist communities
- ❖ oral & aural dimension: variants, didactic & homiletic purpose
- ❖ scholastic prescriptive level articulated by descriptive narratives
- ❖ contextualisation versus essentialisation
- ❖ awareness of cognitive dissonance the texts elicit in "us"

thank you
for participating
in this course

