



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

'In the Footsteps of the Buddha?: Women and the Bodhisatta Path in Theravada Buddhism'

Citation for published version:

Appleton, N 2011, "In the Footsteps of the Buddha?: Women and the *Bodhisatta* Path in Theravada Buddhism", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 33-51.
<https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.27.1.33>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.2979/jfemistudreli.27.1.33](https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.27.1.33)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion

Publisher Rights Statement:

This article was published as Appleton, N. (2011). In the Footsteps of the Buddha?: Women and the Bodhisatta Path in Theravada Buddhism. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 27(1), 33-51, doi: 10.2979/jfemistudreli.27.1.33. No part of this article may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, or distributed, in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photographic, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Indiana University Press. For educational re-use, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center (508-744-3350). For all other permissions, please visit Indiana University Press' permissions page.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



In the footsteps of the Buddha? Women and the *bodhisatta* path in Theravāda Buddhism.

Naomi Appleton

Abstract

Whilst a woman can achieve the state of awakening known as arahatship, Theravāda Buddhist tradition states that a woman cannot achieve full and complete buddhahood. More than this, a woman is unable to successfully aspire to buddhahood, or progress on the path to it – in other words she cannot be a *bodhisatta*. In this article Appleton explores the origins of the doctrine that excludes women from the *bodhisatta* path, as well as its effects on the outlook of women in Buddhist societies. She begins by outlining the *bodhisatta* path as it is presented in Theravāda texts, and tracing the role of *jātaka* stories – stories about previous lives of Gotama Buddha – in codifying this path and excluding women from it. She then examines the striking absence of stories about changing sex between births, and the possible influence of this upon the understanding that a *bodhisatta* is always male. She finishes with an assessment of the relationship between the exclusion of women from the *bodhisatta* path and other ideas about the social and spiritual incapacities of women.

Introduction

It is well known that the Buddha is said to have declared it impossible for a woman to be a fully awakened *buddha*.¹ What is less well known is that Theravāda commentarial tradition

I would like to thank Reiko Ohnuma, Jeffrey Samuels, Sarah Shaw and the anonymous reviewers at JFSR for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

¹ ‘Bahudhātuka sutta’ (*Majjhima Nikāya* 115), Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 925-30. This declaration is also found in the ‘Aṭṭhānavagga’ of the *Ānguttara Nikāya*, and various Chinese sources. Some scholars have argued that the passage is an interpolation into these texts, for example Kajiyama Yuichi, “Women in Buddhism,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 15, no. 2 (1982): 53-70. However, if one looks at the other incapacities of women listed alongside buddhahood in each of these passages – being a Universal Monarch, Māra, Sakka, or Brahmā – it seems at least reasonable to suggest that some

also declares it impossible for a woman to be a *bodhisatta*, a being on the path to buddhahood. Once the initial aspiration to buddhahood has been made and confirmed by a *buddha* of the time, rebirth as a woman is impossible. The consistent male gender of a *bodhisatta* is illustrated in hundreds of *jātaka* stories, which narrate previous lives of the person who became Gotama Buddha. In such stories the Bodhisatta is a human, animal, *nāga* (serpent deity) or god, but never female.

The exclusion of women from buddhahood has led to many Mahāyāna explorations of when (and whether) a woman must become a man before becoming a *buddha*. Stories of magical sex-change that comment upon the illusory nature of gender are found in some of the most influential Mahāyāna texts, including the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*. These Mahāyāna explorations of gender have been ably studied by scholars such as Diana Paul, Lucinda Peach, and Nancy Schuster.² However, the same debate in the Theravāda tradition has been hitherto overlooked. This is primarily due to the belief that the *bodhisatta* path is of little or no consequence in non-Mahāyāna traditions, and therefore that the exclusion of women from this path is of equally minor importance.³

form of the list may pre-date Buddhism altogether, and refer instead to a pan-Indian understanding of women's capabilities. A full discussion of the issue is not within the scope of this article.

² Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985); Lucinda Joy Peach, "Social Responsibility, Sex Change, and Salvation: Gender Justice in the *Lotus Sūtra*," *Philosophy East and West* 52 no. 1 (2002): 50–74; Nancy Schuster, "Changing the Female Body: Wise Women and the Bodhisattva Career in some *Mahāratnakūṭasūtras*," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4, no. 1 (1981): 24–69.

³ To my knowledge there have only been two articles dealing with female past births of *buddhas* outside of the Mahāyāna tradition: Karen Derris, "When the Buddha was a Woman: Reimagining Tradition in the Theravāda," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2 (2008): 29–44; Reiko Ohnuma, "The Story of Rūpāvatī: A Female Past Birth of the Buddha," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 103–145. Both are discussed below. In addition, Monius highlights the possibility of reading the Tamil story of Maṇimēkalai as 'a narrative of a future Buddha's former life as a human being meant to engage its audience in the human struggles and ethical dilemmas of the fully enlightened being-in-the-making.' Anne E. Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism: Literary Culture and Religious Community in Tamil-Speaking South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94.

Theravāda texts, however, preserve an outline of the *bodhisatta* path both as part of the extended biography of Gotama Buddha and as an example that Theravāda Buddhists may aspire to follow. In addition, there is evidence that some exceptional Theravāda Buddhists – such as scribes, scholars and kings – have considered themselves to be following this path. The *bodhisatta* path aims for full and complete buddhahood, which differs from the mainstream Theravāda goal of arahatship in that *arahats* require the teachings of a *buddha*, whereas a *buddha* realises the truth himself without a teacher and later teaches it to others, thereby founding a Buddhist community.⁴ According to Theravāda Buddhism there can only be one *buddha* and one Buddhist community at a time, so the next *buddha* will not arrive until after the current teachings have disappeared. By this reasoning, *buddhas* are extremely rare, and the majority of Buddhists should therefore aspire to become *arahats*, rather than *buddhas*. This contrasts greatly with the Mahāyāna proliferation of *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* in multiple world systems, which allows for the adoption of the *bodhisattva* – the aspiring *buddha* – as the mainstream goal.⁵

Since women are able to become *arahats*, the exclusion of women from the *bodhisatta* path in Theravāda Buddhism does not deny their ability to become awakened. However, it does deny the ability of women to lead the Buddhist community, as well as their ability to pursue the highest spiritual goal. This sends a broader message to women about their spiritual capabilities, and suggests that birth as a female is significantly worse than birth as a male, and must therefore be the result of bad karma. Further, it suggests that an appropriate aim for a Buddhist woman is to aspire to be reborn male. I would therefore argue that, despite the secondary position of the *bodhisatta* path in Theravāda Buddhism, the exclusion of women from it has had a serious impact on the aspirations of Buddhist women in South and Southeast Asia through to the present day.

⁴ There is also a third type of awakening: *paccekabuddhas* realise the truth without the help of a teacher, but they do not found a Buddhist community. Since *paccekabuddhas* only appear during times when there is no Buddhist community they are irrelevant to our discussion.

⁵ The Sanskrit term *bodhisattva* is well known because of the centrality of the *bodhisattvas* in Mahāyāna Buddhism. In discussions of Theravāda Buddhism, which is primarily preserved in the Pāli language, I prefer to use the Pāli equivalent *bodhisatta*, which helps to indicate that the term has slightly different connotations in the Theravāda context.

This article is an exploration of the debate surrounding the impossibility of a female *bodhisatta* within the Theravāda tradition, focusing primarily upon the origins of the idea in some early narrative texts.⁶ I will argue that the formation of a *bodhisatta* path in the Theravāda tradition centered on the genre of *jātaka* stories. These stories narrate episodes from past births of Gotama Buddha and they are hugely popular in Buddhist countries, where they are drawn upon in sermons, festivals, and rituals, and commonly reproduced in children’s books as well as literary works for adults. More than five hundred *jātaka* stories, consisting of canonical verses and a prose commentary that contains the bulk of the narrative, are collected together in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*. It is my contention that the compositional history of this text is at least partly responsible for the exclusion of women from the *bodhisatta* path. However, I will argue that this exclusion is likely to be the result of an early inclusiveness that assumed the soteriological irrelevance of gender.

The *bodhisatta* path in Theravāda Buddhism

According to Mahāyāna polemics, “Hīnayāna” Buddhism, the “lesser vehicle” of which Theravāda is the only surviving form, is the vehicle of the “hearers” (*śrāvakas*) since its followers rely on the Buddha’s teachings to help them attain the limited achievement of arahatship. Such *śrāvakas* know nothing of the vow, the path, or the perfections that are required for attaining buddhahood, which is described in Mahāyāna traditions as the only complete form of awakening.⁷ As a consequence of this polemic many scholars have characterized the difference between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism according to the

⁶ Because we know so little of the authors and audiences of these early Buddhist texts, any form of reception theory is next to impossible, so we must rely upon evidence provided in the texts themselves as they develop and respond to one another. I attempt to situate the textual positions within broader attitudes in Buddhist society towards the end of this article, but I do this based upon more recent evidence for the role of women in Theravāda society.

⁷ See, for example, the views of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti and Asaṅga as examined in Jeffrey Samuels, “The Bodhisattva Ideal in Theravāda Buddhist Theory and Practice: A Reevaluation of the Bodhisattva-Śrāvaka Opposition,” *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 3 (1997): 399-415.

different aims: in Theravāda, it is said, one aims for arahatship, whereas in Mahāyāna one aims for bodhisattvahood, and ultimately full and complete buddhahood.

As Jeffrey Samuels has argued, this division is too simplistic and overlooks the presence of the *bodhisatta* path in the Theravāda tradition. Samuels examines evidence that this path was taken seriously in Theravāda countries, by kings, scholar-monks and manuscript copyists.⁸ He does not, however, give an extensive outline of the path as it is presented in Theravāda texts. It will be necessary to outline this path here, to aid us in our quest to understand when, how, and why women became excluded from it. The main discussions of the path are found in the long introduction to the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* known as the *Nidāna-kathā*, and in the commentaries to three late canonical texts: *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Cariyāpiṭaka* and *Apadāna*.

The *Nidāna-kathā*, or “Story of the Beginnings,” is credited with being the earliest full biography of the Buddha, and most likely belongs to the early commentarial period, certainly predating the commentaries on the *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Cariyāpiṭaka* and *Apadāna*.⁹ It begins with the Buddha’s past birth as Sumedha Bodhisatta. Sumedha makes an aspiration to buddhahood at the feet of the *buddha* of the time, who is called Dīpaṅkara Buddha, and receives from him the prediction to buddhahood that formally marks the beginning of his *bodhisatta* career. In the narrative that follows he is subsequently predicted to buddhahood at the feet of each of the twenty-four *buddhas* of the past. Next the text describes the Bodhisatta’s acquisition of the ten perfections required for buddhahood (generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, effort, forbearance, truth, resolve, loving kindness, and equanimity) with reference to a *jātaka* story that illustrates each one, and a comment that the full story can be found in the *Cariyāpiṭaka*, a small late-canonical collection of explicitly biographical *jātaka* stories. The biography continues through the Bodhisatta’s final birth, renunciation, awakening, founding the monastic order,

⁸ Samuels, “The Bodhisattva Ideal.”

⁹ For a full translation of the *Nidāna-kathā* see N. A. Jayawickrama, trans., *The Story of Gotama Buddha (Jātaka-nidāna)* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990). The *Nidāna-kathā* in part forms a commentary on the *Buddhavaṃsa*, and also contains commentary on the *Cariyāpiṭaka*, but it draws these texts together with other biographical sources in a way unprecedented in the canon. It was fixed no later than the 6th century C.E., but probably contains earlier material. The *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka* commentaries may date to as early as the 6th century C.E. but the *Apadāna* commentary is much later, perhaps 13th century.

and teaching, up until the time that Anāthapiṇḍika donates the Jeta Grove to the Buddhist community of monks. It is in this grove that the Buddha tells many of his *jātaka* stories to the assembled people.

The *Nidāna-kathā* is thus the story of one particular *bodhisatta* - the very one that later became Gotama Buddha. However, it also contains general comment about the requirements of the *bodhisatta* path, for the mythological history of the Bodhisatta is the source for abstract conceptions of the ideal and path. The path begins with a vow or aspiration, which must be made in the presence of, and confirmed by, a *buddha*. This vow can only succeed if eight conditions are met: one must be human and male, have appropriate motivation, be in the presence of a teacher (the commentaries specify a *buddha*), be a renunciant, have attained the required qualities, perform an act of service (for an existing *buddha*), and have strong will. Although these eight qualities are required for the making of a *bodhisatta* aspiration, there is no implication here that such qualities remain throughout the *bodhisatta* career: during his encounters with other *buddhas* of the past, the Bodhisatta is once a lion, a *yakkha* (sprite or ogre), and a *deva* (a god), and twice a *nāga* (serpent), and he is rarely a renunciant, yet he still receives his predictions to buddhahood and resolves to further practice the perfections required to fulfil this aim.

Whilst the eight conditions required for making a successful *bodhisatta* vow do not remain throughout the *bodhisatta* path, there are other restrictions that apply to this path. In the *Nidāna-kathā*, as well as in the commentaries on the *Apadāna*, *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka*, we find a list of the advantages of having become a *bodhisatta*:

Thus the men, perfect in all parts, fixed on Awakening,
transmigrate for a long time through hundreds of millions of eons.
They are not born in the Avīci hell, nor in the space between the worlds,
nor do they become demons or beings tormented by hunger and thirst,¹⁰
nor do they become small animals, even when arising in the bad realms.
When born among men they are not blind at birth,
nor are they deficient in hearing or dumb.
The accomplished men, fixed on Awakening,
do not take female form, nor do they become hermaphrodites or neuters.¹¹

¹⁰ This is a reference to the *peta* realm - the realm of the hungry ghosts.

Freed from the deadly misdeeds, everywhere associating with the pure,
with no use for wrong views, they understand the workings of *kamma*.
Living in the heavens they do not arise as non-conscious gods,¹²
and there is no cause for rebirth amongst the gods of the pure abodes.¹³
Good men, bent on renunciation, detached from the world in birth after birth, they
conduct themselves for the benefit of the world, fulfilling all the perfections.¹⁴

There are clear reasons for some of these exclusions. The non-conscious and pure heavenly realms are excluded because they would allow a *bodhisatta* no opportunity to progress on his path. It is not possible for a *bodhisatta* to be born in the worst of the bad realms, such as the lowest hell (*Avīci*), the realm of the demons or anti-gods (*asuras*) and the realm of the hungry ghosts (*petas*), because of his great merit. The fact that, when human, a *bodhisatta* must always be an able-bodied man, might also be because his stock of merit would prevent him from having incomplete masculinity or any form of physical disability.

It is this list, then, that first explicitly excludes the possibility of a *bodhisatta* being female. It does not, of course, exclude the possibility of a woman becoming a *bodhisatta*,

¹¹ The term translated here as ‘neuter’ (*paṇḍaka*) is never clearly defined in Buddhist texts, but refers to some third category of sex. This category includes beings who are neuter from birth, those who lose sexual capacities because of circumstances after birth, those with an unstable sex, and those who engage in homosexual acts. *Paṇḍakas* are excluded from ordination and are said to be incapable of meditating or understanding any of the *dharma*. For a full discussion of the term see Janet Gyatso, “One Plus One Makes Three: Buddhist Gender, Monasticism, and the Law of the Non-Excluded Middle,” *History of Religions* 43, no. 2 (2003): 89-115.

¹² The *asañña* (literally ‘unconscious’) *devas* have reached a realm of heaven appropriate to their high meditative attainments. There is said to be a strong risk of mistaking this realm for *nibbāna*.

¹³ This is the heavenly realm where ‘non-returners’ (Buddhists who are so advanced on the path that they do not need another human birth) are reborn and attain arahatship.

¹⁴ My trans. from V. Fausbøll, ed., *The Jātaka together with its commentary being tales of the anterior births of Gotama Buddha*, 6 vols. (London: Trübner and Co. 1877-1896) 1: 44-5. The same verses are found in the commentaries to the *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Apadāna* and *Cariyāpiṭaka*; for full references see Toshiichi Endo, *Buddha in Theravāda Buddhism: A Study of the Concept of Buddha in the Pāli Commentaries* (Dehiwela: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1997), 262.

although she would first have to achieve rebirth as a man.¹⁵ Indeed a story of Gotama Buddha's last birth as a woman is found in the non-classical collection of *jātakas* known as *Paññāsa-jātaka* that circulates in Southeast Asia.¹⁶ The story has familiar *dramatis personae*: the *buddha* at the time is called Porāṇa (Old) Dīpaṅkara, to differentiate him from the *bodhisatta* at the time, who is called Rāma and will become the Pacchima (Later) Dīpaṅkara Buddha who predicts Sumedha to buddhahood at the beginning of the current aeon. Rāma makes a successful *bodhisatta* vow at the feet of Old Dīpaṅkara whilst worshipping him with lamps. He then tells Old Dīpaṅkara about the princess who gave him the lamps, who wishes herself to also become a *buddha*. Hearing of her aspiration to buddhahood, Old Dīpaṅkara tells Rāma Bodhisatta that he cannot predict her to buddhahood because she has not fulfilled the eight factors (the same ones listed above). He then explains further: 'Brother, it is not possible for me to make a prediction for the princess because she is a woman, and these eight factors are not complete in her stream of consciousness.'¹⁷ Unable to predict her to buddhahood, Old Dīpaṅkara instead reveals that she will be reborn as a (male) god as a result of the merit of her gift. Then, when Rāma has become (Later) Dīpaṅkara Buddha, (s)he will be born as Sumedha and receive the desired prediction from him.

¹⁵ This is Sharma's concluding thought in Arvind Sharma, "Can There Be a Female Buddha in Theravada Buddhism?" *Bucknell Review: Women, Literature, Criticism* 24, no. 1 (1978): 72-79. Whilst I don't deny that it is in this way possible for a woman to become a *bodhisatta*, this should not lead us to ignore the deeper issues surrounding the perceived necessity of a woman becoming a man.

¹⁶ The term *Paññāsa Jātaka* refers to various collections of stories modeled on the *jātakas* of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* circulating in mainland Southeast Asia in Pāli and vernaculars. One such collection in Pāli is edited and translated for the Pali Text Society (see later note). The *Paññāsa Jātaka* is (or, more correctly, are) part of a wider tradition of "non-classical *jātakas*" (as Skilling terms them in Peter Skilling, "*Jātaka* and *Paññāsa-jātaka* in South-East Asia," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 28 (2006) 113-173). The collection in which this story is found may date from the 14th century (see Skilling, "*Jātaka* and *Paññāsa-jātaka*," 160 ff. for a full discussion), though the story itself is likely to be older, since it is also known in a Chinese version of the *Ekottarāgama*: see Kajiyama, "Women in Buddhism," 66-7.

¹⁷ My trans. from P. S. Jaini, ed., *Paññāsa-jātaka*, 2 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1981-3), 2: 399.

Karen Derris has recently reminded us of the potential of this story to inspire women in Theravāda countries, as it describes a female past birth of the Buddha.¹⁸ However, her use of the term *bodhisatta* to describe the female character is, in my view, misleading. According to all the sources she discusses, including the *Paññāsa-jātaka* examined above, the story consciously predates the first confirmed aspiration to buddhahood that marks the beginning of the *bodhisatta* path as it is traditionally conceived. Whilst this story may inspire women to become *bodhisattas*, and open up the possibility of them behaving like – and even looking like – a *bodhisatta*, it simultaneously reinforces the idea that first a woman must become a man.¹⁹ It therefore upholds the view already espoused in the *Nidāna-kathā* and related texts that the *bodhisatta* path is exclusively male, from the first successful aspiration through to its completion.²⁰

The Role of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*

The *Nidāna-kathā* is the first full attempt at outlining the *bodhisatta* path, and this forms the preface to the largest collection of *jātaka* stories found in any Buddhist tradition, the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*. Each story in this collection has a ‘story of the past’ (usually considered the *jātaka* proper) situated within a ‘story of the present’ which outlines the Buddha’s reasons for telling it. With the exception of the canonical verses, which probably date to before the 3rd or 2nd centuries B.C.E. the text is commentarial and was not fixed until around the 5th or 6th centuries C.E., though much of the narrative is doubtless far older than this. The *Nidāna-kathā*

¹⁸ Derris, “When the Buddha was a Woman.”

¹⁹ Derris herself discusses the ambivalence towards women that is presented in the story. She also suggests that Buddhist audiences would not have differentiated between canonical and extra-canonical *jātaka* stories. This may be true of some audiences, but it does not prevent the story from contributing to the scholastic tradition excluding female birth. We are therefore approaching the story from quite different angles.

²⁰ I am of course limiting my argument to the Theravāda tradition. There is evidence that some schools of early Indian Buddhism did allow that a *bodhisatta* could be female. For example Ohnuma (“The Story of Rūpāvātī”) examines the story of the Buddha’s birth as Rūpāvātī, who gives away her breasts to a starving mother and later acquires a male body through an act of truth.

belongs to the commentarial portion of the text, and introduces notions of chronology and biography to the collection. The *Nidāna-kathā* implies that *jātaka* stories exemplify the *bodhisatta* path, and this idea is echoed in the dedicatory verses to the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, which state that *jātakas* illustrate the path of the magnificent being who ‘brought to fruition over a long time the endless conditions for *bodhi*’.²¹ That followers of the Buddha may aspire to such a path is demonstrated by some of the scribal verses at the end of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, as preserved in Fausbøll’s edition. For example, one copyist expresses his hope that the merit he has earned from copying the text will allow him be reborn at the time of the future *buddha* Metteyya and receive from him a prediction to buddhahood. Another aspires to follow the example set by Gotama Bodhisatta in his *jātaka* stories over multiple births.²² These copyists see the text they have been involved in preserving as an exemplary biography: not just the story of their Buddha, but the story of how one becomes a *buddha* oneself.

Despite the presentation of *jātakas* in this text as exemplary tales of progress on the *bodhisatta* path, when one looks at the individual stories themselves there is little evidence that they are anything of the sort. The Bodhisatta is often less than exemplary, behaving as a villain or fool, or not appearing in the story at all.²³ Few of the stories have explicit Buddhist content or morals; many of the tales are simple examples of folk wisdom. This discrepancy is due to the development of the *jātaka* genre over time. Many of the stories began as simple fables or extracts from the common Indian story-stock and were incorporated into the *jātaka* genre by the identification of one character with the Bodhisatta and the placing of the story in the mouth of the Buddha. Initially the stories were therefore simply tales that were believed to have been told by the Buddha about what he did and witnessed in the past. Only later, with the addition of the *Nidāna-kathā* and the commentarial framing did the collection begin to present

²¹ Fausbøll, *Jātaka*, 1: 1, verse 5.

²² See Fausbøll, *Jātaka*, 6: 594-6. These aspirations may seem to be directly related to the *jātakas*, yet in fact such aspirations – especially the wish to meet Metteyya – are common on other Pāli texts copied in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

²³ It is a common misconception about the *jātakas* that the Bodhisatta is always the hero. For more on his characterization see Naomi Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism: Narrating the Bodhisatta Path* (Ashgate, forthcoming), Chapter 2, and Merlin Peris, “The Jataka Bodhisatta,” *Sri Lankan Journal of the Humanities* vol. 22 (1996): 51-62.

the stories as part of the Bodhisatta's path to buddhahood. This in turn preceded the idea that such a path should be aspired to by others.²⁴ This progression must be borne in mind when examining both the stories individually and the text as a whole.

The consistent maleness of the Bodhisatta in his *jātaka* stories, even when he is born as an animal, might seem to be evidence of the devaluation of the female sex. As Rita Gross has said of this situation: 'To see more affinity between male humans and male animals than between female and male human beings must be an extreme of androcentric consciousness in which, more than is usually the case even for androcentrism, women are seen as outside the norm, as a foreign object but not a human subject.'²⁵ Bearing the developmental stages of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* in mind, I would argue that, whilst Gross' comment is appropriate to the established tradition, it is not the only possible interpretation. The tradition that explicitly excludes women from the *bodhisatta* path belongs to the commentarial layer of the text, and is consequently later than the collection of stories. It is therefore likely that the stories influenced the tradition of excluding women, rather than vice versa. In other words, the fact that the Bodhisatta always happens to be male in his *jātaka* stories led to the understanding that any *bodhisatta* must always be male.²⁶

Further evidence for my argument can be found in an alternative list of eighteen exclusions, found in the commentaries to the *Apadāna* and the *Sutta Nipāta*. These 'impossible states' (*abhabbaṭṭhāna*) into which a *bodhisatta* cannot be born are in most cases the same as in the list found in the *Nidāna-kathā*. Two differences that are important to our investigation can

²⁴ For a full discussion of the compositional history of this text, and its increasing association with the *bodhisatta* path, see Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism*, especially Chapter 3.

²⁵ Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 43.

²⁶ It is still apparently easier for commentators and compilers to cross the human-animal line than the male-female line, since many *jātaka* stories show the Bodhisatta in an animal birth, even though the Buddha was undoubtedly human. However, this was most likely influenced by the pre-existing body of stories, many of which are animal fables of common Indian origin, adapted to fit the genre.

be noted: Firstly, the second list mentions the impossibility of birth as an animal smaller than a quail or larger than an elephant in size. Secondly, it doesn't mention women.²⁷

Endo suggests that the list found in the *Nidāna-kathā* represents an older layer of understanding which may have come from a common Indian source, since the exclusion of women is shared with the *Mahāvastu*, an early Indian text from the now extinct Lokottaravādin school of Buddhism. The exclusion of women, Endo argues, would in any case be natural 'on the basis of a thorough knowledge of the Jātakas.'²⁸ He further argues that the second list is likely to be later because it is longer and more systematic. However, Endo notes that the omission of women from the second list is strange, if it was already established that *bodhisattas* could not be female. As an alternative – and in my view stronger – position he suggests these two lists could merely represent two separate traditions; this interpretation is supported by the presence in one case of both lists in the same commentarial text.

If we assume that these lists represent two separate traditions, the two differences highlighted above become very clearly explained. Women are mentioned in the first list because the Bodhisatta is never female in any of his *jātaka* stories. Animal births in this list are restricted only by the vague exclusion of 'small' animals, thereby permitting stories in which the Bodhisatta appears as – for example – a rat, an iguana, a frog and a fish (*Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* numbers 128 & 129; 141; 239; 75, 114 & 236). The fact that women are not mentioned in the second list suggests that there was not an established doctrine excluding women. Rather, this doctrine developed because of the presence of these many hundreds of stories in which the Bodhisatta is never female.

The question still remains as to why the Bodhisatta is always male in his *jātaka* stories. Rather than being the result of a doctrine excluding female birth, I would like to argue that this was merely the result of a widespread assumption about the stability of one's sex. After all, the Buddha was male, and it is easier to imagine his previous lives as male. The *Buddhavaṃsa* commentary explains the necessity of being male whilst making a successful *bodhisatta*

²⁷ The full list, together with textual references and a discursive comparison of the two lists may be found in Endo, *Buddha*, 260-264.

²⁸ Endo, *Buddha*, 263.

aspiration by referring to the declaration that a woman cannot be a *buddha*.²⁹ This declaration is clearly seen as applying not only to the achievement of buddhahood, but also to the path, since a change in sex is not seen as a natural or likely event. This view of stable gender may exclude women from being like the Buddha, but it must be viewed in the context of a belief that changing sex was not soteriologically necessary in any way.

Changing sex in Theravāda Buddhism

Within the Theravāda tradition there are stories of past births of the Buddha's followers as well as of himself. Many characters are included alongside him in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*. His wife, for example, was his wife in many previous births, and his chief disciples are often shown as wise and virtuous men of the past. There is almost always a preservation of character, role, and gender. In other texts that narrate past births we find similar situations: The *Vimāna-vatthu* narrates fifty stories of women who do virtuous acts and are reborn as female residents of heavenly mansions, and thirty three men who achieve birth as male residents of heavenly mansions, in some cases accompanied by their wives.³⁰ The *Peta-vatthu* narrates some of the less desirable rebirths achieved by both men and women.³¹ The *Thera-apadāna* narrates the (male) past births of some of the Buddha's chief male disciples, and the *Therī-apadāna* narrates the

²⁹ I. B. Horner, trans., *The Clarifier of the Sweet Meaning (Madhuratthavilāsini), Commentary on the Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavaṃsa) by Buddhadatta Thera* (London: Pali Text Society, 1978), 133.

³⁰ I. B. Horner, trans., "Vimānavatthu: Stories of the Mansions," in *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2005). There are also two stories about animals: the Buddha's (male) horse achieves a male heavenly rebirth, as does a frog that dies whilst listening to a sermon preached by the Buddha. With the exception of these two stories, the text demonstrates the remarkable consistency retained by individuals between births.

³¹ H. S. Gehman, trans., "Petavatthu: Stories of the Departed," in *The Minor Anthologies*. In only one case is a change in sex mentioned, when a woman wishes to cease being a woman and achieves birth in the Brahmā realm (p.66).

(female) past births of early converts to the Buddhist order of nuns.³² Women in this text make offerings to previous *buddhas* and resolve to become chief female disciples of Gotama Buddha. There is no aspiration for a change in sex, and indeed this would be unnecessary, because these nuns all became awakened as *arahats*. Since both sexes were said to be able to attain arahatship, there would have been no need to aspire to a male rebirth before progressing on the path to awakening. The *Therī-apadāna* even contains the story of the Buddha's foster-mother Gotamī, who was leader of the nuns' community and is portrayed in the text as some sort of female equivalent to the Buddha, or as Walters puts it, 'the Buddha for women.'³³ These texts present the male and female domains as separate, but equal in their potential for spiritual advancement and degeneration. Consistency in sex across many lifetimes can therefore be seen as a reflection of the soteriological equality of men and women in the early Buddhist community.

There are a few stories of changing sex in the Theravāda tradition, but even these do not challenge the position that one's sex is soteriologically irrelevant. However, they do portray one's sex as *morally* relevant. For example, in the *Mahānāradakassapa-jātaka* a princess tries to convince her father of the importance of ethical actions by telling him about her own previous births. As the result of one birth where she was a man who went after other men's wives she suffered long torment in hell. After that she was born as a monkey whose testicles were bitten off by the leader of the herd, then as a castrated and overworked ox, and then as a human who was neither man nor woman. After this, as the result of good past deeds, she attained birth as a heavenly nymph, followed by her present birth as a princess. She explains that whilst she is fated to have more human and divine rebirths as a result of her good deeds,

³² M. E. Lilley, ed., *Apadāna*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1925). For a translation and study of a selection of stories from the *Therī-apadāna* see Sally Mellick, *A Critical Edition, with Translation, of Selected Portions of the Pāli Apadāna* (Oxford University D.Phil. Thesis, 1993).

³³ Jonathan S. Walters, "A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha's Mother's Story," *History of Religions* 33, no. 4 (1994): 358-379, 375. A critique of Walters' view is found in L. Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 141 ff.

she is unable to become a man until the bad karma accrued from chasing other men's wives is exhausted.³⁴

This is not only a tale of the princess' past gender(s). In the identification of the birth, we discover that this princess becomes none other than Ānanda, the Buddha's (male) cousin and trusted chief attendant. In one sense this is a complimentary identification, since it is the princess who has a proper understanding of karma and tries to convince the king of it. However, one cannot help wondering if there is also a jibe at Ānanda, who is often portrayed as being over-emotional and sympathetic to women: His devotional attachment to the Buddha prevents him from progressing to arahatship until after the Buddha's death, and he is alternately credited with and blamed for convincing the Buddha to found the order of nuns. In another story of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, the *Kusanāli-jātaka*, Ānanda is a female tree-sprite whose home is saved by the Bodhisatta as the sprite of a nearby clump of kusa grass. There is no indication as to why Ānanda was born then as a female, and later attained male birth again, and the inconsistency of pronouns makes it unclear whether the sprite was consistently a female character.³⁵ Again, one suspects a joke at the expense of Ānanda, with his slightly effeminate ways.

A similar story to the *Mahānāradakassapa-jātaka* is found in the *Therīgāthā*, the 'Verses of the Elder Nuns,' a selection of poems said to be composed by the early female followers of the Buddha and dating to no later than the 3rd century B.C.E.. In one of these poems the nun Isidāsī relates her previous birth as a man who went after other men's wives. In a similar set of births to the princess, Isidāsī was then born as a monkey castrated by the leader of the herd, a castrated and overworked goat, a blind, castrated and overworked calf, a human slave who was neither male nor female, and then a young girl who was kidnapped and married off, and later reviled by her co-wife. In her final life Isidāsī's bad experiences continued, as she was rejected

³⁴ *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 544: Fausbøll, *Jātaka*, 6: 219-255; E. B. Cowell, ed. (several translators), *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895-1907), 6: 114-126.

³⁵ *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 121. For a translation of this story and discussion of its problems see Sarah Shaw, trans., *The Jātakas: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006), 90-94, in particular 94, note 7.

and abandoned by no fewer than three husbands.³⁶ Her past lives and their cause are strikingly similar to the princess in the *jātaka*. In contrast to the *jātaka*, however, although birth as a woman is seen as disadvantageous and a punishment for immoral acts, Isidāsī does not have to wait for a male rebirth before becoming awakened.

In the *Therīgāthā*, Isidāsī mentions the name of the nun who first helped her to renounce: Jinadattā. As several scholars have noticed, this name suggests that Isidāsī was first a Jain nun, before converting to Buddhism. Notably, whereas stories of changing sex between births are very rare in Theravāda Buddhism, in Jain stories such a theme is not uncommon. We can therefore speculate that Isidāsī's story may have been influenced by her Jain background. Whether or not this is the case, it seems likely that her verses influenced the *jātaka*, with Ānanda entangled in the story in order to mock his feminine characteristics. The succession of births is strikingly similar, as is the repeated refrain that 'this was because of going after other men's wives.'³⁷ If we accept that the Isidāsī story influenced the *jātaka*, then the idea that one should aspire to male rebirth rather than renounce and pursue the life of a nun indicates a significant shift in focus.

A few stories of changing sex outline the process for becoming male, for those who wish to do so. In the *Sakkapañha sutta* (*Dīgha-Nikāya* 21), a woman called Gopikā is reborn as a 'son of the gods' (*devaputta*) called Gopaka, by 'detaching from the thoughts of a woman and cultivating the thoughts of a man.'³⁸ That this aspiration is part of the cause for her change in

³⁶ C. A. F. Rhys-Davids and K. R. Norman, trans., *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (Therīgāthā)* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), 134-140 and 216-220. An excellent study of this text, as well as a convincing argument for its female authorship, is provided by Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (Surrey: Curzon, 1998). That my title echoes hers is meant to highlight the restrictions on women's achievements in awkward contrast to the evidence of their highest attainments, as found in this text.

³⁷ In the *jātaka* this refrain is *tassa kammaṣṣa nissando paradāragamanassa me* (Fausbøll, *Jātaka*, 6: 238 ff.) "[This is] the result of the action of me going after the wives of others," whereas in the *Therīgāthā* it reads *tassetam kammaphalaṃ yathāpi gantvāna paradāraṃ* (VRI edition, www.tipitaka.org) "This is the fruit of that action, having gone after the wives of others."

³⁸ T. W. Rhys-Davids and J. E. Carpenter, eds., *Dīgha-Nikāya*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1889-1910), 2: 271.

gender is, however, only mentioned briefly, along with other lists of her virtuous acts that resulted in a heavenly rebirth. The idea that cultivating the thoughts of a man might lead to a change in sex is found more prominently in the commentaries to certain *Vinaya* passages, which have been examined by Bapat.³⁹ These passages deal with the monastic rules about what to do if a monk turns into a woman, or a nun into a man. The regulation states that the person must move to the community appropriate to their new gender, and preserve the monastic rules appropriate to their new community. The commentary discusses the reasons for these sex changes: bad actions, especially sexual immorality, lead to becoming a woman, and weakening of bad karma, along with a sincere aspiration to become a man, may lead to the fulfillment of that aspiration. This discussion implies that the same karmic results might apply to changes in sex between births, although this is not explicitly commented upon.

The reasons for a change in gender, whether between births or within a single lifetime, are further explored in the commentary to the *Dhammapada*. Here we find the story of Soreyya, who has a wife and two sons. He is out travelling one day and sees the Elder monk Mahā Kaccāyana. Stunned by the beauty of his golden complexion, Soreyya wishes that his wife was like that. As a result he instantly transforms into a woman, and runs off in shame. Later he marries again and becomes mother to two further sons. After making an offering to Mahā Kaccāyana and asking pardon of him, Soreyya is returned to male form, and swiftly renounces the household life in order to become a monk. Hearing of his story, people often come to ask him which of his sons he loves the most, those he fathered or those he is mother to. He always answers the latter. Later, when people ask the same question of him, he answers that his affections are not fixed on anyone. As the Buddha explains, this is because Soreyya has attained arahatship.

During this story there is a passage giving a general explanation of the causes of sex change. The passage begins with the declaration that ‘there are no men who have not, at some time or other, been women; and no women who have not, at some time or other, been men’ and goes on to explain the sort of actions that lead to becoming female, such as going after other men’s wives, and those that lead to becoming male, such as solemn aspiration and being

³⁹ P. V. Bapat, “Change of Sex in Buddhist Literature,” in *Felicitation Volume Presented to Professor Sripad Krishna Belvalkar*, ed. Radhakrishnan et al. (Banaras: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1957), 209-215.

a good wife.⁴⁰ Ānanda is used as an example of how even a virtuous man can have a tragic past, suffering many births as a woman after going after other men's wives. This commentarial explanation corresponds closely to those found in the *Vinaya* commentaries, yet its main source is once again the *jātaka* story with its parallels in Isidāsī's verses. The explanation here is a little inappropriate to the context of the story, for Soreyya does not go after another's wife as the cause of his change in sex; he does, however, return to his male form through virtuous acts and an aspiration.

These few stories of changing sex are exceptions that prove the rule. There are two ideas being explored in such stories: that birth as a woman is the result of bad karma, and that women should aspire to birth as a man. The idea that being born female is the result of morally bad actions is found in Isidāsī's verses, which are included in the Theravāda scriptures. However, it is only in the *Mahānārada-kassapa-jātaka* that we are told that a woman should therefore aspire to rebirth as a man. This latter idea is then expanded in a few commentarial stories, which therefore imply – but do not make explicit – the idea that rebirth as a man may be spiritually advantageous. What we have is confusion between, or explicit connection between, the social, ethical and soteriological realms. From the observation that women are socially disadvantaged, the argument is that there must be some karmic cause for female birth. Because good conduct is a part of the Buddhist path, it is therefore suggested that women must ethically right themselves and attain a male birth before progressing on the path to awakening. This pattern of argument persists to the present day, as we shall see shortly. However, the karmic reasons for female birth are primarily a commentarial preoccupation: stories of changing sex are rare and almost all limited to the commentarial texts, composed centuries later than the many stories of unchanging sex found in numerous Theravāda scriptures.

In the early tradition rebirth is standardly shown as preserving one's sex, and sex in any case is not an obstacle to spiritual progress, since both men and women can become *arahats*. Thus, if the Buddha was male (as, one might argue, he had to be in such a societal context) then so must his previous births have been. It seems likely, therefore, that the Buddha's maleness and a tradition that sex remains stable over many lifetimes influenced the *jātaka* collection's

⁴⁰ Eugene Watson Burlingame, trans., *Buddhist Legends*, 3 vols. (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1921), 2: 24-5.

portrayal of invariably male births. This collection later became viewed as illustrating the *bodhisatta* path, and so it appeared obvious that women were unable to be on that path. That women cannot be *bodhisattas* was not, therefore, a carefully considered doctrine *designed* to exclude women. It did, however, result in a great inequality, despite widespread recognition that women were capable of achieving arahatship.

Why does it matter?

If one's sex is no obstacle to arahatship, and this is the mainstream goal of Theravāda Buddhism, does it even matter that a tradition developed declaring women unable to be *bodhisattas* or *buddhas*? Many scholars have argued that this exclusion is of no great importance, for women can either become men or *arahats*.⁴¹ However, as Walters has argued, the early community of Buddhist nuns viewed this exclusion as important enough to warrant the composition of the *Gotamī-apadāna*, which portrays the leader of the nuns' community in a role similar to that of the Buddha.⁴² The *Gotamī-apadāna* thus provides one solution to the exclusion of women from buddhahood: the identification of the most senior Buddhist woman with something akin to that goal, and the confirmation that a woman's awakening is of the same quality as a man's. However, this 'separate but equal' solution is incomplete, for Gotamī still relies upon her step-son Gotama Buddha for the Buddhist teachings and the creation of the

⁴¹ A few examples may be cited here: Sharma ("Can there be a Female Buddha," 77) concludes that since women can aspire to become male and then aspire to become *buddhas* 'the requirement of malehood, on this view, becomes a nominal requirement and ceases to be a substantive one.' The view that the enlightenment experienced by *buddhas* and *arahats* is no different and thus that the exclusion of women from buddhahood is of no consequence can be found in Gunapala Dharmasiri, "Buddhism as the Greatest Ally of Feminism," in *Recent Researches in Buddhist Studies: Essays in Honour of Professor Y. Karunadasa*, ed. K. L. Dhammajoti et al. (Colombo: Y. Karunadasa Felicitation Committee, 1997), 138–172. The idea that the exclusion of women from the *bodhisatta* path 'is in practice hardly a restriction, as Buddhas are seen as *extremely* rare individuals. The key goal is to become an *Arahat*, which is open to women' is found in Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 373.

⁴² Walters, "A Voice from the Silence."

nuns' order. In addition, the exclusion of women from buddhahood and the path to it is inextricably tied up with other ideas about the effects of karma on one's sex. This exclusion must also be viewed alongside the restrictions imposed upon, and the early extinction of, the order of nuns, which left women with no living role models for the pursuit of spiritual goals.

As we have seen, the belief that a woman cannot be a *bodhisatta* requires that any woman with that aspiration must first achieve birth as a man. According to the few discussions of sex change in the tradition, this is achieved through moral actions and a sincere aspiration to maleness. The implication is that birth as a woman is inferior to birth as a man, since only men can make the highest of aspirations and pursue the highest of goals, and only men have the potential to found a Buddhist community. The assumption that female birth is inferior is supported by the obvious social constraints of women, who must experience the suffering of childbirth, and subjection to the will of one's husband and his family. This suffering is explained by the idea that birth as a woman is a form of karmic punishment for immoral acts. That women are incapable of the highest forms of spiritual achievement is seen as natural given women's degenerate karmic load.

As scholars such as Alan Sponberg have noted, this confusion of the spiritual and social capabilities of women is due to the inability of the early Buddhist community to differentiate between sex and gender, or 'the failure to distinguish the limitations of social gender roles from the assumption of inherent sexual limitations with regard to the pursuit of liberation.'⁴³ In other words, the socially constructed limitations and sufferings of women led to the belief that women were inherently spiritually inferior to men. The exclusion of women from the *bodhisatta* path, and the lack of example for women in the Buddha's multi-life biography, reinforced the idea that both social and spiritual limitations must be rejected through changing into a man. Only then can one have access to the highest levels of Buddhist achievements. This position is deeply ironic given the almost complete absence of stories of sex change in the scriptures.

The idea that being female is the result of previous bad actions and imposes a limitation on one's ability to progress spiritually has pervaded Theravāda society through to the present

⁴³ Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 3-36, 11.

day. Several studies of contemporary Theravāda society have shown that many Buddhist women believe their sex is decided by previous actions and that this explains the extra suffering endured by women. One Sri Lankan plantation worker interviewed by Perdita Huston explained: 'I would rather have been a man; to be born a woman is a sin. I am a Buddhist, and to be born a man is a privilege. Those who have done good things – or have not done bad things – will have an opportunity to be born men.'⁴⁴ Chatsumarn Kabilsingh records similar sentiments among Thai women, noting that: 'Many women are convinced that they carry a heavy load of negative karma due to the simple fact of their gender, and are therefore eager to gain merit to offset it. Making offerings to the Sangha [community of monks] is the primary way most laypeople hope to gain merit. Monks, being "fields of merit," thus benefit directly from this vicious belief.'⁴⁵ According to Kabilsingh's analysis, women's negative view of their own karma is of direct benefit to the monks, and may go some way towards explaining the predominance of women in the Buddhist lay community.

This is a long way from the example set by the first Buddhist nuns, who rejected the sufferings of marriage and other societal duties and became awakened as *arahats*. These nuns demonstrate the distinction between social and spiritual limitations, by rejecting the former in favour of exemplifying the falsity of the latter. This early example of soteriological equality was, however, short lived. As Nancy Falk has shown, Indian Buddhist nuns struggled economically because of their enforced deference to monks.⁴⁶ The female ordination lineage in Theravāda countries has long since died out, and attempts to reintroduce it have met with little

⁴⁴ Perdita Huston, *Third World Women Speak Out: Interviews in six countries on change, development and basic needs* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), 48. Similar sentiments are expressed by many interviewees in Thalatha Seneviratne and Jan Currie, "Religion and Feminism: A Consideration of Cultural Constraints on Sri Lankan Women," in *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, ed. Darlene M. Juschka (London: Continuum, 2001), 198-220.

⁴⁵ Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1991), 31.

⁴⁶ Nancy Auer Falk, 'The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism,' in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*, 3rd edition, ed. Nancy A. Falk and Rita M. Gross (Belmont, California: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 196-206. An excellent history of Sri Lankan nuns is found in Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *Women Under the Bō Tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

support from the established institutions.⁴⁷ Buddhist women are thus left with no role models for renunciation or spiritual achievements. The best they can hope for is to discharge their societal responsibilities well, give generously to the monastic community, including, perhaps, the gift of a son for ordination, and aspire to rebirth as a man.⁴⁸

This established tradition that women are not able to – or expected to – progress on the path to awakening has no doubt been influenced by many factors, including an early Indian discomfort with the idea of female renunciants, economic problems experienced by the nuns' order, and the fact that – as a student of mine put it in an exam paper years ago – ‘the Buddha himself was historically a man.’ In amongst all these factors we must also include the codification of the *bodhisatta* path that excluded women from being *bodhisattas*, and thus supported the view that rebirth as a woman restricts one's abilities to progress spiritually.

Conclusion

It seems likely that the doctrine that a *bodhisatta* cannot be born as a female was a position developed in the commentarial texts in response to the Buddha's maleness and the presence of many stories of his previous lives as consistently male. The developing *jātaka* genre and its association with the Buddha's long biography thus contributed towards the idea that

⁴⁷ There have been some recent attempts to reintroduce full ordination for women from China, but these have met with little success, and the apparently growing number of female renouncers have had to settle for a state of lay-renunciation and little acceptance or support from the Buddhist community. A useful review of the controversy surrounding recent attempts to reintroduce full ordination to Theravāda countries is found in Hiroko Kawanami, “The *Bhikkunī* Ordination Debate: Global Aspirations, Local Concerns, with special emphasis on the views of the monastic community in Burma,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 24, no. 2 (1997): 226–244.

⁴⁸ Among Thai, Burmese, and Shan Buddhists the idea prevails that the gates of hell are closed for a woman when her son becomes a novice monk: Ven. S. Pannyavamsa, “Recital of *Tham Vessantara-jātaka*: a social-cultural phenomenon in Kentung, Eastern Shan State, Myanmar,” in *Papers from the Shan Buddhism and Culture Conference* (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, December 2007), 6. The tradition of temporary ordination allows all sons to make this gift to their mothers, without a permanent renunciation.

women were spiritually inferior to men. The reality of women's suffering in society supported this view, and so a tradition developed that encouraged women to aspire to become men. Whilst women were still theoretically able to achieve arahatship, the lack of role models for women, and the lack of support for a vanishing order of nuns, meant that women's aspirations became limited. The exclusion of women from the *bodhisatta* path thus acted as a counterbalance to the possibility of women becoming *arahats*. The Buddha's example became seen as applying only to men, for only men are able to achieve what the Buddha achieved. If women want to participate, they must support men on their spiritual paths and make a solemn aspiration to be reborn male.

It is possible to end this article there, with the severely restricted position that the Theravāda scholastic tradition ascribes to women. Yet modern Buddhist women might take heart from the fact that this is just one interpretation of the earliest materials. By returning to the early examples of highly achieving nuns in the *Therīgāthā* and *Therī-apadāna*, one can return to a more egalitarian attitude, albeit one that existed alongside androcentric and misogynist views. The very existence of such texts, and of the Buddhist order of nuns, proves that in the early Buddhist community women were deemed capable of the highest spiritual attainments, whatever their social and karmic load. That a negative view of women became standard in the Theravāda tradition need not prevent Buddhist women from making their own interpretations of the sources I have presented here.