



The Theravāda Perspective on the Impossibility of Women Becoming Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

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ABSTRACT

The research explores Theravāda Buddhist teachings on why female attainment of Buddhahood and the Bodhisattva path became prohibited although ancient scriptures showed women could achieve liberation. The Pāli Canon and Therīgāthā in their early form establish that women can achieve arahantship yet later commentaries and symbols deny female Buddha enlightenment. The denial of Buddha-status to women relies on three principal concepts including the thirty-two marks of a Buddha and the Jātakas' male depiction of bodhisattvas along with textual assertions in the Bahudhātuka Sutta. The paper examines traditional Buddhist prohibitions through various narratives and feminist interpretations and regional texts which show expanded views of spiritual attainment. The paper demonstrates how historical and socio-cultural factors rather than fundamental Buddhist teachings exclude women from carrying out the highest spiritual leadership roles in Theravāda Buddhism and this points towards reform possibilities within the tradition.

Keywords: Theravāda Buddhism, Female Buddhahood, Gender and Enlightenment, Bhikkhunī Sangha, Arahantship, Bodhisattva Path, Doctrinal Exclusion

Early Buddhist Views on Women's Spiritual Potential

Early Buddhism created several layers of female spiritual acceptance through doctrinal support although social tensions opposing those views existed. In a time when ancient Indian society maintained strict male dominance of religious authority and learning the Buddha made a revolutionary move when he accepted female monks into a self-governed order (bhikkhunī saṅgha) (Sirimanne 2016). Through this core establishment the Buddha proved his belief in female spiritual potential while simultaneously breaking social customs.

The Pāli Canon shows that the Buddha openly declared women to have full potential to achieve liberation. Ānanda queries the Buddha about female access to the four levels of holiness (sotāpanna, sakadāgāmi, anāgāmi, and arahant) through his appearance in Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN IV, 278). According to the Buddha women possess the same ability to achieve stream-entry up to arahantship after departing from their household into homelessness through the Dhamma and Teaching proclaimed by the Tathāgata. Spiritual liberation exists beyond gender distinction as well as social status per early Buddhist doctrines.

Ethical conduct and mental cultivation accompanied by insight formed the core of the Buddha's path which he declared anyone at any social level including women could access without barriers. Early enlightened nuns left their testimonies about the path in the Therīgāthā which contains canonical poems from the first females on the path. The Dhamma is taught with stability and authority by women disciples who attained the arahantship goal according to multiple verses in the Pāli Canon. The findings reported in Vinaya texts suggest women could achieve complete liberation by reaching more than 500 such levels of accomplishment (Analayo 2009).

Several sacred Buddhist stories featuring Sujātā who fed the Buddha his last meal before achievement and Khemā the ex-queen who became a nun and achieved enlightening demonstrate that female spirituality knows no bounds (Kajiyama 1982). These stories demolish the belief that women hold any intrinsic spiritual deficiencies because they demonstrate women can grasp and practice the Dhamma at complete mastery.

These early acts of inclusion between the Buddha and his female disciples still contained several conflicting elements. The canonical texts demonstrate how women achieve liberation yet they still carry the patriarchal biases which existed during their writing period. The Aṅguttara Nikāya lists stereotypical female traits negatively while the Therīgāthā contains verses which show women as obstructions to male spiritual advancement. In the Jātakas literature and following texts male birth receives special treatment through descriptions of its connection to superior karmic merit. Romberg (2002, 163) explains that male monastic concerns together with psychological projections regarding their inner challenges produce these representations instead of presenting factual depictions of women.

The Buddha at first showed reluctance toward female ordination before Ānanda convinced him to proceed serves as evidence that doctrine had ambivalent positions. Through the establishment of the Eight Garudhammas nuns received decreased status and inferior standing compared to male monks despite their experienced attainments. A supposed Dhamma lifespan prediction by the Buddha illustrated how his approach to spiritual integration clashed with his social traditionalist stance when he foretold female ordination would trim the Dhamma life expectancy to 500 years from its initial projection of 1000 years (BDEA/Buddhanet 2008).

Academic researchers suggest these additional limitations demonstrate evolutionary societal patterns which equate religious aptitude with established social gender hierarchies. Appleton (2011, 20) establishes that ancient India's social constructs and women's suffering in these conditions led to the belief of women's spiritual inferiority rather than canonical Buddhist doctrine. Not distinguishing biological sex from spiritual potential eventually led to more restricted and later interpretations.

Later Theravāda religious thought reached the restrictive conclusion that women needed male bodies to become fully enlightened buddhas and achieve the higher goal of the Bodhisattva path. The demand that a woman needs to transform into a man before becoming a Buddha strengthens the tradition's attitudes of women being lesser in spiritual achievement while restricting female symbolic religious leadership (Kajiyama 1982, 70).

Although facing practical problems arahantship attainment was acknowledged by early Buddhism as a doctrinal achievement for women. Early Buddhist documentation of women achieving arahantship inspires modern female Buddhist practitioners through its foundation as the bhikkhunī order and its historical testimony of women enlightenment. The Therīgāthā together with the Therī-apadāna present an equalized view of Buddhism which stands in opposition to androcentric viewpoints.

Theravāda Teachings on Buddhahood, Bodhisattva, and Gender

The Theravāda Buddhist perspective presents its framework regarding Buddhahood and Bodhisattva path details using thorough canonical text which developed through hundreds of years of commentarial interpretation. Female practitioners have clear spiritual advancement abilities as demonstrated by their journey to arahantship but face intense restrictions toward achieving the same status as male practitioners becoming full Buddhahood. The doctrinal limitations stem from historical and cultural as well as symbolic elements which define Theravāda Buddhist thinking.

Defining Buddhahood and Gender Constraints

Within Theravāda Buddhism exists a defined category difference between arahants and Buddhas. Arahants achieve enlightenment through following Buddha teachings but Buddhahood stands as the exclusive and high-ranking position of an independent discoverer and teacher of the path. Both liberation through saṃsāra (the cycle of birth and death) can be obtained yet the Buddha's status as world-system teacher brings unparalleled honor.

In Theravāda interpreted Buddhist texts only men are capable of reaching the highest level of enlightenment known as Buddhahood. Multiple canonical sources support that women can achieve arahantship yet only men can become Buddhas according to doctrinal rules (Appleton 2011, 1). The classification of Buddha status includes the requirement of a hidden male sex organ (pavedhanatta) because it is one of the thirty-two defining characteristics (Romberg 2002, 164).

Within the Theravāda tradition the appearance of Buddhas happens seldom. According to Theravāda doctrine a Buddha sprouts only through continuous spiritual development and by accomplishing the ten perfections (pāramīs) which takes an endless number of lifetimes. The largest number of Theravāda practitioners aim to reach arahantship because of its accessibility despite its rare nature while this pursuit exists equally for males and females (Appleton 2011, 19).

Exclusion from the Bodhisattva Path

Within Theravāda, the bodhisatta (Pāli for bodhisattva) refers to someone on the long path toward Buddhahood. The established teachings forbid women from reaching bodhisatta status. The Pāli textual records together with their commentarial lists demonstrate complete disqualification for both women and masculine-deficient or physically handicapped individuals (Appleton 2011, 13).

Jātaka stories account for the exclusion of female bodhisattas because these stories only portray males as the bodhisattas and ignore any gender-transformation stories within the Bodhisattva path. There are no recorded narratives of female bodhisattas which confirms the teachings that women need to be reborn as males before seeking Buddhahood (Sharma 1978, 77). When the sex-change phenomenon connects gender with karma and symbolic authority in the tradition it indicates profound relationships between these aspects.

Academic sources indicate early practitioners believed gender had no impact on enlightenment which led to the exclusion which developed into a practice but changed when the bodhisatta training became standardized and elevated (Appleton 2011, 13).

Symbolic Implications and Doctrinal Consequences

Although women can reach liberation even though the Bodhisattva path denies them eligible status they lose their potential to become future Buddhas who symbolize spiritual leadership. Within Theravāda teachings birth as a female often gets interpreted as due to less favorable kammic outcomes though

male rebirth remains considered more favorable from a spiritual perspective. Faithful Buddhist women now accept that seeking male rebirth represents an appropriate strategy to achieve their supreme spiritual goals.

These teachings embody a symbolic structure which establishes that birth as a man represents the essential requirement for achieving the highest religious leadership roles and doctrinal positions. The view depicts femininity as holding a temporary spiritual position which leads to its replacement instead of its acceptance.

Alternative Narratives and Evolving Perspectives

Secondary accounts allow readers to understand spiritual matters through more inclusive perspectives although the dominant perspective still prevails. The Therīgāthā and Therī-apadāna show that enlightened women achieved spiritual perfection by emphasizing that arahantship remains open to women without restrictions (Analyo 2009, 137). The Buddhist texts deliver alternative perspectives which reveal that early Buddhism accepted women alongside men could achieve their highest spiritual potential.

The Southeast Asian Paññāsa-Jātaka shows the Buddha taking his last rebirth as he exists in female form (Skilling 2006, 113–173). The local tradition accepted this non-canonical story that challenged male dominance in the Bodhisattva path.

The depiction in the Apadāna of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī stands as another important example displaying her significance. History traces Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī as both the foster mother to the Buddha and the first woman who received the bhikkhunī ordination. Multiple interpretations explain her role as the wise female leader of female enlightenment who demonstrates spiritual guidance for women practitioners in the tradition.

Scholars who study feminist approaches now use new interpretive methods to analyze Theravāda religious documents. According to Crosby (2008:44) breaking away from canonical interpretations reveals broader systems of knowledge which embody both female and genderfluid symbols that suggest a complex understanding of gender at the deepest levels of the Buddhist tradition.

Revisiting the Significance of Exclusion

Various scholars today interpret the religious restriction barring women from attaining Buddhahood as primarily symbolic rather than substantial. Most practitioners should focus on arahantship rather than Buddhahood since attaining Buddhahood remains highly challenging and extremely difficult to achieve. The overall meaning of exclusion persists as a vital aspect. This doctrinal belief determines how people view female spiritual authority while affecting current distributions of religious leadership positions within Theravāda communities.

The requirement that women must return as men before attaining Buddhahood manifests enduring consequences for understanding both karmic reward and female gender status. The exclusions of male rebirth have dual ramifications on both professional religious positions and feminine spiritual goals and position within Buddhist practice.

Key Arguments Against Women Attaining Buddhahood in Theravāda Buddhism

The Theravāda Buddhist tradition upholds doctrinally that women cannot fulfill the criteria for becoming a Sammā-Sambuddha Buddha even though their contemplative capabilities enable arahantship achievement. The teaching states women cannot achieve anyone of three kinds of Buddhas in spite of their ability to reach arahantship through Nirvāṇa's realization. Multiple theological and narrative and cosmological themes form the basis for this doctrinal exclusion within the Theravāda tradition.

1. The Physical Requirements of Buddhahood

One of the central arguments against female Buddhahood in Theravāda tradition involves the *thirty-two marks (lakṣhaṇa)* that are said to characterize a fully awakened Buddha. Among these features is the possession of a "hidden male organ" (*pavedhanatta*), considered essential to the ideal male physical form of a Buddha (Kajiyama 1982, 65). This physiological trait is inherently male and, by definition, inaccessible to women. As these marks are viewed not merely symbolically but ontologically necessary for Buddhahood, a female body is seen as incapable of fulfilling the physical prerequisites for this highest spiritual status (Romberg 2002, 164).

2. The Exclusively Male Bodhisatta

Traversing the path to reach Buddhahood in Theravāda Buddhism starts with when a bodhisatta makes their firm wish (*abhinīhāra*) to become a Buddha. Previous Buddhist scriptures state definitively that only male beings can become bodhisattas. The doctrine of male Bodhisattva persists due to hundreds of Jātaka stories that depict the Bodhisatta appearing diverse forms but never as female (Appleton 2011, 13). These homogenous male statues establish both religious instruction and story requirements because Buddhahood remains restricted to males. The path to complete Buddhahood remains closed to women because the path begins with masculine figures exclusively.

3. Absence of Sex-Change Narratives in Theravāda

Unlike some Mahāyāna texts that allow for the magical transformation of gender to accommodate female Buddhahood, the Theravāda tradition lacks any precedent for a bodhisatta undergoing sex change across rebirths. There are no canonical or commentarial stories within Theravāda literature in which a

female being is transformed into a male in order to progress toward Buddhahood. Instead, the doctrine maintains that a woman must be reborn as a man before she can even aspire to become a Buddha. The absence of transformation narratives reinforces a rigid and stable view of gender identity that restricts the female role to non-Buddha attainments (Theravāda Teachings on Buddhahood, Bodhisattva and Gender).

4. Scriptural and Commentarial Declarations of Impossibility

Scriptural declarations explicitly support the position of Theravāda when it comes to women as awakening Buddhas. According to Bahudhātuka Sutta in Majjhima Nikāya 115 it is established dogma that women cannot achieve Samyak-Sambuddha status since they cannot become fully enlightened Buddhas without outside help. The Pāli version of this sutta alongside numerous texts from the Aṅguttara Nikāya declares this assertion as an absolute doctrinal truth even though the Chinese relation of this sutta makes no reference to it (Analayo 2009). The Buddhist Commentarial literature expands on scriptural texts to confirm again that females cannot achieve either Buddha or bodhisatta status thus denying them full access to the path to Buddhahood.

These declarations establish a strict prescriptive rule that both explains and mandates this definition of female gender exclusion from attaining Buddhahood status.

5. Belief in Fixed Gender Identity

Most of these arguments derive their foundations from the belief that gender remains constant. The Permanent features of gender persists from one life time to another before karmic rebirth modifies this fundamental status. As Mahayanism does not accept the idea that gender represents illusions or non-essential elements. A person born female is taken as a sign of unpropitious karma leading to obligatory male rebirth to pursue Bodhisatta progression (Sharma 1978, 77). The Maghāna perspective differs from Mahāyāna teachings because gender roles remain fixed even after achieving merit and mystical understanding.

6. Historical Development of the Doctrine

Various scholars dispute the notion that the present-day Theravāda orthodoxy restrictions ever existed in the early Buddhist doctrine. Buddhist texts from the earliest strata showed arahantship as the fundamental spiritual goal through a process which females could reach. The development of supreme Buddhahood aspirations together with female exclusion in the path emerged during later centuries when the ideal Bodhisatta teachings rose to prominence (Dhammadinnā 2015; Appleton 2011, 6, 21, 50, 59).

The later doctrinal interpretations embedding institutional biases regarding Buddhahood exclude women from attaining this state although this exclusion may not reflect the original salvific truth.

Can Theravāda Buddhism Accommodate Female Buddhas?

Traditional Theravāda Buddhism does not accept female beings becoming Buddhas. These beliefs root themselves in canonical and commentarial materials through their requirements for male physical traits in becoming a Buddha and their total absence of female bodhisattvas and their fixed gender perception. Several scholarly works and new interpretations along with contemporary reform movements allow critical questioning of traditional restrictions that once prevented females from attaining Buddhahood.

Traditional Doctrinal Constraints

Theravāda Buddhism bases its exclusion of women from attaining Buddhahood status through various essential scriptural evidence and narrative traditions. A fully awakened Buddha needs to display thirty-two physical characteristics (lakkhaṇa) with the hidden male sexual organ being a trait Theravāda Buddhists believe would not exist in a female body (Kajiyama 1982, 65). The gender-specific human body requirement establishes theological reasons why women cannot attain Buddhahood while carrying symbolic meanings that link ascension to male physical characteristics.

According to Bahudhātuka Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 115) it is not possible for any female to achieve Samyak-Sambuddha status (complete enlightenment as Buddha). Additionally the Pāli source compilation Aṅguttara Nikāya substantiates the standpoint and the Theravāda commentarial tradition stands firm on the view that female minds cannot achieve develop into bodhisattas (Theravāda Teachings on Buddhahood, Bodhisattva and Gender).

The Jātaka collections serve to permanently exclude women from attaining enlightenment. Every Bodhisatta story throughout hundreds of tales manifests exclusively as male even though the Bodhisatta displays human and animal and deity forms. The portrayal remains male. The Theravāda tradition does not support any interlife shifting of gender by a bodhisatta which reinforces its adherence to male identity throughout the entire Bodhisatta path.

Women's birth as women through negative actions creates a negative belief of female inferiority toward males because some spiritual teachings tell women they can advance their spiritual path by reincarnating as male. These doctrinal elements create an exclusive structure that prevents both women and anyone outside the male gender from attaining the final goal of Buddhahood.

Counter-Narratives and Doctrinal Flexibility

Heritage restrictions of the Theravāda tradition do not create a complete unified perspective within the tradition. Traditional elements within the texts and stories and historical background give the Theravāda tradition opportunities for both interpretation and reform. According to Analayo (2009) the early

Buddhist teachings did not demonstrate natural gender discrimination since they acknowledged women as eligible for reaching arahantship. Evidence of women's spiritual abilities and early entry into liberated states emerges within the Therīgāthā composition when reading the verses composed by ancient enlightened nuns.

The chronological record includes multiple examples of alternative teaching perspectives that can be found in a variety of texts classified as apocryphal and regional documents. A female figure acceptably follows the Bodhisatta path in the unconventional Theravādin tale called the Princess Jātaka. The story which establishes a "predicted prediction" exists independently of the orthodox Jātaka corpus and portrays a woman promised future divinity upon her male rebirth (Derris 2008). The story presents a challenge to sole gender restriction by establishing theoretical female access to the Bodhisatta path.

The Apadāna praises Mahāpajāpati Gotamī as a holy female figure who stands close to Buddha character with her history as the Buddha's foster mother and first bhikkhunī. Her portrayal points to an acknowledgment of profound female leadership and authority within certain strata of Theravāda literature.

Present-day feminist researchers examine additional Theravāda creative works which go further than canonical literature and commentaries. According to Crosby (2008) there exists feminine along with androgynous symbolism in Theravāda religious cosmology which presents a previously unexplored dimension useful for expanding interpretations of gender and enlightenment.

Contemporary Reform and Feminist Engagement

The Theravāda Buddhist community currently shows signs of expanding its gender inclusivity through recent practices. The restoration of bhikkhunī ordination in many Theravādin nations enables the renewal of a complete Buddhist community containing monks, nuns and both lay männ and lay niscrimination. The return of bhikkhunī ordination continues to be advocated because it would show Buddhist traditions at their purest form and enable complete female participation in religious and monastic life (Tsomo 2020, 172).

Today's Buddhist women use "critical reflexivity" as described by Derris (2008) to question male-dominant structures and generate equal spaces through interpretation of Buddhist texts. The Therīgāthā representation serves as an example for present-day women as they continue collecting Buddhist historical recognition while pushing for religious organizational transformations.

Some contemporary Buddhists claim that males are needed only symbolically to attain Buddhahood because women can become reborn as men to achieve enlightenment. However, this explanation does not address the core problem that women need to become male to reach the highest spiritual goal. These beliefs persistently connect spiritual excellence with being male.

Conclusion

The Theravāda Buddhism shows diverse understanding about women's potential in spirituality because they allow arahantship but prohibit their Bodhisattva development which leads to complete Buddhahood. The highest form of spiritual leadership stands reserved for males based on canonical references and commentarial elaborations with symbolic interpretations that require physical masculinity. The early Buddhist texts including the Therīgāthā expose doctrinal limitations by proving that women hold equal spiritual potential as men. Women scholars alongside gender equality activists test the theological rationale behind excluding women as priests by urging reconsideration of established teachings regarding both historical understandings and ethical compatibility between these principles. The current debates regarding female Buddha recognition persist in Theravāda orthodoxy but the beginnings of inclusivity during early times together with modern interest signal future possibilities. Theravāda Buddhist tradition requires divine examination of canonical sources along with acceptance of doctrinal flexibility to achieve spiritual equality within its faith.

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