

Gendered Symbols in Theravada Buddhism:

Missed Positives in the Representation of the Female

Kate Crosby *

ABSTRACT:

The aim of reinstating the Theravada nuns' lineage has been a major motivating force in the production of Buddhist feminist and Buddhological gynocentric writings. While this is inspired by the wealth of evidence in Theravada literature for the intended inclusion of women on the soteriological path, so far the literatures of Mahayana and Vajrayāna Buddhism have been far more productive than Theravada sources for the creation of modern feminist readings. Nevertheless, there has been something of an imbalance in the chronological spectrum of sources used, with Mahayana and Vajrayāna literature being drawn from across the centuries, while most examinations of Theravada sources confine themselves, with rare exceptions, to the Theravada canon. Even within the canon the focus for eliciting paradigms of Theravada approaches to the feminine has tended to be a relatively narrow selection of texts. My purpose here is to look at how current categorisations of the ways in which the feminine is represented in Buddhist literature are affected if we examine a broader range of Theravada literature and related practice. In this paper, I shall draw on material from the earliest, the 'medieval' and the pre-modern periods of Theravada to extend and qualify how Theravada is currently represented in Buddhist feminist writings. In so doing, I show a far greater range of the appropriation of feminine and androgynous symbols within Theravada soteriology and cosmography than previously observed. These provide authority for some of the positive feminist readings of Theravada similar to those found in relation to Mahayana and Vajrayāna Buddhist symbolism.

* Senior Lecturer in Buddhist Studies, SOAS, London, U.K.

上座部佛教的性別化符號

——被忽略的正面女性表述

Kate Crosby *

摘要：

在上座部佛教的文獻中，有大量證據顯示，女性本來就具有解脫成道的能力。受到這些證據的鼓舞，佛教女性主義者和佛教學中的大女人主義者，矢志恢復上座部佛教比丘尼的傳承，而這正是推動他們不斷發表作品的主要動力。

截至目前，就現代女性主義的文本創作而言，北傳（大乘）佛教和藏傳佛教（金剛乘教法）的文獻，遠比上座部佛教的資料來源更為豐富。儘管如此，由於北傳和藏傳佛教的文獻被引用的時空跨距，綿延許多世紀，因此它們所使用的資料來源之年代範圍，一直存在著某種失衡的現象；反之，學者們對上座部佛教之資料來源的檢視，大部分都將其局限在上座部佛教聖典的範圍之內，鮮有例外。即使在聖典的範圍之內，上座部佛教對女性議題的處理方式，也傾向集中於比較狹隘的文本選擇，並以此做為推導研究範型的重心。

本篇論文的目的在於探究：如果我們從比較寬闊的層面來檢視上

* 英國倫敦大學亞非研究學院佛教研究教授

座部佛教的文獻與相關的修行，則目前佛教文獻中對女性表述之方式的分類特性，會受到何種影響？在本篇論文中，作者將引用上座部佛教的早期、中古期和前現代期的材料，藉此擴充並修正上座部佛教在目前佛教女性主義的文本中被表述的方式。透過這種作法，本文作者證明，在上座部佛教的解脫學和宇宙結構學的範圍之內，挪用女性與男性符號的範圍，遠比之前所觀察到的還要大。這些符號類似於在北傳和藏傳佛教的符號體系中所發現的那些符號，它們為上座部佛教中一些正面的女性主義文本，提供具權威性的典據。

The aim of reinstating the Theravada nuns' lineage has been a major motivating force in the production of Buddhist feminist and Buddhological gynocentric writings. While this is inspired by the wealth of evidence in Theravada literature for the intended inclusion of women on the soteriological path, the literatures of Mahayana and Vajrayāna Buddhism have so far been far more productive than Theravada sources for the creation of modern feminist readings. It is my view that this focus on Mahayana and Vajrayāna for eliciting symbols useful for Buddhist feminism is the result of an imbalance in the chronological spectrum of sources used, with Mahayana and Vajrayāna literature being drawn from across the centuries, while most examinations of Theravada sources confine themselves, with rare exceptions, to the Theravada canon. Even within the canon the focus for eliciting paradigms of Theravada approaches to the feminine has tended to be a relatively narrow selection of texts. The reason behind this is that Theravada has long been equated with early Buddhism, in spite of its continued development into the modern period in parallel and sometimes in conjunction with the development of the many forms of Mahayana. My purpose here is to look at how current categorisations of the ways in which the feminine is represented in Buddhist literature are affected if we examine a broader range of Theravada literature and related practice. In this paper, I shall draw on material from the earliest, the 'medieval' and the pre-modern periods of Theravada to extend and qualify how Theravada is currently represented in Buddhist feminist writings. By doing this, I shall demonstrate a far greater range of the appropriation of feminine and androgynous symbols within Theravada soteriology and cosmography than previously observed. These provide authority for positive feminist readings of Theravada similar to those found in relation to Mahayana and Vajrayāna Buddhist symbolism.

Female quasi-Buddhahood and Gender Pairing in Theravada

Before turning to new symbols that might prove useful for feminist Buddhism, I would like to draw our attention to some relatively recent studies that have successfully expanded on the positive inclusion of women in Theravada in ways previously noted only for Mahayana.

It has been observed that in Mahayana certain high level female bodhisattvas function as quasi-Buddhas. This is important for feminists because

of pervasive statements in the literatures of both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism to the effect that women are incapable of full Buddhahood. Particular attention has been paid in this regard to the Buddha-similarity of the bodhisattvas of compassion Tara and the female form of Kuan-Yin; of Vajrayogini, who can function as the central figure in Vajrayāna *sādhana* practice; and of Wīṃālādevī with her lion's roar representative of the highest wisdom, namely the understanding of emptiness. In the case of Wīṃālādevī, Rita Gross has pointed out that scholarly debate within the Tibetan tradition, which excluded the possibility of a female Buddha, struggled to assess the relative standing of Wīṃālādevī in the ten *bhūmi* or stages of bodhisattvahood, with the result that she was variously assessed by some as being at lowest bhūmi and by others as being at the eighth (a point indistinguishable from Buddhahood without extremely subtle analysis). In contrast to the discussion in Mahayana studies of the high status and Buddha-like roles of these female bodhisattvas, Theravada studies have focused on the issue of whether the Buddha was female at any point in his many rebirths, noting the tendency in Theravada for people to retain their gender-identity across lives. Taking a different tack, namely by accepting this tendency for parallel male and female trajectories, Jonathan Walters has pointed out that in the *Apadāna* of the Pāli canon, the Buddha's aunt Gotamī Mahāpajāpatī functions as a female Buddha. Her life, enlightenment, teaching and *parinibbāna* present her not as a second class follower reluctantly acknowledged as capable of arhatship and so grudgingly admitted to the Saṅgha, but as being on a par with Gotama Buddha and in some ways preceding him. Her final demise, her *parinibbāna*, is heralded by earthquakes in just the same way as the Buddha's.

This phenomenon of gender-parallel paths or gender-pairing is reminiscent of another feature of Mahayana sutras pointed out by Rita Gross, namely the explicit inclusion of both female and male potential bodhisattvas as the target audience of sutras, through the address 'sons and daughters of good family.' This form of gender-paired address is important because it indicates that the dharma is intended for both. Recently, Peter Skilling has shown that in Theravada extensive gender-pairing affects the format of entire genres of texts which exist in pairs, one for males and another for females, such as the *bhikkhu/bhikkhunī-pāṭimokkha* and *vibhaṅga*, *Thera/Therī-gāthā*, *Peta/Peta-vatthu*. (Skilling 2001: 242-250). I would like to add that we also

find paired forms of address within Theravada texts of a later period. In the *Upāsakamanussavinaya*, a post-canonical Theravada text explaining the bad conduct that traps people in *saj sāra* and in repeated hellish rebirth, states that its teaching is relevant to all the beings trapped in *saj sāra*, “be they a man of the warrior caste, a woman of the warrior caste, a male renouncer or female renouncer, a brahmin man or brahmin woman, an ordinary woman or man, a minister or the commander of an army, whether a viceroy or a town-watchman, or a merchant, a poor man or poor woman or someone with great wealth, whether of the husbandry caste, the servant caste or a beggar” (Crosby unpublished edition, cf. Crosby 2006 forthcoming: p.2).

In these studies, Walter’s analysis is based on *Apadāna* texts, a previously little studied part of the Pāli canon, the Sanskrit equivalents (*Avadāna*) now also proving interesting for the study of women in Mahayana literature, while Skilling’s observations come from standing back and viewing the overall structure of the Pāli canon. The gender-paired address comes from looking at a Theravada text from the 9th-12th centuries, a period previously ignored for Theravada literature, but not for Tibetan literature, in the creation of feminist readings.

Feminine and androgynous symbols from Mahayana and Vajrayāna sources

While these two features indicate the inclusion of women of the soteriological path, I am here more interested in gendered and androgynous or gender-inclusive symbols of salvific qualities. By gendered symbols I mean, in this context of a gynocentric study, female embodiments of salvific qualities, such as, in Mahayana and Vajrayāna sources, compassion embodied as Tārā or Kuan-yin, wisdom as Prajñā or Prajñāpāramitā, and empowered enlightenment as Vajrayoginī, or even the ‘womb’ imagery of developing Buddhahood in Tathāgatagarbha. By androgynous symbols I mean symbols of enlightenment that either explicitly discount the inherent nature of characteristics such as masculine and feminine or explicitly extol male and female characteristics as inherent and complementary. The most frequently adduced gender-excluding symbol in feminist writings is the Mahāyāna concept of *śūnyatā* ‘emptiness’ as the ultimate truth, which lies behind the stories, much-loved by feminists, of the

gender-transformation and humiliation of characters such as Śāriputra for being fixated on essentially empty phenomena such as gender. The most frequently adduced androgynous symbol is the *yab-yum* or other formulations of the union of male and female in tantric enlightenment, which draw on the complementarity of male and female in the realisation of non-dual transcendence. Writers seeking for symbols such as this, which can be productive for a feminist reconstruction of Buddhism, find them only in Mahayana and Vajrayāna sources. I shall now illustrate that such symbols are in fact available in Theravada.

Feminine embodiments of compassion and other non-ego-derived responses to others

Some of the more rigid Theravādin views on the limited spiritual capability of women are found in the work of the 5th century commentator Buddhaghosa. Buddhaghosa's views cannot be ignored in an assessment of Theravada, because his work became the primary authority in the 12th-century reform of Theravada in Sri Lanka, a reform that in turn influenced much of later Theravada, particularly those forms of political Theravada that were politically dominant. As a consequence, Buddhaghosa profoundly influenced modern academic representations of Theravada.

Buddhaghosa is the great systematiser of Theravada, who sought in his treatise the *Visuddhimagga*, to contain the entire Theravada path into a systematic whole. This work has been the main textual resource for the study of Theravada meditation, which makes up the core of the book. In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa relegates those meditations most designed to generate positive responses to others and to eliminate the discrimination between self and other, i.e. those practices aimed at developing the compassion aspect of the twofold compassion-wisdom aspects of Buddhahood, to preparatory practices not salvific in their own right. These practices are the four *brahmavihāra* or 'divine abidings, loving kindness (*mettā*), pity (*karuṇā*), appreciative joy (*anumodana*) and equanimity/impartiality (*upekkhā*). Collectively these four attitudes are compassion, developed according to the appropriate form of compassion for the status of the living being towards whom they are directed – thus loving kindness is the more general wish for the wellbeing of self and others, pity is appropriate to someone who is suffering, appreciative joy to one is

doing well, and equanimity towards one is succeeding and not in need of one's intervention or support. Another term for these attitudes is the 'unlimiteds' (*apramaṇa/appamaṇa*) because in their perfected form they are experienced without limitation to all beings throughout the cosmos, and they cannot prioritise between self, other or different types of other.

From the earliest references to these practices in the Pali canon and even in the *Visuddhimagga* these unlimited states are epitomized by the attitude of mothers to their children. The earliest instruction on this practice, the *Karaṇīyamettasutta*, advocates a mother's love for her only son as the model for the immeasurable love which one should aspire to feel for all beings. In the *Visuddhimagga*, a mother's love for her children is the model for all four *brahmavihara*. A mother's awareness of her grown up son who is doing well and is no longer needy of her being the model for *upekkha*.

In the *Karaṇīyamettasutta* it has long been noted that it states that one who successfully develops the practice reaches the 'peaceful state', a synonym for enlightenment, and does not 'come to lie again in a womb', i.e. is not reborn. *Metta*, according to this text, is salvific. While systematisers and commentators in the Pali tradition, culminating with Buddhaghosa, sought to reinterpret these statements and relegate the role of the *brahmaviharas* to a subsidiary role, scholars are increasingly recognising other passages in the canon which confirm that the *brahmavihara* were taught as salvific in their own right. In pre-systematised Theravada, then, the compassion aspect of Buddhahood is an equally viable path towards enlightenment, unlike the systematised forms of Theravada which treat it as preliminary to the insight aspect, represented by the *satipatthana* mindfulness practices in the *Visuddhimagga*.

We therefore have salvific compassion represented in Theravada by the ideal mother. This provides us with a Theravada symbol of altruism on a par with Tara or, more closely, Kuan-yin. An obvious difference is that Tara and Kuan-yin are personified as archetypes with specific characters and attributes, but this is not possible in Theravada at the soteriological level because a core Theravada doctrine is that there can be only one Buddha at a time, in contrast to Mahayana which allows many or even unlimited Buddhas. It is thought that some of the most popular archetypal *bodhisattvas* in Mahayana originated with the adoption of regional deities into the

pantheon, an option precluded in Theravada because of its one-Buddha doctrine, leaving deities, be they male or female, in supportive roles outside of soteriology.

Confirmation of the transformative quality of compassion, even as embodied in ordinary women, is seen in connection with a Theravadin belief about breast milk, though this belief is unattested, as far as I am aware, in canonical or reform literature. The belief is that compassion is purificatory, such that it can convert the impure substances of the body, including blood, substances cited as reasons for women's essential impurity in the more misogynistic/ascetic rhetorical Buddhist texts, into pure substances. It is thus through compassion for her baby that the impure woman converts her impure blood, saliva, rotting food, etc. into milk, representative of purity, in order to lactate. This understanding probably underlies another belief, much mocked by early Western observers of Thai Buddhism, that certain (non-reform) meditation practices would lead one's blood to become white. Even to this day there is a belief in Sri Lankan Theravada that men who have developed sufficient compassion can lactate, and that Tibetan monks (Tibetan Buddhism is recognised in modern Theravada as giving a higher place to compassion) are regularly able to do this and that this is why orphans are looked after in monasteries.

(Scholars who have recognised that the *brahmavihara* can be salvific in their own right are, in chronological order: Edward Conze *Buddhist Meditation* 1956; Andrew Skilton *A Study of the Brahmavihara in early Buddhism* unpublished BA dissertation Bristol University 1988; Mudagamuwe Maithrimurthi, *Wohllwollen, Mitleid, Freude und Gleichmut: Eine ideengeschichtliche Untersuchung der vier apramaṇas in der buddhistischen Ethik und Spiritualität von den Anfängen bis hin zum frühen Yogacara*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1999, based on doctoral work mainly conducted 1988-1990 (whose dismissal of the use of motherly love as the model I find flawed) and Richard Gombrich, *Kindness and compassion as means to Nirvana*. Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1998. To my knowledge, none has seen the implications of the essentially feminine nature of the *brahmavihara* in this re-evaluation of their original status.)

Feminine embodiments of wisdom

The ultimate embodiment of the other half of the compassion-wisdom pair of salvific principles in Mahayana is *prajñā* ‘wisdom’ or *prajñāparamita* ‘the perfection of wisdom.’ *prajñāparamita* is personified as the ‘mother of all Buddhas.’ She embodies emptiness, the understanding of reality that transforms the unenlightened into enlightened beings, and thus creates all Buddhas and all teachings/*dharmas*.

Emptiness, *śūnyatā*, is the key doctrinal innovation—or restatement of the fundamental Buddhist truth of impermanence—of Madhyamika Buddhism. While the origins of Mahayana may be debated, it is clear that Madhyamika developed in reaction to Abhidharma Buddhism. Abhidharma categorised existence into entities, *dharmas*, that it considered real, to have inherent existence. Madhyamika seeks to demonstrate that these *dharmas* do not in fact have ultimate reality. They are empty. Because of this reaction to Abhidharma, much of the terminology used in Madhyamika philosophy is taken directly from Abhidharma. It is the *dharmas* of Abhidharma that are treated to types of analysis which reveal their emptiness and inculcate the salvific wisdom, *prajñā*, our mother of Dharma in the sense of truth.

Now Abhidharma also has a ‘mother’ of all Dharma(s), the *matika*, which literally means both ‘mother’ and ‘creator/constructor’. The *matika* in Abhidharma are the lists of *dharmas* found at the start of Abhidharma texts and that form the basis for all analyses of reality in Abhidharma. We have, then, in Abhidharma, an exact parallel, indeed precursor, for the feminine *Prajñāparamita* of Mahayana. This notion of *matika* as mother, creating all *dharmas*, in the sense of the analytical components of reality, the truth taught by Buddhas, and the true qualities of Buddhahood was not the preserve only of scholastic or philosophical texts but was drawn on in myths and meditation practices directed at enlightenment in non-reform Theravada, a point on which I shall elaborate later. The association of the Abhidharma with mother is found in the story of its origins: the Buddha first recounted the Abhidharma section of the canon to the deity in heaven that his deceased birth-mother had become. Only afterwards was it revealed to its human representative, the Buddha’s disciple Śariputra.

Soteriological androgyny: gender exclusive and gender inclusive symbols of Enlightenment

Parables from narrative sections of Mahayana literature often use the motif of girls or women to demonstrate that male-female distinctions are irrelevant to the question of enlightenment. Illustrative of emptiness, such passages use the belief in women as impure and inferior to mock the fixation of male characters, typically Śāriputra who is representative of Abhidharma, on dharmas that do not really exist, such as masculinity and femininity.

These parables are important to feminists because they authorise the possibility of women being more spiritually advanced than men, of women becoming enlightened and of the irrelevance of gender to enlightenment. Female-male distinctions point to emptiness through a gender-excluding symbol.

While most material of this type is drawn from Mahayana literature, Alan Sponberg refers to a Theravada canonical text, the *Aggaññasutta*, in his analysis of male attitudes to the feminine in early Buddhist literature. He terms this category soteriological androgyny. The *Aggaññasutta* describes the origin of human society as a gradual process of degeneration through different rebirths from pure ethereal beings to gross corporeal beings as a result of various acts of greed and selfish stupidity. Initially the beings are sexless, but at a certain point in the degeneration sexual differentiation becomes apparent. Sponberg uses this to argue that even early Buddhism recognised gender distinctions as constructed and not inherent. Thus Theravada also has a textual authority of the type of soteriological androgyny that excludes gender distinctions.

The *Aggaññasutta* is not the only creation myth in Theravada literature. A completely different model is found in the *PathamamĒlamĒlī*, 'First Origins', a paracanonical Theravada text of particular importance in Southeast Asia. In this creation myth all creation results from the union of a primordial woman and man. Woman is primary in this creation myth, in that her existence is treated first and she has the desire to create, while man comes along second, sees the fun that animals have through sex and decides he would like to try it. Yet both parties are responsible for the creation of subsequent generations. This understanding of male and female components being present in all

beings pervades much of Southeast Asian Theravada mythology, symbolism and practice, such that different components of the human body are said to come from the mother or father respectively, while the two levels of ordination into the Buddhist Saṅgha are said to represent first the mother's qualities (lower ordination) and the father's qualities (higher ordination). As a result it is the mother who is the main recipient of merit when a boy is ordained (and the father the merit for higher ordination), and thus temporary lower ordination, traditionally the norm for all boys in Buddhist Southeast Asia, was seen as the way of repaying the mother for the pains she went through in giving her son life and nurturing him through childhood.

This myth of gender inclusive creation moves away from the earlier understanding of procreation as the result of male semen or 'seed', already containing all attributes, being planted in the 'field' that is the woman's womb, and the woman providing nourishment only. The canonical layer of Theravada literature predates the development beyond this understanding of procreation and so does not contain more inclusive myths. Yet these myths allow us to see that in Theravada too there are models for gender-inclusive soteriological androgyny, which provide a parallel for the gender-inclusive soteriological androgyny of Vajrayana. This aspect of gender-inclusive Vajrayana has been one of the most important symbols for feminist Buddhists. While, as far as I am aware, there is no practice of sexual union for the realisation of soteriological androgyny in Theravada, the recognition of the male and female constituents of the body, and their equation with various constituents of reality, *dharma*, is important in a non-reform type of Theravada practice, to which I shall turn next.

Embryonic Buddhas

Tathagatagarbha, the teaching that an embryonic Buddha lies within each of us, has been seen as productive for a feminist Buddhism in two ways. Firstly, the model of embryonic development is so clearly based on pregnancy, the preserve of women. However, this is clearly problematic because of notions of the impurity of the mother and her essentially instrumental value according to Buddhist literature, even once the fact that the mother contributes to the make-up of the progeny has been recognised. The important person is the

new baby.

The second and more important reason for the importance of Tathagatagarbha for feminist Buddhism is because an embryonic Buddha lying within all means that Buddhahood is accessible to all, whether male or female. Particularly in the context of Vajrayana, which presents a method of ritual enactment of enlightenment enabling Buddhahood in a single lifetime, this confirms the possibility of Buddhahood from a female embodiment without the necessity of first going through male embodiment.

It is not widely recognised, beyond a small sphere of specialist Theravadin scholars, that Theravada also has practices akin to Tathagatagarbha and Vajrayana that use a range of meditation practices and ritual enactments to create a Buddha within. The main practice is to internalise qualities and attributes of the path to Buddhahood 'into the embryo' located below the naval by treating them as quasi-physical substances visualised as entering the nostril and being passed down inside the body. Practitioners thus adopt various Abhidharma matika (mother-lists of qualities) to create a Buddha inside their own body who they visualise as seated there on the diamond throne of enlightenment. The process of internalisation is based on traditional medical techniques for medicating the embryo while still in the womb.

Thus Theravada has an exact parallel to the Tathagatagarbha of Mahayana, and we know that both men and women have practised this system. The range of practices that use these techniques are found in texts throughout the Theravada world but appear to have died out other than in certain forms of Thai and Cambodian Buddhism. One of the reasons for the decline is that, since these practices are not attested in the canon or in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, the Theravada reforms that go back to the twelfth century, but were particularly effective in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, excluded them from state approved forms of Theravada. It is these reform types of Theravada that have dominated modern understandings of Theravada. Because of their authorisation in canonical texts, what is 'reform' is seen to be 'original' and the period of Theravada diversity in-between, a diversity which shares features in common with Mahayana, becomes invisible. It is only when we examine the evidence for Theravada diversity that we can recover these feminine and androgynous symbols of Enlightenment.

(For a discussion of non-reform Theravada and examples of the practices

mentioned, see Crosby 2000.)

Implications for the Representation of Theravada in Broader Buddhist Studies

The examples I have discussed reveal that positive female and female-inclusive symbols are as available in Theravada literature as they are in Mahayana and Vajrayana, and will contribute, I hope, to a greater appreciation of Theravada's rich diversity. This also undermines the representation of Theravada as more suppressive of women than Mahayana, a proposition for which I find no basis. Sadly this means that Rita Gross' provocative suggestion in her feminist take on Buddhist history that the attitude to women was *the* factor that led to the historic separation of these types of Buddhism must now be laid to rest. (Gross p.57) The symbols that Buddhist feminists have drawn on from Mahayana and Vajrayana literature as symbols of empowerment are also available in Theravada literature, and are therefore available for Buddhist feminists seeking authority in Theravada sources.

Limitations and revelations of the positive female and female-inclusive symbols

While it is reassuring to find that Theravada did not reject positive female and gender-inclusive imagery, we must acknowledge the limitations of a gynocentric study that seeks to extract empowering symbols for women from literature that, however diverse and however appreciative of women, remains essentially androcentric. The recognition of the female focuses on qualities visible where women's lives intersect with men's, where women are of crucial importance and relevance to men. The two virtues associated with woman that are emphasized in models of salvation are the concern for the wellbeing of others, in particular compassion; and the ability to procreate, to generate something new beyond (and potentially greater) than herself. All the positive symbols noted here, be they feminine or gender-inclusive, are based on these two aspects of motherhood: protective nurturing and procreation.

It has already been recognised that an appreciation of the androcentric concerns naturally reflected in the literature transmitted by monks can enable

us to re-evaluate notorious textual passages that at first sight come across as misogynistic. Sponberg, in analysing the male renunciant's agenda in such texts, has demonstrated that such apparently misogynistic material indicates those areas where women represented a threat to male autonomy, particularly in the practice of celibacy. Warnings of women's hypersexuality and cunning can then be seen as a form of ascetic rhetoric.

In the same way, recognising the androcentric concerns behind the development of more appreciative literature about women alerts our attention to the limitations of the spectrum and nature of female qualities represented. Thus the drawing on the compassionate qualities of the mother and the creative potential of reproduction is essentially an appreciation of what women do for society, particularly from the male perspective. Some aspects of this problem have been noted by Rita Gross, in examining Indian and Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism. She points out the limited value of such symbols for women who explicitly eschew such female roles or who fall short of these ideals. (A devaluation of the status of motherhood in Western feminism and society in general, particularly following the wide availability of the birth control pill from the 1970s onwards, also influences a Western feminists experience of the more traditional high status of mothers. This affects their response to motherhood as a positive symbol.) For our purposes, however, it is the validity of these as religious symbols guiding spiritual development and aspiration that is important here. I would suggest that to see the virtues of motherhood and reproduction as absolutes requires a certain alienation from women. While giving birth and motherhood can be very spiritual experiences requiring a massive re-thinking of notions of self and other, an important reorientation also required on the Buddhist spiritual path, women experience the limitations of the development they gain through these processes. These limitations mean that further symbols of aspiration will be necessary to guide their development. Thus paradoxically these symbols may in practice be more useful for male aspiration. Furthermore, by incorporating such symbolism as metaphors for soteriological ideals in a celibate, renouncer-oriented tradition, that tradition is appropriating motherhood and procreation from the realm of women, who represent *samsaric* society in our androcentric literature. They thereby wrest power from women and contain it within the male realm.

This brings me to a recurrent criticism of feminist readings of Vajrayana literature – that an appreciation of the feminine should not be taken as an historical valorisation of women as human beings and so cannot be used to read a society liberated in feminist terms retrospectively back into the source society of the literary sources used. I would suggest that feminist writers tend to be fully conscious of the distinction between text-historical and existentialist exegesis, while those opposing such work seem to be too closed to any possibility of the historical valorisation of women. For me, looking at positive female imagery in Theravada, one of the striking aspects of this analysis is that it actually reflects the valorisation of women – albeit from androcentric perspectives – found in lived Theravada monasticism. While the appreciation of mothers and the esteem achieved through motherhood is a strong feature of all Theravada societies outside of the monastic context, I have often been struck by the dominance of women at temples: The temple is a permitted place for young women to socialise, even in Sri Lanka where ordination is lifelong and so monks are not prospective marriage partners; mothers of monks keep contact with their sons and make up a significant component of holyday temple attendance; women run the monastic kitchens; and the mother of the head monk often holds a privileged place on ritual occasions. This takes place alongside the awareness of female businesswomen and professionals as important donors. Thus the literature I have drawn on in this study, literature I have characterised as less systematised, less edited through the process of monastic-led reform, seems to reflect a truer picture of Theravada on the ground, even of monastic Theravada, than that previously drawn on to represent historical Theravada. This shows that the characterisation of Theravada has suffered by being based on a single strand of the tradition from a single layer and genre of textual sources.

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