

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Spring 2010

Buddhist Discrimination Against Women in Modern Burma • Venerable Anālayo • **Take It or Leave It and the Ground Between** • Saccavadi Bricker • **Welcome Good Branch, You are Not Unwelcome** • Thea Mohr • **Dignity and Discipline** • Thanissara Mary Weinberg • **Archotyping and the Language of Personhood in the Mātugāmasamyutta** • Jampa Tseodren • **The Bahudhātuka-sutta and its Parallels On Women's Inabilities** • Marica Pimentel • **The Four Assemblies and the Foundation of the Order of Nuns** •



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Archetyping and the Language of Personhood in the Mātugāmasamyutta

By Marcia Pimentel

Because the Buddha is able to employ such linguistic designations as “person,” and “individual” without assuming corresponding substantial entities, he is called ‘skilled in expression’ (vohāra-kusala)... Skillfulness in the use of words is the ability to conform to conventions (sammuti), usages (vohāra), designations, (paññati) and turns of speech (nirutti) in common use in the world without being led astray by them. Hence in understanding the teaching of the Buddha one is advised not to adhere dogmatically to the mere superficial meanings of words.ⁱ

In the fourth book of the *Samyutta-nikāya*ⁱⁱ (‘The Book of the Six Sense Bases’), a curious text invites the reader to consider what and how the Fully Awakened One taught bhikkhus about lay women. The *Mātugāmasamyutta* (‘The Connected Discourses on Women’), stands out as a solitary chapter on the qualities of womenⁱⁱⁱ. Obvious relative clues, such as the inclusion within the *Salayatanavagga*, as well as the collection and the specific placement following the *Vedanasamyutta*

should note what biases and wounds we bring to the reading. For example, we should note our perceptions and states of mind. Additionally, we should try to understand the conventional language used by the Blessed One. We should note the absence of misogynist language, of taboos and prohibitions, of discrimination and anything incompatible with the conventional teaching of the unsurpassed-Teacher-of-gods-and-humans.

Of course the question of “what is the teaching and what is not,” is an active fountain of bhikkhuni and upasika dukkha. Current research into the stratification of the Pali Canon helps cast light on the origin of highly contradictory passages that at times might appear to be a schizophrenic attitude toward women. Given the history of stealthy discriminatory additions to the suttas post the Buddha’s parinibbana, the *Mātugāmasamyutta* may understandably appear toxic at a glance. A careful reading, however, shows that this is not the case.

Dressed in conventional wisdom, the *Mātugāmasamyutta* lays out a complete archotyping path for women leading to Nobility, just as it reinforces an identical goal for men. An archetype can be discerned in as far as it relates to the dynamic relational, non-sequential process of becoming from birth to death to birth. Because there is no fixed pattern and it is not subject to rigid definition, the term “archotyping” is coined here to give a more accurate portrayal of this process in light of the three characteristics of existence: anicca, dukkha and anatta. Archotyping is the arising of perfecting conditions in the effort directed at understanding and embodying the law of kamma. In this, the *Mātugāmasamyutta* shows women and men are equal and complementary.

We find this confirmed elsewhere in the Canon. In the *Samajivina Sutta: Living in Tune* (AN 4.55) for example, we

The five powers (for women in India at the time of the Buddha)... are identical to those of men. Authority is acquired by both men and women by the same avenues.

(‘The Connected Discourses on Feeling’) though undeniably important in contextualizing the discourses, are marks of the compilers and are not known to be specifically attributable to the Buddha.

There are a few helpful guidelines to assist one approaching this text with the intention of understanding. At the outset, we

find: “*Husband and wife, both of them having conviction, being responsive, being restrained, living by the Dhamma, addressing each other with loving words: they benefit in manifold ways. To them comes bliss. Their enemies are dejected when both are in tune in virtue. Having followed the Dhamma here in this world, both in tune in precepts and practices, they delight in the world*

of the devas, enjoying the pleasures they desire.”^{iv} (*emphasis mine*)

Additional support is found in the story of Nakulamata and Nakulapita: Nakulamata and Nakulapita were considered by the Buddha to be the most eminent among his lay-disciples due to their close companionship with each another (A i 26). They were also matched in their faith in the Buddha’s teaching, in their self-control, and in the affectionate way in which they spoke with one another (A ii 62; AN 4.55). A commentary (A i 400) asserts that for 500 births they had been parents or relatives of the Buddha, or more strictly speaking, of the Bodhisattva: “Him of the ten powers” is the term the commentary uses to avoid this awkwardness—and so in this life they treated him like a son. Nakulamata, as was the custom for brides, was taken to Nakulapita’s home and ever since that time (when he was still a mere lad and she a young girl), neither was aware of having transgressed against the other in thought nor in deed, and each expressed the longing to be together not only in the here and now but in a future state also. The Buddha reassures them on this point, and gives as his reason that both of them are on the same level in regard to their belief, their ethical conduct, and their generosity and wisdom (A ii 61f.; AN 4.55). In these respects, therefore, a woman may be the equal of a man.^v

Though he discusses woman and men in the *Mātugāmasamyutta*, the Buddha speaks on the basis of qualities, factors and powers. In the first section (‘Agreeable and Disagreeable’), the Buddha lists five factors and their opposites. “Bhikkhus, when a woman possesses five factors she is extremely disagreeable to a man. What five? She is not beautiful, not wealthy, not virtuous, she is lethargic and she does not beget children.” This is balanced by the five opposite factors which when possessed, a woman may be pleasing to a man: beauty, wealth, virtue, industry and fertility. The five factors are resulting effects: vipāka.^{vi}

Though historically much has been declared and prescribed about beauty, it is the result of living in patient forbearance with a lack of predisposition to anger: “This is the way that leads to beauty, that is to say, not to be angry or given to much rage; even when much is said, not to be furious, angry, ill-disposed or resentful, or to show ill-temper, hate or surliness.”^{vii}

Likewise wealth is the result of kamma. “This is the way that leads to riches, that is to say, to be a giver of food, drink, cloth, sandals, garlands, perfumes, unguents, bed, roof and lighting to monks and brahmins.”^{viii}

Likewise everything is the result of kamma:

“So, student, the way that leads to short life makes people short-lived, the way that leads to long life makes people long-lived; the way that leads to sickness makes people sick, the way that leads to health makes people healthy; the way that leads to ugliness makes people ugly, the way that leads to beauty makes people beautiful; the way that leads to insignificance makes people insignificant, the way that leads to influence makes

people influential; the way that leads to poverty makes people poor, the way that leads to riches makes people rich; the way that leads to low birth makes people low-born, the way that leads to high birth makes people high-born; the way that leads to stupidity makes people stupid, the way that leads to wisdom makes people wise.”^{xi}



Photo © Brenda Batke-Hirschmann

Immediately following, in the second verse, *the Blessed One assigns these same five qualities to men*. In regard to men, the qualities remain identical as does their effect of being either pleasing or displeasing to women: the absence or presence of beauty, wealth, virtue, industry and fertility. These qualities, not as mere words or conventional designations but as the conditions, as effects caused by previous actions, are *identical for women and men alike*. The way to the wholesome qualities,—as is related to Anuruddha^x specifically in six verses, and to bhikkhus in general in the remaining fourteen verses by the Buddha—is the keeping of the five precepts for lay persons: the abandonment of unskillful actions of body, speech and mind.

However removed we are from the India of the Buddha's time, it is helpful to note that these five qualities are still applicable today with only minor variation. Fertility, in the West, may be replaced by a host of symmetrical mental qualities: a sense of humor, sensitivity toward others, good attitude, intelligence. In a basic sense, however all five qualities, remain largely unchanged for a majority of people in the world. And a majority of people—women and men alike—have a little of each quality with little perfection in our world and a great deal of distortion in their understanding.



Photo © Brenda Batke-Hirschmann

Because they are conventional, the verses have cultural limitations. For instance, “Bhikkhus,” the Buddha says, “there are five kinds of sufferings peculiar to women:” when young she “goes to live with her husband’s family.” In our age, and perhaps more specifically in the West, girls are not sent to live with their future husband’s family. In fact, to send a young girl out of her home in this way can be considered a criminal act.

The next three “sufferings”—menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth—are relative. Dangers of pregnancy and childbirth have been largely reduced by medical knowledge and the availability of timely advanced care. But as a woman who has given birth to two extraordinarily wonderful children—however painful the act of birthing was—I cannot consider menstruation, pregnancy or childbirth to be a fraction of the suffering of suffering’s potential in our world, affecting both men and women. In fact, if men had the choice of childbirth or being drafted into active duty, I believe the former would lose much of its drama.

Though some women suffer far more than others regarding menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, there has always been far greater suffering in our world. They are sufferings unique to women only in as far as they do not occur to men, which does not imply they are punishments or that womanhood is a “lower” human rebirth. After labor ceases, the suffering of childbirth ceases; but the suffering of parenthood—unique to mothers and fathers—has begun for a lifetime.

The last suffering, “a woman is made to serve a man” is a conventional view which has fostered sinister interpretations throughout history and is much more difficult to understand than any other sentence in the discourses. For many today, it may serve as a useful concept to ponder, with a useful quality of discomfort; but the interpretations of this, and similar statements, throughout time have likely caused an exponential amount of suffering for girls and women. In our world, male physical strength has translated into male domination, which itself cannot escape the law of kamma. Since it is not permanent, it must be consistently reinforced. Since it is not inherent, it must be continually restated and reaffirmed. Since it is not satisfactory, it must be continually defended. While conspicuously absent from these discourses, men do have their own peculiar sufferings.

According to the Buddha, the five powers of a woman are beauty, wealth, sons, relatives, and virtue. It is said that a woman endowed with these five powers may “dwell with confidence as mistress of the house, get the better of her husband and keep him under her thumb” (S iv 246), but that if she is “lacking in these powers the family may not let her stay in the house, but may drive her forth and expel her” (S iv 248), a fate from which only the possession of moral habit could in theory save her.^{xi}

In contrast, the verse that corresponds to men for this section lists but one power: authority. When analyzed however, the five powers are the completion of the requisites for authority in India for women. And they are in fact the same for men. It is men who crave sons. Even without relatives, men could acquire authority, especially in India at the time of the Buddha.

The powers of beauty and wealth are discussed above as effects from causes. The fifth power, virtue, is also mentioned above, and it is the foundation for all of the other qualities: “Virtue,” Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi says, “is the cohesive force of society.”^{xiii} Authority is acquired by both men and women through the same avenues.

As for a family of supporting relations, there is not much difference for a man or a woman. The Buddha was himself an heir at birth, as was Rahula^{xiii}... as was Yasodhara.^{xiv} Yasodhara’s birthright—born to a Koliya king and queen who were the only other family equal to the Buddha’s Sakyan family—gave her the right to refuse to remarry, and to live in ease while raising her son without a husband. We don’t have far to imagine

that they were each very beautiful, very virtuous, very loved and protected and supported by relatives, very wealthy, and part of a long line of probably similarly qualified and empowered sons and daughters (Siddhartha and Yasodhara were cousins).

The last section of the *Mātugāmasamyutta*, on “growth,” ends with a supreme qualifier. “Bhikkhus,” the Buddha says, “growing in five areas of growth, a woman noble disciple grows with a noble growth and she acquires the essence, she acquires the best of this bodily existence right here... she acquires faith, virtue, learning, generosity and wisdom”. The ‘best’ of the bodily existence for a woman is the same as for a man: nobility. “Growth” nears the trajectory toward perfecting causes and effects on the female path. It is not the identical path as experienced culturally for men, yet both lead in an identical direction: the Middle Way.

For women, Yasodhara illustrates the pinnacle of the archetyping path leading to the transcendent Noble Eightfold Path. Because of our exclusive record-keeping, much of Yasodhara’s story is not clear. It is said that when the Boddhisattva left her, she followed his progress: “Lord, when my daughter-in-law heard that you were wearing yellow robes she also robed herself in yellow. When she heard you were taking one meal a day she did the same. When she heard that you had given up lofty couches, she lay on a low couch and when she heard that you had given up garland and scents she too gave them up. So virtuous is my daughter-in-law.”

Whether Yasodhara possessed every factor of enlightenment that Siddhartha possessed can be heatedly debated. As a bhikkhuni, she attained arahantship and had a following of thousands. While it is not difficult to understand that a woman is not able to become a Buddha (due entirely to cultural impediments), this cannot be considered “to have an impact on spiritual abilities.”^{xiv} It is on a purely conventional level that gender becomes an issue of limitation in spiritual progress.

Though it might collide with modern sensibilities of equality that at times seem so unreachable not only externally but also internally, the *Mātugāmasamyutta* has described two organic pillars of society: woman and man. It is a collection of conventional teachings showing that while a woman’s path is not entirely identical to a man’s path, both paths are not altogether different since both lead to identical goals. It is an archetyping path at its very foundation, calling for virtue from the very beginning—and showing where lack of virtue leads. ❖



Marcia Pimentel is editor of *Present*. A first generation American from a long Cuban ancestry, she hikes, meditates, studies the Suttas and writes. Marcia’s simple, rustic lifestyle in the southern Tennessee hills is natural reflection of a lifelong affinity with nature, animals and insects. Her current research interests include the study of gender revisioning in Buddhist history. Marcia is a novice jhana practitioner and an Abhidhamma enthusiast.

ⁱ Karunadasa Y. *The Dhamma Theory: Philosophical Cornerstone of the Abhidhamma*. Buddhist Publication Society, 1996.

ⁱⁱ Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Editor. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta-nikāya*. Wisdom Publications, 2nd edition, September 25, 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ An ideal example of a type; quintessence... “archetype.” The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 20 May. 2010. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/archetype>>.

^v Horner, I.B. *Women in Early Buddhism*. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/horner/wheel030.html>

^{vi} Horner, I.B. *Women in Early Buddhism*. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/horner/wheel030.html>

^{vii} Vipāka: Pāli word meaning the fruition of Kamma.

^{viii} Ven. Nanamoli, Thera. Translator, *The Shorter Exposition of Kamma*. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.135.nymo.html>

^{ix} Ven. Nanamoli, Thera. Translator, *The Shorter Exposition of Kamma*. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.135.nymo.html>

^x Anuruddha was one of the five head disciples and a cousin of Gautama Buddha.

^{xi} Horner, I.B. *Women in Early Buddhism*. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/horner/wheel030.html>

^{xii} Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Dhamma talk at Cheng Yen Monastery.

^{xiii} Rahula, (born ca. 534 BC), was the only son of Siddhartha Gautama (Pāli Siddhattha Gotama), later known as the Buddha, and his wife Princess Yasodharā.

^{xiv} Princess Yasodharā is the wife of Prince Siddhartha, who later attained enlightenment and became Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Princess Yasodharā later entered the order of Buddhist nuns and attained Arahantship.

^{xv} Bhikkhu Anālayo. *The Bahudhātuka-sutta and its Parallels on Women’s Inabilities*. Printed in this issue of Present.

“The appearance of a variety of schools of Buddhism marked the entrance of dogmatism into Buddhism and dependence on authoritative interpretations. Today, different schools of thought have arisen in Buddhism due to the unquestioning acceptance of “authoritative” interpretations of the scripture. This new dogmatism goes against the non-dogmatic spirit of early Buddhism, and is therefore the beginning of degeneration. It is important to emphasize that this dependence on authorities and belief rather than on understanding for oneself, is to be regarded as a degeneration of Buddhist practice rather than progress. It is a natural human weakness to depend on others rather than to rely on oneself. But the aim of Buddhism is to overcome this weakness through the practice of Dhamma. Dependence on authority is inconsistent with Buddhist scripture.

Use your own judgment. Scripture is only an aid to thinking.”

Venerable Madewela Punnaji, from the presentation “The Place of Scripture in Buddhism and Its Relation to Doing Good”

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Once, while Mahánāga was begging alms at Nakulanagara, he saw a nun and offered her a meal. As she had no bowl, he gave her his, with the food ready in it. After she had eaten and washed the bowl, she gave it back to him saying, “Henceforth there will be no fatigue for you when begging for alms.” Thereafter the Elder was never given alms worth less than a kahāpana. The nun was an arahant.

DhSA.399