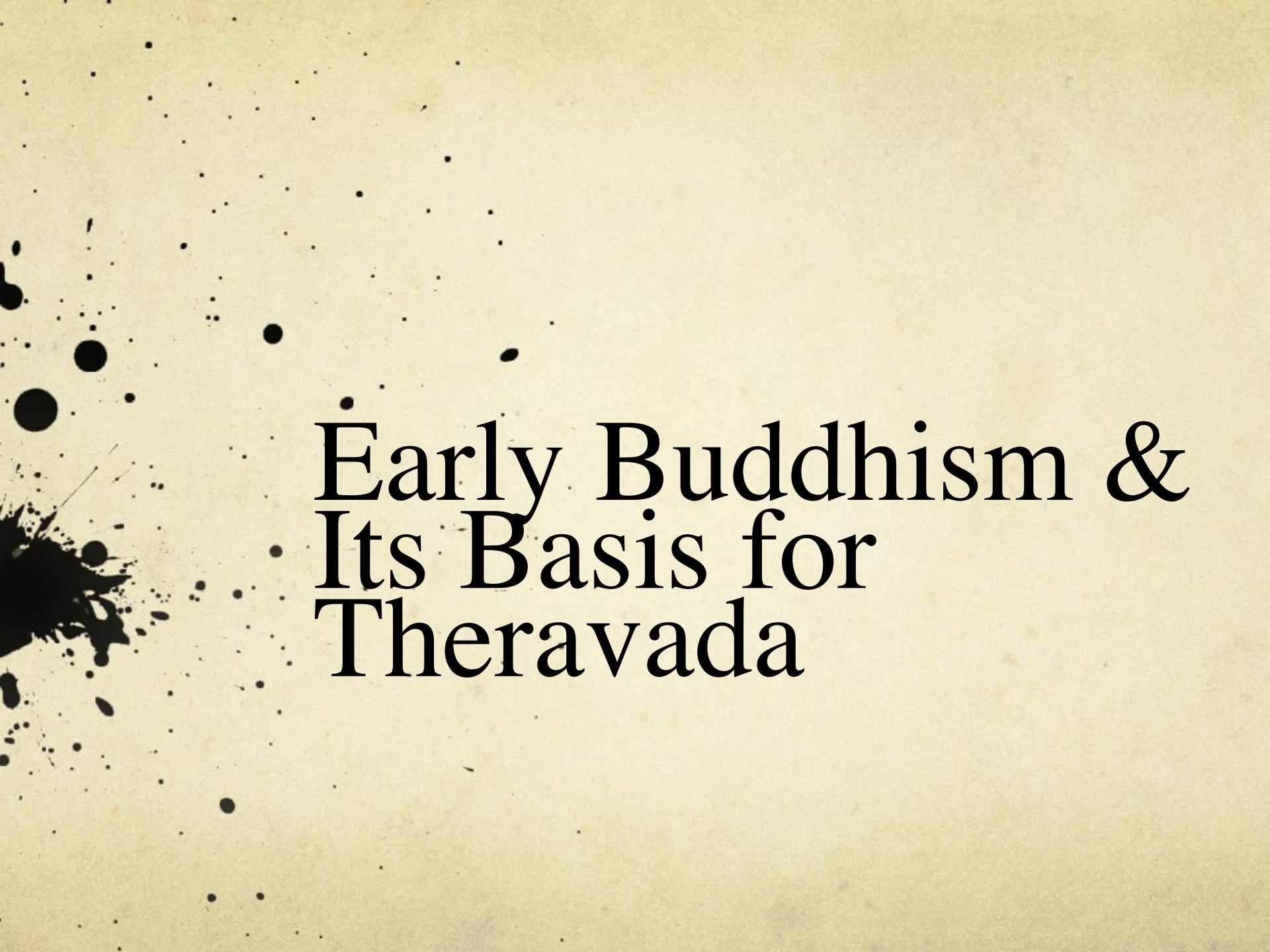




# Conflicting Streams Towards Gender in the Development of Buddhism



# Early Buddhism & Its Basis for Theravada

# The 8 Special Rules for Nuns

- “The eight special rules presented no inherent barrier to women's spiritual development. They mandated institutional subordination, not spiritual subordination. Women were not given inferior spiritual instructions or practices. Indeed, in these aspects the monastic code dealt with women and men in remarkably similar ways. Furthermore, *the monastic code protected nuns from demanding monks who might ask nuns to do housework for the monks or to give them food and clothing—feminine tasks in the renounced world.*” Gross 37
- “For men to take up this lifestyle [of a monk] was already a somewhat common, if not always appreciated, option by the Buddha's time; for women to do it was radically unconventional, and the Buddha was not a social reformer seeking to correct social injustices and inequities. Overcoming androcentric consciousness and patriarchal gender arrangements was not his issue.” Gross, 36

## *Therī-gāthā: Verses of the Elder Nuns*

- a collection of 73 short verses (*gāthā*) in 16 chapters of early women, who were elder nuns having been ordained for 10 years or more, from the time of the Buddha as part of the earliest Buddhist writings in the Theravada Pali Canon.
- “I've developed this path, noble, eightfold, going to the deathless. Having realized unbinding, I've gazed in the mirror of Dharma. I've cut out the arrow, put down the burden, done the task. I, Kisa Gotami Theri, my heart well-released, have said this.” (V. 220-223)

# Freedom from Gender Roles

- O woman well set free! How free am I! How thoroughly free of kitchen drudgery! Me stained and squalid among my cooking pots. My brutal husband ranked as even less than the sunshades he sits weaving always. Purged now of all my former lust and hate, I dwell, musing at ease beneath the shade of spreading trees. Oh but tis well with me! (V. 23-24)
- Bhikkhuni Bhaddha Kapilani ordained together with her husband, who became the famous enlightened ascetic Maha-Kassapa, “We both have seen, both he and I, the woe and pity of the world, and have gone forth. We both are Arahants [enlightened people] with selves well tamed. Cool are we both, ours is Nirvana now.” (V. 63-66)

# Delusion of Gender Identity

- “How should the woman's nature hinder us? Whose hearts are firmly set, who ever move with growing knowledge onward in the Path? What can that signify to one in whom insight truly comprehends? To one for whom the question does arise: ‘Am I a woman in these matters, or Am I a man, or what not am I then?’ is speaking the language of Mara (the devil)!” Bhikkuni Soma (*Sutta Nipata* 5.2)
- There is also instances of the Buddha allowing gender shift between monk and nun and simply applying the different rules to the new gender identity. (*Suttavibhanga* – the first section of the monastic *Vinaya*, Scherer 2016)
- Since Buddhism emphasizes not-self (*anatta*), all intersecting facets of identity (including gender/sex, ethnicity, culture, etc.) *are performative rather than ontological*

# Roots of Patriarchy

- The Buddha: "If Ananda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the dharma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, the Brahma-faring (Buddhism itself) would have endured for a thousand years. But since, Ananda, women have gone forth . . . in the dharma and the discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, the Brahma-faring will endure only five hundred years."
- "How are we to conduct ourselves, Lord, with regard to womankind?" "As not seeing them, Ananda." "But if we should see them, what are we to do?" "No talking, Ananda." "But if they should speak to us, Lord, what are we to do? "Mindfulness should be established, Ananda." *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, Digha Nikaya 16.5.9



# The Development of Conflicting Streams in Mahayana Buddhism

# Expansion of Transgender Perspective

- “For various reasons, by the time the split between older forms of Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism became clear-cut, those who argued that women could have great religious insights and spiritual attainments were usually in the Mahayana camp. This long-standing divide on women's issues is important today, for it is difficult to avoid the impression that the Mahayana forms of Buddhism provide more suitable ground for serious women practitioners and a feminist transvaluation of Buddhism than do the Theravada forms.” Gross 57
- Though women figure prominently in many stories from this period, it is difficult, if not impossible, to link them with any figures recorded in historical annals, or even to regard them as historically realistic characters. Instead, these women are characters used allegorically and fictively to prove doctrinal and ideological points, rather than flesh-and-blood women.
- In many cases in the Mahayana texts, the protagonist is not only lay rather than monastic, but also female rather than male, and young rather than mature and educated.

# Plastic Gender in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*

a scripture featuring a lay person as the ideal practitioner

- A frequent scenario in Mahayana texts recounts a debate between a woman or a girl and a highly respected male elder, often a monk-hero of earlier Buddhism, sometimes a Bodhisattva.
- Shariputra says to a goddess living in Vimalakirti palace: "Why don't you change your female sex?" She replies: "I have been here twelve years and have looked for the innate characteristics of the female sex and haven't been able to find them. How can I change them? Just as a magician creates an illusion of a woman, if someone asks why don't you change your female sex, what is he asking?"
- Shariputra: "But an illusion is without any determinate innate characteristics, so how could it be changed?" Goddess: "All things are also without any determinate innate characteristics, so how could you ask, 'Why don't you change your female sex?'"

# Plastic Gender in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*

- Then the Goddess, by supernatural power, changed Shariputra into a likeness of herself and changed herself into a likeness of Shariputra and asked: "Why don't you change your female sex?" Shariputra, in the form of a goddess, answered: "I do not know how I changed nor how I changed into a female form."
- Goddess: "Shariputra, if you can change into a female form, then all women can also change. Just as you are not really a woman but appear to be female in form, all women also only appear to be female in form but are not really women. Therefore, the Buddha said all are not really men or women."
- Then the goddess, by her supernatural power, changed Shariputra back into his own form. The goddess questioned Shariputra: "Where are the female form and innate characteristics now?" Shariputra: "The female form and innate characteristics neither exist nor do not exist."

The Bodhisattva Guan-Yin/Kannon is originally depicted in male form as Avalokitsehvara in India & Tibet (the Dalai Lama is his manifestation) but transforms into feminine form in East Asia



# The Competing Strand of Sexism

- Asanga's Bodhisattvabhumi: “Completely perfected Buddha-s are not women. And why? Precisely because a bodhisattva, from the time he has passed beyond the first incalculable age (of his career) had completely abandoned the woman's estate. Ascending, thereafter, to the most excellent throne of enlightenment, he is never again reborn as a woman. All women are by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence. And not by one who is full of defilement and of weak intelligence is completely perfected Buddhahood attained.”
- In the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, a core Pure land Buddhist text, one of Amida Buddha's 48 vows: “If, after I have obtained enlightenment, women in immeasurable, inconceivable, immense Buddha countries on all sides, after having heard my name, should allow carelessness to arise, should not turn their thoughts toward enlightenment, should, when they are free from birth, not despise their female nature; and if they, being born again should assume a second female nature, then may I not obtain the highest perfect knowledge.”

# The Competing Strand of Sexism

- While all forms of sexual contact are forbidden for monastics, intra-gender desire for lay people is not denounced until later texts of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> cent. CE, such as Buddhaghosa's commentary on the *Digha Nikaya* and major Mahayana texts like the *Lotus Sutra*, Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosa Sastra*, and the *Yogacarabhumi Sastra* (Scherer 2016)
- Japanese often interpreted the notion of karma in fatalistic terms linked to cultural taboos and notions of ritual pollution. Women were taught that menstrual blood pollutes the earth and offends the spirits. Because of this evil karma they are doomed to a special Buddhist Blood Hell, from which only Soto Zen monks can save them. Women had to rely on the Soto Zen monks to provide them with a special talisman, a specially consecrated copy of the *Menstruation Hell Scripture* (*Ketsubonkyo* 血盆經 a made up sutra) to save them from this unpleasant fate (Bodiford 1996)



# Gender Play at its Extreme in Vajrayana Buddhism

# Embracing and Transforming Impurity

- Vajrayana bases itself on the Mahayana emphasis on the empty nature of phenomena (*sunyata*) and all standpoints being non-dual (containing their contradiction or opposite within them).
- General Mahayana emphasizes the negative, transcendental or existential aspect of this: gender is illusory, thus not worth paying attaching to and best avoided.
- Vajrayana emphasizes the positive, immanent or practical aspect of this: gender differences are real but should be cultivated into a harmonious balance which liberates dualistic attachments and realizes their non-dual harmony or fulfillment.
- Vajrayana attacked all dualistic views in society and religion, such a class and gender distinction, especially notions of impurity. The impure (greed, anger, delusion) should be encountered fully and transformed.
- Enlightenment is attained in this life and this body through cultivating the vital energy of the body through meditation, visualization, and embrace of “impurity” (death, sex, social taboos) while using the Mahayana principle of emptiness and non-attachment to transform the energy.

The Non-Dual Union of Female (Wisdom) and Male (Compassion)  
cultivated internally through meditation and visualization  
and externally through various forms of physical yoga



# The Goddess is Worshipped and Venerated in Peaceful and Wrathful Form

Tara: Beautiful & Compassionate to Suffering

Vajrayogini: Cow Headed & Ruthless to Ego





# Buddhism as It Became Practiced Today

# Localized Patriarchies Wipe Out Universal Equality

- The Theravada bhikkhuni order died out in Sri Lanka in the 11th century, in Burma in the 13th century, and other regions in the 10th century. Since a bhikkhuni must always be present for the ordination of another bhikkhuni, the monks never allowed ordination after this point, only allowing 8 precept nuns.
- In Tibet, it is uncertain whether the nuns' ordination was ever transmitted from India, but certainly it was not transmitted during the second diffusion of Buddhism from India to Tibet in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and if it ever had existed in Tibet, it had died out by then. Tibet also has a tradition of low precept nuns, but also a tradition of tantric yoginis who practiced outside of monastic Buddhism and often gained high levels of insight and enlightenment. Gross 86
- A fully ordained nuns lineage only survived in East Asian Mahayana, though many restrictions carried over the years, like no women being allowed at the great Buddhists centers of Mt. Hiei (Tendai) and Mt. Koya (Shingon).

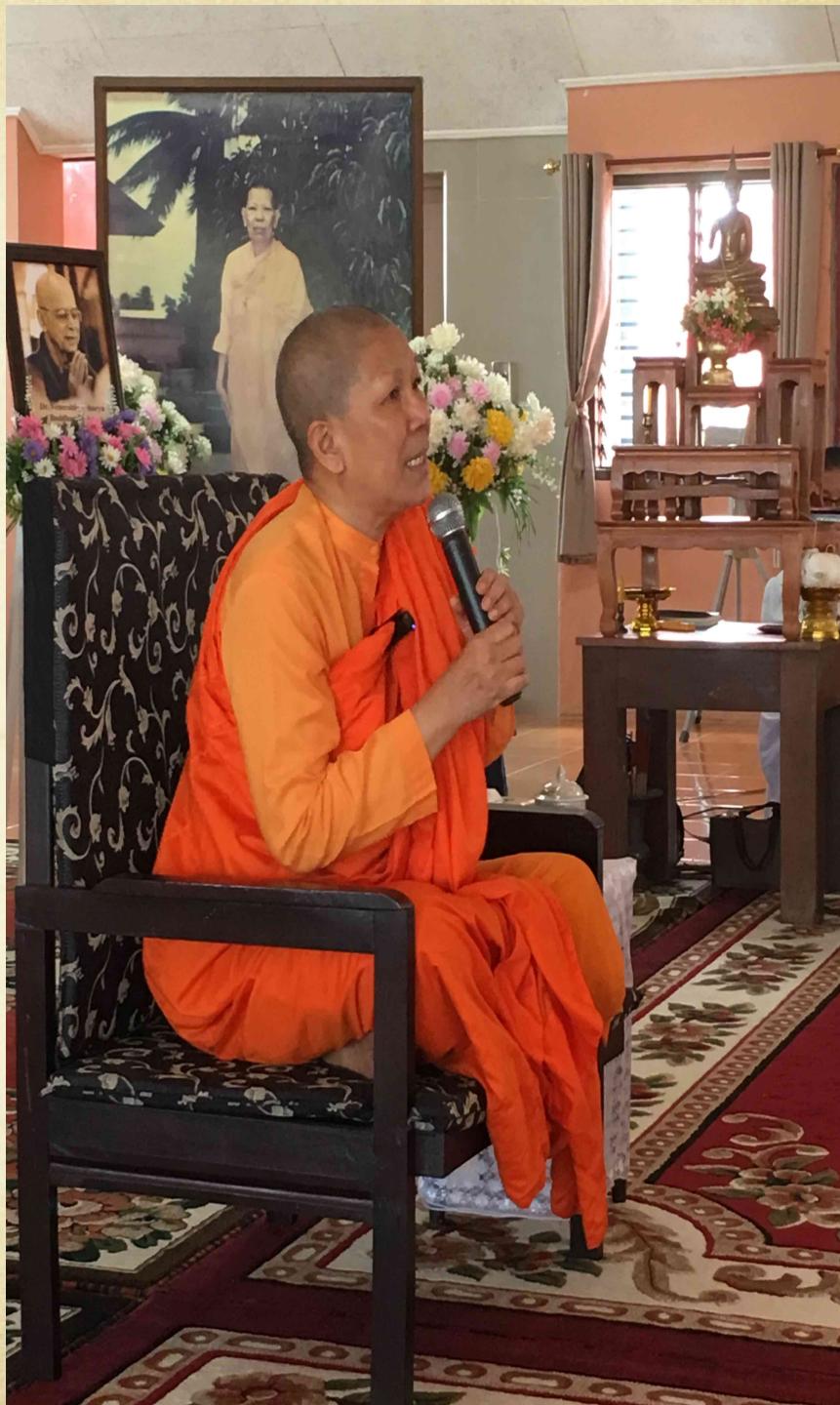
# Buddhist Women's Revival

- In 1996, through the efforts of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, the Theravada bhikkhuni order was revived when 11 Sri Lankan women received full ordination in Sarnath, India, in a procedure held by Dodangoda Revata Mahāthera and the late Mapalagama Vipulasāra Mahāthera of the Maha Bodhi Society in India with assistance from monks and nuns of the Jogye Order of the Korean Seon (Soto Zen) tradition.



# Buddhist Women's Revival

- Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, previously a professor of Buddhist philosophy known as Dr Chatsumarn Kabil Singh, was controversially ordained as first a novice and then a bhikkhuni in Sri Lanka in 2003 upon the revival of the full ordination of women there.
- Full ordination for women in Tibet still does not exist. The Dalai Lama has called for studying how to re-establish the order, but the younger and dynamic Karmapa has openly promoted it as soon as possible.



# The Future is Here: Taiwan

- 75% of monastics in Taiwan are bhikkuni
- Numerous major temples/ denominations are headed by bhikkhuni, such as Tzu-Chi 慈濟會
- Many of these nuns are socially engaged in international relief, environmental activities, animal & human rights, and gay marriage
- Many nuns come from well educated, university backgrounds preferring the life of a nun over limited advancement in the corporate world or life as a housewife.



# The Future is Here Part II: Japan



Rev. Kodo Nishimura – Jodo Pure Land Denomination