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A VOICE FROM THE
SILENCE: THE
BUDDHA'S MOTHER'S
STORY

In this essay I explore a set of women's voices that cluster around a body of Theravāda Buddhist hagiographical texts. I examine the amplifications and silencings of women's voices that characterize both the ancient and medieval Buddhist tradition in which this hagiographical literature was produced and transmitted and the modern Western academic tradition in which it has been studied and interpreted. I want to suggest that the texts of the *Therī-apadāna*—stories about female arhats composed in Pāli in early post-Aśokan India (ca. second century B.C.)—both produced and were produced by a period of strength for Buddhist women, which lasted until the eclipse of that power in Theravādin societies and the silencing of these texts within Theravādin commentarial thought some 1,500 years later. I will focus on one *apadāna* in particular, that ascribed to the Buddha's (surrogate) mother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, and argue that it portrays Gotamī as a supreme paradigm for religious women.

Recovering the strength of the voice that speaks through the *Gotamī-apadāna* helps us to recover simultaneously the voices of two pioneering female buddhologists, Mabel Bode and Caroline Foley. These women pointed to the hagiographies in question as evidence of the power Buddhist women once wielded, but they have been silenced by a buddhological tradition that reproduced the medieval silencings and introduced a feminist critique effecting its own ironic silencing. By returning to the original texts, and rethinking the historical situation in which and for which they were composed, I want to vindicate the views of Foley and

Bode in a demonstration that the medieval commentaries do not speak for all Buddhist history, and I want to nuance the feminist critique with a Buddhist perspective that hitherto has not been taken into consideration. I begin with the modern scholarship, then take its questions back to the original sources. By way of conclusion I return to the modern scholarship and the importance of the Buddha's mother's story for it.

STUDYING BUDDHIST WOMEN

A century ago, at the Ninth International Congress of Orientalists (1892), two "lady members" delivered groundbreaking papers on the role of women in early Buddhism. One was Caroline Foley, who had discovered in Pāli literature what she considered a remarkable degree of religious egalitarianism:

[The Buddhist nun] laid down all social prestige, all domestic success, as a mother, wife, daughter, queen, or housekeeper, and gained the austerer joys of an asexual rational being, walking with wise men in recognized intellectual equality on higher levels of thought, in communion with the mind that was in the Buddhas of all time, and realising in due perspective her relations, actual, past, and potential, to the universe of phenomena, as they in their essential impermanence grew into being and dissolved again.¹

The other was Mabel Bode, whose analysis was similar.² They were the only "lady members" who delivered papers in the Indian and Aryan sections of the Congress, and, not coincidentally, their papers alone dealt with women and women's issues.³ Both were to become major Pāli scholars in their own right.

Foley and Bode believed the Pāli literature of Theravāda Buddhism to contain ample evidence that women played decisive roles in Buddhist history. Like most scholars of their age, they considered Buddhism to be a "Reformation" of Brahmanical Indian society, which was portrayed as both static and oppressive. One of the major "reforms" enacted by early Buddhism, they argued, was an enhanced appreciation and cultivation of female spirituality and the concomitant creation of less oppressive social

¹ Caroline A. Foley, "The Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation as Illustrated by Dhammapāla's Commentary on the Therī-gāthā," in *Transactions of the Ninth International Congress of Orientalists*, vol. 1 (Indian and Aryan Sections), ed. E. Delmar Morgan (London: Committee of the Congress, 1893), p. 348.

² Mabel Bode, "The Women Leaders of the Buddhist Reformation (Abstract)," in *Transactions of the Ninth International Congress of Orientalists*, vol. 1 (Indian and Aryan sections), ed. E. Delmar Morgan (London: Committee of the Congress, 1893), pp. 341-43.

³ Males absolutely dominated the Congress. Not one among the scores of acting and honorary officers was female, and only one woman was included among sixty-one foreign "delegates." "Members" outnumbered "lady members" more than three to one.

roles for religious women.⁴ These reforms were spearheaded by Buddhist women themselves, so Bode and Foley felt confident that their initial forays into Theravādin hagiographical tradition would become the foundation for a comprehensive study of "the women leaders of the Buddhist Reformation," which would be based on the Pāli scriptures.

But that study never appeared. Bode produced no further work on Buddhist women; she concentrated her efforts on editing texts. Foley (1857–1942) did produce a monumental and beautiful translation of the *Therī-gāthā* and parts of its commentary, a major source for Buddhist female hagiography, which I shall describe in greater detail below.⁵ But a more developed theoretical or historical perspective was not joined to this new wealth of data; she did not give further thought to the gendered problematic context that this early Buddhist female hagiography addressed. Rather, she continued to maintain the view that Buddhism was not androcentric simply because it treated women better than did (her image of) Brahmanism. The same view informed the work of her colleague, I. B. Horner.⁶ Although Horner went further than Foley in delineating various scriptural images of the feminine, she too contented herself with the simplistic view that Buddhist women had come a long way from their Brahmanical counterparts. The same can be said of Bimala Churn Law's *Women in Buddhist Literature*.⁷

There is no doubt some truth in the position that Buddhism (and, likewise, Jainism) represented an advance for the women of ancient India. Both the Buddha and the Jina made room in their sanghas for women. But the simplicity of this view is belied in two ways. First, Brahmanism during the early Buddhist period was not an unchanging and timeless essence; thinkers in Brahmanical traditions, too, were attempting during this period to be more inclusive of women and the feminine (e.g., in the development of goddess theologies). Thus, it is not enough to say that early Buddhists encouraged female religiosity; we must ask *how* they did so. Second, the role of women in early Buddhism was itself problematic: it seems clear that in order to gain recognition early Buddhist

⁴ As Cynthia Barker has pointed out to me, this understanding of Buddhism as the solution to some other religion's androcentrism, which justifies in silence Buddhism's own androcentrism, can be fruitfully compared with the nineteenth-century constellation of Christianity as the solution to Jewish and "heathen" androcentrism.

⁵ C. A. F. Rhys Davids, trans., *Psalms of the Early Buddhists. I. Psalms of the Sisters (Therī-Gāthā)* (London: Pali Text Society, 1913).

⁶ I. B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (New York: Dutton, 1930); see esp. pp. 1 ff.

⁷ Bimala Churn Law, *Women in Buddhist Literature* (Colombo: W. E. Bastion, 1927); see esp. pp. 1 ff. For recent examples of this sort of romantic scholarship about Buddhist women, see L. S. Dewaraja, "The Position of Women in Buddhism," *Wheel*, no. 280 (1981); and Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therīgāthā* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1991).

women had to fight not only traditional Indic conceptions of women but equally, or more so, the conceptions of women that developed in the context of early Buddhism's male-dominated ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Despite these inadequacies, it is important that we take stock of the contribution that Foley, Bode, Horner, and Law made. They opened for investigation the question of women's roles in Buddhist history, and they argued that the importance of women in that history has valuable lessons to teach women—and men—today. In particular, they saw in Buddhism a religious egalitarianism that is unsurpassed elsewhere in the history of religions; an egalitarianism that they admired and championed. For Foley, at least, this was more than scholastic admiration: she attempted to enter the Buddhist Path herself in order to attain the exalted state that it left open for women, the state of insight into the impermanence of reality that she describes in the quotation above.⁸

Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism* represented a new stage in the historical study of Buddhist women.⁹ Paul recognized in the texts she studied both an androcentric "traditional" context, which limited rather than expanded religious images of the feminine, and a response to that traditional context from within the tradition itself. Thus the study of Buddhist women emerges in Paul's book as the study of problematic situations and their solutions within Buddhism, rather than as an overly romantic image of Buddhism as the solution to some other religion's sexism. Paul sees Buddhist women as agents of their own status in the Buddhist community, struggling with androcentrism, rather than as the passive recipients of a revelation that rendered gender a non-issue a priori. According to Paul, it took Buddhists centuries to achieve an androgynous buddhology.

However, the Buddhism that Paul vindicates is limited to Mahāyāna tradition and its Sanskrit and Chinese texts; hers is a narrative of the victory that Mahāyāna thought gained over the androcentrism of early (equated with Theravāda) Buddhism. Thus, she displaces the Brahmanical-Buddhist continuum onto a Theravāda-Mahāyāna continuum, in which

⁸ No comprehensive biography of Caroline Foley has appeared. A short biographical account can be found in William Peiris's *The Western Contribution to Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973), pp. 20–25. She is hardly mentioned in the recent biography of her more famous husband by Ananda Wickremeratne, *The Genesis of an Orientalist: Thomas William Rhys Davids and Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984). Some primary materials, which make clear her personal commitment to Pāli Buddhism, have been collected and summarized by Ananda W. P. Gurugé, *From the Living Fountains of Buddhism: Sri Lankan Support to Pioneering Western Orientalists* (Colombo: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1984), pp. 216–305. Another excellent, albeit scornful, source is the collection of unpublished diaries of Anagārika Dharmapāla at the Mahābodhi Society Library in Sārṇāth, Benares.

⁹ Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition*, 2d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

Mahāyāna is championed primarily for not being Theravādin. This analysis is helpful, to the extent that Mahāyāna Buddhist women *did* combat the misogynist foundations of early Buddhism. But something critical is lost in Paul's formulation: the positive characterization of Theravāda Buddhist women. The romantic scholarship of Foley and Bode is undermined by the insight that early Buddhism was not so egalitarian as may at first glance appear, but it has been replaced with a scholarly tradition that maintains that in order to gain voice Buddhist women had to become Mahāyānists. Theravādin women, women who combated the androcentrism of early Buddhism without rejecting the basic tenets of the Buddha's teachings as recorded in the old "Hīnayāna" canons, are silenced.

Karen Lang has taken up Paul's position by returning to the Pāli canon and extending her analysis of the androcentric context faced by early Buddhist women, an important corrective to romantic scholarship on the woman in the Theravādin tradition:

Women were of secondary importance in the Hindu and Buddhist societies of the sixth to third centuries, B.C.E. Both communities supported male ascetics over female ascetics. Despite this lack of support, even from their own community, Buddhist women were active participants in early Buddhist history. Their verses express a concern and compassion for others that lie at the root of Buddhist practice. But because the gradual patriarchalization of early Buddhism tended to obscure their achievements, we need to reclaim these long-dead women as part of our own human history.¹⁰

Although Lang shares with Foley and Bode a desire to recover the agency of women in Buddhist history, and to make thereby a contribution to our understanding of women's roles in modern society, the Buddhist women's voices that Lang recovers for us are not voices of power, like the voices that spoke through Foley and Bode; they are voices of submission, voices of women without support from their own communities, voices that those communities silenced, voices that are really "counter-voices." Theravādin women speaking through Lang embody misogynist attitudes, reproducing them in the process of making them "eloquently testify to their own remarkable achievements."¹¹ From Lang's perspec-

¹⁰ Karen Christina Lang, "Lord Death's Snare: Gender-related Imagery in the Therīgāthā and the Therīgāthā," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 2 (1986): 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68. I believe that Lang's analysis, although insightful, goes too far in the other direction; that is, it makes the condition of Theravādin women appear to be much bleaker than it actually was, a bleakness that is more the product of Western presuppositions than ancient South Asian ones. Lang's specific example—the Buddhist characterization of the body, especially the woman's body, as a sign of impurity ("Lord Death's Snare")—is cast as purely androcentric only with difficulty (regardless of how such a characterization has been employed in the West or elsewhere), given the fact that the internalization of such an understanding of the nature of the body is considered salvific

tive, Theravāda Buddhism—the Buddhism based on the Pāli canon—is something to be moved beyond (and, in her formulation, woman's "countervoice" within early Buddhism turns out to be proto-Mahāyāna!).¹²

These views have been nuanced considerably by other scholars in the last two decades. Nancy Auer Falk, Renate Pitzer-Reyl, and Rita M. Gross, among others, have stressed that the early community had its egalitarian elements and moments, too; avoiding blanket generalizations, they have tried to separate out egalitarian and androcentric strains.¹³ Although their explanations for the growth of androcentrism in the early community differ—Falk blames the natural symbolic association of women with generation and becoming (a distinctly negative image among the early Buddhists), Pitzer-Reyl blames the influence of Brahmanical conceptions of woman, and Gross blames misogynist editor-monks—they agree in treating androcentrism (and especially misogyny) as a later accretion on an originally more egalitarian core. Nancy Auer Falk and Janice D. Willis, moreover, have initiated a long-needed call for reconstructing the social history of women in Indian Buddhism (a project to which the present article is meant as a contribution).¹⁴ Despite the range of interesting questions raised by these authors, however, they agree fundamentally with the characterization charted out by Paul and Lang as discussed above: the early tradition that became Theravāda Buddhism is characterized by androcentrism and at least occasional misogyny; Buddhist women made some strides toward equality as part of the growth of the Mahāyāna (and, for Gross, the Vajrayāna) traditions.

(neither repressive nor tainting) within the epistemology of Theravāda Buddhism, regardless of whether it is a woman or a man who achieves it or whether a male or female body serves as the locus of the insight. Foley recognized this fact, and precisely such an insight constituted for her the exaltation of women's religiosity within early Buddhism.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 78: "This concern for others' welfare, this union of compassion with wisdom, is a distinct female 'countervoice.' That these values become more prominent in later Mahāyāna tradition, which has a less negative image of women, may not be coincidental."

¹³ Nancy Falk, "An Image of Woman in Old Buddhist Literature: The Daughters of Māra," in *Women and Religion*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Joan Arnold (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1974), pp. 105–12; Renate Pitzer-Reyl, *Die Frau im Frühen Buddhismus, Marburger Studien zur Afrika- und Asienkunde, Serie B: Asien, Band 7* (Berlin: Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 1984); Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Nancy Auer Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 207–24; Janice D. Willis, "Nuns and Benefactresses: The Role of Women in the Development of Buddhism," in *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1985), pp. 59–85.

I certainly do not advocate that we return to a romantic disregard for canonical evidence of early Buddhist misogyny, or deny that in developing an androgynous buddhology Mahāyānist (and Vajrayānist) women progressed toward a certain vision of equality. But in this article I want to demonstrate that women in Theravādin tradition—women who continued to value, rather than reject, the ancient canon and the classic monastic structures—were, like their Mahāyānist counterparts, vocal and active in constituting their own worlds. Their voices were obviously different from the voices of women under the Mahāyāna, but they were no less forceful. In the process of recovering their voices from the past, as mentioned, I hope simultaneously to recover some of Caroline Foley's voice, a voice that declared Theravādin women to be of exceptional importance for the history of religious women. But the special value of the Theravādin view within the general study of Buddhist women will be clear only after an historical introduction to the *Gotamī-apadāna*, so I shall return to it only in the Conclusion.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY BACKGROUND TO *Gotamī-apadāna*

Lang's account (like Falk's, Pitzer-Reyl's, and Gross's) focuses on a set of early Buddhist verses called *Therī-gāthā* ("Psalms of the Sisters" in Foley's translation). They parallel a longer set of verses ascribed to men, *Thera-gāthā* ("Psalms of the Brethren"). The speakers in these verses are famous nuns and monks who attained insight into the nature of reality, arhatship, during the lifetime of the Buddha. The entire collection is no later than about the third century B.C., and the verses are steeped in the thought of the early Buddhist *suttas* and *vinaya*. Foley's account, on the other hand, is based on a medieval (perhaps sixth century?) commentary on these ancient verses, Dhammapāla's *Paramattha-dīpanī nāma Therī-gāthā-aṭṭhakathā*. It is possible, then, to see the difference between Lang's and Foley's findings about Theravādin women as a problem not of contradiction, but of historical conflation. All our evidence would support Lang's contention that, under early Buddhism, before about the third century B.C., woman's role was not so exalted as Foley believed. But we can simultaneously affirm that Dhammapāla preserves a record of the fact that later women in the Theravādin tradition reformulated that role in positive and ingenious ways. It was this reformulation—already encoding the kind of response to androcentrism that Paul has elucidated for us—that Foley discerned in 1892. Lang's verses represent not a final Theravādin submission to androcentrism but the first stage in a long history of combating it.

The clue to the manner in which Theravādin women voiced their objections to early Buddhist androcentrism thus lies in the period of transition between the composition of the nuns' "Psalms" and the composition of Dhammapāla's commentary on them. The link between

these two accounts is a larger set of hagiographical poems entitled *Apadāna*.¹⁵ These poems, composed during the second or first century B.C., are literal continuations of the *Thera-gāthā* (i.e., *Thera-apadāna*) and *Therī-gāthā* (i.e., *Therī-apadāna*).¹⁶ As K. R. Norman has demonstrated, even within the *Thera-therīgāthā* we can detect a process of embedding the original verses within later "rubrics" that provide sketchy biographical details about the speaker of each verse.¹⁷ The last pages of the *Therī-gāthā* are virtually indistinguishable from the early pages of *Therī-apadāna*. But in general the *Apadāna* hagiographies are far more complete than those in *Thera-therīgāthā*; they embed the early verses within elaborate descriptions of past and present lives.

Dhammapāla also embeds the early verses within biographical narratives, but his narratives are prose compositions. These narratives are clearly based on the *Apadāna* recensions of the hagiographies, and Dhammapāla usually quotes the appropriate *apadāna* at the end of each section of prose and lexical gloss. But when he rendered these texts into prose, Dhammapāla lost a great deal of their charm; he lost not only their aesthetic quality, composed as they are in simple and light, but catchy and engaging, Pāli verse, but also the interpretive and ideological dimensions of his source texts. Much of the force behind the *Apadāna* voices, including the vocal response they made to gendered problematic situations, was thus silenced. But this silencing was not so severe as that which followed in the composition of *Visuddhajanavilāsini*, the commentary on *Apadāna*, during about the thirteenth century A.D. By that time the so-called "disappearance" of the nuns' order in Theravāda history had literally silenced a certain kind of woman's voice forever.¹⁸ At least women, if not their ideological stances, were part of Dhammapāla's story. The commentary on *Apadāna*, conversely, reflects the historical

¹⁵ The *Apadāna* is included in the *Khuddakanikāya* of the *Suttapiṭaka* of the Pāli canon (*Tiṭṭhaka*), a "miscellaneous" division of the canon that includes examples of the earliest (e.g., *Suttanipāta*, *Dhammapada*) and latest (e.g., *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Cariyāpiṭaka*, *Vimāna-petavaṭṭhu*, *Apadāna*) strata of canonical literature.

¹⁶ On the dating and interpretation of this text see Jonathan S. Walters, "Stupa, Story and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Aśokan India," in *Buddhist Life Stories of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Juliane Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, in press).

¹⁷ K. R. Norman, trans., *The Elders' Verses*, vol. 1, *Theragāthā*, pp. xix–xxv, and vol. 2, *Therīgāthā*, pp. xxi–xxvii (London: Luzac, 1971). Compare his comments in K. R. Norman, *Pāli Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983), esp. pp. 72–77, 89–92.

¹⁸ That scholars continue to satisfy themselves with this simplistic notion—how could one-half of the Buddhist sangha "disappear"?—exemplifies the general neglect that Buddhist women have suffered in modern studies. Important work needs to be done, recovering historically the motives that led Theravāda Buddhists to reconstitute themselves without female monastic access—surely an important chapter in the history of patriarchalization. Falk and Willis (see n. 14 above) have raised some important questions but have made virtually no use of the extant "hard" evidence; for additional references to primary evidence about Indian and Sri Lankan nuns, cf. below, nn. 36 and 37.

absence of nuns by that time: the nuns' *apadānas* are simply excluded, as though they had never existed.¹⁹ Extant manuscripts of the *Apadāna*, all of them considerably more recent than the thirteenth century, internalize this commentarial silencing by adding a colophon after the monks' *apadānas*, which makes the nuns' tales appear to be a mere appendix.²⁰

This medieval silencing of the *Therī-apadāna* was unfortunately and probably unconsciously reproduced by Foley. She embedded her translations, in verse, within prose paraphrases of Dhammapāla's prose biographies. Her prose biographical excerpts eliminated all vestiges of the *Apadāna* ideology (according to which the early verses had traditionally been understood, and according to which Foley herself initially had championed Buddhist women)—even the central focus on previous lives that characterizes all *apadānas* (see below)—and thus displaced the hagiographical tradition from the context in which it originally had meaning.

Simultaneously, wider trends in the study of Theravāda Buddhism contributed to the neglect of the *Apadāna* testimony in the West. Long before the text had been edited and published for Western readers by the Pali Text Society, the society's famous founder, T. W. Rhys Davids, declared the text late and on those grounds dismissed it.²¹ Rhys Davids—who was one of the distinguished “members” of the 1892 Congress and whom Caroline Foley married in 1894—established, through the Pali Text Society and his own writings, a particular normative understanding of Theravāda Buddhism, an understanding that even today is hegemonic within Pāli studies and in the shadow of which Foley subsequently wrote.²² In brief, Rhys Davids privileged the early

¹⁹ Some of the material in the nuns' *apadānas* did, however, maintain a presence in Theravādin culture after the “disappearance” of the nuns, through incorporation in vernacular Sinhala story texts. The story of Gotamī, for example, is preserved through a lengthy retelling in Mayūrapāda Thera's thirteenth-century Sinhala masterpiece, *Pūjāvāliya* (Pandita Kiri-ālle Jñānavimala Sthavira, ed., *Pūjāvāliya* [Colombo: Guṇasena, 1986], pp. 542–87). But even here the new patriarchy is evident: Gotamī wants to become a nun simply in order to please Gotama (rather than as a result of her own previous-life piety and conviction); Gotamī's miracles are said to reflect the miraculous power (*anubhāva*) of the Buddha (rather than of Gotamī herself); her great achievements are presented not as an invitation for women to follow her lead but as a demonstration that the Buddha is worthy of *pūjā*.

²⁰ The colophon says: “Thus the *Buddha-apadāna*, *Paccekabuddha-apadāna* and *Therā-apadāna* are finished. Let it be accomplished! Let it be good! Let there be victory! Let there be an absence of disease!”

²¹ T. W. Rhys Davids, “*Apadāna*,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner's, 1908), 1:603.

²² Foley subsequently wrote as Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, or simply Mrs. Rhys Davids (her husband was simply Rhys Davids). She was overshadowed by her husband and spent most of her career after his death carrying on a dialogue with his ideas. But in fact Mrs. Rhys Davids was the more prolific, and in my view more interesting, thinker. In the body of this article I have regularly referred to Mrs. Rhys Davids by her maiden name because I believe that her participation in Mr. Rhys Davids's “early Buddhism” project was part of the silencing of her protofeminist voice.

portions of the Pāli canon—which he portrayed as the product of the historical Buddha, an essentially rational and psychologically sophisticated would-be secular humanism—while he disparaged the “defacements” of that early core wrought by later Buddhists. The *Apadāna*, along with many other important texts in the Pāli canon and most of the Theravādin postcanonical literature, fell into the latter category: its emphasis on previous lives was taken as a sign of irrationality, its simplicity as a sign of simplemindedness. Publication of the *Apadāna* was apparently not considered of great import by Rhys Davids.

The *Apadāna* finally was published by the Pali Text Society, however, in 1925 (vol. 1) and 1927 (vol. 2). It was the last of the canonical texts to be edited and published in the West. Its editor, one Mary E. Lilley, is explicit in her introductions about the fact that she worked under imperfect conditions and felt no satisfaction with the finished product. Mr. and Mrs. Rhys Davids are conspicuously absent in her acknowledgments (given the fact that they were personally involved in most of the Pali Text Society projects), which express special gratitude instead to folklorist Dr. Barnett, philosopher E. J. Thomas, and, especially, Mabel Bode.²³ Lilley had good reason to be dissatisfied with her work, which is notoriously flawed among the generally excellent products of the Pali Text Society. This was the result, in large part, of both medieval (traditional) and modern (Western) silencings of this text—medieval, because the absence of a commentary on the nuns' *apadānas* and the careless transmission of the nuns' tales in recent centuries reflect traditional silencing of the nuns' voices and contributed to the philological difficulties that Lilley encountered; modern, because the Rhys Davids project generated a scholarly disinterest in the text, which accounts for the inaccessibility of carefully copied and edited *Apadāna* manuscripts in the West of Lilley's day (despite enormous collecting efforts of manuscripts of “early Buddhist” texts by the Orientalists of Europe). Lilley's edition, necessarily reproducing ancient and modern silencings, further silenced the *Apadāna*: a complete translation of the text has not been forthcoming, deferred until a better edition is prepared, while the edition itself has been out of print for years.²⁴ Those fortunate enough to obtain it in a library or (as I did) in a used book store will likely be

²³ The letters of Caroline Foley Rhys Davids to Rev. A. P. Buddhadatta, collected by Gurugé (see n. 8 above), contain repeated expressions of interest in seeing the *Apadāna* published, which is curious given her apparent lack of participation in the actual project. It may be that she was merely responding to interest in the project expressed by Buddhadatta (whose letters have not been preserved).

²⁴ *Apadāna* is the only text of the *Tipiṭaka* still untranslated in the West. Jonathan S. Walters's translation of *Gotamī-apadāna* (forthcoming in *Buddhism*, the new anthology of Buddhist texts edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr., which is to be published by Princeton University Press, perhaps next year) will be, as far as I know, the first translation of a monk's

discouraged by the state of the text, which reinforces the notion that it is late and corrupt. The *Apadāna* remains unmentioned in the works of Paul, Lang, Falk, Pitzer-Reyl, Gross, and Willis.²⁵

But the *Apadāna* was not silent in its context of production. As I have argued in another article, these poems were probably composed for performance in empirewide festivals sponsored by the Śunga and Sātavāhana emperors in the second and first centuries B.C.²⁶ On the basis of a complex homology, which I need not elaborate here, these texts served as a charter for the Śunga and early Sātavāhana empires; the literary unity of all Indians (as characters in a cosmic Buddha biography) constituted an actual association of people from all geographical locations and walks of life as a single imperial unit. This pan-Indian association, the empire, was enacted and affirmed during the imperial festivals. The style of the *Apadāna* texts, light and fun, made them "festive additions" to such occasions. The performers were both monks and nuns, who, in the first person, voiced the achievements of the famous monk or nun to whom the particular *apadāna* was ascribed. Some of the texts, including *Gotamī-apadāna*, weave different characters together into what, given the performative context, we can fruitfully consider to have been sophisticated dramas. And these were dramas in which women's voices—women voicing the words ascribed to famous female saints—were heard side by side with those of men.

The *Apadāna* contains hundreds of hagiographies. It begins with a single *apadāna* of the Buddha²⁷ and a philosophical text cast as *Paccekabuddha-apadāna*,²⁸ then continues with the *apadānas* of some 550 early Buddhist monks and some forty early Buddhist nuns.²⁹ In general, these hagiographies addressed a difficult soteriological problem. The early Buddhists had already composed a great deal of literature in which the biographies of Buddha and his original disciples served as

or nun's *apadāna* ever published in a Western language. To date, only the Buddha's own *apadāna* has been translated: Bhujendralal Barua, "Buddhakhetta in the Apadāna," in *B. C. Law Volume*, pt. 2 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1946), pp. 186–90.

²⁵ It is interesting to note that the champions of Buddhist women in the first and second generations of Western buddhology—Caroline Foley, Mabel Bode, I. B. Horner, and B. C. Law—did, conversely, make mention of the *Apadāna* (although only Law cites it extensively and none of them recognizes its historical and ideological significance).

²⁶ "Stupa, Story and Empire" (see n. 16 above).

²⁷ Only this *apadāna* has been translated into a Western language (see Bhujendralal Barua).

²⁸ Most of this portion of the text is lifted directly from *Suttanipāta*, another text assigned, like *Apadāna*, to the *Khuddakanikāya*.

²⁹ Although it would appear that the monks far outnumber the nuns, in fact many of the nuns' tales describe not individuals but large groups of women (as in *Gotamī-apadāna*, see below); taking these collectivities into account, the women far outnumber the men. The length of the full *Apadāna* text guarantees that a single performance would have required several days to complete.

paradigmatic illustrations of the salvific Path. But this literature focused on the present-life biographies of these Buddhist saints, who lived as renunciants, and so proved paradigmatic only to those Buddhists who already were advanced monks and nuns devoted to the renunciant life. With the advent of Indian imperial formation during the third century B.C., this renunciant religion was faced with an expanded context. Buddhist authors had to make the early soteriological paradigms relevant to universal society (a task that was simultaneously a religious and political necessity). By shifting attention to the previous lives of these great Buddhists as the cause of their present salvation, post-Aśokan Buddhists successfully met the challenge. The early stages in the paradigmatic biographies—the past lives of Buddha and the saints, when they were just ordinary people—were presented to illustrate what ordinary people, not yet far advanced, should do in order to direct their future existences toward *nibbāna*; this hagiographical shift extended the relevance of the sacred biographies to the vast majority of people, who are at the beginning, rather than the end, of the Path. What the *Jātaka* did for the Buddha biography, the *Apadāna* did for the biographies of monks and nuns.

The *Therī-apadāna* addressed a special, gender-related, soteriological problem. The world of the *Apadāna* is characterized by the strict separation of men and women. Monks were always male in their past lives, nuns were always female. This ideological separation of the genders created special kinds of problems in terms of the religious paradigms available for women. For example, if men and women tread separate Paths, then the biographies of men (including that of the Buddha himself) are not directly relevant as paradigms for women.³⁰ Given the universalizing context to which these texts belong, the absence of nuns' tales would have represented a glaring defect: one-half of human society would have been excluded from salvation (as well as political participation). The *Apadāna*'s inclusion of nuns' tales, of stories about the early stages in a woman's Path, extended this paradigmatic relevance to women at large as did the monks' tales to men at large. The *Gotamī-apadāna* alone related arhatship to good deeds performed by (Gotamī in a former birth as) a slave woman, a rich man's daughter, and a powerful goddess; the additional nuns' tales systematically detailed the range of women who have the potential for *nibbāna* (all of them!) and a huge range of salvific acts available for them to perform in order to effect that (future) attainment.³¹

³⁰ Lang (n. 10 above) has already noticed this point.

³¹ As I argue in "Stupa, Story and Empire" (see n. 16 above), the archaeological remains of early post-Aśokan India leave no doubt that the acts prescribed in *Apadāna* were in fact performed by people from all walks of life who contributed to the great Śunga and Sātavāhana building projects.

It may well be that the inclusion of nuns' tales, of women, within the imperial "charter" was not a given but a recognition that women had to claim with some force. The findings of Paul and Lang would suggest that, in the period prior to the composition of *Apadāna*, Buddhist women were decidedly marginalized. Perhaps the monks' tales always contained a colophon suggesting that the *Apadāna* was complete without the nuns' tales; perhaps the nuns' tales really were appended later. They certainly address some sort of androcentrism, for they lash out at a male-dominated context. Thus the Buddha's wife (Yasodharā) claims for herself the credit for the deeds that the Buddha, as her husband in repeated births, did during his paradigmatic previous lives. It was she who actually prepared all the food and other offerings that Buddha offered to "zillions and zillions" of previous Buddhas as the Bodhisatta, which resulted in his this-life Buddhahood.³² Similarly, Bhaddā-Kāpilāni Therī, the onetime wife of a famous monk named Kassapa, states that one of his great deeds during previous lives, giving alms to a former Buddha, was in fact her doing. Kassapa was angered at the offering; if she had not intervened, this salvific moment would have damned him.³³ Another nun glorifies herself for killing a scoundrel husband, stating:

Not in all places
is it man who is wise;
woman too, here and there,
paying attention is wise.

Not in all places
is it man who is wise;
woman is wise, quickly
making a plan.³⁴

³² Mary E. Lilley, ed., *The Apadāna of the Khuddaka Nikāya* (London: Pali Text Society, 1927), 2:584–92. Carolyn Walker Bynum (*Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987]) has demonstrated eloquently that in late medieval Christendom woman's control of food resources provided an important foundation for her social power and religious imagination; in general, the same can be said of Buddhist women. But the cultural context is decidedly different here: food is not something for the Buddhist woman to renounce (and severe fasting is discouraged for monks and nuns alike in Theravādin tradition) as much as it is something for the Buddhist (lay)woman to distribute to monks and nuns, the supremely pious act (*dāna*, almsgiving).

³³ Lilley, ed., *Apadāna*, 2:578–84.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 562, verses 31–32: *Na hi sabbesu thānesu puriso hoti paṇḍito / itthi pi paṇḍitā hoti tattha tattha vicakkhaṇā // Na hi sabbesu thānesu puriso hoti paṇḍito / itthi pi paṇḍitā hoti lahuṃ athavacintikā*. These same verses appear in *Therī-gāthā*, assigned to the same nun (Bhaddā-Kuṇḍalakesā). According to *Apadāna* she spoke them when she killed her husband, a thief whom she saved from execution, and who had taken her, adorned in all her jewels, to perform rituals atop a mountain (with the secret plan of robbing and killing her). When Bhaddā-Kuṇḍalakesā discerned his plan, she begged him for

The nuns' tales might well represent one of our examples of Buddhist literature composed not by monks but by nuns.³⁵ The authors of the nuns' tales borrowed most of the conventions and some of the style that characterize the monks' tales and thereby brought females into the otherwise one-sided hagiographical/constitutional tradition.

The importance of this achievement goes beyond literary balance. There is clear epigraphic evidence that Buddhist nuns actually participated in the imperial building projects which they advocated through their performances of the *Apadāna* stories.³⁶ Their participation in these activities suggests that some nuns enjoyed real power; remembering that both the *Apadāna* ideology and the patronage practices it supported were constitutive of the Śunga and Sātavāhana empires, it is clear that early post-Aśokan Buddhist nuns were among the key players in the most important politics of their day (and, given the nature of their participation, some must also have been powerful economically). Although a comprehensive history of Theravāda nuns remains unwritten, there is good evidence to suggest that nuns continued to play important religious, political, and economic roles in Theravāda Buddhist history right up to their medieval "disappearance."³⁷

THE MESSAGE OF *Gotamī-apadāna*

The *Gotamī-apadāna* is in fact the most remarkable example of this tendency in the nuns' tales to vindicate women.³⁸ This should come as

"one final embrace—then no more intercourse with you." The foolish man approached, and the woman threw him off the mountain. According to Dhammapāla's commentary, which reiterates the same basic story, these verses were not spoken by the nun herself but by the goddesses living on the mountain (*adhivathā devatā*) who witnessed the act; cf. E. Müller, ed., *Paramatthadīpanī: Dhammapāla's Commentary on the Therīgāthā* (London: Pali Text Society, 1893), pp. 100–101.

³⁵ Lang (n. 10 above) has argued that the basis of *Therī-apadāna*, namely, *Therī-gāthā*, is another such example. We might also add to the list the first Pāli work composed in Sri Lanka, *Dīpavaṃsa*, which contains internal indications that its author was a nun in the Mahāvihāra.

³⁶ For some references to nuns in the early post-Aśokan epigraphic record see my "Stupa, Story and Empire" (n. 16 above) and Gregory Schopen, "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit," in *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik*, ed. Georg Buddruss et al. (Reinbek: Wezler Verlag für Orientalistische Fachpublikationen, 1985), 10:9–47.

³⁷ The best survey to date of the relevant sources is R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, "Subtle Silks of Ferrous Firmness: Buddhist Nuns in Ancient and Early Medieval Sri Lanka and Their Role in the Propagation of Buddhism," *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* 14, nos. 1–2 (1988 [published 1990]): 1–59.

³⁸ The best editions of the *Apadāna* available today are published in Sinhala, Thai, and Nāgari scripts. However, because they are comparatively inaccessible in the West, I have indicated verse numbers in the text and notes that correspond to the numbers in Lilley's Roman-script edition of *Apadāna* (n. 32 above). The same numbers have been employed in my forthcoming translation of the text, *Gotamī-apadāna* (n. 24 above), so that within a year or so readers without facility in Pāli will be able to explore this important and fascinating text more fully.

no surprise. According to the earliest texts of the Pāli canon, it was Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī who convinced the Buddha to ordain women, much against his will and only at Ānanda's prodding,³⁹ and she was chief of all the nuns.⁴⁰ So, by the time our text was written, Gotamī already had come to represent the vindication of female spirituality. This vindication is more than a countervoice; it is a voice of leadership and certainty: Gotamī explicitly tells her female followers to imitate her and follow the Buddha (verses 28–29), affirms that even as children females have attained the most exalted of all states (verses 65–66), puts on a terrific show of miracles (verses 80–94) in order to honor a request of the Buddha that she dissuade “fools” who doubt the ability of women to enter the Dharma (verse 79), and parodies typical misogynist views (verses 43–47) even as she undermines them with her own great achievements.

Yet a soteriological problem for women remained: nuns in previous lives could serve as paradigmatic counterparts to monks in previous lives, but who could stand in apposition to the Buddha himself? The Buddha's Path led him not merely to *nibbāna* but to *parinibbāna*, that supreme “going out” that, attained by few, points the goal out for many. Gotama was more than an arhat; he was a Buddha. The Buddha made arhatship possible. If women's transmigrations through cosmic time parallel but do not replicate those of men, then what guarantee exists that the end of woman's Path is parallel to the end of man's? The Buddha's summum bonum, the supreme *parinibbāna*, is reserved for males and proves the ultimate efficacy only of male religiosity.

It is in this context that we can appreciate the special importance of *Gotamī-apadāna*, over and above its importance, along with the other nuns' tales, in the general process of extending early Buddhist soteriology to women in all walks of life. The *Gotamī-apadāna* is, after all, a poetic biography of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the founder of the Buddhist order of nuns (*bhikkhuni-saṅgha*). She was the younger sister of Māyā, the Buddha's natural mother, who died seven days after his birth. Young

³⁹ T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, trans., *Vinaya Texts*, pt. 3, *Cullavagga* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1885), pp. 320 ff. Virtually the same account appears in the *Anguttaranikāya* (iv.274 ff.) as *Mahāpajāpati-sutta*. Compare verses 29, 45 of *Gotamī-apadāna*.

⁴⁰ This is established in an important text of the *Anguttaranikāya* (i.25) which lists the chief monks and nuns, in perfectly symmetrical pairs, according to their special recognitions or achievements within the religion. This is the text (together with Buddhaghosa's commentary on it) that convinced Mabel Bode nearly a century ago that Theravādin nuns were as powerful and important as their male counterparts. Compare verse 105 of *Gotamī-apadāna*, which casts this superiority of Gotamī among the nuns as the fulfillment of a prediction made to her by Padumuttara Buddha 100,000 aeons ago. The *Apadāna* weaves similar predictions (of the status recognized in A.i.25) into its hagiographies of all the monks and nuns on the original list.

Siddhattha was subsequently reared by his aunt, Gotamī, who, as the fecund imagery of this text reveals (e.g., verses 31–36), thus became de facto the Buddha's mother. So the *Gotamī-apadāna* is a portrait of the Buddha's mother. But it is a peculiar biography. Although a life history—stretching back to Gotamī's youth and, further still, her previous lives—is provided by way of flashback, all the action in the text occurs on a single day, which is the day that Gotamī, 120 years old, died. Each event in Gotamī's long biography, moreover, is experienced by her together with 500 other women. Thus *Gotamī-apadāna* is not merely the biography of an individual: it is also the biography of a community of women. Unlike all the other monks and nuns (and the text breaks many of the *Apadāna* conventions, representing Gotamī's uniqueness linguistically),⁴¹ Gotamī reaches not *nibbāna* but *parinibbāna*. Gotamī is held up as the female counterpart to the Buddha. Thus we can explain an odd fact about the name by which our text refers to her. In earlier literature Gotamī's name is always given as Mahāpajāpatī; Gotamī, the only name used for her in the body of *Gotamī-apadāna*, is merely her clan name. But Gotamī is, grammatically speaking, the feminine equivalent of the clan name Gotama by which the Buddha came to be known. Thus her new name alone constitutes her role as female counterpart to the Buddha.

The apposition of Buddha and his mother, of Gotama and Gotamī, is obvious from other internal evidence as well. The Buddha is at his favorite haunt in Vesālī, surrounded by his monks; Gotamī is at her favorite haunt in Vesālī, surrounded by her nuns. Gotamī greets the Buddha as his mother (verses 31–37), who nurtured his physical body (*rūpa-kāya*) with the milk of her breasts. But the inverse is also true: she worships the Buddha as father, who gave her the Dharma as her inheritance. More strikingly, she worships the Buddha as mother, who nurtured her “Dharma-body” (*dhammatanu*) with “Dharma-milk” (*dhammakhiran*).⁴² She alternately addresses the Buddha with terms of respect (such as “Lord”) and terms of endearment (“Gotama,” “son”). She is the leader of nuns and laywomen as the Buddha is with his monks and laymen. As the 500 monks were saved because Gotama pitied them (verse 119), the 500 nuns were saved because of Gotamī's pity

⁴¹ For example, the typical *Apadāna* chorus appears not once at the end of the text but twice in the middle of the text (verses 76–78 and 125–27); Gotamī is the only nun who dies in her own autobiography; the text constantly shifts voice and includes a very rare narrative voice; the text is one of the longest in the collection.

⁴² On the comparison of Buddha and mother in Theravāda Buddhism see Richard Gombrich, “Feminine Elements in Sinhalese Buddhism,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 16 (1972): 67–93. Gombrich is obviously unaware of *Gotamī-apadāna* when he states (p. 69) that “so far as [he] can discover, the Buddha is never compared to a mother (or *vice versa*) in the Pali canon or the commentarial literature.”

(verse 124). As the Buddha is worshiped by the gods (verses 154, 172), Gotamī is worshiped by goddesses (verses 13–17). Gotamī pays homage to Gotama (verses 30–47, 135–38); Gotama pays homage to Gotamī (verses 179–89).

This apposition becomes more clear when we consider *Gotamī-apadāna* in light of the text that parallels it by describing the Buddha's own *parinibbāna*. This is of course the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, which many scholars take as the heart of Buddhism itself. This famous narrative, most certainly older than *Gotamī-apadāna*, is mirrored, step-by-step, in the latter text. This miming seems self-conscious. The *Gotamī-apadāna*, unlike most texts of the *Apadāna*,⁴³ opens in (versified) *sutta* fashion: "One day the Buddha was staying at such and such a monastery in such and such a city; at that time so-and-so was also staying in that city." The opening portion of the text even tells us which *sutta* is being mimed: in the third verse we learn that this is a text about *parinibbāna*.

The *Mahāparinibbānasutta* narrates the events of the last three months in Gotama Buddha's life.⁴⁴ After a long preaching tour the Buddha decides that it is time for his *parinibbāna*. A great earthquake and crash of thunder ensue.⁴⁵ The *Gotamī-apadāna* mimes the scenario: Gotamī decides that it is time to reach *parinibbāna* and resolves to do so, causing an earthquake and thunder (verses 3–6). In the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* the Buddha proceeds to tell a baffled Ānanda what the earthquake means.⁴⁶ Similarly, Gotamī is confronted by the nuns and begged for an explanation of the earthquake (verse 8). The explanation to the monks and nuns is the same: the *parinibbāna* of their leader is imminent. But the identity of the leader about to die is different. According to the *Gotamī-apadāna*, contradicting the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, it was the earthquake caused by Gotamī's decision, rather than by Gotama's, and again by her actual death, that indicated to Ānanda the imminence of Buddha's own departure from the world (verses 62, 176–77)! And Gotamī's nuns, unlike the Buddha's monks, decide to reach *nibbāna* with her.

The *Mahāparinibbānasutta* proceeds to relate how Buddha consoled the distressed Ānanda, who now understood that Buddha was about to

⁴³ An exception is the *Pubbakammapiḷoti*, included as *Thera-apadāna* no. 387, which is actually a discussion by the Buddha of his own previous bad karma. For a discussion of this text (and the difficulties it created), see Jonathan S. Walters, "The Buddha's Bad Karma: A Problem in the History of Theravāda Buddhism," *Numen* 37, no. 3 (June 1990): 70–95.

⁴⁴ For a translation, see "The Book of the Great Decease" (pp. ii.72 ff.), in *Dialogues of the Buddha*, trans. T. W. Rhys Davids and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1910; reprint London: Luzac, 1959), pt. 2, D.ii.72 ff., pp. 78–191.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 114–17.

die. The Buddha's famous explanation that, since all things are impermanent and essenceless, even he must himself die⁴⁷ is mirrored in the consolations Gotamī provides not only Ānanda (verses 63–66) but also her lay followers (verses 20–29, 142–44). The Buddha, in these final stages of his life, proceeds to perform a number of miracles,⁴⁸ as does Gotamī (verses 80–91). The Buddha then passes out of existence through a sequence of higher states of consciousness (*jhāna*)⁴⁹ whose rather complex order is traversed in precisely the same way by Gotamī (verses 145–49). The chief monks and chief gods recite stanzas when the Buddha dies,⁵⁰ paralleled directly by the stanzas uttered when Gotamī decides to reach and then reaches *parinibbāna* (verses 58–60, 62, 151, 53, 156–60, 173–74, 177, 179–89). *Mahāparinibbānasutta* concludes with a description of the proceedings of the Buddha's funeral and of the distribution of his relics;⁵¹ *Gotamī-apadāna* concludes with an elaborate description of Gotamī's funeral (explicitly portrayed as even better than the Buddha's: verses 173–74) and the honor paid to her corporeal relics (by the Buddha himself).

With its portrayal of Gotamī as the female counterpart of Buddha, the *Gotamī-apadāna* was able to solve a serious soteriological problem raised by gender-specific characterizations of the Path. The nuns who wrote it presented, in the monastic genre for eulogies, the *Apadāna*, a portrait of their own great leader. Gotamī is the Buddha for women.⁵² Gotama is not superseded; our text in fact elaborates a devotionism to the Buddha somewhat unique in the literature of this period. But, for the reasons discussed above, the text does portray Gotamī as the Buddha's counterpart, who represents the end of the Path traversed by women just as Buddha represents the end of that which is crossed by men; Gotama and Gotamī are the founders of the *bhikkhu-saṃgha* and *bhikkhuni-saṃgha*, respectively. It is thus that Gotamī's biography is collective; she proceeds toward her goal along with the other 500 nuns because the goal is, for her, more than a personal one. Like a Buddha, Gotamī's own spiritual end is not reached unless the door to *nibbāna* is thereby opened for other women as well.

⁴⁷ For example, *ibid.*, p. 126.

⁴⁸ For example, *ibid.*, pp. 140–41.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 173–75.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 175–77.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186–91.

⁵² The text provides no unambiguous statement of this position, which borders on heresy. But if I am correct about reading *Mahāparinibbānasutta* as the intertextual basis for our text, then the earthquakes caused by Gotamī define her as a Buddha de facto. See Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids, pp. 114–17, and consider what Gotamī's earthquakes meant if not that a Tathāgata had decided to die and had effected her own *parinibbāna*.

There are other ways, too, in which our text underscores the importance of Gotamī for religious women. Like the Buddha in virtually all Buddhist literature, the Gotamī of *Gotamī-apadāna* stands at the center of the universe. Her decision to die causes grief among the laywomen, goddesses, monks, gods, demons, and snake-gods and even distresses God (*Brahma*); when she dies the cosmos itself is shaken: the earth quakes and fumes, mountains shake and oceans weep, the skies thunder and flash with lightning. Gotamī emerges from this text as the most important being in the universe. From the soteriological perspective of Buddhist women this was no exaggeration.

Gotamī-apadāna simultaneously makes an appeal to non-Buddhist Indian women. Like many Buddhist texts of the period, it portrays major Indian deities as subservient to the Buddha (but here, subservient to the Buddhī, Gotamī). Vishnu is an apparition that Gotamī creates (verse 89); little girls as Buddhists attain states undreamed of even by "heretical" (theist and Jain) teachers (verse 66). It moreover attributes to Gotamī certain powers usually associated with Dūrgā or Kālī (e.g., verse 85), and in *Gotamī-apadāna* these powers turn out to be the result of Gotamī's cultivated understanding of the Dharma (verse 79) for which the text encourages all women to strive (verses 29, 144).

Finally, it is worth noting that *Gotamī-apadāna* also addresses a male audience, namely, the androcentric ecclesiastical hierarchy of early Buddhism. The vindication of woman's spirituality does not only encourage women; it also serves as a corrective to men who belittle women's spiritual potential. Misogynist attitudes, explicitly and implicitly, are countered by the example of Gotamī. It is thus that the final stanzas of praise for her accomplishments, spoken by the Buddha as he holds his mother's corporeal relics in his own hands, are addressed to the monks. They too have something to learn from the Buddha's mother's story.

CONCLUSION

It was women's voices like Gotamī's that led several Pāli scholars of bygone days to portray Theravāda Buddhism as comparatively safe ground for religious women. Their conflation of post-*Apadāna* hagiography with the situation in early Buddhism resulted in an unequal treatment that ignored important indications of early Buddhist androcentrism. The corrective to this scholarship by Paul and Lang brings us to a new understanding of Buddhist women, an insight into the problematic contexts they acted to change. But, by reproducing the conflation of early Buddhism with all Theravādin thought, they silenced those strong women's voices that Foley and her colleagues called to our attention a century ago. In the texts of the *Therī-apadāna* we see

something more than a submissive countervoice; we see the product of women who strove to realize the egalitarian ideal of early Buddhism in a world that listened to their voices, in which they were empowered to represent one half, the woman's half, of the universal Path. It is now possible to clarify why this Theravādin voice needs to be heard along with the Mahāyānist voices that Paul has recovered. For it is now possible to see that even in the Theravādin tradition some women successfully launched a powerful challenge to early Buddhist androcentrism.

According to Paul, the Mahāyānists also struggled with the inequality inherent in an assumption that only males can be Buddhas. Among the Mahāyānists, who emphasize that each Buddhist should aspire to the Bodhisattva Path, that is, strive to become a Buddha, this problem became an individual one for women: can *I* become a Buddha? Mahāyāna antiandrocentric argumentation consequently focused on the psychological constitution of the genders.⁵³ The most enlightened of the Mahāyāna solutions, according to Paul, "was the notion that all attachments to sexuality must be removed. . . . Sexuality was eradicated in attributes ascribed to the divine, either by androgynous images or, more precisely, epicene images."⁵⁴

In Theravādin tradition, conversely, the Path to arhatship is emphasized. The monks and nuns in the *Apadāna* do not strive personally to become Buddhas; they strive to become arhats within a Buddha's dispensation. Thus the philosophical problem of whether Buddha-nature is gender-specific did not become the focus for Theravādin argumentation. Instead, the Theravādin problematic was framed by precisely the structure that the Mayāyānists denounced: the separation of male and female spiritual Paths. This separation has never been called into question in Theravādin tradition; Theravāda Buddhists operated within the framework and the special problems it provided, instead of developing an androgynous buddhology.

But this is not to suggest that the Theravādins were left with the position that women must strive to attain male bodies in the next life, which Paul seems to take as the only alternative to androgyny.⁵⁵ Certainly some women accepted this as their goal, and even today it is not uncommon in Theravādin countries to hear such a solution advanced. The tradition, however, devised more ingenious solutions that acknowledged female spirituality *within* female transmigration. The *Therī-apadāna* provided

⁵³ See, e.g., Paul (n. 9 above), p. 309.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 308–9. Note that Gross's new *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (n. 13 above) similarly assumes the inevitability of an androgynous solution to Buddhist androcentrism. Gross stresses androgyny both in her historical reconstruction and in the new buddhology she constructs for modern Buddhist feminists; the new feminist buddhology is androgynous both intellectually and institutionally.

spiritual (and political) paradigms for women in all walks of life: rich and poor, lay and monastic, young and old, high caste and low. It demonstrated that women could become arhats as easily as men and told women who were not yet prepared for the nun's life that in order to achieve *nibbāna* later they should participate as active members of society now. But with the *Gotamī-apaḍāna* it went a step further: it provided an independent ontological basis for the female Path, a female Buddha. Thus the arhatship of women is not dependent on Gotama, but on Gotamī: it was she who founded the nuns' order, it was her *parinibbāna* that cleared the way for nuns to reach the goal.

Paul's final chapter, "A Female Buddha?" persuasively argues that the Mahāyānists, too, created feminine images of Buddhahood. In particular, Paul focuses on *The Sūtra of Queen Śrīmālā Who Had the Lion's Roar*:

If any portrait of the feminine indicates the association of the feminine with Buddhahood, in a religious tradition which had an ideal of egalitarianism and nondiscrimination, on the one hand, but in practice at times represented a poor facsimile of that Mahāyāna Buddhist ideal, on the other, the portrait of Queen Śrīmālā closely approaches the image of a female Buddha. She epitomized the Mahāyāna ideal, that of a sentient being who, regardless of sex or status, strives to realize his or her spiritual potential or Buddhahood.⁵⁶

A comparison of this female Buddha with the Theravādin one represented by Gotamī nuances our discussion of the different contexts in which Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhist women combated androcentrism. Queen Śrīmālā is a laywoman, not a nun; the Mahāyānists eschew the nun's life as inferior to that of a Bodhisattva.⁵⁷ Gotamī, on the other hand, is the nun par excellence. Her Buddhahood is important precisely because it verifies the goal of female monastic practice. Laywomen (like laymen) could look forward to becoming nuns (monks) after further spiritual cultivation (in this life or the next); nuns (like monks) could look forward to eventual arhatship. And Gotamī (like Gotama for the monks) cleared the Path.

Thus the Theravādins did not attempt to eliminate early Buddhist sociological gender distinction, an ideological stance that was played out in sociological gender roles inside and outside the monastic establishment; they preserved and inscribed it by making the Paths of men and women precisely parallel, though still separate. As in the modern period, so under ancient Buddhism, androgyny was thus not the only solution to androcentrism advanced and supported by women. Some

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 289.

⁵⁷ Ibid., chap. 3 and passim.

Buddhist women countered the androcentric foundations of their religion, not by rejecting the entire corpus but by acting in order to transform it. Indeed, the Theravādins to this day maintain a rather sharp dichotomy between male and female births as an ideological given. The radical androgyny of Mahāyāna thought never gained ground among Theravādins; Theravādin women instead allowed gender differences to stand. But some of them did not allow those differences to stand in the way of female spiritual progress. They eliminated the inequality implicit in Buddha's maleness, neither by negating that maleness nor by exalting androgynous women, but by transforming its implications at the ontological level through a vindication of virtuous nuns who, as women, attained precisely the same lofty states achieved by their male counterparts, even by the Buddha himself.

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