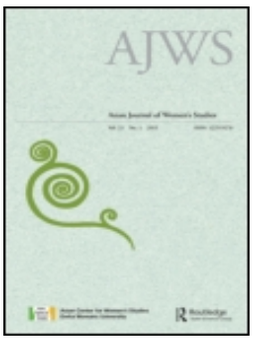

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Lisa Battaglia Owen

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On Gendered Discourse and the Maintenance of Boundaries: A Feminist Analysis of the *Bhikkhuni* Order in Indian Buddhism

Lisa Battaglia Owen
Women's Studies
University of Alabama
Tuscaloosa

Abstract

By analyzing the creation, manifestation, and decline of the *bhikkhuni* (nun) order in Indian Buddhism, this paper attempts to assess the precarious position of the almswoman in ancient Indian society. This study asserts that the peripheral and often non-existent role of the *bhikkhuni* in Buddhism's textual and historical development is a product of both masculinist biases in the composition, redaction and codification of Buddhist texts, as well as androcentric and patriarchal biases within the Buddhist *sangha* and larger Indian community. Underlying this feminist analysis is the notion that the roles and contributions of renunciant women in Buddhism's development were by no means marginal, trivial, or benign. This paper examines the following: the creation of the first Buddhist nuns' order, the consequences of the Eight Special Rules imposed upon nuns, the significance of female renunciation in ancient India, the threat of androgyny posed by nuns and monks, speculations as to why the *bhikkhuni* order suffered virtual extinction, and finally, the theoretical implications of the sex/gender prerequisites for a *bhikkhuni* initiate as set forth in the *Vinaya* (*The Book of the Discipline*). Using the case of the first Buddhist nuns as a model for feminist inquiry, this study demonstrates that permitting women to enter a traditionally male

sphere without altering the basic structure and ideologies of the phallocentric institution, does not guarantee women's freedom from sex/gender oppression.

Introduction

From its earliest manifestations, Buddhism has been ambiguous and tension-ridden with regard to its treatment of women and female embodiment. The Buddhist perspective on the role, status, and spiritual capacity of women embodies a fundamental schism between its historical and institutional androcentrism and negative treatment of women and its egalitarian philosophy and doctrine of liberatory *Dharma*. The Buddha's initial reluctance to ordain women and establish a *bhikkhuni* order is a paramount example of this discord. This paper seeks to elucidate the tension between the emergence of a Buddhist monastic community of women and the reality of women's subordination within the Buddhist monastic structure. This will partly be done by examining the creation and development of the Buddhist nuns' order. These women are deemed just as capable as men of achieving *arhat*ship (the state of spiritual liberation characterized by total victory over desire). By analyzing female renunciation in early Indian Buddhism, the very concept of what it means to be a woman will be critiqued. Furthermore, through an explication of the obstacles endured and overcome by the pioneer *bhikkhunis*, it will be demonstrated that sex/gender oppression is not alleviated through androgynous models, nor combated, without challenging the ideologies, assumptions, and practices of the androcentric, phallocentric, heterosexist institutional structure.[1]

The disadvantaged position and second-rate status of *bhikkhunis*, apparent both in textual accounts and historically in the near extinction of the *bhikkhuni* order, leads one to conclude that women did not seem to play a "pivotal role in the formation or formulation of early Buddhism" (Willis, 1985: 61).

However, recent scholarship on women in Buddhism has brought attention to the previously marginalized and often silenced issue of the role and contributions of renunciant women in the development of Buddhism in India and beyond the sub-continent.[2] Scholars have rediscovered a wealth of information in the *Therigatha*, an invaluable text that highlights the spiritual capabilities and accomplishments of distinguished members of the *bhikkhuni* order (Blackstone, 1998; Lang, 1986; and Murcott, 1991). Further, many have succeeded in painting a more complete picture of the almswoman role by turning to historical, secular documents to supplement references and passages in Buddhist canonical scripture (Willis, 1985; Falk, 1980; and Horner, 1930). Underlying these feminist analyses of women in Buddhism, is the notion that "the contribution made by women to Buddhism, though it has often been neglected or under-estimated, was a real one" (Horner, 1930: 114).

Feminist scholarship on the portrayal and history of Buddhist women, particularly nuns, in canonical and post-canonical texts, reveals the biased nature of the texts themselves, namely, that the words and experiences of women have not been sufficiently recorded.[3] Scholars almost uniformly agree that the Buddhist scriptures were redacted, codified, and translated by men. Further, all canonical texts are attributed to male composition, i.e., the Buddha is the implied author. Thus, the possibility of androcentric and phallocentric biases in the texts must continually be evoked. Consequently, one must question whether the texts reflect a male or masculine perspective, thus revealing only one-half of the "(sexual) spectrum" of perspectives, knowledges, and experiences (Grosz, 1995: 38).[4] A feminist reading of the formation and implications of the first Buddhist nuns' order reveals such androcentric and phallocentric biases and opens up the other, forgotten half of the spectrum, i.e., the female or feminine perspective. Underlying this study is the assumption that, as women, our impressions and experiences of Buddhism would be different "if Buddhist

women had written the history of their own sisters or had recorded their own experiences" (Barnes, 1987: 129).

As Buddhist-feminist scholar, Rita Gross notes, "Stories about men and men's statements were far more likely to be recorded than were stories about women or what women said" (Gross, 1993: 18). Thus, one is left to conclude that the role of women in Buddhism was "most likely thought to be not sufficiently important" (Horner, 1930: xxi). This does not deny the fact that women's role and involvement in Buddhism is discussed in texts throughout all major periods of Buddhist history (Gross, 1993: 23) or that, with the exception of the *Sutta Nipata*, nuns are mentioned in every canonical work (Murcott, 1991: 9). However, discussing "women's issues" from an androcentric perspective is not the same as hearing the stories and voices of women acting as independent and freethinking agents. Therefore, treating "women" as the topic or object of phallocentric discourse differs radically from reading or hearing about women as subjects of their own *herstory*.[5]

The apparent lack of attention and worth, given to the role of almswomen in Indian Buddhism, can perhaps be attributed to the following historical and textual realities: 1) the patriarchal and androcentric cultural milieu in which Buddhism arose; 2) the inferior status allotted to nuns within the monastic structure via the Eight Special Rules; 3) the lack of material, financial, and emotional support bestowed upon *bhikkhunis* by the lay community; 4) the redaction and codification of oral "texts" and written manuscripts solely by men; and 5) androcentric biases within academic scholarship on Buddhism.[6] Despite these cultural biases, taboos, and acts of resistance, the nuns' order came into existence at the very root of Buddhism's inception in India. Women's place in the development of early Buddhist tradition was by no means marginal, trivial, or benign.

The case of the first Buddhist nuns serves as a model for feminists and Buddhists who strive to articulate and realize strategies for women's liberation from sex/gender oppression.

Liberal feminists, for the most part, assert that androgyny (i.e., the formation of androgynous personalities) will liberate women and also men, from the culturally constructed cages of masculinity and femininity (Tong, 1989: 31). As the following analysis of the *bhikkhuni* order will demonstrate, permitting women entrance into a traditionally male "sphere," without altering the basic assumptions and foundations of the androcentric, phallocentric institution, does not guarantee freedom from sex/gender oppression. Further, upholding androgyny as a liberatory goal fails to critique the patriarchal and heterosexist practices that (re)inscribe sex/gender and male-female relationships.

This study attempts to expose the silenced and repressed half of the story, by recovering and uncovering, as much as possible, the development of the *bhikkhuni* order and the forces which relegated nuns to an inferior status, because of their sex.[7] A critique of the androcentric, phallocentric, and heterosexist biases within the Buddhist scriptures and monastic structure brings the unique struggles and accomplishments of the early Buddhist nuns to the forefront of Buddhist-feminist discourse. A feminist (re)reading of the development and implications of the *bhikkhuni* order reveals alternative modes of interpreting women's role in Indian Buddhism and of signifying the female sex.

In order to appropriate the history and theoretical implications of the *bhikkhuni sangha* or the nuns' order into feminist discourse, it is necessary to investigate the following: creation of the first Buddhist nuns' order; the regulation of female monastics via the Eight Special Rules; the requisites for becoming a *bhikkhuni* as set forth in the *Vinaya Pitaka* (*The Book of the Discipline*); attitudes toward female monasticism in ancient India; and theories as to why the Buddhist nuns' order has suffered virtual extinction.[8]

The Creation of the Buddhist Nuns' Order

Siddhartha Gautama (583-463 B. C.), the historical Buddha, founded a *sangha*, or a Buddhist community comprised of monks (*bhikkhus*), nuns (*bhikkhunis*), laymen, and laywomen, to propagate his teachings and convey the *Dharma*. The order and manner in which these four assemblies were established are of particular importance in understanding the precarious position of *bhikkhunis* within the Buddhist *sangha* and the larger Indian community.

Upon gaining enlightenment, Gautama traveled to Banaras with the conviction that he should communicate his discovery of truth and liberation to others.[9] There, Gautama preached the *Dharma* "in an organized, systematic way" to five male renunciants who had been his fellow practitioners before he set out on his own spiritual path and gained enlightenment (Carroll, 1983: 102). Shortly after the "First Utterance," delivered by the Buddha, an incredible phenomenon occurred—the rapid growth of a religious order of *bhikkhus* (i.e., monks or almsmen) and lay-followers (Horner, 1930: xxii). Among the first lay disciples were two women (Carroll, 1983: 103). As this progressive development of the Buddhist community reveals, monks first comprised the *sangha*, closely followed by laymen and laywomen. Since the ordination of women was not initially permitted, nuns were the last group to come into the fold of the *sangha* (Murcott, 1991: 4).

The Buddhist canonical text, the *Cullavagga*, attributes the inspiration and persistence for the founding of the Buddhist nuns' order to Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's maternal aunt. Mahapajapati nursed and raised Gautama from birth after his mother, Maya, died seven days after delivering Gautama.[10] Scholars of women in Buddhism, I. B. Horner and Diana Paul, suggest that myth may have intruded into the orthodox account

of the founding of the women's monastic order, for its establishment, in significant ways, parallels that of the Jains (Willis, 1985: 79, n. 7). For example, in the Jain accounts it is Chanda, Mahavira's aunt (or, in some accounts, his cousin), who heads the women's order. I. B. Horner notes this "curious parallelism" between Mahavira's aunt founding the Jain order of nuns and Gautama's aunt founding the Buddhist order of nuns. She concludes, "A good deal of uncertainty surrounds the actual foundation of the Buddhist Order of Almswomen, and its beginnings are wrapped in mists" (Horner, 1930: 102).

According to Buddhist legend, Gautama left home at the age of twenty-nine to embark on his spiritual quest. After Mahapajapati's husband, i.e., Gautama's father, died and after her son Nanda and grandnephew Rahula (Gautama's and Yasodhara's son) both left to become monks, Mahapajapati occupied the precarious position in ancient India of being a woman without any primary male relations (Murcott, 1991: 14). As Buddhist scholar Susan Murcott speculates, Mahapajapati was left without "the web of family connections that gave every woman in that society her identity and security" (ibid.: 14). Free from the fetters of worldly and familial obligations, Mahapajapati, accompanied by "a number of Sakyan women,"[11] set out on a spiritual quest of her own. The following excerpt from the *Cullavagga* recounts Mahapajapati's determination and urgency as she pleads with the Buddha to establish a monastic order for women:

> Now at one time the Buddha was staying among the Sakyans at Kapilavatthu in the Banyan Monastery. Mahapajapati Gotami went to the place where the Buddha was, approached and greeted him, and, standing at a respectful distance, spoke to him: "It would be good, Lord, if women could be allowed to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless state under the *Dharma* and discipline of the Tathagata."
>
> "Enough, Gotami. Don't set your heart on women being allowed

to do this."

[A second and third time Pajapati made the same request in the same words and received the same reply.] And thinking that the Blessed One would not allow women to enter into homelessness, she bowed to him, and keeping her right side towards him, departed in tears.

Then the Blessed One set out for Vesali. Pajapati cut off her hair, put on saffron-colored robes, and headed for Vesali with a number of Sakyan women. She arrived at Kutagara Hall in the Great Grove with swollen feet and covered with dust. Weeping, she stood outside the Hall.

Seeing her standing there, the venerable Ananda asked, "Why are you crying?" "Because, Ananda, the Blessed One does not permit women to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless state under the *Dharma* and discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata."

Then the Venerable Ananda went to the Buddha, bowed before him, and took his seat to one side. He said, "Pajapati is standing outside under the entrance porch with swollen feet, covered with dust, and crying because you do not permit women to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless state. It would be good, Lord, if women were to have permission to do this."

"Enough Ananda. Don't set your heart on women being allowed to do this."

[A second and third time Ananda made the same request in the same words and received the same reply.]

Then Ananda thought: The Blessed One does not give his permission. Let me try asking on other grounds.

"Are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness to realize the fruits of stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning and *arhat*ship?"

"Yes, Ananda, they are able."

"If women then are able to realize perfection, and since Pajapati was of great service to you—she was your aunt, nurse, foster mother; when your mother died, she even suckled you at

her own breast —it would be good if women could be allowed to enter into homelessness."

"If then, Ananda, Pajapati accepts the Eight Special Rules, let that be reckoned as her ordination" (quoted in Murcott, 1991: 15-16).

Reflecting on this passage, which recounts Mahapajapati's (and Ananda's) request that a *bhikkhuni* order be established, many scholars emphasize the reluctance of the Buddha to accept women into the monastic community. For example, Rita Gross notes, "The idea of a woman's monastic community does not seem to have originated with the Buddha and he may not have been enthusiastic about it" (Gross, 1993: 56). Nancy Barnes writes, "he refused her request three times, and only upon the intervention of Ananda, his kinsman and constant attendant, did he agree to let an order be founded" (Barnes, 1987: 107). Further, Denise Lardner Carmody maintains, "Mahapajapati begged to be admitted into the monastery. Again and again she begged, but each time he replied that women should not give up the status of the householder (layperson)" (Carmody, 1991: 69).

While it is difficult to refute the lack of enthusiasm attributed to the Buddha with regard to Pajapati's and Ananda's requests, it is possible to contest the implicit accusations that the Buddha was unyielding and merciless in his steadfast refusal. Just as the custom when requesting religious teachings from a lama is to make the request three times (Klein, 1995: 53-54), so when Pajapati and Ananda are requesting the Buddha's endorsement of the nuns' order, the custom to make the request three times prevails. Thus, Pajapati's and Ananda's thrice-enacted request is merely a convention, in accordance with tradition. Further, as I. B. Horner notes, "this is the only instance of [the Buddha's] being over-persuaded in argument" (Horner, 1930: 105). It is highly dubious to assert that the Buddha changed his mind this once even though he did not actually want or approve of an order for almswomen. As

Horner asserts, "he was never out-argued and never gave way on questions of behaviour (sic) which he deemed to be wrong" (Horner, 1930: 105-106).

Considering the Buddha's singular change of heart, why did he initially hesitate to permit women entrance into the monastic order? Scholars have highlighted several factors to interpret and elucidate this initial reluctance and conditional acceptance. For example, Horner sets forth four distinct speculations to account for why the Buddha "held back." These are: 1) the appearance of hesitation lay in the hands of monk-editors of the texts; 2) the Buddha, a product of his own time and culture, held back on account of his own biased view of women; 3) the Buddha hesitated to consider how this new *bhikkhuni* order, and thus the Buddhist religion at large, would be received by the public; and 4) he hesitated in contemplation of the potential downfall of the order, fearing that the "constant intercommunication between the two orders would expose both almsmen and almswomen to greater temptations" (Horner, 1930: 109-111). Further, Yuichi Kajiyama speculates, "Gautama hesitated to permit admission of women in the Order, not because women could not attain enlightenment, but because he had to deliberate on problems which might arise between the order of monks and that of nuns, and between the Buddhist Order and the lay society" (Kajiyama, 1982: 60).

Clearly, scholars offer different readings of the Buddha's hesitation on the question of the nuns' order. What is striking about this range of interpretations is the absence of any that represent the Buddha's initial refusal of women as indicative of a belief in women's inferiority or inadequacy. As Rita Gross notes, women's ability to pursue and achieve the highest spiritual goal of *nirvana* is never at stake in the text. Instead, two important questions are raised within this story. First, should women be allowed to renounce their homes and pursue the monastic life? And second, if women are ordained in the Buddhist monastic order, then what would their status and

relationship vis-à-vis monks be? (Gross, 1993: 34). While these underlying issues in the text do not alleviate the apparent discrimination against women, they do shift the focus of the question about the nuns' order away from being about women *per se* (i.e., about women's integrity and capabilities), to being about prevailing social norms, codes, and structures.

While many Buddhist scholars see the Buddha's apparent reluctance to ordain women as an indication of his discrimination against women, others envision this scenario in a much more positive light. Taking into account women's highly circumscribed and subjugated status in ancient Indian society, many scholars consider the Buddha's admission of women into the newly formed male *sangha* as something quite radical. For example, Junko Minamato writes, "I believe that Buddha allowed women to enter the priesthood because he rejected patriarchal principles" (Minamato, 1991: 156). Similarly, Kajiyama concludes, "Gautama asserted equality in religious ability of men and women in the face of the existing convention of societal discrimination against women" (Kajiyama, 1982: 61). Furthermore, Anne Klein emphasizes, "When Buddhism arose in the fifth century B. C., the sanction of female clergy was itself a radical departure from centuries of tradition" (Klein, 1987: 212).

Although the Buddha's sanction of a community of almswomen indicates a radical paradigm shift, "he was not inaugurating an unheard-of scheme" (Horner, 1930: 108). In fact, under the leadership of Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, monasticism had already taken root in India. Horner writes, "When the Buddhist system appeared, they were not unique, for the Jains already had similar organisations (sic) for the male and female adherents of Mahavira. Hence by the time of the rise of the Buddhist Order the step had already been taken, for the Jain monastic and conventual systems were there and were celibate" (Horner, 1930: xxiii, 101). Mahavira extended the privilege of monastic life to women. However, "on the grounds that they [women] are not competent to gain Release (*moksha*),"

women were relegated to an inferior order (Horner, 1930: 101). Considering the path that had been blazed before him by Mahavira, perhaps the Buddha was under severe pressure to follow suit and grant permission to establish a women's order.[12] Horner speculates:

> Gotama would not have given his consent in any light vein to the establishment of an institution which, although not an innovation, because of the Jains, was yet considered advanced and unusual, but must have brought a searching scrutiny to bear on all sides of the problem before he finally pronounced his decision (Horner, 1930: 106).

Like Mahavira, the Buddha relegated almswomen to an inferior order, via his instatement of the Eight Special Rules. However, radically departing from Mahavira's precedence, the Buddha clearly espoused that women are as capable as men of gaining the ultimate spiritual goal (i.e., *arhat*ship).[13] In this, the establishment of the Buddhist *bhikkhuni* order is truly innovative and exceptional.

The implications of the nuns' radical gesture in traditional Indian society must have been enormous and substantial enough for the Buddha to curb the "revolution" with the installation of the Eight Special Rules. While Horner recognizes the discrimination inherent in these Eight Special Rules, she argues that they are "the outcome of an age-old and widespread tradition rather than a prudent provision to keep women in their places" (Horner, 1930: 121). Even if the Eight Special Rules are considered to be an extension of societal norms, this neither eradicates Buddhism's culpability for following suit, nor does it alleviate the oppression that women have suffered within the monastic community. Like Susan Murcott's contention, this study maintains that "their [the nuns'] resolve was audacious in a culture where humility and obedience were desirable traits in women. Perhaps the Eight Special Rules were a bulwark against any possible future boldness" (Murcott, 1991: 17).

Relegating Nuns to an Inferior Status: The Eight Special Rules

The nuns' order was modeled after the monks' order. Both male and female renunciants are required to abide by the *Vinaya* (*The Book of the Discipline*), which prescribes the regulations and discipline for the outward life of members of the monastic order (Horner, 1930: xxi). The life of renunciation and the *Vinaya* precepts that circumscribe it are designed to "propel" adherents toward the principal goal of *nirvana* (Blackstone, 1998: 13). In accordance with the *Vinaya*, a monk is required to follow a total of "about two-hundred-twenty rules" (Barnes, 1994: 142). In comparison, "the extant *Vinaya* of six ancient Buddhist schools list between two-hundred-ninety and three-hundred-eighty rules for nuns" (ibid.). Clearly, nuns' lives are more strictly regulated than monks' lives. Further, in addition to observing the *Vinaya*, nuns are obliged to observe Eight Special Rules, the acceptance of which was the prerequisite to Mahapajapati's ordination and the establishment of the nuns' order. The Eight Special Rules, unique to nuns, are as follows:

> 1. A nun, even of a hundred years' standing, shall respectfully greet, rise up in the presence of, bow down before, and perform all proper duties towards a monk ordained even a day.
>
> 2. A nun is not to spend the rainy season in a district where there is no monk.
>
> 3. Every half-moon, a nun is to await two things from the order of monks—the date of the *Uposatha* ceremony and the time the monks will come to give teaching.
>
> 4. After the rains retreat, the nuns are to hold *Pavarana* [to inquire as to whether any faults have been committed] before both *sanghas*, that of the monks and that of the nuns, in respect to what has

been seen, what has been heard, and what has been suspected.

5. A nun who has been guilty of a serious offense must undergo the *manatta* discipline before both *sanghas*, that of the monks and that of the nuns.

6. When a novice has trained for two years in the six precepts—the first five precepts plus the precept of taking one meal a day before noon—she should seek ordination [the *Upasampada* initiation] from both *sanghas*.

7. A nun is not to revile or abuse a monk under any circumstances.

8. Admonition by nuns of monks is forbidden; admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden (quoted in Murcott, 1991: 197).

These Eight Special Rules were the first rules to be made for the almswomen (Horner, 1930: 118). Unlike the rules of the *Vinaya*, which were formulated as time went on in response to a particular offense or situation, the Eight Special Rules are not the outcome of a particular transgression, *unless being born female can be considered a transgression*! Rather, the Eight Special Rules "embody a large part of the ceremonial and disciplinary aspects of Gotama's monastic system" (Horner, 1930: 119). Clearly, the purpose of these Rules was to keep women's "wayward nature" under control, to keep women in their (inferior) place, and to keep final authority in the hands of the monks (Murcott, 1991: 196). However, the consequences of the Eight Special Rules extended beyond the walls of the *vihara* and disparaged the nuns' reputation among the laity. In short, the status of the *bhikkhuni sangha*, as an autonomous group of spiritually capable women, worthy of honor and support, was thrown into question by a doctrine that clearly subordinated nuns to monks.

On reading the gendered discourse of the Eight Special Rules, one is left to make one of two conclusions. Either the Buddha did not trust women and their capabilities, or he was

concerned about the consequences of giving them the opportunity to control the daily affairs of their *sangha* and dictate their own vocation. The Buddha checked his radical act of allowing women the privilege of ordination by instating these gender-specific regulations. As Susan Murcott attests, "He feared that the formation of such a community could negatively affect the well-being of his total following, not to mention the receptivity of others to this new message" (Murcott, 1991: 196). Thus, the Buddha curbed his revolutionary religion and his radical stance on women's roles by keeping the monastic institution in line with the larger social organization of ancient Indian society. The subordination of nuns to monks, via the Eight Special Rules, was most likely, in the words of Tsultrim Allione, a "compromise allowing women to pursue the spiritual path ascribed by the Buddha without completely disregarding the conventions of Hindu society of the day" (Allione, 1986: 7).

While the Eight Special Rules clearly relegated women to an inferior status, Mahapajapati and the Sakyan women accepted them in order to achieve their primary goal of establishing a nuns' order. In the *Cullavagga*, Mahapajapati is said to have gladly accepted the Rules and taking them as "a garland of lotus flowers," she placed them on her head, vowing never to transgress them (Willis, 1985: 63). Further, the "five hundred Sakyan women" accompanying her are recorded as having done the same (ibid.). Unfortunately, it seems that these revolutionary women readily accepted subjugation under the Eight Special Rules and, accordingly, Nancy Falk asserts that since women of ancient India had always been subordinated to men, "For the most part the nuns apparently did not find these rules oppressive" (Falk, 1980: 215). Perhaps, when compared with their subservience in the larger Indian society, they considered the observance of these rules within the Buddhist monastic community to be the least of all evils.

It must also be noted that this scenario may have no historical validity. Consider the androcentric and patriarchal

context within which this story was recorded and passed down. In light of this account, the women's eager acceptance of subjugation becomes an effective handle for a patriarchal manipulation of language, symbols and structures to ensure women's compliance. The patriarchal and androcentric agenda of the transcribers and mediators of the Buddhist tradition denied women the space to express their disappointment at such regulations and the voice to outrightly refuse the second-rate status imposed upon them. As the following, lesser known, story reveals, Mahapajapati did request that the Buddha abolish the first Special Rule. The annulment of the first Rule, which required that the most senior nun bow down to even the most novice monk, would undercut the other seven rules as well. Since the Buddha refused Mahapajapati's request and maintained adherence to the Eight Special Rules, voicing Mahapajapati's dissatisfaction via the preservation and circulation of this story was presumably not considered a threat to the patriarchal and androcentric agenda:

> "I would ask one thing of the Blessed One, Ananda. It would be good if the Blessed One would allow making salutations, standing up in the presence of another, paying reverence, and the proper performance of duties, to take place equally between both *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* according to seniority." And the venerable Ananda went to the Blessed One [and repeated her words to him]. "This is impossible, Ananda, and I cannot allow it. Even those teachers of false *Dhamma* don't permit such conduct in relation to women; how much less can the Tathagata allow it?" (quoted in Murcott, 1991: 17).

As Pajapati's attempt to eliminate the first and most blatantly sexist rule reveals, she was not in accordance with the discrimination reflected by the rules (ibid.). Several questions emerge at this point, for instance, why did Mahapajapati accept a subordinate status? Why didn't she hold out for equal standing? Furthermore, why didn't Mahapajapati and the "five hundred

Sakyan women" just go off on their own to establish a women's order apart from the oppressive rules and regulations? Given women's rigidly circumscribed role in ancient Indian society, surely they feared that founding their own order apart from the already established *sangha* would cast them into a marginal existence with little or no support from the community. Clearly, Mahapajapati expressed dissatisfaction and questioned the subservience imposed on her, however, she did so within the context of the Buddhist institution. Once inside of the monastic establishment, Mahapajapati used what power she possessed and attempted to change the system. Evidently, by waiting until ordination was secured, Mahapajapati recognized that any initial refusal to accept the Eight Special Rules would impede the primary goal of establishing the nuns' order.

The current state of the *bhikkhuni sangha* reveals that the Eight Special Rules have been instrumental in the subjugation and decline of the nuns' order. By establishing the Rules, which clearly undermined the nun's potentially egalitarian status, the Buddha set up a precedent for the laity and larger Indian community to follow, that is, monks are worthy of more respect and honor than nuns. The doctrine of the Eight Special Rules translated into a harsh social reality for the nuns, whereby lay disciples neglected to extend adequate material and emotional support to the *bhikkhuni* order.

Under the circumstances of nuns' subordination to monks and the lack of patronage bestowed upon nuns, when "hard times" arrived, the *bhikkhuni* order was the first to suffer (Barnes, 1994: 142). Due to the disappearance of the *bhikkhuni* order in several Asian countries (namely India, Sri Lanka, and Burma), Buddhist women have been organizing at the grassroots level to reestablish the nuns' order in all Buddhist countries. However, they have encountered a major hurdle, i.e., a nun must be ordained by other nuns, because of which the nuns' order has disappeared from Theravadin countries. Technically there can be no full ordination within these countries

(Boucher, 1993: 90). According to Karma Lekshe Tsomo, the Chinese Dharmagupta lineage is the only living lineage of full ordination for women in Buddhism today (Tsomo, 1995: 122). Therefore, the only way a "valid ordination procedure" may possibly be carried out is by permitting nuns from China, whose ordination lineage has remained intact, to carry out the *bhikkhuni* ordination (Barnes, 1994: 140). However, reinstating *bhikkhuni* ordination is a complex issue, since Chinese Buddhists belong to the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, which abides by different scriptures, compared to the Theravada Buddhists of South and Southeast Asia (Barnes, 1994: 140).

In 1987 an international conference was held in Bodh Gaya, India, to address the issue of the *bhikkhuni sangha*, where, a valid ordination procedure was conducted and many initiates received full *bhikkhuni* ordination. Clearly, the restoration of the *bhikkhuni sangha* is underway, but all Buddhists, women or men, do not embrace the resurgence of the nuns' order. As Nancy Barnes points out, "the feelings of great numbers of ordinary monks are easily inflamed by any hint that the status quo may be altered" (Barnes, 1994: 143). Only a small fraction of Asian Buddhist monks favor restoring the *bhikkhuni* order (ibid.: 145).

As for resistance among Buddhist women, many eight- or ten-precept women, i.e., "quasi nuns" who are not fully ordained, are not compelled to become fully ordained *bhikkhunis*. Barnes speculates, "some are simply ignorant of the possibility; others weigh the advantages of their present freedom of action against the structure controlled by monks they would have to endure if they became fully ordained nuns" (Barnes, 1994: 143). Since the eight- and ten-precept women are not fully ordained, they are not subject to the rules which govern nuns in the *Vinaya* or, more significantly, to the Eight Special Rules. Thus, due to their ambiguous position within the *sangha* and their independence from the monks' order, they are free from the control and direction of *bhikkhus*. Hence, it is easy to understand why some Buddhist women resist the reinstating of

the nuns' order.

As evident in ancient Buddhist scripture and the historical and contemporary struggles of Buddhist women, resistance to women's full participation in Buddhism has spanned thousands of years. Textual and historical evidence reveals that the *bhikkhuni* order has occupied a disadvantaged position right from the beginning of Buddhism's institutionalization and translation into culturally legible terms. Beginning with the Buddha's supposed hesitation in admitting women into the monastic order and his subsequent denial of Mahapajapati's request for equal standing, women have struggled to rightfully claim a place of their own within this global religion.

The tension between the Buddha's acknowledgement of women's capability of attaining the highest Buddhist goal of liberation (i.e., *arhat*ship), and his designation of the Eight Special Rules as a prerequisite for women entering monastic life, can only be attributed to what Rita Gross terms, "massive institutional failure" (Gross, 1991: 106). Obviously, when women joined the traditionally male *sangha*, it would be necessary to establish rules to regulate the daily lives of the renunciants. What is perplexing, however, is that in the heart of a religion, whose doctrinal foundation is inherently liberating and "gender-free" (ibid: 105), a patriarchal structure emerged (Barnes, 1987: 106). The gender-specific conditions that the Buddha attached to the ordination of women either imply that the Buddha and his followers did not see discrimination against women as a hindrance to women's attaining the highest goal of spiritual liberation (i.e., *arhat*ship). Alternatively, early Buddhists, as members and leaders of a new religious movement, did not want to challenge the long-standing ancient Indian tradition of the subordination of women. In any event, although the core teachings of Buddhism were remarkably free of gender bias, sex discrimination permeated the monastic institution.

Going Forth from Home: Female Renunciation in Ancient India

The discrepancy between the Buddha's conviction that women are as capable as men of attaining enlightenment and his adherence to cultural codes and norms about women's proper place in society, becomes apparent in the examination of women's partial and unequal access to the monastic order. The idea of a community of women, independent of men, living a religious life outside of familial and worldly obligations was considered a threat to social stability (Allione, 1986: 7). The path of the Buddhist nun provided a positive alternative for women who were considered to have virtually no independent status within ancient Indian society. Furthermore, the monastic life freed women from being the chattels of their fathers, husbands, and sons, even though it did, arguably, render them the "chattels" of monks.

By renouncing their homes and entering into homelessness, Mahapajapati and "a number of Sakyan women" embarked on "the very first Women's Liberation march in history" (Boucher, 1997: 72-73). Buddhist scholars have identified these "Sakyan women" in varying ways: as "displaced wives, widows, consorts, dancers, and musicians" (Murcott, 1991: 15); "women from all walks and conditions of life" (Falk, 1980: 209); and as "matrons, turning to the order's rest after a full and exhausting life [and] young [women], moved by the disgust for marriage or saddened by the death of children or other kin" (ibid.: 209).

Similar to Diana Paul, in this study it is maintained that these characterizations of the first Buddhist nuns are problematic insofar as they allege that women "enter the monastic life only after the family or the worldly life is no longer, or never could have been, possible, and further, that the monastic life opens no new life but is the holding area for life's remainder"

(Paul, 1985: 82).

It is not surprising that the first Buddhist women, living in an androcentric and patriarchal culture, are recorded as being "widows," "matrons," "displaced wives," and mothers of deceased children. The message here is clear: only those women who are no longer bound to a father, husband, or son can permissibly disregard the conventions of Indian society and renounce the traditional role of women in favor of the monastic life. By identifying these renunciant women in relation to men and to their former "traditional" roles as wives and mothers, the Buddhist record fails to grant these women full independence and agency. In a tainted androcentric and patriarchal record, these revolutionary women are portrayed as joining the monastic community because there was no other alternative, and this was their last hope.

It is particularly revealing that these five hundred Sakyan women, desiring the life of the renunciant, specify over and over again the renunciation of "their homes." Metaphorically, leaving the home is equated with abandoning false concepts of self and environment.[14] Clearly, however, within a patriarchal society, leaving home carried different meanings and consequences for women than for men. What did it mean for women in ancient Indian society to "renounce their homes?" The strong notion that women's place was "in the home" permeated ancient Indian culture. Shaping social beliefs, structures and language was the fear that if women moved out of "their place," that is, beyond the control of men, social order would crumble into chaos. As Denise Lardner Carmody notes, "Women were so fully identified with begetting children and serving men that a monastic option, allowing women decisive say over their vocation, could seem very dangerous" (Carmody, 1991: 70). Ancient Indian religious literature, extant at the time of Buddhism's formation, espouses the subjugation of women on three fronts—a woman must be deferential to her father when she is young, to her husband when she is married, and to her

eldest son when she is old (Kajiyama, 1982: 56). The most striking example of this patriarchal literature is the *Law Book of Manu* (*Manavadharmasastra*) which explicitly condemns a woman's independence at any time in her life:

> She should do nothing independently, even in her own house. In childhood subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her husband is dead to her sons, she should never enjoy independence. Though [her husband] be uncouth and prone to pleasure, though he has no good points at all, the virtuous wife should ever worship her lord as a god (quoted in Blackstone, 1998: 9-10).

As Janice D. Willis notes, women "were helpmates at best and burdens at worst, but always they were viewed as being inferior, second-class citizens" (Willis, 1985: 61).

Considering women's "proper" role within secular society, the role of the female renunciant emerges as tremendously radical. In her study of the *Therigatha*, Kathryn Blackstone observes that *theris* (i.e., nun *arhats*) report their previous lifestyles more frequently and in more detail than do *theras* (i.e., monk *arhats*) (Blackstone, 1998: 40). "The secular world the *theris* renounced," she writes, "is consistently portrayed as a social world in which they were embedded in a network of relationships, especially with family" (ibid.: 45). Furthermore, "the *theris*, enmeshed in a network of relationships, would probably experience more difficulty gaining permission to join the *sangha* than the *theras* who are relatively unencumbered by relationships" (ibid.). Considering Blackstone's commentary, in light of women's severely restricted role in ancient Indian society (as exemplified in the *Law Book of Manu*), it logically follows that joining the Buddhist monastic community was a far more radical breach for women than for men. Reiterating the tenacity with which the patriarchal environment circumscribed women's roles as wives and mothers, Blackstone notes, "young women who seek to renounce encounter resistance

from their families and a large proportion of *theris* were freed of their social responsibilities prior to joining the *sangha*" (Blackstone, 1998: 48). The special circumstances exhibited by women who join the monastic *sangha*, i.e., their seeking the permission of husband or father, or freedom from the roles of wife and mother, are indicative of women's reality in patriarchal society. Further, these are also prescriptive, insofar as only women who are no longer "embedded in a network of relationships" can permissibly join the *bhikkhuni* order.[15]

In order to deter women from renouncing "woman's sphere," in favor of a traditionally "male sphere" of spiritual education and occupation, the path of the nun's life was espoused as undesirable. In the following textual account, attributed to the Buddha, it is asserted that religion and society will break down if women leave their familial responsibilities. Further, the passage suggests that a woman's "nature" and proper social role necessarily require her exclusion from the monastic life and other roles outside of women's sphere, the home:

> If... women had not received permission to renounce their homes and enter in homelessness under the *dhamma* and discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata, then would the pure religion have lasted long, the good law would have stood for a thousand years. But since women have now received that permission, the pure religion will not last so long, the good law will now stand fast for only five hundred years. Just as houses in which there are many women but few men are easily violated by robber burglars; just so under whatever *dhamma* and discipline women are allowed to renounce their homes and enter into homelessness, that religion will not last long. And just as when the disease called mildew falls upon a field of rice in fine condition, that rice does not continue long; just so under... whatever *dhamma* and discipline women are allowed to renounce their homes and enter into homelessness, that religion will not last long and just as a man in anticipation builds an embankment to a great reservoir, beyond which the water should not overpass, just even so have I laid down these Eight Chief

> Rules for the *bhikkhunis*, not to be disregarded throughout their whole life (quoted in Murcott, 1991: 196).

What is remarkable about this passage is that, despite his prediction and explanation that the acceptance of women into the monastic *sangha* will bring the early demise of Buddhism, the Buddha allowed women to "renounce their homes and enter into the homeless state." As subsequent Buddhist texts, particularly the *Therigatha*, reveal, women did not hesitate to prove their capacity and ability to cope with the rigors of monastic life and embraced its fruits (Willis, 1985: 64).

This text is heavily disputed by Buddhist scholars who assert that these "anti-women statements" do not represent the Buddha's own judgement (Carmody, 1991: 70). Most scholars agree that these words, attributed to the Buddha, are later interpolations made by conservative disciples (Gross, 1993: 56). These are speculated to have arisen during the period when the implications of the Buddha's teaching came under heavy scrutiny. Therefore, scholars assert the interpolations to be the result of "a doctrinal crisis [that] erupted wherein the spiritual capacities of women were challenged and a real effort was made to prove theologically that women are inferior to men" (Barnes, 1987: 114). Rita Gross supports this theory of interpolation by elucidating that this narrative "is quite contradictory with the actual achievements of women in very early Buddhism and is not found in the oldest stratum of Buddhist literature" (Gross, 1991: 107). Nevertheless, as Nancy Falk notes, since the story "was widely circulated as the authentic founding narrative its charges must have cast a very long shadow on the nuns' endeavor" (Falk, 1980: 219). The vehement backlash, evident here, reveals how profoundly the women threatened patriarchal social organization, by crossing the boundaries of sex-role prescriptions and female/male "spheres." With every step that these women took, they transgressed the boundaries of female/male and feminine/masculine and the sex/gender

system tightened its grip, reinforcing its boundaries, to keep women "in their place."

The Ambiguous Position of the Almswoman in Ancient Indian Society: Speculations on the Decline of the *Bhikkhuni* Order

As recorded in the *Cullavagga*, the nuns' order was established "five years" after the male *sangha*.[16] An androcentric reading of this progression indicates that the Buddha's primary aim was to establish a monastic order of celibate monks to learn and propagate his teachings. The order in which these facets of the *sangha* were established conveys a hierarchical picture of the importance and respect accorded to each stratum of institutionalized Buddhism: *bhikkhu*, lay disciple, and *bhikkhuni*. Thus, the hierarchical development of the *sangha* translates into socio-religious truths: monks were foremost in importance, then laymen and laywomen, and lastly nuns. The ambiguous position of the *bhikkhuni* order within Indian Buddhism is clearly manifest in textual and historical evidence. First of all, depictions of the *bhikkhunis'* role are scarce and often negative, in contrast to the frequently exalted role of the laywoman/benefactress in Indian Buddhist texts. Furthermore, material and emotional support for the *bhikkhuni* order by the lay community was minimal. Finally, gender-specific rules were installed, which clearly relegated nuns to an inferior position within the monastic community. The dramatic decline and virtual extinction of the *bhikkhuni* order are direct results of the serious and devastating educational, financial, and material deprivation that Buddhist nuns have faced.

In light of the hierarchical development of the Buddhist community, Carroll argues that, "because of his [the Buddha's] initial reluctance to incorporate women into the *sangha* and thereby give them the same learning opportunities as men, he

inadvertently gave validity to the actions of his subsequent followers [the laity], who neglected or deprecated female [monastic] education" (Carroll, 1983: 103). The nuns' lower profile in the institutional structure of the monastic order can be seen as a logical extension of their lower profile in the larger Indian society. In the same vein, Nancy Falk also notes, "The discriminatory provisions meant that women would never be leaders in the life of the whole community or have any decisive voice in shaping its direction" (Falk, 1980: 216). Buddhist scholar Eva K. Neumaier-Dargyay draws the similar conclusion that nuns had no participation or recognition in the public representation and enactment of culture:

> The invisibility of the Buddhist nuns in the past is an astounding fact and one that raises serious questions about gender construction within the traditional Buddhist communities. The patriarchal societies of Asia gave women a recognized and acknowledged space only when they confined themselves to the roles of mothers and subservient wives. This recognition, however, was not available to celibate nuns. Consequently, there was no public recognition whatsoever of their existence or of the contribution they made to Buddhist belief and practice (Neumaier-Dargyay, 1995: 164).

Further, Tsultrim Allione notes, nuns "suffered from male distrust because of their relatively emancipated position and for this reason Buddhist laywomen were often presented much more positively than nuns in Buddhist stories" (Allione, 1986: 8). She continues, "The Buddhist laywoman was still in her correct slot according to the Hindu social system while nuns held the ambivalent position of having been accepted but with great reservations" (ibid.: 8).

Perhaps the positive emphasis on the laywoman role in contrast to the virtual negation of the *bhikkhuni* role can be attributed to the monks' and nuns' dependence on the laity for material support. Nancy Falk elucidates the extent to which

almsmen (and almswomen) were dependent on the laity for survival: "Lay persons built their monasteries, provided their robes and other modest possessions, and fed them, either as they went on daily begging rounds or by supplying food to monastery kitchens" (Falk, 1980: 211). Furthermore, as Diana Paul notes, since the "monks had to beg for alms from house to house as part of their daily routine a housewife would be the principal almsgiver" (Paul, 1985: 8). Thus, considering the importance of female lay patronage to monastic sustenance, and since monks were the transcribers and redactors of Buddhist texts and histories, it is not surprising that laywomen emerge more frequently, and often more positively, in Buddhist scripture than nuns do (Falk, 1980: 220).

The importance of the almsgiver's role in sustaining Buddhism is elaborated by Janice Willis who asserts that, with Buddhism's development, monastic dependency on the laity ranged from "simple daily alms" to the funding of construction of stupas (i.e., reliquary structures for public worship) and "more permanent and ever-larger monastic complexes" (Willis, 1985: 71). Women benefactresses, particularly, played a significant role in developing and sustaining the Buddhist tradition (ibid.: 83, n. 55). Citing extensive evidence of wealthy women's ("women merchants, wealthy courtesans, and royal queens") patronage of the Buddha from his earliest days as a teacher, Willis argues that, "such material support from women not only embellished but actually sustained the continuance of Buddhism in India right up to its final 'disappearance' from the sub-continent" (Willis, 1985: 73).

In accordance with Willis' account of the increasing importance of and attention devoted to the role of the benefactress, as Buddhism expanded and developed, many Buddhist scholars have suggested that the status of the nun declined as laywomen's status was elevated (Paul, 1985: 79). Willis notes grand stories of female lay patronage from the earliest Buddhist scriptures to the development of the Mahayana:

Visakha is described as the Buddha's "chief Benefactress" because of her donation of "ninety millions;"[17] Ambapali is lauded as "one of the most loyal and generous supporters of the Order;"[18] and Queen Amritaprabha "is said to have built for the use of Buddhist monks a lofty *vihara*" (Horner, 1930: 89, quoted in Willis, 1985: 74; 76). In contrast to the ample textual evidence attesting to the lavish life enjoyed by monks, Paul's commentary on the virtual non-existence of *bhikkhunis* in the record of Buddhism's development is striking:

> Whatever the reason, the nun's life is not well marked in the Mahayana sutra tradition or in the philosophical writing of that tradition. Participation in an intellectual life by the Mahayana Buddhist nuns is not recorded. The nun seems not to have been a significant part of the student body of the great Buddhist universities which were the central gem in the crown of the monk's order, an order which was extensive, prosperous, and productive of extraordinary thought and art (Paul, 1985: 82).

A comparison between Willis' account of the status of the benefactress and that of Paul on the status of the *bhikkhuni* in Buddhism's development, reveals great discrepancies between these two female roles. Further, Paul's account alludes to the huge disparity between the rich intellectual and material endowment of monks and the grave intellectual and material deprivation of nuns.

What is most perplexing about the role of the laywoman/benefactress is her apparent neglect of women monastics. In light of her extensive support of the *bhikkhu* order, the laywoman/benefactress emerges as "male identified." Consider the following definition of "male identification," set forth by Kathleen Barry, in relation to the monk-benefactress relationship:

> [The effect of male identification means] internalizing the values of the colonizer and actively participating in carrying out the colonization of one's self and one's sex. Male identification is the

> act whereby women place men above women, including themselves, in credibility, status, and importance in most situations, regardless of the comparative quality the women may bring to the situation. Interaction with women is seen as a lesser form of relating on every level (quoted in Rich, 1986: 47-48).

Drawing a parallel between the benefactress' extensive support of male monastics and Barry's theory of "male identification" is by no means intended to suggest that Buddhist monks are "colonizers." Rather, Barry's definition of "male identification" emerges as a model with which to interpret the benefactress' implicit deprecation of *bhikkhunis*. By internalizing the message that *bhikkhus* are worthy of more respect and homage than *bhikkhunis*, the benefactress supports male monastics, thus "carrying out the colonization" of herself and her sex.[19] Regardless of the fact that women are just as capable as men of attaining *arhat*ship, as declared by the Buddha and evident in the enlightenment poetry of the *Therigatha*, the patronage of the laywoman/benefactress resides with monks.[20] Within this "male identification" scenario, female support networks, for example, laywomen supporting *bhikkhunis*, are belittled into virtual nonexistence.

In 428 A.D., voyager I Ching wrote the following memoir of his encounter with Buddhist nuns in East India:

> Nuns in India are very different from those of China. They support themselves by begging food, and live a poor and simple life. The benefit and supply to the female members of the Order are very small, and monasteries of many a place have no special supply of food for them (quoted in Falk, 1980: 211).

Although brief, I Ching's observation provides an important insight into the destitute state of the *bhikkhuni* order one thousand years after its founding. By the fourth century A. D., the nuns' order had deteriorated almost to the point of extinction. After I Ching's commentary in the fifth century A. D.,

references to individual nuns or nuns' orders in Buddhist discourse are few and far between. The lack of textual and historical materials on nuns is particularly astounding, considering that the period of Buddhism in India after the third century A. D. was "the best-recorded period in Buddhist history" (Falk, 1980: 210).

As I Ching's commentary indicates, nuns were generally poor and under-supported; further, they were often left unnamed or totally unrecorded in Buddhist discourse (Falk, 1980: 210). Owing to the scarcity of information about the *bhikkhunis* in the texts of Indian Buddhism (with the exception of the *Therigatha*), Diana Paul concludes that "in India the nun's role remained undeveloped—at least as a vehicle for literary expression or as an area in Buddhist culture that needed written commentary and redefinition after the early period" (Paul, 1985: 79). Not only was the role of the nun largely undeveloped in Buddhist scripture, the actual, historical lives of nuns were largely unsupported in Buddhist antiquity. As Nancy Falk contends, "Their singularly poorer state, as compared to the monks,' indicates that they had problems finding economic support" (Falk, 1980: 211). On the question why the nuns barely received enough material support to survive, while monks lived in richly endowed monasteries, Falk asserts that monks and nuns "competed" for donations. Since the nuns' community "had never enjoyed the lion's share of prestige," monks captured "the greater share of support" (Falk, 1980: 212-213). Considering the Buddhist tradition's "inability to affirm completely the idea of women pursuing the renunciant's role," evident both in the doctrine that relegated nuns to an inferior status and the Buddhist community's failure to support the *bhikkhuni* order. It thus becomes clear, right from Buddhism's inception, that the path of the nun was "destined for virtual extinction" (Falk, 1980: 208; Paul, 1985: 78). Given the enormous obstacles placed before the nuns, it is therefore surprising that they survived for so long (Falk, 1980: 222).

The Problem with Androgyny

Beyond the limitations of the Eight Special Rules, which relegated *bhikkhunis* to an inferior status, the androgynous appearance of the nuns and their apparent sex/gender boundary transcendence, rendered them outcasts, destined to a marginal existence. By examining the separate formation of female and male monastic orders, each with its own set of requisites based on sex differentiation, it becomes clear that androgyny was not neutral, benign, or fully realized. A close examination of the development of the criteria for *bhikkuni* ordination reveals that androgyny tends to elevate the male aspect over the female, essentially collapsing the female into the male. Furthermore, the nun's apparent sex/gender boundary transcendence, manifest in their androgynous appearance, their renunciation of traditional female roles, and their entrance into a traditionally male "sphere," is perceived as a serious threat that must be curtailed. Finally, as evidenced in the formation of separate orders for nuns and monks, based on the sex distinction of female vs. male, androgyny is a facade—what is hidden beneath the robe is of paramount importance.

On the spiritual path of Buddhist monasticism, nuns and monks did the same things, followed the same daily routines, lived the same sort of disciplined ascetic lives and practiced the same meditation techniques (Barnes, 1987: 108). Further, they looked almost exactly the same with their shaven heads and identical robes. Nancy Falk elucidates the virtual elimination of gender distinctions between monks and nuns in the following account of their analogous daily lives and indistinguishable appearance:

> Both monks and nuns went on daily begging rounds; both held the important biweekly assembly in which the Rule's provisions were recited, violations confessed, and penances determined.

> Monks and nuns even looked alike; both shaved their heads bare, and both wore the same patchcloth robes dyed to earth color and draped identically over the left shoulder (Falk, 1980: 213-214).

The identical daily routine and appearance of the nuns and monks is striking. After reading Falk's account, one is tempted to conclude that in the Buddhist monastic community, gender role differences have been obliterated. As Nancy Schuster Barnes writes, "In every way, monks and nuns appear to be a single group of renunciants, among whom distinctions based on gender no longer apply" (Barnes, 1987: 108). However, a gender distinction in the form of the nuns' obligatory observance of the Eight Special Rules was enforced. Through the instatement of the Eight Special Rules, the boundary between female and male, and feminine and masculine, was maintained. By further examining the implications of the identical vocation and appearance of the monks and nuns, the motivation behind rigidly enforced sex/gender boundaries will be highlighted.

In *Sex and Suits*, Anne Hollander asserts that "clothes are social phenomena; changes in dress are social changes" (Hollander, 1994: 4). In the Buddhist monastic community, both females and males adorn themselves with the exact same clothing worn in exactly the same fashion. As Hollander emphasizes, women and men dressing the same defies the symbolic separation of woman and man (ibid.: 6). Further, uniformly stylized clothing unites rather than separates the two sexes. Using the example of Roman dress depicted in relief sculpture form in the early Middle Ages, Hollander concludes, "This particular Roman drapery seems to clothe everybody in one endless length of fabric, so that determining the sex of any single figure on the frieze requires some scrutiny" (ibid.: 33). Similarly, the loosely draped robe of the female and male monastic, as well as the shaven head and lack of adornment, virtually mask sexual distinction.

By shearing off every last trace of their femininity, these

women renounced not only their sexuality, but also the roles accorded females based on that sexuality, namely, the roles of wife and mother. In particular, the woman's act of shaving her head became both a literal and symbolic representation of the shedding of her femininity and female sex. As Hollander notes, "Loose female hair was always a specifically sexual reference, the sign of female emotional looseness and sensual susceptibility, and a standard of sexual invitation" (Hollander, 1994: 56). The power of this external sign is significant. In light of the larger Indian social system that these women were renouncing, the shaving of their heads moves beyond the symbolic representation of renunciation to the expression of rebellion. Whether these women consciously realized it or not, by entering a "traditionally male" vocation and assuming an androgynous appearance, they were challenging the "two-sexed world" and threatening the symbolic boundaries between female/male and feminine/masculine that sustain androcentrism and patriarchy. The nuns' threat of asexuality and androgyny is particularly momentous since sexual differentiation has played a key role in keeping women from aspiring to Buddhahood.

In the Buddhist tradition, a Buddha, as well as a universal monarch, was said to display the "thirty-two marks" of a superior being. The tenth of these "marks," or unusual physical traits, was "the concealment of the lower organs in a sheath" (Gross, 1993: 62). Thus, since the Buddha was presumably male, it was concluded that one needed a penis to be a Buddha! Since women "lack" a penis, Buddhahood was not an option for them, at least not while they were in female form. However, several things challenge this age-old belief in the "tenth mark." First, perhaps the point of "the concealment of the lower organs in a sheath" was to emphasize the Buddha's asexuality and abstinence: "The sheathed penis," Nancy Barnes suggests, "symbolizes that his genital virility is controlled and contained and is replaced by his *oral* 'virility'" (Barnes, 1987: 259, n. 11). Second, as sociologists Dean and Juliet MacCannell assert,

"Without actually viewing another's genitals, we have no real *proof* of the other's sex" (MacCannell & MacCannell, 1987: 209). Thus, we are left to question: *if the penis is covered by a sheath, how do we really know it is there at all?* Third, as Rita Gross notes, when considering the female anatomy, "the usual bearers of a *sheathed* 'penis' are not men at all, but women" (Gross, 1993: 63). Fourth, as the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* asserts, everything in and of itself, including all apparent characteristics of beings, is empty of characteristics and illusory. Thus, it is wrong to assume that there is a real distinction between female and male and only unenlightened beings believe in such a distinction. Applying this argument to the "sheathed penis," Nancy Barnes concludes, "A Buddha, then, cannot be distinguished by 'his marks,' and a Buddha is therefore not really 'male'" (Barnes, 1987: 118). And, fifth, by permitting women into the monastic *sangha*, a vocation whose primary goal is the attainment of Buddhahood/enlightenment, the validity and power of the "tenth mark," is completely undermined.

Consider the "tenth mark," "the concealment of the lower organs in a sheath," in light of the identical, androgynous attire of the monks and nuns. Draped in their large formless robes, sporting shaven heads, and performing the same daily tasks and rituals, these renunciants have obscured all the details of "masculine" and "feminine" dress, appearance, and behavior. As Dean and Juliet MacCannell note, "after the genitals are covered, gender is imputed, mainly on the basis of arbitrary signs" (MacCannell & MacCannell, 1987: 209). In the case of the nuns and monks, what "arbitrary signs," disclosing the female and male sex, exist? Since no secondary-sex characteristics were visible, since no "arbitrary signs" could be found, the boundary between masculine and feminine, male and female, was reinforced. This reinforcement is manifest in both the establishment of separate *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni* orders, on the basis of sex, and the subsequent hierarchization of the *bhikkhu* order over the *bhikkhuni* order, via the Eight Special Rules.

Within the phallocentric economy of institutionalized Buddhism, women are separated from and subordinated to men, the possessors of the phallus and, thus, of power and authority.

"You Cannot Be without Female Characteristics": A Feminist Reading of *Bhikkhuni* Prerequisites and the *Bhikkhuni/Bhikkhu* Distinction

If the message of the "gender-free" *Dharma* had been fully realized and translated into culturally legible terms within the Buddhist monastic institution, one would expect a single community of renunciants without discrimination based on sex/gender. However, Buddhism neither developed within a cultural vacuum nor presented itself as a radical critique of social codes and norms. Thus, the cultural assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality and male superiority permeated the foundational structure of institutionalized Buddhism and traditional notions of "female" and "male" were reinscribed. The development of separate women's and men's monastic orders elucidates the paramount importance of sex/gender discrimination within the *sangha.*

Sexual determination, i.e., discerning the sexed-corporeality of the initiate's body, is an initial step on the path toward *bhikkhuni* ordination. In the section of the *Vinaya,* devoted to women's ordination ("Nuns: The Stating of the Matter"), it is explicitly stated that the nuns who help the initiate put on her new robes must examine her body to see that she possesses the requisite female genitals (Lang, 1995: 35-36):

> Then, at the right time the instructress should give the yellow garments. The initiate, after bowing to the feet of the instructress, should accept these garments and put them on. At this time the initiate should be examined. There must be no absence of proper female characteristics, nor should there be any additional presence of male characteristics.... Then, if by this procedure, the initiate

> is found fit, the instructress should give her the yellow garments and perform for her the rite of "Going Forth from Home" (Wilson, 1985: 88).

The examination of the initiate's body, as prescribed in the *Vinaya*, is based on the assumption that we know a woman (or man) when we see one, namely, that it is possible to ascertain what a woman (or man) is (Sawhney, 1995: 204).

The *Vinaya*, in its section, "Nuns: The Stating of the Matter," further states that the instructress must ask the initiate to "truly and fearlessly declare the true as true and the false as false" from a lengthy list of prerequisites. The criteria regarding gender and sexuality are particularly revealing:

> You cannot be of furious temperament, nor grief-stricken, nor pregnant, nor a householder, nor without female characteristics, nor with both female and male characteristics, nor with mixed female and male characteristics, nor currently menstruous, nor nonmenstruous, nor of doubtful sexual characteristics, nor a corrupter of monks... (Wilson, 1985: 90).

Clearly, the *Vinaya* rules are not only concerned with "fit" and "proper" sex/gender, but also with sexual virility, as evidenced in the prescription that the female initiate must not currently be "menstruous" nor "nonmenstruous" (Lang, 1995: 36). The strict guidelines set forth in the *Vinaya*, regarding the gender and sexual potency of the potential monastic, refute the following interpretations by Charles Keyes: The ordination process transforms the renunciant into a new gender identity that is neither female nor male and the gender of the renunciant does not result from biological sexual attributes (Lang, 1995: 35). As the requisites for *bhikkhuni* ordination reveal, androgyny, or some other transcendence of sex/gender norms, is neither a goal nor a possibility within this Buddhist institution. Further, biological determination of the initiate's female or male sex is at the root of the *bhikkhu/bhikkhuni* classification. While on the

surface it seems that monks and nuns have undergone gender transformations and assumed alternative gender roles, gender is neither ambiguous nor ambivalent.

In his analysis of the Buddha's enlightenment, Gananath Obeyesekere concludes that "passion has been stilled, and the source of the passion—the penis—is symbolically castrated" (Lang, 1995: 37). However, the fact that the "sheathed penis" is one of the distinguishing marks of a Buddha reveals that a symbolic castration has not taken place. The Buddhist relationship to sexuality should not be one of castration, but of containment and discipline. The prototypical Buddhist relationship to sexuality is reiterated in the *bhikkhuni* ordination process, wherein the proper placement and functioning of the genital organs are fundamental prerequisites to an initiate's acceptance into the order.

In a religious institution, based on abstinence, what is the purpose of requiring *bhikkhunis* to be fertile, sexually functioning women? As Lang asserts, the female renunciants' going forth from home, shaving her head, and adorning the formless robes indicate "a separation from a sexually active life and the resultant commitment to chastity" (Lang, 1995: 34). Further, the nun's shaving off of her hair "indicates her control over her sexuality and her potential fertility" (ibid.: 35). By undermining her attractive, tempting appearance, a sign of her commitment to chastity, the nun removes herself as a threat to the male monastic community, or so it seems. However, the goal of monastic life is not symbolic of physical castration, but to curb passion and cultivate detachment from all desire, including sexual desire. According to the *Vinaya*, the nun must have appropriate female genitals that function properly. Therefore, sexual desire, as symbolized by the genitals, must be present, not castrated, so that the nun or monk, through mindful meditation and practice, may gain control and containment of her/his genital virility. Though the nun's commitment to the chaste life seems to desexualize her, as indicated by the shaven

head and adornment of formless, androgynous robes, the nun's sexual prowess remains hidden, in check, beneath her robes. Commenting on the gender and sexuality requirements for initiation into the *bhikkhuni* order, Lang writes, "These regulations suggest that she, like the monk, should be capable of performing sexually while keeping sexual desire in check; they further suggest that she should be fertile, although her fertility must be controlled. At issue here is not castration—even symbolic—of genital organs but rather continued control over the mental organ which controls sexual responsiveness" (ibid.: 36). Control of the mind, which in turn brings ultimate detachment from sexual desire, is the goal of the Buddhist renunciant.

The above process, of determining whether a female initiate is suitable for *bhikkhuni* status, reveals a deeper search for an "authentic woman" or "authentic female".[21] In light of Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement, "One is not born, but becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1952: 249), it would seem that any search for an authentic woman would be futile; that is, *woman* is culturally constructed, not a *natural* entity that exists in isolation from cultural determinations. Further, it would seem that if woman is culturally constructed versus biologically determined, then men can become women as well (Sawhney, 1995: 205). As Judith Butler writes, "there is nothing in her [Simone de Beauvoir's] account that guarantees that the 'one' who becomes a woman is necessarily female" (Butler, 1990: 8). "Cultural feminization" throws into question the concept of biology (and thus sex) as natural, unadulterated, and untouched by "the gendered determinations of culture" (Sawhney, 1995: 205, 209). It explodes the apparent dichotomy between gender as culturally constructed and sex as biologically determined and redefines the relationship between sex and gender and the latter can no longer be considered an artificial imposition upon a naturally sexed body. The instructress' search for proof of the initiate's authentic womanhood reveals that the category of sex

is itself a gendered category. Consider Judith Butler's argument refuting the definition of gender as "the cultural interpretation of sex:"

> If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all (Butler, 1990: 7).

Butler continues,

> ... there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along (ibid.: 8).

As the nuns' initiation process discloses, the determination of an *authentic* female corporeality is a response to cultural codes that outline who and what constitutes a woman. Through the examination process, specific body parts are distinguished as *genitals* and deemed *female*. This discerning and naming of the genitals is, in and of itself, a cultural act. As such, the genitals carry cultural meaning and become signs of authentic womanhood. Monique Wittig's commentary on the definition of woman is particularly enlightening here:

> [Sex] is taken as an 'immediate given,' a 'sensible given,' 'physical features,' belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an 'imaginary formation,' which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived (... [T]hey are seen as women, therefore, they are women. But before being seen that way, they first had to be made that way) (Wittig, 1997: 221).

This process of sexing the body, of deeming that the initiate *is*, in fact, a *real* woman, reveals that biology does not exist in isolation from the gendered norms and laws of culture. The search for the authentic female reveals the following: both sex and gender are products of culture; sex and gender neither exist in a dichotomous relationship nor exist independently of each other. Sex/gender codes and norms govern the materialization of bodies, that is, only certain types of bodies (properly sexed female and male bodies) find cultural intelligibility. As Wittig asserts, "'woman' is not something that goes without saying, since to be one, one has to be a 'real' one" (Wittig, 1997: 221). The nuns' ordination process reveals that only the authentic woman finds cultural intelligibility in the *bhikkuni sangha*.

The separation of the monastic *sangha* into a *bhikkhu*, or male order, and *bhikkhuni*, or female order, results from and perpetuates a heterosexist economy.[22] Feminist theorist Jane Flax poses two questions that can be directly applied to this analysis and critique of the Buddhist monastic institution: "What are the relationships between heterosexuality, homosexuality, and gender relations? Are there only two genders?" (Flax, 1997: 174). The only bodies that find cultural intelligibility in the Buddhist *sangha* are those that are properly gendered as female or male. As set forth in the *Vinaya*, the female gender is determined by the existence of "proper female characteristics" and the absence of "any additional presence of male characteristics." The male gender, presumably, is determined in a corresponding fashion. Considering, however, the instructress' questioning of the initiate, discussed earlier, there are clearly more than two genders: bodies that possess *mixed* characteristics, or lack appropriate and distinctive female or male characteristics, threaten the stability of the socio-sexual structure. As the distinction and separation of female and male renunciants reveals, bodies are heterosexually constructed as female and male. The heterosexist economy relies on the biological existence of two discrete, oppositional, and undeni-

ably distinct genders, i.e., female and male. The existence of more than two genders contests the seemingly *natural* differentiation of woman and man and explodes the entire economy. Perhaps it is this threat of disruption and disclosure that renders *other* genders unintelligible within the monastic *sangha*. To permit inauthentic wo/men[23] is to threaten the integrity of the entire order.

Why do nuns and monks inhabit separate spheres within the monastic institution? Further, how does this separation on the basis of *sex* reflect and reiterate the heterosexist assumptions of the culture? Judith Butler poses a similar question, "[T]o what extent is gender identity, construed as a relationship among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire, the effect of a regulatory practice that can be identified as compulsory heterosexuality?" (Butler, 1990: 18). Answers to these questions lie in the following cultural assumptions and their accompanying regulatory practices: the dichotomization of sex into female and male, as *biologically determined*, and hence natural; the cultural construction of a social network in which only two sexes, the authentic female and the authentic male, find representation; the basic presumption that women sexually desire men and vice versa; and lastly, that the sexual practices of women and men follow this heterosexual desire.

The establishment of separate female and male monastic orders is an effect of the heterosexual economy. Within the monastic institutional structure, the control and containment of sexual desire and practice are fundamental; therefore, it is essential that the female and male sexes are separated and somehow distinguished from each other. The Buddhist monastic institution can be seen as a microcosm of the broader heterosexist social matrix. Within the cultural framework of institutionalized Buddhism, pervasive assumptions of sex as natural, real, and the foundation of identity and strict regulatory practices, such as, examining the initiate for requisite signs of authentic womanhood, produce and reinforce the very existence

of the two sexes. Thereby, the presumed sexual practices and mutual desire of the two sexes are also reinforced. As Monique Wittig asserts, "The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual" (quoted in Butler, 1990: 1). Certain types of sexual identities, for example, persons with both female and male characteristics and with mixed or doubtful sexual characteristics, cannot find representation within the *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhuni* order. These prerequisites reveal that regulatory practices are at work, effecting *appropriate* identities that fall within the socio-political matrix of sex/gender norms.

Ambiguously sexed, inauthentic wo/men comprise the domain of abject, intolerable bodies. Considering the guidelines of the *Vinaya*, one can further speculate other kinds of identities that cannot exist within the socio-religious matrix of the Buddhist *sangha*. These include young, pre-pubescent girls and older, menopausal women; mourning widows, women who have lost their children, or women otherwise emotionally afflicted; sexually active or pregnant women; women tied to domestic life or who own property (householders); women who are temptresses or seductresses; men posing as women; hermaphrodites; and lastly, eunuchs or ambiguously sexed or inauthentic wo/men.

The above reading conceives of *characteristics* in purely biological and anatomical terms. Yet, what would an alternative, subversive reading of characteristics reveal? In other words, how would our conclusions differ if these characteristics were considered to be the marks of appropriate gender that, presumably, follow from sex, i.e., that females exhibit femininity and males exhibit masculinity? Is it possible that a *bhikkhuni* initiate, who displays both feminine and masculine mannerisms, behaviors, and attitudes, is in fact defying the rule that *you cannot be with both female and male characteristics*? Or, perhaps, an initiate (with a female-sexed body) who displays solely masculine mannerisms, behaviors, and attitudes is, in fact, guilty of defying the rule, *you cannot be without female characteristics*? This subversive

interpretation reveals that the heterosexual economy is based on the assumption that gender *naturally* follows from sex, that *feminine* is the expressive attribute of female and that *masculine* is the expressive attribute of male. Judith Butler's commentary on the cultural codes and laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of gender, sex, and sexuality elucidates the profound significance of the prerequisites for a *bhikkhuni* initiate:

> The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female.' The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist'—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not follow from either sex or gender (Butler, 1990: 17).

Considering Butler's critique and the above alternative interpretation of characteristics, it becomes clear that nuns only appear to transcend sex/gender boundaries. In reality, the *bhikkhuni sangha* is circumscribed by sex/gender norms, codes, and laws.

The appropriately sexed body, i.e., distinctively female or male, is of paramount and undeniable importance in the Buddhist monastic institution. The seeming irrelevance of sexual differentiation, exemplified in the shaved head and androgynous robes of nuns and monks, coupled with the fundamental significance of sex-distinction, imposed through the requisites of appropriate and properly functioning genital organs for *bhikkhunis*, cast sex/gender into an irresolvable dialectic.

Conclusions

Why did the Buddhist nuns pose such a threat to the monastic institution that the Eight Special Rules were deemed necessary?

Further, how did the Buddhist nuns threaten the androcentric and patriarchal social organization of ancient India? This study has attempted to answer these questions through an analysis of the nuns' threat to sex/gender boundary maintenance on three levels: the renunciation of women's *proper roles*, the assumption of an androgynous appearance and livelihood, and the threat of *inauthentic* womanhood. As the subjugation, impoverishment, marginalization, and virtual extinction of the *bhikkhuni* order reveals, such sex/gender transgressions undermined the stability of the androcentric, phallocentric, and heterosexist economy and, thus, were met with vehement backlash.

The apparent androgyny of the monastic community and its failure to fully liberate women from sex/gender oppression, renders the monastic *sangha* of particular interest to feminist theorists. The subordinate state of the Buddhist nuns reveals that *androgyny* tends to elevate the ideal of the masculine/male while derogating the feminine/female. Androgyny is an inadequate feminist utopian vision since it fails to deconstruct the original categories of female/feminine and male/masculine and merely reinscribes them. As much of recent feminist theory asserts, the socially constructed polarities of gender, i.e., feminine/masculine and sex, i.e., female/male, must be deconstructed. Buddhist philosophy also maintains that exploding dichotomies and dualistic thought and structures moves one into a new area of freedom and liberation. Unfortunately, the institution of monastic Buddhism failed to realize these goals.

According to feminist theorist Sabina Sawhney, "any extension of the boundaries radically alters the basic framework and any inclusion mandates a re-evaluation of the original categories" (Sawhney, 1995: 202). As the Eight Special Rules imposed on the *bhikkhunis* reveal, Buddhists neither succeeded in altering the basic framework of the monastic community nor in re-evaluating sex/gender and the identity categories of woman and man. Institutionalized Buddhism failed to critique

existing patriarchal, androcentric, and heterosexist ideologies and merely reinscribed them within a monastic framework. Within the monastery walls, women were still subject to men and discriminated against because of their female sex.

Perhaps, what is most striking in the story of the founding of the *bhikkhuni* order is the perseverance, courage, and strength exhibited by Mahapajapati and the Sakyan women in the face of extreme adversity. Since the founding of Buddhism, five years earlier, these women had been told both directly and indirectly that they were much less likely than men to reach the goal of liberation because of their female sex. The initial rejection of women from the monastic community and the subsequent investiture of the Eight Special Rules upon the establishment of the nuns' order did not, however, deter these revolutionary women from entering the renunciant *sangha*. Desiring the full spiritual education and livelihood of monasticism, these women assumed a radical stance. In relinquishing their homes and possessions, abandoning their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, renouncing their sexuality, shaving their heads, and adorning themselves in the saffron-colored robes, these women sloughed off their female gender. By shedding virtually all traces of their femininity, they challenged the very notion of what it means to be a woman. With the strength of their collective liberatory vision, the first Buddhist nuns set out on the same monastic path treaded by men. To a large degree, however, Buddhist institutions failed women (Gross, 1991: 106).

As Nancy Falk notes, "Buddhism was a path of enlightenment, not a revolutionary vision of renewed social order" (Falk, 1980: 222). So long as institutionalized Buddhism refused to renounce the patriarchal and androcentric social order of ancient India, women would be unable to find social equality and liberation from discrimination and oppression within its parameters. A critique of the *bhikkhuni sangha* reveals that even if women enter traditionally male spheres, shed their femininity,

and assume an androgynous existence/personality, liberation is not assured. This community of female renunciants confirms that women have challenged institutionalized oppression and sexist assumptions within Buddhism since its founding. However, without an active political and social agenda behind them, *bhikkhunis* were neither equipped with the words nor the power to challenge the sex/gender system which fought to maintain traditional boundaries and keep women *in their place.*

Notes

1. Throughout this paper, I deliberately employ the term "sex/gender" to reiterate the lack of true distinction between sex and gender and to emphasize that sex and gender do not exist independently of or in dichotomous relationship to each other.

2. The marginalization of the role of nuns, both in Buddhist history and scholarship, is quite evident. Pioneering scholar, I. B. Horner, has clearly pointed this out as follows: "In spite of the difficulties presented by the revised and incomplete character of the texts, I hope that the life of women as nuns, so long as the sixth century B.C., is worthy of more than the passing attention, which, with a few notable exceptions, is the most that it has ever been accorded in any treatises on Buddhism" (Horner, 1930: xxii).

3. The only canonical document that I am aware of, attributed to the composition of women, is the *Therigatha,* the enlightenment poetry of early Buddhist nuns. However, as Willis points out, the *Therigatha* was compiled, written, edited, and extensively commented upon by a monk named Dhammapala" (Willis, 1985: 78, n. 3).

4. Feminist theorist, Elizabeth Grosz, writes: "Once the universal is shown to be a guise for the masculine and knowledges are shown to occupy only one pole of a (sexual) spectrum instead of its entirety, the possibility of other ways of knowing and proceeding—the possibility of feminist discourses and knowledges— reveals itself" (Grosz, 1995: 38).

5. I deliberately use the term, *herstory*, as a political act of resistance, that is, to highlight the feminist critique that history has traditionally been the story of men, and for men. In contrast, *herstory* involves uncovering the lives, experiences, and stories of women.

6. The androcentrism of Asian textual preservation of Buddhism

has been reinforced by the androcentrism of Western scholarship on Buddhism. Thus, the Buddhist canon as defined by "Eastern" patriarchy, has in turn defined the canon, for academic inquiry as executed by "Western" patriarchy (Neumaier-Dargyay, 1995: 145). Western inquiry into the nature of Buddhist thought has, for the most part, relied on representative male Buddhist thinkers as the fathers of the Western Buddhist canon (ibid.: 145). Thus, the cycle of overshadowing, ignoring, and suppressing the stories of women is perpetuated.

7. This study recognizes the following obstacles to reconstructing the history of the *bhikkuni* order with strict historical accuracy. First, the Buddhist scriptures that this study relies on were committed to writing several centuries after the time of the Buddha and the first Buddhist women. Second, these texts have undergone various editions, glosses, revisions, and translations at the hands of monks and scholars. And third, some material attesting to the experiences and concerns of the almswomen was surely lost within the oral tradition, or not committed to writing.

8. Nancy Barnes notes that the nuns' order disappeared "from India sometime after the ninth century, from Sri Lanka in the tenth, and from Burma in the thirteenth" (Barnes, 1994: 142). The nuns' order has, however, "continued to thrive" in China, Korea, Japan,, and Vietnam to the present day (ibid: 139).

9. Banaras has been considered a significant religious and intellectual center in ancient India (Carroll, 1983: 102).

10. As recorded in the *Mahavastu*, a historical and legendary collection of tales about Buddha Gautama, Buddhas are "said to be born parthogenetically, that is, without the sexual intercourse of parents" (Paul, 1985: 63). Gautama's mother, Maya, "was destined to the fate of all mothers of Buddhas, namely, to die seven days after giving birth in order to preclude any sexual intercourse after such a marvelous event as giving birth to a Buddha" (Paul, 1985: 63). Thus, from the time of Maya's death, the Buddha was raised by his aunt, Mahapajapati.

11. Most accounts and translations of the establishment of the Buddhist nuns' order refer to Mahapajapati's companions as five hundred women or five hundred Sakyan Women. Five hundred is a generic number/term used to mean a great many.

12. It is highly plausible, due to the frequent references to Jain sects in Buddhist canonical literature, that the Buddha was aware of the existence of Jain nunneries (Horner, 1930: 108, n. 4). Horner maintains that the Buddha was aware of Vesali, "a flourishing center of the Jains,"

and that "he knew of the great reverence in which female Jain ascetics were held" (ibid.: 108).

13. According to the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the Buddha taught:

> Whoever has such a carriage, whether a woman or a man,
> Shall indeed, by means of that carriage,
> Come to Nirvana (quoted in Schuster, 1985: 105).

According to this teaching, sexual differentiation of female/male is irrelevant on the soteriological path to enlightenment. Further, as the Buddha's words reiterate, not only is the soteriological path to enlightenment open to women; it is indeed the same path for women and men (Sponberg, 1992: 9).

14. For a more detailed discussion of the implications of the metaphor of leaving home, see Blackstone, 1998: 83-86.

15. The notion that the "special circumstances" of female renunciants are prescriptive is reinforced by Blackstone's assessment that the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha* "appear to be 'liberation manuals' designed to provide models of success for the women and men who join the Buddhist *sangha*" (Blackstone, 1998: 14). Further, the *Therigatha* is "a model of liberation specifically for women" (ibid.: 117).

16. For references to the lapse of "five years" between the Buddha's establishment of the male and female monastic orders, see Horner, 1930: xxii, 98, 103, and 295. The lapse of "five years" is also referenced in Willis, 1985: 61.

17. The life of Visakha is recounted in the *Dhammapada* commentary, and references to her are found in the *Udana* and in the *Anguttara-nikaya* (Willis, 1985: 83-84, n. 57).

18. An account of Ambapali's life is given in the *Therigatha*.

19. The notion that *bhikkhus* deserve more respect and support than *bhikkhunis* is precedented by the Buddha's instatement of the Eight Chief Rules which clearly relegates nuns to a secondary status. Considering nuns' inferior ranking, perhaps laywomen felt that they would accrue more merit by bestowing alms and gifts upon monks than by bestowing those same alms and gifts upon nuns.

20. See note 13.

21. In her essay, "Authenticity is Such a Drag!" Sabina Sawhney uses the *hijra* (with her/his ambiguous gender and sexual identity) as a model for critiquing notions of masculinity/manhood and femininity/womanhood and the binary division of sex and gender.

Sawhney writes, "Thus, it is not only the gendered notions of masculinity and femininity, but also the biological sexual determinations that are brought to a crisis by the *hijras*. The cultural effect of the *hijras* is to destabilize all such binary divisions, including sex and gender. Thus, the concepts of either an authentic woman or an authentic female are exploded" (Sawhney, 1995: 209-210). Sawhney's use of the *hijra* role as a theoretical tool resonates with my use of the *bhikkhuni* role as theoretical tool for critiquing notions of sex/gender, androgyny, and female-sexed corporeality.

22. I use the term, heterosexist, to signify a social, political, economic, and religious system in which heterosexuality is presumed, prescribed, and unquestioned. By referring to the monastic *sangha* as a heterosexist economy, I am suggesting that heterosexuality, as both ideology and institution, needs to be recognized and critiqued. For a comprehensive analysis of heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality see Rich, 1986.

23. I use the term, *wo/men*, to refer to those persons and bodies that do not fit the criteria for "authentic womanhood" or "authentic manhood." The term *wo/men* signifies that these persons occupy an ambiguous position that is neither located in the realm of "women" nor in the realm of "men."

Glossary

Anguttara-Nikaya. The fourth of the five divisions of the Pali *Sutta Pitaka*.

Arhat. "Worthy of respect;" "worthy one;" one who is free from desire and craving, and thus from rebirth; the religious ideal of early Buddhists.

*Arhat*ship. The state of spiritual liberation characterized by total victory over desire; the realization of Nirvana; the highest stage of spiritual attainment in early Buddhism.

Bhikkhu. Buddhist monk; almsman; male renunciant.

Bhikkhuni. Buddhist nun; almswoman; female renunciant.

Buddha (583-463 B.C.). "The enlightened one;" "The awakened one;" the founder of Buddhism whose historical name is Siddhartha Gautama.

Cullavagga. Part of the third section of Pali *Vinaya-Pitaka* that deals with special aspects of the life of the *sangha*; this section is divided into two parts, the Mahavagga ("Great Chapter") and the cullavaga

("Lesser Chapter").

Dharma/Dhamma. The Buddha's teachings; Truth (i.e., the Truth those teachings convey); the Way (i.e., the means by which individuals follow those teachings).

Dhammapada. An important and widely known book of the Pali Cannon referred to as a brief summary of essential Buddhist teachings.

Gautama. Siddhartha Gautama is the name for the historical Buddha.

Hijra. Derived from the Arabic, *ijara*, meaning eunuchs or castrated men. A blanket term, referring to eunuchs or men who have emasculated themselves, intersexed people, men and women with genital malfunction, hermaphrodites, persons of indeterminate sex organs, impotent men and male homosexuals. The common feature of *hijras* is that they all wear feminine costumes and apparel.

Mahapajapati/Pajapati. (*Maha* is a prefix meaning "Great") The Buddha's maternal aunt; she became the first nun in the Buddhist *sangha.*

Manatta. A form of disciplinary action.

Moksha. Release; the spiritual goal in Jainism.

Nirvana. The state of liberation from *samsara*; the incomprehensible peace of complete spiritual release; the real truth, ultimate reality, the supreme good.

Pavarana. The formal termination of the retreat of the rainy season.

Sakya, A noble clan from which the historical buddha descended.

Samsara. The cycle of existence in the world, characterized by suffering; the birth-death cycle caused by desire.

Sangha. The Buddhist community consisting of four assemblies: monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen.

Stupa. A reliquary for the historical Buddha's remains.

Sutta Nipata. The fifth part of the *Sutta Pitaka.*

Sutta Pitaka. Literally, "Basket of Learning," a part of the Buddhist canon, the *Tripitaka.*

Tathagata. "One who has found the Truth;" synonym for Buddha; a term generally used by the Buddha referring to himself or to other Buddhas; Tatha (truth), agata (come, arrived).

Thera. Monk *arhat*; male elder; man who has grown old with knowledge.

Theri. Nun *arhat*; woman elder; woman who has grown old with knowledge.

Therigatha. The enlightenment poetry of early Buddhist nuns; a collection of hymns believed to have been composed by nuns.

Udana. The third book of *Khuddaka Nikaya* in the Pali Canon. In English, often translated as the "Short Collection."

Upsampada. Higher ordination.

Uposatha. The full moon and new moon days when *bhikkhus* assemble to recite the Fundamental Rules.

Vihara. A monastery; a building or complex of buildings in which Buddhist renunciants dwell.

Vinaya Pitaka (also referred to as *Vinaya*). *The Book of the Discipline*; the rules that regulate the *sangha.* One of the three collections in the Pali cannon.

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