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On Women's Inabilities

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The *Bahudhātuka-sutta* and its Parallels On Women's Inabilities

Anālayo*

Abstract

The present article offers a comparative study of the *Bahudhātuka-sutta*, based on a translation of one of its parallels found in the *Madhyama-āgama* preserved in Chinese translation. The study focuses in particular on the dictum that a woman cannot be a Buddha, which is absent from the *Madhyama-āgama* version.

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Introduction

According to early Buddhist thought, the ability to attain any of the four stages of awakening is independent of gender. An explicit endorsement of women's abilities to reach awakening can be found in a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and its counterparts in two *Samyukta-āgama* collections translated into Chinese, which allegorically refer to a set of wholesome qualities as a vehicle for approaching liberation. The three versions agree that by means of this vehicle the goal of liberation can be reached independent of whether the one who mounts the vehicle is a woman or a man.¹

Such a clear assertion of gender equality in the spiritual realm is remarkable in view of what appears to have been the prevalent attitude towards women and their religious potential in ancient India.² In another discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and its parallels in the two *Samyukta-āgamas* already mentioned, Māra appears as an advocate of ancient Indian machismo in this respect.³ The three versions describe how Māra accosts a meditating nun and tries to unsettle her by suggesting that a woman's innate lack of wisdom renders her incapable of reaching realization.⁴ The nun is quick to give a fitting reply to this insinuation. After clarifying that gender is simply irrelevant, once the mind is concentrated, she tells Māra that with such talk he should better go to those who are still caught up in identifications with being a woman or being a man.⁵

In direct contrast to the prejudice voiced by Māra, according to a range of *Vinayas* the Buddha clearly affirmed women's ability to reach any of the four stages of awakening.⁶ Corroboration for this assertion can be found, for example, in a verse in the *Therīgāthā*, which records a group of thirty nuns declaring their successful attainment of final liberation.⁷ The *Mahāvaccagotta-sutta* and its parallels give even higher numbers, recording that over five-hundred nun disciples of the Buddha had

reached full awakening.⁸ In sum, there can be little doubt that early Buddhism did consider women to be fully capable of attaining the highest level of liberation.

When it comes to the issue of being a Buddha, however, tradition takes the position that only a male is capable of fulfilling such a role. In the early discourses, the locus classicus for this position is the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, according to which a woman is incapable of occupying various positions, one of them being that of a Buddha.⁹ The *Bahudhātuka-sutta* has several parallels which show some variations in their presentation of these impossibilities. Of particular significance is a *Madhyama-āgama* parallel which does not mention any inability of women at all.

This *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* was translated into Chinese by Gautama Saṅghadeva towards the end of the fourth century,¹⁰ apparently based on a Prākṛit original transmitted within the Sarvāstivāda tradition(s).¹¹ Besides this *Madhyama-āgama* discourse and the Pāli *Bahudhātuka-sutta*, other parallel versions are a discourse translated individually into Chinese;¹² a discourse preserved in Tibetan translation;¹³ a full *sūtra* quotation in the *Dharmaskandha* of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, preserved in Chinese;¹⁴ and a full *sūtra* quotation in Śamathadeva's commentary on the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, preserved in Tibetan.¹⁵

In what follows, I will at first provide a full translation of the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Bahudhātuka-sutta*, followed by a comparative study of the various versions of this discourse. I deem such a full translation and detailed comparison to be required in order to place the exposition on the various inabilities of a woman within context, enabling an assessment of the main thrust of the discourse as a whole and of tendencies at work in other parts of the discourse. Based on these two aspects, the absence of a treatment of what women are unable to achieve

can be properly evaluated. Nevertheless, readers interested exclusively in the topic of women's inabilities may skip this part of the present article and directly turn to the discussion of "Women's Inabilities in the Parallel Versions of the *Bahudhātuka-sutta*" on page 161.

Translation¹⁶

The Discourse on Many Elements

1. Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was living in Sāvattthī, in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. At that time venerable Ānanda, who was seated alone in a tranquil place meditating and reflecting, had this thought in [his] mind: "All fears arise from foolishness, not from wisdom. All misfortunes, disasters, and worries arise from foolishness, not from wisdom."

Then, in the late afternoon, venerable Ānanda rose from sitting in meditation, went towards the Buddha, paid respect with [his] head at the Buddha's feet and, standing back to one side, said: "Blessed One, [while] I was alone in a tranquil place meditating and reflecting today, [I] had this thought in [my] mind: "All fears arise from foolishness, not from wisdom. All misfortunes, disasters, and worries arise from foolishness, not from wisdom."¹⁷

2. The Blessed One said: "So it is, Ānanda, so it is, Ānanda. All fears arise from foolishness, not from wisdom. All misfortunes, disasters, and worries arise from foolishness, not from wisdom.

Just as from a heap of reeds and grass a fire might start, [which] burns down a house or a roofed hall, in the same way all fears arise from foolishness, not from wisdom. All misfortunes, disasters, and worries arise from foolishness, not from wisdom.

Ānanda, if there were fears in past times, they all arose from foolishness, not from wisdom. All misfortunes, disasters, and worries [in

past times] arose from foolishness, not from wisdom. Ānanda, if there will be fears in future times, they will all arise from foolishness, not from wisdom. All misfortunes, disasters and worries [in future times] will arise from foolishness, not from wisdom. [723b] Ānanda, if there are fears in present times, they all arise from foolishness, not from wisdom. All misfortunes, disasters and worries [in present times] arise from foolishness, not from wisdom.¹⁸

Hence, Ānanda, due to foolishness there is fear, [due to] wisdom there is no fear; [due to] foolishness there are misfortunes, disasters, and worries, [due to] wisdom there are no misfortunes, disasters or worries. Ānanda, whatever fears, misfortunes, disasters and worries there are, they all start off¹⁹ from foolishness, not from wisdom.”²⁰

3. Then venerable Ānanda, who was [moved] to tears,²¹ held his folded hands towards the Buddha [in reverence] and said: “Blessed One, how is a monk foolish and not wise?”²²

The Blessed One replied: “Ānanda, if a monk does not know the elements, does not know the sense-spheres, does not know causes and conditions, and does not know what is possible and what is impossible. Ānanda, a monk like this is foolish and not wise.”²³

Venerable Ānanda said: “Blessed One, a monk like this is [indeed] foolish and not wise. Blessed One, how is a monk wise and not foolish?”

The Blessed One replied: “Ānanda, if a monk knows the elements, knows the sense-spheres, knows causes and conditions, and knows what is possible and what is impossible. Ānanda, a monk like this is wise and not foolish.”

4. Venerable Ānanda said: “Blessed One, a monk like this is [indeed] wise and not foolish. Blessed One, how does a monk know the elements?”

The Blessed One replied:²⁴ “Ānanda, suppose a monk sees eighteen elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the eye element, the form element, and the eye-consciousness element;
- the ear element, the sound element, and the ear-consciousness element;
- the nose element, the smell element, and the nose-consciousness element;
- the tongue element, the taste element, and the tongue-consciousness element;
- the body element, the tactile element, and the body-consciousness element;
- the mind element, the mind-object element, and the mind-consciousness element;

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these eighteen elements and knows them according to reality.²⁵

5-7. Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees six elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the earth element;
- the water element;
- the fire element;
- the wind element;
- the space element;
- the consciousness element.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these six elements and knows them according to reality.

Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees six elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the element of sensual desire;
- the element of ill will;
- the element of cruelty;
- the element of absence of sensual desire;
- the element of absence of ill will;
- the element of absence of cruelty.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these six elements and knows them according to reality.

Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees six elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the element of pleasure;
- the element of pain;
- the element of [mental] joy;
- the element of [mental] sadness;
- the element of equanimity;
- the element of ignorance.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these six elements and knows them according to reality.

Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees four elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the element of feeling;
- the element of perception;
- the element of formations;
- the element of consciousness.²⁶

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these four elements and knows them according to reality.

8. Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees three elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the sense-sphere element;
- the [fine-]material element;
- the immaterial element.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these three elements and knows them according to reality. [723c]

Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees three elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the material element;
- the immaterial element;
- the element of cessation.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these three elements and knows them according to reality.²⁷

Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees three elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the element of the past;
- the element of the future;
- the element of the present.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these three elements and knows them according to reality.

Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees three elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the superior element;
- the inferior element;
- the middling element.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these three elements and knows them according to reality.²⁸

Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees three elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the wholesome element;
- the unwholesome element;
- the undetermined element.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these three elements and knows them according to reality.

Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees three elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the element of the trainee;
- the element of the one beyond training;
- the element of the one who is neither a trainee nor beyond training.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these three elements and knows them according to reality.

9. Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees two elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the element with influxes;
- the element without influxes.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these two elements and knows them according to reality.²⁹

Again, Ānanda, [a monk] sees two elements and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the conditioned element;
- the unconditioned element.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these two elements and knows them according to reality.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these sixty-two elements and knows them according to reality. Ānanda, like this a monk knows the elements.³⁰

10. Venerable Ānanda said: “Blessed One, like this a monk [indeed] knows the elements. Blessed One, how does a monk know the sense-spheres?”

The Blessed One replied: “Ānanda, suppose a monk sees the twelve sense-spheres and knows them according to reality, [namely]:

- the eye sense-sphere, and the form sense-sphere;
- the ear sense-sphere, and the sound sense-sphere;
- the nose sense-sphere, and the smell sense-sphere;
- the tongue sense-sphere, and the taste sense-sphere;
- the body sense-sphere, and the tactile sense-sphere;
- the mind sense-sphere, and the mind-object sense-sphere.

Ānanda, [a monk] sees these twelve sense-spheres and knows them according to reality. Ānanda, like this a monk knows the sense-spheres.”

11. Venerable Ānanda said: “Blessed One, like this a monk [indeed] knows the sense-spheres. How does a monk know causes and conditions?”

The Blessed One replied: “Ānanda, suppose a monk sees causes and conditions as well as what has arisen through causes and conditions and knows it according to reality, [namely]:

Dependent on this, that exists; [if] this does not exist, that does not exist; [if] this arises, that arises; [if] this ceases, that ceases. That is to say, conditioned by ignorance are formations ... up to ... conditioned by birth are old age and death; if ignorance ceases formation ceases ... up to ... [if] birth ceases old age and death ceases.

Ānanda, like this a monk knows causes and conditions.

12-18. Venerable Ānanda said: “Blessed One, like this a monk [indeed] knows causes and conditions. How does a monk know what is possible and what is impossible?”

The Blessed One replied: “Ānanda, suppose a monk sees what is possible as possible and knows it according to reality, and sees what is impossible as impossible and knows it according to reality.³¹

Ānanda, it is not possible that there could be two wheel-turning kings ruling in the world. [However], it is certainly possible that there could be one wheel-turning king ruling in the world.

Ānanda, [724a] it is not possible that there could be two Tathāgatas in the world. [However], it is certainly possible that there could be one Tathāgata in the world.

Ānanda, it is not possible for a person [endowed] with a vision of the truth to intentionally kill his father or mother, kill an *arahant*, cause a schism in the community or, out of an evil mental disposition towards the Buddha, cause the Tathāgata’s blood to flow. [However], it is certainly possible for an ordinary worldling to intentionally kill his father or mother, kill an *arahant*, cause a schism in the community or, out of an evil mental disposition towards the Buddha, cause the Tathāgata’s blood to flow.³²

Ānanda, it is not possible for a person [endowed] with a vision of the truth to intentionally violate the moral precepts, reject the moral precepts and stop [practicing] the path. [However], it is certainly possible for an ordinary worldling to intentionally violate the moral precepts, reject the moral precepts and stop [practicing] the path.³³

It is [also] not possible for a person [endowed] with a vision of the truth to reject and abandon his own [dispensation] and search for someone to be honored among outsiders, search for a field of merit [among outsiders]. [However], it is certainly possible for an ordinary worldling to reject and abandon his own [dispensation] and search for someone to be honored among outsiders, search for a field of merit [among outsiders].

Ānanda, it is not possible for a person [endowed] with a vision of the truth to follow other recluses and Brahmins and declare: ‘Honorable ones, you see what can be seen and know what can be known.’ [However], it is certainly possible for an ordinary worldling to follow other recluses and Brahmins and declare: ‘Honorable ones, you see what can be seen and know what can be known.’

Ānanda, it is not possible for a person [endowed] with a vision of the truth to have faith in divination and inquire about auspicious and inauspicious [omens]. [However], it is certainly possible for an ordinary worldling to have faith in divination and inquire about auspicious and inauspicious [omens].

Ānanda, it is not possible for a person [endowed] with a vision of the truth to inquire about what is related to auspicious and inauspicious signs from other recluses or Brahmin diviners in order to see if there is some suffering or trouble [to be expected in the future], seeing it as being the truth. [However], it is certainly possible for an ordinary worldling to inquire about what is related to auspicious and inauspicious signs from other recluses or Brahmin diviners in order to see if there is some suffering or trouble [to be expected in the future], seeing it as being the truth.

Ānanda, it is not possible for a person [endowed] with a vision of the truth to reject and abandon his own [dispensation] and, when extreme pains arise, tremendous pains that are not [at all] agreeable, not [at all] pleasurable, not [at all] longed for, not [at all] thought of, that lead up to the ending of life, to follow outsiders and search [for help] from some recluse or Brahmin who bears in mind a spell of one line, [or] a spell of two lines, three lines, four lines, many lines, [even] a spell of a hundred thousand lines, [with the thought]: ‘this will cause me to be freed from *dukkha*,’ searching in this way for *dukkha*, the arising of *dukkha*, the path [leading to liberation from] *dukkha*, and the cessation of

dukkha. [However], it is certainly possible for an ordinary worldling to reject and abandon his own [dispensation] and to follow outsiders and search [for help] from some recluse or Brahmin who bears in mind a spell of one line, [or] a spell of two lines, three lines, four lines, many lines, [even] a spell of a hundred-thousand lines, [with the thought]: ‘this will cause me to be freed from *dukkha*,’ searching in this way for *dukkha*, the arising of *dukkha*, the path [leading to liberation from] *dukkha*, and the cessation of *dukkha*.

Ānanda, it is not possible for a person [endowed] with a vision of the truth to experience an eighth existence. [However], it is certainly possible for an ordinary worldling to experience an eighth existence.

Ānanda, it is not possible that, on account of evil conduct by body, speech, and mind [one] should, [724b] when the body breaks up at death, proceed towards a good destination and be born in a heavenly world. [However], it is certainly possible that, on account of evil conduct by body, speech, and mind [one] should, when the body breaks up at death, proceed towards an evil destination and be born in a hellish world.

Ānanda, it is not possible that, on account of pure conduct by body, speech, and mind [one] should, when the body breaks up at death, proceed towards an evil destination and be born in a hellish world. [However], it is certainly possible that on account of pure conduct by body, speech, and mind [one] should, when the body breaks up at death, proceed towards a good destination and be born in a heavenly world.

Ānanda, it is not possible that evil conduct by body, speech, and mind should have as its result the experience of pleasure. [However], it is certainly possible that evil conduct by body, speech, and mind should have as its result the experience of pain.

Ānanda, it is not possible that pure conduct by body, speech, and mind should have as its result the experience of pain. [However], it is certainly possible that pure conduct by body, speech, and mind should have as its result the experience of pleasure.

Ānanda, it is not possible to fully settle the mind in the four[-fold] establishing of mindfulness if the five hindrances that defile the mind and weaken wisdom are not overcome. [However], it is certainly possible to fully settle the mind in the four[-fold] establishing of mindfulness if the five hindrances that defile the mind and weaken wisdom are overcome.³⁴

Ānanda, it is not possible to aim at developing the seven factors of awakening if the five hindrances that defile the mind and weaken wisdom are not overcome, and if the mind is not fully settled in the four[-fold] establishing of mindfulness. [However], it is certainly possible to develop the seven factors of awakening if the five hindrances that defile the mind and weaken wisdom are overcome, and if the mind is fully settled in the four[-fold] establishing of mindfulness.

Ānanda, it is not possible to aim at attaining unsurpassable and complete awakening if the five hindrances that defile the mind and weaken wisdom are not overcome, if the mind is not fully settled in the four[-fold] establishing of mindfulness, and if the seven factors of awakening are not developed. [However], it is certainly possible to attain unsurpassable and complete awakening if the five hindrances that defile the mind and weaken wisdom are overcome, if the mind is fully settled in the four[-fold] establishing of mindfulness, and if the seven factors of awakening are developed.

Ānanda, it is not possible to eradicate and make an end of *dukkha* if the five hindrances that defile the mind and weaken wisdom are not overcome, if the mind is not fully settled in the four[-fold] establishing of

mindfulness, if the seven factors of awakening are not developed, and if unsurpassable and complete awakening is not attained. [However], it is certainly possible to eradicate and make an end of *dukkha* if the five hindrances that defile the mind and weaken wisdom are overcome, if the mind is fully settled in the four[-fold] establishing of mindfulness, if the seven factors of awakening are developed, and if unsurpassable and complete awakening is attained.

Ānanda, like this a monk knows what is possible and what is impossible.”

Venerable Ānanda said: “Blessed One, like this a monk [indeed] knows what is possible and what is impossible.” Then venerable Ānanda held his folded hands towards the Buddha [in reverence] and said: “Blessed One, what is the name of this discourse, how should we respectfully receive it and bear it in mind?”

The Blessed One said: “Ānanda, you should memorize this [discourse] as the Many Elements, [724c] the Dharma Element, the Element of the Deathless, the Many Drums, the Dharma Drum, the Drum of the Deathless, the Mirror of the Dharma, the Four Chapters. For this reason, call this discourse by the name ‘Many Elements.’”³⁵

The Buddha spoke like this. Venerable Ānanda and the monks heard what the Buddha said, were delighted and kept bearing it [in mind].

Comparison of the Parallel Versions of the *Bahudhātuka-sutta*

In what follows, I survey the more significant variations between the different versions of the present discourse in order to provide a background to my subsequent discussion of the inabilities of women. One such variation occurs in regard to the basic four-fold presentation of

what is required in order to be reckoned wise. The *sūtra* quotations in the *Dharmaskandha* and in Śamathadeva's commentary differ from the other versions in as much as they mention the aggregates as a fifth topic (see figure 1). While Śamathadeva's commentary has the aggregates as the first item in its listing, followed by the four topics mentioned in all versions,³⁶ the *Dharmaskandha* instead lists the aggregates as its respective third (both instances are underlined in figure 1, to facilitate comparison).³⁷ The *sūtra* quotation in Śamathadeva's commentary does not give an exposition to this topic, but only mentions it in its initial listing. The *Dharmaskandha*, however, does provide such an exposition.³⁸

Figure 1: Main Topics of the Exposition

Topics in the discourse versions:

- 1) elements
- 2) sense-spheres
- 3) dependent arising
- 4) impossibilities

Topics in Śamathadeva's commentary:

- 1) aggregates
- 2) elements
- 3) sense-spheres
- 4) dependent arising
- 5) impossibilities

Topics in the *Dharmaskandha*:

- 1) elements

- 2) sense-spheres
- 3) aggregates
- 4) dependent arising
- 5) impossibilities

These variations, together with the absence of any reference to the aggregates in the discourse versions, make it quite probable that this topic is a later addition. This impression is further confirmed by the circumstance that all versions speak of “four chapters” or “four turnings” as one of the possible titles of the discourse.³⁹ Thus it seems safe to conclude that the original exposition involved only four topics—the elements, the sense-spheres, dependent arising, and impossibilities—and did not include a reference to the aggregates or even an exposition of them as a fifth topic.

Substantial variations can also be found in relation to the exposition of the first of these four topics, the elements (see figure 2). The briefest treatment of this topic occurs in the Pāli discourse, which lists forty-one elements. These forty-one elements form the common core of the exposition in all versions. The individual translation additionally covers a set of four elements, three sets of three elements and one set of two elements, so that its listing presents fifty-six elements. These fifty-six elements recur in the other Chinese and Tibetan versions, which have another two additional sets of three elements, so that the listing in these total sixty-two elements. (In order to facilitate comparison, in figure 2 only the additional sets are given in full.)

Figure 2: Listing of Elements

Elements in the Pāli discourse (MN 115):

- 18 elements: the senses, their objects and the corresponding types of consciousness
- 6 elements: earth, water, fire, wind, space, consciousness
- 6 elements: pleasure, pain, joy, sadness, equanimity, ignorance
- 6 elements: sensual desire, renunciation, ill will, absence of ill will, cruelty, absence of cruelty
- 3 elements: sensual sphere, [fine-]material sphere, immaterial sphere
- 2 elements: conditioned, unconditioned

Elements in the individual translation (T 776):

- 18 elements
- 6 elements
- 6 elements
- 6 elements
- 4 elements: feeling, perception, formations, consciousness
- 3 elements
- 3 elements: inferior, middle, superior
- 3 elements: wholesome, unwholesome, undetermined
- 3 elements: trainee, beyond training, neither

- 2 elements: with influxes, without influxes
- 2 elements

Elements in the other versions:

- 18 elements
- 6 elements
- 6 elements
- 6 elements
- 4 elements
- 3 elements
- 3 elements: material, immaterial, cessation
- 3 elements: past, future, present
- 3 elements
- 3 elements
- 3 elements
- 2 elements
- 2 elements

In principle, such differences could have been caused by a loss of text or by an addition. A loss of text due to intentional omission seems improbable, as the elements not listed in the Pāli version are found in other Pāli discourses.⁴⁰ Hence there would have been no good reason for those who transmitted the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* to deliberately eliminate these elements from the exposition. The Pāli discourse also does not show any sign of accidental loss. In fact, this seems less probable because this

would require two cases or stages of accident loss, causing a loss of six elements in the case of the individual translation and a loss of twenty-one elements during the transmission of the Pāli discourse.

This makes it more probable that the exposition on elements has gone through a gradual expansion instead, with the individual translation testifying to an intermediate stage between the exposition on forty-one elements, found in all versions, and the list of sixty-two elements. Such a gradual expansion would be a fairly natural occurrence during oral transmission, where a listing of elements could easily attract other textual items related to the same topic. The assumption of a textual expansion would also be in line with the above discussed case of five against four chief topics, where the aggregates can safely be considered an instance of later addition and thus testify to a tendency towards expansion.

While the presentation of the next two topics—the sense-spheres and dependent arising—is similar in the parallel versions, with the last topic of impossibilities considerable variations manifest again. The parallel versions concur that the simultaneous manifestation of two wheel-turning kings or two Tathāgatas is impossible.⁴¹ They similarly agree that wholesome conduct cannot have bad results or lead to rebirth in hell, just as it is impossible that unwholesome conduct could have pleasant results or lead to rebirth in heaven. The parallel versions also affirm un-animously that a stream-enterer is incapable of committing any of the five heinous crimes, which are to kill one’s mother, to kill one’s father, to kill an *arahant*, to create a schism, and to intentionally hurt a Buddha so as to cause his blood to flow.⁴² While the Pāli version lists these five heinous crimes as five impossibilities, the other versions present them together as a single impossibility (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Main Themes in the Exposition on Impossibilities

Mentioned in all versions:

- simultaneous arising of two wheel-turning kings or Tathāgatas
- evil conduct leads to good results/rebirth; good conduct leads to evil results/rebirth
- a stream-enterer commits five heinous crimes

Mentioned in all versions, but treated differently:

- further inabilities of a stream-enterer (see figure 4)

Mentioned only in some versions:

- awakening reached without overcoming the hindrances etc. (not in Pāli discourse)
- inabilities of women (not in *Madhyama-āgama* discourse, see figure 5)

Another point made in all versions is that stream-enterers will not have faith in outsiders or take an outsider as their teacher. The versions differ, however, as they treat this theme in different ways and also mention various other inabilities of a stream-enterer, which they present alternatively as a single impossibility, as three, as four or as seven impossibilities (see figure 4). These more detailed presentations cover various aspects of a stream-enterer's firm confidence in his or her teacher, indicating that a stream-enterer is unable to give up the precepts or to consider outsiders to be a worthy field of merit or to be awakened. Nor would a stream-enterer believe in auspicious signs. Most versions indicate that a stream-enterer will not be reborn into an eighth existence. Some versions moreover mention a stream-enterer's inability to inten-

tionally kill a living being. The Pāli version stands alone in also indicating that a stream-enterer will not consider any formation (*sankhāra*) as permanent, satisfying, or a self.

Figure 4: Further Inabilities of a Stream-enterer

1 impossibility covering 2 aspects (individual translation):

- after violating monastic precepts slanders own teacher and takes outsider as teacher, searches liberation from outside teacher

1 impossibility covering 6 aspects (Śamathadeva's commentary):

- intentionally kills living beings, gives up precepts, considers outsiders worthy, thinks outsiders are awakened, has faith in auspicious signs, experiences eighth existence

1 impossibility covering 7 aspects (Tibetan discourse):

- intentionally kills living beings, gives up precepts, considers outsiders worthy, takes outsiders as teacher, has faith in auspicious signs, thinks outsiders know truth, experiences eighth existence

3 impossibilities covering 6 aspects (*Dharmaskandha*):

- intentionally kills living beings
- gives up precepts
- seeks teacher or field of merit among outsiders, considers outsiders worthy, practices divination through auspicious signs, experiences eighth existence

4 impossibilities covering 4 aspects (Pāli discourse):

- regards formations as permanent
- regards formations as satisfying
- regards formations as self
- follows another teacher⁴³

7 impossibilities covering 7 aspects (*Madhyama-āgama* discourse):

- gives up precepts
- considers outsiders as perfected and a field of merit
- thinks outsiders know truth
- has faith in auspicious signs
- inquires about auspicious signs from outsiders
- searches way out of dukkha from outsiders
- experiences eighth existence

The variations found between the different versions in regard to types of impossibilities and in regard to the mode of presenting these make it quite probable that a gradual expansion has taken place. Though an accidental loss of text cannot be totally excluded, such an assumption seems highly improbable because a whole series of accidents would be required in order to arrive at the degree of diversity found between the parallel versions. Moreover, none of the items missing in some versions seem to be of such an unusual nature that one would suspect their omission to be intentional.

The same pattern becomes even more evident with other impossibilities mentioned only in some versions, which cover the requirements for reaching awakening and the inabilities of women (see above

figure 3). In the case of the first of these two themes—the requirements for reaching awakening—the Pāli discourse is the only version which does not breach this theme. According to the other versions, the hindrances need to be overcome, mindfulness needs to be established and the awakening factors need to be developed. Each of these builds on the preceding and their conjoint undertaking is required for reaching awakening and therewith, as additionally mentioned in some version, making an end of *dukkha*.

In the case of the second theme—the inabilities of women—the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse is the only version that does not mention these. The other versions present this theme with some variations.

In regard to the differences and variations observed so far in the treatment of impossibilities, it is noteworthy that according to the **Mahāprajñāpāramitā-(upadeśa-)śāstra* (大智度論) the listing of impossibilities originally delivered by the Buddha in the present discourse was subsequently expanded.⁴⁴ As an example for this tendency, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-(upadeśa-)śāstra* mentions the impossibility that a noble one—i.e. one who is at least a stream-enterer—could take an outsider as his or her teacher.⁴⁵ Given that this impossibility is found in all versions of the *Bahudhātuka-sutta*, the observation made in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-(upadeśa-)śāstra* appears to reflect a tendency at work already during the formation of the different versions of the present discourse.⁴⁶

Keeping in mind this tendency towards expansion, noted in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-(upadeśa-)śāstra* and found at work repeatedly throughout the different versions of the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* studied so far, we are now ready to examine more closely the theme of women's inabilities.

Women's Inabilities in the Parallel Versions of the *Bahudhātuka-sutta*

While the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* does not take up the theme of what is impossible for women at all, the other versions of this discourse present the various inabilities of women as a single impossibility, as two or as five impossibilities (see figure 5). As regards content, a difference is that according to some versions a woman cannot be one of the four heavenly kings, while others instead indicate that she cannot be Māra. Another and rather significant difference is that, except for the Pāli version, the other versions also indicate that a woman cannot be a Paccekabuddha.

Figure 5: Impossibilities for Women

1 impossibility covering 6 aspects (individual translation):

- female wheel-turning king, female heavenly king, female Sakka, female Brahmā, female Paccekabuddha, female Buddha

1 impossibility covering 6 aspects (Tibetan discourse):

- female wheel-turning king, female Sakka, female Brahmā, female Māra, female Paccekabuddha, female Buddha

1 impossibility covering 6 aspects (*Dharmaskandha*):

- female wheel-turning king, female Sakka, female Māra, female Brahmā, female Paccekabuddha, female Buddha

2 impossibilities covering 6 aspects (Śamathadeva's commentary):

- female wheel-turning king

- female heavenly king, female Sakka, female Brahmā, female Paccekabuddha, female Buddha

5 impossibilities (Pāli discourse):

- female Buddha
- female wheel-turning king
- female Sakka
- female Māra
- female Brahmā

When evaluating the implications of these impossibilities, it needs to be kept in mind that in a patriarchal society like ancient India the idea of a female wheel-turning king would have been unthinkable. Similarly, it would have been out of the question for ancient Indians to conceive that a female Sakka, a female heavenly king, or a female Brahmā could be reigning in their respective heavenly worlds.⁴⁷ The same reasoning would also apply to Māra, who according to the Pāli commentarial tradition occupied a position similar to a king or a prince in the highest heaven of the sense-sphere realm.⁴⁸

The point behind the above mentioned impossibilities is that a woman cannot fulfill these functions in the present. Though she could become any of these in the future, as long as she is a female she cannot perform the function of any of these rulers since to assume these leadership positions would, from the perspective of ancient Indian patriarchal society, require being a male.⁴⁹

This would also explain why Buddhist tradition holds that someone about to become a Buddha will not take birth as a woman. To do so, at least in a patriarchal society like ancient Indian, would make it more difficult to successfully execute the role of being a Buddha, as people

would have less respect for a female teacher. A parallel reasoning seems to underlie the circumstance that Buddhas are born in families from the warrior or Brahmin class (*varṇa*).⁵⁰ This specification appears to be based on the same logic, since for a Buddha to be born in a low class would make it unnecessarily difficult to be sufficiently respected as a teacher.⁵¹ Thus these specifications on the gender or the social class of a Buddha are an adaptation to ancient Indian society. They do not imply that gender or social class have a bearing on spiritual ability.⁵²

Here it needs also to be taken into account that the presentation in the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* and its parallels still stems from a period in the development of Buddhist thought when the idea of aspiring to Buddhahood had not yet become a general option. As pointed out by Kajiyama (64), “the dictum that a woman cannot become a Buddha ... did not have a target to which it could have been directed,” since at that time “no one, neither man nor woman, aspired to Buddhahood.”⁵³ In sum, then, the inability of a woman to assume the position of a ruler on earth, a ruler in various heavenly realms, or a ruler in the field of Dharma reflects leadership conceptions in ancient India.

From this perspective, one might wonder whether the disabilities of women stipulated in the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* would be relevant in a society where female leadership is a common feature. Just as Buddhas would not need to come from the Brahmin or warrior castes in a society whose class hierarchy does not put those castes at its apex, a Buddha’s gender might not need to be male in a society where gender equality is a generally accepted fact.⁵⁴

Be that as it may, in contrast to these disabilities related to leadership positions, to speak of the impossibility of a female Paccekabuddha would imply equating womanhood with lesser spiritual abilities. A Paccekabuddha does not act as a teacher, so that there would be no need to take into account the preferences of ancient Indian patriarchal society.

The question of becoming a Paccekabuddha is thus solely a question of spiritual ability, as a Paccekabuddha has to accomplish the difficult task of reaching awakening without the guidance of a teacher. Hence to consider it impossible for a female to be a Paccekabuddha amounts to proposing that a woman by dint of her gender is incapable of the degree of spiritual ability required for realizing awakening without the guidance of a teacher. That this is indeed the implication of this particular impossibility becomes evident in the individual translation, which contrasts this inability of a woman to the case of a man, who by dint of merit and wisdom can become a Paccekabuddha.⁵⁵ In short, a woman lacks the merit and wisdom required for this feat.

The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-(upadeśa)-śāstra* goes a step further: in a passage presented as a *sūtra* quotation from the Discourse on Many Elements, this work proclaims that a woman can reach liberation only with the help of a man.⁵⁶ That is, from the perspective of this passage even for becoming an *arahant* a woman will need help by a male. At this point, the degradation of the spiritual abilities of women has become fully manifest.

In view of this evident tendency to devalue the abilities of women, it is quite significant that the *Madhyama-āgama* version does not mention any of the inabilities of women. An accidental loss of such a passage seems less probable in view of the recurrent tendency towards gradual expansion that appears to be at work in regard to other topics in all versions. A deliberate deletion of such a treatment is similarly improbable, since the five inabilities of a woman are listed in another *Madhyama-āgama* discourse.⁵⁷

This discourse is one of several canonical records of the Buddha permitting women to go forth as nuns, following a request by Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and an intervention in her favor by Ānanda. The five inabilities of women are also mentioned in a version of the same

event in the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya,⁵⁸ whereas they are absent from accounts of this event in the Vinayas of the Dharmaguptaka, “Haimavata”(?), Mahāsāṃghika, (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda traditions.⁵⁹ As the passage on the inabilities of women occurs at different junctions in the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya and in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse, it seems probable that this topic is not an original part of the account of the foundation of the order of nuns;⁶⁰ similar to the above discussed case where two out of six versions of the Discourse on Many Elements have a reference to the aggregates that occurs at different junctions in these two versions (see figure 1), where other indications confirm that this reference is a later addition.

Returning to the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* and its parallels, when considered against the background of the purpose of the whole discourse, the theme of what a woman cannot achieve appears to be quite irrelevant. The different versions agree that the Buddha gave his disciple Ānanda an exposition on essential aspects of the Dharma that are required for the development of wisdom. That the development of wisdom requires insight into the elements, the sense-spheres and dependent arising is quite straightforward. The same could also be said for insight into the karmic consequences of wholesome and unwholesome deeds, or for knowledge about certain qualities of a stream-enterer. Such items would still be in line with the general canonical conception of wisdom, which stands for a type of insight and understanding that leads to liberation,⁶¹ not for a mere accumulation of various and perhaps irrelevant facts.

In contrast, to know if a wheel-turning king, a heavenly king, a Sakka, a Māra, a Brahmā, a Paccekabuddha or a Buddha can be female would be of little relevance to Ānanda, who was living at a time when the ruling positions in the various heavens were held to have been already occupied by males, and when the one male who according to tradition could have become a wheel-turning king had already become a Buddha

instead. Given that all of these positions were either already occupied by males or else rendered impossible because of the existence of a Buddha, and given moreover that as a stream-enterer Ānanda would not have had any reason to aspire to become any of these,⁶² it would be difficult to conceive of any practical relevance that knowledge of gender restrictions for occupying these positions could have had for Ānanda.⁶³

In sum, since an accidental loss or an intentional omission of an exposition on the inabilities of women in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse seems improbable, the most straightforward conclusion would be that the theme of women's inability is a later addition to the exposition on impossibilities in the different versions of the Discourse on Many Elements. Thus in this respect the *Madhyama-āgama* version quite probably testifies to an early stage, when the theme of what women cannot achieve had not yet become part of the discourse.

As part of the general tendency to expand on various impossibilities, however, this theme must have soon enough made its way into various versions of the discourse.⁶⁴ Whereas the inability of a woman to be a Buddha can still be seen as an expression of leadership conceptions held in ancient Indian patriarchal society, once her ability to be a *Pacceka-buddha* becomes part of the listing of impossibilities, the implications are clearly a diminishing of the spiritual abilities of women. This tendency can safely be assumed to stand in contrast to the original teachings of early Buddhism, where—as far as the texts allow us to judge—gender was not considered to have an impact on spiritual abilities.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Anguttara-nikāya</i>
B ^e	Burmese edition
C ^e	Ceylonese edition
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
E ^e	PTS edition
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
Q	Peking edition
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	'other' <i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
S ^e	Siamese edition
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
T	Taishō (CBETA)
Thī	<i>Therīgāthā</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

Notes

* I am indebted to Bhikkhunī Tathālokā, Rod Bucknell, Giuliana Martini and Ken Su for commenting on an earlier draft of this article.

¹ SN 1.46 at SN I 33,11: “woman or man, by means of this vehicle draw close to Nibbāna,” *itthiyā purisassa vā, sa ve etena yānena, nibbānasseva santike* (C^e reads *nibbānasseva*); SĀ 587 at T II 156a22: “a sublime vehicle like this, mounted by a man or a woman, will emerge out of the thicket of birth and death, leading to the attainment of the peaceful state,” 如是之妙乘，男女之所乘，出生死叢林，逮得安樂處； SĀ 171² at T II 437a24: “men as well as women, are able to mount this vehicle, will certainly discard name-and-form, become dispassionate and eradicate birth and death,” 男子若女人，能乘是乘者，必捨棄名色，離欲斷生死。

² Jaini (*Gender* 1) notes that the Digambara Jains “vehemently have insisted that one cannot attain mokṣa, emancipation of a soul from the cycles of birth and death (*saṃsāra*), as a female.” Though the formation of the Digambara sect postdates the period of early Buddhism, this position is nevertheless noteworthy in the light of the indication given in the *Jinacaritra* that nuns consistently outnumbered monks throughout Jain history (*Jinacaritra* 134f, 161f, 176f and 214f counts 14.000 monks against 36.000 nuns under Mahāvīra; 16.000 monks against 38.000 nuns under Parśva; 18.000 monks against 40.000 nuns under Ariṣṭanemi; and 84.000 monks against 300.000 nuns under Rṣabha; cf. Jacobi (66,5, 69,18, 71,22 and 75,18). Independent of the historical value of such figures, they do point to the eminent position nuns were believed to have held in the Jain monastic order since the most ancient times. That a whole section of the Jain tradition should eventually come to affirm that women are incapable of reaching liberation shows, as pointed out by Jaini (*Gender* 23), that

“the prejudice against the female sex must have been deep-rooted in the popular mind.” For a study of Digambara nuns cf. Shāntā (630-683).

³ Rajapakse (13 note 14) comments that “it is interesting to note that the doubts in question are raised by Māra, the mythic-symbolic focus of evil in Buddhism, who thus assumes the role of a ‘male chauvinist’ in this setting. Māra generally functions ... as an opponent of goodness and spirituality.”

⁴ SN 5.2 at SN I 129,14: “what is to be attained by seers ... that a woman with her two finger wisdom cannot attain,” *yan taṃ isihi pattabbaṃ ... na taṃ dvaṅgulapaññāya, sakkā pappotum itthiyā* (following the new E^e edition 1998: 283,11). SĀ 1199 at T II 326b1: “the state wherein seers dwell, this state is very difficult to attain, one with a two finger’s wisdom is unable to attain that state,” 仙人所住處, 是處甚難得, 非彼二指智, 能得到彼處. SĀ² 215 at T II 454a5: “what is attained by seers, that state is difficult to reach, with your despicable and defiled wisdom you will not attain a state like that,” 仙聖之所得, 斯處難階及, 非汝鄙穢智, 獲得如是處. The reference to a woman’s “two finger wisdom” in SN 5.2 and SĀ 1199 may have been a popular saying, as it recurs in a different context in the *Mahāvastu* in Senart (3: 391,19 and 392,13); cf. also Kloppenborg (154) for an examination of the Pāli commentarial gloss on this imagery, which explains that the reference is to women’s practice of checking if rice has been sufficiently cooked by taking a grain of rice and pressing it between two fingers. Abeynayake (3) comments that “what is reiterated is nothing but the condemnation that the society had towards women during this period.” Harvey (359) notes that “this passage in some way parallels that of Māra’s tempting of Gotama just prior to his enlightenment. In Somā’s case, specious doubts arise concerning a woman’s ability to attain spiritual states, but she conquers them by seeing the irrelevance of gender.”

⁵ SN 5.2 at SN I 129,23: “what does womanhood matter, [once] the mind is well concentrated? ... one to whom it would occur that ‘I am a woman’ or ‘I am a man’ ... [only] to such a one it is fit for Māra to speak [like this]”; *itthibhāvo kiṃ kayirā, cittamhi susamāhite ... yassa nūna siyā evaṃ, itthāhaṃ puriso ‘ti vā ... taṃ Māro vattum arahati* (S^e reads *itthibhāvo* and *itthīhaṃ*). SĀ 1199 at T II 326b6: “[once] the mind has entered a [concentrative] attainment, what has a female [bodily] appearance to do with that? If knowledge has already arisen, the unsurpassable Dharma will be reached. [But] if the mind has not reached complete separation from the perception of ‘man’ or ‘woman’, then such a one will speak like you, Māra. You should go and speak to such a one”; 心入於正受, 女形復何為, 智或若生已, 逮得無上法, 若於男女想, 心不得俱離, 彼即隨魔說, 汝應往語彼. SĀ² 215 at T II 454a9: “the characteristics of a woman have nothing to do with it, only the mind develops concentrative absorption and contemplates with vision the supreme Dharma. One who has the perception of a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’, may say to a woman that she can achieve nothing in the Dharma. [But] if one has no perception of a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’, how could such distinctions arise?”; 女相無所作, 唯意修禪定, 觀見於上法, 若有男女相, 可說於女人, 於法無所能, 若無男女相, 云何生分別, (where my rendering assumes the last two instances of 相 to be an error for 想, a frequent error in the *Āgamas*, cf. Anālayo “Comparative” 48-49). The protagonist of the present verses appears to have been a remarkable nun with outstanding abilities, as according to the *Avadānaśataka*, Speyer 22,4 (cf. also the *Karmaśataka* in Skilling “Eṣā” 146), she had committed the entire code of rules to memory after a single hearing. Horner (165) comments “that a woman could be represented as making such an utterance is a proof that the old life of Hinduism in which women were regarded merely as child-bearers and as commodities was, if not suffering a decline, at least not passing entirely unquestioned.”

⁶ This is reported in the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T XXII 923a24; in what according to Lamotte (*Histoire* 212) could be the Haimavata *Vinaya*, T 1463 at T XXIV 803b10; in the Mahāsāṃghika *Vinaya*, Roth 13,5; in the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1421 at T XXII 185c17; and in the Theravāda *Vinaya*, Vin II 254,33 (cf. also AN 8.51 at AN IV 276,10). According to a parallel to this account in the (Mūla-)sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1451 at T XXIV 350b15, it was the Buddha’s fostermother who made this point, where the circumstance that the Buddha did not reject her assertion of women’s abilities gives the impression that here, too, such abilities are at least implicitly affirmed. The same holds true for a Sarvāstivāda parallel, MĀ 116 at T I 605a13.

⁷ Thī 120: “in the last watch of the night they destroyed the mass of ignorance,” *rattiyā pacchime yāme tamokkhandham padālayuṃ* (B^o: *tamokkhandham*), followed by indicating at Thī 121 that this was accomplished by a group of thirty elder nuns.

⁸ MN 73 at MN I 490,24: “Vaccha, not merely one hundred, not two hundred, not three hundred, not four hundred, not five hundred, but far more nuns who are my disciples dwell by having realized here and now through their own direct knowledge the influx-free deliverance of the mind and deliverance by wisdom, being established in it through the destruction of the influxes,” *na kho, Vaccha, ekaṃ yeva satam na dve satāni na tīni satāni na cattāri satāni na pañca satāni, atha kho bhiyyo va yā bhikkhuniyo mama sāvīkā āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ diṭṭheva dhamme sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharanti*. SĀ 964 at T II 246c14: “not only one, two, three nuns, (up to) five hundred, there are many [more] nuns in this Dharma and discipline who have destroyed all influxes (up to) and will not experience further existences”; 不但一，二，三比丘尼，乃至五百，有眾多比丘尼，於此法律，盡諸有漏乃至不受後有； and SĀ² 198 at T II 446b13: “in the Dharma I teach, there are not

[only] one, two, three, (up to) five hundred, but many [more] nuns than that who have attained this state,” 我教法中，比丘尼等得斯法者，非一二三乃至五百，其數眾多，where “this state” refers to the earlier mentioned “attaining deliverance of the mind and deliverance by wisdom,” 心得解脫，慧得解脫; cf. also T 1482 at T XXIV 963b17.

⁹ MN 115 at MN III 65,24: “it is impossible, it cannot come to be that a woman should be an arahant who is a *Sammāsambuddha*,” *aṭṭhānam etaṃ anavakāso yaṃ itthi arahaṃ assa sammāsambuddho* (B^e, C^e and S^e: *itthi*). The same position is also taken in AN 1.15 at AN I 28,9, a discourse of which no parallel appears to be known. Such absence of a parallel does not necessarily imply lateness, as lack of a counterpart could also be due to the dynamics of transmission, cf. Anālayo “Chinese” 7-9.

¹⁰ MĀ 181 at T I 723a10-724c3.

¹¹ On the language of the Indic original used for translating the *Madhyama-āgama* cf. Bapat (5), Enomoto (“Āgamas” 20), and von Hinüber (250); on the school affiliation cf. Enomoto (“Sarvāstivāda”), Lü (242), Mayeda (98), Minh Chau (27), and Waldschmidt (136).

¹² T 776 at T XVII 712b14-714a1, entitled “Discourse Spoken by the Buddha on the Fourfold Dharma Instruction,” 佛說四品法門經, a title reconstructed by Nanjio (219) as *Buddhabhāṣita-caturvarga-dharmaparyāya-sūtra*, which according to the information given in the Taishō edition would have been translated by Fāxián, 法賢.

¹³ D (297) *mdo sde sha* 297a2-301b2 or Q (963) *mdu lu* 325b3-330b1, entitled *khamṣ mang po pa'i mdo*, which thus similar to MN 115 and MĀ 181 takes the “many elements” as its title, though in its reference to the Indic original it has these two words in the reverse sequence, D *mdu sde sha* 297a2 or Q *lu* 325b3: *rgya gar skad du dhā tu ba hu ta ka sū tra*. Skilling (Kanjur

772) notes several editions whose title corresponds to the sequence of the Pāli title and suggests that “*dhātubahutaka* must be a reconstruction.” For my work on this discourse I am greatly indebted to Peter Skilling, who kindly allowed me to consult his unpublished translation and edition of the Tibetan discourse. It is a rare gift to be associating with an eminent scholar of such broadminded generosity, especially when it comes to sharing his own unpublished work.

¹⁴ This *sūtra* quotation comes at the outset of chapter 20 on “many elements” in T 1537 at T XXVI 501b25-502c18.

¹⁵ D (4094) *mngon pa ju* 28b2-33b4 or Q (5595) *tu* 31b1-36b6, which gives the title as *khamṣ mang po pa’i mdo*, “the Discourse on Many Elements.”

¹⁶ In order to facilitate comparing my translation with the English translation of the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* in Ñāṇamoli (925-30), I adopt the same paragraph numbering as used by Ñāṇamoli. For the same reason, I also use Pāli terminology (except for such anglicized terms as Dharma and Nirvana), without thereby intending to take a position on the original language of the *Madhyama-āgama*.

¹⁷ MN 115 at MN III 61,9 begins directly with the Buddha broaching this subject, without reporting that a corresponding thought had occurred to Ānanda. The other versions agree with MĀ 181.

¹⁸ MN 115 does not take up the fears of the past and the future. The other versions agree with MĀ 181.

¹⁹ MĀ 181 at T I 723b6: 可得, for which Hirakawa (235) gives as possible equivalents *prā-√rabh* and *sam-ā-√rabh*.

²⁰ At this point in MN 115 at MN III 61,25, the Buddha encourages his disciples to train themselves with the thought “we shall become wise ones

and inquirers,” *paṇḍitā bhavissāma vīmaṃsakā* (S^e only reads *paṇḍitā bhavissāma*, without *vīmaṃsakā*), an injunction that underlines the practical import of the subsequent exposition.

²¹ Such a reaction by Ānanda is not mentioned in the other versions.

²² In MN 115 at MN III 62,2 Ānanda asks directly about how a monk can be reckoned a wise one, without broaching the complementary topic of being reckoned a foolish one. The other versions agree with MĀ 181.

²³ The *sūtra* quotation in Śamathadeva’s commentary and the *Dharmaskandha* add to this fourfold listing the aggregates as a fifth item, which D *mngon pa ju* 29b1 or Q *tu* 32b1 lists as its first, whereas in T 1537 at T XXVI 501c11 they occur in the third place, see figure 1. The *Dharmaskandha* also gives an exposition of this topic by listing the five aggregates, T 1537 at T XXVI 502a13, an exposition without counterpart in the *sūtra* quotation in Śamathadeva’s commentary.

²⁴ Several of the elements listed here are not found in MN 115, see figure 2.

²⁵ At this point in MN 115, and after each of the sets of elements listed subsequently, Ānanda asks the Buddha if there could be another way how a monk can be reckoned as skilled in the elements, e.g., MN III 62,19: *siyā pana, bhante, añño pi pariyāyo yathā dhātukusalo bhikkhū’ti alaṃ vacanāya*. Thus in MN 115 the different sets of elements are alternative options, whereas MĀ 181 gives the impression as if all sets of elements need to be known.

²⁶ This set of four elements is not found in MN 115, though it occurs in the other versions.

²⁷ The present triad of elements (material/immaterial/cessation) and the next triad (past/future/present) are absent from MN 115 and T 776.

²⁸ The present triad of elements (superior/inferior/middle) and the next two triads (wholesome/unwholesome/undetermined and trainee/beyond training/neither) are absent from MN 115, but occur in the other versions.

²⁹ The present pair of elements (with influxes/without influxes) is absent from MN 115, but occurs in the other versions.

³⁰ A final count of all elements is not found in any of the parallels, so that MĀ 181 is the only version that specifies the overall number of elements. A count of sixty-two elements is associated with the present discourse in other sources, however, e.g., in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, T 1545 at T XXVII 367c4: 多界經中說界差別有六十二, (cf. also Buddhavarman's *Vibhāṣā* translation, T 1546 at T XXVIII 279b24); or in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Abh-k 1:28 in Pradhan 18,7: *Bahudhātuke'pi dvāṣaṣṭirdhātavo deśitāḥ* (with its Chinese counterparts in T 1558 at T XXIX 6c2 and in T 1559 at T XXIX 166c24); cf. also T 1552 at T XXVIII 874a6 and T 1828 at T XLII 657b17.

³¹ The listings of impossibilities show considerable variations in the different versions, see figure 3.

³² The contrast here is between the 見諦人 and the 凡夫人, counterparts to the *diṭṭhisampanna puggala* and the *puthujjana* mentioned in the corresponding section in MN 115 at MN III 64,29. The former of these two is at least a stream-enterer, so that the impossibilities listed here contrast a member of the community of noble ones to a worldling.

³³ The present and the subsequent impossibilities, up to the impossibility that a person endowed with view could be reborn into an eighth existence, have as their counterpart in MN 115 at MN III 65,11 a single impos-

sibility, according to which a person endowed with view will not designate another teacher [as his teacher], *aññaṃ sattāraṃ uddiseyya*, see figure 4.

³⁴ The present and the following impossibilities are without a counterpart in MN 115, though they have counterparts in the other versions.

³⁵ Four of these titles, the “Many Elements,” the “Drum of the Deathless,” the “Mirror of the Dharma,” and the “Four Chapters” occur also in nearly all of the other versions, cf. MN 115 at MN III 67,29: *bahudhātuko ... catuparivaṭṭo ... dhammādāso ... amatadundubhi*; T 776 at T XVII 713c27: 四品法門 ... 法鏡 ... 甘露鼓 ... 多界; D *mdo sde sha* 301a7 or Q *lu* 330a8: *le’u bzhi pa ... chos kyi me long ... bdud rtsi’i nga bo che* (thereby qualifying the drum of the deathless as “great”) ... *khams mang po*; T 1537 at T XXVI 502c17: 四轉 ... 大法鏡 (qualifying the mirror of the Dharma as “great”) ... 甘露鼓 ... 多界; D *mngon pa ju* 33b3 or Q *tu* 36b5: *le’u bzhi pa ... chos kyi me long ... bdud rtsi lnga* (speaking of a “five[-fold] deathless” instead of the “drum of the deathless”) ... *khams mang po*. MN 115 at MN III 67,30 also mentions the “Unsurpassable Victory in Battle,” *anuttaro saṅgāmajijayo*, a title not found in the other versions. The same title recurs in a listing of five alternative titles for the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, DN 1 at DN I 46,25, where it is also absent from the Chinese and Tibetan counterparts, cf. DĀ 21 at T I 94a12, T 21 at T I 270c20, and Weller (64,33).

³⁶ D *mngon pa ju* 29b1 or Q *tu* 32b1: *phung po*.

³⁷ T 1537 at T XXVI 501c11: 蘊.

³⁸ T 1537 at T XXVI 502a13: “A wise one who knows and sees the five aggregates as they really are is skilled in the aggregates. That is to say, he knows and sees the aggregate of form, the aggregate of feeling, the aggregate of perception, the aggregate of formations, and the aggregate of

consciousness as they really are. This is reckoned a wise one who is skilled in the aggregates,” 智者於五蘊如實知見，是蘊善巧，謂如實知見色蘊，受蘊，想蘊，行蘊，識蘊，是名智者於蘊善巧。

³⁹ MN 115 at MN III 67,29: *catuparivaṭṭa*; T 776 at T XVII 713c27: 四品法門; D *mdo sde sha* 301a7 or Q *lu* 330a8: *le'u bzhi pa*; T 1537 at T XXVI 502c17: 四轉; D *mngon pa ju* 33b3 or Q *tu* 36b5: *le'u bzhi pa*.

⁴⁰ The four elements occur in an analysis of deeper levels of concentration into its constituent elements under the heading of the four mental aggregates given in MN 64 at MN I 436,21+29. The additional element triplets recur in DN 33 at DN III 215,20+22, DN III 216,16, DN III 217,24, and DN III 218,1, which has the triplet material, immaterial, and cessation as its entry 3:14; what is inferior, middle, and superior as its entry 3:15; past, future, and present as its entry 3:24; wholesome, unwholesome, and indeterminate formations as its entry 3:35; and the trainee, the one beyond training, and the one who is neither as its entry 3:36. The distinction between what is with influxes and what is without the influxes is applied in DN 28 at DN III 112,7 to supernormal powers; in MN 117 at MN III 72,6 to the factors of the noble eightfold path; in AN 2.7 at AN I 81,1 to happiness; and in AN 10.133 at AN V 275,20 to the ten courses of action.

⁴¹ The *sūtra* quotations in the *Dharmaskandha* and in Śamathadeva's commentary agree with MĀ 181 in mentioning the two wheel-turning kings first, T 1537 at T XXVI 502b12 and D *mngon pa ju* 32a1 or Q *tu* 35a2. The other versions mention them in second place, MN 115 at MN III 65,20, T 776 at T XVII 713b18, and D *mdo sde sha* 300a7 or Q *lu* 329a5.

⁴² While in the listing in MN 115 at MN III 65,3, shedding the blood of a Tathāgata precedes schism; T 776 at T XVII 713b27, D *mdo sde sha* 300b3 or Q *lu* 329a8, T 1537 at T XXVI 502b21, and D *mngon pa ju* 32a6 or Q *tu* 35a8

agree with MĀ 181 at T I 724a3 in adopting the opposite sequence. On this type of variation cf. also Silk (254-55).

⁴³ The first three constitute the first to third impossibilities in MN 115 at MN III 64,16, while the impossibility of following another teacher comes as the ninth impossibility at MN III 65,10.

⁴⁴ T 1509 at T XXV 237a28 explains that the “possibilities and impossibilities like these [mentioned before] were declared by the Buddha himself in the Discourse on Many Elements. Based on what the Buddha had said, the treatise masters further expanded by declaring [more] possibilities and impossibilities,” 如是等，是處不是處，《多性經》中佛口自說，諸論議師輩，依是佛語，更廣說是處不是處，cf. Lamotte (*Le Traité* 1525): “toutes ces possibilités et impossibilités, le Buddha les a exposées de sa bouche dans le *To-sing king* (Bahudhātukasūtra), mais les docteurs (*upadeśācārya*), s’appuyant sur la parole du Buddha, ont encore développé au long ces possibilités et impossibilités.”

⁴⁵ T 1509 at T XXV 237b1: refers to the impossibility “that noble ones seek out a heterodox teacher,” 若諸賢聖求外道師; cf. Lamotte (*Le Traité* 1525): “que les saints (*ārya*) recherchent des maîtres hérétiques.”

⁴⁶ Lamotte (*Le Traité* 1525 note 1) suggests that this would be intending the authors of the Abhidharma in particular, “le *Traité* a sans doute en vue les auteurs d’Abhidharma qui ont considérablement augmenté la liste des possibilités et impossibilités dressée par le Buddha.” This is certainly the case, but the same tendency towards expanding the theme of impossibilities seems to make itself felt already in the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* and its discourse parallels.

⁴⁷ Ps IV 123,11 explains that in the present context the reference is to Mahābrahmā, i.e. a Brahmā who reigns in the Brahmā world; in fact the

individual translation, T 776 at T XVII 713b22, speaks explicitly of the Heavenly King Mahābrahmā in this context, 大梵天王; and the *Dharmaskandha*, T 1537 at T XXVI 502b17, speaks of King Brahmā, 梵王. The Pāli commentary explains that the suggestion in MN 115 at MN III 66,8 that a man can become a Brahmā should not be taken literally, as Brahmās are genderless, but should be understood only in the sense that the outer appearance of a Brahmā resembles a man more than a woman.

⁴⁸ According to Ps I 34,2, Māra lives in the *Paranimittavasavattidevaloka* governing his own following like a rebel prince in the border region of a kingdom, *attano parisāya issariyaṃ pavattento rajjapaccante dāmarikarājaputto viya vasati*.

⁴⁹ Barnes (114) comments on the impossibilities for women that “this theory excluded women from leadership.” As Sharma (74) points out, at least in the case of Māra this would not have been an issue, as given the negative role Māra plays in Buddhist texts, “the denial of Marahood can hardly be an embarrassment.”

⁵⁰ This can be seen in the listing of former Buddhas given in DN 14 at DN II 2,28; DĀ 1 at T I 2a16; T 2 at T I 150b1; T 4 at T I 159b21; EĀ 48.4 at T II 790b14 and their Sanskrit fragment counterparts frag. S 360 folio 115 verso in Fukita (4). The *Mahāvastu*, Senart (2: 1,3) points out that “bodhisattvas are born in two types of families, warrior families or Brahmin families,” *dvīhi kulehi bodhisatvā jāyanti, kṣatriyakule vā brāhmaṇakule vā*. Rahula (186) sums up: “if the Buddha is to hail from a backward family, nobody would care for what he preaches and hence an Enlightened One is always to be born in the highest caste of the day.” Wawrytko (286) explains that “prevailing social conditions prompted the Buddha to choose a high caste for his incarnation ... presumably the same practical consid-

erations would have militated against an incarnation in the female gender within ancient Indian society.”

⁵¹ According to the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Gnoli (36,13), the future Buddha chose to be reborn in a warrior family since the warriors were more respected than Brahmins, and his decision on where to be born was taken in order to avoid an objectionable type of birth, *mā me syur atonidānaṃ pare vakkāraḥ* ‘*bodhisattvena garhaṇīyāyāṃ jātau pratisandhir grhīta*’ iti. A related position can be found in the Jain tradition, as according to the *Jinacaritra* (17) in Jacobi (38,9) future *arahants* or wheel-turning kings will avoid taking birth in a low womb or even in a Brahmin womb.

⁵² Here it needs to be pointed out that this inability does not imply, as assumed by An (11), that women are not capable of reaching liberation and be *arahants*, it only concerns the question of being a Buddha.

⁵³ Romberg (164) notes that once “the aim was no longer to become an Arhat, but to become Buddha ... this shift made, in fact, the situation for women worse, because a doctrinal foundation was laid for the necessity of changing the sex before being able to become enlightened.” In fact the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* explains that a woman will not realize the awakening of a Buddha because already an advanced bodhisattva has left behind womanhood for good and will not be reborn again as a female, Wogihara (94,3): *na ca strī anuttarāṃ samyaksaṃbodhim abhisambudhyate. tat kasya hetoḥ? tathā hi bodhisattvaḥ prathamasyaiva kalpāsaṃkhyesyātyayāt strībhāvaṃ vijahāti bodhimaṇḍaniṣadanam upādāya na punar jātu strī bhavati*; cf. also Paul (212 note 7). Harrison (78) concludes that “women ... are generally represented in such an unfavourable light as to vitiate any notion of the Mahāyāna as a movement for sexual equality. Compared with the situation in the Pāli Canon, in which women are at least as capable as

men of attaining the highest goal, arhatship, the position of women in Mahāyāna has hardly changed for the better.”

⁵⁴ A problem with this suggestion would be one of the thirty-two marks with which according to tradition the Buddha was endowed, namely the concealed nature of his genitals, cf. e.g., MN 91 at MN II 136,17: *kosohita-vatthaguyho*, referred to in its parallels MĀ 161 at T I 686b16 and T 76 at T I 883c26 as 陰馬藏. Hae-ju (131) comments that the idea of women’s inability to become a Buddha “may have stemmed from the idea of the Buddha’s unique sexual mark. Even though his sexual organ is concealed, the mark is characterized as male”, cf. also Kajiyama (65). The standard description of the significance of these thirty-two marks, cf. e.g., MN 91 at MN II 134,16 and its parallels MĀ 161 at T I 685a23, and T 76 at T I 883c2, states that one who has these will definitely become either a wheel-turning king or a Buddha. In several discourses, Brahmins investigate the Buddha’s possession of the thirty-two marks and, once they find out that he possesses all of them and have been told by him that he claims to be a Buddha, they come to the conclusion that his claim must be true. Thus possession of the thirty-two marks serves to certify a claim to Buddhahood in the eyes of contemporary Brahmins. However, the standard descriptions of the significance of these marks neither explicitly state nor necessarily imply that to become a wheel-turning king or a Buddha one must invariably be endowed with these marks (though this may well be the way later tradition interprets these passages). It only states the future prospect of one who has them. Thus what this dictum implies for one who does not have all thirty-two marks would be that such a person’s claim to be a Buddha would fail to arouse confidence in Brahmins who believe in the significance of these marks. In the discourses, the situation of someone claiming to be a Buddha without possessing all thirty-two marks does not arise, as whenever the possession

of these marks is under scrutiny, the object of such investigations is invariably Gotama Buddha. Nevertheless, a significant indication can be found in the *Mahāpadāna-sutta*, which makes a point of not including the possession of the thirty-two marks among what is the rule, *dhammatā*, for all Buddhas. Whereas the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* consistently introduces various qualities of the infant bodhisattva Vipassī as *dhammatā esā*, and thus specifies their possession as something that is invariably the case for any Buddha-to-be, when the discourse turns to his thirty-two marks, DN 14 at DN II 16,1, the phrase *dhammatā esā* is no longer used. The same is the case for its *Dīrgha-āgama* parallel, where the recurrent reference to an “unchanging principle for all Buddhas,” 諸佛常法, is no longer used when the description turns to the thirty-two marks, DĀ 1 at T I 4c20. Not all parallel versions agree in this respect, as judging from fragment 143.2 in Fukita (71) the Sanskrit parallel did use the expression *dharmatā* at the outset of its description of bodhisattva Vipasyī’s possession of the thirty-two marks; while another parallel, T 2 at T I 152b13, does not use such a specification even in its description of his other qualities. In sum, at least from the perspective of the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* and its *Dīrgha-āgama* parallel, the possibility that someone could be a Buddha without being in the possession of all of the thirty-two marks does not seem to be categorically ruled out.

⁵⁵ T 776 at T XVII 713b23 indicates that what is impossible for women is instead possible in the case of “a son of a good family who is endowed with the marks of a great man and adorned with merit and wisdom,” 善男子, 具大人相, 福慧莊嚴.

⁵⁶ T 1509 at T XXV 237a19: “if a woman attains the liberation of Nirvana, it is in dependence on a male that she attains it; it does not happen that she attains the path on her own,” 若女人得解脫涅槃, 亦因男子得, 無有自然得道, cf. also Lamotte (*Le Traité* 1524): “si une femme obtient la

délivrance (*vimukti*), le Nirvāṇa, c'est grâce à un mâle qu'elle l'obtient. Il est impossible qu'elle obtienne la Bodhi par elle-même (*svataḥ*).”

⁵⁷ MĀ 116 at T I 607b10: “a woman cannot attain five objectives. That a woman should become a Tathāgata, free from attachment, rightly awakened; a wheel-turning king; Sakka, ruler of gods; King Māra; or Great Brahmā, that is impossible,” 女人不得行五事, 若女人作如來, 無所著, 等正覺, 及轉輪王, 天帝釋, 魔王, 大梵天者, 終無是處. A statement of the same type can also be found in the in many respects closely parallel account in T 61 at T I 858a1: “it is impossible and cannot come to be, a woman cannot at all attain five objectives: she cannot become a Tathāgata, free from attachment, rightly awakened; or a wheel-turning king; she cannot become Sakka; she cannot become Māra; and she cannot become Brahmā, [all] that is impossible,” 無有是處不可容女人, 終不得五事, 不得成如來無所著等正覺, 及轉輪王, 不得為釋, 不得為魔, 不得為梵, 無有是處.

⁵⁸ T 1421 at T XXII 186a12: “a woman has five obstructions, she cannot become Sakka, the ruler of gods, or the Heavenly King Māra, or the Heavenly King Brahmā, or a noble wheel-turning king or a king of the Dharma in the three realms,” 女人有五礙, 不得作天帝釋, 魔天王, 梵天王, 轉輪聖王, 三界法王. The five impossibilities are also mentioned in EĀ 43.2 at T II 757c24, where they serve to explain why a woman cannot be given a prediction of future Buddha-hood. This passage thus shows a stage of development comparable to the extract from the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi* quote above in note 53. A counterpart to the tale in EĀ 43.2 can be found in an apocryphal Pāli *jātaka* ed. in Jaini (“Padīpadānājātaka”), cf. also Gombrich (70) on a version of this tale in a Sinhala prose work composed in the 15th century. The occurrence of this tale in the *Ekottarika-āgama* is one of several passages indicating the integration of compara-

tively late elements into this discourse collection, cf. in more detail Anālayo (“Zeng”).

⁵⁹ Dharmaguptaka Vinaya T 1428 at T XXII 922c-923c, the “Haimavata”(?) Vinaya, T 1463 at T XXIV 803a-c, the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya, Roth (4-21), the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda Vinaya, T 1451 at T XXIV 350b-351c, and the Theravāda Vinaya, Vin II 253-256 (= AN 8.51 at AN IV 274-279); cf. also the survey in Heirman (282).

⁶⁰ In the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, T 1421 at T XXII 186a12, the inabilities of women stand at the beginning of several passages that describe the negative repercussions of allowing women to go forth. In MĀ 116 at T I 607b10 (and in its close parallel T 61 at T I 858a1), women’s inabilities come at the end of a comparable series of passages on the detrimental consequences of permitting women to ordain.

⁶¹ MN 43 at MN I 293,36 indicates that the purpose of wisdom is to develop “direct knowledge,” “penetrative knowledge,” and “abandoning,” *paññā ... abhiññatthā pariññatthā pahānatthā*; its parallel MĀ 211 at T I 790c22 similarly explains that wisdom has the purpose of leading to “disenchantment,” to “dispassion,” and to a “vision in accordance with reality,” 智慧者有厭義，無欲義，見如真義。

⁶² SN 22.83 at SN III 106,3 and its parallel SĀ 261 at T II 66b3 record how Ānanda became a stream-enterer, which Vin II 183,21 indicates to have happened soon after his ordination.

⁶³ Pérez-remón (357) note 48 comments regarding the impossibilities of two Buddhas or two wheel-turning kings arising simultaneously and the impossibilities of women: “these impossibilities and their corresponding possibilities are introduced in between the other impossibilities and possibilities regarding moral matters, interrupting the enumeration of

things morally possible or impossible, a fact that might indicate their later interpolation.”

⁶⁴ Kajiyama (58) concludes that, regarding the listing of inabilities of women, “it is most likely that the dictum did not exist when the Buddhist Order maintained one and the same tradition, but that it was created after the Order was divided into many schools and was inserted into sūtras of various schools.” However, the suggestion by Kajiyama (70) that “the dictum that a woman is incapable of becoming a Buddha arose probably in the first century B.C.” may be putting things at too late a time.

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