

# **Gender Constructions and Gender Relations from a Tibetan Buddhist Perspective**

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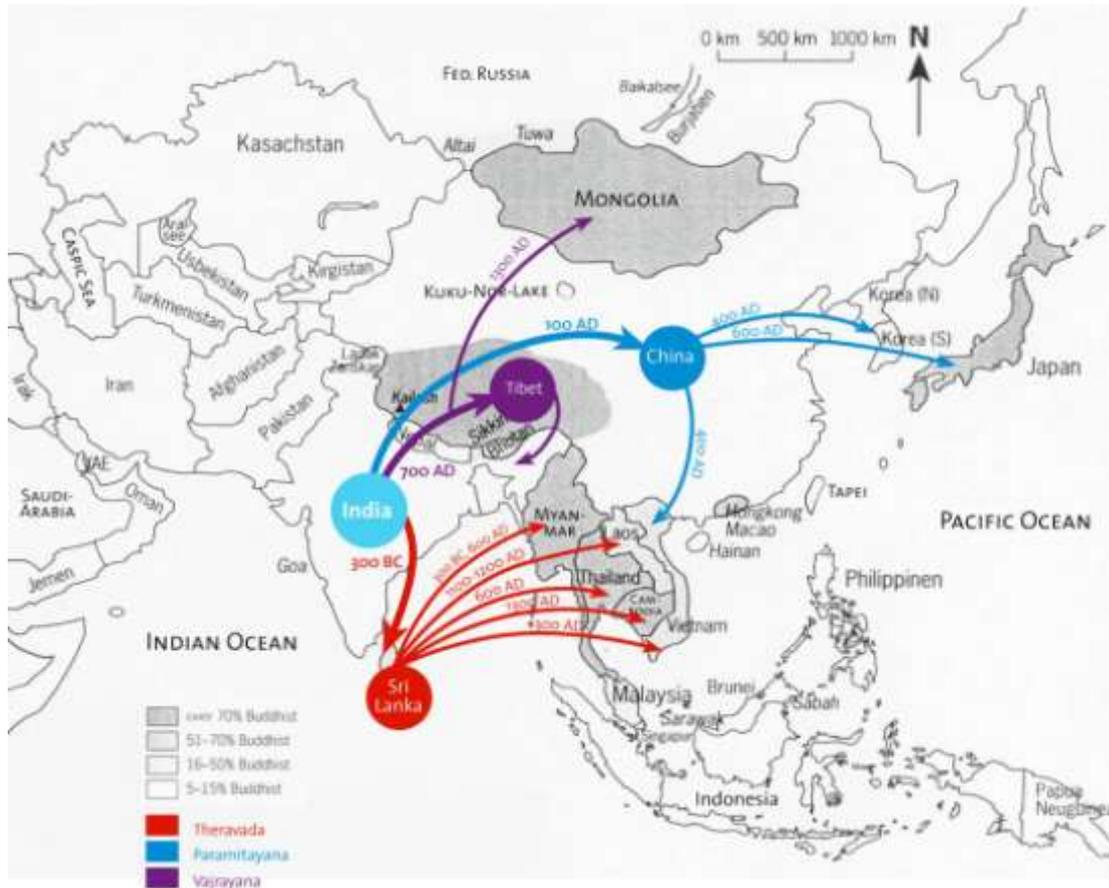
ambiguous

## My Lecture Shows ...

- how the female gender for centuries is being put into question and newly constructed, and how the attitude towards women is ambivalent and/or ambiguous till today
- how the Buddha organised Buddhist communities and its impact on gender relations
- how for centuries hierarchization and exclusion took place
- how the understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and the view of non-duality can have a major impact on the construction of gender
- how the understanding of tantric meditation practice derives from androgyny

I argue that around the year 2000 we have reached a crucial point, and thus Tārā, a female Buddha, and the notion of a queer Buddha have become very important.

# The Three Mainstream Traditions of Buddhism



1. **Theravāda** Buddhism (3rd. cent. B.C.)
2. East Asian Buddhism (1st/2nd cent.) Śrāvaka-yāna + **Pāramitāyāna**
3. Tibetan Buddhism (7th/8th cent.) Śrāvakayāna + Pāramitāyāna + **Vajrayāna**

## Overview: 5 Key Points

1. State of Research and Discussion
2. Reflections on Gender Constructions and Gender Relations in Buddhism
  - Binary sex system, ambivalent attitude towards LGBTQ; subordination of women & exclusion of those who do not fit into this binary system
3. Ultimately Everything Is Empty: Are Gender Specific Differences Really Insignificant?
4. Can Women Become a Buddha? The Buddha – a Man or Queer?
5. Androgyny: The Unification of Masculine and Feminine Traits in Each Person



# 1. State of Research and Discussion

- Gender is historically, socially and religiously constructed in different ways
- The role and image of the sexes in the different cultures vary widely and are continually subjected to change
- There exists a "double blindness": humanities, social and natural sciences are "religion blind", sciences of religions are "gender blind" (cf. King 2005)
- Religion and gender are not stable, but trans-historical categories. Often, however, they are regarded as part of a natural order, normatively specified by the sacred texts (roles of men & women not indefinitely interchangeable). But is there anything women cannot do, when it comes to spiritual growth/liberation?
- Since the late 20th century feminism aims to create an awareness of women's full humanness. Others argue that concepts such as women's subjectivity and equality are rooted in Western ways of thinking and must be relativized according to culture and religion

## State of Research and Discussion in Buddhist Studies

- Rita Gross (1993)
  - argues that since the fundamental teachings and symbols of Buddhism are essentially egalitarian and liberating, Buddhism is “reconstructible”
- Elizabeth J. Harris on Gender (2000)
  - “through the lense of gender studies” there is clearly a need to rediscover women’s histories, to reinterpret holy texts, to campaign for equal rights, to explore the nature of consciousness and the construction of identity, and to affirm the body
- Reiko Ohnuma (2004)
  - stresses that a sense of separation and complementarity of the two genders is pervasive throughout early Buddhist literature

# Ambiguity Towards Women and the Feminine

## Four Distinct Attitudes towards Women and the Feminine

1. Soteriological Inclusiveness (women can attain liberation/nirvāṇa)
2. Institutional Androcentrism (nuns' order is subordinated to monks' order)
3. Ascetic Mysogyny (man's fear of the feminine; endangered celibacy)
4. Soteriological Androgyny (has the potential to produce „equality“; buddhahood as a symbol of the union of male and female forces)

“We have a rich multivocality—not a simple inconsistent ambivalence. ... Rather than seeking a doctrinal reconciliation or justification for this inconsistency of views in the literature, instead we must seek to understand the social and intellectual dynamics of the early community of Buddhists that led to such a discordant juxtaposition of views.” (Sponberg, 1992, 4)

## 2. Reflections on Gender Constructions and Gender Relations from a Tibetan Buddhist Perspective

1. Are there any statements about sex/gender in the early Buddhist texts at all, and if so, which and how many sexes does Buddhism acknowledge?
2. Does classical Buddhist texts make a distinction between biological and social gender?
3. What is the impact of such a categorization on Buddhist attitudes towards LGBTQ, subordination of women & exclusion of those who do not fit into the binary system?



LGBTQ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people

# Self-understanding of Tibetan Buddhists



# The Buddhist Community Is Organized as Two-sex System

## List of 22 faculties (Skt. *indriya*) in the *Abhidharmakośa*

### Femininity/Female sex characteristic

- Skt. *strīndriya*, P. *itthindriya*,  
Tib. *mo'i dbang po*

### Masculinity/Male sex characteristic

- Skt. *puruṣendriya*, P. *puris'*  
*indriya*, Tib. *pho'i dbang po*

Nyānatiloka's Buddhist Dictionary → *indriya* (sex) & *bhāva* ('nature')  
Monier-Williams → *bhāva* (√ *bhū*) also means: becoming,  
being, existing, occurring, appearance

Vasubandhu explains in the *Abhid-k-bh* that due to these two faculties

- beings form the two categories of male and female
- beings differ with regard to physical form, voice and manner of being

Buddhaghosa (4th/5th cent.) explains in *Atthāsālinī* (641) that boys' games are not the same as girls' games (Pruden, 1991, p. 154).

## The Four Assemblies/Discipleships (*catuṣpariṣat*)

1. Monks (bhikṣu)
2. Nuns (bhikṣuṇī)
3. Laymen (upāsaka)
4. Laywomen (upāsikā)

Hierarchization &  
Segregation:

- women/men
- lay/monastic



Nuns' order subordinated to monks' order (institutional androcentrism)



H. E. Sakya Jetsün Chime Luding  
Lama & *upāsikā* (lay woman)

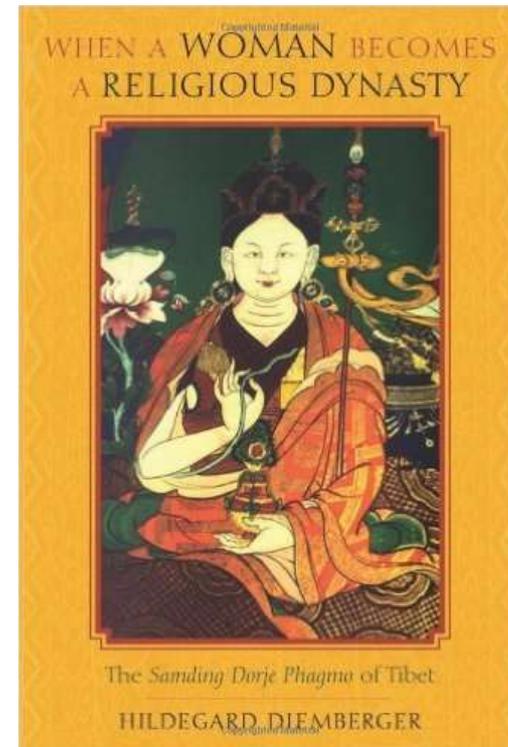


H. E. Mindrölling Jetsün Khandro  
Rinpoche, Lama & *śrāmaṇerikā* (novice)



Dechen Chökyi Drönme b. 1937

12th reincarnation of Samding Dorje Phagmo



Samding Dorje Phagmo 1422–1455

Princess Chökyi Drönme of Gungthang

## The Situation of Women at the Time of the Buddha

- Women had in many respects, at least as nuns, equal opportunities as men to go their way to liberation
- In Tibetan Buddhism we believe in rebirth → the mindstream continues from life to life
- The nature of mind remains always the same until enlightenment
- What changes is the body. Rebirth takes place as male or as female or as LGBTQ
- No distinction is made in the mind training in regard to how to practise as a woman or as a man (precious human rebirth; lead a meaningful life)
- Already in the Vinaya (monastic rules) it becomes evident that there is no essential difference between men and women (a regulation exists how to proceed in case of 'natural' sex change)

## Provisions Concerning a Clear Determination of Sex

- Although there is no essential difference between men and women, the biological sex, however, is significant too. There are situations that prescribe to make sure that the person has the "right" sex.
- MSV ordination manuals for nuns (include to check when bathing and dressing whether the candidate has the respective 'correct' sex)
- List of impediments to ordination ("Are you a woman?" "I'm a woman.")
- Having no or ambiguous genitalia is a reason for being denied the possibility of ordination
- Homosexuality is no impediment (complete sexual abstinence anyway)
  - For lay people homosexuality requires contextual interpretation (5 lay precepts, e.g. to refrain from sexual misconduct)

### 3. Ultimately Everything Is Empty: Are Gender Specific Differences Really Insignificant?

- Gender differences are presented as irrelevant and ultimately insignificant, and thus gender is differently constructed.
- The terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are just a designation (Parallel to Judith Butler's deconstructivistic approach?)
- Bhikkhunī Somā, Pālicanon SN 5.2:

*What does womanhood matter at all, when the mind is concentrated well,  
When knowledge flows on steadily, as one sees correctly into Dhamma?  
"One to whom it might occur, 'I'm a woman' or 'I'm a man',  
Or 'I'm anything at all'— Is fit for Māra to address.*

## 4. Can Women Become a Buddha?



Mahāyāna-Sūtras (ca. 1st century B.C.) – shift in regard to the aim of salvation

Mahāyāna propagates the path of *bodhisattvas* who strive for buddhahood

## Gender Transformation in the Mahayānasūtras

1. A number of Mahāyānasūtras teach that by virtue of spiritual attainment a female *bodhisattva* must change gender in order to achieve buddhahood. Otherwise she cannot obtain buddhahood in this life (D. Paul, 1979).
2. According to other Mahāyānasūtras such gender transformation or change of sex is unnecessary. The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* that in a very humorous way makes fun about the self-importance of some monks enjoys particular popularity.

Thus multivocality with regard to the female body becomes obvious.

The notion of gender transformation can already be found in the Vinaya

Cf. Kieffer-Pülz (2007), Gender Transformation in the Vinayapitaka of the Theravadins

<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/29.0.html> (PDF)

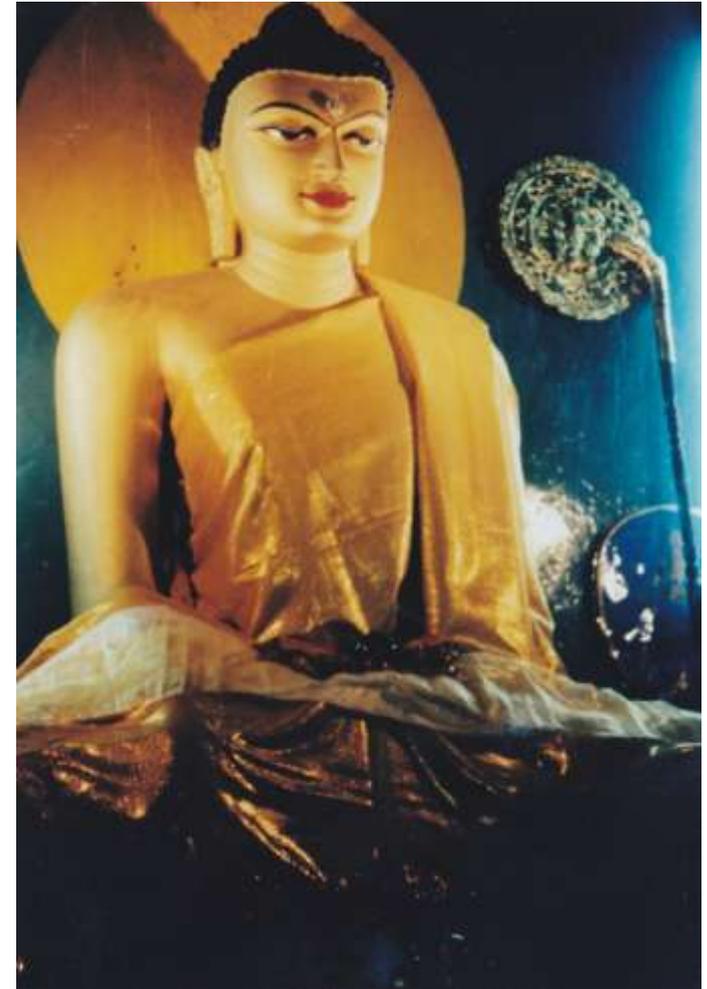
# Tārā – the Liberator (Tib. *sgrol ma*), a Female Buddha

Bhagavatī, 6th/7th century



## The Buddha – a Man?

It would be inappropriate to call a bodhisattva or a Buddha a 'man' or a 'woman', because these terms belong to *saṃsāra*.



## ***The Buddha as Omnibodied, Omnisexed, and Omnigendered***

Mrozik (2006):

- reads intentionally against the sexist discourse of a narrative concerning the previous births of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, rethinking in Butler's terms "what kinds of bodies 'matter'"
- speaks about a "queer Buddha, differently abled Buddha, low-caste or Dalit Buddha, blue-collar Buddha, black Buddha, Latino/a Buddha. The question is not whether and how such Buddhas exist; the question is whether and how such Buddhas (or Bodhisattvas) attain symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility (BTM, p. 3)" ... "Buddhist tradition values difference as much as it values the transcendence of difference" (p. 35)

## 5. Androgyny: Buddhahood is understood as the Unification of Masculine and Feminine Traits in Each Person

*Soteriological Androgyny* seems to be the most interesting category, because it takes into account gender difference and has the potential to produce „equality“



## Prajñāpāramitā is worshipped as the "Mother of all Buddhas"

- *prajñā* (wisdom) is a feminine noun, seen as a feminine quality
- *upāya* (skillful means) is a masculine noun



## Women Can Attain Full Enlightenment in this Lifetime

Tsongkhapa, based on several cycles of *Tantras* such as the *Guhyasamāja*, the *Cakrasaṃvara* and the *Hevajra Tantra*, emphasizes that women can attain full enlightenment in this lifetime (Bentor, 2015)



Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa  
(1357–1419)

## Conclusion: 2 Main Pillars of Buddhist Philosophy



*Pratītyasamutpāda*  
*Dependent Arising*

*Ahiṃsā*  
*Non-violence, Non-injury*