

WOMEN IN BUDDHIST STORY: INSIGHTS FROM A 13TH CENTURY SINHALA BUDDHIST TEXT

There is a growing body of literature today and considerable debate on the topic of Women and Buddhism, the role or place of women in Buddhist doctrinal tradition, their inclusion or exclusion from Buddhist institutions, the patriarchal underpinnings of those institutions, the androcentric nature of the scribal tradition and its impact on the textual tradition as it was handed down over the centuries.

I.B. Horner¹ in one of the earliest studies of women under Buddhism made some interesting general statements on the basis of references to women in the *Thēri gatha* and the Commentaries.

Paula Richman makes an intensive study of a single text, the Tamil Buddhist text *Manimēkalai* by Chattanar, and provides insights into the gender constructions of the time and text.² Rita Gross in her book *Buddhism After Patriarchy*³ tries to find "strategies for a Feminist Revalorization of Buddhism"⁴ and looks to the texts for role models for modern Buddhist women.

Perhaps one other way to throw more light on Buddhist attitudes to women and the shifts as well as the continuities that must necessarily be reflected in Buddhism as it spread and accommodated itself to different societies and cultures, is to look at a single story in its different versions over time.

There is an early collection of poems by women, that has been handed down as an integral part of the Buddhist canon, and a subsequent commentary about the lives of those women poets. As there are also later commentaries that retell those same stories, we have a useful source for a comparative analysis. What I intend to do in this short paper, is to take one of the stories as it appears in three versions or texts and see what variations have

¹ I.B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, 1930.

² Paula Richman, *Women, Branch Stories, and Religious Rhetoric in a Tamil Buddhist Text*, 1988. "Gender and Persuasion: the Portrayal of Beauty, Anguish and Nurturance in an Account of a Tamil Nun" in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. Ignazio Cabezón, 1992.

³ Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, SUNY 1993.

⁴ Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, SUNY, 1993.

been introduced in the telling of it over an extended time frame.

That a body of poems written by women (or certainly perceived as such) was considered important enough to be included in the Theravada Buddhist doctrinal canon, and that they were handed down as a part of that canon for a period of over two thousand years, does say something about the *inclusion* of women in the Buddhist doctrinal tradition and the significance of that inclusion. The persistence of stories about the spiritual achievements of the female nuns or *theris*, achievements considered in no way inferior or second to that of monks, is further highlighted when one takes into account the increasingly male dominated, androcentric, sometimes misogynist nature of the Buddhist monkhood as it became institutionalized over the centuries. In spite of such shifts, and in spite of the fact that the authors of the commentaries were monks and the scribes were also males, these womens' poems remained an integral part of the canon and their stories were told and retold to generations of Buddhists.

My interest in these stories was triggered by my work on the 13th century Sinhala *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* (henceforth referred to as SR). Story collections like the *Jātakas*, the SR and others, have always been considered an important part of the Buddhist commentarial tradition. They were read, related, told and retold by monks and elders, in sermons and stories, to successive generations of Buddhists and even trickled down into the folk repertoire. In Sri Lanka these story collections were considered intrinsic to an understanding of the religion. They were the means by which the abstract concepts of doctrinal Buddhism were made accessible, given an immediacy and made relevant to the day to day lives of ordinary people. The actions and characters of these heroes and heroines of stories provided the role models for lay men and women in the context of daily living.

Several, though not all of the womens' stories in the SR are woven around the *Thēris* (nuns), who appear so fleetingly but vibrantly in the early poems. They retell their stories in another genre, as biography, (perhaps even fictional biography), fleshing out the plot line, giving the characters a context and an every day reality from which to make their statement. The stories were *perceived* as quasi historical, biographical rather than fictive or allegorical. Thus while shifts and changes of emphasis may have occurred in the telling, over the centuries, they still maintained their connection with that quasi-historical past and the basic core story line remained clearly identifiable if not fixed.

We are only too well aware that any record of the past "is always a *selection* from the past and the past is always constructed when it is recounted."⁵ Thus generations of Buddhist monks retelling and re-inscribing those stories, could not but recount them in terms of the concerns of their time, adding, glossing over, minimizing, emphasizing what they considered important. Equally significant would be those core aspects of the story that survive the shifts of time and of genres.

I will discuss three versions of the *Kundalakēsi* story.

The first version, (V.1), is from the commentary to the *Thēri gatha* (Poems of the Nuns) believed to be by a South Indian monk, Dhammapala of Kanchipura⁶ translated by Mrs Rhys Davids. According to Mrs. Rhys Davids, Dhammapala drew on "the unwritten expository material constituting the then extant three *attha-katha's* (commentaries) on the psalms".⁷ Therefore, though Dhammapala's Pali commentary dates from about the 5th century it was clearly based on earlier accounts, possibly from Sri Lanka. It seems to be the earliest version that we have of the *Kundalakēsi* story.

The second version (V.2), is also from a 5th or 6th century Pali work familiar to the Buddhist world as the *Dhammapadatthakatha* (Dhammapada Commentary) translation by Burlingame. I shall refer to it for convenience as the DA. This was a collection of stories used to illustrate or contextualize stanzas attributed to the Buddha that were known as the *Dhammapada* (Stanzas on the Doctrine). The *Kundalakēsi* story was used to contextualize stanza 3 of section 8 of the *Dhammapada* verses.⁸

The author of the DA does not give his name but says in the colophon to his work that he was sent to Sri Lanka (probably from India) with instructions to translate into Pali, an important Sinhala commentary. The original source seems to have been a *written* text since the translator comments, disparagingly, on the diffuse idioms of the Sinhala language. The original of the DA was therefore a written source and probably later than the oral sources on which Dhammapāla of Kanchipura based his commentary. The

⁵ Gross, 1993, p. 20.

⁶ Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists: The Sisters*, Pali Text Society, 1980.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. xvi.

⁸ See J.R. Carter and M. Palihawadene, *The Dhammapada*, OUP 1987, p. 30.

Kundalakēsi story was very likely in circulation first orally and then later in written form, prior to the 5th century A.D. Thus although V.1 and V.2 were roughly contemporaneous Pali works and both, very likely, by Indian monks, they are very different in their treatment of the social context of the story. The oral sources of V.1 seems to reflect a period earlier than the world of the DA text (V.2).

The third version, (V.3), is from the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* (SR) a 13th century Sinhala text by a Sinhala monk named Dharmasena (translation by R. Obeyesekere). It in turn, claims to be a translation (but is in fact a transformation) of the 5th century Pali DA.

V.1, Dhammapala's version, is a brief spare account of the life of the nun Kundalakēsi. It was intended merely as background commentary to the poem and so was probably no more than a writing down of its oral sources. V.2 and V.3 are longer than V.1 and the authorial voice is more pervasively present in those texts.

The SR and the DA texts claim a specific connection even though they are six or seven centuries removed from each other and their authors come from two different cultural contexts -- the Indian and the Sri Lankan. The SR claims to be based on the DA even though it is a longer, more elaborate version of that text. All three versions relate the same story. We thus have three time frames, contexts, and perspectives, and can compare what changes have been made, and what the additions, accretions or omissions tell us about shifts or changes in the attitudes and perceptions of the tellers and their audiences. In doing so we might also get a sense of what core doctrinal beliefs have not changed over time.

I do not imagine that from these tenuous time and narrative fragments we can construct any overarching generalizations about the place of women in Buddhist society or history. But at least we might get a sense, however fragmented of the shifting perspectives of writers and audiences as they handled a given body of material.

Let us take the story of *Kundalakēsi*.

The first appears in a five stanza poem (in the *Thēri gatha* collection of the Pali canon written down in the 1st c. B.C.) as Bhadda, the ex-Jain nun. In Dhammapala's commentary which gives "an account in outline"⁹ of the lives of the Theris who wrote those verses, we are told how, in a former birth,

⁹ *Psalms of the Early Buddhists* I. by Mrs. Rhys Davids, Pali Text Society, 1980, p.3.

She sat listening to the Master (the Buddha Padumuttara) and hearing him place a Bhikkhuni at the top of those whose intuition was swift, she vowed that this rank would one day be here. . . . For twenty thousand years she kept the precepts, and built a cell for the Order. Finally in this Buddha era she was born at Rajagaha, in the family of the king's treasurer, and called Bhadda. [V.1, 63-64].

[She was named Kundalakēsi (Curly Locks) only after she became an ascetic and plucked out her hair which later grew back in tight curls.]

Growing up surrounded by attendants, she saw, looking through her lattice, Sathuka the chaplain's son, a highwayman, being led to execution by the city guard by order of the king. Falling in love with him she fell prone on her couch, saying, 'If I get him I shall live if not I shall die.' Then her father, hearing of her state, out of his great love for her, bribed the guard heavily to release the thief, let him be bathed with perfumed water, adorned him and let him come where Bhadda adorned in jewels waited upon him. [V.1, p.64]

But Sathuka covets only her jewels, plans to kill her and takes her up to the mountain 'Rubber's Cliff' on the pretext of keeping a vow he had made to the deity there.

By his behaviour she discerned his plot. Then he bade her take off her outer robe and wrap in it the jewels she was wearing. She asked him what she had done amiss, and he answered: 'You fool, do you fancy I have come to make offering? I have come to get your ornaments.'
 'But whose then dear one are the ornaments and whose am I?'
 'I know nothing of that division.'
 'So be it dear. But grant me this one wish: let me, while wearing my jewels embrace you.' He consented saying 'Very well.' She thereupon embraced him in front, and as if embracing him from the back, pushed him over the precipice. [V.1, p.64]

She then decides, "I cannot in the course of events go home; I will go hence and leave the world." [V.1 p.65]

She joins the order of Niganthas (Jainas), chooses to undertake its most severe practices, (such as tearing out her hair from its roots) and learns their doctrines. Finally, concluding that

"So far as they go, they know, but beyond that there is nothing distinctive

in their teaching," she leaves and "going wherever there were learned persons she learned their methods of knowledge." [V.1, p.65]

Soon there were none equal to debate with her. She wandered through towns and villages setting up her rose apple bough on a sand pile outside a city as a challenge to anyone to debate her. One day she meets the Buddha's chief disciple, Sariputta, they debate, she loses, he teaches her the Doctrine and sends her to the Buddha.

The Master discerning the maturity of her knowledge said: 'Better than a thousand verses, where no profit wings the word, is a solitary stanza bringing calm when heard.' And when he had spoken, she attained Arahantship together with a thorough grasp of the letter and the spirit. Now she entered the Order as an Arahant, the Master himself admitting her. [V.1, p.67]

Her exultation on achieving enlightenment is expressed in the poem that is recorded in the canon.

Let us look at the same story as retold in the 5th c. DA. Already the personal names Bhaddha and Satthaka are lost. Nor is there the preamble about her efforts in countless rebirths to acquire the intellectual capabilities to be "a Bikkhuni at the top of those whose intuition was swift". [V.1, p.63]

The DA version begins as follows:

A rich merchant of Rajagaha, it seems, had an only daughter who was about sixteen years of age and she was exceedingly beautiful and fair to see. (When women reach this age they burn and long for men.) Her mother and father lodged her on the topmost floor of a seven storied palace in an apartment of royal splendour and gave her a single slave woman to wait upon her.¹⁰ [V.2; DA p.227]

Note the explicitly derogative comment on female sexuality in the parenthetical remark, not to mention the fact that the young woman is now lodged in the topmost floor of a seven story palace. Implicit is the suggestion that the isolation is to preserve her virginity and

¹⁰ Version 2 refers to *The Dhammapada Commentary* as translated by E.W. Burlingame, in *Buddhist Legends* part 2, 1979, p. 227. All subsequent references to this text will be given as DA with page number.

that such action is right and socially acceptable. Version 1 which I quoted earlier has no reference to this practice. The young woman is merely described as "growing up surrounded by attendants and saw through her lattice . . ."

The 13th century SR version, (intended as a translation of the DA) goes as follows:

In the city of Rajagaha there lived a very beautiful young woman of noble family. She was about sixteen years old and extremely attractive. Young women of that age are often intoxicated with their youth and are attracted to men. To prevent any loose behaviour, her parents shut her up in a room on the topmost floor of a seven storied apartment, with only a serving maid to attend on her. It was as if she was imprisoned for being born beautiful.¹¹ [V.3; SR p.1]

There is a definite shift here in the authorial tone. Instead of an outright dismissive condemnation of female sexuality that appears in the DA text, the Sri Lankan monk attempts to explain the 'incarceration' of the young woman. There is a note of sympathy for youth, a subtle irony and an implicit criticism of parents who imprison a child "for being born beautiful".

Comparing the three texts one may read the DA's author/translator's self conscious interpolation as the personal views of a misogynist monk/scribe who couldn't repress his anti-feminist feelings; or alternatively, as an author trying to accommodate his text to the values of his post 5th century Indian readers socialized in Brahminic values. His readers/listeners might have found it difficult to accept that parents could agree to, even aid and abet, (as the original story indicated) their daughter making such a socially unsuitable marriage! By contrast, the mildly ironic comment of the 13th century Sinhala monk seems an attempt in the reverse direction -- to qualify that sexist interpolation and perhaps bring it in line with the sympathies and expectations of his medieval Sinhala audiences.

We know from sociological accounts of medieval Sinhala society that while there were periods when Indian brahminic values influenced Sri Lankan society, yet, by and large, the rigid sexual codes of brahminical Hinduism did not operate in Sinhala society. Robert Knox describing sexual mores as they existed in Sinhala village society in the 17th century comments, (with no small degree of shock and disapprobation, good Puritan that

¹¹ Version 3 refers to the story as it appears in the Sinhala *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*. The English translation is by R. Obeyesekere, (unpublished).

he was!) that Sri Lankan village women freely chose their sexual partners and had a great deal of liberty and opportunity to engage in sexual relationships outside of marriage.¹² He comments too that a Sinhala woman was free to leave her husband if she so decided, taking with her anything that was given as dowry.¹³ While there must surely have been changes in society between the 13th and the 17th century, yet there must too have been certain continuities, especially when we consider that right up to the 20th century, before the proliferation of Victorian puritanism and 'protestant' Buddhism, the norms described by Knox were prevalent in remote rural Sinhala Buddhist villages of the central regions.

The parent daughter relationship is also revealing in the manner in which it is related. In Version 1 the text reads:

Then her father hearing of her state, out of his great love for her, bribed the guard heavily to release the thief. [V.1, p.64]

No qualifications are needed, the father's action is simply explained in terms of his love and concern for his daughter.

In the DA version the mother remonstrates,

Do not act in this manner my dear daughter, you shall have someone else for your husband, someone who is your equal in birth family and wealth [V.2, DA p. 227]

It is clear the parents feel they and not she, must make the decision.

The SR version follows the earlier text but again with a subtle variation in the tone.

The mother asks, 'Dear child, why do you say that? Do you think we

¹² Robert Knox, *A Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon*, London 1691, reprinted New Delhi, 1983, p.91-92.

¹³ "But their marriages are but of little force or validity. For if they disagree and dislike one the other; they part without disgrace. Yet it stands firmer for the man than for the woman; howbeit they do leave one another at their pleasure. They do give according to their ability a portion of cattle, Slaves and Money with their daughters; but if they chance to dislike one another and part asunder, this portion must be returned again, and then she is fit for another man, being as they account never the worse for wearing." *Ibid.* p.93.

intend to keep you confined in the house now that you have reached maturity? We will find you a husband, one suited to you in birth and status.' . . . The father too tried but failed to make her change her mind and wondered what he should do in the circumstances. Then secretly he sent a thousand gold coins to the executioner with the message, 'Take this money and do not kill the man. Release him and send him to us.' [V.3, SR p.2]

If we compare the three passages one might say that in V. 1 considerations of affection and concern for the daughter are the important factors. In the DA account, V.2, social considerations are explicitly raised. Issues such as the seclusion of young females in order to preserve their virginity, strategic marriages to preserve birth and clan status, now appear in the story as accepted norms. The father's action is explained as being done in the absence of any alternative.

In the SR Sinhala account, V.3, parental affection and concern once again surface but social concerns also play a role. We know that in traditional Sinhala society cross cousin marriages were the preferred form allowing for close kin relationships to be further strengthened in the marriage relationship. However strategic marriages among the elites were not unknown. The shifts of tone and in the manner of the telling may then perhaps reflect shifting concerns and social norms of the worlds of their readers/listeners -- the one Indian, (functioning in a mainly Brahminic society,) the other Sri Lankan in a more permissive Buddhist society.

As the story continues the relationship between the young woman and her husband is filled out. Here the three versions vary only slightly.

V.1: . . . Bhaddha, decked in jewels waited upon him.

V.2 expands this to:

She resolved to win the favour of her husband; and from that time on, adorned with all her adornments she prepared her husband's meals with her own hand. [DA p.228].

V.3 the 13th century Sinhala version is the most expansive:

In order to win her husband's affection, she would adorn herself in all her jewellery, prepare his meals herself, feed him, give him to drink, wash his hair and bathe him. [SR p.2].

There is a hint here, in the elaborate specificity of the account that these were not just wifely duties, but slightly excessive (almost servile) tasks taken on by an infatuated young woman in order to win her husband's affections. But the robber husband, untouched by all this, feigns illness, takes to his bed and schemes to kill her.

Both the DA and the SR versions give a dramatic account of the journey up the mountain, the conversations between husband and wife and the final battle of wits between them. At the crucial point Kundalakēsi decides: (I quote from the most elaborate version which is the SR.)

V.3 This fellow is truly wicked. Intelligence after all is meant to be put to use. It is not there to be eaten. Therefore, irrespective of whatever I may have thought or done in the past let me now unflinchingly do to you what I must. She then said to him, 'Dear husband some time back when I saw you being taken for execution I told my parents. They paid a thousand gold coins, saved you from death and gave you to me in marriage. From that moment I have been totally devoted to you. Now just because you might kill me can I hate you? Please do me one favour. Grant me, who am about to die, the opportunity to make my obeisance to you in whatever way I choose.' [SR p.5]

Note the contrast with V.1 and how the scene and the dialogues have been elaborated. The husband agrees to her request. She circumambulates him three times making obeisance from the four directions. Then she says,

V.3 'Dear husband, this is my last obeisance.¹⁴ From now on you will not see me again, nor I, you.' So saying she embraced and kissed him first standing in front and then standing behind. As he stood at the edge of the cliff, lost in thought, she went up to him from behind, put one arm round his neck, one in the small of his back and hurled him over the precipice. Her sharp intelligence proved a match for his physical strength. He was smashed to pieces by his fall becoming himself the sacrificial offering. [V.3, SR p.5]

The author of the SR does not seem to waste much sympathy on the male victim! In contrast to V.1 which merely records the facts:

She thereupon embraced him in front, and then, as if embracing him

¹⁴ There is a play here on the word *dakma* meaning offering and *daka* or *dakima* from the word to see. The line could also translate: "This is my last sight of you."

from the back, pushed him over the precipice." [V.1, p. 64]

the elaboration of the account in V.3 suggests the author's ready acceptance, even approval of the woman's action.

At this point all three versions have a verse interpolation that was no doubt an element in the early oral account which has remained as an integral part of the story. Let us compare them. In V.1, the deity living on the mountain

Saw her do this feat and praised her cleverness saying,
 'Not in every case is man the wiser ever,
 Woman too, when swift to see, may prove as clever.
 Not in every case is Man the wiser reckoned
 Woman too is clever an she think but a second.'¹⁵

In V.3 "the deity observed the actions of the two and applauding the woman uttered the following stanza:

Wisdom is not always confined to men
 A woman too is wise and shows it now and then" [DA p.229]

V.3 replaces the verse with a prose comment:

Do men always know best what to do? No. Sometimes women too know what to do. [V.3, SR p.5]

In spite of the varying styles of the English translations all three texts clearly state that wisdom is not the sole preserve of the male, but that women too can and do lay claim to it.

V.3 adds a further rationalisation of the woman's action by bringing in the karmic argument.

The young woman hurled the robber down from the rock with the help of his enemy his own bad karma and herself escaped death by the grace of her friend, her own past good karma. [SR p.6]

¹⁵ Rhys Davids translation.

Kundalakēsi continues to give proof of her intelligence by anticipating reactions at home.

V.3 She thought, 'If I go back home they will ask "Where is your husband?" If I say I have killed him they will say, "Why you loose woman, you paid a thousand gold coins to obtain him and now you kill him.?" If I say that he tried to kill me they will not believe me and say "why would he want to kill you?"' Whichever way one looks at it there seems to be no point going back.' She realized too that it would be unsafe to travel alone wearing her ornaments so she left them all, right there, and set off into the forest. [SR p.6]

In the account of her career as a mendicant nun the three versions do not differ too much. In V.1, Bhaddha, in keeping with her character of critical inquiry, is not fully satisfied with the ascetic teachings she has learned. She says "There is nothing distinctive in their teachings" and decides to go seek more knowledge for herself.

By contrast, in the DA and SR versions it is Kundalakēsi's fellow nuns who send her out with a rose apple bough and the following advice:

V.2. Go forth sister; if anyone who is a layman is able to match question and answer with you, become his slave; if any monk, enter his order as a nun. [D.A. p.230]

The SR version follows the DA closely with one slight variation:

V.3. If a layman defeats you in debate, become his wife, if a monks wins in debate then join his order. [SR p.6]

Implicit in the two later versions is the suggestion that Kundalakēsi is likely to be defeated by a man, monk or layman. If version 2 suggests she becomes his slave, version 3 suggests the (perhaps slightly kinder fate) of becoming his wife!

As regards her intellectual and debating prowess, however, the story line is maintained unchanged and both versions refer to the fact that

V.2 No one was able to match question and answer with her; in fact such a reputation did she acquire that whenever men heard the announcement 'Here comes the nun of the Rose-Apple' they would run away. [DA p.230]

Contrary to the general opinion among scholars, this story seems to suggest that female ascetics who proved their skill could elicit the same standing and respect in the lay society

as their male counterparts. They also seem to have had the freedom to travel the length and breadth of the country alone, just as male ascetics did.¹⁶ As the Rose Apple Mendicant, Kundalakēsi acquires a considerable reputation for her powers of debate and mastery of philosophical discourses. She has taken on and defeated many male ascetics and teachers in debate and she is supremely confident of her powers.

In V.1, when she is told the children have trampled her rose apple bough on the instructions of the Elder Sariputta, she confidently decides to take him on, and that, before a large audience. She declares,

'An unsupported debate is not effective,' and going back to Savatthi she walked from street to street saying, 'Would you see a debate between the Sakyan recluses and myself?' Thus with a great following she went up to the Captain of the Norm who was seated beneath a tree and after friendly greetings asked, 'Was it on your orders that my rose apple bough was trampled?' 'Yes on my Orders.' 'That being so let us have a debate together.' 'Let us Bhaddha.' [V.1, p.66]

In the DA version it is not Kundalakēsi who gathers together her supporters for the debate. People gather because they are interested in the intellectual confrontation.

As the shades of evening drew on she went to the Elder's residence to put her questions. The entire city was stirred up. The people said to each other, 'Let us go and hear the talk of two learned persons.' Accompanying the nun from the city to the Elder's residence, they bowed to the Elder and seated themselves respectfully on one side. [DA p. 231]

The SR version is very similar.

V.3. That afternoon the female ascetic went to the place where the monk Sariyut resided in order to put her questions to him. The city was agog like the city of heaven when the Asura demons invaded it. Eager to hear the debate the citizens

16 It is interesting that many centuries later, during the 19th century Buddhist Revival movement, when attempts were made to reinstate the order of buddhist nuns that had died out, perhaps taking her cue from Kundalakēsi, "a laywoman [mendicant] named Jitadharmaduta Silavati upasika . . . made a pilgrimage to Anuradhapura [the sacred city] from Galle, [the southernmost city] in a rickshaw, stopping at resthouses and exhorting the crowds." quoted by T. Bartholomeusz (1992)

accompanied the female ascetic to where the Senior monk was and stood respectfully on one side. [SR p.9]

The shift of perspective is very subtle. The citizens who accompany the nun in V.1 are her supporters; in V.2 and V.3 they are merely interested onlookers.

Important however is the fact that in all three versions, in the encounter between monk and female mendicant, there is no suggestion of deference on the part of the woman for the man. She takes the monk on as an equal -- questions him and is questioned by him as an equal. When she cannot answer his question, she is not chagrined by defeat in the debate but instead, eager for new knowledge, responds, "I'm keen to learn so please tell me about it." [SR p.10]

Neither the early male commentator on the *Thēri gatha* nor the subsequent male author/translators of the DA and SR seem to have too much difficulty accepting the fact of a woman's prowess as a debater, and her unquestioned superiority over her male counterparts. Does this ready acceptance indicate something about the deep rooted Buddhist belief in the primacy of intelligence, wisdom and learning and the doctrinal position regarding the absence of any gender link in how that intelligence is distributed? To give some substance to the suggestion that Theravada Buddhist societies had fewer social blocks to female education, I will quote again from the Sri Lankan example. There are graffiti poems by women among the collection found on the rock wall of the 4th century A.D. fortress at Sigiriya. These poems were the spontaneous expressions of visitors on seeing the wonders of the fortress and the beautiful frescoes of women that decorated the rock wall. The fact that, between the 8th and 11th centuries a.d., men *and women*,¹⁷ from different walks of life, left their poems and in some cases their specific identities scribbled on the rock wall (unedited and unexpurgated by later scribes) does make a significant statement about the prevalence of a degree of literacy among women in medieval Sinhala society and a public acceptance of it. Coming down to more modern times there were also well known women poets such as Gajaman Nona and Ranchagoda Hamine whose work was in circulation in the 19th century. These may seem isolated examples but they could not have existed in a vacuum. The most powerful argument however, is that when, after Independence, the Sri Lankan government introduced free education, women quickly entered the system and filled more than fifty percent of the slots in schools, universities and most professional institutions. Nor were these women from just the elite classes. The majority were drawn from the Sinhala rural peasantry who seem to have little or no problem with regard to education for females.

¹⁷ I am Bati a young widow climbing Sigiriya looking for words to stitch into a song.

To get back to the story:

V.1 ends with Bhaddha going to the Buddha, who "discerns the maturity of her knowledge", recites a single stanza hearing which she attains arahantship, "together with a thorough grasp of the letter and the spirit. Now she entered the Order as an Arahant, the Master himself admitting her." [V.1, p. 67]

In the DA version there is a shift. It is not the Buddha or even the Elder Sāriputta who ordains the woman.

V.2. The Elder sent word to the nuns and had her admitted. After being admitted to the Order she made her full profession, took the name Kundalakēsi, and after a few days became an Arahant endowed with the Supernatural faculties. [DA p.232]

The SR version follows closely the DA account. By the time of the DA the institution of nuns was probably well established with the pattern of ordination only by fellow nuns. If, by the time of the SR the institution of nuns did not exist (it is believed to have died out in Sri Lanka by the 11th century), it was still very much a part of the Buddhist imagination. Thus while Bhaddha in V.1. could be ordained by the Buddha, subsequent versions of the story had to bring it in line with contemporary institutions and practice. The Elder sends word to the nuns and it is they who admit her to the Order. Nor does the story end with Kundalakēsi's enlightenment as does the first version. Both DA and SR versions have a further significant qualification.

V.2. In the Hall of Truth the monks began a discussion of the incident. 'Kundalakēsi heard little of the Law and yet she succeeded in being admitted to the Order; moreover, she came here after fighting a fierce battle with a robber and defeating him.' The Teacher came in and asked 'Monks what is it that you are sitting here discussing now?' They told him 'Monks measure not the Law I have taught as being little or much. There is no superior merit in a hundred sentences that are meaningless; one sentence of the Law is better. He that defeats all other robbers wins no victory at all but he who defeats the robbers that are his own Depravities, his is victory indeed. [DA p. 232]

The story of Kundalakēsi, the female ascetic, who so brilliantly and quickly entered the Order and achieved Enlightenment, must have been difficult to assimilate into an increasingly androcentric monastic tradition. It must have been more so on the sub-continent with its strong Brahminical patriarchal culture. Hence the questions raised, and the answers that do not directly address the issue.

It may be pushing this kind of detail but I find it interesting that the author of the Sinhala SR, while keeping basically to the DA version, adds a mildly self deprecatory aside and a

quick rationalization of the monk's talk.

- V.3. Monks are expected to either engage in doctrinal discussion or remain silent, but as this discussion was not entirely unproductive to attaining Spiritual Attainments, they stood around talking. [SR p.10]

It is as if the SR author is aware that this kind of talk can be seen by the reader\listener as a little like gossip and somewhat unbecoming among monks, but he justifies it as being the trigger for a sermon that then helps many to reach enlightenment. The precise question that is raised concerning Kundalakēsi is answered only metaphorically not in the terms in which it was couched. The raising of the question is none the less significant and leaves a whiff of androcentricism in the air.

The evidence of the texts, the *Thēri gatha*, and the numerous stories of women achieving enlightenment indicate that the doctrinal position on this issue did not change over the centuries. In spite of the social and institutional changes Buddhism underwent as it spread to different parts of the world, and in spite of the fact that male monks were the authors who handed down the tradition, this core element of the stories remains unchanged. Gender distinctions are not a factor in achieving enlightenment. Theravada Buddhists, we know, did consider it a necessary condition for Buddhahood, but in none of these stories of women is that issue specifically raised.

I would like to end with a few comments about the Buddhist tradition of a written literature in the vernaculars.

While story-telling is an art as old as time, the *writing down* of stories that illustrate Buddhist doctrine, and then the *reading* (often aloud) and the re-writing of those stories, became very early, a Buddhist activity. While the story line remained fixed, a wide range and flexibility was permitted in the re-telling\re-writing of these stories. These written texts then became a part of the commentarial literature of Buddhism, and in turn, were translated back and forth, from the vernaculars of different lands into Pali, and vice-versa.

The doctrinal canon remained in Pali (and if translated was rendered meticulously close), but the flexibility permitted in the translations of the commentarial literature made them reflect in interesting ways, the worlds, values, and linguistic emphases of the times when they were composed. Thus the DA author in a seemingly cavalier treatment of his original states: "Therefore I shall discard this dialect and its diffuse idioms and translate

the work into the pleasing language of the Sacred texts."¹⁸ The SR author not to be outdone says, "we have abandoned the strict Pali method and taken only the themes in composing this work" and perhaps as an ironic jibe at his predecessor he goes into an elaborate long winded metaphor, full of dependent clauses and ends with the admonition that his work "may have faults and stylistic shortcomings but you the reader should ignore them."¹⁹

As we can see from the above quotation the authorial voice was often present in these works and even the names of the author monks sometimes given at the beginning or end of a text. Thus, in the SR, we have a text, an author (with a strong authorial voice), and a stated connection to an earlier text, which in turn links it to other texts.

There is also the suggestion that a close relationship existed between the authors and the readers/listeners of these texts. The Sinhala SR for example, is a curious blend of colloquial and literary styles. It was considered a part of the written literature (and therefore had certain elements of classical literary style,) but it also had many of the characteristics and rhetorical devices of sermons, drawing images and analogies from the everyday world of its time.

The Buddhist story I have discussed belongs to this tradition, and therefore such stories, written and rewritten over time, with specific audiences in mind, must reflect, to some extent, the concerns and attitudes of the periods of their composition.

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¹⁸ Dhammapada Commentary trans. by E.W. Burlingame, 1975, p. 145.

¹⁹ *Jewels of the Doctrine* translated by R. Obeyesekere, 1992, p. xii.

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