

# BUDDHISM AND GENDER BIAS: AN ANALYSIS OF A JATAKA TALE

Kornvipa Boonsue

*This article is primarily an analysis of the way a Buddhist Jataka story has been used to transmit a male hegemonic ideology. In general, Jataka tales have two main characteristics: the first is the presentation of the Buddhist cosmological world view of Karma and the position of the individual in the cosmos; the second is the projection of a secular world view with respect to the relationship between men and women as husband and wife. It is this gender ideology and its effects on women's perception of their female identity that is presented in this article.*

## **Historical Background of the Jataka Tales**

There is no consensus among Buddhist and Jataka scholars about the origins and history of Jataka tales, but here we may tentatively assign their origin to a pre-Buddhist period and to non-Buddhist authors; they existed in India at that time as *Akkhanas*, popular folklore and ballads. However, in the time of the Buddha and the first council two or three years after his death, the Jatakas were reformulated and recognised as part of the Buddha Dharma as illustrating the doctrine of Karma [Gokuldas: 1951]. Later on, the concept of the Bodhisatta was applied to the Pali Jatakas as well as to the moral stories included in the *Atthakatha*. Therefore, since the fifth century AD, Jatakas have been recognised as a body of stories expounding the concept of Bodhisatta, the hero of each story being identified with the Bodhisatta.

A Bodhisatta has generally been accepted as a being who, in his desire to become a Buddha, has had to pass systematically through a succession of re-births fulfilling a progressive scale of virtues before attaining Buddhahood. According to the Pali Jatakas collected by Fausboll, the number of re-births through which Gotama passed as a Bodhisatta was 550 [Gokuldas, 1951:2].

Ms. Kornvipa Boonsue is a Thai scholar from whose Masters' thesis, presented to The ISS, the Hague, this text is extracted.

## **The Vessantara Jataka and Feminine Identity**

Among the 550 Jataka tales, ten are regarded by Thai Theravada Buddhism as exemplifying the greatness of the life of a Bodhisatta. The Vessantara Jataka is one of those ten and deals with the last life before he was born as Gotama and in which he accumulated his highest merit, called *Paramatta* in the Pali text, the donation of one's own flesh and blood.

The Vessantara Jataka is one of the most popular and effective pieces of Buddhist literature in sustaining Buddhist ethical values in Thai society. It was included in school curricula and in sermons preached in monasteries to villagers.

Most Jataka Tales were organised on a similar basis, each telling a story about both the past and present life of the Buddha and being used to illustrate his doctrine. Every Jataka ends by linking the characters in the stories with those of the present.

The Vessantara Jataka starts in the same way. The story is about a sermon preached by the Buddha when he passed by the town in which he had been born. He surprised his audience of 20,000 *Arahats*, his father and his relatives by coming down from the sky. After he sat down on his throne, a red rain fell as holy water from heaven. Then the Buddha started to preach, telling the story behind this supernatural phenomenon and beginning the story of Vessantara as a Bodhisatta.

## **Woman the matter, man the form**

Jataka tales always start with a concept of family in which gender ideology is present particularly in relation to the formation of female identity in the procreative role. Queen Phusati left her existence in heaven to marry King Sanjaya of Sivi in order to serve as the material base for the conception of the great being. In order to be born the mother of a Bodhisatta, she had had to accumulate very high merit in many lives, in one of which she pleaded to be allowed to become the mother of a Bodhisatta.

The story is imbued with the ideology of gender grounded in biological determinism. Via her womb and menstrual discharge,

woman provides and represents matter, whereas the man's semen provides and represents the form as the soul of the offspring. Since the "form" or "soul" is more divine in its nature and is therefore more important than matter, men are more important than and superior to women. To endorse the female reproductive identity, the story purposely indicates that, during her passage through many lives, it was Phusati's own wish and the ultimate goal of her striving to acquire sufficient merit to become the material base for the Bodhisatta's arrival on earth; it was only by doing so that she fulfilled her divine commission. This is very different to the male image conveyed by Vessantara; the ultimate goal of a man's acquisition of merit is to become a Buddha.

Thus, this text holds two implications about gender identity: 1) it is the male who can attain detachment by virtue of being the "soul"; and 2) the female's fate is determined by her biology; she cannot detach herself from the material world which she is taught to believe is her own nature. In this dualistic view of matter and mind, women have no way of fulfilling their religious convictions because their sexuality, as represented by matter, is considered to be an evil power, a destructive force, provocative and complex. It follows from this view that female sexuality should be controlled, suppressed, repressed and conquered, resulting in maximum celibacy. If one regards this duality as a value system, one can see that female sexuality was distorted and manipulated to turn it into a negative value denying its natural value as a powerful, life-giving force, a source of activating energy, warmth, and compassion.

These Buddhist values became part of Thai culture. The role of woman as mother was treated as the measure of female morality. Women who cannot give birth feel themselves inferior and are badly treated by the family or abandoned by their husbands. The notion of male superiority and female inferiority is also maintained strongly in Thai society; for instance, a woman who does not have a boy child is put in the same position as one who cannot bear a child.

### ***Woman as being with material cravings***

Besides the procreative identity assigned to women, they were portrayed as objects of beauty. A woman's beauty is always regarded as a reward for virtue in her previous life. Thus beauty indicated a state of high cosmic position and high religious morality. The stories also convey the image of woman as a being craving beauty. This is implicit in the account of the moment when the time has come for Phusati to leave heaven: she was allowed ten wishes as a reward for her merit. The boons chosen were all material, and were all in the categories from which a Buddhist should be detached:

Black eyes, black pupils like a fawn, black eyebrows may I have, And Phusati my name; this boon, O bounteous

one, I crave. A son be mine, revered by kings, famed, glorious, debonair, bounteous, ungrudging, ready to lend an ear to prayer. And while the baby is in my womb let not my figure go. Let it be slim and graceful like a finely fashioned bow. Still, Lord, may my breasts be firm, nor white haired may I be. My body all unblemished, may I set the death doomed free. [Cowell and Rouse, 1978:249]

### ***Woman as object under male possession***

When the Bodhisatta was born as Vessantara, he devoted himself to alms giving. At the age of eight, he desired to give his heart, eyes, and flesh to anyone who wanted them. When he grew up, he married princess Maddi and had two children. One day he gave away the sacred white elephant to another state. This elephant was state property, and when people learned that it had been given away, they were very angry. Vessantara had to leave the city as punishment.

The day he left the city he requested his father and the people to allow him to give alms in the form of seven items and seven hundreds of each item. His list included seven hundred beautiful young ladies as well as elephants, horses, male and female slaves, and so on, as the story describes:

Seven hundred women too he gave, each standing in a car, with golden chairs and ornaments bedecked these women are, with lovely dress and ornaments, with slender waist and small, curved brows, a merry smile and bright, and shapely hips. Lo, now the king Vessantara goes banished from the land! [Cowell, E.B. and Rouse, W.H.D., 1978: No 547:267].

Here again the whole combined notion of beauty and women is expressed but now qualified to indicate that women and their beauty were under the control and in the possession of men. There is no description of female slaves, which in a sense constitutes evidence supporting the idea that only high-class women deserve beauty.

### ***Woman and the image of feminine morality***

Next, Vessantara goes to bid farewell to his wife before departing. The story presents Maddi as an ideal wife who is faithful to her husband; she decides: "I shall go where my husband goes."

The wife who shares her husband's lot, be it rich or be it poor, her fame the very Gods do praise, in trouble she is sure [Cowell and Rouse, 1978:263].

Maddi joined her husband, taking along with her their two children. In their exile, she collected roots and fruits for the



family to eat, and gave her husband more time to meditate. But even though Maddi is the subsistence earner for the whole family, she still subordinates herself to Vessantara's wisdom and the power of his knowledge, which the story says women are not in a position to have independent access to. The only way women can have access to knowledge is through men. Therefore, to contribute their share to male achievement, women were assigned the role of supporter or alms giver. Women needed the opportunity to give alms more than men, and this concept shaped behaviour and sex role stereotypes in everyday living. For example, in Thai society women are responsible for routine merit-making such as daily alms giving.

### ***Man the decision-maker, woman the follower***

Vessantara is considered to have performed the most meritorious act of all, leading to attaining Buddhahood, because he had committed his own flesh and blood, that is, his children and wife. In the story, while Maddi was out picking fruit one day, Vessantara gave the two children to Jajjuka, a Brahmin, in charity, without Maddi's consent. When she came back and did not see the children, she asked Vessantara about them, but he did not say anything. He let her suffer and search for her children the whole night. It was not until the next morning that he told her what had happened. Maddi was very sad, tears rolled down her cheeks. Her heart was almost broken, but she did not blame her husband for what he had done. She wanted to show that she was not an obstructing force; she reassured him by saying, "I differ not from the decision that you have taken." Two aspects of being a woman are expressed here: women are the bearers of suffering and women may not express any feelings that might hurt their husbands.

Vessantara felt that what he had done was still not enough to prove his detachment, and he therefore decided to donate Maddi. His father knew that and was afraid that if Vessantara donated Maddi he would have no one to take care of him. The King then disguised himself as a Brahmin and asked Vessantara for Maddi, and then returned Maddi to him, after which he could not give her to anyone else. This is an extreme example of the submissive image of women, since Maddi's reply to the king was:

From maidenhood I was his wife, he is my master still.  
Let him know to whom so he desire or give, or sell, or  
kill [Cowell and Rose 1978: No 547:295].

The story ends with Vessantara's achievement after his attempt to give Maddi away; then sacred red rain falls and his merit-making radiates to his family and people. The story ends by emphasizing Karma and cosmology, since it is stated that:

'Tis hard to do as good men do, to give as they can give,  
Bad men can hardly imitate the life that good live. And  
so, when good and evil go to pass away from earth, the  
bad are born in hell below, in heaven the good have birth  
[Cowell and Rouse, 1978: No 547:295].

Maddi played a big role in Vessantara's achievement but she did not receive any credit for her contribution. All appreciation and honour was given to Vessantara, even for what he achieved via Maddi's painful sacrifices, faithfulness, and virtue.

From a feminist perspective, how could one consider this kind of merit accumulation as the ultimate step to salvation? It is in fact very inhumane and the way in which Vessantara wanted to prove his detachment from worldly things is very selfish. He thought only of himself and of the benefit to himself alone. He did not consider the feelings of his wife and his children, as he explained to Maddi:

Both Jali and Kanhajina I let another take, And Maddi  
my wife, and all for wisdom's sake. Not hateful is my  
faithful wife, nor yet my children are, But perfect knowl-  
edge, to my mind, something dearer far [Cowell and  
Rouse, 1978: No 547:293].

At the ideological level, however, this is the way to rationalise and mystify the privilege, arbitrary power, and superiority of the male sex. Religious texts have been preserved by men, and the stories used to project the stereotype of the ideal woman, which was influenced by Hinduism: women are fitted for two things — procreation and food preparation. Women's status was considered on the whole low and without honour. Women were also portrayed as more miserly and envious, as well as more strongly attached to worldly objects than men, and their knowledge was not considered to equal that of men. All this means is that, in political and civil society, the Jatakas reflect the operation of gender stereotypes. The hegemony of this ideology has been absorbed by the masses. Where women's consciousness is formed under the conditions of subordination and oppression, women will internalize a sense of inferiority as inherent in her own nature. And the moral value of femininity is offered as compensation for her inferiority. For example, in social action and in the everyday life of Thai society, Thai women accept Maddi as their ideal image and themselves as being the passive victims of patriarchal power; they also accept the concept of beauty which persuades women to confine their interests to their own physical self.

The concept of beauty<sup>1</sup> has had strong influence on Thai society and has had a significant impact on women's self perception and world view. Thai women by tradition love to present themselves at their best. In families with more than one daughter, the most beautiful is the favourite one and in

some cases the others may be discriminated against by parents and relatives. Many Thai women who are not beautiful have grown up with an inferiority complex. In Thai society, beauty is one of the decisive factors for women to obtain employment, even when beauty is completely irrelevant for the work they are to do. At the national level the image presented by Thailand at first sight is one of a land of smiles and beautiful women.

At the ideological level, the concept of beauty has provided the basis for the development of capitalism which requires consumerist behaviour. Many businesses exploiting the female body have been successful: high society women spend large amounts of money each year on clothes, cosmetics, ornaments, and the like to make and to keep themselves beautiful, partly because of the image of women in Buddhist literature, where beauty is the reward for women who accumulate high merit so that they will be reborn into a high-status family and especially a royal family. Lower class women also spend a lot of money to acquire beauty and keep an image close to that of high society women. Furthermore, the concept of beauty is linked to the concepts of family and sexuality. Many Thai women feel that their beauty can keep their husbands from having another woman or going to a prostitute. Young women think that their beauty will give them a better chance of marrying a high-status, wealthy husband. These examples reflect other concepts as well, for example, female dependency, women as men's objects, who have to make themselves beautiful to appeal to men.

### ***The gender bias in the Buddhist canon***

Buddhism was considered an egalitarian religion because it supported women more than other religions did, even though Buddhist institutions, like other religious institutions, were created by men and were dominated by a patriarchal power structure. The lower level of women is exemplified by some of Buddha's dialogues, which became part of the Buddhist canon. An example is the dialogue between Buddha and Ananda [Digha Nikaya, 2:141 as quoted by Pavinder, 1980]:

- Ananda: How are we to behave towards women?  
Buddha: Do not look at them.  
Ananda: But, if we have to see them, what shall we do?  
Buddha: Do not talk to them.  
Ananda: But if they speak to us, what shall we do then?  
Buddha: Keep wide awake.

The issue raised by Ananda reflects the Buddhist gender bias which sees women as the cause of all temptation, obstructing monks in their attempts to achieve enlightenment. Here the Buddha himself gives rise to a hierarchy, since his philosophical system provides a wide range of criteria for ranking persons according to their religious achievement. Women were ranked in the lowest level:

If, Ananda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the Dharma and discipline proclaimed by the truth-finder, true Dharma would have endured for a thousand years. But since, Ananda, women have gone forth in the Dharma and discipline proclaimed by the truth finder, now Ananda, true Dharma will endure only for five hundred years [Pali canon, vol. 23:286-287].

The Buddha said this, even after placing Bhikkhunis firmly under the authority of Bhikkhus; for example, under the eight chief rules a Bhikkhuni even of a hundred years standing must salute a Bhikkhu even if the latter had only been ordained the day before and is the most junior Bhikkhu [Vinaya, vol. 2:255-256 as quoted by Talim, 1972:17]. Furthermore, the ordination of a Bhikkhuni will be considered official only if the committee of ordination is composed of Bhikkhus. The Buddha was reluctant to allow women to enter the order, because he realised that if women put aside their family and reproductive responsibilities, the stability of society would be severely affected. The Buddha was also of the opinion that women already had two important responsibilities: they were the principle alms givers to monks and monasteries, and they were the procreators whose reproductive cycle should be maintained so that the continuation of life would not be disturbed.

This is one of the points of contradiction between Buddhism as a philosophy of self-fulfillment and Buddhism as a religion concerned with the secular chores of everyday living; this is what makes Buddhism an egalitarian as well as a patriarchal religion with double standards. This kind of double standard permeates both the Buddhist canon and the Sangha. Women have never been recognised as equal in Buddhist societies, and even Buddha himself defined the role of women as reproducer, supporter and sustainer of the family, society and the monastery.

In Thai society, female monks (Bhikkhuni) do not exist. Thai women can enter Buddhist monasteries as nuns; the role of nuns in a monastery is entirely subservient. They perform mainly the household chores and give the monks domestic assistance even though in principle women were accepted by Buddha as having an equal capacity to experience enlightenment.

This antagonistic Buddhist attitude to women was elaborated in the Jatakas. For example, the Gahapati Jataka states that women can never be kept on the right path; somehow or other they will sin and trick their husbands. The Takka Jataka says "A woman rescued from a flood by an ascetic seduces her rescuer and becomes his wife, but later deserts him for a robber chief and tries to murder him." Numerous Jatakas portray women as evil betrayers, fickle, lustful, and immoral beings. This image justifies the moral strictures imposed on women by the male ruling class.

→

Many texts belonging to the Thai classics contain the same concept and the same image of women, presenting women as evil. For example, in *Kitsana Sonmong*<sup>2</sup>, there is a verse used to teach a younger sister;

A wife must get up before the husband in the morning, go to bed after him at night, speak to him sweetly at all times, honour all those whom he honours, and comply with his wishes in all things [His Royal Highness Prince Parama-Nuchit-Chinorosa as quoted by Kerdthet, 1974:117].

The *Khun Chang Khun Phan*<sup>3</sup>, a popular classic, says "a wife should be careful in serving her husband, otherwise she could be punished by death. She has to care for her husband in order to gain pity in turn. She has to respect her husband and control her manner and to behave properly. [King Rama The Second as quoted by Kerdthet, 1974:115].

The *Klong Loknitti*<sup>4</sup> also portrays women in the same way as the Buddhist Sutta: "there are four things that men cannot trust: 1) the rampaging white elephant, 2) the snake, 3) subordinates born of a concubine, and 4) a wife." In the same book, the concept of woman as object was also taken from the Jataka tales: "Wife and offspring are like clothes; when they become torn or boring, one can change them as we change clothes". [His Royal Highness Prince Dechadisorn as quoted by Kerdthet, 1974: 122].

Proverbs To Be Taught to Women<sup>5</sup>, a book used to teach feminine manners according to the standards of Thai tradition, says "having been born a woman, one should realise that and behave as a woman. One should be conscious of her feminine characteristics. To behave in a manner that is half masculine and half feminine is not appropriate." [Sunthorn Phu as quoted by Kerdthet, 1974: 120].

### Violence

Furthermore, the ruling class legitimized this gender bias in laws such as the Act of Husband and Wife in The Three Seal Law enacted by King Rama the First, which allowed men to use violence against women, stating that:

In the relationship between husband and wife, if the wife makes mistakes, the husband may hit her. If he does the wife cannot sue him. If the wife scolds or curses her husband, she must apologize to him with flowers and sweet rice [Vol. 2:238 as quoted by Kerdthet, 1974:130].

The same law classifies wives according to three categories to legitimize the polygamy system which was derived from the Buddhist cosmology. This law stated that:

1. The central wife (Maeo Klang Mueng) is the wife chosen by parents.
2. The outer wife (Maeo Klang Nok) is the wife whom the husband takes to be his concubine.

3. The slave wife (Maeo Klang Tasi) is the wife whom the husband buys from another household [Vol. 2:206 as quoted from Kerdthet, 1974:56].

Thus, the gender ideology inherent in Buddhism as a religion was in turn derived at least in part from the attitude of Buddha himself, whose consciousness had been formed under the oppressive subordination of women in Hindu culture. Partly too, it was derived from a traditional way of perceiving the fundamental nature of femininity in procreation, i.e., the weakness of women that needs male protection. Under the hegemonic state apparatus, women are permanently in the "process of becoming" and feminine stereotypes are reinforced by the historic roots of Buddhism.

### NOTES

- 1 The concept of beauty during the Buddhist epoch had a significant effect on the social mobility of women. Beautiful women were given the title or distinction of Janapada Kalyani or Nagara Sobhini and there were no caste barriers to bearing this title [Talim, 1972:166]. Furthermore, beauty and the appreciation of beauty are still qualities most admired by Buddhists. This is reflected in Buddhist sculptures and paintings as well as in Thai classical literature, from the Sukhothai period to the Bangkok era, the model being the beauty of the ideal woman described in the Tri Phum Pra Ruang.
- 2 *Kitsana Sonmong* is a poem in which a woman teaches her sister, *Kisana*, the customs and ways of life.
- 3 *Khun Chang, Khung Phan* is an epic poem dealing with the life of a Thai 'culture hero', *Khun Phan*, and his relations with his arch rival *Khun Chang* and a woman they both love, among many other things.
- 4 *Klong Loknitti* is a kind of Thai poem which is called *klong*. The term *Loknitti* refers to modes of relationships among different groups of people.
- 5 A popular reference concerning feminine behaviour written by a famous Thai poet, *Sunthorn Phu*.

### References

- Gokuldas, D. 1951. *Significance and Importance of the Jatakas*, Calcutta University.
- Pavinder, G. 1980. *Sex in the Worlds Religions*, London: Sheldon Press.
- Cowell, E.B. and Rouse, W.H.D. 1978. *The Jataka, translated from the Pali Text*, New delhi: Cosmo Publications.
- Talim, M. 1972. *Woman in Early Buddhist Literature* Bombay: University of Bombay.
- Kerdthet, B. 1974. *Status of Thai Women Reflected in Rattanakosin Literature 1782-1851*, Bangkok: Srinakarintrawiroth University.