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Buddhism and Women—The *Dhamma* Has No Gender

By Chand R. Sirimanne¹

Abstract

The increasing influence and relevance of Buddhism in a global society have given rise to a vibrant and evolving movement, particularly in the West, loosely called Socially Engaged Buddhism. Today many look to Buddhism for an answer to one of the most crucial issues of all time—eradicating discrimination against women. There is general agreement that Buddhism does not have a reformist agenda or an explicit feminist theory. This paper explores this issue from a *Theravāda* Buddhist perspective using the scriptures as well as recent work by Western scholars conceding that there are deep seated patriarchal and even misogynistic elements reflected in the ambivalence towards women in the *Pāli Canon* and bias in the socio-cultural and institutionalized practices that persist to date in *Theravāda* Buddhist countries. However, Buddha's acceptance of a female monastic order and above all his unequivocal affirmation of their equality in intellectual and spiritual abilities in achieving the highest goals clearly establish a positive stance. This paper also contends that while social and legal reforms are essential, it is meditation that ultimately uproots the innate conditioning of both the oppressors and the oppressed as the *Dhamma* at its pristine and transformative core is genderless.

Keywords: Buddhism, women in religion, religious discrimination, meditation

The evolving influence of Buddhism in the West

The increasing influence and relevance of Buddhism in its various forms in the global society of the 21st century have given rise to a vibrant and evolving movement, particularly in the West, loosely called Socially Engaged Buddhism or the *Fourth Yāna* with its roots in traditional Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand (Queen 2000). From a Buddhist perspective, the mind is the forerunner and source of everything in existence, and Buddhism is best described as an ethico-psychological system rather than a religion in the conventional sense of the word (De Silva 1992). Therefore, its ethical framework is inextricably interwoven with its meditative practice and its salvific Path. While its more compassionate and inclusive system of ethics is embraced by the ecological and feminist movements, its meditative practice has come to have a significant impact on Western psychology. Thus, as yet the influence of Buddhism in the West is somewhat fragmented and in the case of meditation, specifically mindfulness has been adapted, largely disengaged from its original Buddhist source.

As Buddhism becomes more influential in the West, many practitioners, academics and activists look to Buddhism for answers to two of the most urgent and crucial issues of our time –

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the protection of the planet and eradicating discrimination against half its population. Recently a Buddhist declaration on climate change was made as a result of a book, (*A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency*), and in a pan-Buddhist response to the many contributions to it, *The Time to Act is Now. A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change* was formulated in an attempt to create a global and non-sectarian awareness and response to what some scientists call the greatest threat to human life (Loy, Bodhi & Stanley, n.d. para. 5):

There has never been a more important time in history to bring the resources of Buddhism to bear on behalf of all living beings. The four noble truths provide a framework for diagnosing our current situation and formulating appropriate guidelines—because the threats and disasters we face ultimately stem from the human mind, and therefore require profound changes within our minds. If personal suffering stems from craving and ignorance – from the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion—the same applies to the suffering that afflicts us on a collective scale.

Over the last few decades Buddhism, environmentalism, the ecological movement and feminism have been the subject of much interdisciplinary work. Buddhist philosophy, ethics and its system of meditation have found common ground with the movements known as Eco-Buddhism and Deep Ecology with the core acknowledgement of the interrelatedness of all beings and their intrinsic value for the health and survival of the planet and all its inhabitants. Macy in her book, *World as lover, world as self* (2003) makes a case for integrating Eco-feminism and Buddhist perspectives for a transformation that would lead to a more compassionate attitude and protection of the planet. In her chapter ‘Acting with Compassion: Buddhism, Feminism, and the Environmental Crisis’, Kaza (2014) explores several areas where American Buddhism and feminism intersect. As they and several other scholars point out, first and foremost is experiential knowledge gained through both the cultivation of the mind and interactions with others. The second is the observation of the conditioning of the mind pertaining to one’s attitudes, emotional barriers and assumptions. The third is the understanding of how everything is interconnected in terms of society, nature and the planet. Kaza (2014) also examines the emotional energy gained through reflection, its therapeutic potential and also the key role that interacting positively with society plays in wellbeing.

Buddhism and women

Gross (1993) in her *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* makes a crucially important and extensive study of all the main sects of Buddhism from a cross-cultural, religious and feminist point of view stating her principal objective as “a feminist revalorization of Buddhism”, analyzing the key Buddhist concepts and attitudes that shape its world view. She as well as other scholars are divided about whether there is a case for feminism in Buddhism, especially in *Theravāda* or early Buddhism seen largely as shaped by patriarchal attitudes as opposed to the later developments in the *Mahayāna* and *Vajirayāna* traditions more favourable towards women. While there is general agreement among Western scholars that there is no explicit feminist theory in Buddhism, material that points to less discriminatory gender attitudes and even a positive stance towards women have been explored. Also, as a belief system that promoted a homeless life discarding attachments to family to reach

its salvific goal of liberation from suffering, early Buddhism had little to say about women's issues and reproduction (Keown 1995).

Overall, however, compared to the other major religions, from the outset women have always played a significant role in Buddhism as lay disciples as well as monastics later on influencing the Order and societies where Buddhism took root (Dewaraja 1994). Dewaraja (1994) also notes that unlike in the other major religions, marriage is a purely secular matter in Buddhism, and also cites the *Sigalovāda Sutta* where the marital relationship is described as a reciprocal one with mutual obligations, and as there is no central creator in Buddhism and hence no sacredness attached to the human body (Gross 1993) nor a strong differentiation of what is natural or unnatural, Buddhism has nothing against contraception (Hughes & Keown 1995; Harvey 2000) or homosexuality (De Silva 2003; Hughes 2007). Most of all, the mere fact of women being included in the teachings and practices was remarkable given that this took place over 2,500 years ago in a patriarchal society where women had few rights with regard to education and religious practices as Halkias (2013, p. 494) notes:

Buddhism's greatest contribution to the social and political landscape of ancient India is the radical assumption that all men and women, regardless of their caste, origins, or status, have equal spiritual worth. This is especially pertinent concerning the status of women, who were traditionally prevented by the *brāhmanas* from performing religious rites and studying the sacred texts of the Vedas.

Although Buddha was not a social reformer, simply the fact that he admitted women into the monastic order was revolutionary and would have no doubt created a great deal of animosity in society and unease even within the male monastic communities. Gross notes that thorough explorations of Buddhism and gender started only in the 1980s, and she identifies four key areas that need further investigation (Gross 2013, p. 663):

First is simply gathering the information about women and gender—given that most Buddhists, especially Western Buddhists, were quite unaware of how male-dominated Buddhism has traditionally been. Second, especially for Asian Buddhists, deep concern about the status of nuns and the need to restore full ordination for them in some parts of the Buddhist world has taken center stage. Third, especially for Western Buddhists, who are usually converts to Buddhism and are generally lay practitioners, a whole gamut of questions about how to live as Buddhists in a non-Buddhist culture became dominant. Finally, Buddhists, especially in the West, have taken up the issue of why there have been so few women teachers and leaders throughout Buddhist history and have begun to change that situation dramatically.

Going beyond simple ambivalence of attitudes, Sponberg (1992, p. 8) explores the many voices of early Buddhism identifying four distinct attitudes: *Soteriological inclusiveness*, *institutional androcentrism*, *ascetic misogyny* and *soteriological androgyny*. The first is that the core Buddhist doctrine and its salvific Path are essentially inclusive and do not discriminate between genders. However, as Buddhism became institutionalized, it took on the societal perspective of male superiority reflecting not only cultural attitudes towards women but also the misogynist views of

male ascetics. Finally, Sponberg sees an attempt in the Canon at a later period to resolve the incompatibility of these three attitudes through incorporating a more inclusive fourth perspective more aligned with its original acceptance of both genders as equals on the salvific Path, which has endured to this day.

Ambivalence in the *Theravāda* stance

My paper looks at the issue of entrenched discrimination against women and achieving equality for them from a *Theravāda* Buddhist perspective citing the *Pāli* Canon as well as the work of recent scholars. This paper concedes that the *Pāli* Canon, or more specifically some of the commentaries, display an ambivalent attitude towards women – at times displaying patriarchal and even misogynistic views, and also acknowledges that there is discrimination of varying degrees in institutional and societal practices in *Theravāda* countries that persist to date. However, there is a strong case for saying that the Buddhist doctrine, at its core, once the societal and cultural trimmings are discarded, is free of any type of gender bias. Central to this argument is the momentous fact of the Buddha's acceptance, albeit with hesitation, of a female monastic order and his unequivocal affirmation of their equality in intellectual and spiritual capabilities in achieving the highest goals in the purification of the mind leading up to enlightenment and his nurturing and praise of their advancement on the Path. In addition, Buddha is said to have stated several times that his disciples consisted of *both* males and females of lay and monastic communities. Furthermore, female disciples are depicted overall in a positive manner in the *Pāli Canon* as strong, intelligent beings who are flawed as well but are transformed by the Buddhist teachings they encounter (Hecker 1994). Women have also played a key role in supporting and disseminating the *Dhamma* both in the time of the Buddha up until the present. In addition, the doctrines of *kamma* and dependent origination as well as core ideals such as harmlessness (*ahimsā*) and universal loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*) and the precepts all make any type of discrimination or harm towards others totally unacceptable. Finally, the ultimate salvific goal of the entire system of meditation in Buddhism is geared towards the seeing and realization of the three characteristics of all existence (*samsarā*) – Impermanence (*anicca*), Unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and Non-self (*Anattā*) (Khin 2011). *Anattā* is the unique concept at the core of Buddhism and negates the existence of any abiding soul or personhood at the deepest level in any sentient being (*SN 22.59*) – hence the cultivation of the mind targets the eradication of all conditioning including the stereotypical attitudes and role of gender. Thus, this paper asserts that while social reform and laws are essential foundations for eradicating discrimination towards women, it is the cultivation of the mind (*bhāvanā*) that ultimately uproot the innate conditioning of all genders.

Negative attitudes towards women

Some scholars point to the misinterpretation and warping of the Buddhist ethos to suit socio-cultural attitudes and prejudice in *Theravāda* Buddhist countries (Dewaraja 1994, para. 19):

Conflicting with the Buddhist ethos and negating its effects in varying degrees is the universal ideology of masculine superiority. So that in all three societies—Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma—there is an ambivalence in the attitudes towards women...

The view that early Buddhism displays a strong patriarchal and even misogynistic attitude towards women is based mainly on the recount of the Buddha's initial refusal to grant the request of his aunt and foster mother, Prajāpati Gautami and her women to become monastics three times. The *Pāli Canon* reports that it was Venerable Ananda who finally convinced the Buddha through presenting a logical case on behalf of the women as the Buddha himself admitted that they were fully capable of attaining the highest goals on the Path to enlightenment. Also, the Buddha is also said to have declared that his original prediction of the teachings lasting for 1000 years would be halved if women were allowed to ordain. In addition, it is also said that he introduced extra 85 rules for the *bhikkhunis* (nuns) including eight special rules ensuring that they would always be subordinate to the monks (BDEA/Buddhanet 2008):

44. ...The special rules for nuns were (1) in matters of respect and deference, a monk always had precedence over a nun, (2) a nun must spend the rains retreat in a place separated from monks, (3) nuns must ask monks for the date to hold the Uposatha and about teaching the Dharma, (4) when a nun did wrong she must confess it before the community of both nuns and monks, (5) a nun who broke an important rule must undergo punishment before both the nuns and the monks, (6) a nun must be ordained by both an assembly of nuns and of monks, (7) nuns must not abuse or revile a monk, and (8) a nun must not teach a monk.

These eight *garudhammas* (see *Appendix A*), are often cited as evidence of Buddha's wish to denigrate women and preserve male dominance even within the Order. Gross (1993; 2013) in particular emphasizes the fact that from the start with these rules *bhikkhunis* were excluded from positions of leadership and influence, which in turn influenced the position of women in Asian societies. She concludes that the acid test for the future of Buddhism is the fostering of women teachers without the subordination of nuns to monks and less segregation of the two groups. Others also point to the 85 extra rules for the nuns as more proof of an attempt to oppress them. However, Thanissaro (2007) explains these extra rules in the following manner:

1. more than one third of these extra rules were formulated to protect bhikkhunīs from being the direct recipients of the abusive or careless behavior of other bhikkhunīs;
2. two of the extra rules (Pācittiyas 6 and 44) prevent bhikkhunīs from putting themselves in a position of servitude to bhikkhus or lay people;
3. according to the rules' origin stories, all but three of the extra rules (Pācittiyas 59, 94, and 95) were formulated only after bhikkhunīs complained to the bhikkhus about an errant bhikkhuni's behavior.

A practical explanation for Buddha's initial reluctance in accepting women into the Order is that maintaining celibacy, which is crucial to the monastic way of life, would become very difficult with the admission of women resulting in the Order lasting for a lesser period (BDEA/Buddhanet 2008):

45. ... Interestingly enough, his prediction proved to be fairly accurate. By the 7th century CE, certain groups of monks were beginning to marry, a trend that, along with other circumstances, eventually led to the decline of Buddhism in India.

Fortunately, in most Buddhist countries, monks and nuns continue to practise celibacy and uphold the original values of the monastic life.

Although this prediction is automatically interpreted as an indictment on women, logically it could also very well be that of men or much rather a realistic assessment of human nature by a great pragmatist. Moreover, scholars also point to the belief in *Theravāda* countries that a female birth is the result of less favourable *kamma* than for a male birth that persist even today, arising from the belief that only a male can even aspire to become a Buddha in *Theravāda*, based mainly on the post-canonical source, the *Jataka Stories*, which depicts the *Bodhisatta* ceasing to be reborn as females even before being reborn as male animals. However, Anālayo (2014, p. 112) investigates this notion in both the Canonical and Commentarial texts and concludes:

These instances give the impression that there might have been a shift of attitude from the canonical sources to the position taken in later literature. In the words of Appleton (“In the Footsteps” 47), “the karmic reasons for female birth are primarily a commentarial preoccupation”.

Importantly he cites the *Cūlakammavibhanga-Sutta* that presents the effects of specific deeds in shaping rebirths where no mention is made of female births (Anālayo 2014, p. 113) as a result of less favourable *kamma*.

In Asian Buddhist countries the most important issue for centuries has been the lack of women monastics, which is also one of the most significant problems for Western Buddhists. While Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia never had a *bhikkhuni* Order, Sri Lanka had a well-established one from the time Buddhism was introduced in the reign of King Devanampiyatissa (BC 250-210) until the fall of Anuradhapura in AD 1017 due to the Cholian invasion. After a prolonged struggle over centuries eleven Sri Lankan *Dasasil* nuns (junior nuns without full ordination) were ordained in 1996 at the Sarnath Temple in India with the help of a team of *Theravāda* monks and the required quorum of *Mahāyāna* nuns from China and Korea (Weeraratne 1998). However, in the other *Theravāda* countries there is still resistance to establishing a female monastic Order. On the other hand, Adam (2000), Rocha & Barker (2011) and other scholars have pointed to the key role that women have always played in the dissemination of Buddhist ideas in Australia as well as overall in the West. In 1995 Ajahn Brahmavamso, Abbot of the Bodhinyana Monastery in Perth took the initiative to establish the first *Theravāda* monastery (*Dhammasara*) for nuns in 1998 with the help of the *Buddhist Society of Western Australia*, and the Australian nun, Sister Ajahn Vayama, became its Abbot.

A case for equality of genders in Buddhism

As the teachings of the Buddha were only committed to writing long after his demise, there is debate about the veracity of the accounts regarding negative attitudes towards women. Some scholars believe these were the writings of disciples prejudiced towards women in a society that became more discriminatory towards them. Others present possible pragmatic reasons for Buddha’s reluctance such as the sheer revolutionary nature of the idea of women as homeless mendicants, the very real dangers inherent in such a life and the wrath of a patriarchal society already critical of world renunciation and Buddha’s rejection of the caste system, avoiding gossip and the need to pacify both society and monks rather than being prejudiced towards women on his

part (Gross 1993; Sponberg 1992). Critics also cite the ongoing belief in *Theravāda* countries that a female birth is the result of inferior *kamma*, and women are urged to pray for male births in the future, which however is a societal issue rather than based on the *Canon* as mentioned earlier. This belief, however, can be justified to a limited extent as in general women's lives were indeed filled with more suffering than men's due to both societal and biological factors at the time of the Buddha, and even today as the high numbers of female embryos being terminated, girls denied education, forced marriages, violence and sexual exploitation of girls and women, barriers in the labour market and lower wages demonstrate. However, the real societal issue is, as Dewaraja (1994, para. 17) points out, the way this idea of inferior *kamma* has been used in patriarchal societies:

...However, it does not necessarily follow that social practice conforms to theory. The egalitarian ideals of Buddhism appear to have been impotent against the universal ideology of masculine superiority. The doctrine of Karma and Rebirth, one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism, has been interpreted to prove the inherent superiority of the male. According to the law of Karma, one's actions in the past will determine one's position of wealth, power, talent and even sex in future births. One is reborn a woman because of one's bad Karma. Thus the subordination of women is given a religious sanction.

The theory of *kamma* is thus often used in the justification of discrimination towards women and in shaping attitudes of both the oppressors and the oppressed in traditional societies (see *Appendix A*). This justification is also not limited just to women but also to the poor, dispossessed, those outside mainstream ethnic groups and castes. Tsomo (2013, p.660) emphasizes the wider implications of discriminatory practices in religious institutions on society in general:

To my mind, it is a natural corollary of human rights to eliminate practices that subordinate women, including the practice of denying women the right to manifest their religious beliefs. Denying women equal access and opportunities institutionalizes their inferiority in society and hence supports everything from inferior education for girls to sex trafficking.

Quite apart from the multi-layered and highly complex operation of *kamma*, it is also illogical to surmise that any female birth is due to inferior *kamma* as opposed to a male birth as there are so many other factors to consider – the time and place, the type of society and parents, their socio-cultural and economic status and the nature of the body and mind (health, appearance, disability, intelligence, skills etc.) in gauging the quality of a life. Also, most crucially of all, as Gross (1993) points out, whatever the truth of this belief of female births being more unfortunate, it *does not* give any individual or society the right to discriminate against females and inflict suffering.

Scholars who take a more positive stance point to the fact that the Buddha is said to have clearly stated at various times that his disciples consisted of *both* men and women from monastic and lay communities (Nyanaponika and Hecker 2003). Furthermore, the *Therigāthā* (*The Songs of the Women Elders*) of the *Pāli* Canon provides significant evidence recounting the struggles and triumphs of the first group of nuns who came from the highest rungs to the lowest in society. The women here are portrayed as complex and spirited human beings grappling with personal, societal and spiritual issues rather than as cowed possessions of men. Gross makes an important

observation with regard to record-keeping in a historical sense: the way records are received and interpreted in androcentric societies pointing out that works such as the *Therīgāthā* have been largely ignored and undervalued (Gross 1993 p. 20). Halkias (2013, p. 494) emphasizes the insignificance of gender in progressing on the Path:

On the other hand, the pursuit of Buddhist practice and attainment is not bound by considerations of gender—“what difference does being a woman make when the mind’s well-centred, when knowledge is progressing, seeing clearly, rightly, into the Dhamma. Anyone who thinks ‘I am a woman’ or ‘a man’ or ‘Am I anything at all?’—that’s who Mara’s fit to address” (*Soma Sutta*, SN.I.129).

A core positive characteristic of Buddhism with regard to gender equality is the absence of an omnipotent Creator God traditionally portrayed as a male at its centre providing legitimacy to male supremacy. Thus, there is also no divine code of conduct that gives authority to males as in other major religions (Dewaraja 1994; Gross 1993). Instead of a Creator God it is one’s *kamma* and dependent origination (*paticca samuppāda*) (see *Appendix A*) that shape the birth of every being opening up the possibility or indeed high probability of being born as any gender in the *samsaric* cycle (*SN* 12.2 PTS: *S* ii 2; *DN* 15 PTS: *D* ii 55; *SN* 12.20 PTS: *S* ii 25). While the main agenda of Buddhism is not social reform, its ethical, doctrinal and psychological frameworks explicitly condemn creating mental or physical suffering for any other being, and the key concepts that suffuse the *Dhamma* are harmlessness (*ahimsā*), *mettā* (universal loving kindness) and compassion (*karunā*) (*MN* 8; Nyanaponika 1994a). Therefore, some *Theravāda* Buddhist leaders such as Ajahn Brahm argues that the *Dhamma* should be evidence enough for gender equality, highlighting the gap between the ideal and practice (Brahm 2014, para. 5):

As Buddhists who espouse the ideal of unconditional loving kindness and respect, judging people on their behavior instead of their birth, we should be well positioned to show leadership on the development of gender equality in the modern world and the consequent reduction of suffering for half the world’s population. Moreover, if Buddhism is to remain relevant and grow, we must address these issues head on. But how can we speak about gender equality when some of our own Theravada Buddhist organizations are gender biased?

Most importantly, *Anattā* or Non-Self, the unique doctrine at the heart of Buddhism that denies an identity or lasting entity at the centre of any being (*SN* 22.59 PTS: *S* iii 66; *AN* 4.49 PTS: *A* ii 52) makes gender difference at the deepest level a superficial factor just as race, ethnicity, appearance or social status. The entire psychological training of Buddhism or its system of meditation, which leads to its ultimate salvific goal of enlightenment, is designed to enable practitioners to see the true nature of the mind-body (*nāma-rūpa*) complex that consists of the ever changing interplay of the Five Aggregates (*khandha*): (1) form (2) sensations/feelings (3) perception (4) mental formations and (5) consciousness (*SN* 22.48 PTS: *S* iii 47; *SN* 22.5 PTS: *S* iii 13).

The role of meditation in eradicating conditioning

Without a doubt social and legal reforms are essential for eradicating discrimination against women. This paper asserts, however, that it is meditation that can ultimately uproot the innate

conditioning of both the oppressors and the oppressed with regard to harmful gender stereotyping and discrimination. As Gross (1993, p. 24) states, “the Dharma is neither male nor female” and what is needed is “an androgynous approach” in the sense of being inclusive of male, female, transgender and intersex people, which is also reflected in the two truths in Buddhism – the concept of gender existing only in the mundane world and truth and not in the supermundane truth. *Theravāda* Buddhism has little interest in reproduction or sexuality - not having a Creator there is no ‘sacredness’ attached to the human form and norms of sexual behaviour. De Silva AL (2003) discusses the implied attitude of *Theravāda* to LGBT sexuality stating that the same rules apply as to heterosexual misconduct – the intention (*cetanā*) (see *Appendix A*) is paramount as always and that as long as sex is between consensual adults and does not involve adultery, and is an expression of love, respect and loyalty, there is no negative *kamma* involved. He also points out that the same prohibitions apply as for heterosexual misconduct (sex with underage persons, prisoners and other helpless people). Thus, gender does not play an overweeningly significant role in the context of Buddhist teachings.

As with all other types of discrimination such as racism and ethnocentrism and wrong doing, laws and social reforms, while setting up crucially important foundations, do not necessarily eradicate deep-seated cultural and personal attitudes. The evidence for this can be observed in many Western countries, in particular countries like Sweden, with firmly established legal and social rights and equality for women, yet with a hidden dark layer of violence against them that is often ignored (Lundgren, Heimer et al 2001). Australia, too has a proud history of pioneering efforts in the women’s suffrage movement and the rights of women are enshrined in law. Nevertheless, the glass ceiling is still in existence in the highest rungs of power and business and women’s wages lag behind men’s in some industries. In addition, the scrutiny afforded to female leaders in any sphere seems to have an extra judgemental dimension that scrutinizes their personal lives critically, and often women too are complicit in this. Also, an unacceptably large number of women are the victims of domestic violence, rape and even murder each year (whiteribbon.org.au 2016). Thus, the uprooting of deep-seated individual and societal conditioning cannot necessarily be carried out only through formal education and laws. Instead deep personal transformation through mental cultivation advocated in Buddhism is the key to eradicating discrimination against women just as with other enduring scourges of humanity such as racism.

***Bhāvanā* in *Theravāda* and mindfulness in the West**

However, the effectiveness of meditation depends largely on the way it is done. Today mindfulness has become a mainstream secular technique in the West largely disengaged from its Buddhist source, used not only in psychotherapy but in almost every sphere of society from education, sports and business to even the military (Cullen 2011; (Kwee, Gergen, & Koshikawa 2006; Mindfulnet.org 2016). It is now touted as a panacea for so many ills and marketed as a product – so much so that some scholars call it ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser and Loy 2013). The *Pāli* term *sati* or mindfulness in *Theravāda*, however, is a deeply moral quality of mind that also means remembering and much more than mere non-judgmental awareness, focused attention or being in the present moment (Nyanatiloka 1980, p. 307). In addition, since the Buddha recommended developing a high level of concentration or *Samādhi* first or at least concurrently with insight or *Vipassanā* meditation (*AN* 2.30 PTS A i 61; *SN* 35.204 PTS: S iv 191; *AN* 4.170 PTS: A ii 156), there is a great difference in the strength of the mindfulness used in the two contexts. Buddhist meditation goes so much further than just the observation of the body and mind noting superficially

that everything rises and passes away. It is essentially a profound and thorough analysis and dismantling of the mind-body (*nāma-rūpa*) complex to its most infinitesimal components until the ultimate truth is revealed that it is empty of a personality and is a mere process rather than an entity (SN 35.85 PTS: S iv 54).

The Pāli word *bhāvana* has a much more complex meaning than the English word ‘meditation’ or ‘reflection’. The ‘cultivation of the mind’ is a closer definition with its active connotation of growing, weeding, fertilizing as opposed to the more passive nature of the other two (Nyanatiloka 1980, pp. 67-69). It is the purification of the mind that entails uprooting and ridding it of the toxins of greed, hatred and delusion and the active cultivation of the positive states of mind such as loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity (Nyanaponika 1994a). The description of Buddhism as an ethico-psychological system demonstrates the inseparable connection between ethical behaviour and mental cultivation—morality/ethics considered as the foundation for the cultivation of the mind. In the use of mindfulness today as a secular disengaged tool the significance of ethical conduct and the development of concentration are largely ignored in keeping with today’s obsession with instant results and also preserving the secular nature of this technique that is mainly responsible for its burgeoning popularity (Wallace 2012). However, a great deal of effectiveness and durability too are lost in this metamorphosis of a meditative system entailing much time and effort (Nyanaponika 1994b) to a mere technique.

Theravāda Buddhism alone has 40 subjects and numerous methods in its system of meditation (Nanamoli 2010; Vajiranana 1987), and although there are many psychotherapeutic goals on the Path of developing the mind, the ultimate salvific goal is the seeing and understanding the three characteristics of Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness and Non-Self not only in one’s own mind and body but in all phenomena of existence (see *Appendix B*). The three fundamental toxins that pollute the mind, greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) rooted in ignorance (*avijja*) create the illusion of a personality (AN 3.33 PTS: A i 134; SN 35.80 PTS: S iv 50), which in turn is further conditioned by nurture, cultural and societal norms. Therefore, just as cultural, ethnic and racial superiority or inferiority, the stereotypical gender roles too are part of the conditioning of the mind much more than the actual biological differences. In Buddhism there is no duality of mind and body—instead it is a mind-body complex working together. Thus, the nature of the body certainly plays a crucial part in the way the mind is attuned and reacts but at deep levels of consciousness reached through meditation, the body begins actually to disappear (Brahm 2006, p. 164). The two truths and the concept of Non-self (*Anattā*) in Buddhism have caused a great deal of misunderstanding leading many Western scholars to label Buddhism as nihilistic or pessimistic. The Buddha recognized the need for labels, concepts and identities in the mundane reality of the world – as indeed a strong will, determination and energy are needed to follow the salvific Path to liberation. This Eightfold Path consists of: Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration, Right Views and Right Intention. The first three belong to *sīla* – ethical conduct or morality, which is the foundation needed for the rest. The next three belong to *Samādhi* – concentration, which is the training of the mind – resulting ultimately in *paññā* (wisdom/insight). It is at the very end of this gradual training (as Buddha described his teachings) that one achieves the insight into the higher or ultimate reality/supermundane truth – that a concrete and lasting identity is absent in any being. William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), which served to establish the great importance of the self in the scholarly study of human behaviour in the West, suggested a similar perspective. His take on the self and consciousness displays many similarities to that of the Buddhist perspective of the ‘self’ as a process rather than a solid entity and he is credited with the phrase “stream of consciousness”

(Goodman 2013), which is an approximate translation of the Pali “*vinnana-sota*” (Nyanatiloka 1980). However, there was little follow up to this until the 1950s when the interest in the self, began to increase from various theoretical angles, not only in psychology but also in sociology and other social and behavioural disciplines as well (Mischel & Morf 2003). In Western psychology there is still little agreement on the definition of the construct of the self, and although there is a long way to go before mainstream acceptance, there is a slow movement towards the Buddhist concept of Non-self with the main obstacle being the fundamental significance placed on individuality in Western civilization.

It is the focus on the mind, its workings and its many ills and the desire to find a solution to human suffering and ultimately happiness, using a logical approach with empirical evidence that is the interface between Buddhism and Western psychology, although the way the two systems approach these issues and their ultimate goals differ (Cayoun 2011). What makes Buddhist meditation both relevant and attractive even today is that it empowers the individual without the requirement of unquestioning faith to a deity with the aim of purifying and strengthening the mind, and this quest for mental and physical health and happiness is one that is timeless and universal (De Silva 1992; Kwee, Gergen & Koshikawa 2006; Williams & Kabat-Zinn 2011). Mindfulness meditation being used today is a secularized version of Insight (*Vipassana*) meditation taught by the Buddha (*Mahasatipatthana Sutta*), with a great deal of variation in the quality of mindfulness and its use across a growing and evolving spectrum of applications (Mindfulnet.org) in the West. The immense popularity of this technique is largely due to the fact that it is a secularized model - crucial for acceptance in Western societies without the problematic label of a religion being attached (Cullen 2011). A generalized description of mindfulness in this context would be heightened awareness, present moment awareness, focused attention on a single mind object (Grabovac et al 2011; Cloud 2010), non-reactive or non-judgmental observation, acceptance of one’s physical and mental processes, openness and compassion (Davis & Hayes 2011). The variations are essentially related to what a particular application has as its objective, but the overall shared goal of mindfulness and Buddhism is to engender stillness in both the body and mind in order to focus on a single mind object such as the breath in the present moment as opposed to the normal cognitive habit of becoming entangled in countless objects and constantly moving back and forth to the past and the future (Gunaratana 2011). This increased awareness of the internal processes of the body and mind help develop tranquillity and observe their true nature of transience through which excessive attachment and negative reactivity can be lessened (Brahm 2006; Kabat-Zinn 2013). The burgeoning use of mindfulness is based on solid empirical evidence of their benefits, not only from psychology but also from fields such as neurobiology that point to measurable positive changes to the brain through meditation (Hanson 2009; Hanson & Mendius 2011). However, there are also studies questioning the exact characteristics of mindfulness being used, the methods employed, and the difficulty in measuring its efficacy and durability (Wallace 2012)). Although still a minority view, a few experts point to the need to align meditation more closely with its original practice in Buddhism to improve its therapeutic value, mainly through integrating basic Buddhist ethics and concentration along with adopting a more holistic attitude to Buddhism (Wallace 2012; Gilbert 2011).

Mindfulness of Breath in *Theravāda* is one of the Ten Recollections (*Anussati*) and is the most popular and best known meditative method of all, an automatic and fundamental task of the body done usually without conscious awareness or effort (see *Appendix B*). Learning to focus the mind on this inconspicuous activity achieves a number of things: Steadying the ‘monkey mind’, achieving one-pointed concentration over time, increasing awareness of the unconscious processes

of the mind and the way in which the mind-body complex interacts mirroring various emotional states especially through the changing nature of the breath (Cayoun 2011). This then gradually enables the mind to note the transience and therefore the unsatisfactory nature of all mental and physical phenomena leading to the final insight of the lack of any abiding personhood. This meditation is especially valued as it comprises techniques to achieve both tranquillity (*Samādhi*) and insight (*Paññā*) and is capable of producing all four *Jhanic* states or absorptions, which are deep levels of consciousness where the constant operation and distraction of the five senses are temporarily shut down and the Five Hindrances (*Nīvarana*) to meditation disabled (Nanamoli 2010, pp. 259-285).

Contemplation of the Body (kāyānupassanā) is another one of the Ten Recollections and one of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipatthāna*) that involves the observation and categorization of the body to 32 parts and its processes with a focus on its impermanent, repulsive and illusory nature (Nanamoli 2010, pp. 236-258). Another technique that is closely linked to this is the *Analysis of the 4 Elements (Catudhātu-vavatthāna)* meditation involving the scanning of the body and the analysis of its primary components (*mahā bhūta*) of Earth, Water, Fire and Air. The immediate goal of these two is the realization that the body is part of an ever changing illusion of an identity created by various mental and physical interactive processes. There are two other meditative subjects that most people, particularly in the West, would consider to be depressive and even morbid. These are on the *Loathsome Objects (Asubha)* meditation consisting of ten subjects, corpses in various states of disfigurement and decomposition ending in a skeleton. The immediate objective here is to gradually reduce the obsessive attachment to the body through discerning its transient, insubstantial and ultimately unattractive aspects subject to the natural laws of decay and symbolic of the materiality that one finds attractive for a brief period (Nanamoli 2010, pp. 169-182). Closely linked to this is the *Contemplation of Death (Maranāssati)*, which focuses on the inevitability of death, the myriad ways it can occur, unpredictability as to the cause, manner, time or place and the brevity and fragility of life uprooting the notion of permanence of not only the body but the current identity in this cycle of life destined to disappear with death (Nanamoli 2010, pp. 225-236). Despite the confronting nature of these meditative subjects, they have great therapeutic potential in destroying the attachment to the body and delusions concerning it as an integral part of one's identity, the significance of its image and its permanence and as a solid source for happiness (Vajiranana 1987).

While all the above discussed meditative practices are directly related to the body with the objective of lessening its significance, the *loving kindness (metta)* meditation belonging to the *Four Immeasurables (Appamānas)* provides another meditative subject that has great significance both in terms of eradicating negative perceptions and fostering positive emotions (Nanamoli 2010, pp. 291-310). This meditation is designed to break down all emotional barriers, minimizing the ego, with the mind becoming ever more compassionate and accepting of oneself and others. It is an effective method for ridding the mind of negativity, and therefore eliminating discriminatory attitudes (Nanamoli 1994). The ideal loving kindness aimed at here is described as a mother's love for her only child in one of the most beloved of *suttas*, *Karaniya Metta Sutta* on loving-kindness, an implicit acknowledgement of the importance of women and the supreme power of maternal love but without its possessive aspect. The enormous transformative and therapeutic potential of the positive emotions as antidotes for psychopathologies have now been recognized in Western psychology as witnessed by the rise of the Positive Psychology movement over the last few decades (Snyder & Lopez 2009), and the incorporation of loving kindness into some mindfulness applications in psychotherapy.

Gender equality from a Buddhist perspective is certainly not about blaming everything on men for they too are victims of stereotypical gender roles. From a materialistic and political point of view, this may still be a ‘man’s world’ but when one looks at the statistics from almost every country, this seems a hollow claim. Men in general have lower life expectancy and are disproportionately the victims as well as the perpetrators of crime, are incarcerated more and suffer from a greater range of addictions, mental and physical ailments than women. Thus, it is crucial for societies as well as individual wellbeing to educate children about the equality of genders and the harmful nature of discrimination at home and as part of their education supported by meditation practice that is gradually being introduced in schools in some Western countries (MiSP 2016).

Conclusions

Without a doubt the intersection between Buddhism and feminism is a growing field of interest as shown by the numerous studies done in recent years. In addition, an international forum for issues connected with the many challenges that Buddhist women face has been the series of conferences organized by *Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women* started in 1987 in Bodhgaya, India. As Buddhism becomes an increasingly relevant globalized force with the scriptures of all schools available freely to so many and both lay and monastic women take on key roles, it is inevitable that outdated prejudice and barriers begin to crumble, which is essential for the flourishing of Buddhism in the 21st century. Finally, the various scriptural sources may present an ambiguous view of women, and discriminatory practices and attitudes still exist in Buddhist countries just as elsewhere. There may also be doubts about the accuracy of the scriptures themselves, as well as their misrepresentations viewed through the opaque prism of each culture as Buddhism incorporated many of the existing beliefs and cultural norms as it spread across different regions. However, meditation is not only the highest and most crucial stage of the Buddhist soteriological Path but also its truly practical, experiential and educational aspect that is timelessly and universally open to everyone to test. The *Dhamma* that promotes the eradication of all negative attitudes and false views is genderless at its pristine and transformative core.

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Appendix A

Anicca (impermanence/transience), *dukkha* (suffering/unsatisfactoriness) and *anattā* (non-self or empty of a concrete or lasting identity). These are the three characteristics inherent in all mental and physical phenomena including sentient beings.

Avijjā: Ignorance/unknowing and a synonym of *moha* (delusion). Although there is no concept of a primary cause in Buddhism, ignorance is often described as the root cause of all suffering as it prevents one from seeing reality as it is.

Bhāvanā: Translated as meditation, reflection or contemplation. A more accurate translation is mental development or the cultivation of the mind with a more active connotation.

Bhikkhu: A male fully ordained Buddhist monastic.

Bhikkhuni: A female fully ordained Buddhist monastic.

Bodhisatta: Enlightened Being – one destined to become a future Buddha.

Brāhmanas: Also *Brāhmīns*. The highest of the four social classes or castes in Hindu India. It is based on the belief that those belonging to this caste possess more purity and that only they can perform vital religious rituals and tasks.

Dosa: Hatred/ill will or anger is one of the three unwholesome roots, cankers or toxins.

Fourth *Yāna*: *Yāna* literally means ‘vehicle’ in *Pāli* and used in reference to the three major schools of Buddhism (*Hīnayāna* (*Theravāda*), *Mahayāna* and *Vajirayāna* (Tibetan). Christopher S. Queen in his *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (2000, p. 24) has suggested this term for the new and evolving phenomenon of socially engaged Buddhism in the West.

Garudhammas: Lit. “heavy rules”. These eight special rules are said to have been introduced by the Buddha (which is contested by some) to ensure that female monastics always accept the authority of the male monastics. Some believe these were introduced to pacify the existing male monastic community at that time and to appease a patriarchal society, and others that these were introduced later on by others discriminatory towards women.

Jātaka Stories: ‘Birth stories’ – recounts of the Buddha’s numerous previous lives.

Jhāna, *jhānic* (adj.): Deep levels of absorption or levels of consciousness achieved through *Samatha* (tranquillity/concentration) meditative practices.

Kamma or *karma* (*Sanskrit*): The natural and impersonal law of cause and effect or moral causation central to Buddhist teachings. Wholesome and unwholesome volitions/intentions (*cetanā*) and their accompanying mental factors manifesting in mental, verbal and physical actions that shape the destiny and rebirth of beings.

Karunā: Compassion or kindness. The second of the *Immeasurables* consisting of *mettā*, *karunā*, *mudithā* (sympathetic or altruistic joy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity).

Khandha: The Five Groups or Five Aggregates of existence. These are the 5 aspects and their interactive processes that constitute all physical and mental phenomena of existence including human beings, which create the illusion of a self or personality: 1. Corporality Group 2. Feeling/Sensation group 3. Perception Group 4. Mental-formation Group and the 5. Consciousness Group.

Lobha: Greed/craving is one of the three unwholesome roots, cankers or toxins. *Rāga* and *tanhā* are synonyms.

Mahā bhūta: The four primary elements of earth, water, fire and air that are the constituents of all matter including the body according to *Theravāda* Buddhism.

Mahāyāna: One of the two principle schools of Buddhism, the other being *Theravāda*, mainly practised in China, Japan, Korea and other parts of East Asia including Tibet (although

- Vajirayāna* is also used for Tibetan Buddhism). It is an umbrella term for a number of schools of Buddhism chiefly characterized by the ideal of the *Bodhisatta*, compassion and universal salvation.
- Mettā*: Loving kindness. Also variously translated as benevolence, friendliness, universal love. It is one of the *Four Immeasurables* in Buddhist meditative practice.
- Moha*: Delusion is one of the three unwholesome roots, cankers or toxins. A synonym is *avijjā*.
- Nāma-rūpa*: Lit. 'name and form', and means the mind-body complex of a being as there is no duality in Buddhism, and they are both inseparable and interdependent.
- Nīvarana*: The Five Hindrances consist of 1. Sensuous/sensual desire 2. Ill-will 3. Sloth and torpor 4. Restlessness and scruples, and 5. Sceptical doubt. These are mental qualities that cloud the mind preventing clarity. They act as obstructions to achieving deep levels of meditation, and are temporarily suspended in the *Jhānic* states.
- Pāli Canon*: Called the *Tipitaka* (lit. The Three Baskets) consisting of three main divisions: 1. *Vinaya Pitaka* (Rules of Monastic Discipline) 2. *Sūta Pitaka* (Discourses) and 3. *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (Higher Knowledge or Philosophy).
- Paticca samuppāda*: Dependent origination or dependent co-arising. This is a fundamental teaching of Buddhism expounding the conditional and interdependent nature of all phenomena and the process of becoming. There are 12 links in this cycle of existence, and Buddhism does not have a concept of a first cause – hence illustrated by a circle. These are 1. Ignorance 2. Volitional Formations 3. Consciousness 4. Mentality-Materiality 5. The Sixfold Base 6. Contact 7. Feeling 8. Craving 9. Clinging 10. Becoming 11. Birth, and 12. Ageing and Death.
- Samādhi*: One-pointed concentration or tranquillity achieved through the fixing of the mind on a single object as opposed to the normal cognitive habit of constantly changing objects. There are many different levels of concentration reached through meditation in Buddhism, and *Samādhi* is also one of the links in the Eightfold Path leading to Enlightenment.
- Samsāra*: Existence – the beginningless and endless cycle of birth and death in which all sentient beings are trapped, where everything is conditioned and every process interdependent. The entire salvific goal of Buddhism is the escape from this into the only unconditioned state, *Nibbhāna* (*Sanskrit: Nirvāna*).
- Theravāda*: The 'Doctrine of the Elders' is the oldest form of the Buddha's teachings handed down in the scriptures in *Pāli* language. It is also called Southern Buddhism or *Pāli* Buddhism and found today in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Chittagong (East Bengal).
- Uposatha*: Lit. fasting or fasting day especially on the on full-moon and new-moon days. Many lay devotees visit the temple and observe the Eight Precepts.
- Vajirayāna*: Tibetan Buddhism.
- Vipassanā*: Insight, introspection into the nature of reality – impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self of all phenomena in existence including the mind and body of all sentient beings. *Vipassana* meditation and *Samatha* (concentration/tranquillity) meditation go hand in hand in the cultivation of the mind in Buddhism leading to Enlightenment.

Appendix B

There are slight variations in the numbers (the *Pali* Canon provides 38 but the *Visuddhimagga* (trans. Nanamoli 2010) considered to be the ultimate authority in this context outlines the following forty meditation subjects (*Vism.* III-XI; Gunaratana 1988):

1. **10 *Kasina* exercises** (ten objects: Earth, water, fire, air, blue-green, yellow, red, white, light and space).
2. **10 *Asubha* subjects** (Loathsome objects or objects of impurity): A swollen corpse, a discoloured corpse, a festering corpse, a fissured corpse, a mangled corpse, a dismembered corpse, a cut and dismembered corpse, a bleeding corpse, a worm-infested corpse and a skeleton.
3. **10 *Anussati*** (Recollections) of the Virtues of the Buddha (*buddhānussati*), the Law (*dhammānussati*), the Noble Monastic Order (*sanghānussati*), Morality, Liberality, the Heavenly Beings, Death, the Body, the Breath and Peace.
4. **4 *Brahma Vihāra*** (Divine Abodes or the *Four Immeasurables*): *Mettā* (Loving Kindness), *Karunā* (Compassion), *Mudithā* (Altruistic Joy) and *Upekkhā* (Equanimity).
5. **4 *Arūpāyatana*** (Immaterial Spheres) of Unbounded Space, Unbounded Consciousness, Nothingness, Neither-Perception-Nor-Non-perception.
6. **1 *Ahāra patikkulasannā*** (Perception of the Loathsomeness of Food).
7. **1 *Catudhātu-Vavatthāna*** (Analysis of the 4 Elements: Earth, Water, Fire and Air).