

EARLY BUDDHIST ATTITUDE Female Body and *Arhatship*

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Abstract: Consciousness is a stream of becoming and it maintains an uninterrupted continuity between two lives according to the early Buddhist texts. It exists in a state of flux or chain of cognition, which is not eternal. Further, the stream of consciousness characterizes one's existence and is completely conditioned by the *kamma* of previous lives. As a result, the male or female body is regarded as the effect of *kamma* of past life. Early Buddhist texts reflect an understanding that female body is the effect of bad *kamma* of one's previous life. The present paper re-examines this early Buddhist attitude towards the female body and argues that, in the early Buddhist philosophy, female body is worthy of *Arhatship*. The paper begins with examining the Buddhist concept of *Self* and body to show that the body cannot be the material or contributory cause of subjective consciousness. The concept of *indriyas* and female body is analysed then because, according to *Abhidharmakosa* of Vasubandhu, the quality of an *Arhat* can be obtained only with the help of eleven *indriyas*. The sexual nature of the body is immaterial with regard to attaining *Arhatship*.

Keywords: *Arhat*, Early Buddhism, Consciousness, Female Body, *Indriya*.

1. Introduction

For early Buddhism, any kind of intentional action whether physical, vocal and mental is regarded as *kamma*. It is also elucidated as the result of previous deeds, since the cyclic development of the individual in *samsāra* is nothing else but the effects of his *kamma*. Male or female body is regarded as the effect

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of *kamma* of past life. Early Buddhist texts reflect an understanding that the female body is the effect of bad *kamma* of one's previous life. Buddhaghosa writes,

The male sex disappears owing to powerful unprofitable *kamma*, and the female sex appears owing to weak profitable *kamma*; and the female sex disappears owing to weak unprofitable *kamma*, while the male sex appears owing to powerful profitable *kamma*.¹

Again according to Bhikkhu Analayo remark,

As the tale from the *Paramatthajotikā* shows, the notion that being female is related to bad karma is found in the Pāli commentarial tradition. Another example is the commentary on the *Dhammapada*, which reports the tale of a householder by the name of Soreyya. The story goes that, on seeing the beautiful skin colour of the *bhikkhu* Mahākaccāyana, Soreyya had the wish to have him as his wife or else that his wife might have a similar bodily hue. This impure thought caused him to change into a woman right on the spot. The tale continues with his experiences as a woman until at some point he offers a meal to Mahākaccāyana and asks to be forgiven, whereupon he becomes male again.²

The present paper re-examines this early Buddhist attitude towards the female body and argues that, in spite of some contrary texts, in the early Buddhist philosophy, there is little or no room for a negative attitude towards the female body. The early Buddhist texts on the whole contribute towards the reclamation of the feminine genius and the up-building of a just and compassionate society beyond the gender prejudice.

2. The Buddhist Concept of the Self and the Body

We construct into our lived world. "The name given to these building blocks, which are said to be ultimate realities in the sense that they cannot be reduced further to other constituents, is

¹Bhikkhu Nānamoli, *The Path of Purification*, Singapore: Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre, 1956,483.

²Bhikkhu Analayo, "Karma and Female Birth," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 21, 2014, 111.

dharmas.”³ The word, *dhamma* can be understood as that “which cannot be reduced to simpler terms under the condition of investigation.”⁴ In early Buddhism, all the physical and mental phenomena of existences are five aggregates (*khandha*) which constitute human personality. The term *khandha* is used in Buddhist literature to refer to the concept of ‘division’ in the sense of a variety of constituent groups. The five aggregates are variously translated as (i) ‘matter’ or ‘form’ (*rūpa*), (ii) ‘sensation’, ‘emotion’ or ‘feeling’ (*vedanā*), (iii) ‘recognition’ or ‘perception’ (*saññā*), (iv) ‘*kammic* activity’, formation of the past residue or ‘force’ (*sankhārā*), and (v) consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Buddhaghosa writes in his *Visuddhimagga*, that feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), *sankhārā* and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) are the four mental aggregates, and *rūpa* is the material aggregate.⁵

Rūpa stands for ‘matter’ in Buddhist philosophy, and it is the five sense organs, five objects and *avijñapti*.⁶ The five sense organs are those of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, which are regarded as the supports of eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness and body-consciousness respectively. The five objects of the five organs are visible matter, sound, odour and touch, taste and *avijñapti*, which means ‘not manifested or not expressed’.⁷ It is said that mental, vocal or physical deeds have some corresponding result, where the result is sometimes open and obvious, but we do not observe such manifested result and for “Buddhists an action without a result, direct or indirect, is impossible,” and hence, the Buddhist terms it as *avijañpati*.⁸

³Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009, 16.

⁴David J. Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992, 73.

⁵Nānamoli, *The Path of Purification*, XIV: 33.

⁶*Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, 63.

⁷Francisa Cho and Richard K. Squier, *Religion and Science in the Mirror of Buddhism*, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2016, 119.

⁸Sukomal Chaudhuri, *Analytical Study of the Abhidharmakosa*, Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1976, 76.

The second *khandā* is *vedanā* which stands for 'sensation'.⁹ The *Majjhimnikāya* clarifies the threefold division of *vedanā* into pleasant, painful and neither pleasant nor painful. Buddhaghosa writes that it is fivefold according to the analysis of its individual essence into (bodily) pleasure, (bodily) pain, (mental) joy, (mental) grief, and equanimity.¹⁰ *Vedanā* is in connection with a particular sense organ and its contact with the subsequent object. It includes different feelings and their conditions. Its functions are to experience the flavour of the object.

The third of the five aggregates is *saññā* or perception. We recognize an object that has once been perceived by the mind through the senses, for instance, perception of various objects as blue object, long, short, square object, etc. *Saññā* is interpretation of the data before these are actually sensed through sense faculties. A person is generally aware only of the final processes when a simple statement like, 'I see a table' is made. Before the utterance of this statement there is a complicated process of "imagination, memory, association, discrimination and judgment"¹¹ after which the person arrives at such a conclusion. *Saññā* works internally and in *khandha*, *saññā* is grouping or categorizing which precedes sensation.

The fourth *khandha* is *sankhārā* or volitions; it is described as anything in which a person's dispositional tendencies have played a major role. "In such cases, the things that are carefully selected for compounding or putting together, that is, the components, may also be called *sankhārā*."¹² Sometimes *sankhārā* or volitions¹³ is discussed as *cetanā*,¹⁴ which is a key term that

⁹Mathieu Boisvert, *The Five Aggregates Understanding Theravāda Psychology and Soteriology*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1997, 51.

¹⁰Nānamoli, *The Path of Purification*, XIV:127

¹¹W. F. Jayasuriya, *The Psychology and Philosophy of Buddhism: An Introduction to the Abhidhamma*, Kuala Lumpur: B.M.S. Publication, 1976, 107.

¹²J. Kalupahana, *Causality: the Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1975, 85.

¹³Nānamoli, *The Path of Purification*, XIV:131

gives significance to the actions of the people and “it cannot in all contexts be adequately rendered by the English words ‘will’ or ‘volition’.”¹⁵ It is the presence of some of these co-nascent factors that determines the specific and developed function of *cetanā*. For instance, when good or bad thoughts are present, *cetanā* becomes moral or immoral *kammic* volition, and may even produce rebirth. In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa writes, “whatever has the characteristic of forming should be understood, all taken together, as the formation aggregates.”¹⁶ In the *Abhidharmakosa*, six classes of volitions (*cetanās*) are called *sanskāraskandha* because it conditions the conditioned *dharmā*. That is to say, it creates and determines the five *khandha* of the future existence.

The last *khandha* is *viññāṇa*. It is commonly translated as ‘consciousness’;¹⁷ but sometimes it is understood as ‘cognition’.¹⁸ However *viññāṇakhandha* is not poles apart from *vedanā*, *saññā*, and *sankhāra* and empirical ego built up out of the element of experience. In early Buddhism the word mind, *viññāṇa* (consciousness), *citta* (mind, consciousness), *mano* all are interchangeable without any risk of unintentional modification of the meaning.¹⁹ From the above analysis we understand that *nāma* or *viññāṇa* are not taken as if a ‘formless’ like soul. The Buddha refused to accept formless and eternal self. The Buddha’s elucidation is the abolition of ambiguity. It is not to shift the soul to the mind. Further “*viññāṇa* is process of ‘discernment’ which is aware of and discriminates objects at various levels of sophistication, working in unison with the labeling, interpreting

¹⁴Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Central Conception of Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2005, 18.

¹⁵Padmasiri de Silva, *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology*, London: Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd., 1991, 79.

¹⁶Nānamoli, *The Path of Purification*, XIV:131

¹⁷Boisvert, *The Five Aggregates Understanding Theravāda Psychology and Soteriology*, 1997, 113.

¹⁸K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2004, 435.

¹⁹Nānamoli, *The Path of Purification*, XIV: 82.

activity of cognition (*saññā*).²⁰ Thus, mind represents the entire mental activity and its function. *Viññāṇa* is explained by Vasubandhu as the relative impression on the apprehension (*upalabdhi*) of each object. In early Buddhism five aggregates collectively constitute the human individual and *viññāṇa* or mind represents last four aggregates (*vedanā*, *saññā*, *sankhāra* and *viññāṇa*) and which cannot exist independently. Hence *viññāṇa* or mind represents all the activities. Again, Buddhism never uses mind as enjoyer (*bhokta*) of good and bad fruit of *kamma*. So it neither in the microcosmic nor in the macrocosmic sense can the *Upanishadic* concept of the soul be regarded as being identical with the early Buddhist concept of *viññāṇa*. The birth and death are merely communicating doors from one life to another, the stream of causally connected processes of consciousness.

To sum up, there is no dualism of the mind and matter (body) in early Buddhist philosophy. Mind and body are inter-related and inseparable. However, in the analysis one could make the distinction between them, and use the term *rūpa* to represent the matter and the term *viññāṇa* to represent the mind and all that is related to the mind and the mental actions including the entire activity of the body. Mind is a train of thought. There is no mention of an enduring self in the early Buddhist treatises, but there is a conception of the 'I' existing. The 'I' is nothing but *nāma-Rūpa*. When one says 'I am hungry', it signifies the experience. According to P. Lakshmi Narasu, in early Buddhism the word "'I' is the summary expression grasped from within, of that unity of the individual life, which appears to external sense as an organism with interacting parts and functions."²¹ Hence, the word *citta*, mind or consciousness stands for experience. Conclusively, mind or *citta* is a flux of thought or a series of mental events in early Buddhist philosophy and it does not belong to a single entity, but to a system of entities. It is merely the result of sensation, and again it is made to precede sensation in causal chain. The word 'mind' was used to describe a complete act of

²⁰Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 153.

²¹P. Lakshmi Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism*. Delhi: Bharatiya Publishing House, 1976, 219.

perception or cognition and it is also a link between two lives.²² Consciousness is the relation between the subject and the object, and we agree at this point that consciousness is all about awareness of the object. It includes all of the enormous varieties of the awareness. Conscious states exist only when they are experienced by some human or animal subject. In that sense, they are essentially subjective. There is some level of vagueness in early Buddhism especially in relation to the terms used because various words are used to connote the same meaning. It can create confusion in the minds of those who take the words ‘mind’ and ‘self’ to ascertain the same meaning. The Buddha does not hold on to an eternal entity called the self, at the same time it does not imply that he replaces the self by the word ‘mind’.

So far I have been dealing with *Nāma-Rūpa* which is nothing but the five *khandhas*. *Nāma* represents the entire activity of the body because one cannot locate the mind in the body. However, the concept of mind is very important in early Buddhism because through this concept, the Buddha has tried to eliminate the concept of soul or self. Main intention to elucidate the Buddhist concept of personhood is to show that in Buddhism mind and body are not different substances; moreover, there is no cause and effect relation between mind and body.

3. Consciousness and Rebirth

There is no positive and negative concomitance between the body and cognition.²³ As we have discussed in the second section of the paper, in early Buddhism one cannot talk about the mind as Soul or mind as master of the body. One has to take the present element of mind and body as an effect of preceding element. Let me take some of the arguments from the *Tattva-saṃgraha*, written by Śāntarakṣita, one of the most important critical thinkers in the history of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. He argues in the *Tattva-saṃgraha*, that the body along with the sense-organs is not the cause of subjective consciousness because even after the

²²Kalupahana, *Causality: the Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 119.

²³Ganganatha Jha, *The Tattvasaṅgraha of Shāntarakṣita with the Commentary of Kamalashīla*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986, 897.

disappearance of the sense-organs one by one, the subjective consciousness works normally. For instance, even when the motor-organs have become disabled by paralysis and other diseases, the subjective consciousness remains intact and enjoys a perfect state of existence.²⁴ Again when there is modification in the body, in the shape of being well-nourished and strong, which is brought about by good food, there is actually perceived a modification in the subjective consciousness in the shape of love and hatred etc. But it does not mean that the body is the material cause of subjective consciousness; it proceeds from preceding consciousness one after the other occurring in the same chain.

Buddhism compares existence to a river, having its source in birth and its mouth in death. Since birth and death are merely communicating doors from one life to another, the stream of casualty is connected to the processes of consciousness and is the medium uniting the different lives of an individual, as well as the different moments and phases within one's life. In early Buddhist philosophy, theory of causation plays a key role which has been established by Buddha. According to this theory nothing arises without a cause and a condition, everything is dependently originating.²⁵ The past *kamma* determines one's next birth.²⁶

Every element or *dhamma*, by nature, is temporary and is able to continue to exist for a single moment. But each *dhamma* perishes conditioning another simultaneously transmitting all its potentialities to its successor. And this process plays key role in rebirth. *Dhamma* changes every moment. It is to be mentioned here that if one uses the word 'change' in Buddhist context, then it does not mean that one thing is replaced by another thing. It

²⁴Jha, *The Tattvasangraha of Shantaraksita*, 899.

²⁵In Buddhism, causation is known as *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, according to which every point-instant of reality arises in dependence upon a combination of point-instants to which it necessarily succeeds; it arises in functional dependence upon a totality of causes and conditions which are its immediate antecedents. *Paṭiccasamuppāda* means, "If something appears, such and such result will follow" (*asmiṃ sati idambhavati: Majjhimanikāya* 1:4:8).

²⁶Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things*, 34.

means that the thing remains the same, but its condition or quality changes. In Buddhist context ‘change’ is like a row of lamps sending flashes, one after the other and thus producing the illusion of a moving light. Motion consists of a series of immobility. The light of a lamp is a common metaphorical designation for an uninterrupted production of a series of flashing flames. When this production changes its place, one says that the light has moved, but in reality other flames have appeared in other contiguous places. In the same token, Buddhist argues that rebirth is just the effect of the last moment of one’s past life. Therefore, if one gets a female body in the present life, it is just an effect of one’s past action. But it does not mean that present element of mind and body have lost its potential energy and capability to attain enlightenment. Herbert Guenther writes in this connection:

In Buddhist reasoning *karman* is no outside force, but the inherent activity of every process. Since activity is limited by the amount of energy available - there is no single action which is not energy-determined - *karman* represents both the potential and kinetic energy of a process. Moreover, since energy cannot be lost it is always present either as kinetic or potential energy. In its potential stage energy is ‘heaped up’ (*upacita*), while in its kinetic state it develops (*vipacyate*) towards a certain effect.²⁷

The main idea of this section of the paper is to show that when one has female consciousness it does not mean that it is going to stop one to attain the liberation. The consciousness is always continuous as a chain. Present moment of cognition has all the potentiality as the preceding moment. Even in the case of disappearance of male body due to bad action, one has all potentiality as male body. Therefore in early Buddhism, one can attain the *Arhatship* with the female body.

4. Indriyas, Female Body and Arhatship

Céline Gruinhagen writes that, in early Buddhism, women are not qualified for Nirvana because only a sincere monk is capable of

²⁷Herbert V. Guenther, *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1991, 20.

attaining enlightenment. The female body is imperfect and impure for mystical experiences and it can be achieved only with the male body.²⁸ In this section I will argue that early Buddhist texts have never considered female body inferior to male body or incapable of attaining *Arhatship*. According to the texts the quality of an *Arhat* is said to be obtainable with eleven *indriyas*. The word *indriya* is derived from the root *idi*, which means to have supreme power. Those who exercise the supreme power are the *indriyas*. Hence the meaning of *indriya* is 'sovereignty'. According to Sutra, there are twenty-two *indriyas*: 1. organ of sight, 2. organ of hearing, 3. organ of smell, 4. organ of taste, 5. organ of touch, 6. mental organ, 7. male organ, 8. female organ, 9. vital organ, 10. faculty of sensation of pleasure, 11. faculty of sensation of displeasure, 12. faculty of sensation of satisfaction, (*saumanasyendriya*), 13. faculty of sensation of dissatisfaction, 14. faculty of sensation of indifference, 15. faculty of faith, 16. faculty of energy, 17. faculty of memory, 18. faculty of absorption, 19. faculty of discernment of *dharmas*, or faculty of *prajna*, (wisdom) 20. power for learning the four Noble Truths (*anājnātamājnāsyaṁindriya*), 21. power of having learned the four Noble (*ājnendriya*), and 22. power of perfect knowledge of the four Noble Truths (*ajnatāvindriya*).²⁹

Among the twenty-two *indriyas*, eleven *indriyas*, which are important to attain *Arhatship*, are: the vital organ (9), the five faculties of sensation (10-14), the five moral faculties (15-19). And in order to attain the last five moral faculties, one has to follow the Buddhist path of purification. It has been said that one can attain the *Arhatship* with the right path. In early Buddhism, there is no mention that one cannot attain the *Arhatship* with the female body. The main focus here is to show that all of the above mentioned *indriya* is attainable with the female body.

In early Buddhism, addressing someone as male or female is not advisable. Instead of defining by the female or male mark, one should identify by the phase of life: "This is the body of one who

²⁸Céline Grünhagen, *The Female Body in Early Buddhist literature*, *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, 23 (2011), 109.

²⁹*Abhidharmkosa*, 130.

was in the first phase of life, in the middle phase, in the last phase.”³⁰ When the word ‘female’ or ‘male’ is used it is not more than a concept which is established for convenience. Early Buddhists always give equal status to male and female. There is no negative attitude towards the female body. In order to attain liberation it is essential to see the reality as it is and the early texts do not give negative or positive status of women.

5. Conclusion

It is often observed that Buddha himself was not ready to include women in the *Saṅgha*. The story goes, when Mahaprajapati requested Buddha to allow women to join the *Saṅgha*, Buddha refused the request, and said:

To go forth from home under the rule of the Dharma as announced by me is not suitable for women. There should be no ordination or nunhood. And why? If women go forth from the household life, then the rule of the Dharma will not be maintained over a long period. It is just as if, O Ānanda, there were a family with many women and few men. It is subject to easy attack and spoliation. It is subject to easy attack specifically of thieves and robber bands. Just thus, O Ānanda, if women go forth under the rule of the Dharma, this rule of the Dharma will not belong enduring. It is as if, O Ānanda, in a big field belonging to a householder, a quantity of thunderbolts with great flashes of lightning fell to the extent that the field was destroyed, ruined, and brought to nought. Just thus, O Ānanda, the rule of the Dharma—if women go forth from a home life—will not continue for long. Suppose, Ānanda, there was a sugarcane field belonging to a householder. Upon it fell a blight by the name of Crimson disease until the sugar cane was destroyed, ruined, and brought to nought. Just in this way, when women go forth, the rule of the Dharma is not long maintained.³¹

³⁰Nānamoli, *The Path of Purification*, 174.

³¹Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Image of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition*, Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979, 84

However, after Ananda's persuasion Buddha allowed the women to join the *Saṅgha* and Buddha gave eight important rules for overcoming obstruction so that women could join the *Saṅgha*. Though Buddha did not want to include women in the *Saṅgha*, the texts never hold that one cannot attain liberation with the female body. There are many women proved that they could attain the noble position like monk and women are quite capable for mystical experiences. The *Dipavamsa* refers to Khema, who was born in royal family of Sāngala and attained the *Arhatship*. Tissā³² renounced the world with the Mahaprajapti and became spiritually so developed that she attained *arhatship*.

Our present study suggests that there is an emphasis on the relation of mind-matter in early Buddhism, and it does not bifurcate the phenomenal into matter and mind, or body and mind, as two separate entities. Nor does it give room for such sort of dualistic bifurcations and compartmentalization in philosophical analysis. Mind, as we have maintained, is not an independent entity. The sensations are inherently located in the sense-faculties. The sense faculties have been recognized as internal. These are the seats of respective sensations. Again sense faculties are constituted by *Rūpa* or matter. Thus the bottom-line is that in early Buddhism one cannot separate the mind from the body, and the birth and rebirth depends on the good and bad action of the last birth. The female body is not an obstacle for spiritual emancipation. It is true that the early Buddhist texts reflect an understanding of the female body as being an effect of bad action. Therefore, the female has different physical qualities than male body. But it does not mean that the female body is of inferior quality and cannot attain liberation. One can achieve *Arhat* with a female body. In early Buddhism, everyone possesses equal capacity to attain nirvana and there is no room for a negative attitude towards the female body.

³²Bimal Churan, *Women in Buddhist Literature*, Ceylon: W. E. Bastian & co., 1927, 91.