



THE END OF SEX(UALITY) AND THE ADOPTION OF A NEW GENDER – RENUNCIATION IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM¹

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¹ This article is based on a paper read at the Annual EASR Conference in Stockholm, August 2012. The present explanations represent one aspect or partial result of my dissertation, a study on sex/gender-systems, western discourse and gender pluralism in Theravāda Buddhism comprehending a much wider field of research than the sex and gender of the Sangha; see Grünhagen (2013).

ABSTRACT

The article presents some findings about the sex(uality) and gender of men and women respectively who decide to join the Buddhist order – the Sangha. Renunciation of the worldly and adoption of the monastic discipline initiates a transformative process, creating new identities. The monastic discipline notably transcends the worldly normative male and female gender and substitutes it with a new gender identity. This new identity is signified as the *sangha gender*, which can in fact be defined as an *asexual male* gender. While for the male, renunciation is the end to his sexuality and the adoption of an alternate normative (even ideal) male identity, women who join the Sangha do not only reject sexual practices and any normative female gender role but are in fact expected to transform their biological sex and become male.

KEYWORDS

Buddhism. Gender. Sangha. Sexuality. Renunciation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The tools of contemporary discourse on sex and gender, its terms and concepts, are predominantly based on developments in western intellectual history and on an understanding of sexual norms that is deeply influenced by a biblical and Christian sex/gender-standard.

Within this, God's will, nature and norm have been equalized and the notion of Adam and Eve, the male and female sex and gender and their heterosexual relations are still – at least subversively – conceived as the natural and normal. Terms and concepts within discourse derive from this underlying premise although social and medical observations and natural sciences were able to conclude that there are multiple forms of sexuality, sex and gender in between these two outposts and beyond the heteronormative (GRÜNHAGEN, 2013, p. 23-78).

The application of these terms and concepts to other cultural contexts is therefore questionable. In the following this will be exemplified by some findings about the sex, sexuality and gender of men and women who decide to become monks (Pāli: *bhikkhu* / *bhikkunī*) and join the Buddhist order – the Sangha. These present findings are based on investigations of the Sangha in the early Buddhist community as reflected in early literature on the one hand and in contemporary Thai society on the other.

Although differing in many respects, both cases adequately show that the monastic discipline notably transcends the worldly normative male and female gender and substitutes it with a new gender identity. The specific features of this gender identity will be further explicated by illustrating the changes in the formation of identity that arise for Buddhist men and women by ending their lay life and adopting the monastic lifestyle.

These explanations will conclude with highlighting the consequences regarding the sex and gender of members of the Sangha depending on whether they have been born in a male or female body, and the social and spiritual status of men and women.

2. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Some basic assumptions of Buddhist teaching and the presumed context have to precede the further explanations to enable a deeper understanding.

Buddhism teaches that everything is suffering. Suffering shall be overcome by realizing that the material world and everything in it – including the self or ego – is an illusion.

The human being is dominated by three poisons (Skt./Pāli: *mūla*) that are conceived as the roots of Samsara: ignorance/delusion, anger/hatred and craving/need. To reach Nirvana these poisons have to be overcome (FREIBERGER; KLEINE, 2011, p. 201-205).

In the present context the poison of craving or need (Pāli: *taṇhā*) is of special interest. *Taṇhā* signifies the craving to own, achieve or experience something – materially as well as mentally – but also passionate desire and sexual lust. Desire is predominantly responsible for the human's attachment to the illusory world: by craving for this or that the bond to the cycle of reincarnation cannot be broken (FAURE, 1998, p. 17-18; GÓMEZ, 2004, p. 213-214).

By attachment to the world and the self, karma is accumulated – it has to be cleared to proceed on the path to enlightenment.

The drive for the satisfaction of sensual lusts has always been conceived as a very powerful force. While Tantric Buddhism under certain circumstances advocates lust and sexual intercourse for advanced practitioners as a shortcut to attain enlightenment, the Theravādins condemn it as a cardinal hindrance on the path of spiritual fulfillment. Connected to the desire and the problem of attachment are the illusions of the substantiality of the material world and the self. In Buddhist worldview, what humans consider as self or ego is non-existent. This understanding is signified by the term *anatta* (Skt.: *anātman*) – selflessness. What leads us to the false belief in a constant self is the sum of experiences that derive from the interplay of the *skandhas*, the five factors of existence which constitute the human being. Each of these factors is object to permanent change, they are not stable and constant, and thus neither can there be a constant self or ego (FREIBERGER; KLEINE, 2011, p. 199-200; STEINKELLNER, 2002, p. 176-181).

The composition and concurrence of the *skandhas* is initiated by conception and birth; it stops at the time of death when the present composition of the *skandhas* dissolves. Sooner or later however, the *skandhas* will merge in a new birth and a different composition. Salvation, the egression from Samsara can only be attained by realizing the illusory nature of the self and the material world and by overcoming it

so that the *skandhas* will not form a new birth but dissolve into Nirvana entirely (COLLINS, 1997, p. 188; cf. MAJJHIMANIKĀYA, I, p. 256-271 [MN I, p. 311-324]).

In numerous passages of the canonical literature, the human body is depicted as impure, vain and worthless. Its drives and functions are an obstacle to salvation and have to be controlled by cultivating the body. This is reflected by the ascetic practice of the Sangha, the religious elite. The Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunīs thereby seek to eventually overcome their physicality and return to an originally immaterial, luminous state of existence as it is described within the Aggañña-Sutta. According to this, the state of origin was brought to an end by earth evolving from the waters in form of some sort of odorous and tasteful foam. The beings – having savored this first appearance of materiality – longed for more and developed the poison of craving (*tanhā*). Greedily they fed upon the earth, by and by they lost their luminescence and gained materiality/physicality, eventually differences in appearance and also sexual differences emerged. The human beings began to feel lust for one another and to indulge in sexual intercourse resulting in conception, birth and the karmic cycle of Samsara (DĪGHA NIKĀYA, III, p. 84-89 [DN III, p. 80-85]; cf. FAURE, 1998, p. 54-57).

These perceptions imply the need for ascetic and especially celibate practice to weaken the ties to the lower world (LANG, 1982, p. 96-97; OHNUMA, 2004, p. 302-303). Further entanglements and attachments are condemned, thus sexual desire and reproduction have to be rejected. The sexual intercourse is the karmic act par excellence as it calls everything into being – the illusion of self, the material existence (FAURE, 1998, p. 33).

According to the understanding of the illusory nature of the material world the dualities and differences of objects within it are also part of the illusory – including sex and gender. Whether one is born in a male or female body should not make a difference regarding the assumed physical, mental, and spiritual capacities mandatory to aspire to the religious goals. Consequently within canonical literature some passages and even a few statements of the Buddha himself note that women have the same capabilities as men to attain

enlightenment² (OHNUMA, 2004, p. 303; SPONBERG, 1992, p. 5-7).

In reality however, this religious standard could not find its implementation in social custom and en lieu with social neglect of gender equality and the androcentric view of the editors of the canonical literature, a majority of misogynous passages have found their way into the scriptures (FINDLY, 1999; SPONBERG, 1992, p. 13-18).

Patriarchal semiotics associates nature, the material, and the body with the female while culture, the mind, and spirit are attributed to the male. In accordance with the patriarchal South Asian environment Buddhism originated from, the man is considered physically, mentally, and spiritually superior to the woman which is why he holds control and power over her (BARNES, 1994, p. 141-142; FINDLY, 1999, p. 70-76; SPONBERG, 1992, p. 17-18).

According to the Buddhist understanding of the properties and conditions of the world, the woman symbolizes the material and the attachment to the illusory. Because of her physical dispositions, her spiritual and intellectual deficiencies, she is tied to the world more strongly and also hinders the male on his way to enlightenment (LANG, 1982, p. 98-99).

Within the concept of karma physicality or physical appearance, characteristics, disabilities – also the sex of a person – is due to karmic consequences. Being born in a female body is considered a result of negative karma and disadvantageous in regard to spiritual success (COLLINS, 1997, p. 196-198; HARVEY, 2000, p. 368-371; OHNUMA, 2004, p. 303).

In fact, in Theravāda Buddhism (in contrast to the later established Mahāyāna tradition) only pious monks – the Bhikkhus – have a chance on enlightenment. Lay people are generally excluded but while lay men can become monks, women – even as nuns/Bhikkhunīs – are still disqualified. When successfully practicing the Dhamma by sponsoring the Sangha, by making donations and bearing sons as Bhikkhus-to-be, they can hope to clear their negative karma and

² See for example: Cullavagga X, 1.3 (Vin PTS V, p. 354); Sanyutta-Nikāya I, 128 (SN I, p. 161-162); Thig 60-62 (Thig PTS: 9); Chaddanta-Jātaka, No. 514 (J V, p. 20-31).

be reborn as a male³ (KEYES, 1986, p. 80-81; KIRSCH, 1985, p. 307).

In the times of the Buddha women usually did not have access to the public sphere; only a few wives and daughters had come in contact with the Buddha's teachings when he was invited by householders to hold lectures at their residences. Generally the adherents of the Buddha were male and consequently the Sangha originally was established as a monastic order of young men (HARVEY, 2000, p. 368-371; OHNUMA, 2004, p. 303). Only after considerable effort of female followers, who voted to be equally allowed to take on this spiritual lifestyle, a female Sangha was installed but subordinated under the control of the male Sangha (CULLAVAGGA X [Vin PTS V, p. 352-392]; cf. GRÜNHAGEN, 2011, p. 109-111). The perception of an ideal fourfold Buddhist society that should consist of a male and female Sangha besides male and female lay people must have been formed subsequently. However, in Theravāda Buddhism the female Sangha could not sustain itself beyond the 13th century due to a lack of social and financial support (BARNES, 1994, p. 139; SPONBERG, 1992, p. 17-24).

In Southeast Asian Theravāda Buddhist countries there are nowadays efforts to reestablish the Theravāda-Bhikkhunīorder (EKACHAI, 2001, p. 292; LINDBERG FALK, 2007, p. 46). These efforts emerged besides older traditions of organized female spirituality in convents of pious lay women. These women actually appear like Bhikkhunīs to the outsider as they are also dressed in robes and observe specific rules including celibacy but they are not ordained and lack correspondent privileges. In Thailand the so called Mae Chii make ten vows and are distinguished from the monks by wearing white robes instead of saffron ones (BARNES, 1994, 139-140; LINDBERG FALK, 2007, p. 25-29, 99). Although they are not really members of the Sangha they adopt a comparable lifestyle – thus the following remarks are also relevant to them.

³ On women and the female body in Theravāda Buddhism, see also Grünhagen (2011). For further information on the perception of men and women and their normative roles see Grünhagen (2013).

3. TRANSFORMATION OF SEX AND GENDER WITHIN THE SANGHA

While the Buddha rejected extreme forms of ascetic practice like physical self-mortification and recommended the middle path, he nonetheless advocated renunciation from worldly responsibilities and sensual pleasures of any kind as a necessity to achieve enlightenment. To provide facilitative conditions for his adherents he joined them together in a community by establishing the Sangha. Within this institution the like-minded ordinates follow a certain codex and indulge in certain practices that promote their spiritual progress (COLLINS, 1997, p. 194-195).

By abandoning their family ties and possessions and adopting the monastic discipline the members of the Sangha – Bhikkhu or Bhikkhunī – disrupt their previous social and religious status and initiate a transformative process that creates new identities. It is the end of one life and the beginning of another. As a sign of this passage an ordination ceremony is performed⁴. Besides making vows to observe the monastic discipline, the novices' physical appearance is altered – they get their heads and eyebrows shaved, get vested in unitary robes and equipped with an alms bowl. The abolishment of individual looks and possessions shall help the overcoming of the illusion of self and the attachment to the worldly. This is emphasized by the already mentioned observation of the monastic discipline, encompassing performative actions like the practice of meditation, the memorization and recitation of texts, the daily alms round, a monthly repetition of shaving the head and eyebrows, the observation of a specific moral code and a monthly penance, and an ascetic and above all celibate life style – practices that imprint the practitioners mind, moral and body. The body acts as a vehicle in the sense of a necessary tool of experience to minister spiritual progress (VOYCE, 2011, p. 443-444).

⁴ For extensive descriptions of ordination ceremonies in Thailand cf. Keyes (1986, p. 72-81) and Lindberg Falk (2007, p. 92-96).

The sexual abstinence and renunciation from reproduction, i.e. asexuality, is the crucial characteristic of the monastic community. It separates the Sangha as an elite and ideal group from the remaining population that is succumbed to drives and appetites. The monastic life style aims to control and eventually overcome craving (*taṇha*). Besides the desire for material goods, fame, honor, friendship and love it most certainly also applies to physical drives and needs like sexual desire; the latter being understood as a major obstacle for all those who strive for enlightenment (COLLINS, 1997, p. 185). This perception paired with the understanding that sensual desires would decline and eventually stop by means of advanced ascetic and meditative practice lead to the imposition of celibacy on all members of the Sangha, novices (Pāli: *sāmaṇera* / *sāmaṇeri*) included.

In that sense, their official attire is also meant to symbolize their membership to a sphere beyond sexual differences, beyond sexuality. This is part of their new role and it actually affects their sex and gender.

The performativity of the monastic discipline constitutes identity; it separates the members of the Sangha from the community of the lay people and consequently privileges the former above the latter due to their spiritual progress. Thus the performative actions act in two directions – they constitute the identity of the members of the Sangha and preserve their reputation and privileges compared to the laity. To uphold and legitimate their privileges the discipline has to be observed by any means (COLLINS, 1997, p. 202-203; FAURE, 1998, p. 71-74; LINDBERG FALK, 2007, p. 34).

The practice within the Sangha confirms that – by means of certain socialization – the connection between physical properties and biological and social roles can be abolished. The abolishment of gender differences in the outward appearance, expressed by unisex robes and hairstyle (the shaved heads) emphasizes the adoption of an asexual, seemingly *androgynous* identity. Therefore it is legitimate to refer to a specific sex, a specific gender identity and specific expectations – a gender role – within the Sangha (KEYES, 1986, p. 85-86).

This gender identity is not based on the biological sex of the ordained but on the monastic, celibate lifestyle transcending sexuality and gender. What can be observed here is

what Judith Butler signified as *Doing Gender*, the social construction of gender by performative actions (BUTLER, 1991, p. 22-24; DEAL; BEAL, 2004, p. 67-68). But furthermore and congruently we also observe the construction or re-shaping of the biological sex – thus: Doing Sex.

To assume, that it is possible as a human being to overcome sexual drive and physical sexuality is a cultural religiously shaped proposition, reminding Judith Butler's hypothesis that besides the category of *gender* also *sex* is a social and cultural construct (DEAL; BEAL, 2004, p. 67-68; WESELY, 2000, p. 32).

Thus the members of the Sangha are forming a separate category within the Buddhist sex/gender system – defined by its asexuality. Relating to an article by Charles Keyes published in 1986, I signify this new identity as the *Sangha gender* (KEYES, 1986; cf. GRÜNHAGEN, 2013, p. 247-250).

While Charles Keyes (1986, p. 86) notes that this *Sangha gender* was only applicable to males in Theravāda countries, because women are not ordained, Monica Lindberg Falk objects – and rightly so – by highlighting that the asexual category was obtained also by the female monks, the Bhikkhunīs. Furthermore the Mae Chiis in Thailand develop a specific Sangha-identity by means of their monastic, celibate lifestyle instead of identifying by their sex (LINDBERG FALK, 2007, p. 45-46, 100-101).

In practice however there *are* differences in the social evaluation and religious acknowledgement of female renouncers and also in the result of the transformative process they merge into by joining the Sangha.

For the male, renunciation is the end to his sexuality and the adoption of an alternate normative (even ideal) *asexual male* identity, following the example of the Buddha who is depicted as *the ideal male* (VOYCE, 2011, p. 444).

Through ascetic practice – meditation and celibate lifestyle – the monks cultivate their bodies in a sense of perfecting their masculinity – they transcend their sex by being/becoming asexual (as the Buddha has been). To understand this perception, one has to keep in mind that the material, lust, the mundane is associated with the female/feminine – the masculine is associated with the intellectual, the mind and

spirit. By letting go or overcoming the feminine aspects, the monk advances the ideal masculine.

A woman on the other hand, that is willing to lead a life striving for spiritual progress finds herself in a dilemma between her personal understanding of doing the right thing in following the example of the Buddha and society's expectations of the right role and behavior of a woman, as daughter, wife and mother. Women who join the Sangha do not only reject sexual practices and become asexual; they reject any normative female gender role and thus become abnormal. Furthermore, being tied to the world by her biological – meaning physical and mental – female dispositions a woman (according to early Buddhist literature as well as to the widespread understanding in contemporary Thailand) cannot successfully follow a spiritual thriving and even less the monastic discipline. She consequently has to deny her own female body and overcome its characteristic functions. Through ascetic practice the body and its appetites, associated with the female, is cultivated and overcome – in fact these practices clearly prevent from pregnancy and birth and eventually also lead to the ebbing of menstruation. Here the body is advanced to the masculine as well. A woman following the example of the Buddha consequently has to transform her biological sex to perfect herself and become male, to be able to perform in the same way the monks do (cf. GRÜNHAGEN, 2013, p. 128-129).

4. CONCLUSION

Considering the aforementioned, the definition of the Sangha gender as androgynous does not hold out against the actual meaning of the word. In fact, the monk perfects his sex/gender to the true and ideal male by abolishing his physical, libidinal dues that are associated with the feminine.

The female that is expected to do the same, performs a total transformation of her female sex and gender to perfect her masculinity (KAWANAMI, 2001, p. 137; LANG, 1982, p. 99-101; OHNUMA, 2004, p. 203). In the end the Sangha gender is not asexual and androgynous but can in fact be defined as an *asexual male/masculine* gender.

Actually the underlying premise is that the ordained woman herself has to be convinced of the inferiority and repulsiveness of her female body. Ultimately she will never reach this ideal masculinity but can only hope to successfully clear as much karma as possible to be reborn in a male body. This understanding is illustrated – for example – by the case of Gopikā in the Sakka-Pañha Suttanta:

She, having abandoned a woman's thoughts and cultivated the thoughts of a man, was, at the dissolution of the body after her death, reborn to a pleasant life, into the communion of the Thirty-and-Three gods, into sonship with us. (DĪGHANIKĀYA, II, p. 271 [DN II, p. 306]).

A meaningful statement regarding this issue was made by a Buddhist monk I was able to interview in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 2010 who told me about the possibility for women, to practice Dhamma by financially and materially supporting the Sangha. Yet, they could not be allowed to every part of the temple or practice because of the impurity of their bodies. He pointed out that there however were nuns in Buddhism – in that case actually speaking about the Thai Mae Chiis that are not ordained as Bhikkhunīs. Asked about their status he said: “When women change their bodies into monks, sex doesn't matter anymore”⁵.

O FIM DA SEX(UALIDADE) E A ADOÇÃO DE UM NOVO GÊNERO – RENÚNCIA NO BUDISMO THERAVADA

RESUMO

O artigo apresenta algumas conclusões sobre a sex(ualidade) e o sexo de homens e mulheres, respectivamente, que decidem juntar-se à ordem

⁵ Interview from 18 February 2010 in Wat Chedi Luang, Chiang Mai, Thailand. The monk was referring to the Mae Chii, that are not actually ordained, but that does not influence the significance of his statement.

budista – a Sangha. Renúncia da adoção mundana, a disciplina monástica inicia um processo de transformação, criando novas identidades. A disciplina monástica nomeadamente transcende os gêneros masculino e feminino mundanamente normativos e os substitui por uma nova identidade de gênero. Essa nova identidade é representada como o sexo Sangha, que pode, de fato, ser definido como um gênero masculino assexuado. Enquanto para o sexo masculino a renúncia é o fim de sua sexualidade e da adoção de uma identidade normativa masculina suplente (mesmo ideal), as mulheres que participam da Sangha não apenas rejeitam práticas sexuais e qualquer papel de gênero normativo feminino, mas também há a expectativa de que transformem seu sexo biológico e tornem-se masculinas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Budismo. Gênero. Sangha. Sexualidade. Renúncia.

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