

# Misinterpretations of the Buddhist Texts and the Problem of Ordination of Women

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A number of Buddhist canonical texts suggest discrimination against women, such as the Buddha's reluctance to allow women to enter the *sangha*, the sub-ordinate status of the *bhikkhunīs* under the eight strict conditions (*aṭṭha garudhammā*), the inferior terms used for the women in canonical texts, five obstructions of a woman, her incapability to become a Buddha and so on. Based on these textual sources, even today women may renounce the household but they cannot become *bhikkhunīs*. Even when they are the prime supporters of the Saṅgha, lay women are still treated as polluted beings. How these discriminatory expressions and misinterpretations of the Buddhist texts gradually became hindrances to the ordination of womenfolk is discussed in this paper with a special reference to the concept of five obstacles.

## ***The Lotus Sūtra and the five denials for the women:***

Examples of gender discrimination in Buddhism are often cited from the *Lotus Sūtra*: A woman cannot become a Buddha unless and until her body is transformed into a male figure. According to the Sanskrit text of the *Lotus Sūtra*, when Mañjuśrī told that the eight year old daughter of Sāgara, the dragon king, was fit to attain the supreme,

perfect enlightenment, Prajñākūṭa Bodhisattva expressed his doubt and said that even Śākyamuni Buddha strived diligently for thousands of *kalpas*, performed meritorious deeds, sacrificed his body for the beings, and only then could he become a perfectly enlightened one. So, it was difficult for him to believe that the daughter of the *nāga* king was able to attain the supreme, perfect enlightenment in a moment. Then, immediately the daughter of the *nāga* king appeared and proclaimed that she had obtained the enlightenment and the Tathāgata himself was witness to it. Hearing this, venerable Śāriputra showed his doubt saying that it was not possible, as there was no example of a woman attaining Buddhahood. Till then (*adyāpi*) no woman had achieved the following five ranks i.e. the rank of a Brahma, a Śakra, a guardian deity [of the four quarters] (*mahārāja*), a universal monarch (*Cakravartin*) and a Bodhisattva who is incapable of sliding back (*avaivartika bodhisattva*). Even so, the daughter of the king Sāgara transformed herself into a male and appeared as an enlightened one.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> atha khalu tasyāṁ velāyāmāyushmāñśāriputrastām sāgaranāgarājaduhitarametadvocat. kevalaṁ kulaputri bodhāya cittamutpannamavivartyāprameyaprajñā cāsi. samyaksambuddhattvaṁ tu durlabham. asti kulaputri strī na ca vīryaṁ sraṁsayatyanekāni ca kalpaśatānyanekāni ca kalpasahasrāṇi puṇyāni karoti, ṣaṭ pāramitāḥ paripūrayati, na cādyāpi buddhatvaṁ prāpnoti. kiṁ kāraṇaṁ. pañca sthānāni stradyāpi na prāpnoti. katamāni pañca. prathamam brahmasthānam dvitīyam śakrasthānam tṛtīyam mahārājasthānam caturtham cakravartisthānam pañcamamavaivartikabodhisattvasthānam. (Kern, H. & Nanjio, B. (ed.), *the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, Bibliotheca Buddhica- X, Meicho-fukyū-kai, Tokyo, 1977. P. 264). Also see Kern, H. (tr.), *the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka (the Lotus of the True Law)*, Chapter- 11, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1980, pp. 252~254; Vaidya, P. L. (ed.), *the Saddharmapūṇḍarīkasūtra*, the Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, Darbhanga, 1960, chapter- 11, p. 161; Kotsuki, H. (ed.), *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtram*, Sanskrit Lotsu Sutra Manuscript from University of Tokyo General Library, Soka Gakkai, Tokyo, 2003; Kubo, T. & Yuyama, A. (tr.), *the Lotus Sutra*, Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1993, Chapter- 12, pp. 197~198; Takakusu, J. (ed.), *Mao-fa-lian-hua-jing*, translated by Kumārajīva, (in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, Vol. 9.), Taishō shinshū daizōkyō kankōkai, Tokyo, 1960, p. 35c; Takakusu, J. (ed.), *Zheng-fa-hua-jing*, translated by Dharmarakṣa, (in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, Vol. 9), Taishō shinshū daizōkyō kankōkai, Tokyo, 1960, p. 106a.

Thus, Prajñākūṭa Bodhisattva had doubts on her obtaining the supreme enlightenment in a moment without any hardship, and venerable Śāriputra also had doubts, as attainment of the supreme enlightenment was very difficult for any one. At the same time he was surprised, too, because it was an unprecedented occurrence. Here it should be noted that both Prajñākūṭa Bodhisattva and venerable Śāriputra did not mention womanhood itself as a hindrance to obtain the supreme enlightenment.

This part of the *Lotus Sūtra* is quoted very often as an example of gender discrimination in Buddhism. But we must not forget that it is the comment made by venerable Śāriputra, not by the Buddha himself. Further, Here, attention should be paid to the term “*adyāpī*” in Sanskrit which means “still”, “yet”, “to this day” etc. If no woman has occupied these five places so far, it does not mean that she can not attain it in the future. Instead of taking it as venerable Śāriputra’s refusal to accept her enlightenment, we may simply interpret the statement as his astonishment. He questioned with astonishment about for such a wonderful and incredible thing that he had never heard of before.

One more important point is to be noted. In the Sanskrit texts of the *Lotus Sūtra* it is written “five places or ranks” (*pañca sthānāni*). When Dharmarakṣa ( 竺法護 ) translated the *Lotus Sūtra* into Chinese in 268 A.D., he followed the Sanskrit interpretation and used the term ‘五位 wu wei’ which means five places or ranks. But after him the text was translated by Kumārajīva in 406 A. D. using a discriminatory expression. He used the term ‘五障 wu zhang’ which means five

obstructions or obstacles. In addition, Kumārajīva's translation also gives the following comments. As a reply to the dragon king's daughter, Śāriputra says, "You say that you will soon attain the highest path. This is difficult to believe. Why is this? [Because] the female body is polluted; it is not a fit vessel for the Dharma. How can you attain the highest enlightenment?"<sup>2</sup>

This part of Śāriputra's comment is neither found in the Sanskrit texts nor in the work of Dharmarakṣa. Various reasons are stated, such as his translation is based on a manuscript from Kucha (Qiu-ci)<sup>3</sup>, the Devadatta chapter where this discriminatory statement is written, did not exist originally in the translation of Kumārajīva<sup>4</sup> etc.

Unfortunately, as the manuscript is no longer extant, there is no way to verify if it was really a part of the original manuscript, or if it was Kumārajīva's idea or if it was added by somebody else later. But one thing is evident that when the text traveled from India to China through Central Asia, it was influenced by the local thoughts of the time and later interpolations of gender discrimination could be possible. It is a very good example of how place and time affected translating and interpreting the Buddhist texts.

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<sup>2</sup> Kubo & Yuyama, the *Lotus Sūtra*, 1993, p. 197.

The original text is:

時舍利弗語龍女言。汝謂不久得無上道。是事難信。所以者何。女身垢穢非是法器。云何能得無上菩提。佛道懸曠經無量劫。勤苦積行具修諸度。然後乃成。(Mao-fa-lian-hua-jing, Vol. 4, T. 9, p. 35c.)

<sup>3</sup> Tian-pin-miao-fa-lian-hua-jing, T. 9, p. 134c.

<sup>4</sup> Tian-pin-miao-fa-lian-hua-jing, T. 9, p. 134c ; Tada & Tada, Hokkebu, Vol. 1, p.19; Karitani, p. 185; Busshō kaisetsu daijiten, p. 358.

Although there are three Chinese translations of the *Lotus Sutra* extant<sup>5</sup>, unfortunately Kumārajīva's work is the most popular in most of the Mahayana countries. In Japan, it added fuel to already existing gender discrimination. How the women grieved because of these five obstacles can be observed from various Japanese literary works.<sup>6</sup>

Further, the five ranks/ obstructions are different in the Sanskrit and in the Chinese texts. In the Chinese version, the five obstructions are inability to become a Brahma, a Śakra, a Māra, a sovereign monarch and a Buddha. The term '*mahārāja*' of the Sanskrit text is not found in any of the Chinese texts. Conversely, the term 'Māra' does not find a place in the Sanskrit texts. But surprisingly, the Pāli texts, however, used the term 'Māra' although it is not an honorable rank according to Pāli tradition.<sup>7</sup> These five ranks/ obstructions should have been the same in all the versions, if they were really important factors on the path of a woman's enlightenment.

### ***The five ranks/ obstacles and the ordination of women:***

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<sup>5</sup> By Dharmarakṣa in 286 A.D., by Kumārajīva in 406 A.D. and by Jñānagupta and Dharmagupta in 601 A. D.

<sup>6</sup> *Murasaki shikibu shū, Ryōjinhisyō, Heike monogatari, Zokuhonchō ōjōden* etc. For detail refer Shirato Waka, "Butten ni arawareta josei tachi" in *Josei to bukkyō, Kōka shōsho- 3*, Kyoto, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya*, Vol. III, pp. 65-66; *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Part- I, p. 28; *Vibhaṅga*, p. 336.

Here it is interesting to note that various other texts also mention these five ranks/ obstructions.<sup>8</sup> The *Lotus Sūtra*, however, is cited the most. Although we do not find the term five ranks/ obstructions, the Pāli scriptures also mention it in the same meaning as mentioned above.<sup>9</sup> In the *Lotus Sūtra* this concept of five ranks/ obstruction was related to the thought of women's attainment of Buddhahood, but in some of these texts in Chinese, it is related to the ordination of women.

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<sup>8</sup> Here is a list of the texts:

- a. *Zhong-a-han-jing*, Vol. 28, T. 1, p. 607b.
- b. *Wu-fen-lü*, Vol. 29 <Di-wu-fen-zhi-ba-bi-qiu-ni-fa>, T. 22, p. 186a. )
- c. *Zhong-ben-qi-jing*, <u-tan-mi-lai-zuo-bi-qiu-ni-pin-di-jiu>, T. 4, p. 159b.  
*Zeng-yi-a-han-jing* (增一阿含經, Jpn. *Zō ichi agongyō*), Vol. 38, T. 2, p. 757c.
- e. *Fo-shuo-chao-ri-ming-san-mei-jing* (仏説超日明三昧經, Jpn. *Bussetsu Chōnichimyō zanmaikyō*), Vol. 2, T. 15, p. 541b.
- f. *Da-zhi-du-lun* (大智度論, Jpn. *Daichidoron*), Vol. 2, T. 25, p. 72b.
- g. *Dai-zhi-du-lun*, Vol. 9, T. 25, p. 125a.
- h. *Dai-zhi-du-lun*, Vol. 56, T. 25, p. 459a.
- i. *Fo-shuo-qu-tan-mi-ji-guo-jing*, T. 1, p. 858a.

<sup>9</sup> a) *Aṭṭhānaṃ etaṃ bhikkhave anavakāso yaṃ itthi arahaṃ assa sammā sambuddho n' etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati. Ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ bhikkhave vijjati yaṃ puriso arahaṃ assa sammā sambuddho ṭhānaṃ etaṃ vijjatīti.*

*Aṭṭhānaṃ etaṃ bhikkhave anavakāso yaṃ itthi rājā assa cakkavattī n' etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati. Ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ bhikkhave vijjati yaṃ puriso rājā assa cakkavattī ṭhānaṃ etaṃ vijjatīti.*

*Aṭṭhānaṃ etaṃ bhikkhave anavakāso yaṃ itthi Sakkattaṃ kāreyya . . . pe . . . Mārattaṃ kāreyya . . . pe . . . Brahmattaṃ kāreyya n' etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati. Ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ bhikkhave vijjati yaṃ puriso Sakkattaṃ kāreyya . . . pe . . . Mārattaṃ kāreyya . . . pe . . . Brahmattaṃ kāreyya ṭhānaṃ etaṃ vijjatīti. (Aṅguttara Nikāya, Part- I, p. 28)*

b) *Aṭṭhānam etaṃ anavakāso yaṃ itthi araham assa Sammāsambuddho, n' etaṃ ṭhānam vijjatīti pajānāti; Ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ vijjati yaṃ puriso araham assa Sammāsambuddho, ṭhānam etaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti; Aṭṭhānam etaṃ anavakāso yaṃ itthi rājā assa cakkavattī, n' etaṃ ṭhānam vijjatīti pajānāti; Ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ vijjati yaṃ puriso rājā assa cakkavattī, ṭhānam etaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti; Aṭṭhānam etaṃ anavakāso yaṃ itthi Sakkattaṃ kareyya, n' etaṃ ṭhānam vijjatīti pajānāti; Ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ vijjati yaṃ puriso Sakkattam kareyya, ṭhānam etaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti; Aṭṭhānam etaṃ anavakāso yaṃ itthi Mārattam kareyya, n' etaṃ ṭhānam vijjatīti pajānāti; Ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ vijjati yaṃ puriso Mārattam kareyya, ṭhānam etaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti; Aṭṭhānam etaṃ anavakāso yaṃ itthi Brahmattaṃ kareyya, n' etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti; Ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ vijjati yaṃ puriso Brahmattam kareyya, ṭhānam etaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti. (Majjhima Nikāya, Vol. III, pp. 65-66)*

c) *aṭṭhānam etaṃ anavakāso yaṃ itthi arahaṃ assa sammāsambuddho, n' etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti; ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ vijjati yaṃ puriso arahaṃ assa sammāsambuddho, ṭhānam etaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti; aṭṭhānam etaṃ anavakāso yaṃ itthi rājā assa cakkavattī, n' etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti; ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ vijjati yaṃ puriso rājā assa cakkavattī, ṭhānam etaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti; aṭṭhānam etaṃ anavakāso yaṃ itthi Sakkattaṃ kāreyya, Mārattaṃ kāreyya, Brahmattaṃ kāreyya, n' etaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti; ṭhānaṃ ca kho etaṃ vijjati yaṃ puriso Brahmattaṃ kāreyya, ṭhānam etaṃ vijjatīti pajānāti. (Vibhaṅga, pp. 336-337)*

Among these, in the Chinese Sūtra *Fo-shuo-qu-tan-mi-ji-guo-jing* ( 仏説瞿曇彌記果經, Jp. *Bussetsu kudommi kikakyō*, later half of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century A. D. ), the Chinese translation of the *Mahīsāsaka Vinaya*, known as the *Wu-fen-lü* ( 五分律, Jpn. *Gobunritsu*, 423~424 A. D. ), the Chinese *Madhyamāgama* or the *Zhong-a-han-jing* ( 中阿含經, Jpn. *Chūagongyō*, 397~398 A. D. ), the *Zhong-ben-qi-jing* ( 中本起經, Jpn. *Chūhongikyō*, 207 A. D.) etc. the five ranks/ obstructions are related to the episode of Mahāpajāpatī's ordination. The *Zhong-ben-qi-jing* describes it in the following way:<sup>10</sup>

When Mahāpajāpatī, the aunt as well as the foster mother of the Buddha, went to the Lord and asked for his permission to become a *bhikkhunī*, he denied her request. But later with the advocacy of venerable Ānanda, he allowed the women to enter the saṅgha, although reluctantly. But he put as a condition the acceptance of the Eight Important Rules (*aṭṭha garudhammā*) to become a *bhikkhunī*. One of the rules states that a nun even if ordained for a hundred years must bow down and pay due respect to a monk ordained even that very day. One day, Mahāpajāpatī went with other *bhikkhunīs* and told Ānanda that the *bhikkhunīs* had practiced the Vinaya and followed the path of the Buddha sincerely for a long time. Then why must they have to respect the freshly ordained *bhikkhus*? Venerable Ānanda informed this matter to the Lord. The Lord said “Stop, stop. O Ānanda. You must be careful of what you say, because what you know is not like what I know. If the women had not been allowed

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<sup>10</sup> T4, p. 158a~159b.

to become bhikkhunī, then the people of other religions and the lay people would have spread their [own] cloth on the ground and seeking for the compassion of the bhikkhus would have said, <O venerables, you have practiced pure vinaya and have [attained] enlightenment. Please walk on this cloth and let us obtain merits for a long time>. If the women had not been allowed to become bhikkhunī, all the people in the world would have opened [their long] hair, spread that on the ground, and seeking for the compassion of the bhikkhus would have said, <O venerables, you follow the vinaya, listen to the wisdom and practice [accordingly]. We request you to walk on [our] hair and let us obtain merit for a long time>. If the women had not been allowed to become bhikkhunī, all the people in the world would have prepared robes, food, drink, cushions and medicine and would have requested the bhikkhus to come and receive them. If the women had not been allowed to become bhikkhunī, all the people of the world would have paid respect to the bhikkhus like the sun and moon, like the gods of the heaven. They would have paid more respect than they do to the scholars of other religions. [Thus] if the women had not been allowed to become bhikkhunī, the True Law of the Buddha would have flourished for one thousand years. [But now] as the women became bhikkhunī, it will be reduced to 500 years. Why? O Ānanda, [because] there are five ranks that the women cannot obtain. Those are the rank of a Tathāgata Buddha, a universal monarch, an Indra, a Māra, and a Brahmā.”

Here, a gradual decline of the Dharma is described. First, lay people will stop respecting the *saṅgha* gradually, and then they will stop giving offerings, as it will not bring any merit to them because of the presence of the women in the *saṅgha* who

are denied the 5 ranks. Next, as the flow of offerings will be stopped, it will be very difficult for the members of the *saṅgha* to continue their livelihood and ultimately there will be no preacher of the Dharma. As a result, the true Law that was supposed to continue for a thousand years will be reduced to 500 years.

The *Wu-fen-lü*<sup>11</sup> states even more clearly that as the women have five obstacles they must respect the newly ordained bhikkhus even if they are ordained for a long time.

The *Fo-shuo-qu-tan-mi-ji-guo-jing*<sup>12</sup> describes almost the same contents but with the following difference. Here it is stated very distinctly that the Buddha did not allow the women to enter the saṅgha as they cannot obtain these five ranks “till the end of their life” that is to say they can not obtain these five ranks after all their effort. The *Zhong-a-han-jing* also depicts in the same way.<sup>13</sup> In both these texts and in the *Zhong-ben-qi-jing* we find an additional statement that the men can obtain these five ranks justifying why men were accepted in the Saṅgha and why they should be revered by the women renunciants irrespective of their seniority. The Pāli texts mention equally too. But the Sanskrit text of the *Lotus Sūtra* does not mention it. Moreover, in all these four texts the description related to the five obstacles is found at the end of the concerned chapter in question. It could be possible that when the

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<sup>11</sup> T22, p. 185b~186b..

<sup>12</sup> T1, p. 856a~858a.

<sup>13</sup> T1, p. 605a~607b.

concepts of pollution and five obstacles were introduced into Buddhist texts, it was thought appropriate to add to the episode of women's ordination.

Unfortunately, as the original Sanskrit versions of the above texts are not extant, it cannot be said with much certainty whether these are the original statements or whether they were changed when translated into Chinese. This concept of five obstacles could be one among various factors for the decline of bhikkhunī lineage.

Most probably the concept of five obstacles was used to highlight the possibility for the salvation of women: even women, who have polluted bodies and five obstacles, can obtain salvation – a key point of Mahayana Buddhism. The following verse may be quoted in this regard:

So profound is Amida's great compassion  
That, manifesting inconceivable Buddha-wisdom,  
The Buddha established the Vow of transformation into men,  
Thereby vowing to enable women to attain Buddhahood.<sup>14</sup>

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14 "Hymns of the Pure Land" in the Collected Works of Shinran, Vol. I, Shin Buddhism Translation Series, Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, Kyoto, 1997, p. 341. (This is the meaning of the Thirty-fifth Vow)

弥陀の大悲ふかければ

仏智の不思議をあらわして

変成男子の願をたて

女人成仏ちかいたり

(真宗聖典編纂委員会(編)、『真宗聖典』「浄土和讃」、東本願寺出版部、京都、1999年、p. 484)

But later with the passing of time, this concept came to be applied to the ordination of women, gradually making the path for ordination more difficult for them.

Unfortunately, in the Jodo Shin sect of Japan, even now Buddhist priests chant this verse exclusively for a woman when she dies in order to make it possible for her to attain the Buddhahood, where as it is not chanted for the departed men.

### *Conclusions*

Thus, what we have today as gender discrimination is in fact the result of a gradual piling up of misinterpretations due to the social characteristics of the times and the linguistic limitations of the places where the texts were translated as they traveled from India to other regions. Because of these misinterpretations, now, many women have to remain at the status of novice nun even if they want to become bhikkhunīs. Misinterpreted parts of the texts were accepted as the words of the Buddha and in the long run women were treated as the polluted beings. According to my informal questionnaire I have come to find that in most of the Buddhist countries women in general are treated as polluted beings without any concrete notion of why they are polluted. They are not aware of the underlying reasons and just follow the custom blindly. I believe, a careful study of the texts and a proper understanding of the contents can to some extent solve this problem for women renunciants and female laity and give them the position they deserve.

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### ***Abbreviations:***

1. PTS : The Pali Text Society

2. T : The Taishō shinshū daizōkyō