

Introduction

Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reflection on reasons, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think, "The ascetic is our teacher." But when you know for yourselves, "These things are unwholesome, these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practised, lead to harm and suffering," then you should abandon them. . . . when you know for yourselves, "These things are wholesome, these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practised, lead to welfare and happiness," then you should engage in them.¹

Having renounced the conventional ways of thinking and behaving, a human teacher gives the above advice about taking actions and accepting views. He is concerned with the prevalence and causes of *dukkha* (Sanskrit: *duhkha*), the unsatisfactoriness of ordinary life, the disease and anguish of conventional existence, the suffering particularly pronounced at the troubled time in which he lived.² He affirms that *nibbāna* (Sanskrit: *nirvāna*), the cessation of *dukkha*, is achievable, and he teaches the practices and views that can lead all sentient beings to it. At the same time, however, he discourages blind faith in any tradition, teaching, or teacher, himself and his own teachings included. He does not encourage wayward dismissal of all practices and doctrines, either.³ Rather, he teaches his followers to reflect critically on the consequences of the actions they take and the ramifications of the views they accept.

This human teacher is the Buddha, “the awakened one.” He is also known as Siddhāttha Gotama (Sanskrit: Siddhārtha Gautama) and Sākyamuni (Sanskrit: Śākyamuni), the silent sage of the Sākya (Sanskrit: Śākya) tribe at the foothill of the Himālayas. He is popularly dated in the sixth to fifth centuries BCE according to Buddhist traditions, albeit exact dates are still disputed.⁴ His oral teachings have attracted so many followers that he is retrospectively considered the teacher and founder of a religious tradition. His followers are now commonly called Buddhists in the English language, and their practices and views are now collectively termed Buddhism. Followers of the Buddha’s teachings, however, refer to the Buddhist views and practices as the *Dhamma* (Sanskrit: *Dharma*). Rooted in the verb *dhr*, meaning to support or to sustain, the word *dhamma* has the connotation of the natural order or cosmic law that underpins the operation of the world in both the physical and moral senses. It is a multivalent word in both Hindu traditions and Buddhist traditions. In Hindu traditions, it can mean religious-social duties, the customary observances of a caste or sect, law usage and practice, righteousness, justice, norm, morality, virtue, religious or moral merit, piety, religion, sacrifice, and so forth. In Buddhism, it is used to denote the totality of the Buddha’s teachings and the Buddhist path, or any one of Buddhist principles, or any individual element or phenomenon that collectively constitutes the empirical world and existence, including physical objects, activities, circumstances or conditions of life, as well as mental objects, psychological processes, and character traits. In the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, *Dhamma* also designates the reality of Buddhahood.⁵ In this book I distinguish between *Dhamma* and *dhamma*, with the former referring to the Buddha’s teachings, and the latter referring to the individual element that constitutes the empirical world.

In the long history of Buddhism, the most prominent exegetes of the *Dhamma* have largely been monastic males who were most likely from the upper strata of their societies. Buddhist scholar Roger R. Jackson notes that, in pre-modern times, the major theorists and disseminators of the Buddhist *Dhamma*, whom he terms “theologians,” were “an élite within an élite, for they were among the very few people within their societies who were able to separate themselves from lay life to follow the monastic calling, and they were, unlike the majority of the populace (and probably the majority of monastics)[,] literate.”⁶ In addition to being separated from the majority of people and having the education and leisure to tackle the voluminous Buddhist literature, they were befriended by the political and economic élite in

their societies because they were seen as “sources of spiritual power and temporal legitimation.”⁷ This privileged group usually had been culturally conditioned to identify with the existing social orders and not to question them. As a result, Buddhist masters in history have been known more through their teachings about, and pursuit of, individual inner peace in various adverse situations, than through their effort in challenging and restructuring the social institutions at their times. Most of them also uncritically inherited an androcentric bias that has been persistent in most societies and in most ages. The privileged androcentric perspective of the major transmitters of the *Dhamma*, which focused on individual spiritual transformation and paid little attention to structural problems and gender inequity, has been kept alive in their commentaries and translations.⁸ Being the *Dhamma* teachers and lineage patriarchs, those privileged men were (and still are) much revered in most Asian cultures where Buddhism has been influential, and as such their teachings sometimes became utterly unchallengeable. Thus, even though the transmitters of the Buddhist *Dhamma* of later times were not necessarily of the upper classes, and even though some of them were not even male, they inherited their masters’ blind spots together with their insights. As a result, they took the existing social orders and gender roles for granted, focused on inner peace *only*, overemphasized isolated meditation and individualistic intellectual study, and devalued social relationships.⁹ Even among traditional Asian Mahāyānists, who often self-proclaimed to be committed to “liberating all sentient beings,” the *socio*-ethical implications of the Buddha’s teachings were often downplayed, and the cultivation of the mind was often propped up as the sole point of the Buddhist *Dhamma*. Socio-ethical engagement was thus rendered secondary by some, if not utterly unimportant.

Western colonialism in Asia, unfortunately, pushed Buddhism further down the path of social indifference and individual purification. Edmund F. Perry relates this recent history in his foreword to Walpola Rāhula’s *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*:

The image of the Buddhist monk as a public leader engaging in social and political activities had been obscured, deliberately so, by Western colonialists and their accompanying Christian missionaries. By imposing a particular type of Christian monasticism upon the Buddhist clergy, restricting the clergy’s activity to individual purification and temple ministries, the colonial administrators dispossessed the

bhikkhus of their influence on the public life of their people and actually succeeded in instituting a tradition of Buddhist recluses, to the near exclusion of other types of clergy.

. . . The conspiracy to “convert” the Buddhist monk from public leader to disengaged recluse prevailed so widely and pervasively that today even in independent countries the monks have to struggle against so-called Buddhist politicians who, still possessed by the “heritage” left by the imperialists, want, more than the colonial Christians, to silence and seclude the monks as though the monk constitutes a public menace.¹⁰

Under Western colonial rule, Buddhism was branded as a religion that lacked a social ethic and thus irrelevant to modern society. That misrepresentation was furthermore taught to the colonized, especially the élite who received “modern” education and learned to see their own traditions through the colonial lens.¹¹ To this day, “Western scholars of Buddhism tend to perpetuate the image of the Buddhist monk as something like the medieval mystic recluse of the Christian faith,”¹² and “Popular literature in the West often presents the ‘essence’ of Buddhism as primarily about inner experience rather than its institutional and social realities.”¹³

However, the historical and social reality is that the Buddhist goal of the cessation of *dukkha* has never been disregarded, even though at times it was turned inward and individualized. Prior to the colonial presence, Buddhism in Asia had had a “considerable history of social involvement.”¹⁴ In Theravāda countries, such as Ceylon (Sri Lanka), *bhikkhu-s* (Sanskrit: *bhikṣu-s*; male Buddhist renunciates) had served as the ethical and spiritual educators of the masses, preservers of cultural heritages, main providers of medical care and social services, and advisors to the rulers.¹⁵ Even in East Asian countries where the Confucian tradition is said to have dominated the social, ethical, and political spheres, *bhikkhu-s*, *bhikkhunī-s* (Sanskrit: *bhikṣuṇī-s*; female Buddhist renunciates), and lay followers often engaged in social work and disaster relief as an effort to fulfill the Mahāyānist bodhisattva vow of “liberating all sentient beings.” Engaged Buddhist theorist Ken Jones observes, “in both Theravada and Mahayana scripture, the practical relief of suffering is commonly given first priority.”¹⁶

In the Buddhist *Dhamma*, ethical discipline is an indispensable part of the path that leads to *nibbāna*, and inner peace and social well-being are positively correlated. Part of understanding non-Self (Pāli: *anātta*; Sanskrit: *anātman*) and interdependent co-arising (Pāli:

paṭiccasamuppāda; Sanskrit: *pratītyasamutpāda*; also translated as dependent origination, interconditionality, or simply co-arising) is to see the mutual generations and mutual reinforcements between the “inner” states of an individual and her or his “outer” behaviors, between an individual’s behavior and the social realities, and between the seemingly “external” socio-cultural phenomena and the seemingly “internal” mental processes of individuals. As such, individual transformation includes ethical dealing with one’s surroundings, and social well-being is a *bona fide* Buddhist concern. Robert Magliola observes that the globally influential engaged Buddhists “were *perhaps* inspired in part by western models, but they have *revived* (long-untapped) political/social reserves in their own Buddhism.”¹⁷ (Emphasis added.) That is, rather than being a purely modern invention inspired by Protestant Christian values,¹⁸ social ethics has been ingrained in the Buddhist *Dhamma* since its inception.

In this book I draw from the foundational teachings recognized by all Buddhist schools in order to revive its social ethics that has often been downplayed and neglected. In this regard, this book provides a theoretical and textual foundation of socially engaged Buddhism and its ethics. Christopher Ives aptly critiques that engaged Buddhist discourses so far largely deploy a rather nebulously defined concept of “interdependence” and thereby “step onto a slippery rhetorical slope and, by extension, run the risk of succumbing to slippery argumentation.”¹⁹ A theoretical work that grounds the ethics of socially engaged Buddhism in foundational Buddhist texts is therefore much needed. At the same time, heeding the Buddha’s own injunction as quoted at the beginning of this chapter, I will maintain a spirit of inquiry taught by the Buddha²⁰ and think critically about traditional materials, keeping in mind that the true criteria for Buddhist views and actions are alleviating *dukkha* and contributing to welfare of all sentient beings.²¹ In this effort, I am joining those who engage in critical and constructive Buddhist thinking, exploring the ways in which the Buddhist teachings can be understood and revalorized to help deal with various forms of social *dukkha* in today’s much globalized and still patriarchal world. The critical-constructive Buddhist thinking, otherwise termed “Buddhist theology,” involves “critiquing past elements of tradition inappropriate to a new time, recovering or re-emphasizing other elements, critiquing Western models inadequate for a fuller understanding of Buddhism, and exploring the potential of Buddhist experience to shine new light upon a host of contemporary cultural and religious concerns.”²² This approach to the Buddhist *Dhamma*, as I will show in the section “*Dhammic Exegesis*” below, is completely grounded in the Buddha’s own

teachings and examples as recorded in the earliest Buddhist literature, even though some may consider it a form of “Buddhist Modernism” that emerged newly “out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity.”²³

In the same effort of taking up the Buddha’s injunctions to alleviate *dukkha* and work for the well-being of all, male and female, this book also seeks to address the social expectations and impositions of gender roles, which have resulted in much suffering for women and sometimes for men also. The concept of *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*), in particular, has been frequently misused to justify male dominance. A female rebirth has been commonly viewed as the unavoidable result of negative *kamma* from past lives, and the purported negative *kamma* from past lives is used to justify the mistreatments that a woman endures in this life.²⁴ In light of these abuses and in the spirit of alleviating suffering, a feminist critique is necessary in the revitalization of the socio-ethical dimensions of the Buddhist teachings. Gender is a very basic aspect of individual identity to which a person may tenaciously cling,²⁵ and yet the central Buddhist teaching of non-Self has never been consistently applied to gender, which is rather questionable for a tradition dedicated to analyzing the constructedness of self-identity and discouraging all forms of self-clinging.²⁶

I will build on the work of liberal and liberationist feminist scholars of Buddhism, particularly Rita M. Gross, and extend their effort by referencing recent feminist analyses of gender construction and socio-economic ramifications of sexism and rigid gender roles. In particular, theories inspired by poststructuralism and Foucault, such as constructivism posed by Judith Butler, provide a richer language for explicating the socio-ethical implications of basic Buddhist teachings such as non-Self, five aggregates, *kamma*, and the significance of the *Sangha*. These feminist theories can form a more nuanced and yet more radical critique of gender hierarchy (and any other form of social inequity that claims to be based on inherent nature). More importantly, they can better capture the dynamic complexities that are conveyed by the teaching of interdependent co-arising: relations among beings are as dynamic and ever-changing as beings themselves are. Thus regarded, ethics in Buddhism is not about abiding by a set of rigid, inalterable rules, but *an ongoing process of striving to be ethical in the midst of ever-changing relations among ever-changing beings*. *Sangha*, one of the Three Jewels in which all Buddhists take refuge, then, is not a closed community bound by geographical proximity, much less by blood relation, but is *an unending effort of building communities*

and working interconnections. It follows that *nibbāna*, the cessation of *dukkha*, is not a static existence where nothing happens, but a *dynamic endeavor of alleviating dukkha and making peace that requires the participation of everyone entangled in the interconnected web of life*. Recent poststructuralist feminist theories serve as an interpretive tool that demystifies and yet brings forth the insights of Buddhism. They can be very helpful in my revitalization of this-worldly Buddhist social ethics informed by interdependent co-arising. They can also make basic Buddhist teachings accessible and acceptable to people who are concerned with their own and/or global social well-being but do not identify themselves as Buddhists.

Aiming at ceasing the *dukkha* that is present in social realities, the Buddha's teachings cannot be separated from social interactions, but they cannot be reduced to social interactions, either. *Nibbāna* is unattainable through "external" structural and behavioral changes alone, in the same way that it is unattainable through "internal" emotive and conceptual changes alone. To say the least, *nibbāna* literally means "blowing out" or "extinguishing," and in the canonical understanding what is blown out or extinguished is the three "fires" of delusion (*moha*; synonymous with ignorance [Pāli: *avijjā*; Sanskrit: *avidyā*] in Buddhist usage), greed/lust (*lobha*; synonymous with *rāga*), and hatred/ill will (Pāli: *dosa*; Sanskrit: *dveṣa*). These three "fires" are also called three "poisons" and three "root vices" (Pāli: *akusala-mūla*; Sanskrit: *akuśala-mūla*). Together, they comprise *taṇhā* (Sanskrit: *tṛṣṇā*), the deeply seated fixations that cause *dukkha*. Immoral conducts occur "through a misapprehension of the facts [i.e., delusion] . . . together with an emotional investment," which swings to the extremes of greed/lust and hatred/ill will.²⁷ The cessation of *dukkha*, therefore, concerns "the destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, [and] the destruction of delusion."²⁸ That is to say, *nibbāna* requires not only behavioral transformation, but also emotive and conceptual transformations. The Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path (Pāli: *ariya-atthangika-magga*; Sanskrit: *ārya-astanga-mārga*), through its Three Learnings (Sanskrit: *triśikṣā*) of ethical discipline (Pāli: *sīla*; Sanskrit: *śīla*),²⁹ mental training (Pāli/Sanskrit: *samādhi*),³⁰ and wisdom development (Pāli: *paññā*; Sanskrit: *prajñā*),³¹ is a holistic program that guides behavioral, emotive, and conceptual transformations altogether. Ethical social interaction is certainly not all there is in the Buddhist path to the cessation of *dukkha*, just as individual inner peace is not. The Buddhist *Dhamma* teaches that the "internal" and the "external" are interconnected, and therefore we need to work on both at the same time.

Foundational Texts and Basic Teachings:
Nikāya-s in the Pāli Canon

Buddhist literature is traditionally divided into three groups, called the Three Baskets (Pāli: *Tiṭṭaka*; Sanskrit: *Tripiṭaka*): the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (the Basket of Disciplines for Renunciates), the *Sutta Piṭaka* (Sanskrit: *Sūtra Piṭaka*; the Basket of the Discourses of the Buddha), and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (Sanskrit: *Abhidharma Piṭaka*; the Basket of Higher Teachings, referring to scholastic and philosophical renditions of the Discourses of the Buddha). The three major branches of Buddhism, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna, however, do not recognize the exact same set of texts. The Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna collections, in fact, contain many more texts than the Three Baskets, even though the term “Three Baskets” is often used as a generic term for the whole collection of Buddhist teachings. Theravādins generally consider the Pāli Canon to be the authentic teachings of the Buddha and remain suspicious of many of the texts preserved in the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna collections. Mahāyānists and Vajrayānists, on the other hand, generally do not question the legitimacy of the Pāli Canon, even though they may consider their respective tradition to be the ultimate form of Buddhism and may consider the Pāli Canon a product of the Buddha’s “skillful means” that caters to people of lesser capacities.³² That is, Buddhists across traditions recognize early Buddhist literature as the basic and foundational texts of Buddhism, and more often than not they “see themselves as directly in the line of that early Buddhism.”³³ More importantly, various forms of “Modern Buddhism,” such as the multiple strains of “Engaged Buddhism” taking place simultaneously in different regions, “Critical Buddhism” in Japan, and “Buddhism for the Human Realm” in Taiwan, all see themselves as a return to the Buddhist *Dhamma* practiced at the time of the Buddha and all appeal to the early Buddhist literature.³⁴ Therefore, in order to make the Buddhist social ethics revitalized in this book recognized as *Dhammic* (that is, in accordance with the Buddhist *Dhamma*) by Buddhists across traditions, I will mainly reference the Pāli Canon for the key concepts of Buddhism.

Among the Three Baskets, the *Vinaya Piṭaka* is most readily associated with ethics since it contains behavioral codes. In fact, most of the discussions about Buddhist ethics available either focus on the *Vinaya* alone or rely heavily on it.³⁵ However, it is not very practical to extract Buddhist social ethics from the *Vinaya* for the simple reason that the majority of Buddhists in the world are not renunciates and do not abide by the hundreds³⁶ of precepts contained in the *Vinaya*

Piṭaka. Moreover, many of the rules in the *Vinaya*, such as the practice of rain retreat, were simply customary practices among wandering ascetics in Northeastern India at the time of the historical Buddha or later.³⁷ A kind of Buddhist social ethics that may be recognizable by Buddhists in the modern world, who are predominantly lay and mostly do not live in Northeastern India, has to be extracted from the *Dhamma* contained in the *Sutta Piṭaka* acknowledged by all those who walk the Buddhist path.

To extract Buddhist social ethics from the *Dhamma* rather than the *Vinaya* is in fact a valid approach in Buddhists' own terms. The *Dhamma* and the *Vinaya* are traditionally mentioned together as "*Dhamma-Vinaya*."³⁸ Ian J. Coglan expounds the mutually dependent and mutually enhancing relation between *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* as such:

If ethics [as reflected in the *Vinaya*] is not extensively taught, it is difficult to establish the basis for generating the correct view of dhamma, in accordance with the progressive development of the three higher trainings. If dhamma is not extensively taught, it is difficult to understand the need for ethics and the very nature of dhamma itself. Without a stable understanding of these two, negative internal and external conditions will tend to quickly undermine the spiritual life. Aspirants, therefore, need to train for a long period within a proper training structure overseen by others adequately trained in ethics and dhamma. Such realized guides are capable of directly demonstrating the path in accordance with their realization.³⁹

Thai scholar-*bhikkhu* Phra Prayudh Payutto (Rājavaramuni) also explains the connection and distinction between the Buddha's teaching and the precepts he laid down over time: "Buddhism in its entirety consists of the *dhamma* and the *vinaya*. . . . The *dhamma* deals with ideals and principles, whereas the *vinaya* deals with rules and circumstances in which these ideals and principles are practiced and realized."⁴⁰ The *Vinaya* is the *Dhamma* spelled out in detail for a particular group of people in a particular socio-cultural context at a particular time, but the overarching principles of the *Vinaya* were contained in the *Dhamma* recorded in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. Étienne Lamotte therefore asserts, "While the *Vinaya* is only a convention (*samvṛti*) adopted as a line of conduct, the Dharma as propounded in the *Sūtra* represents the absolute truth (*paramārthasatya*)." ⁴¹ Therefore, even though the *Vinaya* is ostensibly more relevant in the discussion and construction of Buddhist ethics,

it is the *Dhamma* recorded in the *Suttas* that provides the rationales for the ethical codes in Buddhism.

The *Sutta Piṭaka* in the Pāli Canon consists of four major collections of *suttas* called the *Nikāya*-s. They are called *Āgama*-s in the Sanskrit Buddhist texts and are preserved in the Chinese *Tripitaka*. Despite the variations in arrangement, Étienne Lamotte observes, “The doctrinal basis common to the āgamas and nikāyas is remarkably uniform.”⁴² The Pāli *Sutta Piṭaka* contains a fifth collection of short texts, such as *Theraḡāthā* and *Therīḡāthā*. It has been recognized by scholars of the Pāli Canon that each of the four major *Nikāya*-s carries its own distinctive immediate objectives. The *Dīḡha Nikāya* (The Long Discourses of the Buddha⁴³) “is permeated by a concern with the propagation of Buddhism.”⁴⁴ *Suttas* in this collection either portray the Buddha in debate against brāhmins or glorify the Buddha profusely. The *Majjhīma Nikāya* (The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha⁴⁵) “has its spotlight directed towards the Buddhist community itself,”⁴⁶ and so its *suttas* deal largely with the fundamentals of the Buddha’s teachings, including the building of communities according to Buddhist ideals. The *Samyutta Nikāya* (The Connected Discourses of the Buddha⁴⁷) would have served as a reference for those “who were capable of grasping the deepest dimensions of Buddhist wisdom and who were charged with clarifying for others the subtle perspectives opened up by the Buddha’s Teaching.”⁴⁸ As such, it contains *suttas* pertaining to philosophical theories and structures in which the *bhikkhu*-s and *bhikkhunī*-s are trained. The *Anguttara Nikāya* (The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha⁴⁹) focuses more on what is practical in terms of “personal edification,”⁵⁰ and hence the *suttas* in this collection teach basic ethical observances as well elucidate the methods of rigorous mental training. The fifth collection, consisting of fifteen or fourteen or nineteen or twelve books, is named *Khuddaka Nikāya* in the canon of some schools, *Ksudraka Piṭaka* in the canon of some other schools that use Sanskrit texts, and excluded from the canon of still others, such as the Sarvāstivāda.⁵¹

More often than not, instructions contained in the *Anguttara Nikāya* were directed toward renunciant and lay male brāhmins who were most concerned with self-purification. The abundance of instructions on self-purification in this collection, then, is better understood as the result of the Buddha’s attempt to appeal to those male brāhmins, rather than the overall focus of the Buddha’s teachings. Targeting mainly at male brāhmins wary of temptation and contamination, not surprisingly this collection also contains the majority of the rather misogynist statements that can be found in the *Nikāya* literature.⁵²

Likewise, it would be erroneous if one concludes, based on the *Dīgha Nikāya* that aimed at propagating Buddhism, that the Buddha was only concerned with glorifying himself. It is probably best to look to the *Samyutta Nikāya* for doctrinal nuances, and the *Majjhima Nikāya* for the Buddha's instructions on community building. The exposition of central Buddhist teachings such as co-arising and five aggregates in this book, therefore, will be drawn primarily from the *Samyutta Nikāya* and the *Majjhima Nikāya*. The *Dīgha Nikāya* and the *Anguttara Nikāya* will be referenced when the main issue is the Buddha's skillfulness in communicating with privileged non-Buddhists as well as with male Buddhists with strong brāhmanic backgrounds.

Citing the *Nikāya* texts in the Pāli Canon as the foundational teachings of the Buddha is not the same as endorsing the claim made by some Theravādins that Theravāda Buddhism is the "authentic" or "pure" Buddhism that has preserved the Buddha's original teachings without change.⁵³ First of all, in terms of basic Buddhist teachings, one of the "Three Marks of Reality" (Pāli: *tilakkhaṇa*; Sanskrit: *trilakṣaṇa*; also translated as the "Three Characteristics of Existence"⁵⁴) in Buddhism is that everything in the phenomenal world is impermanent; every phenomenon co-arises with its material and socio-cultural surroundings and therefore changes together with them. From a Buddhist perspective, that is, it is rather delusional for one to claim that something has never changed for two thousand five hundred years. Many Western scholars on Buddhism have also seen Theravāda as preserving original Buddhist teachings with little change,⁵⁵ to the extent that the Theravādin emphasis of individual effort and its practice of not acknowledging women's equal potential have been retrospectively, and quite inaccurately, attributed to early Buddhism. The prevalence of equating Theravāda Buddhism with early Buddhism is evidenced by the fact that a search of "early Buddhism" in a library catalogue is likely to bring forth entries on Theravāda Buddhism.

Additionally, in terms of historical evidence, Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asian countries has been compromised by political powers and reshaped by the existing local cultures as much as Mahāyāna Buddhism in East Asian countries has.⁵⁶ To say the least, the vestiges of Brāhmanism, especially its over-emphasis on individual purity and its hierarchical social structure, are still readily discernible today in Theravāda countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Brahmā, the "creator" according to brāhmins' construction, is commonly worshiped in Theravāda countries under the misleading title of "The Four-Faced Buddha." Even Tavivat Puntarigvivat, who claims that Theravāda Buddhism has preserved the Buddha's teachings "without

any significant change," acknowledges that in Theravāda countries such as his home-country Thailand, "monks not sympathetic to state policies are structurally excluded from senior administrative positions within the *Sangha*, just as monks supportive of the regime in power receive material and career advancement in the *Sangha* hierarchy."⁵⁷

One of the most salient proofs of Theravāda having been reshaped by the cultural and political norms in its locality is the position and title of *Sangharāja* (literally, "the king of *Sangha*") within the Thai Theravādin *Sangha* hierarchy, officially appointed by the king.⁵⁸ This office is a direct contradiction to the Buddha's own teachings and practices as recorded in the Pāli Canon. It was recorded that the Buddha said, "It does not occur to the Tathāgata, 'I will take charge of the Bhikkhu Sangha,' or 'The Bhikkhu Sangha is under my direction,' so why should the Tathāgata make some pronouncement concerning the Bhikkhu Sangha?"⁵⁹ The Buddha considered himself a teacher and not a ruler of the *Sangha*; therefore it would not be in conformity with his role as a teacher to appoint a successor. Furthermore, his final injunction to the *bhikkhu*-s and *bhikkhunī*-s was, specifically, "Dwell with yourselves as your own island, with yourselves as your own refuge, with no other refuge; dwell with the Dhamma as your island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge."⁶⁰ Similarly, in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* the Buddha was recorded to have instructed, "What I have taught and explained to you as *Dhamma-Vinaya* will, at my passing, be your teacher."⁶¹ It is recorded in the *Majjhima Nikāya* that, by not appointing a successor, the Buddha intended (or so as the compilers of the *Nikāya* texts understood it) for his disciples to lead a relatively egalitarian communal life according to the *Dhamma-Vinaya*, rather than to have a hierarchical structure with a king-like figure.⁶²

Related to the above is another glaring counterproof to the claim that Theravāda has transmitted the original Buddhist teachings without change: the current male *sangha* hierarchy's opposition to the restoration of the *bhikkhunī sangha*,⁶³ which was established by the Buddha himself as recorded in the Pāli Canon. For this reason, Rita M. Gross points out that "contemporary Theravādin Buddhism is not identical with early Buddhism, especially in practices regarding women."⁶⁴ It might seem that male dominance was sanctioned by the Pāli Canon, which the Buddhist traditions in general and the Theravāda tradition in particular believe to have reached its current content and format at the First Council held immediately after the Buddha's death. Presumably, the Canon thus constructed carries the Buddha's words as his own direct disciples remembered them, and therefore the misogynist attitude contained in the Canon was from

the Buddha himself. However, one has to keep in mind that the Pāli Canon had been orally transmitted for at least four hundred years before it was committed to writing. In fact, very few Buddhist texts in their present form can be definitely dated to earlier than the fourth or fifth centuries CE. Some of the early texts may have been committed to writing in the first century BCE, approximately four hundred years after the Buddha's passing. The *Vinaya* texts were codified in their present form even later, in about the fourth to fifth centuries CE.⁶⁵ Peter N. Gregory thus questions the validity of equating the Pāli Canon with the Buddha's own words:

Although the Pāli canon may, as a whole, be closer to the Buddha's "word" than any other extant textual corpus, it is still mediated by the collective memory of the community that compiled, codified, redacted, and transmitted it orally for hundreds of years before ever committing it to writing, and even when finally put into writing, it did not remain static but continued to be modified by the tradition over the ensuing centuries. As we have it today it is thus far removed from the Buddha, and we have no way of gauging how close or how distant any given statement is to the words of the Buddha.⁶⁶

Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi also point out in the introduction to their translation of the *Anguttara Nikāya*, "it is essential to realize that they [the Pāli texts] are the products of an oral tradition."⁶⁷ For the sake of oral transmission, "These were streamlined, condensed and standardized, cast into a format suitable for memorization; hence the prevalence of stock phrases, formulaic definitions and frequent repetition."⁶⁸ The suttas in the *Nikāya*-s themselves contain evidences of extensive editing for the purpose of memorization. David R. Loy further observes that the history of oral transmission provided "many opportunities for some passages to be intentionally or unintentionally 'corrected' by monks less enlightened than the Buddha."⁶⁹ In other words, the Pāli *Nikāya*-s, the earliest Buddhist literature traditionally held to be the most authentic, are not the exact recording of the Buddha's exchanges with his followers, but are products of a later period.⁷⁰ The *Vinaya* texts, in fact, supply the information that the *Dhamma* was not only uttered by the Buddha, but also by his direct followers, wise recluses (*rsi*), gods (*deva*), and apparitional beings (*upapāduka*).⁷¹ What might have actually taken place at the First Council, Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests, "was the drafting of a comprehensive scheme for classifying

the suttas . . . and the appointment of an editorial committee (perhaps several) to review the material available and cast it into a format conducive to easy memorization and oral transmission."⁷²

Moreover, according to the tradition, the First Council was attended by five hundred *bhikkhu-s*, and *bhikkhu-s* only. The prominent *bhikkhu-s* at the time of the Buddha were largely of upper-class backgrounds,⁷³ and it was highly likely that they had been heavily influenced by the androcentric culture in the larger society.⁷⁴ It was a culture, *bhikkhunī* scholar Karma Lekshe Tsomo points out, in which women "were classified as dependents either under the protection of their father, their husband, or, upon a husband's death, their husband's brother."⁷⁵ In that culture, women existed largely as men's property, which was subject to plunder and abuse if the "ownership" was not clear or was not firmly established. In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, for instance, the Vajjians' "not forcibly abduct[ing] others' wives and daughters and compell[ing] them to live with them" was extolled as a "virtue,"⁷⁶ which evinces that in India at that time it was not uncommon for men to use violence to snatch women from other men and force them to provide menial and/or sexual services.

Needless to say, privileged men were more likely than women to have the freedom of leaving home and becoming renunciates if they so desired. Men in that society generally enjoyed much greater mobility, as well as safety, than women. In addition, upper-class families, having control over lower-class people and practically living off of their labors, could afford losing one man or two in the family to spiritual pursuits. By contrast, it was much more difficult for women to break the confines of their homes to follow the Buddha around since permission from the male kinsmen in charge was required in order to join the Buddhist *Sangha* as a renunciate.⁷⁷ "[I]n a patriarchal society, men simply left their wives, without a mutual agreement . . . By contrast, wives who wished to become nuns usually had to wait until their husbands died or granted them permission to leave."⁷⁸ Even if a woman did successfully leave home, she was at a much greater risk of being assaulted in a society where women had to be owned by men and guarded by their "owners." Incidents of male violence against female renunciates were recorded, and some regulations were designed to prevent it as a result.⁷⁹

In a culture so deeply entrenched in these forms of sexism, it should not come as a surprise that the compilers of the Canon, who were very likely to be men from upper-class families, retained an androcentric or even misogynist attitude. To make things worse for women, celibacy was the norm amongst the anti-Brāhmanic renunciates

(Pāli: *samaṇas*; Sanskrit: *śramaṇas*) at the time. The Buddhist *Sangha*, being one of the only two religious orders that accommodated female renunciates (the other one was Jainism), was likely to incur suspicion and criticisms both from other celibate renunciates and from the larger androcentric society.⁸⁰ Wijayaratna points out that the first group of women who joined the monastic sangha were relatives of the Buddha from the Sākya tribe, which incurred suspicion from outsiders regarding the seriousness of their renunciation.⁸¹ It was highly probable that the Buddha tailored his teachings to suit the mentality of his predominantly male audience on the one hand, and to respond to the criticisms coming from the non-Buddhist society on the other. It was also highly probable that, in order to guard the reputation of the Buddhist *Sangha* under the societal expectation of establishing the ownership of women, the male compilers further sought to control and subordinate the female renunciates among them. Perhaps the male compilers did so also to help themselves deal with the requirement of celibacy at the close proximity of women:

The compilers of the various Buddhist monastic codes that we have appear to have been very anxious men. They were anxious about—even obsessed with—maintaining their public reputation and that of their order, and avoiding any hint of social scandal or lay criticism. They were anxious about their body and what went into it; and they were anxious about women. They appear, moreover, to have been particularly anxious about nuns, about containing, restraining and controlling them. At every opportunity they seem to have promulgated rules towards these ends.⁸²

According to the Theravāda tradition, the five hundred *bhikkhu*-s at the First Council reprimanded Ānanda for the “offense” of introducing women into the Buddhist *Sangha*,⁸³ which reflected the anxiety that Gregory Schopen, scholar of early Buddhist monasticism, poignantly points out in the quote above. The male compilers’ effort of keeping women contained and controlled is also reflected in the later interpolation, roughly in the first century BCE, of the *aṭṭhagarudhammā* (Sanskrit: *aṣṭaugurudharmāḥ*), the eight revered conditions that intended to subordinate *bhikkhunī*-s under *bhikkhu*-s and may have indirectly contributed to the demise of the *bhikkhunī sangha* in the Theravāda tradition.⁸⁴ Scholars concluded that misogyny grew more pronounced after the first few hundred years of Buddhism, and “[t]he positive attitude toward women evident among the early Buddhists seems to

have declined sharply around the time written Buddhism literature began to appear."⁸⁵

The Pāli Canon recorded largely upper-class androcentric understandings and redactions of the Buddha's teachings. It does not preserve the exact words of the Buddha without change and does not reflect the Buddha's own position in every regard. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that, in the Buddhist worldview, texts are also phenomena (Pāli: *dhamma-s*; Sanskrit: *dharmā-s*) that have been interdependently co-arisen, which means that texts also bear the "Three Marks of Reality," i.e., unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, and lack of self-essence. In other words, from the Buddhist perspective, no text is sacred if the word "sacred" means in and of itself holy, permanently true, and worthy of unconditional veneration. To say that texts are not "sacred" in Buddhism is not to suggest that textual study bears no importance for Buddhists. Buddhism, as other religions, is to some extent defined by its texts and Buddhists do commonly use traditional texts to gauge their understandings and guide their practices. In Buddhist terms, now that the Buddha entered *parinibbāna* and is no longer in the world, a follower aspiring to realize Buddhahood can only learn the *Dhamma* from Buddhist texts or from knowledgeable practicing Buddhists, whose knowledge is likely to have been based on their study of Buddhist texts. Moreover, in the contemporary world of rising literacy rate and increasingly individualistic approach to religious traditions, more and more Buddhists are turning to texts by themselves for insights and guidance.⁸⁶ Discourses that are based on the study of classical texts still carry more weight than those that are not, and discourses that invoke the Buddha and appeal to the core teachings can speak to Buddhists across traditions. Even though the Buddha's own position remains unknowable due to the history of oral transmission, in the absence of archaeological evidences from the early period, "the texts are all we have."⁸⁷

Besides, it is worth noting that the Pāli texts do contain some egalitarian and profeminist statements alongside the androcentric or even misogynist regulations. The very appearance of egalitarian statements in a highly patriarchal society, and the survival of them, suggest either that the Buddha himself had not been as misogynist as the later compilers of the Pāli Canon were, or that at least some compilers understood the Buddha's teachings very differently. Alan Sponberg maintains that early Buddhist literature recorded a multiplicity of voices rather than one ambivalent, uncertain voice.⁸⁸ At any rate, the fact that those egalitarian statements appeared and survived speaks volumes.⁸⁹ It refutes an entirely misogynist reading

of Buddhist teachings and can support a gender-inclusive ethic that is well grounded in early Buddhist texts. Moreover, all of the core teachings of the Buddha support an all-inclusive revalorization of Buddhist ethics, as shown in the following section.

*Dhammic Exegesis: Interdependent Co-Arising
and the Cessation of Dukkha*

The singular goal of the Buddha's Teaching is *nibbāna*, the cessation of *dukkha*. Therefore, a view or practice that is not conducive to the cessation or alleviation of *dukkha* is not worth endeavoring, let alone holding onto.⁹⁰ That is, according to the Buddhist *Dhamma*, the cessation of *dukkha*, rather than religious identity or cultural boundary, is the criterion for adopting a view or practice.

The Buddha on numerous occasions discouraged his followers from dogmatically clinging to philosophical views or religious doctrines. In the *Anguttara Nikāya*, for instance, the Buddha said that religions came into dispute with one another "because of lust for views, because of adherence, bondage, greed, obsession and cleaving to views."⁹¹ In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha said it was in terms of not propounding "full understanding of clinging to views" and not propounding "full understanding of clinging to rules and observances" that a teaching would be "unemancipating" and "unconducive to peace."⁹² Even when talking about his own teachings, the Buddha cautioned against clinging and then reiterated that the purpose of imparting or learning or practicing the *Dhamma* was emancipation and cessation of *dukkha*:

Bhikkhus, both formerly and now what I teach is *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*. If others abuse, revile, scold, and harass the Tathāgata for that, the Tathāgata on that account feels no annoyance, bitterness, or dejection of the heart. And if others honour, respect, revere, and venerate the Tathāgata for that, the Tathāgata on that account feels no delight, joy, or elation of the heart.⁹³

And the Buddha went on to suggest that his listeners adopt the same attitude. He taught the *Dhamma* in order to cease *dukkha*, not to provide an anchor for identity clinging or any form of self-absorbed dejection or elation. And his followers were instructed to do the same.

The Buddha likened his *Dhamma* to a raft, which was built solely for the purpose of crossing a great expanse of dangerous water and

reaching the far shore that was safe and free from fear. He asked his listeners to reason about the proper use of the raft:

By doing what would that man be doing what should be done with that raft? Here, bhikkhus, when that man got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: “. . . Suppose I were to haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water, and then go wherever I want.” Now, bhikkhus, it is by so doing that that man would be doing what should be done with that raft. So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.

Bhikkhus, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the teachings.⁹⁴

The Buddha gave teachings for people to practice and utilize so that *dukkha* would cease in their lives. The teachings in and of themselves were not meant to be sacred or inalterable, not to mention the written texts that carried those teachings. They could be abandoned, as the simile showed, once they served the purpose of transporting people across the *dukkha*-filled body of water. In fact, they *should* be abandoned if they did not help alleviate *dukkha* or, worse, ended up producing more of it.

Having the cessation of *dukkha* as the criterion also means that a teaching helpful in removing *dukkha* from life should be learned and put into practice, even if it was not given by the Buddha or a Buddhist master. As reflected in the opening quote, the Buddha taught his followers not to cling to or dismiss a teaching on account of the identity, lineage, school, or denomination of the teacher. Whether a teaching is to be accepted and practiced depends on whether it is conducive to the cessation of *dukkha*. Whether or not the teaching is given by someone in one's own philosophical, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural group is ultimately irrelevant.

What kind of teaching would be considered conducive to the cessation of *dukkha*? The Buddha was reported to have said that it is through not understanding interdependent co-arising that “this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe, the ill destiny, ruin and the round of birth-and-death.”⁹⁵ For as long as people do not understand the ways in which persons and psycho-socio-cultural forces co-arise and inter-condition one another,