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BUDDHISM: PHILOSOPHY BEYOND GENDER

I. CHALLENGING SOCIAL STEREOTYPES ACROSS CULTURES

“One chooses dialectic only when one has no other means.”¹

Why is it that woman philosophers “lack advancement,” the self-description of Shakespeare’s Hamlet.² Why are we underrepresented in philosophy classrooms and faculties? The statistics provide clear evidence of our minority status; fewer than twenty percent of students and faculty in the discipline are women, the lowest percentage within the humanities.³ Why are we so rarely welcomed into the highest ranks of discourse and recognition? Women are universally absent from lists of history’s great philosophers, unless the compilers are intent on demonstrating their commitment to diversity.⁴

The situation in philosophy merely reflects the wider culture. Although women constitute roughly half of any given population, they continue to be marginalized in myriad ways. In the area of popular entertainment, the feature film “Bee Movie” (Simon J. Smith and Steve Hickner 2007) blithely remakes reality in a masculine mode by presenting the worker bees as male. The director and producer undoubtedly would argue that accurate depictions of worker bees as female would be less marketable (by denying the starring role to Jerry Seinfeld) or even less believable in an androcentric environment. Blockbuster films routinely feature all male casts or relegate women to a supporting role. Yet it is extremely rare to see all female casts.⁵

My intention is not to propose plans for more effective affirmative action programs that alleviate the obvious imbalance. Instead, I recommend that we get to the root of mistaken perceptions and conceptions about gender by applying Buddhist methodologies for dealing with delusory, dualistic obsessions in general. Elsewhere I have argued that sexism has arisen within philosophy, not due to inherent gender distinctions, but rather as the offshoot of “feminine” and “masculine” value systems. Initially associated with a pragmatic division of labor—in China inner (*nei* 内) and outer (*wai* 外), respectively—these

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values became gender stereotypes that privileged the masculine/male while denigrating the feminine/female.⁶

The exclusion of women from philosophy's historical record is puzzling. Since the ancient Greek tradition that gave birth to Amero-Eurocentric philosophy is literally the love of wisdom, embodied in the goddess Sophia (Σοφία), it seems only logical that philosophers should be willing to ignore gender distinctions. Parmenides of Elea credits a goddess, possibly Sophia, with showing him the Way of Truth (*Aletheia* ἀλήθεια) in "On Nature." Aletheia is also the name of the goddess of truth. Moreover, Parmenides' sphere of Being, the sum total of what exists, is decided nongendered. Socrates had no qualms about admitting in the *Symposium* that he was a student of the priestess Diotima of Mantinea.⁷ In Plato's *Republic* Socrates deftly demolishes the sexist dogmas of his opponents regarding gender differences, concluding that "there is nothing peculiar in the constitution of women which would affect them in the administration of the State."⁸ By arguing that both women and men serve as Guardians in his utopian *polis*, Plato rationally chooses expediency over the narrow-minded "fruit of unripe wisdom" expressed by detractors.⁹

Despite these promising beginnings, a dismissive attitude has prevailed among philosophers who assume maleness is the standard against which females are to be measured (hence the biologically erroneous designation of women as the second sex). Aristotle declares that males are "the most rounded off and complete" while females fall short in numerous ways.¹⁰ Hegel's famous descriptions of males as proactive animals and women as placid plants reinforce those same stereotypes.¹¹

Later philosophers realized the complexity of the male-female relationship. Friedrich Nietzsche, widely assumed to be a misogynist, in fact displays a wide range of assessments of women vis à vis philosophy, as revealed by Jacques Derrida.¹² Condemnation of woman arises first from their association with the "power of lying," then with the "power of truth." In the first case, Derrida argues, Nietzsche "was, he feared such a castrated woman," while in the second case "he was, he feared such a castrating woman." The most fascinating dimension involves woman "beyond this double negation, affirmed as affirmative, artistic, Dionysiac."¹³ Derrida suggests that Nietzsche "was, he loved such an affirmative woman." As Spivak explains, "in order to *have* (possess) the truth (woman) the philosopher must *be* the truth (woman), undoing Freud's incipient phallogentrism." She identifies this as an incipient deconstruction of gender stereotypes—"Is Nietzsche seeking to undo that 'repudiation of femininity' in the male—the other side of which is possession . . . and describe a femininity that is not defined by a male desire to supply a lack?"¹⁴

As an undercurrent of the “other” that can be subverted but not dispensed with, the values of “Feminine Philosophy” have been marginalized in nearly all cultures.¹⁵ While it has been claimed that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, we are not distinct species.¹⁶ The representative planets reflect the underlying axiological bias—Mars as the god of war must be balanced by the Venus, goddess of love. Dualisms are mutually generating. If women did not procreate men could not decimate. Expecting unquestioned feminine support, the masculine is given permission to act in extreme ways. The returning warrior Mars relies on his Venus waiting at home as surely as a disgraced politician counts on his faithful wife to stand by her unfaithful man.

Extending far beyond abstract scholarly inquiries, these pervasive and often perverse gender distinctions influence how we live our lives as individuals as well as communities. A society charts its course and determines its destiny through the values it chooses to emphasize, as well as those it marginalizes. For example, the U.S. involvement in the devastating Vietnam War led people, especially young people, to reevaluate their values. Rejecting the “masculine” Mars values associated with the military, proponents of the antiwar movement were drawn to the “feminine” Venus values of love. The Age of Aquarius with its promise of peace seemed to be in ascendancy. Despite some changes in the social fabric, the warp threads of gender stereotypes were not removed, merely mutated.

Militaristic values, assumed to reflect a confrontational reality, continue to dominate in politics, business, even on our highways (road rage), with dire consequences for the nurturing “feminine.” Those who question “manly” competition, preemptive strikes, and government-sanctioned torture, while advocating diplomacy, are deemed at best misguided idealists and at worst emasculated cowards or traitors. Women must become one of the boys or retreat to a sheltered princess paradise. The path to empowerment requires competing with men at their own game. In movies and online entertainment updated versions of the Valkyries (like Angelina Jolie) are armed, dangerous, and generally victorious.

With feminine values under assault, women are convenient targets, even for other women. The advances made by the Women’s Liberation Movement have not merely been compromised, but reversed. The “gender wars” have been extended to well-meaning arguments for educating boys and girls separately, based on either inherent differences in nature or social experience.¹⁷ This signals a surrender to the alleged inevitability of distinctions, settling for a “separate but equal” solution that cannot succeed.

Laozi 老子 seems to address a similar axiological imbalance in chapter 28 of the *Daodejing* 《道德經》, recommending that *yang* 陽 be understood but *yin* 陰 embraced. Early Confucian philosophers sought the Mean (*zhong* 中) in the ideal of the *junzi* 君子 whose outer-directed *yang* qualities of boldness (*yong* 勇) and faithfulness (*xin* 信) are mitigated by *yin*'s inner-directed receptivity (*rang* 讓), and reciprocity (*shu* 恕).¹⁸ In the *Daxue* 《大學》 text, a young mother is presented as a role model for a leader, quoting The Enjoiner of Kang: “[Treat the people] as if safeguarding an infant.”¹⁹ Confucian classics also refer to the ruler as parent, “father/mother” (*fu mu* 父母) of the people.²⁰

Predating widespread use of *yin* and *yang*, the *Yijing* 《易經》 advises us to respond with receptivity or assertiveness depending on the circumstances. Only later is complementarity recast as hierarchy. The change is especially evident in the Neo-Confucian reinterpretation of the *Yijing* demonizing *yin*, and hence women, as evil and in need to strict control. A veritable Confucian fundamentalism can be discerned in the philosophy of Zhu Xi 朱熹 and others, leading to a denigration of women—including footbinding, the isolation, and even glorified death of widows.

Buddhist philosophy offers a more radical approach than mere androgyny by going beyond both male and female. Its Middle Way reestablishes an egalitarianism underlying superficial determinants of identity by revealing the Buddha-nature predating impositions of discriminating mind. While feminists often resort to reversing gender discrimination by privileging feminine values over masculine ones, Buddhist philosophers aim at more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic of delusory thinking—they clear the deck. Adamant arguments for a woman's equal access to awakening demonstrate Buddhism's expansive egalitarianism that dares to champion a “wisdom embracing all species.”²¹ This requires a removal of our dualistic metaphysical myopia by rigorously deconstructing human constructs.

II. THE INFORMATIONAL CASCADE: REASON GONE AWRY

“Whatever one is accustomed to always seems natural.”²²

How can we lure the philosopher-fly out of the self-contrived fly-bottle of gender bias? To answer this question, we must understand why, after decades of feminist activism, genuine equality continues to elude women. Recent research conducted across cultures offers bleak prospects for deep-rooted change, concluding that “while the view of an ideal leader varied from place to place . . . whatever was most

valued, women were seen as lacking it.”²³ Resented for displaying their competence and scrutinized on the basis of their physical appearance, women leaders are routinely undervalued by their constituents, in defiance of objective evidence to the contrary.²⁴ Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek, 2004 Nobel laureate in literature, provides chilling insight into the challenges faced by even the most talented women:

A woman is permitted to chat or babble, but speaking in public with authority is still the greatest transgression. . . . A woman’s artistic output makes her monstrous to men if she does not know to make herself small at the same time and present herself as a commodity.”²⁵

Proposed solutions to the sexist dilemma continue to wallow in dualistic delusions. On one hand, women are encouraged to embrace new versions of the feminine stereotype that glorify the denigrated values of compassion, nurturing, sensitivity, and so on. On the other hand, women are advised to emulate men by assuming a testosterone mantle of invulnerability.²⁶ In both cases the underlying dialectic of sex remains unchallenged. There is no solution to this dilemma, only a dissolution of the underlying mechanism responsible for the dialectic. An “informational cascade” has embedded a stereotype of female inferiority for thousands of years. Researchers describe this phenomenon as a kind of cognitive laziness, mindlessly following the behavior of predecessors: “[A]t some stage a decision maker will ignore his private information and act only on the information obtained from previous decisions. Once this stage is reached, his decision is uninformative to others. . . . In the absence of external disturbances, so do all later individuals.”²⁷ This phenomenon has been discerned in economics (bank runs, investments, and shopping patterns), evolutionary theory (sexual selection), as well as scientific research.²⁸ It also underlies racism, nationalism, and assorted sectarian mind-sets. What begins as a rational strategy to learn from others can degenerate into mindless, counterproductive herd behavior, turning a rational individual into an unreflective dogmatist. Men assume they have a vested interest in maintaining gender stereotypes deemed beneficial to them, while women may avoid questioning those same stereotypes due to conditioning or religious indoctrination.

Buddhist philosophy offers a radical approach that cuts through the conformist, yet oddly comfortable, battle lines. It directly confronts and challenges the root causes of our epistemological confusions and delusions, rather than passively accepting hearsay knowledge. As Tibetan practitioner Gendun Chopek observes: “If all of us would believe in this world that we see with our eyes rather than that world that we see through letters [language], it would be good.”²⁹ The mind’s constructs prevent clear perception:

. . . due to the single great insanity from our having continually drunk from the crazing waters of ignorance from time immemorial, there is no confidence whatsoever in our decisions concerning what does and does not exist, what is and is not. Even though a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, or a hundred thousand of such insane people agree, it in no way becomes more credible.³⁰

Similarly, the *Lotus Sūtra* refers to “the dense forest of mistaken views” that incites “overbearing arrogance.”³¹

The source of the deluded perceptions and conceptions that effectively prevent us from encountering the full range of reality can be traced to the limiting constraints of ego-self. By continuing to misidentify ourselves, we become estranged from our true identity, our Buddha-nature. The nondualism recognized by Buddhism heals the divisiveness that spawns conflict. Gender stereotypes shape the respective constructs of maleness and femaleness. Conditioned to see itself as superior to its female counterpart, a “male” ego becomes incapable of an objective assessment.

Succumbing to a victim mentality, women cling to the role of the “downtrodden.” Nietzsche discusses the dynamic of the subservient spirit under the guise of the self-effacing camel in his “Three Metamorphoses” (*Also Sprach Zarathustra*); “wanting to be well loaded,” the camel seeks out difficulty and the desolation of the desert.³² Perceiving herself as a nurturing caregiver, the camel functions as an enabler of male ego. Thus, men are allowed to savor their presumed superiority so that women (as castrated) may in turn exult in their control over the fragile male ego (as castrator) they deign to indulge. Hence, arise adages glorifying women’s clandestine power—“The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Is the Hand that Rules” (William Ross Wallace’s poem)—and tributes to women as the power behind the throne. Such claims are vainglorious self-delusions, tools of oppression, or both. Was there ever a hierarchical relationship in which the subordinate did not harbor a secret sense of superiority?

To end both delusion and oppression requires a twofold approach. Due to the insidious dialectic at work here, liberating women from stereotypical constructs demands a corresponding liberation among men. The polarized extremes of gender stereotypes cannot avoid tension and conflict; each feeds on its presumed opposite. Recognizing the underlying dynamic, Buddhist philosophy dissolves the tension by deconstructing the underlying dualistic constructs, thereby awakening us to the nondual reality devoid of hard-wired male and female natures.

Various Buddhist texts demonstrate ways to affect this mutual liberation. Our cast of characters includes two female “camels” (a weatherbeaten grandmother and a nubile novice), a highly skilled sea

serpent's daughter, and a goddess (*devakanyā*). Two prominent male practitioners also have crucial roles—a transcendent teacher and a wise but still somewhat deluded disciple of Śākyamuni Buddha. First, we will explore possible liberation paths for women as facilitated by a male master. Then the tables are turned in a number of ways as females take on the role of teacher, dealing with a recalcitrant male student who continues to cling to delusions of superiority.

III. A WOMAN'S ROLE IN DHARMA

“Did you dream you would become an old nanny-goat?”³³

How can women be awakened to the delusory distortions of gender, while avoiding a sense of victimhood or the illusion of clandestine control that prevent them from even attempting to enter the Dharma path? Admittedly in Śākyamuni's own day there were heated controversies over the viability and advisability of a female Sangha and some Buddhist texts deny women the opportunity to emulate the Buddha. However, these objections are inconsistent with the message of the Buddha and Buddhist philosophy, reflecting the limitations of their proponents.³⁴ True masters, such as Milarepa (1052–1135), seek ways to transcend sexist manifestations of cultural conditioning. Known for his peripatetic penchant in propagating the Dharma, Milarepa ministered to a wide range of human types in his wanderings, from shepherds, bandits, and logicians, to housewives, merchants, kings, and scholars, even a dying follower of the pre-Buddhist Bon religion in Tibet. Rising above speciesism, he also interacted with a pigeon, a dying sheep, and a *dakini* (goddess).

An encounter of special interest involves Milarepa's meeting with two very different women—an accomplished young aspirant of Buddhism and a bitter old housewife. Despite the historical period and cultural context, sexist overtones are conspicuously absent. Although Milarepa is aware of their restrictive roles as women, he has transcended the superficial constructs of human conditioning, including gender stereotypes. Realizing they have been deeply affected by discriminatory social conditions, he incorporates those undeniable facts into each of his therapeutic sessions. A lethal thunderbolt is aimed at the suffering egos wallowing in sexism as a way to escape responsibility for their own liberation. Once all vestiges of sexist assumptions are shed, the glass ceiling is shattered.

Milarepa first meets an “Angel of Wisdom” working in the fields. When he requests alms, she asks him to wait for her at her nearby home. Unfortunately, the reception committee at the home is the antithesis of his first female contact: Youth is supplanted by old age,

beauty with ugliness, compassion with belligerence. While the girl responded readily to Milarepa's request, the homebound grandmother rushes at him with a handful of ashes. Denigrating him as a "miserable yogi-beggar," she accuses him of plotting to steal her food and even the jewelry of her daughter and daughter-in-law. A perfect representative of a downtrodden ego (so degraded that she is deprived of even a name), she exemplifies a feminine victimology that has been festering for years. Milarepa patiently uproots the deep-seated anger fueling these outbursts. He does not offer her pity, but rather Buddhist tools for empowerment. First, he must break through her nine defense mechanisms—running the gamut from anger and self-loathing to anticipatory anxiety about death—that have accrued over a lifetime of hardship and mistreatment.

1. Anger and Self-Loathing

The grandmother seems to be attacking Milarepa, but in fact she is lashing out at the Dharma, which she blames for her entrapment in karma and *duhkha*. Milarepa repeatedly assures her "things may be different for you." Like a skilled therapist, he counsels her to look within her own mind for the source of her suffering. The assumed cause of her disease, Buddhism's teachings, is actually the means to her self-liberation. She must take responsibility for what she has become to recognize her inherent power to change her miserable life.

2. Oppression and Exploitation

Milarepa is well aware of the conditions that account for her "nanny-goat" status. Prevailing social conditions have reduced her to a life of servitude as a housewife whose duties never end. Buddhism offers the prospect of change by means of a competent teacher able to revolutionize her sense of self-identity.

3. Powerlessness and Isolation

Although Buddhism cannot change the patriarchal family structures that relegate her to the periphery of society, Buddhist practice can transform her experience of reality by deconstructing her thoughts and mind. Power, wealth, and male heirs are the generally held desiderata that elude her. But is this reality?

4. Resentment and Rebellion

Theft, robbery, and violence may seem her only weapons, but these only serve to injure her further. She is "burned up with fury."³⁵ Simi-

larly, an old camel, although a beast of burden, becomes embittered and defiant. But is this her true identity?

5. *Jealousy and Obsessiveness*

Milarepa recognizes the old woman's strategy to alleviate her own pain—delighting in the sufferings of others (in German, *Schadenfreude*). Although gossiping, meddling, and gloating over the affairs of others seem to bring her some relief, Milarepa asks her to carefully reconsider these tempting poisons.

6. *Physical Impairment*

The master does not gloss over the inevitable exigencies of the aging process, her feeble physical condition and impaired mobility. While she cannot stop the clock, she can learn to accept the inevitability of her degeneration and refocus her mind on Dharma.

7. *Ravages of Old Age*

Adding to these difficulties are the extreme deteriorations in her appearance, her “ugly face is wrapped in wrinkles.”³⁶ Milarepa indulges in no flattery, will not stoop to add to the burden of delusions the old woman has been carrying around with her all of your life. She must fearlessly confront the truth of her situation if she is to awaken.

8. *Poverty and Dehumanization*

Lacking even simple creature comforts, she lives on coarse food and drink, is dressed in rags, and owns only a coarse bed. Milarepa's depiction of her state is neither cruel nor exaggerated, merely descriptive: “Grandmother, you are now a wretch, half woman and half bitch!”³⁷ Only when she has reached the nadir of existence will she be able and willing to accept the proffered means to liberation.

9. *Death*

Mortality is the final persuasive argument, as Milarepa questions her ability to confront her own demise. Liberation and an advantageous rebirth are difficult; a return to *Samsāra* is nearly unavoidable. Hence, the rapid approach of death elicits fear and grief.

The old woman's response to these verbal barrages demonstrates the effectiveness of the teaching: Loosening her grip on the ashes she intended to throw at Milarepa, they fall to the floor along with her

tears. Once the underlying fears have been exposed, anger and bitterness are assuaged. In place of her past sense of helpless victimization, she has been shown a way to self-liberation. Metamorphosed, the camel can escape conceptual enslavement and find its true transgendered identity.

When the young woman, Bardarbom, arrives she initially misunderstands what has transpired. The old woman defends Milarepa against charges of cruelty. On the contrary, she credits him with awakening her, urging Bardarbom to seek the same spiritual guidance and thus avoid years of suffering. Bardarbom responds enthusiastically. Milarepa introduces her to his spiritual resources: “true knowledge from without,” inner “Awareness of Mind,” and the true illumination of the mind. Like the grandmother, Bardarbom must realize her true identity. The three initiations necessary to enter this path underscore the foundation of Buddha-nature, including identification with Buddha’s body and “illumination of the self-recognition of Mind-Essence.” She compares them to “the majesty of the lion” (paralleling the assertive lion that supplants Nietzsche’s subservient camel).³⁸

Milarepa presents three teachings—the outer of “hearing, thinking, and practicing,” the inner of clear awareness, and the ultimate enlightenment. Echoing the theme of identity, Bardarbom depicts them as a flawlessly reflecting “rustless mirror.” The corresponding three practices call for “complete disregard of the self-body” (inclusive of gender) and complete knowledge of reality, which the disciple envisions as “a great eagle flying in the sky” (transcending the mundane world). A more specialized practice removes mental distractions, awakening the mind “from drowsiness” and allowing it to rest in its true nature. The dualities of heaven and hell are banished, along with meditation and distraction, hope and fear, outer and inner, real and absolute.³⁹

Yet Bardarbom hesitates, due to the abiding self-doubt generated by sexism and its consequences. Declaring herself limited by her woman’s nature, it is clear she has succumbed to sexist stereotypes, just as the grandmother. Bardarbom repeats the litany of past sinful conduct responsible for her “inferior [female] body.” Even a good life “means bondage and non-freedom”—“Great is our ambition, but our perseverance is small.”⁴⁰ So the young camel asks for an easy practice to follow, suited to her “limited” understanding.

The Master will neither confirm nor deny her self-assessment. Rather than dwell on her psychological and social conditions, he emphasizes that the right teacher is better than son or husband, enlightenment better than secular life. In other words, she must set aside the artificial social standards. Dharma outweighs eloquence; devotion is preferable to coquetry. Her true impediment to the

practice of Dharma is her own “cunning and deceit/Like a merchant in the market-place,”⁴¹ trying to get the best deal. By accepting society’s stereotypes and devaluations of women she undervalues her own abilities. She deceives herself into thinking that she cannot succeed, and therefore has an excuse to not even make the attempt.

Milarepa has a much higher opinion of Bardarbom’s potential however, and vigorously counters her defeatist attitude, urging her to embrace meditation. Still she hesitates, protesting that as a “slave of household work” she lacks the time needed for Dharma practice.⁴² He refuses to accept such rationalizations. Holding herself back is likened to “feeding a strange watchdog,” which carries the risk of being bitten.⁴³ Among her main enemies are “‘Inertness,’ which makes one go astray/ . . . /laziness and caprice.”⁴⁴ Having internalized sexist stereotypes, she confines herself to a passive “womanly” role in secular life.

Bardarbom was able to defy social constructs and realize final awakening. She is recognized as one of the four “female heirs” of Milarepa, demonstrating that the Master was adept at taking human nature where he found it and revealing Buddha-nature. Thus, he advised Bardarbom to rest in the sky without being distracted by the clouds.⁴⁵

IV. A TRANSGENDER TURNING OF THE DHARMA WHEEL

“All things are neither male nor female.”⁴⁶

The same delusions embedded in gender stereotypes that ensnare women mislead men, even men who are otherwise well on the way to enlightenment. Following the analysis and advice of Dharmakārti, men need to clear “away the nets of conceptualization” that obscure reality,⁴⁷ derived from what he calls “the fiction-making mind [that] does not take you very far.”⁴⁸ Among these conceptual traps is the issue of women’s potential for awakening, which is addressed in several key Mahāyāna texts, including the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Vimalakārti Nirdeśa Sūtra*. Here we encounter females who reject stereotypes of subservience or covert control. Moreover, they cut through the complacency of Buddhist men, challenging them to transcend similar constraints of maleness.

The reluctant male student in both these dialogues is none other than Śāriputra, acclaimed as the wisest of Śākyamuni’s inner circle of disciples. This implies that even the most accomplished practitioners of Buddhist deconstruction can be stymied when moving from theory to practice. In both scenarios Śāriputra falls prey to the Informational Cascade that denigrates women’s potential for enlightenment. Rather

than merely parroting sexist stereotypes, Śāriputra engages in a rationalization of his discriminatory assumptions. Attached to his highly rated reputation for wisdom, he engages “the human gift for rationalizing irrational behavior,” found in children as young as four and even in capuchin monkeys.⁴⁹ Interpreted as a survival tool, this so-called gift protects our self-delusions in order to avoid the cognitive dissonance that would require us to take a fresh look at familiar situations. Buddhism not only welcomes cognitive dissonance, but creates it, thereby forcing us to break through our delusions.

Although the *Lotus Sūtra* involves many women practitioners, chapter 12, entitled “Devadatta,” is especially associated with gender issues. Most of the controversy surrounding this chapter focuses on the question of whether femaleness is an impediment to awakening. Buddha’s efforts on behalf of all living beings would seem to extend to the dragon king’s daughter. Her significance stems in part from her Nāga lineage. The name derives from the Sanskrit word for snake, *nag*, particularly cobras, associated with watery depths, a symbol of fertility and abundance. Buddha is often depicted as being sheltered by one or more cobras poised above his head (as is the “Second Buddha,” Nāgārjuna). By extension a *nāga* can represent: A being (including snakes and dragons) who inhabits the depths, that is, profound wisdom; an extraordinary animal with human qualities; an extraordinary human being with animal qualities; and a mysterious human being. The association of the very young *nāga* princess with *yin* water and fertility underscores her femaleness.

Despite her species identity, the child’s “keen roots” of wisdom are praised by Mañjuśrī (the bodhisattva associated with wisdom), who has no reservations about the exalted practice of the princess. The report of her instantaneous awakening demonstrates the *Lotus Sūtra*’s empowerment potential. However, Bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulated voices doubts concerning the unprecedented speed and ease of her enlightenment. The princess suddenly appears on the scene, offering words of praise to the Buddha and asking him to verify her realization of *bodhi*. It takes a Buddha to know a Buddha.

Śāriputra follows up the challenge of Bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulated, expressing skepticism about her instantaneous realization. Curiously, the very efficacy of the *Lotus Sūtra*’s message of empowerment seems to be undermined. Why would anyone, let alone Wisdom Accumulated, question the eyewitness testimony of the bodhisattva acknowledged to be the wisest? And why would such a skeptic immediately be joined by the wisest of the voice-hearers? Both, it seems, are caught up in a sexist Informational Cascade. This is verified when Śāriputra falls back on the sexist script by invoking the Five Obstacles inherent in women as defiled beings. He assumes this

is irrefutable evidence against her realization, since women are unable to become a Brahma heavenly king, the king Śakra, a devil king, a wheel-turning sage king, or a Buddha. Each represents an accomplished authority figure, stereotypically seen as male. Together they point to a single impediment—she is not a he.

The defiled state of the female is directly connected to the fertility embodied by the *nāgas*, signaling an insurmountable bondage to the sensory world. Sigmund Freud famously declared, “anatomy is destiny” (*Die Anatomie ist das Schicksal*).⁵⁰ Women are destined to be the bearers of life due to their physical form, which seems to conflict with the birthless and deathless ideal of Buddhism. Or does it? One could interpret this negative attitude toward women as a form of gynophobia, an irrational fear (*phobia*) of women (*gyno*), arising among men who perceive women as the catalyst of desire and lust, and hence incapable of enlightenment.⁵¹

The actions of the princess speak louder than words. She presents a precious jewel to the Buddha, which is immediately accepted, symbolizing confirmation of her Buddha-nature and Buddhahood. Transforming herself into a male, she instantaneously performs the required bodhisattva practices, assumes a seat on a jeweled lotus in the “Spotless World of the south,” and realizes enlightenment (confirmed by the manifestations of the thirty-two features of a Buddha and eighty characteristics of Buddhas and bodhisattvas as well as the preaching of Dharma). The chapter ends with the extinction of all doubts, as the entire assembly, we are told, “silently believed and accepted these things.”⁵²

The gender transformation undergone by the *nāga* princess has elicited wide-ranging interpretations, some regarding it as proof that women are barred from enlightenment within their female bodies. However, the *Tian-tai* 天台 tradition espouses a much more egalitarian view. In the *Fa-hua wen-ju* 《法華文句》, Zhi-yi 智顓 cites the authority of the *Tai-jing* 《胎經》 in arguing that females, including the *nāga* princess, need not undergo a bodily change to realize Buddhahood: “. . . the dharma nature is like a great ocean. No right or wrong is preached (within it). Ordinary people and sages are equal, without superiority or inferiority.”⁵³ Distinguished Masters such as China’s Sixth Chan Patriarch Hui-neng 慧能 and Zen Master Dōgen 道元 in Japan accepted women disciples, defending them against male detractors. In chapter 14 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Buddha rejects distinctions of man and woman as an integral aspect of the nondiscriminating mind able to “view all phenomena as empty.”⁵⁴ Since gender is merely one aspect among many forms of delusory discrimination, the apparent sex change can be seen as symbolic of the ultimate irrelevance of physical form.

Further support for Buddhism's transgender position is found in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* (revolutionary for its title character and main teacher, a layperson). In the seventh chapter Śāriputra again issues a challenge to an accomplished female figure, this time a goddess. The chapter begins with questions from Mañjuśrī, who was a key player in the previously discussed *Lotus Sūtra* passage. The bodhisattvic voice of wisdom asks Vimalakīrti "How should a Bodhisattva look at living beings?"⁵⁵ A string of concrete metaphors is presented—the reflection of the moon in the water, the echo produced by a voice, clouds drifting across the sky, etc. The common thread is the illusory quality of phenomena and, more specifically, the illusion created by the perceiver that requires perceptual deconstruction. A wise magician can see through his or her own trick. This profound point of Buddhist philosophy—the prerequisite of a non-discriminating mind that cuts through delusions—contains the seeds of the chapter's challenge to the specific delusion of sexism. This leads to a discussion of what prevents a bodhisattva from appropriately regarding living beings, namely "baseless discrimination." Mañjuśrī inquires about its root and is told it is "inverted thinking" that in turn is rooted in "non-abiding," which is itself rootless.⁵⁶ In other words, these mere constructs have no true foundation, and are built on nothing.

Thus far, the assembly has been engaged in merely a theoretical discussion. An opportunity arises for theory to progress into actual practice with the sudden appearance of a goddess. It becomes clear that abiding remains a major problem for the assembly when she sends forth a shower of flowers. The petals do not adhere to the bodhisattvas (such as Mañjuśrī), but do abide or stick to voice-hearers (such as Śāriputra), even though the latter vigorously attempt to shake them off. The goddess explains why this is so to the unhappy Śāriputra: He is "not in the state of suchness."⁵⁷ The goddess defends the flowers for their lack of differentiation, in contrast to Śāriputra's discriminating mind. She invokes a version of the Informational Cascade to explain why Śāriputra continues to wallow in abiding: "[I]t is you (alone) who give rise to differentiation. If you (still) differentiate after leaving home in your quest of Dharma, this is not the state of suchness . . . it is because the force of habit still remains that these flowers cleave to your body but if you cut it off, they will not stick to it."⁵⁸

Further discussion touches on the constructs of time, space, and language. In each case the goddess bests "the wise elder" by pointing out his abiding in what are ultimately delusory concepts: "[L]iberation is neither within nor without nor in between, and words are also neither inside nor outside nor in between. . . . all things point to liberation."⁵⁹ The goddess explains that an upāyic use of language

appearing to discriminate between liberation and nonliberation has been employed by the Buddha for the sake of “those who are proud (of their superior knowledge).” Śāriputra expresses his hearty approval of her words, unaware that he is about to be exposed as one of those held back by the limitations of pride. His case parallels the five thousand “overbearingly arrogant” audience members in the *Lotus Sūtra* who stage a walkout in chapter 2 rather than risk hearing the complete message of the Buddha.⁶⁰

Śāriputra inquires about the accomplishments and experiences that account for her eloquence. She attributes the eloquence to a lack of both accomplishment and experience, for such claims are evidence of arrogance. She also refuses to identify herself with any of the three vehicles (voice-hearer, *pratyekabuddha*, or *bodhisattva*). Although compassion may cause her to assume many forms in her teaching, she instead espouses the same one Buddha vehicle taught in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Realizing how profound the understanding of the goddess is, Śāriputra wonders why she does not assume male form. Obviously, this is meant as a compliment—she is good enough to be a he, to share his superiority. The focus now shifts to the illusory discriminations of gender identity. After twelve years of seeking, the goddess informs Śāriputra “I have been looking in vain for a female bodily form; so what do you want me to change? This is like an illusionist who creates an illusory woman; is it correct to ask him to change this unreal woman?”⁶¹ Like mental constructs, her alleged femaleness has no intrinsic existence.

The goddess then provides a concrete demonstration of her philosophical insight through a role reversal. She transforms Śāriputra into a goddess and herself into a man resembling Śāriputra. She then challenges “him” to do what he had asked of her—change this female form. In fact, such a change is unnecessary because “[l]ike Śāriputra who is not a woman but appears in female bodily form, all women are the same and though they appear in female form, they are fundamentally not women. Hence the Buddha said: ‘All things are neither male nor female.’” Based on personal experience (rather than the secondary source of a sexist Informational Cascade), the startled Śāriputra must agree that the “form of a woman neither exists nor is non-existent.”⁶² He has recognized the artificial constraints of both self-identified femaleness and maleness, as well as the defective dualism of existence and nonexistence.

Śāriputra’s encounter with cognitive dissonance has not been fully resolved however. When the goddess announces her pending rebirth “like a Buddha by transformation,” he counters that the dualism of birth and death does not apply to the transformation body of Buddha. The goddess asserts egalitarianism by reminding him that this is

equally true for all living beings (due to their inherent Buddha-nature). Śāriputra demonstrates that he continues to abide in temporality by inquiring when the goddess will realize supreme enlightenment. Cryptically she responds “when Śāriputra returns to the worldly way of life.” Assuming this is a reference to a regression from voice-hearer status to mundane existence, he rejects it as an impossibility. Once again he has been misled by his preconceptions and entrapped by language. The goddess observes that the very possibility of realizing enlightenment “is not an objective which can be realized.” Śāriputra argues that this runs counter to the innumerable cases of Buddhas who either have realized supreme enlightenment or will do so in the future. Since he has failed to fully grasp the goddess’ previous deconstruction of temporality in relation to liberation, she reminds him of the timelessness of *bodhi*. Once again she directs him to consult his own experience—Has he realized arhatship in the sense of not abiding in the “concept of winning anything?” Just so, she informs him, do Buddhas and Bodhisattvas experience realization when “free from the idea of winning supreme enlightenment”?⁶³

Vimalakirti ends the chapter by apprising Śāriputra of the goddess’s astounding qualifications, most notably her ability “to play with the Bodhisattva transcendental powers.” Her special vow commits her to appear “at will (everywhere) to teach and convert living beings,”⁶⁴ even the wisest who assume they have nothing to learn from a mere female. The underlying message of this chapter on how to look at living beings involves an emptying out of deluded constructs and discriminations, including gender identity. This brings us full circle to the illusions mentioned at the beginning of the chapter—we must avoid fixation on the mere reflection of the moon in the water, the echo produced by a voice, clouds drifting across the sky.

V. WHAT PHILOSOPHERS CAN LEARN FROM BUDDHIST DECONSTRUCTION

As we have seen, the Informational Cascade engulfs both its victims and its perpetrators. In considering candidacy for enlightenment, both women and men often succumb to the pressures of sexist stereotypes, demanding the two-pronged approach of Buddhist masters noted previously. Unable to imagine their own awakening, the Tibetan laywomen allow themselves to slip into downtrodden camel status. The persuasive power of the sexist stereotypes must be shattered to unleash the egalitarian promise of Buddhist philosophy. Accordingly, Milarepa aims his devastating thunderbolts at the conventional “wisdom” that constrains both the grandmother and the young

woman. However, even wise and seemingly well-meaning men like Śāriputra can cling to self-righteous denials of women's worth, rationalizing their adherence to a sexist script.

Unless we are willing to question centuries of “common sense,” the ubiquitousness of Buddha-nature will remain hidden beneath human constructs, lurking under the cultural radar. Instead of relying on secondary information we must dare to consult our own experience. Few do so unless they encounter “external disturbances” capable of derailing the Informational Cascade.⁶⁵ The *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* create just such cognitive dissonance. The least likely to succeed females—a *nāga* princess and a goddess—upāypically deflate the ego of an errant but reputedly wise and highly respected male, Śāriputra. Gender is merely one manifestation of the broader problem of the discriminating mind that blocks full awakening to/as reality. Liberation cannot be limited to the constructs of time or space, gender or species identity, language or thought.

The same insight applies to philosophy as a discipline. Asked to imagine the figure of a philosopher in one's mind's eye, both women and men are likely to conjure up a solitary figure lost in thought—perhaps the archetypal, but misnamed, “Thinker” of Rodin.⁶⁶ Few, if any, would immediately bring to mind a female figure. What we have seen in the past is precisely what we expect to see in the future, even though as philosophers we are well aware that the principle of induction is not infallible, merely an often reliable survival tool. Marginalized, if not completely ignored, in philosophical circles, women are far less likely to be students or professors, to serve as plenary speakers at conferences, or assume professional leadership roles. Since this is the way things have been, most assume it is the way things are and even the way they should be.

To see beyond gender, we must challenge the often defective input of the Informational Cascade, as does Buddhism. However, we must do more than invent mechanisms to circumvent baseless discrimination. Until all sentient beings dare to confront the cognitive dissonance of sexism born of the discriminating mind interim measures are required. The adoption of gender-neutral practices has garnered positive results; blind reviewing has resulted in a larger percentage of publications by women.⁶⁷ The Informational Cascade will not disappear, but it can be reconfigured by providing new information that increases the visibility of philosophers who happen to be women. Just as in the past it had seemed “natural” to exclude women from philosophy, in the future it can come to seem just as “natural” to include us.

ENDNOTES

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Problem of Socrates," in *Twilight of the Idols or, How One Philosophizes with a Hammer*, in Walter Kaufmann, trans., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 467.
2. *Hamlet*, Act III, scene 2.
3. "Percentage of women on tenured/tenure-track appointments at Top-54 Doctoral Programs in Gourmet Report: 19.153%; Average percentage of women at the Top 54 Doctoral Programs: 19.46%; Median percentage of women at Top-54 Doctoral Programs: 18.75%," 2006 *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (2004): 116–20, of the *APA Newsletters*; Postscript November 20, 2004 (updated June 10, 2007); http://csulb.edu/~jvancamp/Female_Friendly.html#postscript (accessed November 4, 2007).
4. Mary Ellen Waithe, editor of the series *A History of Women Philosophers*, has ruminated on the differences between male and female philosophers; see her introduction to volume 4 of the series (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), xli–xlii.
5. One notable exception is the 1939 film "The Women," which has the dubious distinction of being identified as "the greatest classic bitch film of all time." Posted by guil fisher (guil12@aol.com), Philadelphia, PA, November 4, 1999, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032143/-42k> (accessed November 4, 2007).
6. Sandra A. Wawrytko, *The Undercurrent of Feminine Philosophy in Eastern and Western Thought* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981).
7. Evidence for the historical existence of Diotima is presented by Mary Ellen Waithe, "Diotima of Mantinea," in *A History of Women Philosophers*, ed. Mary Ellen Waithe (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 98–109.
8. Plato, *The Republic*, V 454–56, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Dialogues of Plato, Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 7, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1971), 359.
9. *Ibid.*, 360.
10. Aristotle, *History of Animals*, book ix, chapter 1 (608b), trans. D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, in *The Dialogues of Plato, Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 9, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1971), 133–34.
11. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), addition 107 to paragraph 166.
12. Jacques Derrida, "La question du style," in *Nietzsche aujourd'hui?* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1973), I: 265, 267, as discussed by Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface," to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 35–36.
13. Nietzsche credits a woman, Lou Salomé, with making him "ripe for my Zarathustra," most likely as a model of life-affirming passion; translated by Angela Livingstone and quoted in her work, *Salomé: Her Life and Work* (Mt Kisco: Moyer Bell, 1984), 54.
14. Spivak, "Translator's Preface," 37.
15. Wawrytko, *The Undercurrent of Feminine Philosophy in Eastern and Western Thought*.
16. Studies of gay marriages have revealed that stereotypical male and female behavior, assumed by some to be biologically hardwired, is in fact influenced by the context of human relationships. See Tara Parker-Pope, "Gay Unions Shed Light on Gender in Marriage," *New York Times*, June 10, 2008, D1, 5.
17. Elizabeth Weil, "Teaching to the Testosterone," *New York Times Magazine*, March 2, 2008, 40–41. The current crusade to separate the sexes may be motivated by the fact

- that boys lag behind their female counterparts in education—in 2005 women constituted fifty-seven percent of students in American colleges and the following year fifty-eight percent of B.A. degrees were awarded to women.
18. These complementary characteristics are discussed by W. Scott Morton, without mention of the gender element, in “The Confucian Concept of Man: The Original Formulation,” *Philosophy East and West* 21, no. 1 (1971): 71–73.
 19. *Da Xue*, chapter IX.2, translated by Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko, included in *Chinese Philosophy in Cultural Context: Selected Readings from Essential Sources* (San Diego: Montezuma Publishing, 2007), 223–24.
 20. For example, *Da Xue* 10:3 describes the Profound Person as the father/mother of the people, quoting the *Shi Jing* 《詩經》, 172.
 21. This phrase occurs repeatedly in the *Lotus Sūtra*.
 22. The character Old Tuo reflecting on the role reversal in the Country of Women, chapter 13 of Li Ju-chen’s *Flowers in the Mirror*, trans. Tai-yi Lin (London: P. Owen, 1970), 107.
 23. A 2006 study by Catalyst cited by Lisa Belkin in “The Feminine Critique,” *New York Times*, November 1, 2007.
 24. Nicholas D. Kristof, “When Women Rule,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2008, 13; Kristof cites the research of MIT economist Esther Duflo in Indian villages. One bright note—Duflo observes “Exposure reduces prejudice,” in that second-generation female leaders were evaluated more realistically. See “Powerful Women: Does Exposure Reduce Prejudice?” coauthored with Lori Beaman, Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, Rohini Pande, and Petia Topalova. Available at <http://econ-www.mit.edu/files/2406> (accessed March 2, 2008).
 25. An interview conducted by Deborah Solomon, “A Gloom of Her Own,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, November 21, 2004, 31.
 26. The prevalence of these schizophrenic models is reflected in two recent how-to manuals for female executives: Nina DiSesa’s *Seducing the Boys Club: Uncensored Tactics from a Woman at the Top* (New York: Ballantine, 2008) and Christopher V. Flett’s *What Men Don’t Tell Women about Business: Opening Up the Heavily Guarded Alpha Male Playbook* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2008).
 27. Sushil Bikhchandani, David Hirshleifer, and Ivo Welch, “A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades,” *The Journal of Political Economy* 100, no. 5 (1992): 994.
 28. Sushil Bikhchandani, David Hirshleifer, and Ivo Welch, “Informational Cascades and Rational Herding: An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Reference,” available at <http://www.info-cascades.info> (accessed November 4, 2007).
 29. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “The World Is Round or Spherical,” *The Madman’s Middle Way: Reflections on Reality of the Tibetan Monk Gendun Chopék* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 17.
 30. Gendun Chopék, “Eloquent Distillation,” in Lopez, *The Madman’s Middle Way*, 8, 49.
 31. Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sūtra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 30, 37.
 32. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, part I, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 138.
 33. Milarepa, “A Woman’s Role in Dharma,” in *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, vol. I, trans. Garma C. C. Chang (New York: University Books, 1962), 137.
 34. See Sandra A. Wawrytko, “Sexism in the Early Sangha: Its Social Basis and Philosophical Dis-solution,” in *Buddhist Behavioral Codes and the Modern World*, ed. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko (London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 77–96.
 35. Milarepa, *Milarepa*, 137.
 36. *Ibid.*, 138.
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. *Ibid.*, 139–41.
 39. *Ibid.*, 141–42.
 40. *Ibid.*, 143.
 41. *Ibid.*, 144.

42. Ibid., 145.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 146.
45. Ibid., 148.
46. Buddha as quoted in *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sūtra (Wei Mo Chieh So Shuo Ching)*, trans. Lu K'uen Yü (Charles Luk) (Berkeley: Shambala, 1972), 79.
47. Quoted by Chopek in "Eloquent Distillation," 95, 70.
48. Chopek, "Eloquent Distillation," 15, 51.
49. John Tierney, "Go Ahead, Rationalize. Monkeys Do It, Too," *New York Times*, November 6, 2007.
50. Sigmund Freud, "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), 665.
51. In Albania a woman is allowed to assume a male role, and its privileges, by vowing lifelong chastity. See Dan Bilefsky, "Old Custom Fades in Albania: Woman as Man of the Family," *New York Times*, June 25, 2008, A1, 12. However, a similar vow by Catholic priests does not consign them to a female role.
52. Watson, *The Lotus Sūtra*, 189.
53. Miriam Levering, "Is the Lotus Sutra 'Good News' for Women?" in *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope: Essays on the Lotus Sutra*, ed. Gene Reeves (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing 2002), 481–82.
54. Watson, *The Lotus Sūtra*, 198.
55. *Vimalakirti*, 70.
56. Ibid., 73–74.
57. Ibid., 74.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., 75.
60. Watson, *The Lotus Sūtra*, 30.
61. *Vimalakirti*, 78.
62. Ibid., 79.
63. Ibid., 79–80.
64. Ibid., 80.
65. Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch, "A Theory of Fads," 994.
66. Contrary to popular beliefs, the statue generally referred to as "The Thinker" is in fact "The Poet," Rodin's depiction of Dante at the gates of hell.
67. Amber E. Budden, Tom Tregenza, Lonnie W. Aarssen, Julia Koricheva, Roosa Leimu, and Christopher J. Lortie, "Double-Blind Review Favours Increased Representation of Female Authors," *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*, 23, no. 1 (2008): 4–6.