

On Women's Inabilities

A comparative study of a controversial section of the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta (M 115) and its parallels

A summary by Piya Tan ©2010

[To be studied in reference to M 115 = SD 29.1a]]

1 The Pali Bahu Dhātuka Sutta and its parallel

1.1 THE 28 POSSIBILITIES AND IMPOSSIBILITIES. The whole section on the 28 possibilities and impossibilities (*thānāthāna*) [§§12-19] is found in **the Aṭṭhāna Vagga** (A 1.15) and **the Vibhaṅga** (Vbh §809),¹ which calls it “the Tathagata’s knowledge of true reality regarding cause as cause and non-cause as non-cause” (*tathāgatassa thānañ ca thānato aṭṭhānañ ca aṭṭhānato yathā, bhūtam nāṇam*) (Vbh 335). Its Commentary glosses “possibility” (*thāna*) as “cause” (*hetu*) (VbhA 423). A detailed analysis of these 28 statements is given in **the Sammoha, vinodanī** (the Vibhaṅga Commentary).²

Basically, this teaching says that an individual who is accomplished in right view would never regard formations (things of this world) as permanent, nor pleasurable, nor as self, but it is possible for an ordinary worldling to think so [§12]; or commit any of the five heinous karmas, that is, killing of one’s own mother or father, or an arhat, or shedding Buddha’s blood, or causing a schism in the order. Furthermore, only one Buddha can arise in a world-system at a time, and he will always be a man [§13].

A key statement here is that only one full self-awakened Buddha can arise in a single universe³ at one time. This is like the discovery of fire or the invention of the wheel: it needs to occur only once. The Buddha is the most highly evolved of beings within a certain universe. This perfection in spiritual evolution takes an astronomical number of world cycles, and as such is rare indeed. As such, the Buddha is said to be *sui generis*, all in a class or species of his own.⁴

Similarly, the highest position of power, be it evil (Māra) or good in a mundane sense (Sakra), or in a globally political sense (a wheel-turning monarch), is always filled by the most powerful of men, and only one such being can exist at a time [§14].

All this is *neither* patriarchy *nor* anti-feminism on the part of early Buddhism, but a reflection of *the realities of ancient Indian patriarchal society and worldly politics*. A Buddha arises in a society that is culturally, economically and spiritually advanced, and understandably, such a society is always patriarchal. The arising of such an effective teacher may, in a way, be said to be *a spiritual evolution* based on a natural selection of the most physically and mentally developed of humans to become the Buddha of his time. On the other hand, the positions of worldly and celestial powers are always held by a male figure, arising from *natural selection of social evolution* [§15]. As we shall see, we have clear evidence that the passages on the women’s inabilities were later interpolations [2.2-2.4]

1.2 THE LIST OF WOMEN’S INABILITIES IS AN INTERPOLATION. **Analayo** has done a very instructive comparative study of the Pali Bahu Dhātuka Sutta and its parallel versions, entitled “The Bahudhātuka-sutta and its parallels on women’s inabilities” (2009),⁵ and much of this essay is based on his study. The most significant point of this comparative study is that the Pali reference to five inabilities of women

¹ A 1.15/1:26 f = Vbh 809/335-338.

² VbhA 2138-2197/423-439 = VbhA:Ñ 2:171-187.

³ The early texts, however, speaks of parallel universes: see (**Ānanda**) **Abhibhū S** (A 3.80.3/1:227 f) = SD 54.1 & **Kosala S 1** (A 10.29.2/5:59) = SD 16.15.

⁴ See (**Pāda**) **Doṇa S** (A 4.36/2:37 f) = SD 36.13.

⁵ Analayo also refers to the Tib version of Bahu Dhātuka S, ie, De (297) *mdo sde sha* 297a2-301b2 or Q1 (963) *mdo lu* 325b3-330b1, entitled *kham s mang po pa’i mdo*, which thus similar to M 115 & MĀ 181 takes the “many elements” as its title, though in its reference to the Indic original it has these two words in the reverse sequence, De *mdo sde sha* 297a2 or Q1 *lu* 325b3: *rgya gar skad du dha tu ba-hu-ta-ka su-tra*. **Peter Skilling** (Kanjur 772, unpubl) notes several eds whose title corresponds to the sequence of the Pali title and suggests that “*dhātu, bahutaka* must be a reconstruction.” (Analayo 2009: n13)

—to become a Buddha, a universal monarch, Shakra, Māra, or Brahma—is not found in the Āgama version (in Chinese translation) of the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta. The ancient Buddhist texts connected with our discussion are as follows:

- (1) Madhyama Āgama: 多界經 **Duōjiè jīng**, the Discourse on the Many Elements (MĀ181),⁶
- (2) Individual Chinese translation: 佛說四品法門經 **Fóshuō sìpǐn fāmén jīng**, the Discourse Spoken by the Buddha on the Fourfold Dharma Instruction (T17.776.712b14-714a1),⁷
- (3) Tibetan translation: De (297) *mdo sde sha* 297a2-301b2 or Ql (963) *mdo lu* 325b3-330b1, entitled ***Khams mang po pa'i mdo***,⁸
- (4) A full sutra quotation in **the Dharma,skandha** of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, preserved in Chinese;⁹
- (5) a full sutra quotation in **Samatha,deva**'s commentary on the Abhidharma,kośa Bhāṣya, preserved in Tibetan.¹⁰

Analayo, in his comparative study of these ancient parallels, has shown that **the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta** (M 115) preserves a more original set of teachings on the elements (*dhātu*) than the Chinese or Tibetan versions (2009:151-160). Furthermore, all these texts (2-5) mention some similar list of women's inabilities. Only the 多界經 **Duōjiè Jīng** (MĀ 181) omits any mention of such a list.

The 多界經 **Duōjiè Jīng** (MĀ181), significantly, is the Āgama version of the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta. It was translated into Chinese by Gautama Saṅgha,deva towards the end of the 4th century, apparently based on a Prakrit original transmitted within the Sarvāstivāda tradition(s). And, unlike its Pali version, it does not contain the list of women's inabilities.

It is highly unlikely that this text would deliberately omit this list, since the other Chinese and Tibetan texts contain them. As such, it is safe to surmise that the 多界經 **Duōjiè Jīng** version is the oldest, and that the list of women's inabilities were *a late interpolation* in the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta.

This important fact raises a couple of interesting questions (which I shall limit to the Pali version). How did the list of women's abilities find their way into the Pali Bahu Dhātuka Sutta? Or was the list omitted, accidentally or deliberately, from the Āgama version? What has the early Buddhist teachings have to say about these five alleged inabilities of a woman? We will examine each of these questions in turn.

2 The list of women's inabilities

2.1 VERSIONS OF THE LIST OF WOMEN'S ABILITIES. While the Madhyama Āgama version of the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta does not have the list of what is impossible for women, the other versions of this discourse list the various inabilities of women as a single impossibility, as two or as five impossibilities [Fig 2.1].

⁶ The Chinese Āgama reference is 多界經 **Duōjiè Jīng** (MĀ181/T1.26.723a10-724c3). See also **Analayo** 2006: 480-487. For an Eng tr, see **Analayo** 2009:139-151.

⁷ T17.776.712b14-714a1, 佛說四品法門經 **Fóshuō sìpǐn fāmén jīng**, "Discourse Spoken by the Buddha on the Fourfold Dharma Instruction," a title reconstructed by Nanjio (*Catalogue* 1883:219) as Buddha,bhaṣita-catur,varga,-dharma,paryāya-sūtra, which according to the Taisho ed would have been tr by Fāxián 法賢 (Dharma,bhadra from Nālandā, and who came to China in 973; not the better known Fāxiān 法顯).

⁸ Which is thus similar to M 115 & MĀ 181 takes the "many elements" as its title, though in its reference to the Indic original it has these two words in the reverse sequence, *De mdo sde sha* 297a2 or *Ql lu* 325b3: *rgya gar skad du dha-tu ba-hu-ta-ka su-tra*. **Peter Skilling** (Kanjur 772, unpubl) notes several eds whose title corresponds to the sequence of the Pali title and suggests that "*dhātu,bahutaka* must be a reconstruction." (Analayo 2009: n13)

⁹ This sutra quotation is at the start of ch 20 on "many elements" in T26.1537.501b25-502c18.

¹⁰ De (4094) *mngon pa ju* 28b2-33b4 or Ql (5595) *tu* 31b1-36b6, which gives the title *as khams mang po pa'i mdo*, "the Discourse on Many Elements."

Fig 2.1 Impossibilities for Women (Analayo 2009: 161 f)**1 impossibility covering 6 aspects (individual Chinese translation):**

- female universal monarch, female heavenly king, female Shakra, female Brahmā, female Pratyeka Buddha, female Buddha

1 impossibility covering 6 aspects (Tibetan discourse):

- female universal monarch, female Shakra, female Brahmā, female Māra, female Pratyeka Buddha, female Buddha

1 impossibility covering 6 aspects (Dharma,skandha):

- female universal monarch, female Shakra, female Māra, female Brahmā, female Pratyeka Buddha, female Buddha

2 impossibilities covering 6 aspects (Samatha,deva's commentary):

- female universal monarch
- female heavenly king, female Shakra, female Brahmā, female Pratyeka Buddha, female Buddha

5 impossibilities (Pali Sutta):

- female Buddha
- female universal monarch
- female Shakra
- female Māra
- female Brahmā

Their details differ: in some versions, a woman cannot be one of the four heavenly kings, while others instead list that she cannot be Māra. Another common but significant difference is that, except for the Pali Sutta, the other versions also say that a woman cannot be a Pratyeka Buddha.

Apparently, these impossibilities must have been interpolated into the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta at a time when patriarchalism was predominant, such as imperial India of Asoka. In such a society, the idea of a female universal monarch would have been unthinkable: the emperor Asoka was a man.

Similarly, as on earth, so in the heavens. The patriarchal Indians, would similarly reject any notion of a female Shakra, a female heavenly king, or a female Brahmā ruling in their respective heavens.¹¹ The same reasoning would also apply to Māra, who, according to the Pali commentarial tradition, occupies a position similar to a king or a leader in the highest heaven of the sense-world.¹²

2.2 AN ANACHRONISTIC LIST. According to **Analayo**, the point behind the abovementioned impossibilities is that a woman cannot fulfill these functions in the present. Though she could become any of these in the future, as long as she is a female she cannot perform the function of any of these rulers, since to assume these leadership positions would, from the perspective of ancient Indian patriarchal society, require being a male.¹³

¹¹ MA 4:123,11 explains that the present context refers to Maha Brahmā, ie the leader of the Brahmā world; in fact, the individual tr, T17.776.713b22, here speaks explicitly of the “Heavenly King Great Brahmā, 大梵天王 *dāfān tiānwáng*; and **Dharmaskandha**, T26.1537.502b17, speaks of King Brahmā, 梵王 *fānwáng*. The Bahu Dhātuka Sutta Commentary explains that the statement in M 115/3:66,8 that a man can become a Brahmā should not be taken literally, as Brahmās are genderless, but should be understood only in the sense that a Brahmā appears looking more like a man than a woman (MA 4:123).

¹² According to Majjhima Comy, Māra lives in the Para,nimmitta Vasavatti *deva,loka* governing his own host like a rebel prince in the border region of a kingdom (*attano parisāya issariyam pavattento rajja,paccante dāmari-ka,raja,putto viya vasati*) (MA 1:34,2).

¹³ **Analayo** 2009:162. **NS Barnes** comments on the impossibilities for women that “this theory excluded women from leadership” (1987:114). As **A Sharma** points out, at least in the case of Māra, this would not have been an issue, as given the negative role Māra plays in Buddhist texts, “the denial of Mārahood can hardly be an embarrassment” (1978:74).

Understandably, in such a society, for a Buddhist tradition which views that a Buddha-to-be will never be born a woman. To do so in a patriarchal society like ancient India would make it almost impossible to effect the role of a Buddha, as people would have less respect for a female teacher in such a society.

The tradition that Buddhas are born in families from the kshatriya (warrior) or brahmin class is apparently based on a similar reasoning.¹⁴ The reasoning is that for a Buddha to be born in a low class would make it unnecessarily difficult for him to be respected as a teacher.¹⁵ As such, it is clear that such restrictions on the gender or the social class of a Buddha were a post-Buddha mythology to legitimize Buddhism in ancient Indian society. As **Analayo** has stressed, they do not imply that gender or social class have a bearing on spiritual ability.¹⁶

A note of mythology is helpful here. All religions have a historical core or foundation, but various myths arise or are created after the religious founder's death. This is the stuff of literature, where the word or a story has the power to move us with joy or move us to goodness. It is a "what if" imagining, so that we do not have to put our hands into the fire to be burnt. Mythology is the halfway house of spirituality, where we having rested in its power and bliss, muster the strength to move on to see more directly into true reality.

2.3 ASPIRATION TO BUDDHAHOOD. It must also be taken into account here that the presentation in the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta and its parallels still stems from a period in Buddhist history *when the idea of aspiring to Buddhahood was not an option* (as it is was in later traditions). As **Kajiya** points out, "the dictum that a woman cannot become a Buddha...did not have a target to which it could have been directed," since at that time "no one, neither man nor woman, aspired to Buddhahood" (1982:64).

Cludia Romberg further notes that once "the aim was no longer to become an Arhat, but to become Buddha...this shift made, in fact, the situation for women worse, because a doctrinal foundation was laid for the necessity of changing the sex before being able to become enlightened" (2002:161). In fact, **the Bodhisattva, bhūmi** explains that a woman will not awaken as a Buddha because already an advanced bodhisattva has left behind womanhood for good and will not be reborn again as a female.¹⁷

Paul Harrison concludes that "women...are generally represented in such an unfavourable light as to vitiate any notion of the Mahāyāna as a movement for sexual equality. Compared with the situation in the Pali Canon, in which women are at least as capable men of attaining the highest goal, arhatship, the position of women in Mahāyāna has hardly changed for the better" (1987:78). Harrison remark is supported by the fact that four out of the five parallel texts related to the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta—all four of which belong to the Mahāyāna—contain the list of women's inabilities [1.2].

¹⁴ This is evident in the listing of former Buddhas given in **Mahā'padāna S** (De 14/2:2,28); DĀ 1/T1.1.2a16-T1.1.2a19; T1.2.150b01-T1.2.150b04; T1.4.159b21; EĀ 48.4/T2.125.790b14 and their Skt fragment counterparts, frag S 360 folio 115 verso in **T Fukita** (2003:4). **The Mahavastu** says that "bodhisattvas are born in two types of families, warrior families or brahmin families" (*dvīhi kulehi bodhisattvā jāyanti, kṣatriya, kule vā brāhmaṇa, kule vā*) (**Senart** 1890, Mvst 2.1/2:1,3). **T Rahula** adds that "if the Buddha is to hail from a backward family, nobody would care for what he preaches and hence an Enlightened One is always to be born in the highest caste of the day" (1978:186). **S Wawrytko** explains that "prevailing social conditions prompted the Buddha to choose a high caste for his incarnation...presumably the same practical considerations would have militated against an incarnation in the female gender within ancient Indian society" (1994:286).

¹⁵ According to the **Saṅgha, bheda, vastu**, the future Buddha chose to be reborn in a warrior family because the warriors were more respected than brahmins, and his decision on where to be born was taken in order to avoid an objectionable type of birth (*mā me syur atonidānam pare vakkārāḥ "bodhisattvena garhaṇīyāyām jātau pratisandhir grhīta iti*) (ed **Gnoli** 1977:36,13). A similar position is found in Jainism: **Jina, caritra** 17 says that future arhats or universal monarchs will avoid taking birth in a low womb or even in a brahmin womb (**Jacobi** 1879: 38,9).

¹⁶ Here, **Analayo** points out that this inability does not imply, as assumed by **An** (2002:11), that women are not capable of reaching liberation and become arhats, but only concerns the question of becoming a Buddha (2009:180 n52).

¹⁷ *Na ca strī anuttarām samyaksambodhim bhisambudhyate. tat kasya hetoḥ? tathā hi bodhisattvaḥ prathamasyaiva kalpāsamkhyeyasyātyayāt strībhāvam vijahāti bodhi, maṇḍa, niṣadanam upādāya na punar jātu strī bhavati* (**Wogihara** 1930:94,3); cf **DY Paul** 1979:212 n7.

In sum, then, the inability of a woman to assume the position of a ruler on earth, a ruler in various heavenly realms, or a ruler in the field of Dharma reflects leadership conceptions in ancient India that was under the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism that advocated self-aspiration to Buddhahood.

From this perspective, we might wonder whether the inabilities of women stipulated in the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta would be relevant in a society *where female leadership is a common feature*. Just as Buddhas would not need to come from the brahmin or warrior castes in a society whose class hierarchy does not put those castes at its apex, a Buddha might not need to be a male in a society where gender equality is a generally accepted fact.¹⁸

2.4 ULTIMATE DEGRADATION OF WOMEN. Another significant point to note about the parallel texts already mentioned [1.2], only the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta and its Madhyama Āgama parallel do not mention that women cannot become Pratyeka Buddhas. We have so far seen the ideology of women's inabilities in terms of *leadership positions*, but to speak of the impossibility of a female Pratyeka Buddha would imply *equating womanhood with lesser spiritual abilities*. A Pratyeka Buddha does not act as a teacher, so that there would be no need to take into account the preferences of ancient Indian patriarchal society.

The question of becoming a Pratyeka Buddha is, as such, solely a question of spiritual ability, as a Pratyeka Buddha has to accomplish the difficult task of reaching awakening without the guidance of a teacher. Hence, to consider it impossible for a woman to be a Pratyeka Buddha amounts to proposing that a woman, simply on account of her gender, is incapable of the degree of spiritual ability required for realizing awakening without the guidance of a teacher.

The implication of this particular impossibility is clearly evident in the individual translation [1.2], which contrasts this inability of a woman to the case of a man, who through merit and wisdom can be-

¹⁸ A problem with this suggestion, as **Analayo** notes would be with one of the 32 marks with which according to tradition the Buddha was endowed, namely, the concealed nature of his genitals, cf **Brahmāyu S** (M 91): *kos'ohita, vattha, guyha* (M 91.9/2:136,17), referred to in its parallels **MĀ 161/T1.26.686b16** and **T1.76.883c26** as 陰馬藏 *yīnmācáng*. **Hae-ju** comments that the idea of women's inability to become a Buddha "may have stemmed from the idea of the Buddha's unique sexual mark. Even though his sexual organ is concealed, the mark is characterized as male" (1999: 131), cf also **Kajiyama** 1982:65. The standard description of the significance of these 32 marks states that one who has these will definitely become either a universal monarch or a Buddha: see **Brahmāyu S** (M 91/2:134,16) and its parallels **MĀ 161/T1.26.685a23**, and **T1.76.883c02**. In several discourses, brahmins are recorded as investigating the Buddha's possession of the 32 marks and, once they ascertain that he has all of them and have been told by him that he claims to be a Buddha, they accept his claim as true. Thus, for the brahmins, the possession of the 32 marks serves to certify one's claim to Buddhahood. However, **Analayo** cautions, the standard descriptions of the significance of these marks neither explicitly state nor necessarily imply that to become a universal monarch or a Buddha one must invariably be endowed with these marks (though this may well be the way later tradition interprets these passages). It only states the future prospect of one who has them. Thus what this dictum implies for one who does not have all 32 marks would be that such a person's claim to be a Buddha would fail to arouse confidence in brahmins who believe in the significance of these marks. In the discourses, the situation of someone claiming to be a Buddha without possessing all 32 marks does not arise, as whenever the possession of these marks is under scrutiny, the object of such investigations is invariably Gotama Buddha. Nevertheless, a significant indication can be found in **Mahā'padāna S**, which makes a point of *not* including the possession of the 32 marks among what is the natural rule, *dhammatā*, for all Buddhas. Whereas **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14) consistently introduces various qualities of the infant bodhisattva Vipassī as *dhammatā esā*, and thus specifies their possession as something that is invariably the case for any Buddha-to-be, when the discourse turns to his 32 marks (D 14/2:16,1), the phrase *dhammatā esā* is no longer used. The same is the case for its **Dirgha Āgama** parallel, where the recurrent reference to an "unchanging principle for all Buddhas," 諸佛常法, *zhūfó chángfǎ*, is no longer used when the description turns to the 32 marks, **DĀ 1/T1.1.4c20**. Not all parallel versions agree in this respect, as judging from fragment 143.2 in Fukita (2003:71) the Skt parallel did use the expression *dharmatā* at the outset of its description of bodhisattva Vipasyī's possession of the 32 marks; while another parallel, **T1.2.152b13**, does not use such a specification even in its description of his other qualities. In sum, at least from the perspective of **Mahā'padāna S** and its **Dirgha Āgama** parallel, the possibility that someone could be a Buddha *without* being endowed with all of the 32 marks does not seem to be categorically ruled out. (**Analayo** 2009:181 n54, normalized). On the Buddha's 32 marks, see **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30) = SD 36.9 (3).

come a Pratyeka Buddha.¹⁹ In short, a woman, merely on account of her sex, lacks the merit and wisdom needed for such an attainment.²⁰

The Mahā,prajñā,parāmitā (Upadeśa) Śāstra, taking a step further, presents a passage as a sutra quotation from the Discourse on the Many Elements [1.2], proclaiming that a woman can attain liberation only with the help of a man.²¹ From this perspective, it means that even for becoming an arhat, a woman will need help from a man! At this point, says **Analayo**, the devaluation of the spiritual abilities of women is fully manifest (2009:164).

3 Gender has no impact on spiritual ability

3.1 POST-BUDDHA BUDDHISM AND THE ALLEGED INABILITIES OF A WOMAN. While it is evident that the later Buddhist texts [1.2] tend to devalue the abilities of women, it is very significant that the Madhyama Āgama version does not mention any of these inabilities. An accidental loss of such a passage is improbable in view of the fact that in all the other versions, the general tendency is that of gradual expansion of their topics. A deliberate deletion of such a list, too, is similarly improbable, especially since the five inabilities of a woman are listed in another Madhyama Āgama discourse, MĀ 116.

MĀ 116 claims that “a woman cannot attain five objectives. That a woman should become a Tathāgata, free from attachment, rightly awakened; a universal monarch; Shakra, ruler of gods; King Māra; or Great Brahmā, that is impossible.”²² A similar statement is found in a closely parallel account in **T61**, where it is said that “it is impossible and cannot come to be, a woman cannot at all attain five objectives: she cannot become a Tathāgata, free from attachment, rightly awakened; or a universal monarch; she cannot become Shakra; she cannot become Māra; and she cannot become Brahmā, [all] that is impossible.”²³

MĀ 116 recounts one of several canonical records of the Buddha permitting women to go forth as nuns, following a request by Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī and an intervention in her favor by Ānanda. The five inabilities of women are also mentioned in a version of the same event in **the Mahī,śāsaka Vinaya**,²⁴

¹⁹ T17.776.713b23 indicates that what is impossible for women is instead possible in the case of “a son of a good family who is endowed with the marks of a great man and adorned with merit and wisdom,” 善男子,具大人相,福慧莊嚴。

²⁰ Cf **Saññoga S** (A 7.48), where it stated that a woman *should* rise above being physically a female (A 7.48/-4:57-59) = SD 8.7.

²¹ T25.1509.237a19: “if a woman attains the liberation of Nirvana, it is in dependence on a male that she attains it; it does not happen that she attains the path on her own,” 若女人得解脫涅槃,亦因男子得,無有自然得道 (Analayo's tr), cf **E Lamotte**: “Si une femme obtient la délivrance (*vimukti*), le Nirvāna, c'est grâce à un mâle qu'elle l'obtient. Il est impossible qu'elle obtienne la Bodhi par elle-même (*svataḥ*)” (*Le Traité* 1524).

²² 女人不得行五事,若女人作如來,無所著,等正覺,及轉輪王,天帝釋,魔王,大梵天者,終無是處 (**MĀ 116**/T1.-26.607b11- b13, Analayo's tr.

²³ 無有是處不可容女人,終不得五事,不得成如來無所著等正覺,及轉輪王,不得為釋,不得為魔,不得為梵,無有是處 (T1.60.858a01), Analayo's tr.

²⁴ T22.1421.186a12: “a woman has five obstructions, she cannot become Shakra, the ruler of gods, or the Heavenly King Māra, or the Heavenly King Brahmā, or a noble universal monarch or a king of the Dharma in the three realms,” 女人有五礙,不得作天帝釋,魔天王,梵天王,轉輪聖王,三界法王. The 5 impossibilities are also mentioned in EĀ 43.2/T2.125.757c24, where they serve to explain why a woman cannot be given a prediction of future Buddhahood. This passage thus shows a stage of development comparable to the extract from the Bodhisattva, bhūmi quote above [2.3]. A counterpart to the tale in EĀ 43.2 can be found in an apocryphal Pali Jātaka ed in **PS Jaini** (“Padīpadanajataka”), cf also **R Gombrich** on a version of this tale in a Sinhala prose work composed in the 15th century (1980:70). The occurrence of this tale in the Ekottarika Āgama is one of several passages indicating the integration of comparatively late elements into this discourse collection: for detail, see **Analayo**: Zeng. Cf **Jina, kāla, -mālī** (Ratana, paññā, 16th-cent Siam), where it is said that our Buddha was a woman in a distant past life (Jink:J 1978: 3): see Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004: §18.

whereas they are absent from accounts of this event in the Vinayas of the Dharma.guptaka, the “Haimavata”(?), the Mahā,saṅghika, the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda and the Theravāda.²⁵

As the passage on the inabilities of women *occurs at different points* in the Mahī,śāsaka Vinaya and in the Madhyama Āgama discourse, it seems probable that this topic is not an original part of the account of the foundation of the order of nuns.²⁶ Similar to the above discussed case where two out of six versions of the Discourse on the Many Elements have a reference to the aggregates that occurs at different points in these two versions,²⁷ where other indications confirm that this reference is a later addition.²⁸

3.2 THE LIST OF WOMEN'S INABILITIES IRRELEVANT TO THE SUTTA. When we carefully examine the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta and its parallels against the background of the purpose of the whole Pali Sutta, the theme of a woman's inabilities seems clearly irrelevant. The different versions agree that the Buddha gives Ānanda *a teaching on aspects of the Dharma essential to the development of wisdom*. It is quite straightforward that the development of wisdom entails insight into the elements, the sense-spheres and dependent arising. The same goes for insight into the karmic consequences of wholesome and unwholesome deeds, or for knowledge about certain qualities of a streamwinner. Such topics are clearly related to the general canonical notion of wisdom, which is a type of insight that leads to liberation.²⁹ A list of what is impossible for women simply sticks out like a sore thumb, especially where it clearly refers to such temporal matters of power and rulership.

It is obviously irrelevant to Ānanda whether a universal monarch, a heavenly king, a Shakra, a Māra, a Brahmā, a Pratyeka Buddha or a Buddha can be female, especially when he was living at a time when power and rulership in the various heavens were believed to have been already occupied by males, and when the one man who according to tradition could have become a universal monarch had already become the Buddha.

All these positions were either already occupied by males or else rendered impossible because of the existence of a Buddha. Moreover, Ānanda, as a streamwinner, would have no reason to aspire to any of these.³⁰ As such, it would be difficult to see any practical relevance that a knowledge of gender restrictions for occupying such positions could have had for Ānanda.

Furthermore, on the impossibilities of two Buddhas or two universal monarchs arising simultaneously, and the impossibilities for women, **J Pérez-Remón** observes that, “These impossibilities and their corresponding possibilities are introduced in between the other impossibilities and possibilities regarding moral matters, interrupting the enumeration of things morally possible or impossible, a fact that might indicate their later interpolation.” (1980:357 n48)

In sum, concludes **Analayo**, since an accidental loss or an intentional omission of an exposition on the inabilities of women in the Madhyama Āgama discourse seems improbable, the most straightforward conclusion would be that the theme of women's inability is a later addition to the exposition on impossibilities in the different versions of the Discourse on the Many Elements. Thus, in this respect the Madhya-

²⁵ Dharma.guptaka Vinaya T22.1428.922c-923c; “Haimavata”(?) Vinaya, T24.1463.803a-c; Mahā,saṅghika Vinaya, **G Roth** (1970:4-21); the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda Vinaya, T24.1451.350b-351c; and Pali Vinaya (V 2:253-256 = A 8.51/4:274-279); cf also the survey in **A Heirman** (2001:282).

²⁶ In Mahī,śāsaka Vinaya, T22.1421.186a12, the inabilities of women stand at the beginning of several passages that describe the negative repercussions of allowing women to go forth. In MĀ 116/T1.26.607b10 (and in its close parallel T1.61.858a1), women's inabilities come at the end of a comparable series of passages on the detrimental consequences of permitting women to ordain.

²⁷ See **Analayo**, Figure 1 (2009:152 f).

²⁸ **Analayo** 2009:161-166.

²⁹ **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43) indicates that the purpose of wisdom is for the sake of “direct knowledge,” “penetrative knowledge,” and “abandoning” (*paññā...abhiññ'attha pariññ'attha pahān'attha*) (M 43/1:293,36). Its parallel MĀ 211/T1.26.790c22 similarly explains that wisdom has the purpose of leading to “disenchantment,” to “dispassion,” and to a “vision in accordance with reality,” 智慧者有厭義,無欲義,見如真義.

³⁰ (**Puṇṇa**) **Ānanda S** (S 22.83/3:106,3) & its parallel SĀ 261/T2.99.66b03 record how Ānanda became a streamwinner, which V 2:183,21 records as occurring soon after his ordination.

ma Āgama version quite probably testifies to an early stage, when the theme of what women cannot achieve had not yet become part of the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta. (Analyo 2009:166)

There was a general tendency that the various impossibilities were expanded through the post-Buddha ages, so that this theme found its way into various versions of the discourse.³¹ We noted, for example, that the notion of women's inabilities is also found in **the Atthāna Vagga** (A 1.15) and **the Vibhaṅga** (Vbh §809).³² However, since the Aṅguttara materials, here definitely the list of women's inabilities recounted in the Atthāna Vagga, is an echo of **the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta** (M 115) or from a common older post-Buddha tradition, that also is recorded in the Vibhaṅga. Since we have shown that the section on women's inabilities in the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta is an interpolation, it also follows, after the fact, that this list in the other two texts are also late additions that go against the early Buddhist spirit.

In summary, while the inability of a woman to become a Buddha might reflect the prevalent ideology of leadership in ancient Indian patriarchal society, an additional allegation that she is unable to be a Pratyeka Buddha only implies a deliberate downplay or degradation of the spiritual abilities of women. Such a tendency surely stands starkly opposed to the early Buddhist teachings, where gender has no bearing whatsoever on spiritual ability.³³

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³¹ On the listing of inabilities of women, **Kajiyama** concludes that "it is most likely that the dictum did not exist when the Buddhist Order maintained one and the same tradition, but that it was created after the Order was divided into many schools and was inserted into sutras of various schools" (1982:58). However, according to **Analyo**, the suggestion by Kajiyama that "the dictum that a woman is incapable of becoming a Buddha arose probably in the first century BC" (1982:70), may be putting things at too late a time (2009:166).

³² A 1.15/1:26 f = Vbh 809/335-338.

³³ On the spiritual capacity of women, see SD 66.

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