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Some Remarks on Research on Gender Roles in the Textual Sources of Buddhism[1]

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Abstract

The presented paper reflects on the perspective of the field of Buddhist studies/Buddhology relating to research on gender roles, especially female roles in Buddhist traditions within the scope of textual study of sources. After briefly introducing the discipline and the history of research on gender within Buddhist studies, the article concentrates on the main shortcomings and also the current perspectives and postulates of contemporary research on gender roles in Buddhism.

Key words: Buddhism, Buddhist studies, gender studies, gender, gender roles, women in Buddhism
Słowa kluczowe: buddyzm, badania nad buddyzmem, gender studies, płeć kulturowa, role płciowe, kobieta w buddyzmie

This paper offers some reflections on the scholarly perspective of gender studies in the field of Buddhology or Buddhist studies. I would like to focus mainly on gender studies as an approach towards the study of women's status in Buddhism. My aim is to indicate problems I find significant, namely the lack of research on non-feminine gender roles in Buddhism and the continuity of application of the contemporary Western framework of thinking towards the object of research, and give suggestions on addressing these problems.

Buddhist studies, or Buddhology, is generally viewed as an interdisciplinary scholarly discipline. It is traditionally classified as a discipline in the field of oriental studies, that emerged as an outcome of the broadening of the topic to other, more

[1] Prievious version of the paper was presented under the title *Feminist Approach in the Study of Buddhism – Some Remarks* at the Second International Krakow Study of Religions Symposium *Religion: Fields of Research, Methods and Perspectives*.

traditional disciplines like Indology, Sinology, Mongolian studies etc.[2] According to the distinguished Polish Buddhologist Marek Mejor, "Buddhology is a discipline which researches Buddhism in its various forms, and its main method of research is philology – understood as scholarship on language, literature etc."[3] The textual approach and philological methods of analysis are the main features of the methodology of research on early Buddhist traditions. Of course, this approach is only partially applicable for research on contemporary traditions, which, apart from textual sources, can also engage fieldwork and methods of qualitative research from anthropology or social sciences. In recent decades we have also witnessed a wider application of archaeological and epigraphical sources in the study of historical Buddhist traditions. Nevertheless, the focus on textual sources remains a distinguishing mark of Buddhology as a discipline in general.

Since Buddhology is an interdisciplinary mode of study, it also engages in methods from other fields, such as social sciences – an example of this is the recent application of gender studies to research gender roles in Buddhist textual traditions or in contemporary Buddhist-oriented societies. However, even if we can trace the beginning of scholarly reflection on the place of women in Buddhism back to the late nineteenth century – the time of the emergence of Buddhist studies as a discipline – only in recent decades has it gained a position as a significant field of study. Gender studies in its general concept situates itself among currents stemming from feminist scholarship, namely an intellectual trend known as academic feminism, which has a very broad, interdisciplinary character, as it combines methods of various scientific approaches (e.g. sociology, philosophy, literary criticism). The distinctive feature of gender studies is the use of the category "gender," which is defined in terms of a role, as its primary category, separating it from "sex," which is treated as only a biological category. Gender studies in general primarily focus on the study of gender roles in culture and society.

Feminist scholarship, and, subsequently, the gender studies approach have been widely used in the study of Buddhism. Their application in the field of Buddhology began simultaneously with the emergence of the study of Buddhism in the West in the late nineteenth century. Historically, the first papers concerning the role of women in early Buddhism were presented at the Ninth International Congress of Orientalists in 1892 and were published a year later.[4] They were delivered by two female scholars associated mostly with the study of the Pali language – Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys-Davids and Mabel Bode, who devoted their papers to the role of women in the "Buddhist reformation," taking into account hagiographies of eminent Buddhist nuns present in the Pali Canon. Although the topic of female roles in Buddhist tradition was not a major topic of interest in male-dominated academic circles, and

[2] M. Mejor, *Uwagi o historii i perspektywach rozwoju studiów nad buddyzmem* [Remarks on the History and Perspectives of Development of Buddhist studies], in: *Buddyzm* (*Studia Religiologica* 37), J. Drabina (ed.), Kraków 2004.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 9.

[4] A. Collett, *Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate*, "Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion" (Fall, 2006), vol. 22, no. 2 p. 55.

the attempts of both scholars were generally overlooked by their contemporaries, present-day scholars agree that those first endeavours were a valid contribution to the study of Buddhism.[5] A detailed examination of the scholarship of Rhys-Davids and Bode from the perspective of the debate on Buddhism and gender was presented by Alice Collett in her compelling paper "Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate." Collett, by analysing not only Rhys Davids's academic work, but also her personal writings, shows how the early research was motivated and what challenges were met by the pioneering scholars of female roles in Buddhism. From her analyses we can extrapolate that the interest of the aforementioned scholars in studying the position of women in early Buddhism developed from their personal convictions – Rhys-Davids was even briefly a supporter of the woman's suffrage movement.[6] Although ground-breaking in the choice of topic and approach, the first attempts by the two scholars were not able to avoid the shortcomings typical of late-nineteenth-century researchers from a Western background: the main one being that they shared a certain Orientalist[7] prejudice.[8] The popular notion in those times was also to picture the historical Buddha as a social reformer – a view that was challenged by later scholarship on Buddhism – and thus the first female scholars of Buddhism had the tendency to describe Buddha as a reformer also with respect to the position of women.[9] These shortcomings were also present in the book which was undoubtedly the next milestone in studying women in Buddhism – the first monograph on the subject authored by I.B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism. Laywomen and Almswomen*,[10] which, although originally published in 1930, remains a classic work today. Horner's greatest contribution to the field of scholarship on the place of women in Buddhism was the distinction of various social models and roles of women depicted in Pali literature. Nevertheless, she saw Buddhism as if it were a modern egalitarian social current, which was a rather simplified vision. She also stressed that Buddhism in ancient India was a solution for the oppression that women suffered from Brahmanism, which she described as a patriarchal and misogynous religion in comparison to egalitarian, open-minded Buddhism.[11] Contemporary scholarship shows that this vision was rather inaccurate, and Buddhist literature also contains many passages that could be considered misogynous; it was also proven that it was not as egalitarian as the first Western scholars of Buddhism thought. This deficiency may have come from her methodological assumptions – she analysed only the sources in the Pali language.[12] A possible solution could be to focus more on the historical

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 56.

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 73.

[7] "Orientalism" is a term coined by Edward Said, who defines it as a set of prejudices of people of the West towards the East and things Eastern, within which the East was seen as underdeveloped or within a romantic vision of "the mystic East": E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978.

[8] A. Collett, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 71.

[10] I.B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism. Laywomen and Almswomen*, London 1930.

[11] J.S. Walters, "A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha's Mother's Story," *History of Religions* (May, 1994), vol. 33, no. 4 p. 360. See also A. Collett, *op.cit.*, pp. 74–76.

[12] A. Collett, *op.cit.*, p. 69.

context in which the tradition has emerged and considering other Indian sources, such as Sanskrit or Vedic Sanskrit literature. These sources could become an important factor contributing to the development of a more coherent image of the position of women in Brahmanism, and deliver a relevant point of reference in constructing a coherent vision of the view of women in Ancient India.

Further significant scholarship on gender in Buddhism was developed only during the second half of the twentieth century. The introduction of the academic feminism and gender studies approach influenced further academic reflection on the subject. An important example of this phenomenon is the work of Rita M. Gross, whose most influential book remains *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*.[13] As Gross herself writes, in her early scholarly work she criticised the lack of feminist perspective in the methodological approach in the field of history of religions, that resulted in a lack of scientific works about women's religiosity. This led her to create the first doctoral dissertation dealing with the place of women in religion to be accepted by a major graduate institution, written under the guidance of Mircea Eliade at the University of Chicago.[14] In the field of research on Buddhism and gender, her major contribution is the introduction of systematised feminist critique in the study of Buddhism on a wider scale, along the lines of the feminist critique of Christianity. Her perspective can be problematic as she combines the outsider's view (as a scholar) with that of an insider (a follower of the religion being researched). In her own words, she works as a comparativist, a feminist, and a Buddhist "theologian."[15] Although her work was criticised as having an Orientalist prejudice and for certain generalisations,[16] the change in the perspective of scholarly approach towards roles of women in religion remains a valid contribution.

Recent decades were also the time when the ancient sources ceased to be the predominant material analysed by the scholars of Buddhism. The twentieth century introduced a form of scholarship that was concerned with the relations between tradition and modernity. From this time on, scholars stopped writing only about women of an ancient era, but started to include modern Asian Buddhists and Western Buddhists in their research. This broader approach introduced new problems: that of the researcher's own perspective. As the Taiwanese author Wei-Yi Cheng remarks, Western feminism's theoretical and empirical analyses of other cultures are often based on Western values and neglect the variation of values within and among other cultures.[17] Referring to her own experience, Cheng stresses that modern Asian women can feel

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[13] R.M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy. A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, State University of New York 1993. I cite after the first Indian edition by Sri Satguru Publications, New Delhi 1995.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 293. However, the dissertation concerned not Buddhist traditions, but aboriginal religion in Australia – R.M. Gross, *Exclusion and Participation: The Role of Women in Aboriginal Australian Religion* (1975).

[15] R.M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy...*, p. 5.

[16] N.S. Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant*, Oxford–New York 2013, pp. 29–30.

[17] W. Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka: A Critique of the Feminist Perspective*, London 2007, p. 7.

alienated when reading analyses of Buddhism (ancient and modern) written with an Orientalist rhetoric from the Western perspective.[18] This proves that Orientalism remains one of the major problems of contemporary scholarship – both in the scholarship based on textual study of ancient sources, and in the study of modern Buddhist-oriented societies. The solution she proposes is to pursue a cross-cultural perspective in the research, and study the phenomenon from a wider angle. How hard this problem is to avoid can be seen in the scholarship of Cheng herself. I concur with the opinion of Nirmala S. Salgado, who states that Cheng failed to steer clear of the Orientalist perspective in her work.[19] Salgado introduces her conclusions on gender in Buddhism-oriented scholarship in the first chapters of her book *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant*, which addresses the issue of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lankan society. She argues that scholars like Rita M. Gross, Wei-Yi Cheng and Tessa Bartholomeusz "address gender and women's studies in Buddhism by using master narratives that are of questionable relevance to the everyday lives of women living in Buddhist countries."[20]

Furthermore, in my opinion, the notions on which the research on gender in modern applications of Buddhism is formed still stem from the author's views on the earliest forms of Buddhism. The textual approach is to some extent unavoidable as the researchers frequently refer to the canonical literature of Buddhism. Even the contemporary Buddhist teachers of various traditions refer to what the Buddha said about a given subject, and thus shape the framework in which their followers think. The problem that emerges at this point is that the interpretation of a given researcher does not always take the cultural and historical context in which the canonical sources appeared into consideration. The problem of the historical context being overlooked by some scholars researching gender roles in Buddhism is pointed out, among others, by the author of *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity and Gender*, Bernard Faure. According to him, the main methodological problems in feminist interpretations of Buddhism are the following: first, among some researchers there is a certain hermeneutical naïveté or wishful thinking that insists on taking texts at face value and reading them through one single code. Second, he points out a certain ideological problem, namely the danger of "ventriloquism when speaking in the name of a silent other." Third, he stresses the problems that arise due to the lack of attention towards the socio-historical context.[21]

Faure argues that many examples of the feminist-oriented approach are concerned with two extremes: either with praising some outstanding women figures of history or literature, or with concentrating on the subordinate or inferior position of women in a given society. He stresses that this mode of research orientation is "criticized as being blind to cultural and historical contexts and inequalities other than those related to gender, and so as being complicit in perpetuating the image of women as passive

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 199.

[19] N.S. Salgado, *op.cit.*, pp. 40–41.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 23.

[21] B. Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity and Gender*, Princeton 2003, p. 4.

victims."[22] In his opinion the work of a historian should not be determined by an ideological or political agenda. He concludes:

> A more nuanced reading would acknowledge that, while some women were passive victims, others were not. The responsible historian needs to attend to both sides. All models, whatever their initial validity, become counterproductive when they are determined by an ideological or political agenda, and are flawed from an historian's viewpoint.[23]

Lack of attention to the historical and cultural context and at the same time stressing the gender methodological approach can lead to interpretations that would vary conspicuously from the interpretation from the research that is able to combine the two.

Recent years have shown that the perspective of the contemporary scholars researching Buddhism and gender is evolving. The research shows more reflection on methodology, and the topics are more varied. Authors are more widely addressing the role of women in religion and society, not only examining the outstanding female figures or woman-victims, but also covering such topics as motherhood and childbirth,[24] family life from the Buddhist perspective,[25] the concepts of marriage,[26] or attitudes towards children[27] in Buddhist traditions.

Scholars such as Collett and Karen Derris have pointed out that there has been a major overlooking in the scholarship of women in Buddhism when it comes to the choice of the texts to be analysed. In the case of study of the Pali Canon, Collett notes that some texts have been "over-studied," and thus have formed the centre of the textual debate on women in early Buddhism, namely the Therīgāthā and Vinaya.[28] Similarly, the emphasis on particular sources and overlooking others may influence not only the scholarly debate but also women's roles in contemporary Buddhist-oriented societies. As Derris puts it,

> Canonical texts, perhaps none more so than the *Therīgāthā* (*Songs of Elder Nuns*), have long represented a source of both inspiration and justification as women seek to establish roles in the sangha and Buddhist societies. However, later commentarial and postcanonical literature, from the fifth century CE onward, in Pali and vernacular languages, have largely been overlooked,

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[22] *Ibidem*, p. 6.

[23] *Ibidem*.

[24] R. Ohnuma, *Ties That Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism*, Oxford–New York 2012, *Family in Buddhism*, L. Wilson (ed.), New York 2013; A. Paris Langenberg, *Female Monastic Healing and Midwifery: A View from the Vinaya Tradition*, "Journal of Buddhist Ethics" 2014, vol. 21.

[25] S. Clarke, *Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms*, Honolulu 2014.

[26] Articles by Karen Muldoon-Hules, "Avadānaśataka: The Role of Brahmanical Marriage in a Buddhist Text," and Jonathan S. Walters, "Apadāna Therī-apadāna: Wives of the Saints: Marriage and Kamma in the Path to Arahantship," both published in: *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*, A. Collett (ed.), New York 2013; K. Muldoon-Hules, *Brides of the Buddha and Other Stories: Reading the Women's Stories of the 8th Varga of the Avadānaśataka in Context* (Unpublished dissertation UCLA 2011).

[27] *Little Buddhas: Children and Childhoods in Buddhist Texts and Traditions*, V.R. Sasson, Oxford University Press 2012.

[28] A. Collett, *Historio-Critical Hermeneutics in the Study of Women in Early Indian Buddhism*, "Numen" 56 (2009) 91–117, p. 107.

> and yet this large corpus also offers valuable representations of women, gender, and sexuality that could usefully be held up to further the agendas of women seeking to define their roles and opportunities in Buddhist institutions and communities.[29]

A meticulous reading of under-researched textual traditions could also render a detailed comparative study possible between depictions of women in the particular canonical and paracanonical texts on a wider scale, which also remains one of the postulates of the discipline.[30] The situation pointed out by the aforementioned scholars is gradually changing – the growing interest in the field of Buddhism and gender scholarship results in translations of texts which were previously not translated into Western languages, an example of which might be Jonathan S. Walters's forthcoming translations of the stories from the collection of the *Apadāna* texts from the *Khuddaka nikāya* of the Pali Canon.[31]

Without a doubt, the development of scholarship on previously neglected topics can help to provide a more coherent vision of the place of women and their religious life in Buddhist traditions. Nevertheless, in my opinion an especially significant problem nowadays is the lack of research on non-feminine gender roles in Buddhism. While at present we have access to growing scholarship on gender in the feminine context, the lack of studies on Buddhist discourse on masculinity and homosexuality remains a postulate of contemporary research. There are, however, some attempts in the field that try to fill this gap. The first monograph on the issue of masculinity in early Buddhism was published by John Powers in 2009. In his book entitled *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex and the Body in Indian Buddhism*,[32] Powers showed how a close reading of well-known passages from the Buddhist canon in the lines of masculine studies can bring interesting results, and even rewrite the mode of how the Buddhist tradition is perceived. His attempt, although sometimes criticised,[33] nevertheless showed the inadequacy of studies on the problem of masculinity in early Buddhism, even though we have access to a vast amount of not only textual, but also iconographic sources. Among the issues that Powers addresses in his book is the issue of homosexuality in the canonical sources, mainly in the scriptures coming from the field of monastic discipline – which is a contribution to the study of another insufficiently studied topic, homosexuality in Buddhism. The only previous scholarship on the subject is the articles that appeared in the volume *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, namely Leonard Zwilling's *Homosexuality as Seen in Indian Buddhist Texts* and Paul Gordan Schalow's *Kukai and the Tradition of Male Love in Japanese Buddhism*.[34]

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[29] K. Derris, *When the Buddha Was a Woman: Reimagining Tradition in the Theravāda*, "Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion" 2008, 24/2, pp. 30–31.

[30] A. Collett, *Historio-Critical Hermeneutics...*, *op.cit.*, p. 105.

[31] Contributor's note in: *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*, A. Collett (ed.), p. ix.

[32] J. Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex and the Body in Indian Buddhism*, Cambridge, MA 2009.

[33] See the review of the book by Alice Collett in *Buddhist Studies Review*, 27 January 2010 (115–117).

[34] Both articles have been published in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, J.I. Cabezón (ed.), New York 1994.

The main problems of the research on gender roles in Buddhism remain the same throughout the years, both in the area of textual research and in fieldwork-related research on contemporary Buddhist-oriented societies. In my opinion, although we witness constant progress in the development of the scope and the methodology of scholarship, the most poignant problem continues to be the application of the contemporary Western framework of thinking towards the object of research. This is especially problematic when we deal with textual sources on the canonical textual traditions of Buddhism that originate in an area that is remote to Western scholars not only in terms of culture and geographical span, but also from the historical perspective.

Another problem that arises from dealing with culturally and historically distant sources is unfamiliarity with detailed study of historical and cultural contexts of a given tradition. The solution for this can be to give more attention to the historical context in which the tradition emerged. In the case of the tradition of the Pali Canon this would mean relating the Buddha's teaching to early Brahmanical texts and ancient Jainism.[35] However, these problems apply not only to scholarship on gender in early Buddhism, but also to any form of research on early Buddhism in general. What is specifically the problem of gender-oriented studies in Buddhology is the domination of the feminist standpoint, which leads to a lack of research using the approach of masculine studies. To solve these problems, research in this field should apply an interdisciplinary approach and a cross-cultural perspective accompanied by a detailed study of historical context. To provide a coherent vision of gender roles in Buddhist traditions, scholars should strive to cover the whole range of topics and texts, especially those that failed to draw the attention of previous scholars. The application of interdisciplinary methodology will further broaden the perspective. A wider view could also be acquired by collaboration of scholars from different approaches and coming from different backgrounds, as well as by wider application of a comparative approach, both in textual study and in fieldwork. This will lead to a much-needed new paradigm for gender studies in Buddhology, in which the masculine and feminine viewpoints are equally well represented.

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[35] R. Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, Sheffield 2013, p. vii.

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