

Can the Buddha ever be a woman?

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Ask Question

Is it true that the Buddha will never be a woman? If so, why is this?

To be specific, I am particularly asking whether or not the Buddha itself can be female. I am *not* asking whether a woman can become a Buddha in her future life.

asked Sep 8 '14 at 11:02



Jordy van Ekelen

96511125

13 Answers 13

up vote 35 down vote accepted

In the (translated into English) Pali text that I have, there's a section titled "The Admission of Women to the Order" within a chapter titled "Stability of Societies". This section describes Ananda's asking the Buddha whether Maha-Pajapati could join the order.

When Ananda asks for the third time, he asks,

"Lord, are women capable, after going forth from the home unto the homeless life under the Norm-Discipline set forth by the Tathagata, -- are they capable of realizing the Fruit of Stream-winning, of Once-returning, of Never-returning, of Arahantship?"

And the Buddha's reply to that question,

"Women are capable ... of doing so, Ananda."

(Which is why and how Ananda persuaded the Buddha to allow women to be ordained.)

FYI I did a Google search for Bahudhātuka Sutta -- because that seems to be the one/only basis on which other answers claim that a woman's being a Buddha is impossible.

The first search result is this paper, The Bahudhātuka-sutta and its Parallels On Women's Inabilities.

The Abstract for this paper says,

The present article offers a comparative study of the Bahudhātuka-sutta, based on a translation of one of its parallels found in the Madhyama-āgama preserved in Chinese translation. The study focuses in particular on the dictum that a woman cannot be a Buddha, **which is absent from the Madhyama-āgama version**.

Its conclusions is (page 166),

the inability of a woman to be a Buddha can still be seen as an expression of leadership conceptions held in ancient Indian patriarchal society

and (page 166)

This tendency can safely be assumed to stand in contrast to the original teachings of early Buddhism, where -- as far as the texts allow us to judge -- gender was not considered to have an impact on spiritual abilities.

and (page 185)

Kajiyama (58) concludes that, regarding the listing of inabilities of women, "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 sūtras of various schools." However, the suggestion by Kajiyama (70) that "the dictum that a woman is incapable of becoming a Buddha arose probably in the first century B.C." may be putting things at too late a time.

The arguments for why this is a late addition start in the section titled *Comparison of the Parallel Versions of the Bahudhātuka Bahudhātuka-sutta* on page 151 and can be summarized as:

- Evidence that other parts were added:
 - "Aggregates" seems to be new
 - Items were added to the "elements" topic

Therefore it's possible that an item (the item regarding women) was added to the "impossibilities" section.

- The difference between versions could be explained as a later addition (into some versions), or as a later loss (from the other versions); but an addition is more likely.
- There are various other differences in the "impossibilities" section.
- The "impossibilities for women" doesn't exist in all versions
- In the versions which do include the "impossibilities for women" section, there are differences between versions.
- Buddha's being a woman, or low-caste, would be incompatible with contemporary society (because they wouldn't be respected when alive), which was the reason for the argument that a woman would have to be reborn as a man before she could be the Buddha
- Some versions (not the Pali) say that a woman cannot even be a Paccekabuddha, which is proof that more and more degradation of women's abilities were added over time. (page 164)

- It's therefore significant that one of the versions doesn't mention it at all (i.e. it implies that it wasn't original)
- The addition doesn't fit, wasn't useful in the context of other information which was intended to be practical (page 166)

Maybe could better link the transition of the context? (from arahantship being possible to women, to the question at hand)

I think you're asking why my first quote (the Buddha's reply to Ananda's question, which was about "Arahantship") is relevant to this question, which is about the Buddha.

The paper I linked to above says that, at that time, no-one had the ambition of becoming the future Buddha: perhaps Arahant was synonymous with the highest feasible spiritual attainment, and that women were able no less than men to achieve it (page 163):

Here it needs also to be taken into account that the presentation in the Bahudhātuka-sutta and its parallels still stems from a period in the development of Buddhist thought when the idea of aspiring to Buddhahood had not yet become a general option. As pointed out by Kajiyama (64), “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.”⁵³ 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.

The footnote says,

⁵³ Romberg (164) 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.” In fact the Bodhisattvabhūmi explains that a woman will not realize the awakening of a Buddha because already an advanced bodhisattva has left behind womanhood for good and will not be reborn again as a female, Wogihara (94,3): na ca strī anuttarāṃ samyaksambodhim abhisambudhyate. tat kasya hetoḥ? tathā hi bodhisattvaḥ prathamasyaiva kalpāsambhūyasyātyayāt strībhāvaṃ vijahāti bodhimaṇḍaṇīśadanam upādāya na punar jātu strī bhavati; cf. also Paul (212 note 7). Harrison (78) 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 Pāli Canon, in which women are at least as capable as men of attaining the highest goal, arhatship, the position of women in Mahāyāna has hardly changed for the better.”

[up vote](#) [18](#) [down vote](#)

This reminds me of a Zen story. A North-American female student approaches her Zen master and asks: "Is it true that a woman can never become a Buddha?" Zen master says "yup". The student gets into a long rant about women discrimination, equal rights, and how deluded the Zen master must be in his culturally-inherited biases. Zen master waits until she runs out of steam and says: "Wait. Are you [=still identifying yourself with] a woman?!"

The moral of the story, obviously, is that the serious student must abandon any and all

identification, both personal- and group-based, including identification with gender. Identification is a form of attachment that leads to passions, taking sides, arguments, and a whole gamut of problems.

In AN 7.48 Buddha clearly explains that the person must transcend their gender biases, both masculine and feminine:

"And how is there lack of bondage? A woman does not attend inwardly to her feminine faculties, her feminine gestures, her feminine manners, feminine poise, feminine desires, feminine voice, feminine charms. She is not excited by that, not delighted by that [...] This is how a woman transcends her femininity.

"A man does not attend inwardly to his masculine faculties, masculine gestures, masculine manners, masculine poise, masculine desires, masculine voice, masculine charms. He is not excited by that, not delighted by that [...] This is how a man transcends his masculinity.

In SN 5.2 a nun named Soma says:

What
difference
does being a woman make
when the mind's well-centered,
when knowledge is progressing,
seeing clearly, rightly,
into the Dhamma.

Anyone who thinks
'I'm a woman'
or 'a man'
or 'Am I anything at all?' —
that's who Mara's
fit to address.

[up vote](#) 16 [down vote](#)

Can the Buddha never be a woman? If it is true, why can't they?

According to MN 115, a woman cannot be a *Buddha* and, as far as I know, the reason is not explained anywhere in the canon.

He understands: 'It is impossible, it cannot happen that a woman could be an Accomplished One, a Fully Enlightened One — there is no such possibility.' And he understands: 'It is possible that a man might be an Accomplished One, a Fully Enlightened One — there is such a possibility.'

-MN 115, The Many Kinds of Elements

answered Sep 8 '14 at 11:40



Unrul3r

3,3431532

up vote 7 down vote

This is not an easy question because in one sense the Buddha can never be a man or a woman, because the Buddha is not a physical object. Yet every man and woman is within its core the essence of the Buddha nature. The mask we wear is our human identity. What is behind the mask, meditation gives us glimpses of, yet who we really are is always a mystery or uncertain. If you are asking can a woman realize the Buddha nature in this lifetime, perhaps we should look at all the nuns that Shakyamuni Buddha initiated. He did not discriminate but freely invited all to drink the wisdom of wonder. Sometimes the questions are only answered in the depths of our own meditation.

answered Sep 9 '14 at 0:03



soulsings

2,852615

up vote 4 down vote

I suppose the misunderstanding about this comes from the fact that "man" can mean *two* different things, while a *woman* can mean only one. The problem is present in virtually *all* contemporary languages - *man* can mean "male" or "human being". As such, my interpretation of MN 115 is simple and consistent with both AN 7.48 and SN 5.2 - only a **man** (a human being by itself) can achieve higher; being only a *man* or a *woman*, limited by gender, means you're limited to Māyā.

Also, I agree 100% with Andrei on Realization.

answered Sep 8 '14 at 14:49



vaxquis

1435

up vote 4 down vote

A woman cannot be a Sammasabuddha, Pacceka Buddha, Maha Brahma, Devaputta Māra, god Sakka or a Cakkavatti. Even if a woman aspires to become a Buddha in the future, she won't get the Niyatha Vivarana (confirmation) by another Buddha until she's born as a man. - MN 115.

This might not sit well with the modern social standards which are big on gender equality. But that's how it is when it comes to laws of nature.

As a side note, Theravada tradition does not drop/add or change Suttas to fit well with the social standards of the time. That's one reason why it is still the tradition that is closest to the original teachings of the Buddha.

up vote 4 down vote

A woman can become a Buddha in a future birth. Gautama the Buddha was once a woman when 1st thought becoming a Buddha was planted in her mind. [p8 [Practising the Dhamma with a View to Nibbana](#), Ch1 Eminent Buddhist Women by Karma Lekshe Tsomo]

The Bodhisattva and Buddhas are always male so you have to be born in latter lives as a male to complete your Bodhisattva career and become a Buddha.

After the definite prediction of future Buddhahood you will always be male. Before that there is a chance Bodhisattva may change between male and female.

Though in modern times this might seem controversial [Bahu Dhātuka Sutta](#) mentions certain things a woman cannot achieve:

He understands that it is impossible, there is no chance, that a woman would become a worthy fully self-awakened one—this is not possible.

And he understands that it is possible, there is the chance, that a man would become a worthy fully self-awakened—this is possible.

He understands that it is impossible, there is no chance, that a woman would become a universal monarch—this is not possible.

And he understands that it is possible, there is the chance, that only a man would become a universal monarch —this is possible.

He understands that it is impossible, there is no chance, that a woman would attain the state of Sakra—this is not possible

...

For more comparative discussion on this matter see: [On Women's Inabilities](#) by Piya Tan and [The Bahudhātuka-sutta and its Parallels On Women's Inabilities](#) by Ven. Anālayo

answered Sep 8 '14 at 11:40



[Suminda Sirinath S. Dharmasena](#)

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[up vote](#) 3 [down vote](#)

I've wondered about this myself. One way to think about it is that the Karma of a Bodhisattva always leads them to possess the best possible qualities to allow them to teach when they become a Buddha, and in societies with sexism, it would make it harder to teach and be taken seriously by the general public, so therefore, a Bodhisattva would be born as a male in a sexist society in order to be able to teach widely. If this is so, that would mean that the reason that Buddhas aren't women isn't that women are inferior, but because Buddhas always have to approach societies in a way that will allow them to be effective.

That's just my personal interpretation. I also think this principle would only apply in a sexist society, so if by the time the Buddha Metteyya will come it won't be taboo for a woman to be a leader, I think Metteyya might be born as a woman.

up vote 3 down vote

The Pali texts are quite misogynistic and clearly state that a female can never become a Buddha due to the fact that she experiences several karmic disadvantages compared to males, especially menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth, but also including inferior social status (see Peter Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, p. 285).

Moreover, females are the "door" through which rebirth occurs, and are thus identified with samsara. Since the bodhisattva in his final birth must be the "best of men," free of all ordinary afflictions, though not yet a Buddha, a bodhisattva will never be reborn as a female in his final rebirth. The 32 marks of a great man clearly include exclusively male attributes. There is no denying that this is the orthodox or traditional attitude of those who accept the Pali Canon as their basis.

Whether this was the actual teaching of the Buddha is less clear, since the Buddha stated that females could attain nirvana and clearly ordained nuns. He also implied that the sangha must include nuns to be complete, and explicitly affirmed women's rights as the fifth principle of a good and strong society. One can criticize this view logically on the grounds that men also suffer various gender-related afflictions, such as excessive lust, aggression, violence, etc. More than five hundred female arhants are mentioned in the Pali Canon (ibid). The Chinese Tiantai school and Tibetan Buddhism both recognize female Buddhas (op. cit., p. 186).

The Dalai Lama has clearly stated that a female could become a Dalai Lama, but of course the Dalai Lama is a bodhisattva, not a Buddha, and is not experiencing his final birth (otherwise there would be no lineage of Dalai Lamas). Ajahn Brahm has criticized this doctrine publicly, for which offence he was expelled from his lineage in Thailand. Female ordination is still prohibited in Thailand so far as I know. I have presented a talk on this topic entitled "The Status of Women in Ancient India and the Pali Tradition."

answered Nov 11 '16 at 17:19

user4970

up vote 2 down vote

MN 115 (Bahudhātuka Sutta) does not state a woman cannot be an arahant (fully enlightened being). MN 115 (Bahudhātuka Sutta) only states a woman cannot be the Sammasambuddha.

There is only one Sammasambuddha in a world system. In the current world system, the only Sammasambuddha is Gotama.

Importantly, a Sammasambuddha is the Buddha that:

(i) discovers enlightenment without a teacher, when Buddhism does not exist in the world;
and

(ii) commences the Buddhist religion by teaching his discovery.

A Buddha that attains or discovers enlightenment without a teacher but does not teach & does not start the Buddhism religion is not a Sammasambuddha. Instead, they are a silent Buddha.

Thus, a woman cannot be a Sammasambuddha. This is not an unreasonable point of view since it is difficult for a woman to convince men who believe in God or Atman that all things are not-self.

In the future, if the Buddha-Dhamma disappears, it is unlikely (impossible) the new Sammasambuddha will be a woman for the same reasons.

Since women are not particularly partial to the teaching of anatta (not-self), it is unlikely a female Sammasambuddha would arise in a matriarchal society since women are less likely than men to accept the teaching of anatta because the majority of women have stronger reproductive instincts than men.

Thus, it is likely MN 115 is correct when it states it is impossible for a Sammasambuddha to be a woman. Modern ideas of "feminism" will not change this.

answered Nov 6 '16 at 12:23



Dhammadhatu

23.9k11043

up vote 1 down vote

No, it is not true. According to the Lotus Sutra, women can attain Buddhahood in this lifetime. This sutra being the only sutra that says this accounts for its popularity among women over the centuries.

From Burton Watson's translation pp 226-8 -

Before his words had come to an end, the dragon king's daughter suddenly appeared before the Buddha, bowed her head in obeisance, and then retired to one side, reciting these verses of praise:

He profoundly understands the signs of guilt and good fortune

and illuminates the ten directions everywhere.

...

And having heard his teachings, I have attained enlightenment—

the Buddha alone can bear witness to this.

answered Apr 22 at 6:16



Jonathan Cender

1985

up vote 0 down vote

Neither a man nor a woman can become a Buddha. Only a Bodhisattva having completed the necessary parami can become a Buddha. In that last life of the Bodhisattva, the Bodhisattva takes on a masculine shape. This is what is said in the Theravada texts.

answered Nov 28 '16 at 15:57



Kaveenga Wijayasekara

1,365513

up vote -4 down vote

"If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change." -
The 14th Dalai Lama

The 14th Dalai Lama has said that if somebody proves to him that reincarnation is not real, he will stop believing in it. That is because truth trumps scripture. We learn more and more as time goes on, and in fact we are encouraged to in scripture. We are not stuck in a past century with the limited knowledge of that century.

Today, male-female equality is a scientifically-proven fact.

Therefore you cannot truthfully say "only men can ..." or "only women can ..." because you are wrong in both cases.

For any man that doubts this, you can pick any field of human endeavor, and there is a woman alive somewhere right now who is better at it than you. Doesn't matter if it is science or fighting or what. There is a female mathematician somewhere right now who can run circles around you in math. There is a female special forces soldier somewhere who could kill you in 2 seconds before you got a punch in.

Science has also shown that we all start out in the womb as female. So if you believe only men can be buddhas, why would a male buddha who can only be reincarnated as a male buddha start out in the womb as female?

So, yes, if men can be buddhas women can be buddhas because women are scientifically-proven to be equal to men. Any particular buddha you want to refer to can be reincarnated as a woman or a man, and any man or woman can become a buddha in this life or the next. No distinction based on gender can be truthfully made. Again, doesn't matter what scripture says.