Can Women Attain Enlightenment through Vajrayāna Practices?

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While in other Buddhist contexts the presence and participation of women may be a matter for dispute, there is no doubt that quite a few Indian manuals of Vajrayāna practices are explicit about the participation of women. Still, different and sometimes opposing opinions have been expressed in recent research\(^1\) in response to the following questions: Did women enjoy a position equal to male practitioners, or were they rather denigrated and sexually exploited by them? Did women achieve their own spiritual progress by means of these practices, or were they merely instrumental in the progress of men? Moreover, could women attain enlightenment by means of Vajrayāna practices?

Previous studies of women in Vajrayāna have taken varied approaches, such as exploring life stories of accomplished women, taking a female perspective in the reading of the texts, or presenting statistical and epigraphic evidence.\(^2\) In this paper I would like to examine the position of certain Indian and Tibetan writers with regard to the place of women in Vajrayāna practices, especially on the question of whether women can attain enlightenment. Testimonies of this kind have not appeared in previous studies, although they should be taken into account, since they draw a very different picture. As background, I will begin by presenting some accounts from Pāli and Mahāyāna literatures, and allow them to speak for themselves.
PĀLI LITERATURE

One well-known statement found in Pāli Suttas is that women cannot attain the following five states: Fully Enlightened One, Wheel-turning Monarch, Indra, Māra and Brahmā. For example, the Majjhima (III 65–6) lists the possible and the impossible:

He [the bhikkhu] 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.”

Though the way to the renunciate life conducive to enlightenment was open to women, this came along with a sense of women’s collective guilt. According to the famous story on the foundation of the order of Buddhist nuns, told in a few Suttas and Vinayas, the Buddha does affirm that women are capable of realizing Arhatship [this statement is missing in the Sanskrit version]. But, after consenting to a request made by the woman who had been dearest to the Buddha—his stepmother, Mahāprajāpati, who had raised him as a child after his mother’s death—that women be allowed to join the order, the Buddha lamented in the presence of Ānanda: ‘Now that women have been ordained, the Dharma will remain in this world for only five hundred years.’ Thus, early Buddhism did allow women to tread the path to enlightenment, but it was not a simple matter to negotiate this opportunity.

In spite of the statement that a woman cannot become Buddha, it would be improper to conclude from this that Pāli literature is totally antagonistic towards women. There are other voices too. In Women Under Primitive Buddhism, I.B. Horner (1930) presents evidence in support of women who practise Buddhism. A well-known episode is that of the Bhikkhunī Somā:

The Bhikkhunī Somā was meditating at the foot of a tree, when Māra “desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her and addressed her in verse:

That state so hard to achieve which is to be attained by the seers,
Can’t be attained by a woman with her two-fingered wisdom.”

“Then the Bhikkhunī Somā, having understood, ‘this is Māra the Evil One’, replied to him in verses:
What does womanhood matter at all when the mind is concentrated well,
When knowledge flows on steadily as one sees correctly into Dhamma.
One to whom it might occur, ‘I’m a woman’ or ‘I’m a man’
Or ‘I’m anything at all’—is fit for Māra to address.

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, ‘the Bhikkhuni Somā knows me’, sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.”

Here the idea of women’s incapacity is taught by Māra, the very embodiment of delusion. Another example from the Pāli canon, indicative of the equal potential of women and men, also presented by Horner, is in the following verse:

One who has such a vehicle—
Whether a woman or a man—
Has, by means of this vehicle,
Drawn close to Nibbāna.

Here women, together with men, come close to but do not quite enter into Nibbāna.

MAHĀYĀNA LITERATURE

The generalization made in the earlier days, that the Pāli tradition is to be characterized by a misogynic attitude, while the Mahāyāna is more egalitarian, is now long known to have been an exaggeration. It is true that Mahāyāna Sūtras often address both kula-putra and kula-duḥhit in an equal manner, but this does not tell the whole truth. The best-known example for denying women access to advanced paths to enlightenment in a Mahāyāna Sūtra is found in the longer Sūtra of The Land of Bliss (The Longer Sukhāvatī-vyūha Sūtra). In this Sūtra the Bodhisattva Dharmākara makes a series of vows that would take effect in the Buddha land he will create for the sake of his disciples. In each of these vows he declares that he would not reach full awakening unless certain conditions can be fulfilled. One of his vows is:

Blessed One, may I not awaken to unsurpassable, perfect, full awakening if, after I attain awakening it is the case that women in measureless, countless, inconceivable, incomparable, and limitless Buddha-fields in all regions of the universe, upon hearing my name, have serene thoughts of faith, generate in
their mind[s] the aspiration to attain awakening, feel disgust at their female nature, and yet are reborn again as women when they leave their present birth (translated from Sanskrit by Gómez 1996: 74).

Dharmākara vows here to attain enlightenment, only if women everywhere, after having heard his name, will generate the mind for enlightenment, will despise their feminine nature, and will not be born again as women. According to an early translation of the Sukhāvativṛyāha Sūtra into Chinese, dated to the second or third century, there will be no women in Amitābha’s Buddha land. Women wishing to be reborn there will be born as men.

Not only in Sūtras, but in Śāstras as well, disparaging statements about women are found. In the chapter on enlightenment in his Bodhisattvabhūmi, Asaṅga maintains that women cannot be enlightened, since all of them possess by nature (prakṛtyā) numerous afflicting emotions and a weak understanding, and as such cannot reach enlightenment. In describing the Bodhisattvas’ practice during three immeasurable eons (asatkhyeya) before they can become Buddhas, Asaṅga explains that after passing beyond the first immeasurable eon, the Bodhisattvas abandon womanly existence and are no longer born as women. Furthermore, Śāntideva’s The Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life (Bodhi-caryāvatāra), a work well known for its meditations on compassion and exchanging the self with the other, includes in its last chapter the following verse (30):

May the women in the world become men. May the lowly obtain grandeur and yet be free of arrogance.

However, there are examples of a very different approach to women and their potential for enlightenment. Most famous is the story of the eight year-old daughter of Sāgara, the Nāga King, found in chapter 11 of The Lotus Sūtra (Saddharma-puṇḍarika Sūtra). Here the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī declares that the daughter of Sāgara is capable of attaining the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment, but the Bodhisattva Prajñākūṭa expresses his doubt. At that instant the daughter of Sāgara, the Nāga King, appears before them, and voices her wish to attain enlightenment. Śāriputra ‘reminds’ her that a woman cannot become a Buddha. She then offers the jewel on her head to the Buddha, changes herself into a male Bodhisattva, and attains enlightenment. Then the Bodhisattva Prajñākūṭa and the Elder Śāriputra become silent.
Śāriputra, a principal student of the Buddha renowned for his wisdom, comically represents early Buddhism in the Sūtras of the Mahāyāna. The daughter of Sāgara attained enlightenment in spite of his ‘reminder’, but in the Lotus Sūtra she could not do this without first changing into a male body. Such transformations of women into male Bodhisattvas are quite common in Mahāyāna Sūtras.¹⁵

Here the woman does not die and attain rebirth, rather ‘her female organs disappear and male organs appear’ (strīndriyam antarhitaṃ puruṣendriyam ca prādurbhūtām).¹⁶

In other cases the woman does indeed need to undergo death followed by rebirth as a man. Such is the story of Gaṅgā-devī in the The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses (Aṣṭa-sāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā Sūtra). In this story the Goddess of the Ganges vows to teach Dharma to all beings without fear. The Buddha then predicts that in the future she will be the Tathāgata, the Perfectly Enlightened One, Suvarṇapuṣpa. He explains that after her death she will not be a woman, but will be born as a man, who will travel between the Buddha Lands and attain enlightenment.¹⁷

Another well known story is that of the goddess and Śāriputra in The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa), which may be summarized as follows: The goddess who lived in the house of Vimalakīrti took on a bodily form in the presence of the Hearers and the Bodhisattvas. Impressed by her teachings Śāriputra asked her: ‘Why don’t you change out of your female existence?’ She answered: ‘For the twelve years that I have lived in this house, I have looked for the nature of my female existence, but was unable to find it. How can I change it?’ Then, by her magical power, the goddess caused Śāriputra to appear in her form, and caused herself to appear in his form, and asked him: ‘Why don’t you change out of your female existence?’ Then Śāriputra, in the form of the goddess said: ‘I do not know how I lost my male body nor how I can change out of my feminine form.’ The goddess replied: ‘If, O Elder, you were able to change out of your feminine form, then all women could change their female existence. Just as, O Elder, you appear as a woman, so also all women appear in the form of a woman, but it is without being women that they appear in the form of women. It is with this intention that the Blessed One taught: “All phenomena are not really male or female.” She adds that all phenomena are unreal, created
by illusion. Then the goddess released her magic and each turned back to
their original form. The goddess asked: ‘Where, Venerable Śāriputra, is
your feminine form?’ Śāriputra replied: ‘My feminine form is neither
made nor changed.’18 Here, in this story from the Mahāyāna tradition, we
have travelled far beyond the story of the Bhikkhuni Somā in the Pāli
canon.

VAJRAYĀNA LITERATURE

Vajrayāna manuals that instruct on practices for a man and a woman
who practise together are written from the point of view of the male
practitioner. So far I have not come across any exception. Also, the
Vyaktabhāvanugata-tattva-siddhi by the Yoginī Cintā, described and
translated by Shaw for demonstrating that ‘Tantric union is designed
to be a mutually liberative and transformative practice for both the
woman and the man who perform it together,’19 is written for a male
practitioner who practises together with a consort.20 Such manuals for
Vajrayāna practice would seem to take it for granted that the actual
practitioner is male. Therefore, it is quite instructive to read what
some Indian and Tibetan writers think about the role of women in
Vajrayāna practice. Even though quite a few books and articles were
written on women in Buddhism in recent decades, these passages
have been very often neglected.

It is not only men who bring about the accomplishment of awakening born
from passion, but women as well accomplish this.21
The yoginīs will bestow siddhis of ultimate truth pristine wisdom on the
male practitioners....And the male practitioners will bestow the ultimate truth
pristine wisdom on the yoginīs as well....Thus, by means of this path, both
men and woman will attain [awakening] without difficulty.22
Just as in relying on his consort, the male practitioner attains enlightenment
by meditating on the generation of the pristine wisdoms of the four empties,
also in relying on the male practitioner, the consort as well meditates on the
clear light arising from the generation of the four empties, and is thereby
awakened in this life.23

Male practitioners, endowed with the complete essential characteristics
explained in the books, train together with female companions. And women,
edowed with the complete essential characteristics for practising the path,
also abide together with male companions, and similarly practise the two
stages of the tantric path, except in some special cases. Therefore, this method
of training in the path in terms of male practitioners, would be the method of training of the female practitioners as well.24

In the extraordinary Highest Mantra, women as well are awakened in this life, by relying on this path [of the Highest Mantra].25

If read in ignorance of their authors’ names, one might have thought that some of these passages were written by twenty-first century advocates of equality for women. However, these words were written by Candrakirti, perhaps, in the ninth century, by Bhavabhadra, perhaps, in the ninth to tenth century, by Tsong-kha-pa in the early fifteenth century, and by the latter’s disciple Mkhhas-grub-rje.

Tsong-kha-pa does not attempt to refute the fact that most Vajrayāna manuals are written from the point of view of the male practitioner. However, it seems that he was delighted to read Candrakirti’s commentary on two verses from the Guhyasamāja Tantra,26 and in his own commentary on the Guhyasamāja Tantra, the Mtha’-goe-drin-chen-nyu-gu, he presents the fruit of his efforts to locate similar statements in other scriptures. On the basis of Candrakirti’s Pradipoddyotana, Tsong-kha-pa states that the way to enlightenment is open for women who practise Vajrayāna:

Though it seems that the majority of the Tantras and the Indian sādhanaś teach mostly from the point of view of a man, it is not impossible [to attain enlightenment, the stage of Vajradhara] in a body of a woman.27

Tsong-kha-pa goes on to emphasize that the fruit women attain by means of this practice of the Highest Mantra in no way differ from the fruit men attain.

Since the commentary28 explains that ‘they accomplish the stage of Vajradhara’, the object of attainment is the same.29

According to the Pradipoddyotana,30 there are five types of disciples, the blue-lotus-like, the white-lotus-like, the lotus-like, the sandalwood-like and the best type, the jewel-like. Tsong-kha-pa asserts that a jewel-like disciple might very well be a female.

A jewel-like disciple, who attains the supreme accomplishment in this life is not necessarily only a man; this disciple can be a woman as well.31

This being the case, why are the scriptures written from the point of view of the male body and not from the perspective of a woman practitioner? In response Tsong-kha-pa says that when a sādhana
instructs one to ‘dwell in a pleasant place, such as a cremation ground, together with a consort’ and so on, the practice from the point of view of a male practitioner is the same as that of a female practitioner. ‘Therefore, the method of training in the path for women is not taught in detail separately’. Still, there are exceptions in some special cases. For example, a male practitioner meditates on the tip of the channel at his vajra, while a female practitioner meditates on the tip of the channel at her lotus. Other than that, the meditations are the same in both cases.

Also when a woman meditates on praṇa practices such as vajra-recitation (vajra-jāpa) and pot-breathing practices (kumbhaka, bum-pa-can), her meditation is similar to that of a man. And also the practices in which one meditates on oneself as a chosen enlightened being (iṣṭadevatā, yi-dam) such as Akṣobhya, Cakrasaṃvara or Hevajra, and in relying on a wisdom consort (jñāna-mudrā) generates great bliss, are similar in both cases.

While a wisdom consort is a visualized or imaginary companion, and not an actual or real person, according to Tsong-kha-pa the same holds for an actual consort (karma-mudrā). During the completing process (niṣpanna-krama), an actual consort plays a role when, by relying on the internal condition of vajra-recitation and on the external condition of a consort, the knots at the heart of the practitioners are completely untied. As the white drop of the male and the red drop of the female arise and descend through the central channel, in reaching each of the four cakras, the practitioners experience increasing states of joy. The four states of joy allow the four increasing empties to appear to the subtle mind in the forward and reverse orders respectively, and finally bliss and emptiness unite.

According to Tsong-kha-pa these practices are completely symmetrical with regard to both man and woman:

As in relying on the Mother, the four joys are generated in the mental continuum of the Father, so also in relying on the Father, the four joys arise in the mental continuum of the Mother.

The equivalent of a male practitioner who generates the four joys by relying on an actual consort, is a female practitioner who generates the four joys by relying on her male companion. Also similar are the ways of generating the four joys descending and stabilizing below, of generating the four empties in the forward and reverse orders, and of meditating by uniting bliss and emptiness during the fourth joy and the fourth empty in the forward order, and so on.
As his scriptural authority, Tsong-kha-pa refers to the mantra for blessing the vajra and the lotus found in the Hevajra Tantra. In the mantra for blessing the lotus, the practitioner turns to the lotus in requesting her to bestow bliss and to arouse the four joys; and in the mantra for blessing the vajra, the practitioner turns to the vajra in requesting him to bestow the four joys. According to Tsong-kha-pa, in blessing the lotus, the male practitioner, the Father, addresses the female, the Mother, while in blessing the vajra, the Mother addresses the Father. It is here in the second mantra, spoken by the female practitioner, that Tsong-kha-pa finds the scriptural authority for her equal role. An additional authoritative source for Tsong-kha-pa is Bhavabhadra, cited above, who maintains that ‘by means of this path, both men and woman will attain [awakening] without difficulty’.

Tsong-kha-pa’s disciple Mkhas-grub-rje (1611–4) further explains how a female practitioner attains enlightenment at the culmination of her Vajrayāna practice without undergoing death followed by rebirth as a man. The process here is identical for both male and female practitioners. After the four joys and the four empties arise in their mental continuum, they continue their practices and subsequently attain the illusory body (māyā-deha). Upon the attainment of the illusory body, they relinquish their male or female bodies as the case may be, and this takes place in their very lives, without undergoing death and rebirth. Finally, after attaining the actual, clear light, and the state of union, they are awakened. This practice of the Highest Mantra makes it possible to attain enlightenment in one’s own body, since in abandoning their bodies when they attain the illusory bodies, the practitioners do not undergo death and rebirth. And this path to the illusory body is open equally to both male and female practitioners.

The position that the equality of women in the highest path of the Vajrayāna is one of the extraordinary qualities of this Vehicle is still current. The fourteenth Dalai Lama holds the same view:

But the position of Highest Yoga Tantra is different [from that of the Vinaya, Abhidharma and Mahāyāna]...In Highest Yoga Tantra—for example, in the Guhyasamāja Root Tantra—the possibility of a female practitioner becoming fully enlightened in her lifetime in female form is stated explicitly and unambiguously.
CONCLUSION

We have seen that there are differing voices within each of the three traditions—the Pāli, the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna. In the literature of both the Pāli and the Mahāyāna traditions we can find very clear statements which negate the possibility that women as such can attain enlightenment. However, both traditions also struggle with the tensions that arise both from disallowing women to attain enlightenment and from allowing them. The account on the foundation of the order of Buddhist nuns reflects this tension in more than one way. The Sūtras of the Mahāyāna that enable women to achieve enlightenment, while requiring that they change into men just before getting there, either in that very life or through death and rebirth, demonstrate this conflict. Furthermore, the two figures who can be brought forward to demonstrate the female potential to attain enlightenment are not actually human, but a nāgini and a goddess respectively. Still, in both the Pāli and the Mahāyāna traditions, we do find attempts to surpass the problematics of women’s enlightenment by going beyond the distinction between female and male.

The theoretical ground that completely transcends the distinction between male and female is the idea of emptiness. In neither the Lotus Sūtra nor the story of Gaṅgadevi⁴¹ is emptiness a major concern, while in The Teaching of Vimalakīrti, it is because all phenomena are empty of self-nature that there really is no such thing as male or female. Therefore, the distinction between men and women has no bearing on the attainment of enlightenment. As the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra explains: ‘Neither with a female body nor with a male body is true enlightenment attained...for there is no achieving perfect enlightenment in any way.’⁴² Of course, emptiness is fundamental for some of our commentators on Vajrayāna practices as well.

Vajrayāna texts that necessitate the active participation of female companions in the practice offer a new promise for women. The terms Tsong-kha-pa uses for the female and male practitioners are wisdom (prajñā) and means (upāya) respectively. The union of wisdom and means is the foundation of the Bodhisattva’s path to enlightenment. Due to their wisdom the Bodhisattvas realize emptiness, and due to their means, which includes compassion and the other five perfections (pāramitās), they strive to attain full enlightenment for the sake of all beings. When the two Vajrayāna practitioners unite, they engage
in the Bodhisattva’s path to enlightenment in which emptiness and means are equal. Therefore, the wisdom here, the female practitioner, must be equal to the means, the male practitioner.

In light of this position held by one of the most influential Tibetan figures, is it justified to maintain the following?

In unpacking the meaning of female consorts, one needs always to bear in mind that the Buddhist tantric couple represents prajñā and upāya, with prajñā being a passive principle, the enjoyed, not the enjoyer; the known, not the knower; the object, not the subject. And: female tantric consorts are inexperienced...they are vessels and aids for men’s spiritual advancement and not accomplished practitioners in their own right. 43

Or:

[All] these tantric texts now under consideration have clearly been produced primarily for the benefit of male practitioners...[T]he feminine partner known as the Wisdom-Maiden (prajñā) and supposedly embodying this great perfection of wisdom, is in effect used as a means to an end, which is experienced by the yogin himself. 44

Miranda Shaw had in mind, in writing her book Passionate Enlightenment, to arrive at the conclusion that women may indeed attain enlightenment.

I found no evidence of barriers to women’s participation [in Vajrayāna] at any level, including the attainment of enlightenment. 45

We probably would have been more convinced by her arguments had she relied on some of the passages in which Candrakīrti, Bhavabhadra, Tsong-kha-pa and Mkhas-grub-rje address this very issue.

Notes

2 Ibid.
3 The Bahudhātuka Sutta, Sutta 115.15 in the Majjhima Nikāya, translated in Nāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 929. See also Ariyuttama, I 28.
4 See also Ariyuttama Nikāya VIII 51, the Cullavagga X. 1 (Müller 1996: 320–6), and Dhamaguptaka’s Book of Discipline III 14.
5 Translated by Frances Wilson in Paul 1985: 77–94.
6 This translation is by Bhikkhu Bodhi in the Samyutta Nikāya 2000: 222–3. It is found in the Bhikkhunī Samyutta, part no. 5 in the Saṅghāvagga. See Horner 1990: 164.
Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi in the *Samyutta Nikāya* 2000: 122.
This is in the *Devatā Samyutta* 5, 6; no. 1 in the *Sagāthāvagga*. See Horner 1990: 104.


10 Vasubandhu as well in his *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* (not a Mahāyāna text) maintains that: ‘The Bodhisattva is a male and not a female, for he has already gone beyond the state of female’ (La Vallée Poussin 1988: 691).

11 This chapter may have not been written by Śāntideva (La Vallée Poussin 1907), although the Tibetan tradition regards it as authentic.

12 Wallace and Wallace 1997: 141.

13 Literally Śāriputra says that a woman cannot gain the stage of an irreversible Bodhisattva, one of the higher stages before Buddhahood.


15 See Paul 1985: ch. 5.

16 Lamotte 1994: 169, n. 37. As Lamotte notes (ibid.) this is also called a ‘reversal of the support through the transformation of the female or male organs’ (*āśraya-parivṛttiḥ stī-puruṣa-vyājana-parivartanāḥ*), as appears in Vasubandhu commentary on *Mahāyāna-sūtrālankāra* (ch. 11, v. 4) translated in Thurman 1979: 115—‘physical transformation, resulting from the change of the masculine or feminine sex organs of a monk or nun’.


20 As pointed already by Davidson 2002: 97.


23 Tsong-kha-pa’s *Mchlan*, Zhol 176b4, ACIP 271a.

24 Tsong-kha-pa’s *Mtha’-gcod*, 309.4–6, ACIP 117b.


27 *Rnam-bshad* 316.3.

28 The *Pradīpoddyotana*, ibid.

29 *Rnam-bshad* 316.6.

30 Chakravarti 1984: 4, D. 5.7–6.3.

31 *Mtha’-gcod* 308.6.
Here Tsong-kha-pa cites as an example the Śrī-Hevajra-sādhana (Dpal-dgyes-pa-rdo-rje’i-sgrub-thabs) by Ācārya Saroruha (Tib. Slob-dpon Padma, Grub-chen Mtsho-skyes) Skt. p. 133; Tib. Derge, vol. 9, p. 2.4.

Ibid. 309.6.

Ibid. 309.6–310.1.

Ibid. 310.1–2.

Ibid. 310.6.

Ibid. 310.4–6.

Hevajra Tantra, Snellgrove 1959; II.xii.5.

Ibid. 312.3, 313.1–2.


Though found in The Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra, this episode is not about emptiness.

Schuster 1981: 35.

Young 2004: 139 & 141.


Shaw 1994: 197.

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