Wilson, Charming Cadavers

Introduction

Encountering Death

Biographies of the Buddha place a vivid realization of the inevitability of old age and death at a crucial moment in the life of the founder. Living the pampered life of a prince intentionally shielded by his father from the realities of life, Gotama reportedly took a series of chariot rides that led him away from the sheltered environment of the palace. He saw during these outings a wizened old man, a sick man panting and shaking with fever, and a dead man. Learning from the charioteer that old age, sickness, and death are intrinsic to the human condition, Gotama was filled with agitation. One biography suggests that the prince was physically overcome with faintness when he saw the dead man and had to support himself by leaning against the pole of the chariot in which he was riding.[1]

Alarmed at these signs of the inevitable decay that begins with birth and ends in death, the prince marveled that people can enjoy themselves knowing the inevitability of death. That these are the rather naive words of one who has just had the scales fall from his eyes is clear. At some level we all know that death is, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, "the blight man was born for," but that hardly stops us from savoring the pleasures of life.[2] In his later career as a teacher, the Buddha recognized the extent of human sanguineness with regard to old age and death and found ingenious ways to impart a vivid sense of realism and a concomitant sense of urgency to people oblivious of the blight they were born for.

Confrontation with death and decay looms large in the history of Buddhism.[3] While acknowledgment of the fact of death and reflection on the transformative mysteries of

death figure prominently in other Indian religious traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism distinguishes itself among Indian traditions in the extent to which meditation on death and the transience of the human condition is linked with spiritual progress.[4] One of the lessons that the Buddha is said to have taught again and again in his capacity as head of the monastic order (*sangha*) is the utter perversity of pursuing sexual gratification when the human body, in its natural state, emits substances as foul as those emitted by putrefying corpses.[5] That living bodies are comparable to walking corpses was a lesson that Gotama learned with his own eyes in the harem just before he renounced the world. Waking up in the women's apartments in the middle of the night, one version of the Buddha's story explains, Gotama noticed the saliva dripping from half-opened mouths and the rigor-mortis-like postures of the sleepers and suddenly had a vision of the harem as a charnel field strewn with corpses. This vision of beautiful women ravaged by death so agitated Gotama that he left home immediately to seek a path that leads beyond birth and death.

In his later career as teacher and head of the male monastic order, the Buddha helped those monks troubled by sexual desire to see the perversity of yearning for bodies that are riddled with corruption. There were special places in ancient Indian cremation grounds where the bodies of paupers and executed criminals were left to rot; it was to those charnel fields, Buddhist hagiographies report, that members of the early *sangha* were sent by the Buddha so that they could contemplate the foulness of the body.[6] The Buddha reportedly urged his monks to visit charnel fields in order to contemplate the various kinds of disfiguration to which rotting corpses are subject. On one occasion, when a monk found that even in the charnel field he was troubled by lust, it is said that the Buddha went with that monk to the cremation ground and conjured up an attractive young female body for the man to feast his eyes upon. The Buddha then used his psychic powers to turn that alluring body into a worm-infested corpse.

The Buddha reportedly told love-smitten monks cautionary tales that explicitly compare attractive women to flesh-eating ogresses and other demonic beings who take on human forms in order to seduce and devour men. These tales suggest that monks would do well to view feminine charms as deceptive appearances covering corrupt, decay-ridden bodies. When an ogress wants to devour a man, she presents a deceptively attractive human facade that fools the unwary victim. Like

the false form assumed by a demonic man-eater, the outer form of dress, ornaments, and cosmetics covering a woman's body constitutes a false facade that is as perilous to a man as the human guise of an ogress. Failure to see through the specious charms of human women, these cautionary tales suggest, is comparable to perishing at the hands of a terrible ogress or other demonic feminine being.

With such a strong sense of men's vulnerability to women's charms, it is not surprising that representations of the Buddha show him having grave reservations about allowing women to take ordination as nuns. He finally did so, we are told, on the condition that women accept a set of special rules that subordinate women to men within the monastic assembly.[7] Nuns were, for example, asked to show respect for monks by bowing to them, although the only gesture of deference required of men in the *sangha* is that a junior monk should bow to his seniors. "Any nun," Nancy Falk explains, "no matter how long she had been in the *sangha,* must treat any monk, even the rudest novice, as if he were her senior."[8] Falk has argued that it is no surprise that the order of nuns should have eventually disappeared from many Buddhist countries by the end of the first millennium. Subordinated to men from the beginning by special rules, women had few opportunities for leadership within the *sangha,* less prestige than monks because of their circumscribed leadership roles, and therefore less support from the lay community. When hard times came, the order of nuns was more susceptible to economic deprivation and eventually died out for lack of support.

Object Lessons

This book argues that the subordination of women to men within Buddhism as it developed in India and South Asia during the first millennium of the Common Era has a larger dimension that has not been articulated by scholars. My analysis of literary conventions used in Buddhist hagiographic literature shows women frequently represented as objects of meditation whose sole function in the narratives in which they appear is to lead to the edification of the male subjects who observe them. In a broad cross-section of hagiographic literature, male protagonists become Arhats, or "worthy ones," through viewing dead, dying, or disfigured female bodies. By viewing women as object lessons on the folly of desire, the men in these narratives thereby achieve the state of spiritual liberation that is characterized by the eradication of desire

and thereby become worthy of veneration and emulation. Women are subordinated to men in this literature in that they are consistently made subservient to men by the very structure of narratives in which they appear. The women who serve as objects for the edification of men are, for the most part, anonymous. When they are given names, they are nevertheless scarcely endowed with anything comparable to the full subjectivity of the male protagonists in these narratives. It is always the man who sees and the woman who is seen, the man who speaks and the woman who is spoken about. The roles are not reciprocal. There is little possibility in these narratives for an intersubjective exchange of equals between the male subjects and their female meditation-objects, for the women are represented largely without consciousness, voice, or agency. My analysis suggests that these narratives, in constituting women as mute objects of the male gaze, express an androcentric Buddhist ethos that gives priority to the experience and perspective of male subjects. Because the body of literature I analyze cuts across sectarian and scholastic lines and includes a variety of Buddhist traditions, I argue that the objectification of women for the edification of men is truly a pan-Buddhist theme.

This book suggests that Buddhist women living in South Asia in the first millennium of the Common Era were subordinated to men not so much by rules that enshrine male privilege and circumscribe women's rights but by representational practices that would have made it difficult for a woman to imagine herself following in the footsteps of highly revered Buddhist saints. In influential hagiographies that were (and for the most part still are) repeated in sermons and enacted in performances throughout the Buddhist world, men achieve liberation from suffering by learning to see through the specious charms of women. These hagiographies tend to represent entrapment in *saṃsāra*—the painful cycle of birth and death—as a male dilemma while gendering *saṃsāra* itself as feminine, as a prison in which women are the agents of incarceration. It would have been difficult, I believe, for South Asian women to imagine themselves participating as active agents in the drama of salvation as it is represented in these tales. Cast in the active but negative role of a temptress charged with keeping male observers in a state of delusion, a Buddhist woman hearing a hagiographic sermon might well imagine herself playing a more positive role only when she is at her most passive. When, through death or serious illness, she has lost all control over her bodily functions,

her charms will at last be revealed for what they really are. No longer a potential temptress, she will be transformed into a redemptress capable of liberating male observers from the bonds of *saṃsāra*.

There are a number of hagiographies redacted by South Asian Buddhists during the first millennium of the Common Era in which women are clearly the heroines, but I believe that they support rather than challenge my thesis that male subjectivity prevails in this body of literature. In them, nuns instructed by male mentors view their own aging bodies as objects of contemplation or, if too vain to objectify themselves in that way, view female phantasms that are magically conjured up by the Buddha for their edification. Cataloging the deterioration of their own bodies or viewing with horror the dying bodies of female phantasms, these nuns may be said to regard the female body from the perspective of a male subject. Their meditation experiences do not constitute a female equivalent of what monks do in charnel fields. These women, like their male mentors and other monks whose stories are told here, contemplate only female bodies, not the decaying bodies of men. Feminist film theorists have shown how women, while watching a movie shot from a male point of view, will adopt a male subject position and objectify the women on screen in order to identify with the movie's male protagonist. I believe that many South Asian Buddhist women learned to identify against themselves in order to see the world from the perspective of their male heroes. Despite the fact that South Asian Buddhists clearly appreciated tales with women protagonists, these stories of Buddhist heroines ultimately reinforce the message of female subservience found in the men's stories since in them the point of view associated with the male subject is reinforced and shown to be normative for all.

Was the Buddha a Feminist?

As Jonathon Walters has documented in an article on women in the Theravāda tradition, the earliest students of the role of women in Buddhist history tended to credit the Buddha with the liberation of Indian women.[9] Turn-of-the-century Pāli scholars such as Caroline A. Foley (later Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids) and Mabel Bode, like many nineteenth-century Orientalists, regarded Buddhism as a radically egalitarian reform movement. Challenging those pre-Buddhist institutions that gave certain men privileged access to spiritual power, the Bud-

dhism reconstructed by these scholars embraced a more democratic spiritual ideal that included those previously excluded, especially women and the lower castes. Foley argued that Buddhism placed women on an equal footing with men by offering a genderless ideal of the renouncer as "an asexual rational being."[10] I. B. Horner, encouraged by Mrs. Rhys Davids to produce a monograph on the subject, argued in 1930 that Buddhism brought women equality, autonomy, and respect unprecedented in pre-Buddhist India:

> Under Buddhism, more than ever before, [a woman] was an individual in command of her own life until the dissolution of her body, and less of a chattel to only be respected if she lived through and on a man. . . . What Gotama did for women shines as a bright light in the history of freedom. . . . Buddhism became not only an antagonist of Brahmanism [the early Indian religion out of which Hinduism developed] and a revolt against the caste system, then beginning to draw India into its clutches, but also an attempt to promote the cause of rights for women, for which in a spirit which was startlingly modern the women themselves were beginning to fight.[11]

That early Buddhism was championed, at the turn of the century and into the 1930s, as a progressive movement while Brahminical (or early Hindu) institutions were vilified as oppressive to women should come as no surprise to students of nineteenth-century Orientalism. The identification of more "advanced" religio-cultural systems against the backdrop of those deemed less advanced is a rhetorical strategy that permeates nineteenth-century discourse about Asia and the Middle East. Groups and institutions that did not threaten colonial interests were often favorably compared to those that did challenge colonial supremacy.[12] In the case of early twentieth-century British scholars writing about India, it was only natural to champion a religion that was all but defunct in India and vilify one that was, through the work of Indian activists such as Mahātma Gandhi, becoming increasingly intertwined with the Indian Independence movement. But to assert that Buddhism was not androcentric simply because it treated women better than early Hinduism did, as Walters aptly puts it, is to offer a hypothesis that cannot be verified without determining just how badly women actually fared under the auspices of Hinduism.[13]

Since the 1970s, the role of women in Buddhist history has re-

emerged as a topic of interest to many scholars. Although different in significant respects, modern studies of Buddhist women's history evidence many of the same preoccupations and presuppositions that guided the groundbreaking work of the early Pāli school of Buddhist studies. Once again (as is inevitable, I believe), the history of Buddhism is made to reflect the concerns of the scholars reconstructing it. In the work of Foley, Bode, and Horner, the early history of Buddhism is seen to anticipate the struggle for suffrage by women in the West. These authors are anxious to show that Buddhist women themselves struggled for full participation in the life of the community; their arguments are cast in terms of women's "rights," access to the public sphere, and other issues pertinent to women fighting for full participation in democratic society. With the rise of the second wave of the women's movement in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, a new feminist agenda emerged in Buddhist studies. Having been granted access to the public sphere, women in the sixties and seventies found themselves restricted by unstated assumptions and discriminatory "glass ceilings." Recognizing that women can be granted full legal privileges and still be barred from enjoying them because of stereotypical assumptions about how women behave, the advocates of second-wave feminism set about changing society's image of the feminine. Representations of women deemed exploitative and demeaning were exposed and their authors censured as a means of liberating women from the stereotypes that oppress them. In her monograph on images of the feminine in Mahāyāna Buddhism, Diana Paul reflects such guiding concerns.[14]

Like many contemporary scholars of Buddhist women's history, I have been influenced by the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Like them, I consider the images of women in Buddhist literature worthy of close scrutiny, believing that they are as decisive as the actual powers and privileges accorded to women. But unlike those contemporary scholars who regard the history of Buddhism as a gradual movement away from the misogyny of early Buddhist literature, I am unable to give later forms of Buddhism such as the Mahāyāna a clean bill of health with regard to sexism.[15] Harsh condemnations and exploitative figurations of the feminine in which women undergo mortification for men's edification abound in those texts (such as the *Lalitavistara* and other Sanskrit biographies of the Buddha) which proclaim in their colophons their allegiance to the Great Vehicle, as well as those

that show Mahāyānist influence but belong to other canons. Explicit arguments against the importance of gender in path progress coexist, in Mahāyāna texts, with vicious tirades against women.[16]

Claimed by the Theravāda school as their scriptural foundation, the Pāli *Nikāyas* (collections of discourses of the Buddha) are as ambivalent as Mahāyāna texts with regard to the spiritual capacities of women. On the one hand, the Mahāyānist view that gender distinctions cease to exist when understood from the perspective of emptiness is not absent from the Pāli *Nikāyas*. For example, in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* an interchange between Māra, archenemy of the Buddhist order, and the nun Somā begins with Māra challenging the ability of a woman, with her "two-finger wit," to achieve the status of a sage. Somā responds by suggesting that femininity means nothing when mindfulness and insight are established, concluding that Māra should go tempt someone deluded enough to distinguish male and female.[17] On the other hand, another passage from the same text declares womankind the corruption (*duṭṭha*) of the celibate life.[18] Elsewhere in the *Nikāyas*, women are repeatedly blamed for the downfall of men and explicitly linked to the premature decline of the Buddha's teachings.

The focus of this study, however, is not so much the perceived character of women but rather how disgust-inspiring representations of women figure in the religious achievements of members of the men's monastic order. My sample is a broad cross-section of hagiographic literature redacted in India and Buddhist South Asia after the reign of the Indian emperor Aśoka (third century B.C.E.) in which repulsive figurations of the feminine lead to the edification of prominent monks.[19] In hagiographic texts representing a variety of scholastic affiliations, including Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna schools (such as the Theravāda), appealing female bodies become edifying objects of contemplation through death, disfiguration, and sleep so deep that it resembles death.[20] Within each of these three basic scenarios there are various permutations. Thus women who die may die in a variety of ways. Some fall ill and die; some grow old, fall ill, and die; and some die suddenly without any signs of old age or disease. After death, their corpses may burst open with putrefaction, wither away with desiccation, or shrivel up in the flames of the cremation fire. Placing macabre figurations of the feminine at crucial moments in the hagiographies of leading members of the *saṅgha*, the redactors of post-Aśokan texts show the power of horror to promote insight into the Dharma, or the teachings of the

Buddhas. In addition to linking grotesque figurations of the feminine with the lofty spiritual attainments of their subjects, the redactors of these hagiographies frequently suggest, in editorial asides, that such grisly scenes can have salutary consequences for all who listen to the tales of the lives of the saints. Horrific figurations of the feminine instantiate the Buddha's teachings in such a graphic and compelling manner that only a fool would be oblivious to the lessons about life and death that they teach.

The female objects of meditation at the heart of this book are curious creatures. They are teachers who taught noted monks (and who continue to teach, as their stories are repeated by Buddhists today). But in their role as teachers they do not utter a single word. What they have to teach is not what is on their minds but what is going on in their bodies. As Sartre points out in his discussion of what it feels like to be the object of another's gaze, the person being observed by another will remain a mere object, a fixture in the mental universe of the other, unless he or she can return the gaze of the other and make the other an object in his or her own universe of meaning.[21] But the dead, dying, or unconscious women who appear in the pages to follow are incapable of returning the gaze of their male observers. Since they are never given the capacity to return the gaze that surveys them, they cannot assert their own status as conscious subjects.

In thinking about the role that dead, dying, and disfigured women play when they serve as objects of meditation for saints and those who hear and repeat their tales, I have found Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* to be a useful resource.[22] In this meditation on the role of bodily alterations in instantiating abstract, disembodied ideals, Scarry focuses on the many spheres of life in which altered bodies are made to serve as display boards that instantiate and thus confer facticity on abstractions whose truth is otherwise difficult to demonstrate. Although Scarry's analysis of torture, war, circumcision, and other forms of marking the body does not involve a systematic consideration of gender, it does comment on the frequency with which women's bodies are drafted into the service of ideological instantiation.[23] Her argument supports the work of art historians like John Berger and sociologists like Erving Goffman who argue that the female form is constantly called upon to embody abstract ideals for (and to sell goods and services to) the spectator.[24]

The gruesomely transformed female bodies that appear in post-

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Aśokan hagiographic literature instantiate three principles that, while characteristic of all conditioned phenomena, are not always easy to discern. In the eyes of one with insight, all phenomena are impermanent (Sanskrit, *anitya;* Pāli, *anicca*), characterized by dis-ease or suffering (Sanskrit, *duḥkha;* Pāli, *dukkha*), and without any abiding essence (Sanskrit, *anātman*; Pāli, *anatta*). Horrifically transformed women make these three features of conditioned things emphatically visible for those who have a tendency to reify what are only transient, essenceless phenomena. With their aging, dying, bleeding, and putrefying bodies, they body forth the truths of the Dharma that many people have to see with their own eyes to believe.

While altering the perceptual world of the observer, grotesque figurations of the feminine are also associated with dramatic changes in behavior. For monks troubled by sexual desire, horrifically transformed female bodies serve as object lessons on the folly of lust. But seeing the ills to which flesh is heir also alleviates another problem that threatens the commitment of Buddhist renouncers to their monastic vocation, and that is the desire to produce heirs. Chapter 1 explores the sociology of celibacy in its South Asian context and suggests why the desire for sexual gratification and the desire to reproduce pose such a threat to the life of the *sangha.*

Chapter 2 describes various forms of meditation by which insight into the nature of *saṃsāra* may be achieved through developing a salutary sense of aversion toward impermanent things, particularly the body. I argue that Buddhist constructions of the body capitalize on Brahminical concerns about bodily impurity, but in Buddhist texts Brahminical discourse is used selectively, for distinctly Buddhist purposes. Brahminical discourse focusing on the filth that leaks from the anus, mouth, nostrils, and other bodily apertures is echoed in Buddhist scripture and meditation literature. The body is constituted in Buddhist literature as a leaky, sievelike container that is constantly sullied by the defiling substances that flow from every orifice. But where Brahminical discourse advocates closing off the apertures of the body through purificatory rites, the sacrality that Brahminical discourse promises the practitioner of purificatory rites is achieved by Buddhists through recognizing that bodily closure is impossible. Like a boil so filled with pus that it leaks in nine places, the body described in Buddhist discourse is a wound with nine holes that neither merits nor is amenable to ritual purification.[25] Although it should certainly be cared for—that is, washed and clothed, just as one cleans and bandages a wound—there is no point in fussing over the body since it is a wound that will never heal.

Chapter 2 also introduces the reader to some of the literary methods that post-Aśokan writers and redactors use to evoke a salutary sense of aversion toward carnal pleasures. Analyzing Pāli, Sanskrit, and Tamil Buddhist texts, I argue that Buddhist authors and redactors were masters at subverting accepted literary conventions in order to communicate the folly of desire. Post-Aśokan Buddhist texts use unconventional literary methods such as the blending of erotic and repulsive imagery to suggest homologies between carnal pleasure and carnage, bedrooms and battlefields, bliss and bondage—homologies that persuade the sensitive reader or listener of the rapacity of the sex act and the perversity of sexual desire.

Chapter 3 focuses on Pāli hagiographies that climax in repulsive figurations of the feminine. Several of these hagiographic narratives take place in the women's apartments or harem. Through the appearance of death in the midst of deep sleep, the erotic space of the harem suddenly comes to resemble a charnel field strewn with dead bodies. Other hagiographies are set in the charnel field itself. These narratives echo the Buddhist meditative practice of going to charnel fields to contemplate uncremated corpses in various stages of decay and disfiguration. They recall the typologies found in meditation manuals: there are worm-infested bodies that teach the lesson that the human body is a repository of parasitic creatures, there are festering corpses that show the natural putridity of the body's interior, as well as other types of dead bodies with other lessons to teach. One woman has had her appendages cut off and is deposited in the charnel field along with her detached body parts. She resembles the type of corpse that meditators are likely to find after a battle, an execution, or an animal attack in the jungle; meditators must partially reassemble such corpses for the purposes of meditation.

These hagiographic retellings of prominent monks' meditative experiences do more than simply illustrate the successful use of techniques described in meditation manuals. They also innovate. They feature, for example, "fresh" cadavers—the bodies of women who have died quite recently, bodies too well preserved to serve as objects of contemplation. In these latter accounts, cremation is used to transform the charming cadaver into a charmless tangle of burnt limbs. Hagiographic depictions

of charnel ground meditations are also innovative in their very premise. While meditation manuals suggest that it is a bad idea for a monk to look at a dead woman's body because he might find it arousing, post-Aśokan hagiographies combine arousing and disgusting stimuli in ways practitioners of aversion therapy might approve of: alluring women die sudden, spectacular, and disgusting deaths that sicken the beholder just at that moment when he is most vulnerable to the charms of women. These narratives suggest that the path to wisdom is not always the path of prudence; sometimes the path of prurience—in which desire is encouraged only to be subverted in the end—is much more efficacious.

Chapter 4 reflects on the similarities between Māra, the god of death and enemy of renouncers, and the Buddha as "fishers of men." Both Māra and the Buddha are depicted as using guileful methods to foster allegiance to the way of life they represent, and neither one is averse to using the enticing bodies of beautiful young women as a lure for men susceptible to lust. Māra captures his victims by offering them such flesh-baited hooks that deliver death instead of gratification. Through the provisional encouragement of sexual desire, the Buddha occasionally mimics Māra, baiting the "hook of the Dharma"[26] with female flesh that is intended to deceive the unwary. But the Buddha ultimately subverts the sexual desire that he encourages by the strategic use of repulsive figurations of the feminine.

Seeing Through the Gendered "I"[27]

In the narratives analyzed in chapters 1–4, the women whose bodies burst open with putrefaction, wither away with desiccation, or shrivel up in the flames of the cremation fire do not typically occupy the position of literary subjects. With one notable exception, the stories in which they appear are not *their* stories but those of the monks who apprehend them as objects of contemplation. These grotesquely transformed women are merely objects of the male gaze, solutions to the male dilemma of how men may be liberated from the captivating charms of women. Chapter 5 presents post-Aśokan Pāli hagiographies of nuns who do occupy the subject position. These are accounts of genuine female subjects, but they are curiously self-reflexive subjects who achieve insight into the Dharma by observing their own bodies (or those of magical doubles) undergoing grisly transformations. Many of the nuns whose excellence in monastic training brought them recognition and inclusion in hagiographic anthologies are women whose preferred form of meditation is self-contemplation. Such women often comment on how old age has wrecked the former beauty of their bodies and turned every eye-catching feature into an occasion for disgust. Nuns are often represented, in hagiographic anthologies, as if standing before the mirror. They survey their aged flesh and catalog with pride the wrinkles and cataracts and sagging breasts that make them less likely to turn men's heads now that time has made them perfect exemplars of the truth of the Dharma. By turning their gaze in the direction which androcentric convention compels them to look in order to achieve the insight of an awakened subject, these female subjects inevitably interact with themselves as objects.

My reading of post-Aśokan hagiographies suggests that those nuns who saw themselves from the point of view of their male observers had the best chance of being recognized by their peers for their perspicacity and insight into the Dharma; the stories of such self-objectifying women were likely to be remembered and included in hagiographic anthologies. Those nuns who went out of their way to make sure that their true inner nature was clearly conspicuous and not hidden from the male gaze were singled out for special appreciation by the monastic assembly. There is a tale, for example, of an attractive young nun named Subhā who gouged out her eye and gave it to a man who was smitten with the beauty of her eyes. Subhā's self-disfiguration had a (predictably) spectacular effect on her deluded admirer; she gave that man an education the likes of which only the Buddhas can give. She made the abstractions of Dharma come alive for him by bodying forth the words of the Buddhas in her own flesh.

Subhā also managed to arrest an unwanted sexual overture that bordered on sexual assault (in that her admirer had followed her to an isolated place and cornered her there, using physical force to prevent her escape). This Buddhist tale of self-disfiguration as self-defense bears striking resemblances to medieval Christian accounts of women who disfigure themselves in order to repulse potential rapists (a trope within Christian hagiography that Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg has dubbed "the heroics of virginity").[28] In both the Buddhist and the Christian accounts, women keep potential rapists at bay by making themselves abhorrent to their assailants. That they do so at great cost to their own physical integrity (and are lionized by their hagiographers in some disturbing ways that elide their bodily suffering) is a significant and (to

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feminists) troubling feature of both Buddhist and Christian hagiographic traditions.[29]

But there is a more interesting dimension to the comparison that emerges when we consider the fact that both Buddhist and Christian hagiographic traditions lionize women who gouge out their own eyes to repulse the gaze of their assailants. Subhā resembles those sainted Christian women like Saint Brigid of Kildare and Saint Lucy of Syracuse who, their hagiographers tell us, avoided unwanted marriages and preserved their virginity by sacrificing their own organs of sight. As we explore the ways that hagiographic literature represents the actions of sainted Buddhist and Christian women, the eye that is so dramatically gouged out serves as an icon of a distinctly female way of seeing. What better image to represent the blinders that restrain the female gaze (subject, as it is, to the derivative forms of subjectivity that exist for it in the empire of the male gaze) than the eyes that these women removed so that they might see (and be seen) as good Buddhist and Christian women?[30]

CHAPTER ONE

Celibacy and the Social World

What makes a man to wander,
What makes a man to roam,
What makes a man to wander,
And turn his back on home?

Lines from a song by Max Steiner
in the film *The Searchers*

Shock Therapy

It can be a momentous and shocking experience when one sees the world through the eyes of a renouncer for the first time. Especially when one has formally renounced the social world in joining a monastic order but has lost or not yet achieved a sense of commitment to monastic life. Indian Buddhist hagiography is full of climatic scenes of transformation in which worldly, dissatisfied renouncers—especially lovesick monks and vain nuns—become serious, committed renouncers when they suddenly perceive the truth of the Dharma or cosmic order displayed in the world. Such breakthroughs are described as searing, mind-jolting experiences. They are denoted in Pāli and Sanskrit by the term *saṃvega* and other derivatives of the Sanskrit root $\sqrt{vij}$, meaning "to tremble or shudder with excitement or fear." Because they involve seeing with deep emotion, the Indian art historian Ānanda Coomaraswami refers to *saṃvega* experiences as instances of "aesthetic shock." These experiences certainly are, as Coomaraswami's terminology suggests, primarily associated with seeing rather than with hearing. But the agitation of *saṃvega* occurs primarily when the Dharma one has *heard* becomes the Dharma one *sees*. *Saṃvega* thus might be rendered as "the agitation of recognition," or, in more popular parlance, an "aha experience."

Sometimes it is the sight of beautiful things, like the body of a Buddha or a place of pilgrimage, that causes the shock of recognition.[1] But usually, the state of *samvega* is brought on by the sight of things that incite pity, things that convey the ideas of impermanence and suffering. Because the cremation ground is a repository of corpses and thus a mute testimony to the impermanence of all human life, it is the site of many *saṃvega* experiences described in post-Aśokan hagiographies. Members of the *sangha* spent time in the charnel fields of cremation grounds practicing a meditation technique called the meditation (*bhāvanā*) on foulness (Sanskrit, *aśubha;* Pāli, *asubha*) in which the meditator contemplates corpses in various stages of decay.[2] This form of meditation is praised by the Buddha of the Pāli canon and discussed at length in doctrinal compendia such as Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga.* According to Buddhaghosa—the fifth-century commentator who is often considered the premier spokesman of monastic Buddhism—the meditator should go to a cremation ground and select a corpse in one of ten stages of decay, from a corpse bloated with putrescence (*uddhumāta*) to a skeleton (*aṭṭhika*).[3] Each of the ten stages has a characteristic foulness that serves as an antidote to the one of ten types of attraction to physical form.[4] For example, the bloated corpse suits those who are particular about the shapes of bodies; discolored corpses are recommended for those who are attentive to the complexion of the skin.

Cultivating a sense of foulness is especially recommended for those of a passionate disposition.[5] But Buddhaghosa warns would-be meditators not to go rushing off to view just any corpse they should happen to hear about. They should first ascertain the sex of the corpse, as it could be a hindrance to their chastity to contemplate the body of someone of the opposite sex, especially one that is newly dead.[6] Because such a body could cause untoward thoughts (literally, "writhing," *vipphandana*), Buddhaghosa states that monks should avoid using female bodies as objects of meditation, as nuns should avoid using male bodies.[7]

But if the hagiographic tradition of the post-Aśokan period is any indication of actual practice, it appears that many monks did not heed Buddhaghosa's warning. Stories in which prominent monks contemplate dead women with salutary results at watershed moments in their monastic careers appear quite frequently, even in commentaries that are attributed to Buddhaghosa himself. And what's more, a number of these stories show the Buddha lending his authority to this practice by

commandeering dead women's bodies and orchestrating experiences of aesthetic shock around them.

Why would the redactors of these post-Aśokan hagiographies give pride of place to a practice that holds such risks for the meditator? This deviation from the council of prudence calls for a reflection on the vagaries of desire and the value of temptation in overcoming desire.[8] The structure of many of these stories suggests an analogy with aversion therapy.[9] Just as aversion therapists initially encourage inappropriate desires only to eradicate them by introducing painful, noxious stimuli, so these monks' encounters with bodies of the opposite sex are experiences that arouse the desire of the monk only to subvert it in the end. In one, a lovesick monk goes to see the object of his affection only to find that she has been dead for three days and her body is bloated with putrescence. In another, the Buddha evokes an aha experience in a lust-ridden monk by conjuring up an apparition of a lovely young woman that stirs the monk's desire; the Buddha then uses his psychic powers to transform the spectral woman into a worm-infested corpse.

Hagiographies that climax in horrific figurations of the feminine are extremely graphic; they assault the senses like an open wound. The reader or listener cannot help but recoil from the stark images of decaying beauty these stories present. Through this visceral experience of revulsion, one can achieve an existential awareness of the first Noble Truth (Pāli, *ariya-sacca;* Sanskrit, *arya-satya*) of Buddhism: the dis-ease or dissatisfaction that dogs even the most pleasurable sensations. By acting on the body as a site of knowing, these stories persuade the reader or listener that there is no gainsaying the cardinal truths of Buddhism. The effect of such stories on the sensitive reader or listener may approximate the transformative power of contemplating decaying corpses in the cremation ground. What Buddhaghosa says of the charnel ground meditator may well be said of those who listen to tales of men transformed by encounters with bodily corruption: "Because he sees so many corpses, his mind is no longer subject to the power of lust."[10]

Horrific Figurations of the Feminine

As objects of sexual desire, women are often seen as obstacles in the celibate path of the monk, sensual stumbling blocks to be avoided at

all costs. The Buddha of the Pāli canon frequently advocates avoiding women altogether. For example, when the Buddha's personal attendant Ānanda asked, shortly before the Master's death, about how one should behave toward women, the Buddha reportedly answered: "You should avoid their sight, Ānanda." "But what if we do see them, Blessed One? What are we to do then?" The Master replied: "Do not speak to them, Ānanda." "But what if we do speak to them, Blessed One?" "Then you must watch yourself, Ānanda."[11]

Although avoiding the opposite sex is recommended, the monastic community must rely on the lay community for its material support, and such dependence requires that monks and nuns live in close proximity to lay households. For monks who regularly gather alms from door to door and accept invitations to eat in lay households, avoiding women altogether is out of the question. Thus avoidance is impractical as a strategy for subduing desire. But avoiding women may also be as ineffective as it is impractical. Avoidance certainly reduces the opportunities for a monk to act on sexual urges, but it does not necessarily protect his mind from lustful thoughts. The stories of aesthetic shock analyzed here suggest that in order to vanquish sexual desire, the enemy must be encountered, engaged, and exposed as a cause of suffering. In this pursuit, encounters with beautiful women are extremely useful to the renouncer, offering him a field in which to engage and overcome his desire. Like the young women who shared Gandhi's bed during his controversial "experiments in celibacy," tempting female bodies may be drafted into the service of male celibacy.[12]

Because all bodies harbor the signs of foulness within, anyone's body can be used as an object lesson on foulness. But one finds few post-Aśokan accounts of women experiencing aesthetic shock while viewing male bodies.[13] There is, to my knowledge, only one post-Aśokan tale of a male body causing an aha experience in a woman, and it involves the disciple Ānanda—a man who is depicted as closer to women than any other man in the early *sangha,* a man whose identification with women is so complete that he calls himself a "womanly" (*mātṛgrāma*) man.[14] The relative absence of male objects of contemplation is as conspicuous as the presence of the male gaze in this literature. From the number of narratives in which alluring female bodies serve as sources of insight for sexually frustrated monks, it is clear that these post-Aśokan narratives have the suppression of male sexual desire as one of their primary goals.

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