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# Gender Fluidity and the Divine Feminine In Buddhist Narratives

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## Abstract

This academic article examines gender fluidity and the Divine Feminine in Buddhist narratives through the lenses of non-duality, emptiness, wisdom, compassion, and symbolic transformation. Rather than treating gender as a fixed biological or social essence, Buddhist narratives often present gender as a contingent, relational, and pedagogical form shaped by karma, perception, interdependence, and skillful means. The article argues that feminine figures in Buddhist traditions should not be understood merely as representations of women in a social sense, but also as symbolic expressions of *prajñā* (wisdom), compassion, generative power, and the empty nature of identity.

Drawing on Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna materials, including the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, *Prajñāpāramitā*, Guanyin, Tārā, and *Ḍākinī* traditions, the article explores how Buddhist narratives challenge rigid gender binaries and patriarchal assumptions. The goddess episode in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the gender transformation of Guanyin, the enlightened feminine agency of Tārā, and the wisdom symbolism of *Prajñāpāramitā* all demonstrate that gender may function as a skillful means rather than as an ultimate identity. The article also considers selected Theravāda narratives, including Bhikkhunī Somā and women associated with beauty, sexuality, and liberation, to show that spiritual attainment is not limited by gendered embodiment.

The article contributes to Buddhist studies, feminist Buddhist interpretation, and gender discourse by proposing that the Divine Feminine in Buddhist narratives reveals gender as empty, fluid, and transformative. Ultimately, Buddhist symbolism does not simply replace masculine dominance with feminine essence; rather, it points toward a non-dual vision in which all gendered forms become provisional expressions of awakening.

**Keywords:** Gender fluidity; Divine Feminine; Buddhist narratives; Non-duality; Emptiness; *Prajñāpāramitā*; Tārā; Guanyin

## **Introduction**

Gender has often been interpreted through fixed binary categories of male and female, especially within social systems shaped by patriarchal assumptions. Buddhist philosophy, however, offers conceptual resources for questioning such essentialist views. Through the doctrines of non-self (*anattā*), emptiness (*śūnyatā*), impermanence, and interdependence, Buddhism understands identity not as a permanent essence but as a conditioned and relational process (Payutto, 2017; Williams, 2009). From this perspective, gender can be examined not as an ultimate ontological reality but as a provisional form shaped by perception, culture, embodiment, and symbolic meaning.

Buddhist narratives provide important examples of this non-essentialist view of gender. In the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the goddess transforms Śāriputra's body into a female form to demonstrate that gender distinctions are empty and depend on conceptual attachment (Lu, 1990). Similarly, the figure of Guanyin, who developed from the male bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara into a feminine embodiment of compassion in East Asian Buddhism, illustrates the fluidity of gendered representation in Buddhist devotional culture (Bailey, 2009; Irwin, 1990; Xu, 2023). Tārā's enlightened feminine agency, Prajñāpāramitā's role as the "Mother of Buddhas," and Dākinī symbolism in Vajrayāna traditions further reveal that the Feminine operates not merely as a social category but as a symbolic expression of wisdom, compassion, and transformative insight (Haas, 2013; Landesman, 2008; Paul & Wilson, 1985; Shaw, 1998; Simmer-Brown, 2002).

Although Buddhist traditions have historically existed within patriarchal cultures, their doctrinal foundations also contain resources for challenging rigid gender hierarchies. Contemporary gender theory and neuroscience likewise question simplified binary models of gender and embodiment, suggesting that identity is more complex than conventional male-female divisions imply (Joel et al., 2015; Shepherd, 2016). This article, therefore, examines gender fluidity and the Divine Feminine in Buddhist narratives, arguing that gendered forms function as symbolic and pedagogical expressions of non-duality rather than fixed identities. Its contribution lies in showing how Buddhist narratives can enrich contemporary discussions of gender, embodiment, wisdom, and liberation.

## Theoretical Framework

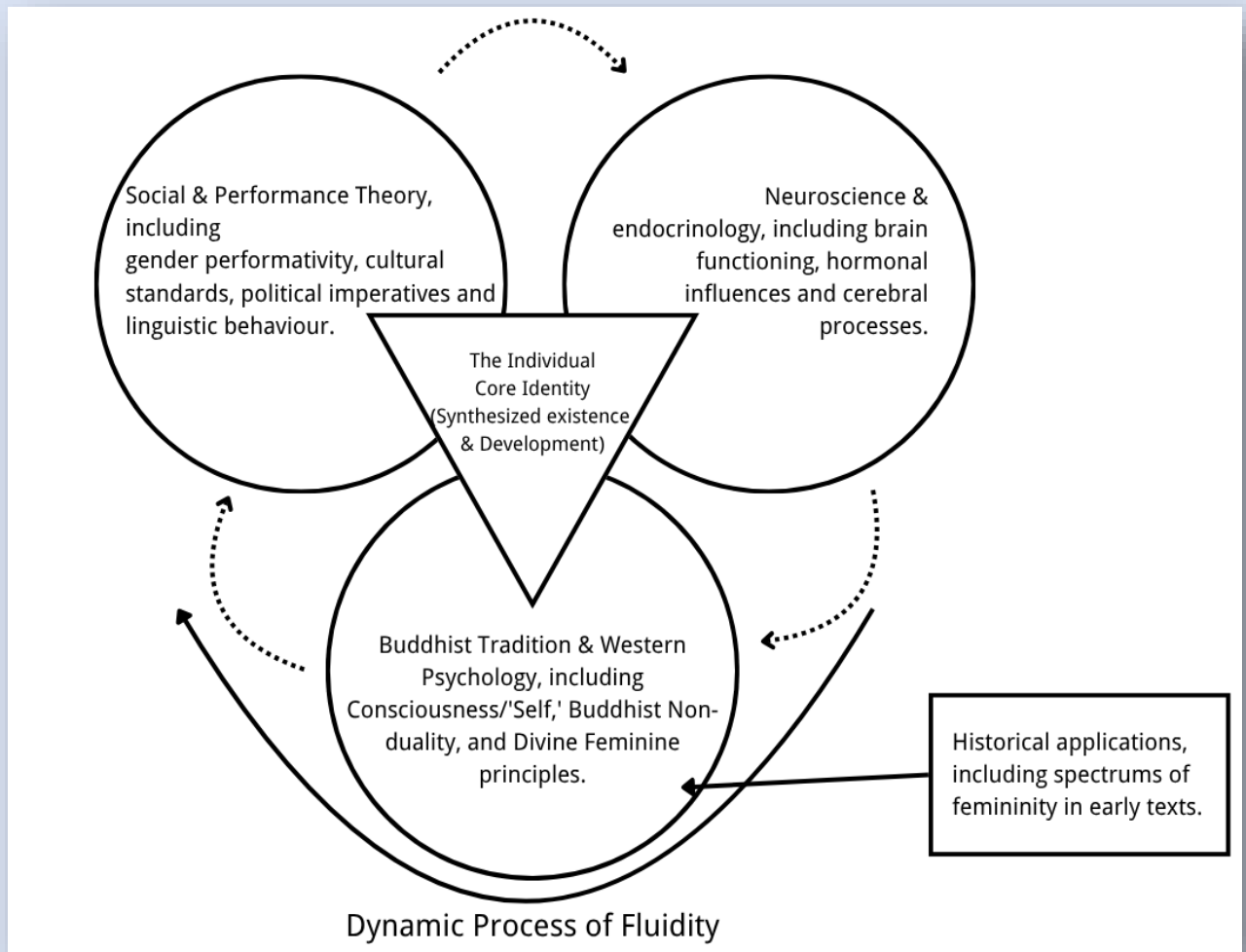


**Figure 1:** Diagram for the Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together Buddhist philosophy, gender fluidity, archetypal theory, psychology, and comparative mystical traditions. The main assumption is that gender should not be understood as a fixed ontological essence, but as a dynamic, symbolic, relational, and culturally mediated process. This view is compatible with Buddhist teachings on non-self (*anattā*), emptiness (*śūnyatā*), impermanence, and interdependence, which challenge all fixed identities and reveal phenomena as conditioned, changing, and dependently arisen (Payutto, 2017; Williams, 2009). Within this framework, the Divine Feminine is not treated merely as a biological or social category, but as an archetypal and symbolic expression of wisdom, compassion, receptivity, transformation, and non-dual awareness.

## **1. Gender Fluidity**

Gender fluidity refers to the understanding that gender is not limited to a rigid male-female binary. Contemporary gender theory suggests that gender is shaped through the interaction of embodiment, language, social practice, performance, and cultural interpretation. Shepherd (2016) argues that gender involves biological dimensions but cannot be reduced to biology alone, since gendered identity is also performed and socially constructed through repeated cultural practices. Neuroscientific studies further complicate binary assumptions. Joel et al. (2015) demonstrate that human brains do not fall neatly into two distinct categories of “male” and “female,” but instead display mosaic patterns of features. McEwen and Milner (2016) also show that sex hormones influence the brain in complex and dynamic ways, suggesting that gendered behavior cannot be explained through simple biological determinism.

From a Buddhist perspective, this non-essentialist understanding of gender is consistent with the analysis of selfhood. Abhidhamma thought does not posit a permanent self behind experience but analyzes human existence as changing processes of consciousness, feeling, perception, volition, and mental formations (Ronkin, 2022). In this sense, gender is also a conditioned process rather than an independent essence. Buddhist wisdom (*prajñā* or *paññā*) involves direct insight into the changing and empty nature of phenomena (Payutto, 2017). Therefore, gender fluidity can be interpreted in Buddhist thought as a manifestation of conditioned identity: meaningful at the conventional level but empty of a fixed ultimate essence.

Symbols play an important role in communicating this insight. Buddhist traditions often use symbolic forms such as goddesses, mothers, bodhisattvas, and feminine wisdom figures to express subtle truths that cannot be fully captured through conceptual language. Jungian psychology similarly understands archetypes as deep symbolic structures that shape perception and meaning before conscious interpretation (Jung, 1968/1964). In Buddhist narrative, the feminine symbol may therefore function as a skillful means, pointing beyond literal gender toward insight into emptiness and non-duality.

## **2. The Archetypal Feminine**

The archetypal Feminine appears across religious, psychological, and cultural traditions as mother, protector, seductress, wisdom figure, healer, and transformative force. In archetypal theory, the Feminine is not limited to women

as biological persons but represents a symbolic field associated with fertility, receptivity, nurture, embodiment, creativity, emotion, destruction, and renewal. Neumann (n.d.) describes the Great Mother archetype as both nurturing and terrifying, life-giving and death-bearing, protective and transformative. This ambivalence is important because the Divine Feminine is not merely gentle or maternal; it also includes disruptive, erotic, wrathful, and liberating dimensions. In Buddhist traditions, this complexity appears in figures such as Prajñāpāramitā, Tārā, Guanyin, and Ḍākinī. Prajñāpāramitā is called the “Mother of Buddhas” because wisdom gives birth to awakening. This maternal symbolism does not imply that the ultimate truth is biologically female; rather, it expresses the generative power of insight. Tārā represents enlightened feminine agency, compassion, and fearless activity, while Ḍākinī figures in Vajrayāna Buddhism embody wisdom that may appear peaceful, wrathful, erotic, or transformative (Haas, 2013; Shaw, 1998; Simmer-Brown, 2002). These figures challenge conventional assumptions that femininity is passive, subordinate, or merely domestic.

The archetypal Feminine also functions psychologically. Griessel and Kotzé (2009) suggest that feminine and masculine archetypes participate in the formation of self-understanding. However, in Buddhist symbolism, archetypes are not only psychological images but also soteriological devices. They guide practitioners toward liberation by disrupting attachment to fixed identity. Thus, the Divine Feminine in Buddhist narratives should be read not as a fixed feminine essence but as a symbolic expression of wisdom, emptiness, and transformative awakening.

### **3. The Masculine and Feminine in Different Mystics**

The interaction between masculine and feminine principles appears in many mystical traditions. In Taoism, yin and yang represent complementary forces: yin is associated with earth, receptivity, darkness, and femininity, while yang is associated with heaven, activity, light, and masculinity (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2025c). These principles are not absolute opposites but mutually arising aspects of a larger dynamic process. In Kabbalistic and Hermetic traditions, masculine and feminine principles are also interpreted as active and receptive, giving and receiving, generating and forming (Schneider, 2001; The Three Initiates, 1908).

Buddhist thought shares certain structural similarities with these traditions but differs in its emphasis on emptiness. In Vajrayāna symbolism, masculine and

feminine principles often appear as *upāya* and *prajñā*, or skillful means and wisdom. Their union does not represent ordinary gender hierarchy but the non-dual integration of compassion and insight. Yab-yum imagery, for example, symbolizes the inseparability of method and wisdom rather than merely sexual polarity (Shaw, 1998; Williams, 2009). Therefore, Buddhist masculine-feminine symbolism does not affirm dualism as ultimate. Rather, it uses polarity as a symbolic language to transcend it.

#### **4. Feminine as “Negative.”**

The Feminine has often been associated with the “dark,” hidden, receptive, or unconscious side of symbolic systems. However, “negative” should not be interpreted as evil or inferior. In many traditions, darkness represents depth, mystery, containment, gestation, and transformation. Misinterpretation occurs when the hidden or receptive dimension of femininity is judged through patriarchal assumptions as irrational, dangerous, or morally suspect. Psychological studies show that gender perception is often shaped by emotional and cultural coding. Hess et al. (2009), for example, demonstrate that facial expressions of emotion may influence gender perception, showing how gender recognition is shaped by interpretive bias rather than by neutral observation.

In Jungian terms, the anima represents the feminine dimension within the male psyche. It can function as a guide toward deeper consciousness or as a disruptive force when ignored or projected (Hill, 1998). Buddhist narratives similarly reveal that attachment to gendered appearance can distort perception. The problem is not the feminine form itself, but clinging to form as the ultimate. The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*’s goddess episode illustrates this point by showing that gendered bodies are empty of fixed essence and function as pedagogical forms (Lu, 1990). Thus, the so-called “negative” feminine may be reinterpreted as the hidden dimension of wisdom that destabilizes rigid identity and opens the practitioner to non-dual understanding.

In this framework, gender fluidity and the Divine Feminine are understood as symbolic pathways to Buddhist insight. They reveal that gendered forms are meaningful but provisional, powerful but empty, culturally embodied yet ultimately non-essential. The Feminine, therefore, does not replace masculine dominance with another fixed essence; it points beyond all fixed identities toward wisdom, compassion, and liberation.

## **Non-duality and Divine Feminine in Buddhist Tradition**

Buddhist narratives use gendered forms not to confirm rigid male–female dualism, but to reveal the instability and emptiness of all fixed identities. In Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, feminine figures such as Prajñāpāramitā, Guanyin, Tārā, and Ḍākinī embody wisdom, compassion, protection, and transformative insight. These figures show that gender can function as *upāya*, or skillful means, through which Buddhist teachings communicate non-duality, emptiness, and liberation. The Divine Feminine, therefore, should not be read as a fixed feminine essence, but as a symbolic and pedagogical expression of awakened qualities.

### **1. Deconstructing the Binary: Buddhist Non-Dualism as a Framework for Fluidity**

Buddhist philosophy provides a strong conceptual foundation for questioning rigid gender binaries. Through the doctrines of non-self (*anattā*), emptiness (*śūnyatā*), impermanence, and dependent origination, Buddhist thought does not treat identity as a permanent, independent, or self-existing essence. Gender, from this perspective, can be understood as a conventional designation rather than an ultimate reality. This does not mean that embodied gender experience is irrelevant; rather, it means that gender should not be absolutized as a fixed ontological truth. Mahāyāna philosophy, especially its teaching of emptiness, further emphasizes that all phenomena arise dependently and lack inherent existence (Williams, 2009). Thus, male and female identities are meaningful within conventional experience but empty of independent essence at the level of ultimate analysis.

The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* offers one of the most powerful Buddhist narrative critiques of gender essentialism. In the well-known goddess episode, Śāriputra questions why the goddess does not transform herself out of female form. In response, she uses supernatural power to change Śāriputra into a female body and herself into his form. This reversal reveals that gendered identity is unstable, contingent, and dependent upon perception. The goddess teaches that all phenomena are neither male nor female, thereby exposing the emptiness of gender distinctions (Lu, 1990). This narrative does not deny the appearance of gender but shows that attachment to gender as the ultimate truth is a delusion.

This principle is also seen in the relationship between *prajñā* and *upāya*. In Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, wisdom (*prajñā*) is often symbolically

associated with the feminine, while skillful means (*upāya*) is associated with the masculine. Their union represents not domination or hierarchy, but non-dual integration. Enlightenment arises not from the supremacy of one principle over another, but from the inseparability of wisdom and compassionate method. The feminine principle, therefore, becomes a symbolic expression of insight into emptiness, while the masculine principle represents compassionate activity in the world. Together, they demonstrate that duality is pedagogical rather than ultimate (Shaw, 1998; Williams, 2009).

## **2. Diving into the Divine Archetypes: Goddesses as the Feminine Principles**

Buddhist narratives and iconography present several feminine figures who embody wisdom, compassion, transformation, and non-dual awareness. These figures should not be interpreted merely as divine women in a literalistic sense, but as symbolic and archetypal expressions of awakened qualities. Prajñāpāramitā, Guanyin, Tārā, and Ḍākinī traditions all reveal how feminine forms serve as skillful means to communicate subtle truths about emptiness and liberation.

Prajñāpāramitā, often called the “Mother of Buddhas,” represents the perfection of wisdom from which awakening is born. Her motherhood is symbolic rather than biological: wisdom gives birth to Buddhahood because insight into emptiness is the condition for liberation. In this sense, the Divine Feminine is not a fixed feminine essence but a generative principle of awakening. The maternal image communicates the creative and liberating power of wisdom, while also challenging patriarchal assumptions that spiritual authority must be masculine (Paul & Wilson, 1985; Williams, 2009).

Guanyin, the East Asian form of Avalokiteśvara, is another important example of gender fluidity in Buddhist devotion. In early Indian contexts, Avalokiteśvara was generally represented as male, but in China and East Asia, Guanyin increasingly appeared in feminine form as a compassionate savior and protector. This transformation demonstrates the adaptability of Buddhist symbols across cultural contexts. Guanyin’s gender shift does not indicate doctrinal inconsistency; rather, it reveals that gendered form can serve the needs of devotees through *upāya*, or skillful means. Bailey (2009) argues that Guanyin can be interpreted as a transgressive and transformative figure who opens space for non-binary and fluid understandings of compassion. Recent studies of Guanyin

devotion also show how feminine representations became powerful vehicles for women's religious practice and devotional agency (Berezkin, 2023; Xu, 2023).

Tārā further deepens the Buddhist understanding of the enlightened feminine. In Tibetan and broader Vajrayāna traditions, Tārā is revered as a liberating female Buddha or bodhisattva who embodies compassion, protection, and swift enlightened activity. Her famous vow to remain in female form challenges the assumption that awakening requires male embodiment. In this way, Tārā becomes both a symbol of spiritual equality and an embodiment of active compassion (Bühnemann, 1996; Landesman, 2008). Similarly, Ḍākinī figures in Vajrayāna Buddhism represent wisdom, transformation, and the fierce disruption of ignorance. They may appear beautiful, wrathful, erotic, or terrifying, but their function is to awaken practitioners from conceptual attachment and reveal the dynamic nature of reality (Haas, 2013; Simmer-Brown, 2002).

### **3. Synthesizing Perspectives: The Buddhist Metaphysics of Gender Fluidity**

The Divine Feminine in Buddhist tradition must be understood within the larger metaphysical framework of emptiness and non-duality. While many religious traditions use masculine and feminine symbolism to describe cosmic polarity, Buddhism ultimately refuses to grant these polarities independent reality. Instead, gendered forms are understood as provisional, symbolic, and pedagogical. They are meaningful because they guide beings toward awakening, but they are empty because they lack a fixed essence.

The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*'s goddess episode is especially important in this regard. By transforming Śāriputra's body, the goddess demonstrates that gender is not an absolute identity but a conditioned appearance. Her teaching that things "do not exist, yet do not exist" expresses the Middle Way logic of emptiness: phenomena appear conventionally but lack inherent existence (Lu, 1990). This insight allows Buddhist narratives to employ gendered imagery without falling into gender essentialism.

Similarly, the Theravāda tradition includes narratives that undermine gender-based spiritual limitation. In the dialogue between Bhikkhunī Somā and Māra, Somā rejects the idea that womanhood obstructs awakening, declaring that when the mind is well concentrated, and wisdom sees the Dhamma clearly, gender is irrelevant to liberation. This episode shows that even within early Buddhist materials, spiritual attainment is not ultimately determined by gendered embodiment.

Thus, Buddhist narratives present gender as a field of transformation rather than confinement. Feminine figures such as Prajñāpāramitā, Guanyin, Tārā, and Ḍākinī reveal that the Divine Feminine is not a metaphysical substance but a symbolic pathway into wisdom, compassion, and emptiness. The masculine and feminine are not final opposites but provisional forms through which non-dual truth becomes visible. In this way, Buddhist metaphysics offers a fluid and liberating account of gender: forms appear, function, and teach, but none can be grasped as ultimate.

In summary, non-duality and the Divine Feminine in Buddhist tradition reveal that gendered forms are meaningful but not ultimately fixed. The goddess in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the compassionate transformation of Guanyin, the enlightened agency of Tārā, the wisdom symbolism of Prajñāpāramitā, and the transformative power of Ḍākinī figures all demonstrate that gender can function as skillful means. These narratives do not simply elevate femininity over masculinity; rather, they dissolve attachment to both as rigid identities. The Divine Feminine, therefore, operates as a symbolic doorway into emptiness, interdependence, compassion, and awakening.

## **Historical Spectrums of Femininity**

The historical representation of femininity in Buddhist narratives reveals that women and feminine figures cannot be reduced to a single social, moral, or symbolic category. Buddhist literature includes queens, courtesans, mothers, nuns, goddesses, healers, temptresses, renunciants, and enlightened practitioners. These diverse figures show that femininity in Buddhism operates across a wide spectrum: it may appear as beauty, desire, wisdom, compassion, temptation, discipline, service, or liberation. Rather than treating feminine embodiment as a fixed obstacle or essence, many Buddhist narratives use feminine experience as a field through which attachment, perception, morality, and awakening are examined.

### **1. Manifestations of Femininity in Early Buddhist Literature**

While the metaphysical frameworks in the Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions of Buddhism provide the symbolic language for gender fluidity, these concepts are not mere abstractions. Having defined the 'Feminine Principle' or the 'Divine Feminine' as archetypes of wisdom and non-dualistic motion, we can presently examine its particular presentations throughout history. Women who uphold beauty, and women who engage in sex work for their

livelihood or even their offspring, are not blamed in Buddhism. Specifically, the Buddha was not opposed to sex workers as the identity or characteristic of an individual. However, he disapproved of prostitution. Sex workers and men indeed engage in detrimental behaviours as a result of their involvement with prostitution, as it appears to be a deleterious activity.

This means that in Buddhist culture, even sex workers are not disparaged, which means that in Buddhism, we do not judge and give any individual a static label of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. On the contrary, the Buddha offered them the option to choose the right path. It is equally possible for individuals, including all women in any status, to attain enlightenment through Dharma practice. The concept of ‘beautiful’ is a conventional construct that varies throughout many countries and cultures. ‘Saddharma’ in Buddhist scriptures is interpreted as ‘upright’ or ‘beautiful’, highlighting authenticity and wisdom that transcends conventional perception (NCCU Academic Hub, n.d.).

In the Mahāyāna tradition, the Śūraṅgama Sūtra pointed out that “The absolute One Reality is the Eternal Mind which is beyond birth and death and is the common source of both Buddhas and living beings. Man, because of his basic ignorance caused, since the time without beginning, by the first thought which screened his True Mind, became subject to birth and death. Thus, both the permanent and impermanent united to transform (that True Mind) into the store consciousness (alaya-vijñāna), the root of samsara” (BuddhaNet, n.d.-b). The restriction on the influence of women in society occurs when the appearance and sexuality of women are viewed as abnormal and sometimes harmful phenomena. Women (or those who operate from this “female self-perspective”) are more used to seeing themselves as the subjects of others’ attention; they are conditioned to detach themselves from their subjectivity.

During the Buddha’s era, parallel situations arose, and the Buddha provided a clear pathway to overcome the mysteries of transmigration and follow the path indicated by the narratives and stories below.

## **2. Āmrapālī**

In the Theravāda tradition, Āmrapālī is mentioned in ancient Pali writings and Buddhist texts, particularly regarding the Buddha's residence at her mango grove, Ambapali vana, where he delivered the renowned Ambapalika Sutra (Ancient Buddhist Texts, n.d.). The Buddha’s impartiality towards women in this story is frequently cited as an example.

The Courtesan Amrapali is a woman of incredible allure and elegance, exhibiting proficiency in various artistic disciplines. The king of Vaishali, Manudev, conspired to possess Amrapali after watching her dance in the city. At the same time, Amrapali's childhood love and intended husband, Pushpakumar, was assassinated on their wedding day, and then an official proclamation was issued declaring Amrapali as Vaishali's bride. Unlike them, Buddha harbored no such prejudice against her because of her beauty. He dined at her abode and accepted her grove for the Buddhist community.

Life of Buddha (Part Two) Ambapali's Gift: "The Buddha accepted the gift, seeing the purity of heart that offered it. He then gladdened Lady Ambapali again with the Dharma. This was the turning point of Ambapali's life: she understood the Dharma and became a virtuous woman. Sometime later, she entered the order of nuns, and with the heart of wisdom strengthened in her, she became an arahant" (Ancient Buddhist Texts, n.d.).

### **3. Uppalavaṇṇā**

In both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, Uppalavaṇṇā's beauty was reminiscent of the dark-blue Uppala flower. In Indian mythology, her complexion was described as blue or golden, akin to the calyx of the blue lotus (Tathaloka, n.d.).

Uppalavaṇṇā is portrayed in the legend as an incredibly alluring young woman who incites madness in men before her renunciation. When she reached maturity and contemplated marriage, a tumult ensued; kings throughout India submitted their proposals to her, leaving her with no viable solution. Immediately and willingly, Uppalavaṇṇā chose to become a nun. She is willing to be dispatched by her father to avoid a possible conflict regarding her marriage.

One evening, when the others were absent, she lit a lamp to prepare the hall to attain enlightenment within two weeks of entering monastic life. Throughout her earnestness, she comprehended the trajectory of the Buddhist Path and total realization. The Uppalavanna Sutta: Sister Uppalavanna, the verses between Uppalavanna and the Mara show her attitudes towards rape and rage: "She replied to him in verses: If even a hundred-thousand rapists came across me like this, I would not stir a hair. I would feel no terror, and I am not afraid of you, Mara, even alone like this. Here, I disappear. I slip into your belly or stand between your eyebrows, and you do not see me. I have mastery over the mind and have well-developed the bases of power. I am free of all bonds and unafraid of you, my

friend. Then Mara the Evil One, sad & dejected at realising, “Uppalavanna the nun knows me,” vanished right there” (Ancient Buddhist Texts, n.d.).

#### **4. Jivaka**

In Theravāda tradition, Jivaka was abandoned in a wooden box on a refuse heap adjacent to the road by his mother, who was a prostitute. Jivaka studied medicine under a renowned instructor for seven years. During the Buddha's era, he was India's greatest physician. After Devadatta struck the Buddha with a rock splinter, Jivaka healed the Buddha. Recognising the benefits of peace near a monastery, Jivaka constructed one in his mango orchard. Buddhist monks and the Buddha were invited to the monastery, where he provided them with alms and left. As a result of the consecration ceremony of this monastery, Jivaka achieved the first stage of sainthood (sotapanna). There are no limitations on who can engage in practice and attain enlightenment, including the offspring of a prostitute (BuddhaNet, n.d.-c).

#### **5. Sundara**

In Theravāda tradition, Sundara, the son of a prosperous millionaire from Rājagaha, was named for his striking beauty (Dictionary of Pali Proper Names n.d.). Sundara's mother lamented on a festival day, observing other households' sons revelling with their brides. A courtesan proposed to seduce him, and the mother vowed that if she succeeded, she would make her Samudda's wife and bestow upon her several presents. The courtesan presented herself to him, seducing him with an alluring demeanour. Subsequently, Sundara, recognising the instability of a worldly individual's heart, made a profound effort and achieved Arahantship.

The text from Sundara Samudda and the Courtesan: “And seeing her before me, a courtesan, ornamented, finely clothed, hands palm-to-palm over her heart like a snare of death laid out, apt attention arose in me, the drawbacks appeared disenchantment stood at an even keel: With that, my heart was released. See the Dhamma's true rightness! The three knowledges have been attained; the Buddha's bidding, done” (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2010).

In *Herosexual: An Archetype for Sexual Healing*, resolving detrimental erotic countertransference and the shadow of sexual power through the engagement of erotic “Reality”. As the sexual shadow already exists in unconscious reality, the practical approach is to confront it directly through

different media: dreams, fantasies, and active imagination. Rather than expelling the shadow, this is intended to integrate it into consciousness (McClintock, 2004).

### **6. Ananda**

In the Mahāyāna tradition, the Śūraṅgama Sūtra is an essential text for Zen/Chan Buddhism, encompassing Buddha-nature, Yogācāra philosophy, and esoteric Buddhism. The Sutra opened with a story of the Buddha. In the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, when Ananda was out begging for food by himself, Mātangī (a low-caste woman in the time) fell in love with him. With her mother's help, she then used evil magic and succeeded in drawing Ananda close to her sensual body on the mat. Ananda was on the verge of breaking the rules of pure living. At the same time, all of this was known to the Buddha, who, following the royal feast, returned to the vihara with the king, princes, and elders eager to hear the essentials of the Dharma. The Buddha repeated a transcendental mantra, and Manjuśrī was instructed to use it to overcome the magic and bring Ananda and Mātangī to the Vihara. Due to the incident, Ananda realised his failure to recognise the ultimate reality, "I have been allowed to be His (The Buddha) disciple, but I have presumed on His compassion. Thus, although I have heard much of His preaching, I have failed to avoid the worldly and have been unable to overcome the magic which has turned me around, causing me to visit a house of prostitution. All this is because I failed to reach the region of Reality." Ananda realised that only true wisdom can remove our transmigration to Samsara, for sensuality is the primary cause (Lu, 1987).

### **7. The Buddha's Pathway**

Nonetheless, the Buddha acknowledged that women possess the same spiritual potential as men, including those who have taken the path (Ter Horst et al., 2005, pp. 239–49).

In addition to the Theravāda traditions, the Aṅguttara Nikāya has presented the top arahant nuns (Aṅguttara Nikāya 1.235–1.247). In stories about the foremost older nuns, they expressed their aspirations and good deeds toward Buddhas and Paccekabuddhas in their past lives. Their previous lives are revealed, along with where they were born and the conditions at the time of Buddha Gotama. In all of the narratives, the nuns from diverse backgrounds, both privileged and disadvantaged, can achieve their highest aspirations when given appropriate guidance at the right time (The Stories about the Foremost Elder Nuns" 2017).

A different praise is given to each nun according to their respective qualities: Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the foremost in seniority; Khemā with great wisdom; Uppalavaṇṇā with psychic power; Paṭācārā, who has memorised the monastic training rules; Dhammadinnā, who teaches the Dhamma well; Nandā, who practices jhānas; Soṇā, who are energetic; Sakulā with the divine eye; Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā with swift insight; Bhaddā Kāpilānī who recollect past lives; Bhaddakaccānā who have attained great insight; Kisāgotamī who wear coarse robes; Siṅgālakamātā who are strong in faith.

The female role models arose from tantric practices in Vajrayāna tradition, where ritual participants emulated and venerated deities conceptualised as maternal and paternal equals. A range of desires is illustrated through gazes, smiles, touches, and sexual embraces. In this context, these levels of desire align with a practitioner's capacity to channel desire towards cultivating a more refined and potent consciousness, thereby comprehending the wisdom of emptiness.

Frontgia suggested that the feminine nature can be replaced by non-gender-based archetypes (Filigenzi, Olivieri, and Rockwell 2015, 105–33). Maitreya Buddha (Fat Buddha, Happy Buddha, Future Buddha) in Mahāyāna tradition is recognised in Buddhist teachings as both a Bodhisattva and a Buddha. This ancient form of iconography may once have been justified by attributing it to Maitreya as a symbol of legitimate succession. The Maitreya Buddha symbol represents a close connection between religion, art, and iconography in Asia. In addition to the nurturing breast, the Feminine is represented by the big belly vessel (Nyanasobhano, 1989).

In summary, the historical spectrum of femininity in Buddhist narratives is diverse, complex, and transformative. Figures such as Āmrapālī, Uppalavaṇṇā, Jīvaka's mother, the courtesan in Sundara's story, Mātangī, and the elder nuns reveal that Buddhism does not present femininity as a single fixed essence. Feminine figures may appear through beauty, desire, vulnerability, motherhood, social marginality, wisdom, service, or liberation. However, none of these roles is ultimate. Buddhist narratives use these figures to examine attachment, perception, compassion, moral agency, and awakening. The central insight is that gendered identity, like all conditioned phenomena, is meaningful in conventional life but empty of fixed essence. Therefore, femininity in Buddhist history becomes not a limitation but a dynamic field through which the Dharma teaches transformation, non-attachment, and liberation.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that Buddhist narratives present gender not as a fixed ontological essence but as a fluid, symbolic, and relational form shaped by emptiness, interdependence, and skillful means. Through figures such as Prajñāpāramitā, Guanyin, Tārā, Ḍākinī, Bhikkhunī Somā, and other female figures in Buddhist traditions, the article shows that the Feminine is not merely a biological category or social identity. Rather, it functions as a profound symbolic field through which wisdom, compassion, non-duality, transformation, and liberation are expressed.

The Divine Feminine in Buddhist narratives challenges patriarchal and binary assumptions by revealing that gendered form is provisional. The Vimalakīrti Sūtra's goddess episode, Guanyin's transformation across gendered forms, Tārā's vow to remain in female form, and Prajñāpāramitā's identity as the "Mother of Buddhas" all suggest that gender can operate as a pedagogical and liberative device. These narratives do not deny embodied difference, but they prevent such difference from being mistaken for ultimate truth. In this sense, gender becomes a form through which the Dharma communicates emptiness rather than a boundary that limits awakening.

The article also demonstrates that Buddhist traditions contain resources for rethinking gender beyond rigid male-female dualism. While Buddhist history has often been shaped by patriarchal institutions, its doctrinal foundations—especially anattā, śūnyatā, interdependence, and non-duality—provide strong philosophical grounds for questioning essentialist gender identity. The Divine Feminine, therefore, should not be interpreted as a fixed feminine essence, but as an archetypal and symbolic expression of awakened wisdom.

Ultimately, gender fluidity in Buddhist narratives reveals the non-dual nature of consciousness itself. When gendered forms are understood as empty, symbolic, and skillful, they become pathways not to attachment, but to liberation.

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