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Towards Healing the Fracturing in the Male-Female Relationship in the Sangha

Introduction:

When we started thinking about this presentation we were considering strategies of how to decrease the fracturing in the Sangha around gender differences. But the more we went into it and talked about it, the more we realized that gender conditioning is a very complex and deep phenomenon.

In the first part of this presentation we will describe some of the factors in the Sangha that generate the fracturing which to our thinking stands in contrast to what the Buddha originally intended. Then we will briefly consider some of the developments that are contributing towards healing this fracturing. After that we will consider the question: 'is it necessary for us to understand gender conditioning in order to realize ultimate truth?' Lastly, we will suggest some points for discussion.

I. Factors that generate the fracturing:

a) Institutional

It is helpful to bring to mind that the Buddha's teaching was deeply controversial and radical in his time and was not popular with the ruling Brahmanical elite. For example, his teaching on anatta was contrary to the teachings of all other spiritual teachers at the time. The Buddha clearly took a very radical approach to the caste system, teaching that it was not relevant to an individual's potential for liberation, caste identity was annulled as soon as one joined the Sangha. Similarly the Buddha took a radical approach towards the gender customs of his day by accepting women into the Sangha and by establishing rules to protect them from exploitation by men, including bhikkhus.

Considering this it is not unlikely that some distortions to his original teachings would have come into the scriptures after his death. This is especially so, given that it was already controversial during the Buddha's lifetime and then only written down 500 years later. This was also the case with the Christian teachings when Constantine had them officially written down and agreed to. The accuracy of the recording of the Buddha's teaching is legendary (a legend?), but it is clear that there were many controversies regarding what had been memorized by the monks, as discussions about disputes continued for seven to eight months at both the second and third councils. There is no record of bhikkhuni participation in any of the councils and during the first council the Ven. Ananda was criticized by Ven. Mahakassapa, who was presiding over the council, for having supported Ven. Mahagotami's request for the going forth.

This fracturing in the male-female relationship in the Sangha is embedded in the institution today, starting with the garudhammas and the question of whether or not the bhikkhuni ordination lineage has been broken. Many scholars are beginning to openly question the validity of the garudhammas as originating from the Buddha himself, seeing them rather as a later Brahminical addition. The question of the ordination lineage is also controversial and most of us are familiar with scholarly works to this effect. Papers such as that of Bhikkhu Bodhi, given at the Hamburg conference, provide the details of these arguments and are freely available. We don't particularly want to enter into debates around these arguments here.

Clearly the very origin of this fracturing goes back to the time when the Buddha's teaching was laid down in writing or even earlier to the first council when bhikkhunis were excluded and has now become increasingly institutionally entrenched. The main problem in Theravada and also Vajrayana is that women have no recognized ordination parallel to the bhikkhu ordination in the Sangha as they had in the Buddha's time.

b) Cultural

A second and more recent factor that generates the fracturing is the increasing tension between contemporary Western cultural values and Asian gender roles which colour our monastic etiquette. The inequality of standing between men and women is no longer acceptable in Western societies, not only culturally, but also legally. As women samanās, this affects all our relationships – with the male Sangha, with lay women supporters, and with our families and friends. We are often seen to be copying and following the male Sangha, because we usually have to refer to the male Sangha for consent and legitimation for just about everything we do. Once we have the bhikkhus' consent, then we do have relative autonomy in our daily lives. But still, most leadership and decision-making positions in the Sangha, including the Western Sangha, are held by monks. There is a tendency for us not to be seen to embody a source of wisdom in our own right, but rather to be a secondary source drawing on a more primary source. If you can go to the primary source yourself, why would you bother with the secondary source?

Many other aspects of Asian gender behaviour are foreign, alien and unacceptable in the West, especially in the context of our Western societies having relatively recently, and only after centuries of women's efforts, adopted gender equality as a goal. What is unpalatable, for example, is women approaching men on their knees, monks not reciprocating gestures of respect like anjali, bowing, or asking forgiveness (pavarana), the daily food offerings made only to the bhikkhu Sangha, the annual kathina ceremony which is only for bhikkhus, the lack of equality in decision-making bodies, etc.

These dynamics are repeated every day on all formal occasions. Anything frequently repeated becomes habitual and unquestioned. For us it reinforces old conditioning patterns that we are trying to undo in ourselves. We are trying to liberate ourselves from the debilitating social expectation that what we have to offer is of second rate value. One might argue that this is just conditioning, just personality, a phenomenon in the realm of

samsara, but if it is harmful, goes against the values of contemporary society, and doesn't foster the independence of mind and confidence to see through delusion, should that not be a reason for concern?

i. More about these factors

These fractures, institutional and cultural, did not exist while the Buddha was alive. There was a bhikkhuni order and the Vinaya rules were in large measure created by the Buddha so that the Sangha would blend into the culture of the day.

In contrast to what the Buddha established with the four fold Sangha, today in Thailand, the mae chees have no legal status as clerics, but are regarded as practising Buddhist laywomen who fall under the control of the Buddhist clergy. This approach is practised in Wat Nong Pah Pong and all its branch monasteries in Thailand and this naturally influences the Western Sangha of the Thai forest tradition.

After the first four years of the order's existence in England, it became necessary to establish the order of Siladhara for women samanās at a level of ordination higher than samanera/samaneri but not equivalent to bhikkhu/bhikkhuni. After 25 years, there are still only 16 Siladhara in the world today and our status within the wider Sangha and even our own Sangha remains unclear. Many promising nuns have been lost to the order of Siladhara through loss of faith in the efficacy of the form. For these ex-nuns the undermining aspects of the form did outweigh the support it offers to them. To most Westerners this ongoing discrimination between men and women is unacceptable and jarring.

II. Moving towards healing the fracturing

The unacceptability of this situation is now being recognized within the wider Sangha itself as more and more women are taking bhikkhuni ordination and more and more bhikkhus are coming to support this, including some internationally respected scholarly bhikkhus like Bhikkhu Bodhi. Bhikkhu Bodhi asks the question:

“What would the Buddha want his elder bhikkhu-disciples to do in such a situation, now, in the twenty-first century?” Would he want us to apply the regulations governing ordination in a way that excludes women from the fully ordained renunciant life, so that we present to the world a religion in which men alone can lead the life of full renunciation? In working out a solution to our own problem, therefore, we have these two guidelines to follow. One is to be true to the spirit of the Dhamma – true to both the letter and the spirit but above all to the spirit. The other is to be responsive to the social, intellectual, and cultural

horizons of humanity in this particular period of history in which we live, this age in which we forge our own future destinies and the future destiny of Buddhism.”

What are these “horizons of humanity” in this particular period of history, of present day civilization? One is surely the aspiration to move towards partnership as the principle governing the ordering of our societies. Partnership is a principle which recognizes variety and acknowledges the value of different contributions. It is a move away from patriarchy, from being exclusively governed by enforced authority, from “...separatist all-male control of religious, military, economic, and political institutions [which] is, psychologically speaking, a homosexual culture”. (Chesler: 198)

Starting in the 1800s – the dawn of feminism – women left behind in the home when families were split up through industrialization, have sought to find a place for themselves in the modern corporate world. This led initially to a copying of the male model of efficient productivity in the market place. Many men found this estranging and threatening and many women found this approach to be unfulfilling and alienating.

In modern society the masculine and feminine are out of balance - both in themselves, and in relation to each other. This has become glaringly evident. What we see today is rationalism out of touch with intuition, materialism out of touch with altruism, independence out of touch with connection, and specialization out of touch with vision. It requires more and more violence to maintain – against ourselves, against each other, against our children and against the very earth that sustains our life.

In the process many women lost touch with their own strengths as women. Their roles as mature female adult in the home, and as mother to the children, became seriously eroded. The father’s role too – as mature male and father has also degenerated through the ever-increasing demands made of him by a materialist corporate world. The effect of this is quite apparent in all the new problems children are experiencing in modern society. Jungian psychologist James Hillman asks what we are giving our children today when what we expect of them is more hours at school, an earlier age at the computer, more consumer goods and more competitive pressures. He asks “who would want to grow up in that world?” Children are increasingly restless, less able to concentrate, less creative, less peaceful.

Men in the West are now writing increasingly about the more unhealthy aspects of traditional masculine conditioning. Many younger men no longer accept this conditioning and want to play more of a role in the process of parenting their children. Many women who have sought equality in the corporate world have become disillusioned with the aridity of that world and are turning away from it. Rather than seeking equality on masculine terms in a male-determined world, women are now more interested in discovering and developing their own qualities and in building partnerships with men that foster male-female complementarity.

In this context, do we then, as persons regarded as spiritual guides, not want to embody something that can help people reconnect with their inner strengths as men and as women and in relationship to each other, rather than perpetuate a model that undermines our potential?

What are we, as monastic contemplatives, modelling in a society facing this kind of crisis? On the one hand we are embodying very pure spiritual aspirations that counter the dehumanisation of materialism but on the other hand we are also, paradoxically, embodying an ancient system that demeans the feminine. We seem to be saying “good old fashioned patriarchy is the ideal”. Are we not in an ideal situation to find new and healthier ways of relating to each other? As contemplatives we believe that we could potentially make a significant contribution to this if we are willing to open to the effects of our conditioning.

III. Some thoughts on how we might work with this as samanas

A first question to ask when looking at how we might work with this as samanas is: ‘is it really necessary to be aware of our conditioning, including our gender conditioning, in order to realize ultimate truth?’ Should we be open to examining the psychological roots of our gender conditioning, or is this just whirling around in samsara? It is often said that the Path is open to all, male or female, young or old, whatever race, class, nationality, or religion.

This question touches into the heart of the relationship between the Dhamma and Vinaya. The Dhamma is transcendent – it leads to the unconditioned. The Vinaya provides the guidelines and standards for dealing with ordinary everyday actions and interactions. It relates to the conditioned realm. The Vinaya provides the containing framework for embodying the Dhamma in daily life. It provides a stable and grounding foundation on which spiritual aspiration can grow towards insight sheltered from the contending forces of the ego’s delusions. It is only through awareness of these delusions in our conditioning that we can safely let go into the unconditioned. Therefore we feel that awareness of the nature of our conditioning is essential, especially as we are embodying a powerful archetype.

The spiritual quest itself is an ancient, universal and powerful archetype. It is often overlaid with the archetype of the Warrior and inter-mingled with overtones of the Ruler archetype in the form of the Priest-King. These are very masculine archetypes that are found throughout virtually all spiritual teachings in all traditions. Spiritual brotherhoods have a great deal in common with ancient male initiation rites of passage. In these rites, females are excluded and young males are removed from their influence to be ‘reborn’ among men as a man, to have their masculinity validated, and to be instructed in the

traditions, secrets, and wisdom of the ancestors. In modern society the purpose of these ancient male rites – to establish the bonds and obedience necessary in warriors - is far more explicit in the form of military training. Remnants of these themes live on also in spiritual brotherhoods. Archetypes of the spiritual female, in contrast, are polarized between the young and innocent Virgin on the one hand, and the old Trickster or Witch on the other hand. There are very few, if any, independent spiritual sisterhoods.

In an earlier age, before humankind knew how babies were conceived, it was believed that women had the power to spontaneously produce children. Societies were then more matriarchal as women were seen to be very powerful. Once it was realized that sperm had something to do with it, the pendulum swung to the opposite extreme and in many parts of the world (including India) it was believed that sperm contained fully formed fetuses that were merely implanted in women's bodies for growth and development. Women were merely bearers of children produced by males alone. This was the dawn of patriarchy.

It led to the taking hold of a collective and more-or-less subconscious underlying assumption – in place for thousands of years now - that women, although much like men, are in some way lesser beings, not quite as fully human as men. Having a penis then somehow makes men more human, and, as Chesler (1978:211) says, this then becomes the root-sign of both humanity and true divinity. We see this even in the Pali scriptures where it is stated that only a male person can become a Buddha. Chesler goes on to say that “this belief is so crucial and so deep that it remains psychologically ‘invisible’ to both men and women.”

It is interesting that producing children has been so central to ideas of relative human worth for thousands of years. This is not surprising given how precious children are. Even this, which is something that happens because nature is the way it is, and has nothing to do with any human ‘powers’ at all, we have managed to turn into a source of conceit and competition among ourselves. Can we ever really let it sink in that we are neither at the centre of the universe nor its executive directors? It is clear from this how crucial gender is in the formation of the ego or personality.

Many modern theories in psychology are based on various interpretations of the classic Oedipal complex: that is, on the gender-based rivalries that arise in family relationships: between fathers and mothers, fathers and sons or daughters, mothers and daughters or sons, and sons and daughters. Some argue that competition and rivalry among males is only contained by an unspoken pact that excludes females from the fray and reduces them to property to be sorted out among the males. This too is believed to be one of the origins of patriarchy. Some suggest that competition among females for males is surreptitious, hidden and deceptive, hence the common view of women as manipulative and controlling. And many more are the theories to be found.

We would like to think that the time has come to bring all this into the light of consciousness and begin to recognize it for what it is – an inherited ideology and

mythology - and move beyond it - into a relationship of a more balanced partnership.

The question we would like to discuss here is: Can we build the trust between us that we would need in order to grow and develop together in a brother/sister or spiritual friendship relationship in the context of celibacy? Can we trust our commitment to celibacy and to our spiritual aspirations enough to explore these areas of our conditioning together? Are we willing to step out of the realms of mythology and fantasy and into reality? Are we willing to enter into mature relationship with each other as whole people and not as our imaginary or ancestral fabrications? Are we willing to set aside our preconceptions of each other, our views, our beliefs and biases, and open ourselves to discovering something new or different about each other? Can we trust our own inner strength to abide with whatever feelings arise through this – whether they be fear or anger, attraction or longing? If we can do this, we believe we would have something of great value to offer.

As Sujato bhikkhu put it: “To my mind a far bigger problem (than the danger of monk and nuns disrobing for a relationship) is that, when entirely separated from nuns, monks may not learn to respect women as equal partners in the spiritual life. Monks are able to relate to women as a mother: the wonderful donors who bring food every day. We see women who are like a daughter: the enthusiastic girls and young women who come to learn and meditate. We treat women like a lover: the temptress to be feared and guarded against. But never can we relate to women as a sister; a friend as we grow together through life. I think this is very sad, and is our great loss.”

IV. Suggestions for points to discuss

Clearly there is no quick fix to this. We would need to work with both the inner and outer dimensions of it. We could certainly make some suggestions about the outer dimensions of it that would lead to a more balanced relationship in our daily life. But that alone would not solve the problem because it would not get to the inner root of it and that is where our greater interest lies and what we would most like to discuss here with you.

a) Outer dimension

Regarding the outer dimension of it, bhikkhuni ordination might seem like the logical solution, but without addressing the issue of the garudhammas and the ancient gender prejudices underlying some of the bhikkhuni rules, it would feel like taking a major step backwards rather than forwards. Would we want to alienate ourselves even further from other Western women?

But bhikkhuni ordination aside, and working with what we have at present, as a starting point it would help to have clarity about the legal standing of the order of Siladhara within the Sangha. We have to tell aspiring anagarikās that theirs will be a lesser ordination in this tradition which is not recognized anywhere in the world except in our own monasteries. This comes as a painful shock – that our spiritual aspiration as women

can only be pursued in a context of exclusion from the main body of the Sangha.

As it stands, the legal situation precludes the possibility of balancing daily ceremonies like the food offering, public annual ceremonies like the kathina and private ceremonies like pavarana, and restricts our participation in decision-making. This is extremely difficult to defend and becomes a source of powerful and continuous tension among ourselves. It is not easy to bear for too many years.

If this situation remains as it is, it seems that the best alternative solution would be to establish separate monasteries for monks and nuns. At least that way the gender imbalance does not continue to be a daily visibly reinforced perception slowly translating into a habit of mind and becoming internalized. The cost of this approach will be even further estrangement from human beings of the other gender which would foster projections and deepen delusion.

b) Inner Dimension

Regarding the inner dimension of it, it would be helpful if we could all become more conscious of our gender conditioning and how it affects our attitudes and behaviour towards one another, and towards lay people, especially lay women.

As an example of unconscious gender bias we would like to present a few quotes from an interview with the highly respected Theravadin monk, Bhikkhu Payutto. The interview is entitled 'Where women stand' and was published in the Bangkok Post in September 2001. It may be a bit out of date now, but serves to illustrate how powerfully unconscious attitudes inform so-called rational views.

In answer to the question *how would you analyse the problem of male/female relationships and their consequent conflicts?* he said that the problem has three aspects: biological, social and spiritual and that spiritually there is no question of women being able to reach arahantship just like men. Here men and women are equal. But, of the biological and social aspects, he says: "Women's biological nature has placed them socially at a disadvantage. And because of this biological predestination, it is more difficult for women than men to live a life that is free and independent from society." What he says here shows a profound prejudice that a woman's biological nature is a social disadvantage. Surely the Venerable is not intending to say that children are a "social disadvantage"? But besides that, every child born has both a mother and a father – no child is ever conceived or born without a father. How then is a man in a socially more advantageous position? Does the Venerable think that fathers have less responsibility towards their children? And, is he saying that bhikkhus live a life that is free and independent from society? Our understanding is that as samanas we are meant to be dependent on society.

These statements seem to us to exemplify unconscious and even rather harmful gender-prejudiced conditioning that needs to be made conscious and let go of. Gendering is very

central to human consciousness. Following on consciousness of oneself as a human being, the very next conceptual differentiation of consciousness is as either male or female. It is that fundamental to the formation of the content of consciousness.

Looking at male and female archetypes and family relationship constellations are two ways of bringing some of these aspects of personality into consciousness for transformation.

As monks and nuns, all of us, whether we like it or not, embody the ancient archetype of the Sage. This is a powerful archetype and is easily subject to ego inflation. Awareness is crucial to containing and preventing this. Awareness is heightened if a woman can see herself through the eyes of a man and if a man can see himself through the eyes of a woman. In this we can help one another in areas where we are unable to see clearly through the veils of our conditioning.

However we view gender relations, it is clear that gender conditioning is very deep. It relates to our biology, our physical bodies, our feelings, our perceptions, the way we cognize our sense experiences and the way we construct our “realities”. Women were not created from Adam’s rib. Adam was not the prototype human with Eve a kind of derived exemplar. It is asking a lot, but can we get away from these ancient conceptions of ourselves and take a closer look at the reality of what we actually are? The “I” is only a thought but in order to realize this, a so-called “separate individual” needs to free up all available energy trapped in concepts like male/female, superior/inferior. If we can do this, then we can find a more appropriate way of relating to one another to our mutual benefit and support on the Path.

Reading.

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