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WOMAN, BODHISATTVA, AND BUDDHA

Reiko Ohnuma

In this article, I explore the figure of the male bodhisattva—first and foremost, the Buddha Śākyamuni during his previous lives, but more generally, any male who has taken the vow of a bodhisattva and is currently working his way toward Buddhahood.¹ More specifically, I explore how the male bodhisattva's body is conceived in Indian Buddhist literature and the types of gender imagery invoked in that conception. The particular context in which I examine these issues is the large body of Indian Buddhist narratives involving the theme of the bodhisattva's bodily self-sacrifice.

The bodhisattva's propensity to sacrifice life and limb for others was an extremely popular theme in the Indian Buddhist tradition. Indian Buddhist literature is replete with stories in which the Buddha, during his previous lives as a human being or an animal, cheerfully sacrifices his head, eyes, flesh, blood, or entire body on behalf of someone in need. In his previous birth as King Śibi, for example, the Buddha gouged out his eyes and gave them to a blind man; in his birth as Prince Mahāsattva, he allowed his body to be devoured by a starving tigress; and in his birth as a noble elephant, he ripped off his own tusks and gave them to a greedy hunter.² Such stories dramatically illustrate the great selflessness and compassion cultivated by the Buddha during his long career as a bodhisattva. In terms of the bodhisattva's cultivation of the six "perfections"

An earlier version of this paper was originally presented at the Harvard Buddhist Studies Forum in March 1998 and subsequently presented at the Dartmouth College Feminist Inquiry Seminar in May 2000. I thank the members of both forums for their insightful comments and suggestions. I also thank Lisa Owen of Vanderbilt University for her suggestions about some of the sources I use herein, and my two anonymous reviewers, many of whose suggestions I have incorporated.

¹ A bodhisattva is someone who has made a formal vow to attain full and perfect Buddhahood. Though bodhisattvas can be either male or female, I am here focusing solely on the male bodhisattva. The vast majority of bodhisattvas throughout Indian Buddhist literature are male, and with very few exceptions the Buddha himself, during his previous lives as a bodhisattva, is always depicted as a male.

² For a full list of references for each of these three stories, see the entries "Sivi," "Vyāghri or Mahāsattva," and "Ṣaḍḍanta or Chaddanta" in Leslie Grey, *A Concordance of Buddhist Birth Stories* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990).

(*pāramitā*) needed for Buddhahood (i.e., generosity, morality, forbearance, energy, meditation, and wisdom), they are almost always classified as preeminent examples of the “perfection of generosity” (*dāna-pāramitā*). So generous was the bodhisattva, these stories suggest, that he gave away not only material goods but even *his own body*. Stories involving the bodhisattva’s gift of his body to others became some of the most popular and celebrated stories in the Indian Buddhist tradition.³

It is within this general context that I explore some of the interesting gender imagery employed in connection with the male bodhisattva. Because bodily self-sacrifice is so intimately connected with the bodhisattva career, and because stories of bodily self-sacrifice so often involve a significant amount of discourse on the body, this material constitutes an especially rich resource for exploring the depiction of the male bodhisattva’s body and the types of gender symbolism employed in this depiction.

Drawing primarily on this material, I will advance and substantiate the following thesis: The body of the male bodhisattva occupies a fluid and shifting position in between the bodies of a woman and a Buddha. On the one hand, descriptions of the male bodhisattva’s body invoke much of the imagery of the woman’s body, making both types of body parallel to each other and inferior to the thoroughly masculine body of the Buddha.⁴ On the other hand, such depictions often reverse and resignify the values typically associated with the woman’s body in order to give the bodhisattva’s body a *positive* valuation as the proper precursor to the Buddha’s body, rather than the *negative* valuation normally granted to the body of a woman. Within the Indian Buddhist gender system, the male bodhisattva’s body thus occupies a shifting and fluid position in the ideological continuum running from “woman” to “Buddha.”

Woman’s Body, Bodhisattva’s Body

Buddhist doctrine and meditational theory hold both men’s and women’s bodies to be insubstantial and impermanent conglomerations of flesh, bone, skin, and blood and thus unworthy of the care, attention, and attributions of

³ For more on the bodhisattva’s bodily self-sacrifice, see Reiko Ohnuma, “*Dehadāna*: The ‘Gift of the Body’ in Indian Buddhist Narrative Literature” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, 1997); “The Gift of the Body and the Gift of Dharma,” *History of Religions* 37, no. 4 (1998): 323–59; and “Internal and External Opposition to the Bodhisattva’s Gift of His Body,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2000): 43–75; as well as Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (1932; reprint, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), 181–87; and Eugene Watson Burlingame, trans., *Buddhist Parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 297–336.

⁴ Though Mahayana and Vajrayana texts do depict female Buddhas, my argument throughout assumes the male Buddha of the mainstream tradition.

desirability and permanence we ordinarily bestow upon them.⁵ Nevertheless, recent scholarship has demonstrated quite convincingly that when it comes to *stories* about bodies or *descriptions* of particular bodies, these qualities of impermanence and undesirability—as well as more negative qualities, such as impurity, repulsiveness, and foulness—are largely associated with women's bodies and not with men's. Through careful literary analysis, feminist scholars such as Karen Lang, Kathryn Blackstone, and Liz Wilson have shown that throughout Indian Buddhist literature, whenever bodies are condemned for their filth and pollution or corpses in the charnel ground are meditated upon as emblems of impermanence and suffering, those bodies and corpses are inevitably depicted as female.⁶ Wilson's work, in particular, has demonstrated how frequently female bodies in Indian Buddhist literature are "horrifically transformed" through death, cremation, or mutilation and then used as objects of meditation for the edification of the male subjects who observe them. In contrast, these scholars point out, the male body is never invoked in a similar way; that is, male bodies and male corpses do not generally serve—for either men or women—as emblems of impermanence and suffering.

This contrast between the woman's body and the man's body becomes even starker when the man in question is a bodhisattva. Let us compare, for example, the mutilated body of a woman and the mutilated body of the male bodhisattva that we so often encounter in Buddhist stories of bodily self-sacrifice. If, as Wilson has shown, the mutilated body of a woman frequently serves as a potent reminder of the impurity and foulness of *all* human bodies, might not the mutilated body of a male bodhisattva engaging in self-sacrifice serve a similar purpose? Wilson argues convincingly that such is not the case. Unlike the mutilated body of a woman, a bodhisattva's mutilated body does *not* generally serve as an edifying spectacle of impermanence and suffering for either male or female observers. In fact, far from emphasizing the body's negative qualities, many stories of self-sacrifice actually do just the opposite, instead suggesting

⁵ For scholarship on Indian Buddhist conceptions of the body, see J. H. Bateson, "Body (Buddhist)," in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner's, 1908), 758–60; Yuichi Kajiyama, "The Body," in the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, ed. G. P. Malalasekera, vol. 3 (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Government Press, 1972), fasc. 2, 255–62; Steven Collins, "The Body in Theravāda Buddhist Monasticism," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley, Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions, no. 8 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 185–204; and Paul Williams, "Some Mahāyāna Buddhist Perspectives on the Body," in Coakley, 205–30.

⁶ Karen Christina Lang, "Lord Death's Snare: Gender-Related Imagery in the Theragāthā and the Therīgāthā," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11, no. 2 (1986): 63–79; Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (Richmond, England: Curzon, 1998); and Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

that the male bodhisattva's body—even when cut up, mutilated or dead—is a perfect, adamantine body worthy of elaborate ritual treatment. Wilson thus draws a strong contrast between the body of a woman and the body of a male bodhisattva.⁷

In my own research on stories of bodily self-sacrifice, I, too, have been struck by the extreme idealization of a male bodhisattva's mutilated body and its stark contrast with the repulsive and wholly negative depiction of a mutilated woman.⁸ While the woman's body not only shares in but actually serves as a privileged emblem of the impurity, impermanence, and foulness of all ordinary human forms, the male bodhisattva's body is another matter altogether: like the perfectly controlled and decorous body of a good monk or the golden-colored and irresistibly attractive body of the Buddha, the male bodhisattva's body falls into a Buddhist category of "ideal bodies" that seem to overcome the limitations of the ordinary human form and are exalted rather than degraded. The woman's body and the male bodhisattva's body thus stand at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum of Buddhist conceptions of the body.

This seemingly simple contrast is not, however, the entire story, for as an ample body of scholarship on feminine symbolism in religion has attested, gender imagery is never quite so simple as such a straightforward contrast between "male" and "female" would suggest.⁹ Gender symbols are multivalent and polysemic, and women and women's bodies constitute such a rich symbolic resource that they are inevitably drafted into new contexts, sometimes acquiring new values in the process. In this particular case, I argue that when we shift our attention away from actual female characters to some of the more subtle evocations of female gender invoked within these stories, we find that the male bodhisattva's body is indeed sometimes described using feminine imagery and in a way that makes it strangely akin to the body of a woman.

The Physical Ministrations of Women

My first example of female imagery used in connection with the male bodhisattva is the comparison sometimes drawn between the bodhisattva and the prostitute. There is a rather striking parallelism between these two figures, par-

⁷ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 105–9.

⁸ Ohnuma, "Dehadāna."

⁹ See, for some representative examples, Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman, eds., *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon, 1986); José Ignacio Cabezon, ed., *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); and, more recently, Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

ticularly in regard to their relationships with other beings. Because the prostitute is a woman who eschews the particular love of spouse and family, she is free to bestow her services equally upon all, thus mirroring the bodhisattva's commitment to universal compassion and the service of all sentient beings. The crucial difference between the two, of course, is that the prostitute is driven by greed and bestows her services through exchange, whereas the bodhisattva is driven by compassion and bestows his services through pure generosity. Nevertheless, both the prostitute and the bodhisattva are singularly driven to seduce and satisfy all customers without exception, and both effectively employ a wide variety of skills aimed at pleasing all types of beings.

Liz Wilson, in her discussion of this parallel,¹⁰ draws attention to a Mahayana text called the *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra*, in which the bodhisattva's teaching of the Dharma through skillful means (*upāya-kauśalya*) is explicitly compared to the diverse methods by which prostitutes fleece their customers. The bodhisattva who is skilled in means is likened to a prostitute who has sixty-four means of seduction at her disposal. This is a reference to the list of the "sixty-four arts" of the high-class courtesan enumerated in Indian erotic manuals, including such skills as dancing, singing, writing poetry, flower arranging, fencing, carpentry, and training fighting cocks.¹¹ In the passage in question, these various means of sexual seduction are compared to the bodhisattva's many means of spiritual seduction of beings to the Dharma:

As an illustration, consider a prostitute. She has sixty-four seductive wiles; for example, to obtain wealth and treasures, she may coax a man into generously giving her his valuables by pretending that she is going to marry him, and then she drives him away without regret when she has obtained the precious objects. Similarly, good man, a Bodhisattva who practices ingenuity can use his skill according to [particular] circumstances; he teaches and converts all sentient beings by manifesting himself in forms they like and by freely giving them everything they need, even his body.¹²

As Wilson notes, "The use of skillful means is thus a feminine wile, a dharmic seduction that resembles the samsaric overtures of *filles de joie*."¹³

I would argue, however, that this parallelism between the prostitute and

¹⁰ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 124–25.

¹¹ See A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the History and Culture of the Indian Sub-continent before the Coming of the Muslims*, 3d rev. ed. (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1982), 183.

¹² *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra*, translated in Garma C. C. Chang, *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Selections from the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), 434.

¹³ Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 124.

the bodhisattva is due not only to the prostitute's unique status as a woman totally un beholden to marriage and reproduction and thus able to minister equally to all, but also to the fact that the prostitute specifically uses her *body* to please her clients. Though she may have sixty-four means of seduction at her disposal, it is, after all, the gift of her body that undergirds all other skills and defines her as a prostitute, just as, one might argue, the bodhisattva's gift of his body similarly undergirds all other of his skillful means and defines him as a bodhisattva. Indeed, the gift of one's body is said to be one of five gifts that define a bodhisattva and that every bodhisattva must perform in the course of his career.¹⁴ Thus, both the prostitute and the bodhisattva may be said to be ultimately defined by a physical gift of the body.

The parallelism between the prostitute's gift of her body and the bodhisattva's gift of his body is implied in another location as well. In a famous didactic Buddhist text known as the *Milindapañha*, a king named Milinda directs a series of difficult questions on Buddhist doctrine to a monk named Nāgasena. In one of these exchanges, King Milinda asks Nāgasena about a previous birth of the Buddha. When the Buddha was formerly a king named Śibi, he gouged out his own eyes and gave them to a blind, old beggar. Later on, he magically created a new pair of divine eyes for himself by performing an Act of Truth.¹⁵ In the discussion in question, King Milinda fails to understand how King Śibi's eyes could have been restored, since there was no physical basis left from which they might arise. The monk Nāgasena explains that there *is* such a thing as truth and that by performing an Act of Truth, one can make things happen: rain can fall, fires can go out, and so on. Thus, King Śibi's eyes arose through the power of truth: "Through the power of truth and without any other cause, Great King, did that divine eye arise."¹⁶

Nāgasena further illustrates the great power of the truth by telling a story about a prostitute. One day a king, impressed by the size and strength of the mighty Ganges River, asked the assembled townspeople, countryfolk, minis-

¹⁴ See, for example, *Cariyāpīṭakattakathā* 96, cited in I. B. Horner, trans., *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, part 3, *Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpīṭaka*, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. 31 (London: Pali Text Society, 1975), pt. 2, p. 14 n. 1.

¹⁵ An "Act of Truth" is a ritual procedure in which one makes a truthful statement and specifies what result one desires from making this statement (e.g., "I state that X is true, and if X is true, may Y occur"). If the statement is true, the power of truth itself causes the result to occur. The Act of Truth is a common motif in Hindu and Buddhist literature and is frequently employed in Buddhist stories of bodily sacrifice to restore the body part given away. For more on the Act of Truth, see, for example, Eugene Watson Burlingame, "The Act of Truth (Saccakiriya): A Hindu Spell and Its Employment as a Psychic Motif in Hindu Fiction," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1917): 429–67.

¹⁶ Vilhelm Trenckner, ed., *The Milindapañho: Being Dialogues between King Milinda and the Buddhist Sage Nāgasena* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1880), 120.

ters, soldiers, and chief advisers whether any of them could make the mighty river flow backward. In all the crowd, only one person could do so—the prostitute Bindumati, who performed an Act of Truth and reversed the river's flow. Upon seeing this, the king was astonished: "What power of truth is there in you, who are thievish, fraudulent, evil, deceitful, wicked, who have broken and overstepped the bounds [of decency], and live by plundering those who are blind?" Bindumati explained that even one such as she "could turn the world with its gods upside down" by means of the power of truth. When the king asked her to repeat her Act of Truth, Bindumati replied:

Whoever gives me money, Great King, whether he be a Kṣatriya, a Brahman, a Vaiśya, a Śūdra, or anyone else, I serve each of them in the same manner. There is no special distinction in one who is called a Kṣatriya, nor is there anything despicable in one who is called a Śūdra. I amuse myself with whomever has money, free of fawning and repugnance alike. This was my Act of Truth, Lord, by which I made this great Ganges River flow backwards.¹⁷

An obvious question raised by this story is this: Why does Nāgasena specifically use a *prostitute* to illustrate how an Act of Truth works? Previous scholarship on the Act of Truth, in commenting on this story, has frequently suggested that depicting a prostitute performing an Act of Truth highlights the great power of the truth; in other words, so powerful is the truth that even an immoral and lowly person such as a prostitute can make the Ganges River flow backward by means of its awesome power.¹⁸

Given the didactic nature of the *Milindapañha*, this is no doubt true. However, I believe that more attention should be paid to the obvious parallelism between the prostitute and King Śibi, because it is specifically King Śibi's Act of Truth concerning the gift of his eyes that is illustrated by means of the prostitute Bindumati. Why is this an apt illustration? Because both the king and the prostitute give away their bodies; both use their bodies to please all solicitors equally, regardless of their social status (even beggars, in the case of King Śibi); both satisfy all supplicants with total equanimity ("free of fawning and repugnance alike," a common characteristic of the bodhisattva); and both draw on the power of their bodily gifts to make miraculous things happen (King Śibi's restoration of his eyes and Bindumati's reversal of the flow of the Ganges River). Thus, a direct parallel is drawn between the bodhisattva's gift of his body and the prostitute's gift of her body—a parallel, I argue, that subtly genders the male bodhisattva's body as feminine.

At the same time, a sharp distinction is still maintained between the bo-

¹⁷ Ibid., 122.

¹⁸ See, for example, Burlingame, "Act of Truth."

dhisattva and the prostitute. King Śibi is generous, compassionate, and kind, while Bindumati is evil, deceitful, and wicked. King Śibi gives his eyes away as a free gift; Bindumati “amuses [herself] with whomever has money.” King Śibi allows a blind man to see; Bindumati makes a living “by plundering those who are blind.” Thus, a strict ideological distinction between “woman” and “male bodhisattva” is maintained; the prostitute is not celebrated, nor is the male bodhisattva degraded. Nonetheless, the female imagery of the prostitute is invoked and utilized in a limited way: the prostitute who ministers sexually to others by means of her body is drafted into the service of representing and suggesting the male bodhisattva’s bodily self-sacrifice.

Much the same thing occurs in my second example of female imagery used in connection with the male bodhisattva. This is the comparison sometimes drawn between a bodhisattva and a mother. Throughout a wide variety of Buddhist texts, bodhisattvas are constantly exhorted to love others “as a mother loves her only child.” A mother’s love is frequently invoked as the most intense and self-sacrificing type of love possible and thus as a suitable model for the aspiring bodhisattva. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between them: Whereas the mother selfishly loves only her own child in this way, the bodhisattva loves all beings with equal intensity; and whereas the mother’s love is a manifestation of craving and attachment, the bodhisattva’s love is detached and characterized by equanimity. In other words, the comparison is applicable only to a certain degree; it is the *imagery* of motherhood that is borrowed, not all of its connotations.

Although the parallelism between a mother’s love for her child and a bodhisattva’s love for all beings has frequently been noted before, it is again the explicitly *physical* aspect of this love—love through one’s *body*—that I believe needs to be brought to the fore. For just as the quintessential mother nurtures her child physically through breast milk, the quintessential bodhisattva offers his body as food to feed hungry beings. This, in fact, is the most common reason the bodhisattva commits a deed of bodily self-sacrifice. Thus, the bodhisattva is similar to the mother not only because of the intensity of his love but also because he shares with the mother a tendency to express this love by giving away his body. As in the case of the prostitute, we may even go so far as to say that both the bodhisattva and the mother are ultimately defined by a physical gift of the body.

This comparison between the bodhisattva’s gift of his body and the mother’s gift of her body is suggested in several different stories. In the famous story of the tigress, for example, the bodhisattva is a man who sacrifices his own body to feed a starving tigress.¹⁹ This starving tigress also happens to be a new

¹⁹ On the various versions of this story, see “Vyāghri” in Grey (cited in n. 2).

mother: she has just given birth to a litter of cubs and is so exhausted and crazed with hunger that she intends to devour her newborn cubs instead of feeding them. The bodhisattva saves both the mother and her cubs by offering his own body as food and thus appeasing the mother's devouring hunger. This juxtaposition—the “bad mother” who refuses to feed her children and wishes only to devour them, and the bodhisattva who offers up his own body to save the children's lives—suggests that the bodhisattva is, in fact, the “true” mother, the “real” mother, the “good mother” who freely gives her body away. The very structure of the story highlights the comparison between the bodhisattva's gift of his body in the form of food and the mother's gift of her body in the form of breast milk.

In one version of the tigress story, this parallel becomes even more explicit. In the *Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtra*'s version of the tale, the bodhisattva is a prince named Mahāsattva who throws his body off a cliff and allows the starving tigress to devour him.²⁰ Just as this momentous deed is occurring, Prince Mahāsattva's own mother, the queen, experiences the strange phenomenon of milk being produced from her nipples. One way of interpreting this episode is to surmise that as Prince Mahāsattva is being killed by the tigress, his mother's body instinctively reacts to his distress by producing milk—just as it reacted, perhaps, when Prince Mahāsattva was a crying baby. I would also suggest, however, that the text is here drawing a comparison between the figures of the bodhisattva and the mother in regard to the gift of the body: the bodhisattva gives away his body in the form of food, just as the mother gives away her body in the form of breast milk.

An even clearer example of this comparison is offered by the story of Rūpāvati, which exists in several Sanskrit versions.²¹ Here, the Buddha Śākya-muni, in a previous life as a woman named Rūpāvati, cuts off her breasts and feeds them to a starving woman in order to keep the woman from devouring her newborn infant. In this case, the figures of the bodhisattva and the mother are almost totally conflated. Once again, we have a “bad mother” who refuses to feed her child and instead intends to devour him, in contrast to the bodhisattva as a “good mother” who willingly offers her body to save the child. The *Divyāvadāna*'s version of the story, in fact, goes out of its way to suggest that

²⁰ Johannes Nobel, ed., *Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra: Das Goldglanz-sūtra, ein Sanskrittext des Mahāyāna-Buddhismus* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1937), 85–97.

²¹ The three versions of which I am aware are found in the *Divyāvadāna*, the *Avadānakalpalatā*, and Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamāla*. See E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil, eds., *The Divyāvadāna: A Collection of Early Buddhist Legends* (1886; reprint, Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1970), 469–81; Paraśurāma Lakshmana Vaidya, ed., *Avadāna-kalpalatā of Kṣemendra*, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, nos. 22–23 (Darbhanga, India: Mithila Institute, 1959), 2:316–19; and Michael Hahn, *Haribhaṭṭa and Copadatta, Two Authors in the Succession of Āryaśūra: On the Rediscovery of Parts of Their Jātakamālas*, 2d rev. ed. (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1992), 51–57.

Rūpāvati, and not the starving woman, constitutes the boy's "true mother": Rūpāvati and the child physically resemble one another, for both are described in exactly the same terms, as "pleasing, attractive, and beautiful, endowed with an excellent, bright complexion"—a description that sharply contrasts with the appearance of the starving woman herself.²² Moreover, at the end of the story, Rūpāvati is identified as a past life of the Buddha, whereas the child is identified as a past life of the Buddha's son Rāhula—once again suggesting that Rūpāvati is the boy's "true mother."

In this story, then, the bodhisattva who gives away his body is, at the same time, a kind of mother who has intense compassion for a newborn child. Moreover, she is a mother who very literally breast-feeds, by cutting off her own breasts and allowing them to be eaten. Thus, once again, the bodhisattva's gift of his body in the form of food and the mother's gift of her body in the form of breast milk are made parallel—or, in this case, virtually collapsed into one. Nonetheless, an ideological distinction still remains between the mother and the bodhisattva: whereas the mother breast-feeds in a passive manner, letting milk leak involuntarily out of her breasts, Rūpāvati (the bodhisattva) breast-feeds in a much more active and heroic manner, literally slicing off her breasts and feeding them to the other woman. Once again, the imagery of motherhood is utilized, but the hierarchical superiority of "bodhisattva" over "mother" is still maintained.

One final, startling detail of the story cannot pass without comment. At the end of the story, Rūpāvati draws upon the power of her magnanimous deed to perform an Act of Truth. But instead of using this Act of Truth to restore her severed breasts (as we might reasonably expect), Rūpāvati uses it to get rid of her female gender altogether and transform herself into a man, "for manhood is an abode of virtue in this world."²³ This startling development underscores the intended comparison between mothers and male bodhisattvas. It suggests that Rūpāvati has "really" been a male bodhisattva all along and that the story initially depicts her as a woman simply as a way of emphasizing the comparison with mothers and breast-feeding.

If we can now generalize from our two comparisons—the prostitute and the mother—then perhaps we can say that the love and attention commonly provided by male bodhisattvas are sometimes likened to the love and attention commonly provided by women, particularly in their roles as prostitute and as mother. Indeed, the bodhisattva in some sense combines the best qualities of both, thereby overcoming the faults characteristic of each type of woman. The prostitute's fault is that, although she ministers equally to everyone, her love is

²² Cowell and Neil, *Divyavadāna*, 471.

²³ This quotation comes from the version of Rūpāvati's story found in Haribhāṭṭa's *Jātakamaḷā* (Hahn, 55).

neither genuine nor freely given; the mother's fault is that, although her love is both genuine and freely given, it is restricted solely to her own children. The bodhisattva, combining the best of both figures, has a genuine and freely given love that is showered equally upon all beings—like a loving mother who prostitutes herself to the entire world.

In considering the significance of gender within these comparisons, however, it is especially important to emphasize the *physical* nature of this love—love through one's *body*—and the way in which women are used as an emblem of this type of love. Within these comparisons, the intensely physical ministrations enacted by the bodhisattva through self-sacrifice are compared to the physical ministrations commonly provided by women; both women and male bodhisattvas tend to *give their bodies away*. And this, I would argue, subtly genders the bodhisattva's gift of his body as feminine.

Bodhisattva versus Buddha

In many contexts, moreover, to gender something as feminine is implicitly to contrast it with—and subordinate it to—that which is gendered as masculine. As many feminist theorists have demonstrated, the attribute of “feminine” does not stand in a vacuum; it is a part of the ideological gender system by which “masculine” and “feminine” are opposed to each other and made to appear as mutually exclusive categories standing in a hierarchical relationship of dominance and subordination.²⁴ In this particular case, I argue that to gender the bodhisattva's gift of his body as feminine is to contrast it with the Buddha's gift of Dharma, which is implicitly gendered as masculine.

I have demonstrated elsewhere that both a parallel and a hierarchy are consistently drawn between the bodhisattva's gift of his body in the past and the Buddha's gift of Dharma in the present.²⁵ Many stories dealing with the bodhisattva's bodily self-sacrifice suggest, in various ways, that whereas the bodhisattva gives away a physical body, the Buddha gives away a “spiritual body,” which is the body of Dharma (*dharmakāya*), that is, the body of his teachings. The bodhisattva enacts a physical salvation, while the Buddha enacts a spiritual salvation. The bodhisattva's gift of his body and the Buddha's gift of the “body of Dharma” are thus parallel, yet they also stand in a hierarchical relationship:

²⁴ Teresa de Lauretis, for example, defines the gender system as follows: “The cultural conceptions of male and female as two complementary yet mutually exclusive categories into which all human beings are placed constitute within each culture a gender system, a symbolic system or system of meanings, that correlates sex to cultural contents according to social values and hierarchies”; see *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 5.

²⁵ Ohnuma, “Gift of the Body” (cited in n. 3).

whereas the bodhisattva gives away his physical body to appease the base sufferings of hunger and thirst, the Buddha gives away his “Dharma-body” to eradicate permanently the great suffering of samsara (the endless cycle of re-birth). Clearly, the Buddha’s gift is vastly superior to that of the bodhisattva, and the revolutionary transformation entailed by the attainment of Buddhahood is thereby celebrated and affirmed. One effect of subtly gendering the bodhisattva’s gift of his body as feminine, then, is to contrast it with, and subordinate it to, the Buddha’s gift of Dharma, which is implicitly gendered as masculine. The bodhisattva’s gift of his body is “physical” and “female” in nature—akin to the gifts of the prostitute and the mother—whereas the Buddha’s gift of Dharma is “spiritual” and “male.”

Indirect evidence in support of this claim may be found in a few verses of the *Gotami Apadāna*, which has recently been translated by Jonathan Walters.²⁶ In these verses, the Buddha’s foster mother, Mahāpajāpati Gotami, compares her physical nourishment of the baby Buddha through breast milk with his “spiritual nourishment” of her by means of the Dharma:

It was I, O well-gone-one,
who reared you, flesh and bones (*rūpa-kāya*).
But by your nurturing was reared
my flawless dharma-body (*dhamma-tanu*).

I suckled you with mother’s milk
which quenched thirst for a moment.
From you I drank the dharma-milk,
perpetually tranquil.²⁷

Thus, whereas Mahāpajāpati provided the Buddha with a physical body (*rūpa-kāya*), he provided her with the “body of Dharma” (*dhamma-tanu*); whereas she fed him physical milk that satiated his thirst for a moment, he fed her the “milk of Dharma” that satiated her thirst forever. Clearly, there is both a parallel and a hierarchical ranking between her gift and his gift. On the one hand, the gift of breast milk and the gift of Dharma are parallel; on the other hand, the physical nurturance provided by the mother is clearly inferior to the spiritual nurturance provided by the Buddha. Moreover, although the male bodhisattva’s gift of his body is not explicitly mentioned in these verses, we have already seen in other contexts that this gift is similar in nature to a mother’s gift of her breast milk. Both gifts are parallel to the Buddha’s gift of Dharma and

²⁶ Jonathan S. Walters, trans., “Gotami’s Story,” in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 113–38. For an interesting discussion of this *apadāna*, see also Jonathan S. Walters, “A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha’s Mother’s Story,” *History of Religions* 33, no. 4 (1994): 358–79.

²⁷ Walters, “Gotami’s Story,” 121.

might be used to symbolize it, but both are also ultimately inferior; both can be considered “physical” and “female” in contrast to the “spiritual” and “male” gift provided by the Buddha.

Many feminist theorists have written of the way in which women tend to be intimately associated with the physical and natural realm. Women often become emblematic of physicality itself, in contrast with the spirituality that tends to be associated with men. “Women,” as Elizabeth Grosz has noted, “function as *the* body for men,” thereby denying men’s corporeality and allowing men to inhabit a pure, disembodied, and transcendent place of authority.²⁸ Although these ideas have been discussed primarily in relation to the history of Western thought and I do not wish to overstate their applicability to a non-Western context, they are at least partially applicable to non-Western traditions such as Indian Buddhism. In the present case, I argue, women are indeed associated with physicality and men with spirituality; therefore, if one wishes to draw a hierarchical distinction between the physical salvation offered by the bodhisattva and the spiritual salvation offered by the fully enlightened Buddha, women and feminine imagery constitute one important symbolic resource for doing so. The bodhisattva’s physical salvation of beings through dramatic deeds of bodily sacrifice is indeed celebrated and praised, yet by the subtle gendering of this salvation in feminine terms, it is effectively subordinated to the purely spiritual salvation offered by the Buddha.

***Tathāgata-garbha* and the Reversal of Values**

But subtly feminizing the male bodhisattva is, perhaps, a dangerous game. Women and their bodies, as we have seen, carry many intensely negative connotations in Buddhist literature and might therefore be unsuitable as symbolic vehicles for the male bodhisattva, who is generally depicted in a wholly positive way. This leads me to the second half of my thesis, namely, that although the male bodhisattva is sometimes described by means of feminine imagery, many of these images reverse and resignify the values typically associated with the female body and therefore become positive rather than negative in tone.

My first example of this use and reversal of feminine images pertains exclusively neither to the male bodhisattva nor to stories of bodily self-sacrifice. Instead, it involves a more general concept. I am referring here to the Mahayana notion of *tathāgata-garbha*. *Tathāgata* is a synonym for *Buddha*, whereas *garbha* can signify a “womb” or “embryo.” *Tathāgata-garbha* is thus

²⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 38. Elsewhere, Grosz states: “The coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order.” *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14.

generally translated as “*Tathāgata-womb*” or “*Tathāgata-embryo*” and refers to an indwelling potential for Buddhahood that every living being is said to possess and that is often envisioned in female images of pregnancy and gestation. Although the notion of *tathāgata-garbha* might potentially be seen as a positive female symbol for Buddhahood—and has sometimes been celebrated as such²⁹—it is important to take a closer look at exactly how female imagery is employed in this case. Indeed, I contend that the notion of *tathāgata-garbha* uses the female imagery of pregnancy and gestation in a way that reverses all of the values typically associated with the female body.

This can be clarified if we look at how the body is depicted in each case. Several feminist scholars have detected in Indian Buddhist literature a persistent emphasis not only upon the foulness and impurity of women’s bodies but also upon their deceptive and duplicitous nature.³⁰ Women’s bodies, much more so than men’s, are described as being foul and disgusting on the inside while appearing beautiful and pure on the outside. A woman’s beauty is depicted as an external, artificial creation—like a painted puppet or doll—that relies on clothing, perfume, and ornaments to cover up and conceal the “bag of excrement” that lies underneath and constitutes woman’s true nature. Descriptions of women’s tempting bodies display a persistent use of this inside/outside imagery. A woman’s body is likened, for example, to “a multicolored bottle containing a potent poison”³¹ and to other such images of concealment and deception. Over and over again, the male observer is encouraged to see through a woman’s specious external charms to discern the filth and impurity that lie within: “Seeing bodies that are beautiful on the outside, the foolish man is attracted. Knowing that those bodies are defiled on the inside, the self-possessed man is indifferent.”³²

The notion of *tathāgata-garbha*, in contrast, executes an exact reversal of the values of this inside/outside imagery in its description of indwelling Buddhahood. As William Grosnick has noted, for example, the third-century C.E. *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* consists largely of a collection of similes that “portray something extremely precious, valuable, or noble [i.e., the potential for Buddhahood] . . . contained within something abhorrent and vile [i.e., a covering

²⁹ See especially Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 187–88.

³⁰ See, for example, Lang, 71–73; Blackstone, 69–75; and Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 93–95 (all cited in n. 6).

³¹ This phrase comes from the *Udayanavatsarājaparivartah* (part of the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*), qtd. in Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition*, 2d ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 41.

³² This quotation appears in chap. 26 of Cowell and Neil’s *Divyāvadāna* (cited in n. 21), 355.

of passions and afflictions].”³³ Many of the similes used in this sutra, in fact, are almost exact transpositions of the inside/outside images used in other contexts to describe women’s bodies. Thus, whereas a woman’s body is likened to a razor blade smeared with honey, filth hidden inside a beautiful vase, or a dangerous knife covered with silk,³⁴ the *tathāgata-garbha* is here compared to pure honey surrounded by a swarm of bees, pure gold that has fallen into a pit of waste, and a pure gold statue wrapped in worn-out rags.³⁵ A Mahayana sutra says of a woman’s body that “the interior is feared, though the external appearance is serene,” whereas the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* says of *tathāgata-garbha* that “although the outside seems like something useless, the inside is genuine and not to be destroyed.”³⁶ The two images are thus exact transpositions of each other. The notion of *tathāgata-garbha*, while borrowing the imagery and language of female pregnancy and gestation, reverses the values typically associated with the female body and thus constitutes an implicit denigration of women’s actual biological functions. The *tathāgata-garbha* constitutes the “real” womb, the “real” embryo, of which woman’s womb and embryo are only pale and imperfect reflections (just as Mahāpajāpati’s breast milk is nothing more than a sorry substitute for the “true” milk, which is the milk of Dharma).

The *tathāgata-garbha* is not restricted to male bodhisattvas, of course. Both men and women are said to possess it, so the notion itself is not gender-biased; if anything, it provides us with an argument for the ultimate equality of men and women and the irrelevance of all gender distinctions. Nevertheless, it is the *way* in which *tathāgata-garbha* means what it means that is significant: through the notion of *tathāgata-garbha*, the potential for Buddhahood—the most exalted ideal of the Buddhist tradition—is signified as a complete reversal of all those values normally associated with the female form.

Jewels on the Outside, Jewels on the Inside

My second example of the strategy of reversing the values of the inside/outside imagery typically associated with women’s bodies takes us back to the male bodhisattva and the theme of bodily self-sacrifice. It concerns the use of imagery associated with jewels in Indian Buddhist literature. There is a strik-

³³ William Grosnick, trans., “The *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*,” in Lopez, 92–106; the quotation is on p. 93.

³⁴ The first two similes appear in the *Lalitavistara* (S. Lefmann, ed., *Lalitavistara* [Halle, Germany: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1902–1908], 1:207–8); the third simile appears in the *Udayanavatsarājaparivartah* (Paul, 41).

³⁵ All three images appear in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*; see Grosnick, 97, 98, 100–101.

³⁶ The first quotation comes from the *Udayanavatsarājaparivartah* (see Paul, 41); the second quotation comes from the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* (see Grosnick, 97).

ing difference between Buddhist depictions of the woman's body and the bodhisattva's body in relation to the literary motif of the jewel.

As we have already seen, women are frequently said to conceal the foulness and impurity of their bodies through various artificial means, such as clothing, cosmetics, and jewelry. Jewels and jeweled ornaments are repeatedly mentioned as one of the primary artifices by which a woman presents a seductive image of her body and conceals her true nature as a "bag of excrement." A Mahayana sutra, for example, states: "Ornaments on women show off their beauty. But within them there is great evil, as in the body there is air. With a piece of bright silk, one conceals a sharp knife. The ornaments on a woman have a similar end."³⁷ Likewise, in the *Āśokāvadāna*, when the Buddhist elder Upagupta goes to visit the prostitute Vasavadattā, who lies mutilated in the charnel ground, his comments make clear the role that jeweled ornaments play in a woman's deceptive beauty: "When you were concealed by various external things that lead to passion, such as clothing and ornaments, those who observed you could not see you as you really are, even if they made an effort. But now this form of yours is seen sitting here in its true nature, free from artificial contrivances."³⁸ Even in the paradigmatic life story of the Buddha (as told in the *Buddhacarita*), we find that Siddhārtha's final realization before renouncing the world deals explicitly with women's use of jeweled ornaments. Waking up in the middle of the night and seeing the sleeping women of his harem arrayed in various disgusting poses, Siddhārtha thinks to himself: "Impure and foul—such is the true nature of women in the world of the living. But deceived by clothing and ornaments, a man succumbs to passion in the company of women."³⁹ These types of statements are so common and consistent, in fact, that the mere mention of a woman's jewels constitutes a sort of shorthand for a broader complex of ideas concerning the deceptive and artificial beauty that women construct to conceal their inner impurity and lead men into seduction. The impure filth on the inside concealed by the beauty of jewels on the outside is a consistent trope in the description of women's bodies.

In contrast, jewels are used quite differently in stories of bodily self-sacrifice involving the male bodhisattva. Jewel imagery, in general, plays a predominant and pervasive role in much Buddhist discourse on the bodhisattva, but I am interested here primarily in the way in which the body given away by the male bodhisattva is consistently compared to or identified as a jewel. A few examples will suffice. In many stories of bodily self-sacrifice, the supplicant who

³⁷ This passage, too, comes from the *Udayanavatsarājaparivartaḥ*, which seems to be a particularly rich source for inside/outside images of women (see Paul, 41).

³⁸ Cowell and Neil, 354.

³⁹ *Buddhacarita* 5.64. E. H. Johnston, ed., *The Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha*, by Āśvaghoṣa, new enlarged ed. (1936; reprint, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), pt. 1, p. 54.

asks for the bodhisattva's body is really the god Śakra in disguise, who is only testing the bodhisattva's generosity. Such stories sometimes describe this test as being analogous to the process of testing a jewel to ensure that it is not artificial. For example, in the *Aviśahyaśreṣṭhi Jātaka* (*Jātakamālā* no. 5), Śakra tests the bodhisattva's generosity by gradually taking away everything he owns to see whether he will continue to be generous toward others. At the end of the story, after revealing his true identity, Śakra says to the bodhisattva: "I hid your possessions in order to increase your fame and glory by subjecting you to a test. After all, even if a jewel is beautiful, it cannot become a famous and priceless jewel without being subjected to a test."⁴⁰ Śakra's analogy implicitly suggests that the bodhisattva himself is a jewel.

In other cases, moreover, this comparison pertains explicitly to the bodhisattva's *body*. In a story from the *Sūtrālaṅkāra*, for example, the bodhisattva mutilates and sacrifices his body on behalf of a hungry falcon, who is really Śakra in disguise. Śakra justifies this cruel test of the bodhisattva by stating: "When one chooses an excellent jewel, one examines it several times in order to make sure that it is not fake. The means of examining a jewel are to cut it, shatter it, expose it to fire, and strike it; then alone can one know that it is not fake."⁴¹ In this case, the bodhisattva's body is explicitly compared to a jewel, and the torture undergone by the bodhisattva's body during self-sacrifice is compared to the cutting, burning, and rubbing of a jewel in order to ensure that it is genuine.

Another comparison of the bodhisattva's body to a jewel occurs in the *Candraprabhāvadāna* (*Divyāvadāna* no. 22), in which the bodhisattva is a king named Candraprabha who cuts off his own head and gives it to a Brahman supplicant.⁴² This awe-inspiring deed of self-sacrifice is presaged by two ominous dreams experienced by the king's two chief ministers, both of which involve the loss of jewels. The first minister dreams that the king's jeweled crown is taken away, and the second dreams that a "boat made out of all kinds of jewels" belonging to the king is broken into hundreds of pieces. In both dreams, the loss of jewels augurs the loss of King Candraprabha's head. This identification between the king's head and a jewel is further reinforced by the ministers' subsequent attempt to persuade the supplicant to accept a pile of "jeweled heads" in place of the king's actual head.

More explicit jewel-as-head imagery occurs throughout the *Manicūdāva-*

⁴⁰ Hendrik Kern, ed., *The Jātaka-mālā: Stories of Buddha's Former Incarnations*, Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), p. 27, v. 32.

⁴¹ The story in question is no. 64 in *Aśvaghōṣa's Sūtrālaṅkāra*. My translation of the passage is based on Huber's French translation of the Chinese version; see E. Huber, trans., *Aśvaghōṣa Sūtrālaṅkāra* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1908), 332.

⁴² Cowell and Neil, 314–28.

dāna, in which the bodhisattva is a king named Mañicūḍa (“Jewel Crest”) who is born with a jewel attached to his head, “brilliant and beautiful, excellent in eight ways, and admired by thousands [of people].”⁴³ The text consistently emphasizes the fact that the jewel covers King Mañicūḍa’s head (having “grown over three-fourths of his head”) and penetrates very deeply inside his head (having “entered down into the roof of his palate” “with very deep roots”).⁴⁴ When King Mañicūḍa decides to give away his crest-jewel, the text emphasizes the fact that it can be removed only by splitting open his skull; in fact, when the jewel is removed, his very brain comes out along with it. In King Mañicūḍa’s case, then, the gift of his body is the gift of an actual jewel.

Though many more examples could be cited, these few should suffice to show the striking difference in the use of jewel imagery when applied to a woman’s body and when applied to the body of a male bodhisattva. Whereas a woman uses jewels as an artificial disguise to conceal the true nature of her body, a male bodhisattva’s body itself constitutes a jewel—the genuine thing, devoid of false advertising or artifice. Whereas a woman’s body has an impure inside concealed by the artificial beauty of jewels on the outside, a male bodhisattva has an ordinary physical head that must be split open to reveal the precious jewel lying underneath. Thus, just as we saw in the case of *tathāgata-garbha* imagery, the male bodhisattva’s body is depicted using quasi-feminine imagery (that of jeweled ornaments) but in a way that directly reverses the inside/outside values typically associated with the body of a woman.

This gender-related use of jewel imagery can also be elucidated in terms of the notion of “open” and “closed” bodies. Bernard Faure, in speaking of Chan notions of the body, contrasts the “open, porous, messed up body” of ordinary deluded people with the closed, bounded, and impenetrable body of the Chan practitioner.⁴⁵ A similar contrast is drawn by Liz Wilson, who borrows Bakhtin’s notions of the “grotesque” and “classical” bodies.⁴⁶ On the one hand, Buddhist meditation on the foulness of the body tends to conceive of the body in “grotesque” terms—an array of nine orifices continuously oozing all manner of vile substances. On the other hand, much of Buddhist monastic discipline is concerned with producing a “classical” body—one clearly bounded, carefully regulated, and shut off from material exchanges with the outside world. Wilson

⁴³ Ratna Handurukande, ed., *Mañicūḍavadāna, Being a Translation and Edition, and Lokānanda, a Transliteration and Synopsis*, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. 24 (London: Pali Text Society, 1967), 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 77, 79, 85.

⁴⁵ Bernard Faure, “Substitute Bodies in Chan/Zen Buddhism,” in *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*, ed. Jane Marie Law (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 211–29; the relevant passage is on 212–13.

⁴⁶ Liz Wilson, “The Female Body as a Source of Horror and Insight in Post-Ashokan Indian Buddhism,” in Law, 76–99; the relevant passage is on 91–94.

further associates the “open” and “closed” bodies with specific genders. In stories involving “horrific transformations” of the female body, the woman is depicted as a “grotesque” or “open” body, with undue emphasis on the orifices of her body and the substances they emit. The aversion and repulsion caused by viewing this body, Wilson contends, produces in the male spectator a “classical” or “closed” body, characterized by complete physical closure and impenetrable boundaries. (Once again, women serve as *the* body for men and thus allow men to deny their own corporeality.) Furthermore, Wilson claims that this association of the two bodies with specific genders is not limited to stories of horrific transformation but holds true for Buddhist thought in general.

The differential use of jewel imagery in regard to women and male bodhisattvas that I have outlined accords well with this general picture of “open” and “closed” bodies. A woman’s body is “open” and “grotesque”—a porous, leaky sieve that is constantly and involuntarily oozing with impure bodily substances. The only way she can disguise this open body is by patching it together with an artificial exterior built out of makeup, clothing, and jewelry. Jewels are an especially effective disguise precisely because of their impenetrable and altogether “closed” nature. A male bodhisattva’s body, by contrast, is a “closed” and “classical” body. Despite the fact that stories of bodily self-sacrifice frequently depict the bodhisattva cutting open his body and shedding blood and pus, this cutting is compared to the cutting of a jewel and only serves to reveal the pure, impenetrable, and adamant jewel-body that constitutes the bodhisattva’s true form. Thus, the woman’s body may appear to be “closed” but is actually “open,” whereas the bodhisattva’s body may appear to be “open” but is actually “closed.” The bodhisattva thus executes an exact transposition of the inside/outside values typically associated with the bodies of women, even while making use of feminine imagery in his contrast with the thoroughly masculine Buddha.

I hope that these far-flung examples substantiate my basic argument that within the Indian Buddhist gender system, a male bodhisattva’s body occupies a fluid and versatile position in between the bodies of a woman and a Buddha. On the one hand, descriptions of the bodhisattva’s body invoke much of the imagery of the woman’s body, making the two bodies parallel to each other in their inferiority to the masculine body of the Buddha; on the other hand, such depictions may reverse and resignify the values typically associated with the woman’s body in order to give the bodhisattva’s body a positive valuation as the proper precursor to the Buddha’s body, rather than the negative valuation normally granted to the body of a woman. Such depictions constitute both a fantasy that men can actually have the alluring bodies of women without their impurity and at the same time a recognition that this alluring beauty remains “female” in nature—nothing more than a physical precursor to the transcendent, spiritual, and disembodied beauty of the Buddha, which is implicitly gen-

dered as male. Returning once again to the image of the jewel, we might say that whereas a woman wears jewels as an outer deception, and whereas a male bodhisattva's body itself constitutes a jewel, the Buddha takes off his jewels permanently on the night of his renunciation because his physical body itself has come to bear the spiritual and transcendent beauty that can only metaphorically be represented by jewels. The Buddha's body thus represents the male fantasy's culmination.

The Bodhisattva and the Reversal of Values

Let me conclude the arguments I have made by suggesting that gender and gender imagery are not the only realm in which the figure of the bodhisattva engages in a "reversal of values." In fact, a lot of Buddhist discourse on the bodhisattva revolves around the idea that those things which would ordinarily be conceived of negatively when undertaken on behalf of *oneself* may be conceived of positively when undertaken by the bodhisattva out of compassion for *others*. This is the logic that underlies, for example, the famous meditation on the "exchange of self and others" that appears in chapter 8 of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.⁴⁷ Here, the bodhisattva is instructed to cultivate the negative emotions of hatred, jealousy, and envy; but instead of directing them toward others from his own perspective, he should direct them toward himself from the perspective of another. In this way, he will come to sympathize with other beings, minimize his own needs, and put all his energy into benefiting others. Thus, emotions that would keep an ordinary person in a state of delusion and bondage instead promote the bodhisattva's compassion and his progress on the path to Buddhahood. Within the context of the bodhisattva's extreme compassion and "other-oriented" perspective, the traditional values of such emotions are reversed.

Taking such a strategy to its extremes, many Mahayana texts revel in their depiction of the bodhisattva as a being who reverses all of the values of traditional Buddhist terminology. Thus, the *Vinayaviniścaya-Upāli-pariprcchā* states that the bodhisattva should have no fear of sins involving "passion" (*rāga*), since passion brings him closer to other beings.⁴⁸ The *Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra* celebrates the intense "suffering" (*duḥkha*) that the bodhisattva experiences when he contemplates the suffering of others;⁴⁹ and the *Bodhi-*

⁴⁷ *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8.120–73. For an English translation, see Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, trans., *The Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 99–103.

⁴⁸ See Pierre Python, trans., *Vinayaviniścaya-Upāli-pariprcchā: Enquête d'Upāli pour une exégèse de la discipline* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1973), 116–17.

⁴⁹ See Sylvain Lévi, ed., *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra, exposé de la doctrine du Grand Véhicule selon le système Yogācāra* (Paris: H. Champion, 1907–1911), 1:218–19.

caryāvatāra states that the bodhisattva is motivated solely by his “thirst” (*tr̥ṣṇā*) for the well-being of others, and compares the bodhisattva’s intense suffering for others to a body wholly enveloped in flames.⁵⁰ Thus, concepts and images that would normally have negative connotations in a Buddhist context—passion, suffering, thirst, and a body enveloped in flames—are revalorized and re-signified as positive terminology when it comes to the bodhisattva and his great compassion for others. In short, with the Mahayana tradition’s extreme elevation of the virtue of compassion and its philosophical claim that samsara is no different from nirvana, the bodhisattva becomes a radical figure whose conduct is determined wholly by his compassionate intentions rather than by any formal criteria. Thus, some Mahayana texts describe bodhisattvas who kill, steal, lie, and have sex—all in the service of compassion. Bernard Faure has described this as an “ideology of transgression” that has its roots in Mahayana thought and finds even fuller expression in the Chan/Zen and Vajrayāna traditions.⁵¹ I would add to this the further claim that a similar ideology of transgression is implicit even in non-Mahayana stories dealing with the bodhisattva’s extravagantly compassionate deeds.

Perhaps, then, the bodhisattva’s “reversal of values” in the area of gender and gender imagery is just a part of this larger pattern. Perhaps the bodhisattva, as one who is capable of reversing the values of all traditional terminology, is more susceptible to being described with female imagery without being tainted by the negative connotations that such imagery normally bears. Perhaps the bodhisattva’s “ambiguous morality” is inscribed upon his body through a sometimes ambiguous gender identity.

⁵⁰ *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8.109 and 6.123; see Vidhushekhara Bhattacharya, ed., *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1960), 164, 111.

⁵¹ See Bernard Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), esp. 39–48 and chap. 3.