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## Wrestling with Essentialism: The *Dharmas* of “Gender” in Later *Theravāda* Scholasticism

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# Wrestling with Essentialism: the *Dharmas* of “Gender” in Later Theravāda Scholasticism

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## Abstract

This article provides a history of gendered ontology in later Theravāda commentaries and compendia. While the canonical Theravāda *Abhidhamma* sets out a model of gender based on binary *dharmas*—distinct *indriyas* (“faculties”) of femininity and masculinity—this seems to have been poorly received by later commentators, who repeatedly reconceptualized the *dharmic* foundations of gender. I suggest that this is due to the inadequacy of binary and essentialized models to account for the wide diversity of gender experiences depicted in the canonical *Vinaya*, with implications for contemporary arguments for gender essentialism.

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## Introduction

What, if anything, is “gender” in Theravāda systematic thought? A number of words in Theravāda languages can be used to refer to social categories we might recognize as gendered: “men,” for example, can be described as having a “masculine state” (P. *purisa-bhāva*, Skt. *puruṣa-bhāva*), as being characterized by “manliness” (P. *purisa-tta*, Skt. *puruṣa-tvā*), or as having a “mark of masculinity” (P. *purisa-liṅga*, Skt. *puruṣa-liṅga*; often the genitals, yet more often the penis).<sup>2</sup> Yet each of these terms have other meanings, and context alone determines their applicability to “gender.” In short, while historical Theravāda thinkers had many words with which to describe the masculinity of men and the femininity of women, there seems to have been no easy equivalent for the super-category which, in modern languages, encompasses both social groups; the super-category we call “gender.”

To be clear, that super-category is by no means undisputed territory. “Gender” has a history and a politics. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the term was borrowed from linguistics to distinguish the social performance of masculinity, femininity, and their others from the biological “sex” which supposedly underlay such categories (see, e.g., MacCoby; Scott). Subsequent critical theorists went further, questioning the self-evident status of an underlying “sex,” and arguing that all supposed distinctions between “genders” were culturally determined (Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Fausto-Sterling; Lorber). Others, meanwhile, maintain that masculinity and femininity are ontological essential categories: that is,

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<sup>2</sup> By preferring Sanskrit terminology in-text, I do not intend to deny that Pāli is central to the Theravāda intellectual tradition; nor do I intend to misrepresent this tradition “as if it were part of a homogenous ‘*abhidharma*’” (Heim and Ram-Prasad 1088). However, the Theravāda tradition is multilingual, and the terms used for *abhidharma* in some Theravāda languages are derived from Sanskrit rather than Pāli (such as Sinhala *abhidharmaya* and Thai *abhidharm* อภิดรรมา). In preferring Sanskrit terminology, I aim to include this later and broader tradition, rather than to conflate it with other *abhidharma* traditions like that of the Sarvāstivāda.

that they are categories which exist on some fundamental level beyond the influence of cultural construction. This latter position is sometimes motivated by a legitimate concern with the practicalities of feminist or queer activism in a non-essentialist ontology (e.g., MacKinnon; Nussbaum; Stock).<sup>3</sup> It is also, unfortunately, disingenuously weaponized against trans\*, non-binary, and genderqueer individuals, and used retrogressively to police the “proper femininity” of those assigned female at birth—in other words, to further the very patriarchal agenda which MacKinnon et al. seek to overturn.

A frequent claim of essentialist arguments is that a binary distinction between “men” and “women” is universal and self-evident, and that arguments to the contrary are merely “an aberrant product of twenty-first century culture” (Spencer-Hall and Gutt 19). However, as Spencer-Hall and Gutt themselves argue, this was not the case. A wide variety of evidence—historical and ethnographic alike—suggests that gender roles were understood to vary considerably in societies both before and beyond the modern West (Herdt; Laqueur; Lugones; Oyěwùmí). Buddhist sources, particularly those under the wide parasol of the Mahāyāna, have also contributed in this regard. For Mahāyāna thinkers, no phenomena (*dharma*s) exist on an essential level; even phenomena as *prima facie* self-evident as “masculinity” or “femininity” were no exception. This position was by no means an invention of the Mahāyāna: canonical texts, such as the *Samyoga-sutta* (AN 7.51, 4:57), suggest that “our identification of features as gendered is entirely down to irrational mental generations” (Ngaserin

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to suggest that all feminist approaches are necessarily essentialist, and that only trans\* or queer theorists question essentialism. Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, long characterized as a work of trans\* theory, was explicitly written as a work of feminist philosophy; it is therefore part of what Cristan Williams portrays as a long history of trans-inclusive radical feminism (including, significantly, both MacKinnon and her longtime collaborator Andrea Dworkin). I am grateful to Tess Wingard for discussions on this point.

22).<sup>4</sup> But Mahāyāna texts make this point most explicitly; most famously, perhaps, in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*, which makes a mockery of “femininity’s inferiority” and “gender’s unchanging nature” alike to illustrate its broader point about “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) (Cole 283–88; Hamlin 108–10; Collett 82–87). Mahāyāna treatments of gender have therefore provided valued resources for contemporary anti-essentialist scholars and activists alike (see e.g., Gross, *Buddhism*; Gross, “Dharma”; Li; Owen; Scherer, “Gender”).

Non-Mahāyāna sources have, however, been less frequently brought to bear on these debates. This is in part because non-Mahāyāna Buddhism is often presented as irredeemably patriarchal, and so an unlikely resource for feminist philosophy.<sup>5</sup> But it is also because the characteristic philosophical tradition of non-Mahāyāna Buddhisms, the *abhidharma*, itself is often interpreted as irredeemably essentialist, in that it posits a series of actually-existing phenomena (*dharma*s) underlying our conventional reality (see most classically Karunadasa, *Dhamma Theory*). If we accept this reading, then the inclusion of *dharma*s related to “femininity” and “masculinity” in *abhidharma* lists must suggest that some kind of ultimately-existing “essence” underlies what we perceive as “gender.”<sup>6</sup> As

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<sup>4</sup> See also Cabezón 317–320 and Dhammadinnā 278–281.

<sup>5</sup> Rita Gross, one of the most prominent scholars of Buddhist feminism, suggests that “no one who strongly advocated women’s positive qualities seems to have been in the camp of the more conservative, older forms of Buddhism” (*Buddhism* 57). Lisa Owen, drawing on Barnes, argues that “early Mahāyānists ‘became champions of equality’ against adherents of older Buddhist philosophical schools” (22).

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars have conflated “gender essentialism” with “biological essentialism”: the belief that not only are genders ontologically fundamental; they are located or grounded in some part of the body (see most notably Sweet and Zwilling; cf. Anderson 56; Ngaserin 14–15). Others have taken “gender essentialism” as meaning something which limits “the scope of human action” (Anderson 44): gender is essentialized only when it determines what “men” can or should do, which “women” can or should not. This is an important consideration, with obvious implications for social discrimination. However, I understand “essentialism” in a narrower manner: the belief that “gender is a truth that is somehow there, interior to the body, as a core or as an internal essence, something that

a result, those engaged in critiques of gender essentialism have generally perceived *ābhidharmika* Buddhism as a less helpful resource than are Mahāyāna schools of thought: Jingjing Li, for example, has recently (and productively) contrasted a Yogācāra dialectics of gender with “the Abhidharma’s metaphysical realism” (300). This all seems fairly damning for *ābhidharmika* Buddhism from a feminist perspective. As Sherice Ngaserin pithily puts it, if we were to accept this reading then perhaps the best advice we could offer to Buddhists in *abhidharma* traditions suffering from gender oppression is simply to “consider becoming a Mahāyāna Buddhist instead” (18).

More recent work, however, has problematized this assumption that the *abhidharma* is necessarily ontologically essentialist. Maria Heim and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad have argued that the canonical Pāli *Abhidhamma* and its earliest commentators do not ascribe an ontological fundamentality to *dharmas*, nor intend them to comprehensively explain all elements of conventional reality. Rather, they understood these *dharmas* as therapeutically useful for “a contemplation of an analysis of existence” (Heim and Ram-Prasad 1088). It was only in later periods of *abhidharma* thought that these earlier heuristic categories were reinterpreted as ontologically substantive (Heim, “The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*” 151–152).

This seems to also have been the case for *abhidharmic* thought about gender. Ngaserin has shown that later Sarvāstivādin and Vaibhāṣika thinkers seemed to adopt increasingly essentialist stances on binary gender; a similar process, I suggest, took place in the later Theravāda *abhidharma* tradition. I suspect that this is not coincidental, but rather the result of the rather incongruous nature of the canonical *Abhidhamma*’s explanation for gender difference. Attempts by subsequent commentators

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we cannot deny, something which, natural or not, is treated as given” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 212). In taking up this narrower definition of essentialism, I align myself with Dhammadinnā’s focus on the process of “essentialization” (see particularly 275) and Ngaserin’s search for a metaphysics of gender.

to reconcile this incongruity with other similar *dharmas* led to an increasingly binary and essentialized interpretation of how “gender” functions in an *abhidharmic* frame. This interpretation was, in turn, at odds with the far more diverse gender experiences evidenced elsewhere in canonical texts, particularly in the *Vinaya-piṭaka*. Later attempts to reconcile this tension were, ultimately, unsuccessful, in that no single “model” seems to have become universally accepted by other commentators as an adequate explanation for *vinayic* gender experience in an *abhidharmic* ontology.

To demonstrate this, I provide a broad overview of four “models” of *abhidharmic* gender proposed in the Theravāda intellectual tradition. This begins with the canonical model: that there exist discrete *dharmas*, called *indriyas*, respectively of femininity and masculinity; and that these *indriyas* are coterminous with the various phenomena (bodily form, behavioral habits, and more abstract qualities like “womanliness” and “manliness”) that observers might recognize as “gendered.” Buddhaghosa (fl. c. fifth century), the great Theravāda exegete, reformulates this model, positioning *indriyas* as distinct from, and as causes of, the somatic and behavioral manifestations of gender. Anuruddha (prior to the tenth century) renames these distinct causes “*bhāvas*” (a “state of being,” itself often simply translated “gender”), and his principal commentators Sāriputta (mid twelfth century) and Sumaṅgala (late twelfth or early thirteenth century) clarify that this is because they do not seem to act like true *indriyas* at all. Finally, Mahākassapa (late twelfth or early thirteenth century) argues explicitly that neither *indriya* nor *bhāva* can be properly understood as a cause of the visible manifestations of gender. Taken together, I suggest that this long history of disagreement indicates a broader problem with all essentialist accounts of gender.

### The Canonical *Abhidhamma*

In this section, I outline the approach to gender taken in the canonical Theravāda *Abhidhamma*. In short, I argue that “the *dharmas* of gender” are an incongruous inclusion in the *abhidharmic* model, even if—as argue Heim and Ram-Prasad—that model was only ever intended to be heuristic rather than ontologically essential.

Masculinity and femininity are defined in the canonical Theravāda *Abhidhamma*—as in other *abhidharma* traditions—as a type of *dharma* called an *indriya*: a “faculty” which controls some aspect of the human condition.

. . . an item or faculty that is seen as exercising some kind of power, force, influence or control over whatever is its domain; “(controlling) faculty” seems a more or less apt translation. (Gethin 104)<sup>7</sup>

These faculties are the mechanisms by which past *karma* intervenes in human development, from the moment of conception onwards throughout a lifespan. Thus the eye-faculty (P. *cakkhu-*, Skt. *caḥṣur-indriya*) controls sight, as well as the development of the physical eyeball;<sup>8</sup> others, like the displeasure-faculty (*dukkha-*, *duḥkha-indriya*), faith-faculty (*saddhā-*, *śraddhā-indriya*), or the aspiration-for-yet-unknown-knowledge-faculty (*anaññātañassāmīti-*, *anāññātamāññāsīyāmi-indriya*) have more mental and soteriological functions. There is, however, no singular “*indriya* of gender.” All extant lists include distinct *indriyas* of both femininity (P. *itthī-indriya*, Skt. *strī-indriya*) and masculinity (P. *purisa-indriya*, Skt. *puruṣa-*

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Heim’s experiential and analytical interpretation of *indriyas*, in which they represent phenomena “present in a particularly strong way in a particular occasion of this type of experience, whereby it operates as a faculty governing the experience as a whole” (“The *Dhammasaṅgani* and *Vibhaṅga*” 147).

<sup>8</sup> The term *indriya* also applies, in some circumstances, to the sense-organs themselves. However, both the Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda *abhidharma*, at various points, draw a distinction between the physical organs (*adhiṣṭhāna*, *śasambhāra*) and the underlying sensory capacity (*prasāda*; see Karunadasa, *Analysis* 44–49).

*indriya*), each associated with a variety of (similarly binary) somatic and social characteristics (*vyañjanas*).<sup>9</sup> The Theravāda definition of the two *indriyas* of gender is repeated nearly verbatim in both the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*:

What, then, is the *indriya* of femininity? That which, of a woman, is the physical mark (*liṅga*) of a woman,<sup>10</sup> the characteristic (*nimitta*) of a woman, the behaviour (*kutta*) of a woman, the deportment (*ākappa*) of a woman, womanliness (*itthī-tta*), being a woman (*itthī-bhāva*); that is called “the *indriya* of femininity.” What, then, is the *indriya* of masculinity? That which, of a man, is the physical mark of a man, the characteristic of a man, the behavior of a man, the deportment of a man, manliness, being a man; that is called “the *indriya* of masculinity.” (*Vibhaṅga* 5:220, 122–123)

What, then, is the materiality (*rūpa*)<sup>11</sup> that is the *indriya* of femininity? That which, of a woman, is the physical mark of a woman, the characteristic of a woman, the behaviour of a woman, the deportment of a woman, womanliness, being a woman; that is the materiality that is the *indriya* of femininity. What, then, is the materiality that is the *indriya*

<sup>9</sup> By this I mean the standard list of *liṅga*, *nimitta*, *kṛtya* (Pāli: *kutta*), and *ākappa* (Pāli: *ākappa*). They are not identified as *vyañjanas* in the canon, and *vyañjana* is often interpreted as referring specifically to the genitals (Cabezón 364). But at least one later subcommentary understands *vyañjana* as a shorthand for the full list of characteristics, including the social-behavioural *kṛtya* and *ākappa* (*Mohavicchedanī*, 63).

<sup>10</sup> Usually “genitals,” or more specifically male genitals. My translation here is deliberately coy, as Buddhaghosa will offer us some rather unusual glosses. Based on the wider usage of these terms in both Sanskrit and Pāli worlds, however, it seems like that *liṅga* and *nimitta* were indeed meant to refer respectively to genitalia and to secondary sexual characteristics.

<sup>11</sup> Heim and Ram-Prasad argue that *rūpa* for Buddhaghosa signifies not an ontological claim about material substances in the world, but rather an “analytic by which he understands how experience is undergone” (1085).

of masculinity? That which, of a man, is the physical mark of a man, the characteristic of a man, the behavior of a man, the deportment of a man, manliness, being a man; that is the materiality that is the *indriya* of masculinity. (Dhammasaṅgaṇī 633–634, 143)

There are three points in this definition, and in other references to the *indriyas* of gender throughout the canonical *Abhidhamma*, which make them rather unlike the other *dharmas* also categorized as *indriyas*. These are (1) that the two *indriya* of gender are binary; (2) that they are totalizing; and (3) that they are not “conditions” for the arising of other *dharmas*. Considering each of these features in more detail alerts us to the fact that something *odd* is going on with these two *indriyas*.

First, we might note that this is a *strongly* binarized understanding of gender. We might even go so far as to say that this is not an understanding of “gender” at all, but rather of “genders”: for all that these two *indriya* are clear parallels of one another, there is no emic super-category into which both “masculinity” and “femininity” are subsumed. Instead, we are simply presented with two distinct *dharmas*, with no explicit connection drawn betwixt; when we moderns call them *dharmas* of gender we do so heuristically, through our own lenses.<sup>12</sup> Women are simply “women,” with all and only the somatic and behavioral characteristics of women, and *mutatis mutandis* for men. Crucially, each is described as being “that which, of a woman, is . . .”; no allowance is given for the possibility of, for example, “a man” possessing the various *vyañjanas* here associated with femininity, or *vice versa*. This is a configuration of gender difference we should not take for granted as a historical given. Many historical cultures have understood themselves to consist of more or fewer “genders” than those with which we are familiar today or have had no concept analogous to

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<sup>12</sup> It is for this reason that the present article is subtitled “the *dharmas* of gender,” in plural homage to Gross’s influential article on “the *dharma* of gender.”

“gender” at all prior to its colonial imposition (see, e.g., Herdt; Lugones; Laqueur; Oyěwùmí; and the overview in Shirley). This included, crucially, premodern South Asia. As we will see in following sections of this paper, other parts of the Buddhist canon seem to be very open to gendered experiences beyond the normatively masculine and feminine. This raises, as Bee Scherer has observed, the very valid question of why the *dharmas* of gender “express themselves in a hegemonic male and female binarism despite the early development of theoretical three- and fourfold sex/gender systems” (“Queering” 5).

The second point worth noting is that these binarized *indriyas* are totalizing, to an extent unusual among the other material *indriya*. The eye-*indriya*, for example, is distinct from the physical organ of the eye (the *māṃsa-cakkhu*).<sup>13</sup> The *indriyas* of gender, however, seem to be fully coterminous with a range of somatic (*liṅga, nimitta*), behavioral (*kutta, ākappa*), and even conceptual (*-tta, -bhāva*) phenomena. The implication of this is that the converse is also true: the state of being a woman is itself the *indriya* of femininity.

We should not take this for granted as a necessary feature of an *abhidharma* perspective. The Sarvāstivāda *Dharmaskandha* locates the two *indriya* of gender in the groin, and attributes to them a specifically sexual function (T. 1537.26.499a22–29).<sup>14</sup> This seems to suggest that the *indriyas* are not abstract phenomena which exist only at the fundamental level,

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<sup>13</sup> On this interpretation see Karunadasa (*Buddhist Analysis* 44–45) and Rhys-Davids (173–174, notes 1 and 3). Rhys-Davids’ reading, including the term *māṃsacakkhu*, is heavily reliant on Buddhaghosa’s commentary. But as Karunadasa makes clear, this does seem the most plausible interpretation of the *cakkhindriya* being described as *pasāda*, which we might translate in this specific context “subtle.”

<sup>14</sup> I do not read Chinese, and am grateful to Liyu Hua for identifying this reference and providing me with a translation. Any errors in my presentation of this material arise from my misunderstanding of Dr. Hua’s generous explanation, and should not be taken as representative of his interpretation. Buddhaghosa is likely responding to the Sarvāstivāda position when he tells us that the *indriya* of gender “are both, however, spread throughout the entire body, like the sense of touch” (*Visuddhimagga* 447).

but also biological components of the human body. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the terms used for these *indriya* in the Chinese translation (respectively *nǚgēn* 女根 and *nángēn* 男根) have come to mean, in more modern languages, the physical genitals themselves. As Ngaserin outlines, later Sarvāstivāda commentators engage in considerable debate over whether this means that the two *indriya* of gender are really essential *indriyas* in their own right at all (122–128).

This insight from the later Sarvāstivāda leads us to our third noteworthy point: that these two *indriyas* seem to not be acting like the other *indriyas* at all. This is confirmed by the final book of the canonical *Abhidhamma*, the *Paṭṭhāna*, which lists the “conditions” (P. *paccayas*, Skt. *pratyayas*) on which reality is built. The other 20 *indriyas* are listed as “conditions by way of faculty” (*indriya-paccaya*); the two “gendered” *indriyas* alone are excluded from this list (*Paṭṭhāna* 2:16, 7–8). Y. Karunadasa directly attributes this omission to the fact that the femininity- and masculinity-*indriyas* seem not to *cause* femininity and masculinity so much as actually *constitute* those apparent phenomena. He suggests that

The obvious implication seems to be that the two items are not interpreted as *indriyas*, although they are so designated. The situation is perfectly understandable for, as we have seen, according to the earlier texts they mean femininity (*itthī-tta*) and masculinity (*purisa-tta*) and not... what are responsible for them. (*Buddhist Analysis* 57)

In other words, although listed as “*indriyas*,” Karunadasa does not believe that they are proper *indriyas* at all: a situation which he notes would lead to conceptual problems for later Theravāda commentators.

These three features of the *indriyas* of gender—that they are binary, totalizing, and do not function as *paccayas*—suggest that they are an uncomfortable fit among the other *indriyas* postulated in the canonical

Theravāda *Abhidhamma*. This indicates to us that even at this canonical stage, gender was being conceived of in a different manner to other *dharma*s nominally of the same class. Of course, if we adopt the reading favored by scholars like Maria Heim—that the *Abhidhamma* provides heuristic tools for analysis, not hard lists of essential phenomena—then this might be a moot point. However, as the follow sections will outline, the later tradition seems to increasingly *not* follow this interpretation, and to favor instead a more literal reading: that gender is binary, divided into discrete, actually-existing *indriyas* respectively “of women” and “of men.” Simultaneously, later thinkers seek to apply this (interpretation of) this model to the far wider diversity of gender experiences attested elsewhere in the canon, particularly in the *Vinaya*. This tension would pose significant interpretive problems.

### **Buddhaghosa (c. Fifth Century) and His Commentators**

Within the Theravāda tradition, Buddhaghosa is valorized as its most influential exegete. His commentaries on the entire Pāli canon, and his meditation manual *Visuddhimagga*, are considered authoritative by all later scholastics—even when, as modern scholars have noted, those later scholastics diverge from Buddhaghosa’s interpretations. Buddhaghosa in turn, although presenting himself as a mere exegete, often introduces his own novel perspective into his readings of the canonical texts.<sup>15</sup> This is certainly true of his interpretation of the mechanics of gender, which seem to depart from the model presented in the canonical *Abhidhamma*.

Buddhaghosa’s model of gender difference is described at length in the “Chapter on Materiality” of his *Atthasālinī* (321–323), a commentary on the canonical *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*. The model appears in his commentary

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<sup>15</sup> On Buddhaghosa as a thinker see the works of Maria Heim, particularly *Voice of the Buddha*.

on *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* 633–634 (143). The passage has been translated accurately and comprehensively elsewhere (Anderson and Manring 312–314), and so need not be repeated here in full. Instead, this section focuses on Buddhaghosa’s central interpretive move—reinterpreting the gendered *indriya* as more typical members of their class, which is to say *causes* of the visible manifestations of gender rather than coterminous with them—and the somewhat dissatisfied responses of his earliest commentators.

Buddhaghosa’s own dissatisfaction with the canonical model likely arises from his knowledge of the more varied and mutable expressions of gender experience he knew from his *Vinaya* commentaries. He explicitly evokes two such cases in his commentary (at *Atthasālinī* 322): the *ubhato-byañjanaka*, “one with both signifiers,” whom we might recognize in modern medical terminology as an intersex person;<sup>16</sup> and a legal case in which a previously male monastic awakens to find themselves with female genitalia (*liṅga*). In articulating his new model of *indriya* as a *cause* of gendered manifestations, Buddhaghosa appears to have attempted to simultaneously account for such cases while suggesting a binary and essentialist core to the *indriya* supposedly underlying them.

In service of this, Buddhaghosa opens his discussion by defining the *indriyas* not as coterminous with *liṅga*, etc., but instead as their *cause*:

In the discussion of the *indriya* of femininity, “that which” is a causal term (*karaṇa-vacana*). The meaning here is “through which cause (*yena kāraṇa*) a woman has the *liṅga* of a woman, etc.” (*Atthasālinī* 321)

As other scholars have noted, this would make the gendered *indriya* function much more like others of their class: the *indriya* of femininity is now what *causes* the somatic and behavioral characteristics of a woman, rather

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<sup>16</sup> The term “intersex” is now generally considered preferable to “hermaphrodite” (Spencer-Hall and Gutt, Appendix s.v. “hermaphrodite”).

than being those characteristics themselves (Anderson and Manring 314; Cabezón 361; Karunadasa, *Buddhist Analysis* 55).

However, after briefly glossing those four characteristics,<sup>17</sup> Buddhaghosa goes further, and disambiguates out “the state of being a woman” (*itthī-bhāva*) and “womanliness” (*itthī-tta*) from both the *indriya* and the four characteristics:

‘Womanliness’ (*itthī-tta*) and ‘being a woman’ (*itthī-bhāva*)—both have the same meaning; the meaning is ‘their own nature (*sabhāva*) is woman.’ This is produced from *karma* and arisen during reincarnation (*paṭisandhi*, Skt. *pratisandhi*). But a woman’s *liṅga*, etc., are arisen during existence (*pavatta*), dependent on the *indriya* of femininity. (*Atthasālini* 321–322)

This explanation appears to place its emphasis on “womanliness” and “being a woman,” now said to arise during reincarnation (or perhaps more specifically at the moment of conception) as a direct result of past *karma*. Crucially, they are glossed with the term *sabhāva*, “their own nature.” In other *abhidharma* traditions, this term signifies ontological realism: something with its own nature *actually exists* on an ultimate level. Buddhaghosa’s use of the term is more circumscribed, suggesting instead only that a *dharma* is distinct from other kinds of *dharma* (Karunadasa, *Dhamma*

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<sup>17</sup> Buddhaghosa’s definitions of these terms are unusual in a wider South Asian context. He defines *liṅga* not as “genitals” but as “bodily form” (*saṅṭhāna*), including the shape and size of the hands. *Nimitta* is very reasonably “characteristic” (*sañjānana*), that by which we recognise something; Buddhaghosa tells us that for women this is the presence of breasts and the absence of facial hair, but also the manner of dress and hairstyle. *Kutta* includes, for women, playing with dolls as children; *ākappa* includes the way that one walks, talks, stands, eats and so on (*Atthasālini* 321). The later tradition knows that these definitions are unusual. Sāriputta offers us definitions more in line with wider South Asian usage (most notably, for him *liṅga* is the sexual organ), followed by a verse summary of Buddhaghosa’s “alternative definitions” (*anikpariddekin varṇanā*) (*Abhidharmāthasāṅgraha-sannaya* 6.7, 172).

Theory 21-25; Heim and Ram-Prasad 1091). *Indriya*, meanwhile, is mentioned only in a relative clause, as something upon which the *liṅga* etc. are “dependent” when they arise during existence.

This is not to say that *indriya* is entirely sidelined. Later in the same passage, Buddhaghosa tells us that the *indriya* of femininity still has the defining characteristic (*lakkaṇa*) of woman-*bhāva*, “being a woman” (and *mutatis mutandis* for the *indriya* of masculinity). However, its function (*rasa*) is now to indicate “[this person is] a woman,” suggesting a more phenomenological understanding of *indriya*’s role. Finally, the “gendered” *indriyas*’ manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*) is given as a causal state (*kāraṇa-bhāva*) of the somatic and behavioral indices of gender. This latter point suggests that the “gendered” *indriyas* are rather more like “normal” *indriyas*, causing rather than “being” the visible manifestations they govern.

Buddhaghosa then introduces an arboreal analogy: *indriya* is like a seed, and the *liṅga* etc. are the leaves and branches of a tree sprouting from that seed (at *Atthasālini* 321). Only the tree, not its seed, are visually perceptible, just as only the somatic and behavioral indices of gender (but not its underlying *indriya*) are visible. The remainder of his discussion focuses only on these visible indices, particularly *liṅga*: these arise during reincarnation, but can subsequently change and fluctuate during existence;<sup>18</sup> this change is said to be a result of one’s morality (*kusala*), with both a loss of masculinity and acquisition of femininity framed negatively. This is positioned as a direct response to the possibility (in a *Vinaya* case

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<sup>18</sup> This particular clause opens with the somewhat ambiguous “these both” (*ubhayam ‘pi ‘tam*). The preceding two sentences define the *indriyas* of masculinity and femininity, and so *prima facie* would refer to these rather than to the *liṅga* etc. However, “these both” are said to have arisen during existence for beings of the First Era (*paṭhamakappikas*) only subsequently during reincarnation. This is almost certainly a reference to the events of the *Aggañña-sutta* (DN 27), in which previously asexual beings of the First Era manifest the *liṅga* of men or women. Along with the following discussion of *liṅga* alone, this makes me tentatively suspect that with *ubhayam* Buddhaghosa refers to the two sets of indices, rather than to the underlying *indriya*.

which Buddhaghosa explicitly quotes) that a man may spontaneously develop a female *liṅga* overnight, after which point she is treated as a normative woman for legal and ritual purposes.

All this together presents a model of gender in which *some* phenomena—the somatic and behavioral indices—are subject to meaningful fluctuation throughout an individual’s life. But does this mean that the underlying *indriya*—the “seed”—too changes with the *liṅga*? The canonical *Vibhaṅga* seems to suggest so: if, as quoted above, “the *indriya* of femininity” is “That which, of a woman, is the physical mark (*liṅga*) of a woman . . . ,” then a change in the *liṅga* must indicate a change in the *indriya*. This would also be the neatest way to account for changes in the visible manifestation of gender: to say that a shift in *liṅga* is accompanied by a shift in the underlying *indriya*.

But Buddhaghosa does *not* claim this, at least not explicitly. His tree analogy seems to not read well with such a neat explanation: whatever environmental factors influence the growth of the tree during its existence has no effect on what seed it once sprouted from. The seed is, as Buddhaghosa’s metaphor makes clear, merely the causal factor (*kāraṇa*) for the tree. And this seems to me to be the point of the metaphor: separating off *indriya* as a causal factor allows Buddhaghosa to accommodate mutability in the visible indices, as evidenced in the *Vinaya*, while maintaining something of *indriya*’s essential nature. The latter arises during reincarnation, and serves as the foundation for the *liṅga* etc., but it is not necessarily subject to the same fluctuations during existence as are its visible products. Importantly, this seems to be a move away from the phenomenological and towards the ontological: a seed does not allow us to perceive or conceive of a tree, but rather is the (actual) object from which the (actual) tree sprouts.

Buddhaghosa then turns (at *Atthasālinī* 322–323) to discuss the *ubhatobyañjanaka*, “one with both signifiers,” a figure introduced in the ca-

nonical *Vinaya* (at e.g., *pārājika* 1.1.9, in *Vinaya-piṭaka* 3:28). His treatment of this category furthers the impression that he wants to maintain a binary and unchanging nature to the underlying *indriya* assigned at birth, even if the somatic and behavioral manifestations of gender fluctuate during one’s lifespan. In most Buddhist traditions the *ubhatobyañjanaka* is understood to manifest the characteristics of both genders simultaneously, and that this is caused by the copresence of both gendered *indriyas* (Cabezón 359–60). Buddhaghosa, however, takes a different approach: the *ubhatobyañjanaka*, he tells us, is a binary category after all. When a “male *ubhatobyañjanaka*” who experiences lust for another man his male *vyañjana* becomes concealed and he manifests a female *vyañjana*, and *vice versa*, keeping sexual relations neatly heteronormative.<sup>19</sup> The underlying *indriya*, crucially, does not change, explicitly because

... if it were that their *indriya* was the cause (*kāraṇa*) of dual *vyañjanas*, then a dual *vyañjana* would *always* be established. But it is not established. Therefore it should be understood that this [*indriya*] is not that cause of *vyañjana* for them. It is a lustful mind, with the support of *karma* (*kammasahāya*), which is that cause. And as there is only one *indriya* for them, therefore the female *ubhatobyañjanaka* can impregnate themselves and cause the impregnation of others; the male *ubhatobyañjanaka* can cause the impregnation of others, but cannot impregnate themselves. (*Atthasālinī* 322–323)

In other words, all *ubhatobyañjanakas* are “properly” male or female—right down to the level of reproductive capabilities!—as determined by the underlying *indriya*, and regardless of whatever might be

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<sup>19</sup> See discussion of the heteronormativity of Buddhaghosa’s *ubhatobyañjanaka* in Cabezón 364–66. This is reflective of a wider attitude among historical male scholar-monks that sex is necessarily, or at least ideally, phallic and penetrative (Cabezón 131; cf. Langenberg, “Reading against the Grain”; see more widely Murray 197).

changing on the surface. This interpretation allows Buddhaghosa to maintain both the binary nature of gender—even in one with “both *vyañjanas*,” the trappings of masculinity and femininity are never coterminous—and, of course, heteronormativity, through the arising of *vyañjanas* “appropriate” for the object of one’s desire.

However, in the process of redefining the *ubhatobyañjanaka* along binary lines, Buddhaghosa seems to have made *indriya* entirely irrelevant to their gender expression. *Indriya* determine the “default” or “proper” gender of an *ubhatobyañjanaka*, yes—the *indriya* of femininity for a “female *ubhatobyañjanaka*”—but the actual cause (*kāraṇa*) of the manifested *vyañjanas* is the *ubhatobyañjanaka*’s state of mind and past *karma*. This is, to be clear, entirely alien to the position of the canonical *Abhidhamma*, which maintains that the two *indriya* are coterminous with the *vyañjanas*; *karma* operates on *vyañjanas* only indirectly through the mediation of these *indriyas*. It also appears to contradict Buddhaghosa’s own position, made only a page (in the modern print edition) earlier: that the gendered *indriya* are the cause (*kāraṇa*) of their respective *liṅga*, *nimitta*, and so on (*Atthasālinī* 322).

This problem seems to have occurred to Buddhaghosa’s later subcommentators. In the earliest extant subcommentary on Buddhaghosa’s *Atthasālinī*, the commentator Ānanda agrees that *indriya* do not change within a single lifetime, even for an *ubhatobyañjanaka*. He seems to go further, however, and suggests that even cases (like the monk who awoke with female *liṅga*) should properly be understood as happening across multiple lifespans rather than spontaneously:

‘Both [sets of *liṅga*] disappear through immorality and are brought about by morality’ should be understood as being said with reference to a good rebirth (*sugati*). For reincarnation in a bad rebirth is caused by immorality; therefore, if it were that a state (*bhāva*) emerges as a result of immo-

rality, then existence would be like reincarnation. This pair [of *indriyas*] do not co-exist in any lifespan (*santāna*). Because of sayings like ‘for whom the *indriya* of femininity arises, does the *indriya* of masculinity [also] arise? No’—therefore it is said that even the *ubhatobyañjanaka* has only one *indriya*. (*Līnatthajotikā* 151)

Ānanda is concerned, perhaps, with the idea that excessive moral or immoral deeds could cause gender change within a single lifespan. He makes the (seemingly reasonable) point that this would have the consequences of such actions implicate both processes of rebirth and our ongoing existences—a rather worrying implication, perhaps, for those who are happy with the state (*bhāva*) into which they were initially reincarnated.

Later subcommentators, however, do not seem to accept this notion, and argue instead that the underlying *indriya* of the monk who awoke as a nun does indeed change along with the visible *liṅga*. Vajirabuddhi tells us in his *Vinaya* subcommentary that

‘The female *liṅga* arose’ [means that] the female form arose, and further that this was with the disappearance of the *indriya* of masculinity and with the manifestation of the *indriya* of femininity. Thus (*vice versa*) in the manifestation of the *indriya* of masculinity. (*Vajirabuddhi-ṭīkā* 100–101)

Sāriputta of Poḷonnaruva, an influential twelfth-century commentator, also seems to suggest that *indriya* is inextricably implicated in *liṅga* change. He offers a similarly botanic metaphor:

‘The male form is vanished, the female form is produced’—it should be shown that by seeing the destruction or formation of a fruit, the destruction or formation of its cause (*kāraṇa*) is also stated. For in the absence of an *indriya* of masculinity, the male form disappears; when the *indriya* of

femininity appears, the female form manifests. (*Sārat-thadīpanī* 2:101)

Here Sāriputta explicitly argues that any change in the visible manifestation of gender must be due to a shift in the underlying *indriya*. This argument is particularly noteworthy because it seems to diverge from Sāriputta's position in the *Abhidharmārasaṅgraha-sannaya*, discussed further below. Let us note for now that both commentators, Vajirabuddhi and Sāriputta, seem to have argued in their respective *Vinaya* commentaries that the *indriya* were always implicated in Buddhaghosa's account of *liṅga* change. However, this is not self-evident in Buddhaghosa's own account; and at least one other early commentator, Ānanda, seems to offer a different reading.

In short, Buddhaghosa offers a model of gender which simultaneously (1) presents the *indriya* of gender as more typical *indriya*, in that they "cause" rather than constitute gender's visible manifestations; (2) allows for significant and meaningful change in those visible manifestations; and yet (3) does not explicitly admit to a change in the underlying *indriya* established at the moment of reincarnation, which is still said to be coterminous with woman- or man-*bhāva*, "being" a member of that gender. To achieve such a model, he seems to have deviated from the *Abhidhamma*'s definition of the gendered *indriya* considerably; he also seems to have introduced new mechanics whereby morality (*kusala*) can directly influence the manifestation of *liṅga*, etc. regardless of the original *indriya*. This alone may raise some conceptual questions: if *indriya* serves only to set the "initial" gender, which is thereafter subject to fluctuation, what role does it play? Why not simply allow *indriya* to fluctuate alongside the *indriya*? Such questions do not only occur to modern readers. As the respective commentaries of Ānanda, Vajirabuddhi, and Sāriputta (in his *Vinaya* commentary) suggest, later generations of Theravāda scholastics seem to have their own problems with Buddhaghosa's model, and its application to the

wider variety of gender roles evidenced in the canonical *Vinaya*. The greatest challenge, however, would appear in a later text also written by Sāriputta.

### **Anuruddha (c. Tenth Century) and His Commentators**

Buddhaghosa's legacy in the Theravāda world is difficult to overstate. But Theravāda intellectual history also took place outside of the Buddhaghosan textual tradition: other texts acquired their own commentaries, which acquired in turn their own sub-commentaries, glosses, and vernacular translations. Perhaps the most influential of these alternative textual traditions is that associated with the c. tenth century *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* attributed to Anuruddha, the philosophical and pedagogical legacy of which continues into the modern period. The *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* is a terse summary of key *abhidharmic* concepts, organized in a structure independent of the canonical *abhidharma* texts.

Anuruddha departs from the canonical *Abhidhamma* in more than just structure. In his enumeration of the material *dharmas*, rather than following the canonical *Abhidhamma* by listing *indriyas* of femininity and masculinity, Anuruddha instead tells us that “Womanliness (*itthī-ttā*) and manliness (*purisa-ttā*) are called ‘the materiality (*rūpa*) of *bhāva*’” (*Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* 6:7, 172). In other words, gendered *bhāva*—not *indriya*—are now to be considered fundamental *dharmas*.

The implications of this shift in language were first laid out by the earliest commentator on the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, Sāriputta of Poḷonaruva. We have noted above that Sāriputta was also responsible for a *Vinaya* subcommentary in which he largely seems to have agreed that *indriya* directly causes the visible manifestations of gender, and that any shift in those manifestations must be accompanied by a shift in the under-

lying *indriya*. In his Sinhala-language *Abhidharmāṛthasaṅgraha-sannaya*, however, he lays out an entirely alternate model of *abhidharmic* gender, following the categories given by Anuruddha in the root text. We know too little about the intellectual trajectory of Sāriputta’s life, or even the sequence of his works, to determine whether this represented a shift in his thinking (in either direction), or if he merely intended to explain the position of the text on which he commented without committing himself to either perspective.<sup>20</sup> Whatever the reason, his commentary on Anuruddha’s “materiality of *bhāva*” lays out a significant divergence from the models of the canonical *Abhidhamma* or of Buddhaghosa:<sup>21</sup>

The *bhāva* of a woman is womanliness (*itthī-tta*); the *bhāva* of a man is manliness. Here, that called womanliness (*strī-tvā*) is defined as the cause (*hetu-tvā*) of a woman’s *liṅga*, *nimitta*, *kṛtyā*, and *ākalpa*; that called manliness is described as the cause of a man’s *liṅga*, etc.

. . . and being (*bhavati*) that by which one recognizes ‘this is a woman, etc.,’ it is called ‘*bhāva*.’ This materiality of *bhāva*, like a sense of touch (*kāyaprasādayak*), is spread throughout the entire body. (*Abhidharmāṛthasaṅgraha-sannaya* 6:7, 172)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> It is also worth noting a longstanding theory that Sāriputta’s *Vinaya* subcommentaries were not written by him personally, but rather by a committee which he oversaw (Malalasekera 194). If so, then this might explain the divergence.

<sup>21</sup> Sāriputta seems to explicitly critique Buddhaghosa in this passage. He defines the four *vyañjanas*, in a manner far more consonant with wider South Asian usage (so *liṅga* is defined as a sexual organ, *aṅgajāta*, rather than Buddhaghosa’s *saṅṭhāṇa*). He then acknowledges that they are defined otherwise in “the commentary” (*arthakathāya*), and summarizes Buddhaghosa’s definitions in a novel Pāli verse. This is a rare moment of explicit disagreement with the otherwise authoritative Buddhaghosa.

<sup>22</sup> Sāriputta’s commentary switches frequently between Pāli loanwords (reflecting the root text on which he comments) and Sanskrit loanwords (reflecting wider practices of scholastic Sinhala in this period), hence both “*itthī-tta*” and “*strī-tvā*” for “womanliness.”

Here, the term *bhāva* seems to entirely supplant the term *indriya* used in the canonical and Buddhaghosan explanations of “gender.” We might be tempted to take these words as synonymous, bearing in mind that the canonical *Abhidhamma* does include both *bhāva* and the suffix *-tta* (“-ness”) in its definition of *indriya*. But to do so would be to suggest an uncautious inconsistency to both Anuruddha’s root text and Sāriputta’s commentary thereon, both of which seem to adamantly avoid the term *indriya* in their discussions of gender.

This impression is furthered in the second commentary on Anuruddha’s *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, the *Abhidhammatthavibhāvinī* of Sāriputta’s student Sumaṅgala. Sumaṅgala’s work closely follows that of his teacher, and it is sometimes regarded as a translation of the *Abhidharmārthasaṅgraha-sannaya* into Pāli. In places, however, Sumaṅgala adds material of his. This includes, significantly, his discussion of the causal conditions (*paccāyas*), which he explicitly tells us do not include the gendered *indriyas*, unlike others of their class:

And are the *indriyas* of femininity and masculinity not included among groups like the ‘five senses (*pasādas*)’? Correct, they are not. Even if there is conformity (*anuvattanīyatā*) with their *liṅgas*, etc., this is not due to being causal conditions. For while ‘life’ and ‘sustenance’ are preservers and sustainers of those things for which they are causal conditions, and are of an inseparable conditional nature (*avigata-paccāya-bhūta*); it is not thus [for the gendered *indriya*], which are not helpers by helping [to sustain] in any way the woman- and man-*bhāva*, *liṅga*, etc. (*Abhidhammatthavibhāvinī* 8:32, 315)

Here we see explicit recognition of the fact that the gendered *indriyas* seem to be unlike all others of their class; they are *indriyas* in name alone. This seems to represent a decided shift away from the *indriya*-centered

model of the canonical *Abhidhamma*, and of the Buddhaghosan textual tradition. The *indriyas* of masculinity and femininity are not rejected outright; that would be to suggest that the infallible word of the Buddha, as recorded in the *Abhidhamma*, is wrong. However, their role is considerably marginalized. In their place, it is *bhāva* that seems to operate on the *vyāñjanas*, and to “conform with” (*anuvattaniyatā*) the physical manifestations of what we might call “gender.”

We gain some context for Anuruddha’s focus on *bhāva* rather than *indriya* by returning once again to *Vinaya* subcommentaries, and particularly to the figure of the *paṇḍaka*. The *paṇḍaka* is a difficult figure to analyze systematically (as Janet Gyatso suggests, this difficulty may rather be the “point” of the *paṇḍaka*: 108). For our purposes, let us note that the *paṇḍaka* represents a “non-binary” or “gender-deficient” category (Vimala; Scherer, “Queering”), who appears in the canonical *Vinaya* but is elaborated on considerably in Buddhaghosa’s commentaries. Crucially, Buddhaghosa introduces the notion that there are five types of *paṇḍaka*, including a “fortnight *paṇḍaka*,” who is only a *paṇḍaka* for half of the lunar month; a “made *paṇḍaka*,” who was once a normative man but became a *paṇḍaka* after destruction of the testes (i.e. castration); and “non-male *paṇḍaka*, born irreparably without *bhāva*” (*Samantapāsādikā* 5:1015–16).

The only explicit mention of the *paṇḍaka*’s *indriya*, to my knowledge, appears in Vajirabuddhi’s subcommentary on Buddhaghosa’s *Samantapāsādikā* discussion of the *liṅga*-changing monk:

‘The female *liṅga* arose’ [means that] the female form arose, and further that this was with the disappearance of the *indriya* of masculinity and with the manifestation of the *indriya* of femininity. Thus (*vice versa*) in the manifestation of the *indriya* of masculinity. As for the Brahma [gods], the faculty of masculinity does not arise; only the male form arises. **And as for any *paṇḍaka*, the male form arises even**

**in the absence of the *indriya* of masculinity.** It is not like that for them (i.e. the *liṅga*-changing monks). (*Vajirabuddhi-ṭīkā* 101)

Vajirabuddhi seems to be quite explicitly telling us that *paṇḍakas* are without *indriya* altogether, and yet still have a “male form.” This conforms with *Vinaya* descriptions of the *paṇḍaka*, like “men” but unlike both “women” and *ubhatobyañjanakas* (at least, while in “female” form), not having a vagina. Once again, however, this seems to raise questions about the necessity of *indriya* in the *abhidharmic* gender scheme: if *paṇḍakas* can possess a male form even in the absence of *indriya*, why do men, women, and (as discussed above) *ubhatobyañjanakas* require one or the other *indriya* themselves?

This question is not taken up by any later commentators, who do not seem to invoke *indriya* at all in their discussions of the *paṇḍaka*. Instead, their focus seems to shift onto a different concept: the *bhāva* of the *paṇḍakas*. This is most obviously relevant to the final *paṇḍaka* sub-type, the “non-male *paṇḍaka*.” Vajirabuddhi raises the possibility that, because only this sub-type is said to be “without *bhāva*,” the other four *paṇḍaka* sub-types must have some *bhāva* of their own:

Of the five, only the *napuṃsakapaṇḍaka* is without *bhāva*. The remaining four should be understood as having *bhāva*. But their *bhāva* is ‘*paṇḍaka*.’ Some say ‘Those four are really men!’ Some say ‘the *pakkha-paṇḍaka* is really a woman.’ (*Vajirabuddhi-ṭīkā* 393)

The suggestion that there is a distinct *paṇḍaka-bhāva*—or, put more bluntly, that *paṇḍakas* constituted a third gender—does not seem to have been well-received by later commentators; nor does the idea (posited by Vajirabuddhi as a counter-position) that *pakkha-paṇḍakas* fluctuate freely

between femininity and masculinity. Sāriputta writes, in what seems a clear response to Vajirabuddhi:

With reference to the *Paṇḍakavuttha*, some say ‘A *pakkha-paṇḍaka* is one who is a woman in the dark fortnight and a man in the bright fortnight.’ However, because it is only the extinction of passion in the non-*paṇḍaka* fortnight stated in [Buddhaghosa’s] commentary ‘In the dark fortnight they are a *paṇḍaka*, in the bright fortnight their passion is extinguished,’ it is understood that the increased passion in the *paṇḍaka* fortnight means the attainment of *paṇḍaka-bhāva*. Therefore, this alone should be considered as the essential [meaning]. Because they have neither feminine nor masculine *bhāva*, they are [like the *napuṃsaka-paṇḍaka*] ‘without *bhāva*.’ (*Sāratthadīpanī* 3:231)

In Sāriputta’s reading of the commentary, “being a *paṇḍaka*” (*paṇḍaka-bhāva*) is defined by possessing the feverish desire (*pariḷāha*) characteristic of only the dark *pakkha*. Nonetheless, he seems to reject Vajirabuddhi’s suggestion that there is a distinct *paṇḍaka-bhāva* in the same sense that there is a woman-*bhāva* or man-*bhāva*; Sāriputta’s *paṇḍaka* is without *bhāva* altogether. This aligns, perhaps, with the position taken in the *Abhidharmāṅgraha-sannaya*, Sāriputta’s *abhidharma* commentary, in which male and female *bhāvas* seem to take the place of the canonical *indriyas* in determining (binary) gender.

Does this shift in language, from *indriya* to *bhāva*, signify some clear conceptual reconfiguration? Or does it only serve to allow Anuruddha and his commentators to distinguish “true” *indriyas* from the *dharmas* which govern femininity and masculinity? Even if we assume the latter, this is still a noteworthy critique of earlier models’ acceptance of gender being caused by an underlying *indriya*. Sumaṅgala’s explanation seems to go fur-

ther: here there is merely “conformity” with the *vyañjanas* rather than a true causal relationship.

### **Mahākassapa (Late Twelfth or Early Thirteenth Century)**

Cola Mahākassapa is a critically understudied figure in Theravāda intellectual history. According to his own biography, he lived in a monastery called Nāgajjuna on the banks of the river Kaveri, in the Cōḷa country (now Tamil Nadu) (*Mohavicchedanī* 359). Although Buddhism was firmly on the wane in Southern India by this point, Mahākassapa’s *abhidharma* commentary, the *Mohavicchedanī*, seems to have been widely accepted throughout the Buddhist world, particularly in Myanmar (Norman 153). To Kassapa is also attributed a *Vinaya* subcommentary, the *Vimativinodanī*, which is notable for positioning its author as a true exegetical heir of Buddhaghosa and critiquing Sāriputta’s interpretations as having been waylaid by rival jurisprudential traditions (Gornall 523–5).

Kassapa’s disagreements with Sāriputta extend to the *abhidharmic* model of gender. In keeping with Kassapa’s self-presentation as a diligent adherent of Buddhaghosa’s exegesis, the *Mohavicchedanī*’s discussion of gender opens by directly quoting Buddhaghosa’s technical definitions: the *indriya* of femininity has the defining characteristic (*lakḥaṇa*) of woman-*bhāva*, “being a woman”; the function (*rasa*) of indicating “[this person is] a woman”; and the manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*) as a causal state (*kāraṇa-bhāva*) (and *vice versa* for the *indriya* of masculinity; *Mohavicchedanī* 62, quoting *Atthasālini* 321). However, while Buddhaghosa specifies that the *indriyas* of femininity and masculinity are causal states of the somatic and behavioral indices of gender, Kassapa skips over this phrase. Instead, he clarifies:

The causal state (*kāraṇa-bhāva*) of the feminine or masculine *liṅga* etc. of both these [women and men] is not inherent (*sarasata*), as their state as a condition (*paccaya-bhāva*) is not established by any conditional relationship in the *Paṭṭhāna*. Rather, their arising is solely through their own generative conditions (*janaka-paccaya*). Because of the invariable (*niyamena*) arising of forms (*rūpa*) appropriate to the *liṅga*, *nimitta*, *kutta*, *ākappa*, and *bhāva* corresponding to women and men, and because it is based on (*tad-padhāna*) the designations (*vohāra*) of *liṅga*, *nimitta*, and so on, it is called “*paccaya-bhāva*” and “*indriya-bhāva*” out of convention (*pariyāyato*.” (*Mohavicchedanī* 62–3)

Here, Kassapa tells us that it is not *indriya* causing the arising of the visible indices of gender after all: they arise from their own generative conditions. We merely refer to these conditions as an *indriya* out of convention. This seems to be quite a substantial departure from the preceding models. As we have seen above, and as Karunadasa has noted (*Buddhist Analysis* 58), the direct influence of *karma* seems to be increasingly emphasized throughout subsequent models of gender. Here, as L. P. N. Perera puts it, it plays “*an exceptional role*” (187, emphasis in original). No longer is an *indriya*, or any other essential *dharma*, deemed necessary to mediate between *karma* and its results: the visible indices of gender arise by and of themselves.

Kassapa then makes this argument even more explicit by returning, once again, to a gendered experience known from the *Vinaya*: the case of the *ubhatobyañjanaka*. Here he argues explicitly against both *indriya* and *bhāva* as causes of the gender manifestations of the *ubhatobyañjanaka*:

. . . therefore, the male *vyañjana* of a female *ubhatobyañjanaka*, even in the absence of the *indriya* of masculinity—and the female *vyañjana* of a male *ubhatobyañjanaka*, even in the

absence of the *indriya* of femininity—arise **only** due to past *karma* (*purimakammato eva*). For if it were through one or the other *indriya* that the unnecessary *vyañjana* were to arise, this would produce the nonexistence of the second *vyañjana*.

They [also] do not have two *bhāvas*. If that were so, then they would constantly be in the temporary state (*bhāva-ppasaṅga*) of dual *vyañjanas*. Instead, when lust for a woman arises in his [sic] mind, then the male *vyañjanas* manifest, and the female *vyañjanas* are concealed. [Quoting from Buddhaghosa’s *Atthasālinī*:] ‘And as there is only one *indriya* for them, therefore the female *ubhatobyāñjanaka* can impregnate themselves and cause the impregnation of others; the male *ubhatobyāñjanaka* can cause the impregnation of others, but cannot impregnate themselves.’ As it is the inflamed mind (*rāga-citta*) accompanied by *karma* which is the cause (*kāraṇa*) of *vyañjanas* for these *ubhatobyāñjanakas*—not *bhāva*!—thus a condition (*paccaya*) such as *karma* etc., which produces the dual *bhāvas*, should be understood as the cause (*kāraṇa*) of the respective *liṅga*, *nimitta*, and so on—even of those who are naturally (*pakati*, Skt. *prakṛti*) female or male. (*Mohavicchedanī* 63)

This seems to be a fairly explicit rebuke of the idea that *bhāva* could take central place in the ontological mechanics of gender. Instead, Kassapa turns to *karma* itself as the explanatory factor, noting that it accompanies the “inflamed mind” which supposedly causes the *ubhatobyāñjanaka*’s gender shifts. This *karma*, he suggests, is the real *paccāya* (condition), produces the two *bhāvas*, and should be understood as the cause of the visible manifestations of gender. Crucially, he takes this analysis a step further and suggests that it may not only be *ubhatobyāñjanakas* who are so gov-

erned by *karma* and their lusty minds: “natural” (*pakati, prakṛti*) men and women are just as susceptible.

*Indriya* and *bhāva* seem to be yet further sidelined when we consider the *Vinaya* subcommentary attributed to Kassapa, the *Vimativinodanī*. Here, Kassapa offers us the most detailed consideration of the four *paṇḍaka* subtype introduced by Buddhaghosa, the “made *paṇḍaka*” who was once normatively masculine until he experienced some trauma or injury to the testicles. Like the case of the monk who spontaneously manifested a female *liṅga* overnight, this suggests the possibility of one’s gender identity changing over time: from “man” to *paṇḍaka*, with concomitant loss of eligibility for ordination. Yet more interestingly, this occurs as a result of entirely external factors (i.e. castration). This seems to suggest that one’s *bhāva*, rather than determining the somatic manifestations of gender, can actually be influenced by changes to parts of that physical manifestation:

Because ‘seeds are removed’ is specified, when only the ‘indicator’ (*nimitta*, likely here a euphemism for the penis) is removed and the ‘seeds’ (*bīja*, testicles) remain, there is not a *paṇḍaka*. Even for a monk, when that is removed out of ‘freedom from distress’ (*anābādha*) there is only a ‘heavy penalty,’ but there is not *paṇḍaka*-ness. It is [still] not suitable to act in lust towards the genitals [even] when seeds are removed. Male-*bhāva* disappears (*pumabhāvo vigacchati*); even the signs (*liṅgas*) of masculinity such as a beard disappear, even ordination disappears, and the feverish passion of defilement (*kilesa-pariḷāha*) becomes overwhelming and hard to resist—like that of a non-male *paṇḍaka*. Therefore, they say that even one like this who is fully ordained should be expelled. (*Vimativinodanī* 2:113)

Here, we are explicitly told that *bhāva* disappears because of changes to the physical body, not the other way around.<sup>23</sup>

This is a significant departure from the earlier models of Buddhaghosa and of Anuruddha/Sāriputta, let alone from the model laid out in the canonical *Abhidhamma*. Kassapa's suggestion that such model might reflect "conventional" usage allows him to offer an alternative without explicitly contradicting Buddhaghosa or the canonical texts—yet his model does appear to be rather alternative indeed, leaving no room for *indriya* or even *bhāva* to determine the manifestation of gender. Indeed, in this final case of the "made *paṇḍaka*" we see a suggestion that *bhāva* can be determined by bodily integrity, rather than the other way around.

## Conclusions

The preceding discussion has tracked changing models of gender across the later Theravāda tradition. While the canonical *Abhidhamma* seems to suggest that there are *indriyas*, "faculties," of both masculinity and femininity, which are coterminous with both the state of being those genders (*bhāva*) and with those genders' visible manifestations (the four *vyañjanas*: *liṅga*, *nimitta*, *kutta*, and *ākappa*), this model does not seem to have been found satisfactory with any later commentators. Buddhaghosa agreed that the *indriyas* are synonymous with their respective *bhāvas*, but are actually *causes* of the *vyañjanas*, an argument variably received by his own direct subcommentators. Anuruddha and his primary commentators (Sāriputta and Sumaṅgala) suggested that there is no true *indriya* of femininity and masculinity after all, and that what causes the *vyañjanas* (or, in Sumaṅgala's interpretation, at least *conforms* with those *vyañjanas*) is best

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<sup>23</sup> It is tempting to read this as an indication that the male *indriya* is somehow located in the testicles. In his *abhidharma* work, however, Kassapa is explicit that this is not the case, and that they are spread throughout the entire body (*Mohavicchedanī* 63).

identified simply as “*bhāva*.” Finally, Kassapa argued that neither *indriya* nor *bhāva* determines the expression of *vyañjanas*: *karma* and *kusala* determine gender expression directly.

The purpose of this discussion has not been to assess the merits or flaws in any particular model of gender, and much less to arrive at a cohesive “Theravāda view of gender.” Rather, my intent has been to track, across these theorists, a series of disjunctures in the terminology used to describe and explain “gender” in an *abhidharmic* frame. These disjunctures reflect, I suggest, an ongoing dissatisfaction with how the binarized terms laid out in the original canonical *Abhidhamma* could be reconciled with the wider variety of gendered experiences described in the canonical *Vinaya*. These attempts seem to have *failed*, in that none—even those of the otherwise authoritative Buddhaghosa—seem to have been met with the collective support of later generations of commentators.

The Theravāda’s problems with *indriya* are, I suggest, symptomatic of a broader issue with all essentialist explanations for gender: that they are simply inadequate descriptors of the evident diversity of reality. A strong parallel runs throughout these monks’ discussions—of *liṅga*-changing monks; of *ubhatobyañjanakas* with both masculine and feminine characteristics; of *paṇḍakas* who are neither fully male nor fully female—and more modern discourse about binary essentialism. However, the monastic treatments of non-binary “gender” categories discussed above differs in one crucial respect from contemporary binary essentialism: the extent to which these monks could deny the *validity* of those individuals who problematized the binary.

When presented with evidence that contradicts previously held positions, we generally have two options available to us: to abandon or adapt our beliefs; or to discard the evidence. Modern gender essentialists opt for the latter, and reject the validity of non-binary, intersex, and trans\* experiences: hence the often violent insistence that trans\* and

non-binary individuals are merely “pretending” to have a gender other than assigned to them at birth; hence surgical intervention on newborn intersex babies, to make their anatomy better conform to what the doctor believes is their “proper” gender; hence also reinvigorated attempts to police the behavior, physical appearance, hormone levels, skeletal structure, or chromosomes of even women who were assigned female at birth (AFAB)—particularly women of color—if they come too close to violating someone else’s idea of “how *real* women should look or act.”

For medieval Buddhist scholastics, this option of rejecting experiences which do not conform to the binary ideal was simply not available. The existence of *paṇḍakas* and *ubhatobyañjanakas*, and the possibility of going to bed one night as a man and awakening as a woman, were all recorded in the canonical *Vinaya* and ascribed to the Buddha himself. The validity of these experiences could not be denied without also denying the word of the Buddha. But the *abhidharma* model of two mutually exclusive *dharmas*, respectively governing masculinity and femininity, was *also* the inviolable word of the Buddha, leaving our scholastic monks in an uncomfortable bind: they couldn’t deny the validity of the evidence, but equally they were very limited in how far they could adapt their core belief in binary gender.

The history of gendered discourse in the later Theravāda is therefore a history of discordant failure. It is a failure to come to consensus; a failure, of many monks over many generations, to articulate the perfect mechanism by which binary *indriyas* lead to diverse manifestations and experiences of gender, in a way which would satisfy the next generation of scholar-monks; and ultimately a failure to make sense of the world in strictly binary and essentialist terms. The history of these failures is a useful corrective, I hope, to claims that gender-diverse ontologies are a fundamentally modern challenge to “traditional” gender orders. Modern essentialists are not the first to attempt to constrain human experience into

a binary model; as the history above suggests, they will not be the first to fail in this attempt.

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