

# Race, Color, Ethnicity & other trappings of non-self in Early Buddhism

Tathāloka Bhikkhunī

listen to the talk given with these slides online here:

<http://dharmaseed.org/teacher/468/talk/21102/>



Buddha Teaching in Veluvanna (Courtesy [http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/makha\\_bucha\\_day.html](http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/makha_bucha_day.html))

We may all be familiar with images of the Buddha portrayed as in the lovely paintings here, with the Buddha and all of the monks present representing an image of harmony through homogeneity.



Navam Poya (Courtesy Georgia Buddhist Vihara/[www.gavihara.org](http://www.gavihara.org))

Idyllic, set in the Bamboo Grove Monastery, on a full moon night with the Himalayas shining in the background, all of the monastics appear to be of the same gender (male), wearing the same color robes, of the same color skin, features, age...



Wat Yai Chai Mongkol, Ayutthaya, Thailand (Courtesy Rainer Lott, Steffi Esch/Flickr)

In these Thai statuary images of the Buddha with his foremost male and female disciples, all appear white-washed uniformly in the same colors.



Leading Disciples of the Buddha (Courtesy The Walters Art Museum (CC) Creative Commons  
<http://art.thewalters.org/detail/81907/buddha-and-two-disciples/>)

If we look at Burmese or Thai Buddhist paintings of the Buddha with his leading disciples such as this one, we might assume that although the Buddha was golden-skinned, both his main disciples were white men!



Dambulla Cave Painting of Buddha and Disciples (Public domain work courtesy Wikipedia Commons)

Or, as in this Dambulla cave painting, that both the Buddha and disciples were all at least as brown as our American president, if not darker.

But there is another far more  
interesting story...

...that appears in both the ancient  
Canonical and Commentarial texts,  
as well as in a vast multiplicity of  
both ancient and more  
contemporary Buddhist art...



... a story rich and diverse in color.



Leading Bhikkhu Disciples of the Buddha (Courtesy The Island  
<http://www.island.lk/2009/02/09/features13.html>)

According to the texts, of the Buddha's two foremost leading male monastic bhikkhu disciples, Sariputta of Great Wisdom - the Buddha's "right hand man" -- was supposed to have been of light color...



Sariputta and Maha Moggalana (Courtesy of Singapore Mangala Vihara/mangalavihara.org.sg)

...and Maha Moggalanna of Great Spiritual Power (or Great Spiritual Potency as Ven Bhikkhu Bodhi translates) - the Buddha's "left-hand monk" is supposed to have been dark of skin. And not just a little dark, but very dark.



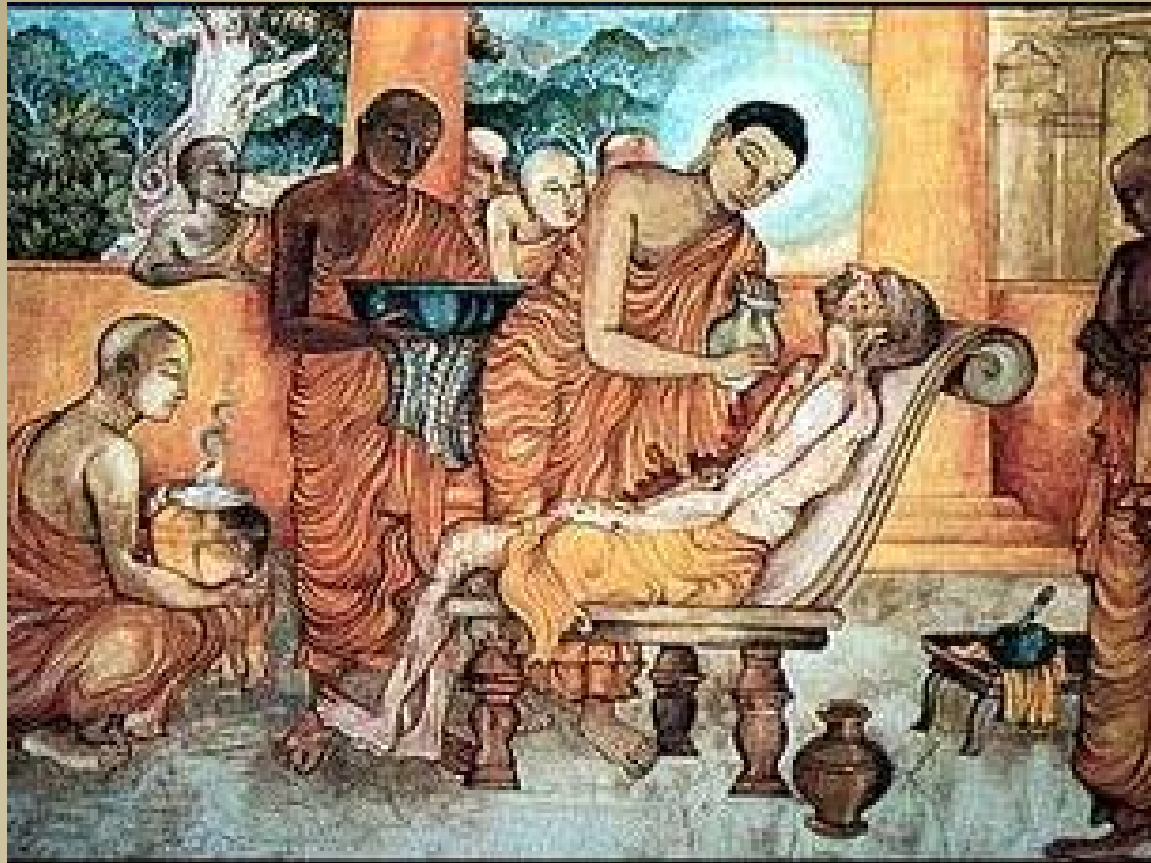
Sariputta and Maha Moggalana (Courtesy of <http://blog.dzone.lk/2013/02/25/the-importance-of-navam-poya/>)

...such a beautiful dark color that he is sometimes portrayed as blue, like another popular dark-skinned Indian saint, Krishna, whose name means “Black”.



Sariputta and Maha Moggalana flanking the Buddha (Courtesy [http://fwbo-news.blogspot.com/2008/12/new-painting-unveiled-at-lbc\\_17.html](http://fwbo-news.blogspot.com/2008/12/new-painting-unveiled-at-lbc_17.html))

This is a contemporary image recently enshrined in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order's London Buddhist Centre. The golden-skinned Buddha sits in the center, flanked by Sariputta of Great Wisdom on his right hand and Moggalana of Great Spiritual Power on his left. You can notice here that the laity and monks are also of various colors or races.



Buddha ministering to the sick (Courtesy Buddhahnet)

I personally like this tender and moving portrait of the Buddha bathing and nursing a poor, frail, sick monk who had been abandoned by his peers. Here the Buddha mentions to those who would follow him that we have no one else but each other, and that if we have love for him, to give care for those who are suffering, as if they were him, that is, as if they were Buddha. Here it is a white man who is portrayed as the abandoned “other”, object of compassion.

But, what of the foremost leading women disciples of the Buddha?



Fourfold Assembly of the Buddha, Hall of the Reclining Buddha, Wat Po, Bangkok (Courtesy Lawan Vongchindarak)

We find this beautiful painting of the Four Assemblies of the Buddha's disciples, here with the bhikkhus and laymen on his right hand and the bhikkhunis and laywomen on his left hand. Notice that all the four assemblies are painted in the skin colors known to the Thai people.



## Uppalavaṇṇā, Foremost in Spiritual Power

Here we have a contemporary statuary image of the female monastic bhikkhuni Uppalavanna, the Buddha's foremost leading bhikkhuni disciple in spiritual power. Again, as with other statuary images, what would we know of her race or color? Here, if we didn't know better, we might think she had been Chinese.



Bluestone Image of Utpalavarna Bhiksuni at Fo Guang Shan Buddha Memorial Center (Courtesy Coco Rodriguez/Flickr)



Uppalavanna movie poster

And here, in this contemporary Sri Lankan feature film named for her, “Uppalavanna”, she appears as a chocolate-brown-skinned Sinhalese (Sri Lankan) woman.



Buddha Returns from Trayastrimsa Heaven Greeted by Bhikkhuni Uppalavanna (Public domain work courtesy Wikipedia Commons)

But again, according to the text, she was named for the color of the Uppala lotus - of a dark blue hue representing those who are very black. Here, in this frontspiece from the ancient Indian palm leaf *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita* (Perfection of Wisdom) collection, the bhikkhuni Uppalavanna is shown bowing before the Buddha in her patchwork monastic robe. You may notice that the deities flanking the Buddha, Indra and Brahma, are also of different colors.

There is a well-established tradition of art and storytelling that portrays both Uppalavaṇṇā and Mahāmoggalāṇna as having very dark skin, as part of the fulfillment of their past life aspirations. The Buddha also made such a determination, having admired past buddhas' foremost disciples of both lighter and darker skin tones, which inspired and affirmed the various *vaṇṇas* (Skt: *varṇas*) colors or classes in their full participation in that buddha's dispensation.

According to Ranjini Obeysekere in her *Portraits of Buddhist Women: Stories from the Saddharmaratanaṅgaliya* (pp 109-110), “since the rank of chief disciple, whether male or female, had to be filled by one of dark complexion, Uppalavaṇṇā was born as dark-skinned as a garland of blue lotuses”.

She notes that of the chief disciples of a Buddha, one is always dark-complexioned, the other light. Thus the Elders Mahāmoggalāna and Uppalavaṇṇā’s dark-complexion and Sāriputta and Khemā’s light. According to Obeysekere (f 3), this “was to perhaps emphasize the all-embracing inclusiveness of Doctrine, in the context of the various peoples and castes of the [Indian] subcontinent.”

(**Note:** Ven Bhikkhu Bodhi and other scholars find the caste system to have come into being as such after the time of the Buddha, rather the suttas reflect a system of four classes, not solidified by birth.)



Buddha Teaching (Public domain work courtesy Wikipedia Commons)

The paintings here associated with the Perfection of Wisdom genre, which may have originated about the first century of the Common Era, generally illustrate racial and ethnic plurality in a positive and affirmative light. Here the golden-skinned Buddha sits in teaching mudra with two saintly dark-skinned monastic disciples on either hand in rapt attention.



Parinirvana of the Buddha (Public domain work courtesy Wikipedia Commons)

Here is a palm leaf painting of the Buddha's passing away - his Parinirvana or Final Nirvana.

After the Buddha's final passing, as Buddhism continued to develop, we find the multi-racial theme also continuing in its imagery.



Prajnaparamita (Public domain work courtesy Wikipedia Commons)

Here we find Bhagavati Prajnaparamita - the Perfection of Wisdom and Mother of All Buddhas herself - flanked by both saintly dark-skinned woman disciples, as well as multi-hued attendant bodhisattvas or deities.



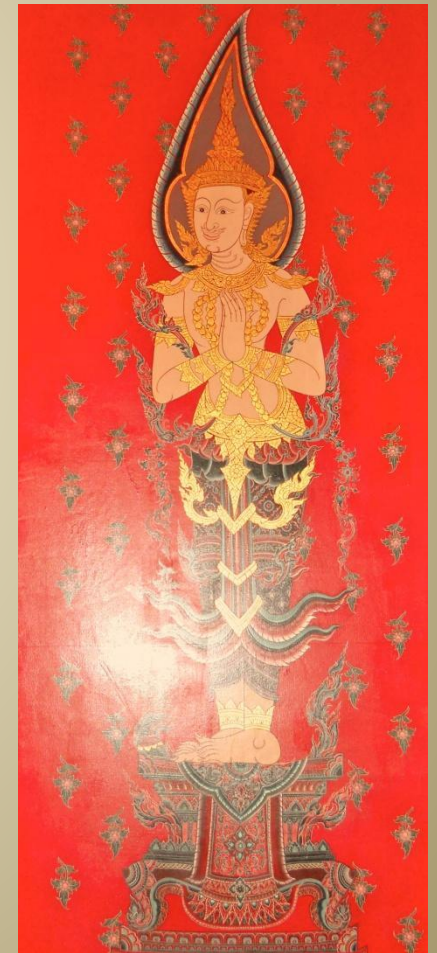
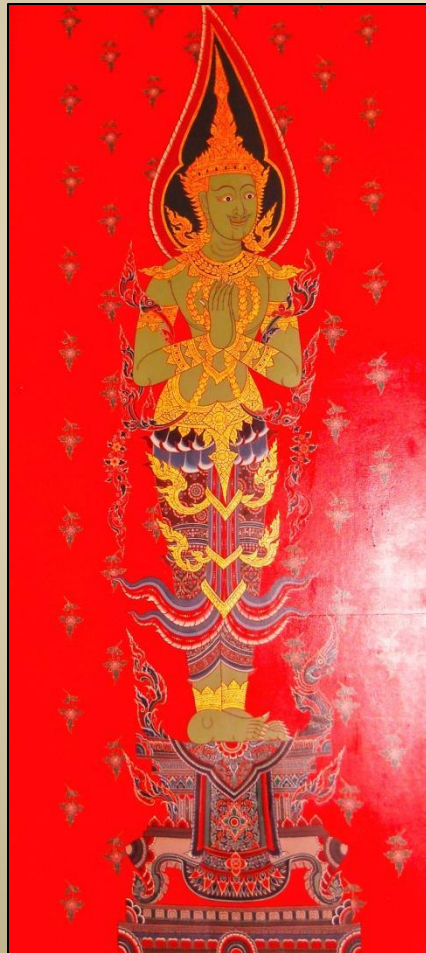


Maha Maya Gives Birth to the Bodhisattva (Public domain work courtesy Wikipedia Commons)

The Lady Maha Maya too -- the Buddha's birth mother - is attended upon by deities of each color who give reverent welcome (on behalf of the heavens or all humanity?) as she gives birth to the Bodhisattva, the Buddha to be.

Not only are Buddhist humans remembered for being of many races and colors, but the blessings and protection of the heavenly beings - the royal guardian devas -- are also imagined so. These are the four colors/races guardian kings painting from Wat Buddhanusorn Thai Buddhist Temple in Fremont, here in Northern California, in the San Francisco East Bay. They guard and bless the four corners of the temple and all who come within its space.

Four Guardian Devas Paintings, Wat Buddhanusorn, San Francisco East Bay (Courtesy Brenda Walsh)





Buddha Trinity (Courtesy mesosyn.com)

There is also a genre where the Buddhas themselves are depicted in different colors. Here, the medicine Buddha, the “Blue Buddha” (does this mean the Black Buddha?) is on the left, a golden Buddha Sakayamuni in the center, and a red-skinned (native American? Mongolian?) Buddha Maitreya is on the right.

We now return from the  
esoteric and celestial realms to  
very earthy embodiment...

**Temple wall mural  
behind the main  
Buddha image at  
Wat Buddhanusorn  
in the San Francisco  
East Bay, Northern  
California**

We will come down  
gently, through the  
fog, past the Golden  
Gate Bridge, the  
golden spires and  
green roof of the  
temple, and the Bodhi  
tree and Seventeen  
Mile Drive's lone  
cypress, to a group of  
Thai monks in their  
golden saffron robes  
and to an international  
group of monastics in  
their saffron brown  
robes just below...

Mural Behind the Main Buddha Image,  
Wat Buddhanusorn, San Francisco East  
Bay (Courtesy Brenda Walsh)





Ajahn Chah with Multi-ethnic Sangha (Public domain work courtesy Wikipedia Commons)

Returned from the heavenly celestials back into the human world...

When looking for images to share here, I Googled “Buddha with Multi-Ethnic Sangha”. Here we find beloved teacher Ajahn Chah together with Ajahn Sumedho, and Ajahn Pasanno, the abbot of Abhayagiri Monastery just north of us in Mendocino County.



**Bodhinyana Monastery (Courtesy parami.org)**

Pindapata - almsround - at Bodhinyana Monastery in Western Australia. Bodhinyana (the mens' monastery), Dhammasara (the womens' monastery), Jhana Grove Retreat Center and their Dhammaloka city center are wonderful examples of harmonious and joyful multi-ethnicity in Buddhism in contemporary times.



Buddha Leni Caves Monastery, Aurangabad, Maharashtra (Courtesy of [tathaaloka.wordpress.com](http://tathaaloka.wordpress.com))

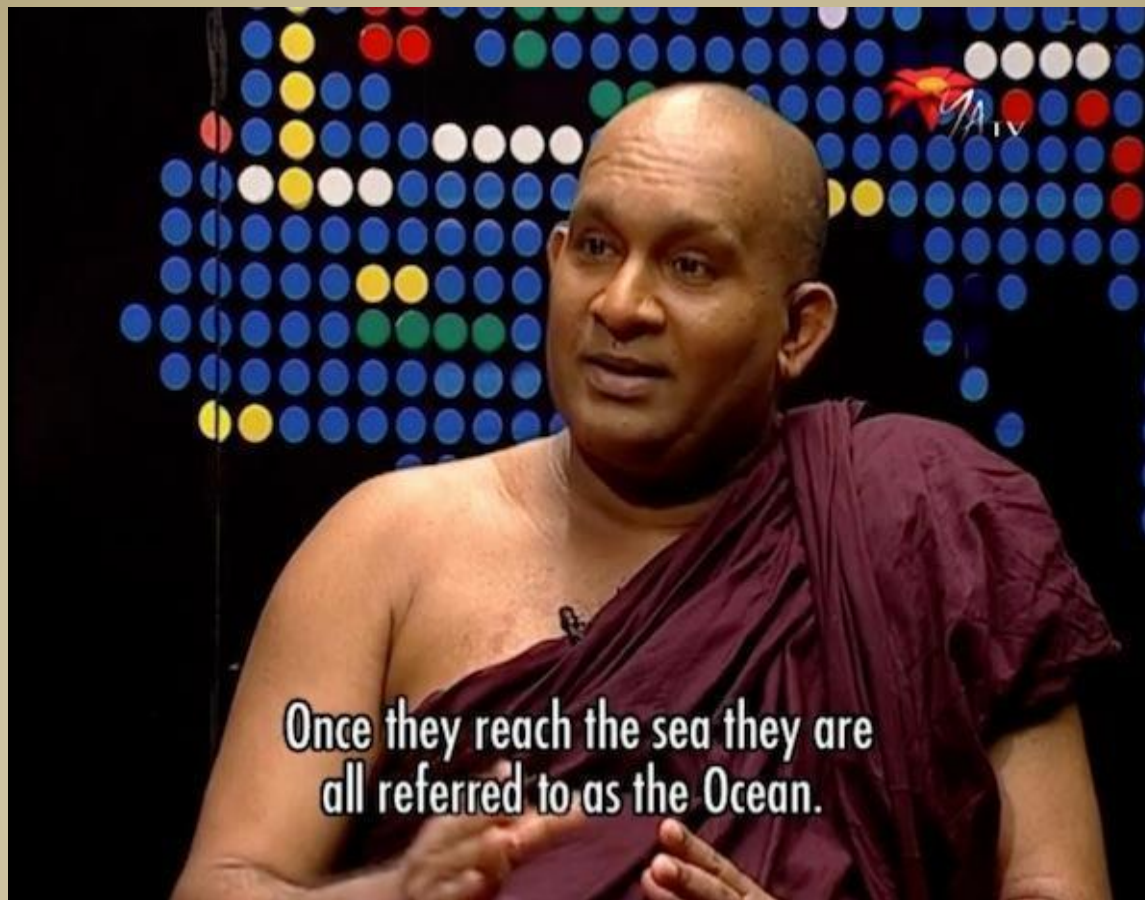
I was also surprised to find photos of myself in the top row of images in the Google Search - although it's true, both this body and heart are truly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic. Here I am with bhikkhuni Ayya Satima from Sri Lanka, bhikkhuni Ayya Gunasari from Burma, and many, many former-Dalit (untouchable) Buddhist monastics from India, at Buddha Leni Caves Monastery in the Indian State of Maharashtra.





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Last but not least, here is our multi-national Dual Sangha of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis processing into the upper meditation hall at Spirit Rock, for the first Bhikkhuni Ordinations here. Monastics and lay teachers and friends came from all over the world for this, from North and South, East and West, in true and ancient Buddhist style.



Ven. Dambara Amila Thero (Courtesy of

<http://groundviews.org/2012/05/16/a-different-take-from-the-sangha-the-dhamma-and-religious-co-existence-in-sri-lanka/>)

This photo is from an eminent Sri Lankan bhikkhu teacher's public commentary calling for ethnic and religious appreciation, non-harm and non-violence.

The Buddha emphasized action and absolutely denied that clan, class, race or bodily characteristics have anything to do with someone's worthiness; instead, emphasizing action, that is, our actions of body, speech and mind.

*Vijjācaraṇasampanno,  
So seṭṭho devamānuse'ti.*

~

Consummate  
in wisdom and conduct,  
[S]he is said to be most excellent  
among heavenly and human  
beings.

-- the Buddha, *Ambattha Sutta*, Long Discourses 3, §277

'In the supreme perfection of wisdom and righteousness, Ambattha, there is no reference to the question either of birth, or of lineage, or of the pride which says: "You are held as worthy as I," or "You are not held as worthy as I..." "..." "For whosoever, Ambattha, is enslaved (in bondage) to the notions of birth or of lineage, or to the pride of social position, or of family connections, they are far from the best wisdom and righteousness.

It is only by having got rid of all such bondage that one can realize for oneself the unexcelled perfection of wisdom and conduct...'

-- the Buddha, *Ambattha Sutta*, Long Discourses 3, §278