

A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION ON THE IMAGES OF FEMININE IN MAHĀYĀNA TRADITION

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Abstract

This study attempts to offer a new dimension for understanding religion's influence on the self-concept of women by examining the religious portraits of women and the feminine in a broader range of religious tradition. The author will be treating these images as distinctive features in the overall value system of Mahāyāna Buddhism in ancient China and India and interpreting the internal contradictions and pressure within those systems of belief. Based on the stories from Buddhist scripture, the author elaborates on the gender roles and ideals in Mahāyāna Buddhist culture. Those

Stories disclose who women were expected to be, what the ranges of feminine character and behavior should be. They provide a contrast to corresponding definitions of masculinity. The tales and myths are not only evaluative and informative but also invitational: They are intended to be read not as history but as descriptions suggesting values and ideology, disclosing perspectives of the feminine, of sexuality, and of gender roles. These stories raise questions and suggest answers simultaneously. An attempt is made to deal with the question of gender and its relation to states of spiritual being and the potential for religious practice. The author emphasizes that gender roles and definitions were constantly changing and that notions of sexuality and its relevance to religious practice have no definitive answer or consensus throughout Mahāyāna Buddhist literature.

Key words: The Images of Feminine; Mahāyāna Buddhist literature; Gender roles; Value system of Mahāyāna Buddhism

Introduction

Like Judaism and Christianity, Buddhism is an overwhelmingly male-centered institution dominated by a patriarchal power structure. As a consequence of this male dominance, the feminine is frequently associated with the secular, powerless, profane, and imperfect. Male Buddhists, like male religious in other cultures, established normative behavior for women by creating certain ideals of femininity. At the same time, men's opportunities for interaction with women were minimized by the restrictions of devout practice. In early Buddhist monastic communities, interaction with laywomen was necessary for economic support but otherwise was avoided. When we find texts in which the sacred is represented as masculine, we have a polarization that suggests both internal psychological conflicts and external social barriers between male and female.

The translated texts in this study represent an attempt to document a range of problems concerning the depiction of women and her feminine nature in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. Affirmative and negative portraits are included. Some texts represent a dualistic system of beliefs and values, in which women are excluded as fully human and religious. The arrangement of texts is organized according to a typology, progressing from the most negative images of the feminine to the most positive and affirmative ones.

The focus of present study is on traditional attitudes toward women, their stereological paths (paths to salvation), and the images of the feminine in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, written from approximately the second century through approximately the sixth century A.D. The author's investigation of textual materials from the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition includes many texts which have been generally ignored by other scholars. These samples are characteristic because they discuss recurring themes found in other Mahāyāna Buddhist texts as well. The author has considered a number of the texts as paradigmatic and influential in representing the views of female sexuality in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Tantric Buddhist tradition, which affirms sexuality as sacred and which is rich in sexual imagery, has been treated by others and is not discussed in this research.

The interpretation of textual materials in this study has presented some problems. Of the nineteen texts, sixteen are sutras, that is, purportedly the sermons

and lessons spoken by the historical Buddha to his disciples. Comprising more than twenty-five volumes in the Chinese Buddhist canon, the sutras developed over hundreds of years in different regions and by different authors. The audiences to whom these texts were addressed ranged from the religious orders to the laity and included men and women, both literate and illiterate. Sutas may have been selected by Buddhist teachers in terms of their appeal to the audience being addressed. However, little information is available concerning the type of audience and locale because the sutras are not dated and the authorship is unknown.

Of the other texts, which are not sutras, one text describes the disciplinary rules of the nuns and two are folktales, incorporated into a Mahayana Buddhist anthology known as *The Collection of Jewels*. The materials include poignant folktales, rhetorical diatribes, myths, devotion poems, and religious vows. Even some of the sutras mentioned above probably were originally folktales or myths which were later incorporated into the genre of Buddhist literature known as sutras. Because of the overlap in categories or types, texts are often difficult to identify. What may have originally been a folktale or rhetorical diatribe may have been revised according to the standardized format and style of a sutra, with the word "sutra" appended later to the title. In the titles of the texts in this volume, the word "sutra" is included if it appears in the original Sanskrit or Chinese text from which the translation is made.

All these texts reveal various shades of attitudes toward the feminine and of attributes of the feminine imposed on Buddhist women. Some of the selections are humorous and imaginary, others morbid and pessimistic. Some materials were originally in Sanskrit; others in Chinese. To place these diverse texts into their geographical and historical contexts is speculative, not only because of their anonymity but because they developed over a long time, with continuous emendations and accretions to the originals.

A Buddhist text may have had two periods of development. A Sanskrit text, after its original composition, sometimes underwent generations of revision even before further development, revision, and editing, when the text was exported to China. These factors preclude identifying all variables necessary for reconstructing the historical context of each text. Besides, the views put forth in any given text may not have been a dominant view of the general populace and may, in fact, have been either ignored or unknown to many followers and practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism. Thus, many of the texts no doubt have incorporated what were originally non-Buddhist ideas and attitudes, but it is almost always impossible to identify the cultural context of such borrowings.

The argument may be put forth that Hindu and Confucian values, as well as indigenous folk beliefs, are the origins of Buddhist nonegalitarianism. However, if Buddhists accepted nonegalitarian beliefs from outside their original teachings and incorporated them as sutras, that is, as part of their scriptural canon, they had to have accepted such beliefs as worthy of the status of scripture. To that extent, they could not have considered such nonegalitarian views as the antithesis of the Buddha's doctrine; therefore, they cannot be said to have consistently or wholeheartedly advocated equality of the sexes.

Textual materials do not necessarily reflect the practical religion, the religion of people at large. Questions concerning the significance of Buddhist texts to practicing male and female Buddhists remain to be answered. The illiterate lay Buddhist of both sexes may not have even known about misogynist texts. Furthermore, literate Buddhist women may not have cared to read antifeminist texts even if they knew of their existence. All the information in the textual materials may represent only orthodoxy and not the common tradition of lay Buddhist practitioners. The intent of presenting these materials is to compare and contrast the various orthodox attitudes toward sexual stereotyping within a broad range of Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine.

Given these limitations and problems with regard to Mahāyāna Buddhist materials, what kinds of information and inferences can be derived concerning femininity and women's status in Buddhist societies? The worth of these texts lies in their revelation of permutations of two central themes found cross-culturally. The first is the notion that the feminine is mysterious, sensual, destructive, elusive and closer to nature. Association with this nether world may be polluting and deadly for the male and therefore must be suppressed, controlled, and conquered by the male in the name of culture, society, and religion. Female sexuality as a threat to culture and society provides religion with a rationale for relegating women to a marginal existence.

The second theme is the notion that the feminine is wise, maternal, creative, gentle, and compassionate. Association with this affective, emotional, transcendent realm is necessary for the male's fulfillment of his religious goals and for his release from suffering. Sexuality may be either controlled or denied in the feminine as sacred. In the role of nun or virgin, sexuality may be transcended as irrelevant to fulfilling human potential. In the role of mother, sexuality is usually viewed as in a controlled state, a state of equilibrium. Mahayana Buddhists usually preferred the notion of transcendence of all sexuality in religious women, rather than in the controlled sexuality of the mother.

The interplay of these two central themes can be seen as the mediation in Buddhism between two world views. The first view is dualistic: Masculine and feminine are seen as discrete categories, like spirit and matter. The second view is integrative: Masculine and feminine are seen as complementary aspects of unified spirit, in the manner of compassion and wisdom. This is the more prevalent Mahāyāna Buddhist view.

The selection of Buddhist texts translated here documents major varieties of female stereotypes in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, reflecting both the propounded ideals of Mahayana Buddhist teaching and the prejudices of a society that challenges those ideals. Eleven of the selections are translated from the Chinese recensions, some of which are also extant in Sanskrit. When the Chinese recension has been preferred over the Sanskrit, it is due to clarity of style and to a more interesting development of the narrative (as in the case of "Sadaprarudita and the Merchant's Daughter" from *The Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses*). The other eight selections are translated from the Sanskrit recensions. Identification of the texts and their primary recensions are given, and the English translator is indicated at the bottom of the first page of each translated text, as well as notation of first English translations. Not all of the translations correspond to the entire text of the original; some of the material has been extracted because of the length of the original text, its lack of relevance to the issue of feminine stereotypes, or the repetition of details unnecessary to the central themes under discussion.

1. Traditional views of women

1.1 "Temptress": Daughter of Evil

Traditional Buddhist attitudes toward woman as inferior reflect a view of woman as temptress or evil incarnate. The lustful woman is seen with unrestrained sensuality, perhaps irrevocably so. She has an animalistic nature associated with innate sexual drives not found in the nature of the male. Buddhist literature implies that woman is biologically determined to be sexually uncontrollable. By despising her own nature, woman can perhaps deny her biological destiny of depravity. This view is clearly illustrated in the translations presented in this part.

In the study of woman as an instrument of evil, a distinction must be made between the symbolic representation of woman, generalized as the dark, sensual, emotional nature of the personality or "eternal feminine," and the actual being of woman as an individual. Woman, as the "eternal feminine," the temptress and seductress, is a common element in religious thought. Woman is Eve, precipitator