

Buddhist Attitudes Toward Women's Bodies

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People in the field of religious studies have begun to raise questions about the assumptions made with regard to women cross-culturally. Current research has tended to deal with *how* these assumptions affect both men and women in three ways:

1. There have been studies on women's authority and power in religious institutions.
2. There have been studies on what women write about their own religious aspirations and practices.
3. There have been studies on images of women and the feminine, that is, how symbols affect women's and men's self-concepts.

My own recent work belongs to the last category.

I began to look at generalizations about women's position in the Buddhist tradition in the summer of 1974 after completing my dissertation. I decided to take a closer look at the generally held academic views about women in Buddhism, namely:

1. Women were of secondary importance in Theravādin and other early primitive Buddhist societies. This was due to the importance of monastic institutions and the inferiority accorded to the institution of nuns.
2. Women were elevated to equal (or near equal) status in Mahāyāna societies because of less importance placed on monastic institutions. More attention was given to lay-oriented Buddhism and to the doctrine of universal Buddhahood—or the One Vehicle (Ekayāna). Hence, with emphasis on participation among the laity together with the claim that all beings are potential Buddhas, women would be viewed as equal in their capacity for religious fulfillment.

My study of the texts, however, does not support such a generalization about the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition. And I suspect that the generalization about Theravāda as wholly antagonistic towards women, or at least more antagonistic than Mahāyāna, also is overstating the case. This present study focuses only on

Mahāyāna literature from India and China, and does not deal with Theravāda Buddhism nor with Tantric or Vajrayāna Buddhism.

Let me present a more complex picture of the religious norm for women in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. This will entail showing how women were often relegated to a secondary status in that tradition. Women were not accorded the same kind of universal respect conferred upon men. But, there were instances in which the literature attempts to present an egalitarian view. Hence, the title of my lecture "Buddhist Attitudes Toward Women's Bodies in Mahāyāna Literature," could be subtitled "Sexual Ambiguity in Buddhist Literature."

The ambiguity with regard to women's sexual nature—more precisely, with regard to sexuality in general—has been apparent in many cultures of various ages and epochs. On the one hand, woman was regarded as a potential and actual danger to man's welfare, and on the other hand she was creative, nurturant, and supportive. Traditional religious stories, images, and ideals absorbed by members of a culture are frequently the vehicle of misogynist views in society—that is, society's devaluation of women and of sexuality. I would like to turn to some Buddhist *sūtras* which present a very interesting, yet difficult to analyze, symbolism of sexuality. These *sūtras* represent a dominant, perhaps *the* most dominant, theme in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. That theme is one of *amorphous* sexual natures, that is, the ideal that one is *neither* male *nor* female or to say it positively, one is *both* male *and* female. The *sūtras* refer to this as sexual transformation, that is, the capacity to transcend discriminations based upon sexual and gender distinctions (*chuan-nü-shen*), by somehow becoming the other sex.

BODHISATTVAS WITH SEXUAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Let's turn to texts in which sexual identity is essential to one's religiosity. I discuss these texts in Chapter Five of my book, *Women in Buddhism*, where I interpret "Bodhisattvas with Sexual Transformations."¹ The term Bodhisattva refers to the ideal Buddhist practitioner: one who follows Mahāyāna doctrine, takes vows to practice compassion towards all living beings, and supports the Buddhist community is called a Bodhisattva. There is also a more grandiose form of Bodhisattva—namely, those mythical or savior figures who descend from a Buddha-land to help the faithful.

I want to discuss the first type of Bodhisattva, that is, the idealized Buddhist practitioner. If a woman is acknowledged as having the spiritual potential of becoming a Bodhisattva, then she has access to the way of enlightenment. If she is denied this capacity, she is denied the religious goal of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Some texts, such as the *Pure Land Sūtra*, *deny* women birth in the Pure Land unless they *despise* their female nature. Despising the female nature results in rebirth as a man in the Pure Land.² Vows to be reborn as men were seen as acts of piety performed by devout Buddhist women. In texts of this kind, the female sex is subordinated to the male sex as inferior—as defective and impure

